

Minority Language and Culture – Ngaalam

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Language Name: Ngaalam
Language Family: Nilo-Saharan Language Phylum
Sub-Division: East Sudanic
Group: Surmic

Location: Gambella Regional State, Ethiopia
Anuak Zonal Administration
Dima District
Koy Locality

Estimated Population: 1500

A. Introductory Notes

1. Introduction

The Language and the People

Ngaalam has never been a majority language. In fact, it was a language considered to have disappeared or become extinct a century ago. The Ngaalmer have been rediscovered as a distinct group speaking a language called Ngaalam by the author in January 2015. Their location lies in the South Western Ethiopia in the Anuak Zone of Gambella Regional State ([Map](#)).

The speakers of Ngaalam are scattered in the forest belt of South Western Ethiopia among the Baale and Majang speakers and are estimated, by our principal language assistants, to be around 1500 individuals. Since the Ngaalamer ([see below on nomenclature](#)) are widely dispersed into a vast area and interspersed with other communities, at this stage, it is difficult to know the exact number of speakers of the language. None of the national population censuses conducted by the Ethiopian government in 1994 and in 2007 mentioned the Ngaalamer. They have never been mentioned in any official document at regional nor federal level and their very existence was unknown until 2015.

Nomenclature

Historically, the Ngaalam were known under a variety of other names which also appear in the literature. The self-name or the ethnic name of the group is Ngaalamer; Ngaalamit is the singular form.

The neighboring tribes call them by a variety of names: Anuaks call them Olam (which means according to the principal informant ‘the name of a tree’); this name is often seen in some of the old writings (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Bryan 1945). The Majang call them Majir; the Tirma-Chai, neighboring Surmic tribes, call them Ngidini [**ngidini**] while the Baale call them Ngaalama [**ngaalama**].

The Ngaalamer call their neighbors by different names: Berier for Anuaks; Suri for the Baale and Tirma-Chai. They also call the Murle by their self-name – Murle. The Ngaalamer sometimes use the name Tama [t'ama] as a self-name but stress that their ethnic name is Ngaalamer. According to the elders, Tama is a name used by outsiders to refer to the Ngaalamer but without any negative connotation.

Linguistic Classification

The identity of the group, the nomenclature referring to their language as well as the linguistic classification of the language has been recently clarified based on a comparison made between Ngaalam and ten Surmic languages. It has now become clear that Ngaalam is a distinct language within the Surmic group. More specifically, Ngaalam has been classified as a coordinate branch of the Didinga-Murle-Baale group that forms the South West Surmic branch. (See comparative data and linguistic classification in Moges (2015) [Ngaalam: sketch of grammar and its genetic position](#)).

2. History and Basic Ethnographic Information

Culturally the Ngaalamer are quite similar to their Nilo-Saharan neighbors and represents more of an egalitarian society with little and loose social structure. There is one hereditary chief and there are no clear age set groups or explicitly defined social structures in the society. The elders of the community including the Chief could remember six generations of their genealogical ancestors. They seem to have lost their genealogical accounts. The elders could not tell their story of origin and myth of origin which seems to have been lost.

Their way of life and their economic base have also been in the process of change. The elders claim that the Ngaalamer were once pastoralists with abundant cattle at their disposal but they gave up cattle keeping due to an endless raid of cattle by their stronger neighbors which resulted in a permanent loss of property and life. The continuous attack on their properties and human capital, especially women, contributed to the dwindling number of speakers of Ngaalam and probably this has been one of the external causes for the endangerment of their language and culture.

In accord with the claim made by elders, Murdock (1959: 172, 329) mentions the Ngaalamer as cattle keepers. Hence, originally it looks that they were semi-pastoralists in which their economic base was cattle keeping supplemented by river basin cultivation, hunting and gathering. After giving up cattle keeping they must have resorted to river basin cultivation as their means of subsistence supplemented by hunting and gathering and the principal crops were millet, beans and maize. In line with the oral traditions, therefore, the shift from semi-pastoralist way of life to hunter-gatherers must have taken place under external pressure from neighboring tribes. An additional factor for the shift could possibly be that the area was infested by the tsetse fly.

The Ngaalamer have not yet given up the life style of hunter-gatherers entirely. But due to the influence of the northern settlers (largely Amharas and Oromos) and other external factors such as accessibility to their land (once an extremely remote land), establishment of large scale commercial farms in the area, the concomitant policy of resettlement programs by the government, and the massive flow of peoples of various cultures from the highlands (especially farmers), the Ngaalamer are again in the process of shifting their economic base to the agricultural way of life. Some even started cultivating cash crops such as sesame by emulating the northern settlers who are acclaimed to be productive in harvesting sesame and rice. It seems that the Ngaalamer had moved from semi-pastoralist way of life to hunter-gatherers and are now in the process of moving to an agricultural way of life.

Perhaps due to the intense contact with the settlers, an interesting instance of abandoning of an age-old cultural practice has been reported by the elders that they gave up the removal of lower incisors which they used to practice in the past. This has been an aerial feature still being practiced by many of their neighbors such as the Anuak and the Majang.

The Ngaalamer has an important festival known as Tikacha, an annual gathering where all members of the community get together and celebrate the occasion for six consecutive days. The festival takes place at the end of the harvest season in January every year as a sign of ensuring their togetherness and renewal of the society's cohesion. The ritual leader prepares the festival and invites members of the community and people of all ages congregate around the compound of the chief and commemorates the event by dancing, singing, eating and drinking. Apparently it is a way of strengthening the unity of the group and expressing loyalty in a common cultural heritage against the danger of foreseeable total assimilation. The celebration is also an occasion for exchanging information on the fate and survival of their very existence. The chief plays the role of a unifying figure. In addition, the chief has the role of mediating conflicts between members of the community and between the people and their gods. He also represents the community during conflict with other ethnic groups.

Traditional (folk) beliefs among the Ngaalamer are also undergoing significant changes as a result of contact with other communities especially with the northern settlers. Although many Ngaalamer are still followers of traditional beliefs, during the last ten years (2005-2015) quite a significant number of them have been converted to Islam, Orthodox Christianity and the Protestant religion. While the northern settlers brought with them Islam and Orthodox Christianity and introduced the two major religions to the Ngaalamer, according to our information, the protestant religion was introduced to the

Ngaalam community through the Majang missionaries who also speak the Ngaalam language.

Since the Ngaalamer have started to embrace both Islam and Christianity, it goes without saying that, shortly this will diminish the role of the chief as a unifying spiritual leader which will in turn facilitate and accelerate the process of assimilation into the dominant culture of the northerners. In this process, spiritual and secular values of the group will no longer be functional which will conceivably affect the ethno-linguistic identity of the people.

Patterns of Multilingualism

The pattern of multilingualism among the Ngaalamer shows that Baale (a neighboring Surmic language) is the second widely spoken language by the speakers of the Ngaalam. One-third of the children are growing up speaking Baale as their first language which is clearly indicative of the direction of the language shift situation.

Generally, there is an ongoing shift in the language use situation but Baale has proved to be an important language for primary socialization. As compared to the older generation, the younger generation is, therefore, in the process of shifting language solidarity. Generally speaking, Ngaalam is still visible in the public domain but the direction of change is also becoming more obvious that means Baale is going to take over, though gradually, in the public domain as well.

The Overall Language Policy Context

Clearly there are favorable policies that recognize the linguistic rights of every ethnic group and in theory all languages have equal recognition by the state (see [The Ethiopian Language Policy](#)). But there is no mechanism laid down by the Federal government through which it guarantees the rights of minorities and checks on the implementation of those policies as stipulated in the Constitution of 1995. Hence, Ngaalam has not been recognized and never been mentioned in any official document both at regional and federal levels. Practically its existence is unknown to the government and the institutions concerned with the rights of ethnic minorities.

Language Vitality

For the purpose of establishing the direction of change and shifting language solidarity among the speakers of Ngaalam, UNESCO's parameters on language vitality have been employed to evaluate the language vitality and level of endangerment of Ngaalam. The following six major factors were employed for assessing a language's vitality and the state of endangerment. These are: intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, domains of language use, response to new domains and media, materials for language education and literacy as well as governmental and institutional language attitudes. Refer to [UNESCO \(2003\)](#) for a detailed discussion of the vitality index.

Intergenerational Language Transmission

According to the preliminary sociolinguistic survey discussed in Moges (2018) [Ngaalam: an endangered Nilo-Saharan language of the south west Ethiopia](#), Ngaalam can be characterized as "stable yet threatened" which means that it is "spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission" but the dominant language, Baale, has penetrated into the home environment and in some cases the dominant language is taking up certain important communication contexts in the public domain as well.

Absolute number of speakers

As mentioned earlier, the exact number of Ngaalam speakers is difficult to determine at this stage since they are living scattered over a vast area and interspersed with other communities such as the Baale and the Majang though they can be estimated to be around 1500. Besides being a small group, the style of their settlement coupled with the pattern of multilingualism among the speakers may possibly expose them to a high degree of risk that could lead to total assimilation. Thus, based on absolute number of speakers Ngaalam can be labeled as critically endangered or moribund language.

Domains of Language Use

The language use situation of among the Ngaalam speakers can be characterized as "multilingual parity", that is, due to the pattern of multilingualism in the native language and in the dominant language Baale, the latter has already began penetrating the home domains. The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages in certain important communicative domains such as the home domains is therefore a defining characteristic of the sociolinguistic situation.

Response to new domains of language use

For the Ngaalam language, there is no sign of expanding to new domains of language use such as media as a result of change in their life style or living conditions. The speakers seem to continue the use of the dominant language in the new domains as well as in the media. In the locality under discussion, the medium of instruction in primary schools, the language of administration and the language of media is dominantly that of Amharic, the official working language of the Federal government. As Suhua (2010:5) rightly pointed out, "Since education is an important domain in language use, besides reflecting the status, functions, and vitality of a language, it may also directly affect the language's transmission, its social functions, vitality and value". Nonetheless, since the Ngaalam speakers have been living in the bushes isolating themselves from the modern way of life and have not been recognized by the political system as a minority group and rather considered as part of the other communities such as the Baale and the Majang, the chance of expanding their language to new domains is pretty remote.

Availability of materials for language education and literacy

General education or even basic literacy plays a vital role in language development and maintenance in general. It also plays a catalyst role in insuring the intergenerational language transmission and in increasing the vitality of the language in particular. For education to be an important factor in language vitality, the availability of materials and a practical orthography would be an essential prerequisite. Thus [UNESCO's \(2003\)](#) document uses the availability and quality of materials for language education and literacy as one parameter to evaluate the level of endangerment and vitality of a language. Ngaalam is a language with no written materials. In fact, it has never been recorded in any form as it is a language spoken by a community living isolated in the south west forest for generations. They have been just rediscovered as a community speaking a distinct language of their own.

Governmental and institutional language attitudes, policies, and official status

Governments and institutions may have explicit and/or implicit language policies or attitudes towards dominant and non-dominant languages either to encourage or discourage their uses in certain important communicative contexts. As stated in the UNESCO's (2003:12) document,

The maintenance, promotion, or abandonment of non-dominant languages may be dictated by the dominant linguistic culture, be it regional or national. The linguistic ideology of a state may inspire linguistic minorities to mobilize their populations toward the maintenance of their languages, or may force them to

abandon them. These linguistic attitudes can be a powerful force both for promotion and loss of their languages.

Ethiopia's constitution as well as other relevant documents issued by the Federal government has an explicit language policy ([see the Ethiopian Language Policy 2021](#)) and according to these documents all Ethiopian languages have equal official status. But the official recognition of all ethnic groups and all languages have not been materialized at all levels in that the Federal government has no clear guidelines in protecting the rights of minority groups. As rightly stated, in UNESCO's document, having "equal legal status, however, does not guarantee language maintenance and long-term vitality of a language" (UNESCO, 2003:13). Hence, although there is an official recognition in protecting minority languages, there is no mechanism in place in ensuring these rights are protected at all levels and the situation of Ngaalam in light of UNESCO's scale falls under "differentiated support".

Community members' attitudes towards their own language

One can say that the speakers of Ngaalam have maintained a positive attitude towards their own language. From our observation in the field, it seems that the Ngaalamer use their language without promoting it. But this does not mean that they are neutral about the use of their language. They have made clear choices and preferences for certain functions in the use of the dominant and native languages.

Nevertheless, due to the pattern of multilingualism that prevails in the community, as speakers of the dominant and non-dominant languages, there is some level of competition between Baale and the native language so that some speakers have also developed a positive attitude towards the dominant language, thus creating a bilingual situation whereby the dominant and the native languages coexist and are in use in important domains.

Generally speaking, most speakers (up to 85%) have shown a positive attitude towards Amharic. Amharic is the language most speakers would like their children to learn and this is perhaps in recognition of its role as a vehicle of upward social and economic mobility and its apparent dominance at the national level. But it is difficult to imagine that they have developed a negative attitude towards their language and view their language as an obstacle to economic mobility and integration to mainstream society. Conceivably, what they intend to communicate by their responses to the various attitudinal variables is that they would like to maintain a diglossic situation where the native language is used in home contexts and the dominant language (in this case Amharic) serves in public domains such as in education and media. From the perspective of UNESCO's scaling, therefore, Ngaalam may fall into Grade 4, where most members

tacitly support language maintenance. All the same, we may also add that, the speakers of Ngaalam feel like maintaining the pattern of multilingualism that prevails in the home environment.

Type and quality of documentation

As per UNESCO's document (2003:16), in order to assess the urgency for documenting a language the type and quality of existing documented materials must be known. The document states, "the type and quality of existing language materials must be identified. Of central importance are written texts, including transcribed, translated, and annotated audiovisual recordings of natural speech". Accordingly, the following scale for grading the amount of information has been identified.

Since nothing has been documented on the language and the culture and no record is available, except for the 300 basic lexicon recorded by the author for the purpose of a historical-comparative analysis, certainly Ngaalam can be labeled as "undocumented" language, where no materials of any kind exist.

The assessment of the strength of language vitality against the six major evaluative factors identified by UNESCO (2003) has indicated that Ngaalam is a threatened and unsafe language which is in the direction of language shift to the dominant language, Baale. Due to the pattern of multilingualism, the dominant language is increasingly penetrating into the very vital communicative domains including the home domains. Hence, the trend in the existing language use domains shows that there is a multilingual parity in which the dominant and non-dominant languages are in mutual co-existence for the time being. What is more, the language is not responsive to new domains as in basic literacy and the media, and materials for language education and literacy are totally non-existent. Definitely the language is not in a position to expand the existing domains due to the dominance of Amharic in those spheres.

The assessment of the organizational and institutional attitudes against UNESCO's factor demonstrated that although explicit favorable policies exist that recognizes and protects minority languages, these policies are not able to guarantee language vitality and maintenance due to the gap in implementation of those policies. The attitude of members of the community towards their language, on the other hand, seems to be positive and there is no sign that points to the fact that they have a negative attitude towards their own language. Surely, they have a positive attitude towards the dominant languages.

In light of the above facts, and due to the total absence of documented and recorded materials, it is reasonable to suggest that there is urgency for documentation of the linguistic and cultural heritages of the people.

3. Linguistic Features

For the details of the linguistic features and the corresponding data presented below, see Moges (2015), "[Ngaalam: sketch of grammar and its genetic position](#)".

Phonological Features

The sound pattern of Ngaalam is typical to Surmic; it shows close resemblance to the South West Surmic (SWS) pattern.

Pattern of stop consonants

There is a three-way distinction between voiceless stops, voiced stops and implosives. The voiceless stops occur in all positions within a word. Whereas voiced stops and implosives occur only word initially and word medially and they are all absent from word final position.

Ngaalam shares the characteristics of many Surmic languages in having the full series of implosives and in imposing restrictions on the occurrence of implosives word finally.

ATR Vowels

There are nine vowels, which can be categorized into [+ATR] and [-ATR]; the [+ATR] vowels includes [i, e, o and u] and the [-ATR] vowels are [ɪ, ɛ, ɔ, and ʊ]. The low vowel [a] seems to be neutral.

Tone

A tentative analysis of tone shows that there are two tone levels, high and low, and a falling tone. Examples: [akat] with H-H tone 'tongue', [akat] with L-L tone 'food'; [mua] with H-L tone 'lion'.

Grammatical Features

Number marking

Number marking involves a tripartite division between plural marking, singulative marking and a pattern of replacement. The tripartite marking system of number marking in nouns is characteristic for Northeastern Nilo-Saharan languages ([Dimmendaal, 2000](#)).

Numerals

Like the rest of the Surmic languages Ngaalam has a quinary numeral system and combines base five, base ten and base twenty systems for higher numerals. The word for

'twenty' contains the root for 'person', **eeti** with H-H-L tone (one person with all fingers and toes); a system based on fingers and toes is typical to Surmic.

Higher numerals are twenty-based representing one person for 'twenty', two persons for 'forty', three persons for 'sixty', etc. The source and meaning of **difa** 'one hundred' is not clear for the time being. Compare the Oromo form **diba** and the Majang form **dibe** for 'hundred', however.

Demonstratives

Demonstratives in Ngaalam follow the head noun as in Baale and make a binary distinction between proximal and distal and alternate between singular and plural: **nigite** 'this', **nigitoni** 'that', **niginegi** 'these', **niginogi** 'those'.

The demonstratives in Ngaalam contain the widespread Surmic formatives -ni (singular) for the distal and -gi (plural) for both the proximal and distal. Examples: **oroḏa nigite** 'this dog'; **oroḏa nigitoni** 'that dog'; **oroḏe niginegi** 'these dogs'; **oroḏe niginogi** 'those dogs'.

Adjectives

Adjectives follow the head noun: **makaje** 'big'; **ḳḳḳḳ makaje** 'big elephant'; **ḳḳḳḳ-tḳ makaje** 'the elephant is big' [literally: it is the elephant that is big]; **kuttur** 'short', **kḳḳḳ kuttur-ijo** 'the tree is short'.

Adjectival forms in Ngaalam express various concepts of dimension, value, physical property, age, etc. Examples: **unn-o** '(It is) long'; **kuttur-o** '(It is) short'; **abburew-o** '(It is) hot'; **lalew-o** '(It is) cold'; **kilew-o** '(It is) dry'; **maane-o** '(It is) yellow'.

Case System

The case system of Ngaalam is typical to the Surmic pattern: the accusative case has no case marker (marked by a zero morpheme). The citation form of a noun or a pronoun is also in the accusative case.

Historical-Comparative notes

See the [Sketch of grammar and comparative data in Moges \(2015\) “Ngaalam: a sketch of grammar and its genetic position”](#).

Alternation between voiced geminated stops and implosives

As described in detail in Moges (2001), there is a frequently recurring alternation between voiced geminates and implosives in SWS languages. It is argued that this alternation resulted in the development of implosive consonants from earlier geminated voiced stops word medially, a sound change which further fed the existing pattern of implosive consonants by means of the developments such as ***gg** > **ɠ**, ***bb** > **ɓ** and ***dd** > **ɗ**. Ngaalam shares this regular sound change with the SWS languages.

ATR harmony

The ATR Harmony is also a dividing line between the two coordinate branches of South Surmic namely, South West Surmic (SWS) and South East Surmic (SES). It is argued in Moges (2001:314) that "Proto-Surmic must have had a balanced ten vowel system consisting of two sets of five vowels each, which may be distinguished by the ATR feature".

It was further argued that synchronically languages such as Murle and Baale must have lost the +ATR [a] vowel historically reducing in effect their vowels into a nine-vowel system, while the seven-vowel system happened to be the norm for SES languages.

Ngaalam patterns with the Murle and Baale by having a nine-vowel system and ATR harmony system between the two sets of vowels. In Ngaalam, just like the SWS languages, the +ATR vowel triggers the harmony.

4. Current circumstances and future challenges and opportunities

Ngaalam is a language spoken by a minority group of approximately over a thousand and a half people of hunter-gatherers that survived in the forest belt of Southwest Ethiopia, one of the remotest areas in the country until recently. The language has now been exposed to threat due to a conspiracy between external and internal factors. The external factors include the accessibility of the area due to the construction of infrastructural facilities, the establishment of large scale commercial farms in the area, the resettlement policy of the government and the massive flow of peoples of different cultures and languages from the north.

The penetration of major religions such as Islam and Christianity into the Ngaalamer community and the opening of schools in which Amharic is the medium of instruction are factors corollary to the external forces. On top all these, Amharic is the language of administration at local level and the language of the media as well.

Internal factors are related to the change of the life style of the Ngaalam community triggered by external pressures. According to the oral traditions, the Ngaalamer were once semi-pastoralists keeping cattle in the area but gave up cattle-keeping due to the continuous cattle raid by their more powerful neighbors that resulted in huge losses in terms of human and material resources. These incidents must have reduced the number of Ngaalam speakers over time and eventually weakened their economic bases turning them into hunter-gatherers. Besides, the frequent intermarriage with their dominant neighbors such as the Baale, who are cattle-keepers and, who are economically better-off, must have put the Ngaalam in a subordinate position. The subordinate social and economic position and the subsequent survival strategy adopted by the Ngaalamer must have led to the pattern of multilingualism that is readily observable among the Ngaalam speakers today. The sociolinguistic situation can, therefore, be described as "bilingualism in diglossia", where the Ngaalam speak Baale whereas the latter do not speak Ngaalam. For example, our principal language consultant, Getachew Ojulu, was born from a Baale father and a Ngaalam mother. While his mother speaks Baale as a second language his father does not speak Ngaalam.

The process of language shift to Baale has been in progress for some time now and this ongoing process seems to be accelerated by the encroachment of Amharic into the Ngaalam society as a language of administration, education and the media. It is also important to note at this juncture that Amharic is perceived by the Ngaalamer as the vehicle of upward social and economic mobility signaling the inevitable assimilation of the Ngaalam community into the mainstream society. At any rate, "A language that can no longer be maintained, perpetuated, or revitalized still merits the most complete documentation possible. This is because each language embodies unique cultural and ecological knowledge in it" (UNESCO 2003:6).

B. Questions for further study

Study questions for undergraduates:

- (1) Compare and contrast the following means of subsistence: *pastoralism, semi-pastoralism, river-basin cultivation, hunting and gathering*, and *agricultural* ways of life.
- (2) How do you define the term "ethno-linguistic" identity?

- (3) What is linguistic classification? How do we classify languages into families?
- (4) What do you understand by 'language shift' and 'language maintenance'? Explain by providing examples, if possible.
- (5) What is implementation in language planning?

Study questions for graduate students:

- (1) What are the internal and external factors contributing to the shifting of language solidarity?
- (2) How do you relate language policy implementation with the notions of language rights and linguistic citizenships?
- (3) Describe the concept of "regular sound change".
- (4) What is the articulatory and acoustic nature of implosive consonants? What could be the possible origin of these consonants in Ngaalam and other Surmic languages, for instance?
- (5) What do you understand by ATR vowel harmony process?

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D. Others

- i) Audio file on the self-introduction of a native speaker
- ii) Transcription and translation of the audio file
- iii) Ngaalam texts
- iv) Some pictures