

Language and Identity within the Decision Theory Framework: The Case of the Rendille People of Kenya

Dr. Kenneth Ngure¹ & D. W. Karuru^{2*}

¹Department of English and Linguistics, Kenyatta University,
P. O. Box 43844 - 00100, Nairobi, Kenya
E-mail: kennethngure@rocketmail.com

²Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Moi University,
P. O. Box 3900 – 30100, Eldoret, Kenya
E-mail: dkaruru@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract

The question pertaining to considerations made by individuals and members of a community for purposes of identity construction is often asked by scholars but the answers offered exhibit glaring variations. Language is cited by some individuals and groups as being propitious for identity formation while others cite other aspects of a people's culture such as food, clothes, and such other considerations as genetic descent and geographical location. In this paper, we examine within the framework of the Decision Theory (DT), the factors relied upon by members of the Rendille ethnic community for identity formation. We demonstrate that based on some factors, the Rendille identity is perceived to be in two levels; the broad and narrow identity. Ancestral descent is a useful factor in the formation of the broad Rendille identity while participation in certain rituals, initiation rites in particular, is critical in the formation of the narrow Rendille identity. Such levels form part of the Rendille culture and as Miyaoka (2001) points out, language may be said to be the last stronghold of culture. Ours, therefore, is a study in sociolinguistics paying particular attention to the Rendille community.

Key Words: Rendille, identity, language, culture, clan

* E-mail of the corresponding author: dkaruru@gmail.com

1.0 Introduction

Fishman (1991), a renowned sociolinguist, was the first to introduce the terms Xman and Xish which linguists use in discourses focusing on the role of language in identity formation (Fishman 1991:11). The term Xman stands for the name of a particular ethnic community while Xish represents the name of the language spoken by the ethnic community. There is a group of scholars, *inter alia* Miyaoka (2001), who subscribe to the view that one cannot ascribe to oneself an identity associated with a given language when he/she does not speak the language. Put in other words, according to these scholars, one cannot be Xman without Xish.

Miyaoka (2001:8) for example underscores the inevitability of the role of a language to a peoples' identity. He points out that,

Once an ethnic group loses its own language, even if some fragments of its material culture (e.g. ethnic costumes, crafts, or whatever) live on, they may represent little more than a lingering twilight: the culture may possibly have been lost or, at least, may not be functioning as an organic whole any longer. In this sense language may be said to be the last stronghold of culture.

There are other scholars, however, like Rigsby (1987:370) who do not put a lot of premium on the ability to speak a language. According to such scholars, speech is a mere external trait, like dress and appearance, which may not count for much when it comes to identity formation. They suggest that what is critical is the inner values and principles which guide people's lives and, therefore, make up the real substance of their social and personal identity. It is for that reason that he challenges the view that "one cannot be a real Indian unless one can speak an Indian language (Tsunoda 2005:165).

Dorian (1998) (quoted in Tsunoda (2005:164) interrogated members of an ethnic community concerning the usefulness or otherwise of the ability to speak a language and the claim to ethnic identity. She says that,

I found that when I asked speakers of Scottish Gaelic whether knowledge of Gaelic was necessary to being a 'true highlander', they said it was; when I asked people of Highland birth and ancestry who did not speak Gaelic the same question, they said it wasn't.

This, therefore, indicates that the issue of language as a means of assigning identity may be a relative one which at times depends with the respondents.

2.0 Theoretical Perspectives

This paper is guided by the Decision Theory (DT) as postulated by Schlee (2008). The theory will be used to provide insight to the factors that the Rendille community uses to construct a linguistic identity which yield two levels of identity; the Rendille identity in the broad sense of the word and the Rendille identity in the narrow sense of the word. This theory recognizes the fact that there are certain dimensions that people adopt when they want to identify themselves and also others. These dimensions may be based on such criteria as language, religion and descent among others (Schlee 2008:25). DT takes cognizance of the fact that identities are not static; they have the potential of redefinition and modification, albeit, within a certain range. The manipulation of identities is often achieved by use of what Schlee (2008) calls 'strategies of inclusion and exclusion'.

3.0 Discussion

In this section, this paper discusses the issue of Rendille identity *vis-à-vis* language and other parameters used to set Rendille identity. Apart from explaining who the Rendille are, the section also describes the social structure of the community depicting Rendille clans and the Ariaal, an important sub-group among the Rendille. It is in this section that the question of language and Rendille identity is discussed. The issue of clan affiliation and Rendille identity is also discussed. Finally, the section describes the main initiation ceremony of the Rendille, *Galgulaamme*, and examines how this ceremony may be used to determine Rendille identity at the expense of language.

3.1 The Rendille People

The Rendille ethnic community lives in Marsabit County, in northern Kenya. The territory occupied by the community, an arid semi-desert, covers about 50,000 Km (Sato 1977:1). It borders Lake Turkana in the North –West, Mount Marsabit in the East, the Chalbi Desert in the North, the Merrile River in the South-East and the Ndoto mountains in the South West (Swanepoel & Pillinger 1985:1). The community practices mainly pastoralism and therefore their livelihood depends on camels, goats, sheep, and lately few cattle (Ngure 2012). The language they speak referred to as Rendille, belong to the Eastern Cushitic sub-family of the broad Afro-Asiatic family of languages (Heine & Mohlig 1980).

3.2 The Social structure of Rendille community

The Rendille community is not stratified along class lines. The community has nine clans, regarded as the clans of the Rendille ‘proper’ or ‘white’ Rendille, as they call themselves and are called by their neighbours (Schlee 1989:9). These clans are divided into two moieties, Belesi Bahai and Belesi Berri (the ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ moieties respectively). Belesi Bahai consists of five clans (they include, D’ubsahai, Rengumo, Matarbah, Nahagan and Uiyam). Belesi Berri, on the other hand, consists of four clans (they are Saale, Urwen, Galdeilan and Tubcha). All the clans, with the exception of Rengumo, are exogamic. They are generally cooperate groups who tend “to rely on one another economically...mobilizing local pressures and arriving at important decisions by debate and consensus” (Spencer 1973:29). There is however a tenth clan, the Odoola clan, which is treated specially as it does not belong to any of the moieties. The clan is also found among Gabra and the Sakuye¹ (Schlee 1989:9). The Ariaal are also considered a part of the Rendille speech community in terms of language use although their clans are said to have Samburu names.

3.3 The Ariaal

Ariaal are considered to be an offshoot of the Rendille. At this point, it is prudent to say something about the Ariaal and the circumstances surrounding their genesis. Investigation conducted by anthropologists regarding the genesis of Ariaal as an offshoot of Rendille indicates that the group became distinct in the nineteenth century (Fratkin 1991:18; Spencer 1973:153; Schlee 1989:40). The investigation is, however, not categorical regarding the circumstances and the linguistic groups that contributed to the ‘birth’ of this socio-cultural group that claims identity with the Rendille. Fratkin (1991:18), for example, says that Ariaal is a social formation:

¹ Gabra and Sakuye communities are also found in northern Kenya. They live in similar ecological environments with the Rendille. The two share a lot with the Rendille in their subsistence strategies. However, their languages are experiencing language shift to Boraana, a language belonging to the same language family, Afroasiatic (Schlee & Shongolo 2012:5).

... created by immigrants from Rendille and Samburu (as well as Boran, Dasenech, Maasai, and Turkana) who came together in western Marsabit during the period of draught, warfare, and disease of the later 19th century.

This is not very different from what Spencer (1973) observes. Spencer (1973:130) claims that the Ariaal group is made up of a mixture of people who descended from Rendille and Samburu ethnic communities. Schlee (1989:40), apparently, shares a similar view with Spencer regarding the groups that played a pivotal role in the formation of Ariaal when he says:

In the area between the Ewaso-Ngiro in the south, a mixed culture developed among the ancestors of the Samburu and the Rendille: the Ariaal, bilingual and interested in both camels and cattle.

Nick and Lynn Swanepoel (1983:2) describe Ariaal as the:

Rendille who claim to have left Rendille proper clans to form six new clans. Five of the six clans speak Rendille while one ... speaks only Samburu. They have all adopted some Samburu customs, mainly with regard to the circumcision ceremony. Whereas the Rendille are by and large camel herders, the Ariaal have now become predominantly cattle keepers.

From the foregoing accounts it appears that in recounting the beginnings of Ariaal it is unavoidable to mention Samburu. The Rendille and Samburu have been allies for many generations. Of note is the fact that as the issue of identity is discussed in these cases, the aspect of language seems peripheral as it is observed that while most of the six clans speak Rendille, at least one speaks Samburu only. Even for those speaking Rendille, Schlee (1989:40) notes that most are bilingual.

Interestingly, although the Ariaal may have descended from the alliance of Samburu-Rendille, they perceive themselves as a distinct society although they are fully aware of the ambiguity in their identity. They are neither fully Samburu nor fully Rendille, but a mixture of the two. They exploit this ambiguity to their advantage. They can access the resources of the cattle economy such as grazing fields and water, controlled by the Samburu, as well as the camel economy and the rituals associated with it which are controlled by the Rendille (Schlee 1989:9).

3.4 The Question of Language and Rendille Identity

When one considers literature addressing the formation of Ariaal and their ascription of the Rendille identity, it is apparent that there are instances when Ariaal are reckoned as Rendille and there are also instances when they are treated as being non-Rendille. This inconsistency in the identity of the Ariaal arouses curiosity on what may be identified as the basis upon which the Rendille identity is constructed. One question that one may ask is: *What does it take to be a Rendille?* Among some communities in Kenya and, possibly, the likes of Miyaoka elsewhere, a quick response would be that the ability to speak Rendille language would be the decisive criterion used to determine if one was a Rendille or not. The Samburu, using this criterion, regard the Ariaal as Rendille because they speak Rendille. This is discernible in the following observation by Fratkin (2004:5):

The Ariaal are affiliated with the Samburu clans and age-sets and are considered Samburu by the Rendille, yet because they also *speak Rendille* and keep camels as well as cattle the Samburu treat them as Rendille. (Fratkin 2004:5; emphasis ours).

However, in the same observation by Fratkin, the Ariaal are ascribed the Samburu identity by the Rendille, again on account of being able to speak, this time, Samburu language. What there is here, is a case of what looks like a ‘dual citizenship’ which is unique in that it is realized and enjoyed by the recipients but not recognized as dual citizenship by the granting authorities (in this case the Samburu and Rendille).

The double heritage of the Ariaal is well captured in the following disclosure by an Ariaal elder (recorded by Fratkin (1991:24):

We’re really something in between Samburu and Rendille. We are not something different; we are really both things together. We live in Rendille country, keep camels, and follow camel rites like *soriu* (Sic.) and *almhado*. Although we stay away from the *galgulumi* (Rendille age-set initiation ritual) as we do not think the Rendille want us there, we do send our camels there to be blessed. Our houses are Rendille and *we speak both languages*. Yet we also keep cattle, we follow the Samburu *mugit* (age-set rites), and speak in Samburu language. (Emphasis ours)

Clearly, when one considers the perspective of the three groups regarding this matter of identity, it is apparent that *language proficiency alone may not be a sufficient index for identity marking*.

3.5 Clan Affiliation and Rendille Identity

Another criterion worth exploring is clan affiliation. According to Ngunjiri (2012:270) the Rendille identity can be perceived in two dimensions; there is being a Rendille in the general sense of the word and there is being a Rendille in the strict sense of the word. A Rendille in the general sense of the word is one who can trace his/her lineage to one of the nine clans of the Rendille while a Rendille in the strict sense of the word is one whose clan is eligible to partake in the *Galgulaamme*² ceremony. While the two-dimension perspective is acceptable, the use of clan affiliation as a basis for forging one of the Rendille identities is what appears problematic. As noted earlier on in the accounts by Nick and Lynn Swanepoel (1983:2) and Fratkin (2004: 5), the Ariaal formed new clans that are affiliated to the Samburu ones and different from the nine Rendille clans. Schlee (1989: 9) shares the same view when he says that the Ariaal have, ‘five clans with Samburu names, four of which correspond to Samburu sections. The fifth clan is *Ituria* - ‘mixture’ in Samburu...’

He, however, notes that “Despite their strong Samburu orientation, most of them are of comparatively recent Rendille origin and follow the exogamy rules of their Rendille clan of origin” (Schlee 1989:9). What emerges from this discourse is that, in as much as the Ariaal have their own clans which bear Samburu names, they do not totally dispense with the Rendille clans to which their ancestors belonged. They adhere to exogamy rules of their Rendille clans. It is also the case that the non-Ariaal Rendille also recognize the fact that the Ariaal have ‘underlying’ Rendille clans which are often highlighted during marriages lest exogamy rules are violated. This recognition that the Ariaal too have some claim of association to the Rendille clans is what contributes to the inclusion of the Ariaal to what Ngunjiri (2012:270) calls Rendille in the ‘general sense of the word’ which Schlee (1989:9) refers to it as ‘Rendille’ in its widest sense. In this paper we call this identity, Rendille in the broad sense of the word or simply the broad Rendille identity.

3.6 The initiation ceremony and Rendille Identity

After establishing that affiliation to Rendille clan, however remotely, bequeaths one some right to the Rendille identity, it is worth pointing out that there are other considerations that are often at play when it comes to acquiring the Rendille identity that excludes others who had been incorporated in the broad Rendille identity. According to Schlee (1989:9),

² This important Rendille initiation ceremony is described in detail in section 3.6 below.

The criterion used to distinguish Rendille and Ariaal is the initiation rituals: there are differences in the circumcision rituals but more importantly, the Samburu and Ariaal hold various *ilmugit* sacrifices while the Non- Ariaal Rendille, in the year after circumcision, holds the *gaalgulamme* ceremony.

It is prudent to say something about *gaalgulamme*³. This is an elaborate ceremony held after every fourteen years by the ‘white’ Rendille. It is an extremely important ceremony as it incorporates members of all the nine Rendille clans.

The ‘white’ Rendille ... define themselves by the *gaalgulamme* ceremony, for which they gather once in fourteen years in a gigantic circle of houses...Attached to this fourteen years cycle is a long series of rituals, which involve a complicated division of ritual labour and require cooperation of the nine clans. The tribe becomes visible here as a corporate whole.

Schlee (1989:9)

This ceremony is extremely critical where the Rendille identity is concerned. There seems to be some restrictions as to who should take part in this ceremony. According to the account of an informant interviewed in the field, the Ariaal are not allowed to the *gaalgulamme* since they do not have a hut in the large circle which is constructed by the joint effort of the clans that belong to the two moieties (Ngure 2012: 201). This is corroborated by the Ariaal Elder whose testimony we had highlighted,

We’re really something in between Samburu and Rendille. We are not something different; we are really both things together. We live in Rendille country, keep camels, and follow camel rites like *soriu* (sic.) and *almhado*. Although we stay away from the *galgulumu* (Rendille age-set initiation ritual) as we do not think the Rendille want us there, we do send our camels there to be blessed.

It is doubtless that the Ariaal do not participate in the ceremony. Before looking at the reason for their lack of participation, let us consider what Schlee (1989:9) says about other groups that do not take part in the ceremony:

The Gooborre, a subclan of the Saale, speak Rendille, live among Rendille, breed camels and are generally counted among the ‘white’ Rendille. However, they ‘kill *ilmugit*’ and do not participate in *gaalgulamme* ceremony. The case of the of the Rengumo subclan, Ongom, may well be similar. (Schlee 1989:9)

It seems that in order to participate in *gaalgulamme*, there are certain restrictions imposed on persons which have to do with not just membership to the nine clans, but also their conduct when it comes to the *ilmugit* sacrifice. The *ilmugit* sacrifice is a Samburu equivalent of the Rendille’s *gaalgullamme*. If any subclan participates in *ilmugit*, then it cannot partake in *gaalgulamme*. It appears that, to the Rendille, participation in *ilmugit* is perceived as having some ‘defiling’ effect on persons. The participants are deemed as falling short of the demands of ‘purity’ required of those who participate in *gaalgulamme*. It is interesting to note that, while the two communities have coexisted peacefully for ages and cooperation between them cemented, when it comes to this one ceremony, *gaalgulamme*, the Rendille have rigid rules of exclusivity that they do not compromise.

³ *Gaalgulamme* (also variously referred to as *galgulumu*, *gaalgulaamme*, *galgulaamme*) is a Rendille ceremony performed in one vast settlement on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana.

The Odoola clan, often treated as the tenth clan, also suffers some ‘discrimination’ during the all important ceremony (*gaalgulamme*) as its members are not allowed to get into the circle since the clan is not aligned to either of the moieties. The clan is, however, allowed to participate but from outside the perimeter of the circle.

It is useful to note that the Rendille community does hold other ceremonies which are exclusively Rendille but the Ariaal and Odoola clan are allowed to participate fully. These include *Almado*⁴ and *Sorio*⁵ (Schlee1989:9: Fratkin 1991:24).

4.0 Conclusion

The Rendille identity is a bit complex. It is apparent that apart from language, there are many other parameters of identifying it. It appears that it is possible for a person at one instance to qualify as a Rendille and at another instance to be regarded as not being Rendille. The Rendille identity can be perceived in the imagery of an onion; comprising of layers. The strategies of inclusion and exclusion are crucial when determining the various layers. The outward layer, which in this paper is referred to as the broad Rendille identity is constructed on the basis of association with one of the clans of Rendille. This association may be remote, as in the case of the Ariaal whose immediate clans have Samburu affiliations but with Rendille clans lurking in the background. The inner layer represents a Rendille identity that is highly restrictive; this may be the *crème de la crème* of the Rendille community. This identity excludes the Ariaal (all those belonging to clans with a Samburu association) and members of the sub-clans that participate in the Samburu ceremony known as *ilmugit*. In a nutshell, this Rendille identity, in this paper is referred to as the narrow Rendille identity, is only applicable to those who are eligible to partake in the Rendille ceremony held after every fourteen years known as *gaalgulamme*. By and large, language seems to be very peripheral, confusing at times, in the question of Rendille identity.

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⁴ *Almado* (also variously referred to as *almhato*, *almodo* or *olhdalmhato*) is a festival that is held annually and does not entail unmarried youths or boys.

⁵ *Sorio* or *soriu* is a family festival celebrated four times a year.

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