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Source: *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, Anno 56, No. 1 (Marzo 2001), pp. 69-89

Published by: [Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente \(IsIAO\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40761499>

Accessed: 09/07/2013 05:43

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BILIN: SPEAKER STATUS STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

by Abbebe Kifleyesus (*)

Introduction

Eritrea does not constitute a unit linguistically or culturally. Instead, this new-born country, with an estimated population of about 3,500,000 people, is characterized by a large variety of language families and groups on the one hand, and a considerable degree of cultural diversity on the other. Many Eritreans are therefore multilingual or, at least, bilingual. Processes of urbanization in rapidly changing economic and political conditions in Eritrea further act as agents for the diffusion of particular languages at the expense of others. In this scenario *linguae francae* have developed, giving rise to situations of rather stable bilingualism or diglossia. Because encroaching diglossia from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña resulting in the gradual substitution of Bilin by these languages has been observed in the area of Sänhit ⁽¹⁾, the present contribution is directed towards examining speaker status health and death and disseminating general and specific information on the causes and effects of language shift in Eritrea using Bilin as a case in point ⁽²⁾. More specifically, this essay attempts to provide

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(1) The people call themselves Bilin. The word that refers to the people and their language is spelled differently in different sources. In sources that use German and Romance languages such as Italian and French it appears as Blin or Bilin. Recently the form Blean appeared in Eritrean literature of English expression. Many authors use Bogos or Bilin to refer either to the region or to the people. The areas where the Bilin survive are conveniently referred to as Bogos in both Bilin and Tegrēñña and Sänhit in Tegrä. A common Bilin oral tradition which makes reference to the past using the Bilin language also employs *Bét Tärqé*, *Bét Täwqé*, and *Gäbrä Tärqé Qur* to refer to clan genealogical ancestors of the group (Adhana 1988). I am particularly indebted to Adhana Mängestäab and Nayzghi Gäbrä Mädhén. The former for reading and commenting on a draft of this essay and the latter for constructive criticisms with regards these Bilin backgrounds.

(2) The discussion contained in this essay, necessarily somewhat abbreviated owing to

answers, at least in part, to the following questions: (a) to what extent and in what ways, do economic and social factors play a role as causal mechanisms for Bilin bilingualism and obsolescencism?; (b) how important is Bilin as a potential and actual symbol of ethnic identity relative to other symbols? In short, this essay examines Bilin linguistic interaction with Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña speaking populations, investigates the tremendous expansion of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña, and the social and economic provisions which may have led to a rapid increase in the Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña speakers and hence caused the linguistic and cultural absorption of the Bilin, and discusses the linguistic and cultural elements that contribute to Bilin language drift and shift in the context of the cultural character of language and identity ⁽³⁾.

Bilin Ethnographic Setting

The Bilin who have early on attracted the attention of Europeans as is testified and attested to by the flow of reports of missionaries and travelers (Munzinger 1859; Issel 1876; Sapeto 1878; Portal 1892) arrived to their present location in a wave of migrations from the Agaw heartland of central Ethiopia via eastern Tegrä, Akkälä Guzay and Hamasén where in Sänhīt their principal traditional cultural centres are now Magarih, 'Ona and Kärän (Conti Rossini 1897, 1930; Pollera 1935). In the past the Bilin absorbed non-Bilin speaking herders who settled among them and were divided into serfs (*mekhirukhu*) and aristocrats (*semgär*) (Nadel 1944 cited in Lenci 1999; Gamst 1984). The aristocrats are descendants of the original conquering Agaw migrants, and the serfs or client — bondsmen are descendants of the Tegrä-speaking peoples already in the area. Oral customary laws such as *Tärqér Feteḥ*, named after lineages and clans, acted as Bilin legal traditions dealing with criminal and civil cases, and were

constraints of space, is based on field work carried out in the Bilin speech communities of Ḥalhal, Ḥašāla and Ḥalimäntäl during the summers of 1997, 1998 and 1999. The attempt to reach members of Bilin communities with a view to studying the status of their speech generally did not encounter difficulties, as the traditional Bilin code of hospitality and generosity, together with a positive pride in the local language, provided a first hearing. This all the more could have been true had I a reasonable command of Bilin in order to forge strong personal links and create a lasting bond with consultants I intended to work among. Yet it was not always easy to gain the cooperation of local speakers in areas where the language was eroding because many felt that the knowledge they have of Bilin is rather too limited. A Bilin who does not speak the language may be ridiculed as a "deaf Bilin".

(3) The speed with which Bilin language replacement is taking place is a phenomenon I did not attempt to study.

invoked in interminable proceedings like inheritance, blood revenge and other legal matters. Among the Muslim Bilin this traditional law was less of use due to the development of *shari'ah* (Awrajja Kärän 1961; Gäbrä Yäsus 1964; Haylä Maryam 1986).

Today the Bilin comprise about 2.5% of the Eritrean population and inhabit the Sänhit area of the 'Ansäba valley where they are scattered in the surroundings of Mägariḥ, Halḥal, Hašäla 'Ila-Bär'id (originally Cendeq) and Halimäntäl, and where Da'werotay, Mänsura, and Hagaz roughly form the boundaries for their enclave that is nowadays made up of 50% Sunni Muslim and 50% Christian population of which the majority are Catholic with very few Protestant and Tewahdo households ⁽⁴⁾. Most Bilin live in tablelands along the seasonally flowing Barka and 'Ansäba rivers and their tributaries and practice maize or 'effun (*Zea mays*), millet or *madil/bultug* (*Pennisetum glaucum*), barely or *sekem* (*Hordeum vulgare*), wheat or *järug* (*Triticum aestivum*) and legume agriculture using oxen and ploughs, and subsist on these crops as daily intakes in the form of bread (*ṭayta*, *ṭabitära*, *mänšakhw*, *qečča*), porridge (*kala*), beverage (*selekh*), and supplementary foods such as boiled grain (*tukun*) and roasted grain (*ṭä'ät*) ⁽⁵⁾. The Bilin whose cropland here is mostly controlled by kinship groups are culturally and linguistically a homogeneous group; and it is the fierce attachment to one another that has until recent times through endogamous practices kept their culture and language alive. During recent years, much of Bilin cultural tradition has been uprooted due to war, periodic droughts, and subsequent displacements and dispersals. Among the Bilin lineage is traced through the father's line and yet like matrilineal societies mother's brother (*äg*) is highly respected ⁽⁶⁾. Bilin women do not marry men they love but love the men they marry, and when they do, they do not call their husbands using first names because it is considered disrespectful; and among the Muslim Bilin, polygynous marriages are rare curiosities rather than norms.

(4) The Bilin number around 87,500 (Nayzghi, personal communication based on Kärän Municipal Administration Records). Gamst (1984) estimated the Bilin population as 50,000 while Killion (1998) puts it as 60,000. Adhana (personal communication), a Bilin and an authority on the subject rejects these numbers as underestimations, instead he suggests a total of 120,000 half of whom, based on Catholic Church Records in the diocese of Kärän surroundings, are Christian Bilin. In any event, the Bilin are dominated by the far more numerous Tegrä whose number has been estimated at about 1,000,000.

(5) The Bilin see themselves as agricultural people in contradistinction to the Tegrä, by whom they are surrounded and who think of themselves as pastoral people. Bilin oral traditions indicate a much greater dependence upon cattle in the distant past. At present, goats, some sheep and cattle are kept as a source of wealth, dairy products and flesh foods.

(6) This unique social organizational feature requires further anthropological investigation. For details on Bilin lineage, marriage and life cycle ceremonies, including *gäbtina*, see Mäbrahtu (1983), Pawlos (1986), Wäldä Maryam (1986).

Bilin is the northernmost Agaw dialect, i.e. it belongs to the Central Cushitic linguistic group (Ehret 1976; Thompson 1976; Appleyard 1988) (7). Contacts between the Bilin and Tegrä/Tegreñña enabled the Bilin to pick up Tegrä/Tegreñña from these peoples. Intensification of contacts and subsequent linguistic assimilation continued since recent times and Bilin children born in these periods acquired Tegrä and/or Tegreñña as their mother tongue rather than Bilin. The result is that younger children no longer learned Bilin, while older children or adults unlearned it. Several consultants note that parents really now seem to insist on speaking Bilin to their children, but that their children would reply in the Tegrä language, presumably because this is the only language in which they are fluent.

At present the Bilin are largely fragmented and divided from each other islands, as it were, in a sea of Tegrä and/or Tegreñña (8). What was once a Bilin continuum, extending from the extreme south of Dämbāzan to the far north of Halhal, linked by waves of migrations until the dissolution of such population movements in the eighteenth century, has now developed into a language expressed in a whole series of variations but not dialects along the way (9). The preeminence of these variations is amply demonstrated by the fact that Bilin speakers tend to view themselves principally as members of their own local variety group and their allegiances are thus equally local on the linguistic level.

The Bilin will therefore relate fairly well to speakers of reasonably similar varieties, say, within or along the same valley (10), and to a diminishing extent, to speakers of distant varieties which are less

(7) Bilin is genetically related to Agaw ethno-linguistic groups like Qemant, Qwara, Awññi, Xamtañña, and Fālaša of central Ethiopia. These languages are cognate and thus share a reconstructible common ancestor form (Reinisch 1882; Fleming 1976). For an extended list of Agaw and other related Central Cushitic languages, see Unseth (1990, 1998) and Lockot (1998).

(8) In addition to the rural speech communities in those areas where Bilin has traditionally been spoken, some speakers are also to be found in national or regional capitals like Asmara, Massawa, Agordat and Tassanay. The presence of these individuals and their families in these urban centres is of long standing but does not appear to have been self-perpetuating. One easily notes that the urban dwelling Bilin have a tendency to abandon their language more readily than those who live in the traditional Bilin homelands (Kiflä Maryam 1985).

(9) Bilin thus lacks dialect. What was once an interspersed Central Cushitic continuum, originating in the Abbay/Wag/Lasta line in central Ethiopia and extending from the extreme south of Säräyā to the far north of Bilin country in Halhal in Eritrea, has existed as a single language that, like most languages, didn't express itself in a series of dialects along the way. This is amply demonstrated by the fact that today mother tongue education at the primary level is given in Bilin that is well understood by all Bilin children. Because Bilin speakers relate very well to each other, they tend to view themselves principally as members of one linguistic group and their allegiance is thus equally national at the linguistic level.

(10) These Bilin varieties are reasonably similar to each other and are to be encountered as a group in close proximity to one another.

comprehensible to them. In rare instances speakers of widely dissimilar varieties resort to either Tegrä or Tegrēñña in order to carry on a conversation together, rather than make the effort of continuing to struggle with one another's comparatively unfamiliar native speech forms. A Bilin who masters the linguistic variety of a particular area will be deemed a good speaker by the local inhabitants while another who may speak a different variety with even greater proficiency will not be reckoned as good, and where a Bilin speaker has enough confidence in his own linguistic variety he may even stigmatize speakers of unfamiliar varieties as wrong or still associate them with particular forms of Bilin often spoken of with disfavour⁽¹¹⁾. Bilin speakers of varieties which have a number of features unfamiliar to the majority of speakers from other Bilin localities are thus often aware of the unusual nature of their linguistic variety. This awareness is heightened in the case of the Bilin who have learned to read, as they will also perceive the gap between their own linguistic variety and the literary form. The situation in the Bilin homelands is additionally complicated by the fact that the state has, since 1998, been promoting a standard written form of Bilin to be introduced at the elementary level in the Bilin predominant areas of the 'Ansäba Administrative Region'⁽¹²⁾.

The current Bilin speech communities, now largely confined to the areas mentioned above are in many ways either surrounded by or interspersed amongst the Tegrä and/or the Tegrēñña. Their members for the most part share the same ethnic and linguistic background and have religious affiliations in common with Muslims and Christians of the area. But above all, they must struggle for a place alongside Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña, the two giants among Eritrea's nine ethnolinguistic groups. And it is either in Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña, the public languages of the 'Ansäba valley, that written administrative exchanges, mass media transmissions, and most official businesses or commercial transactions, are negotiated and conducted, the percentage of Bilin speakers being now so small as to be irrelevant. It is here nowadays that the Bilin language is slowly being displaced by Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña due to intermarriage, economic and

(11) In the area of Halhal and Halimäntäl where I carried out most of my field work I met with two reactions which are worthy of mention *à propos* of this. My key consultant announced to his neighbours initially that I was studying the local Bilin variety because it was the "Halhal Bilin" and therefore the "right Bilin", but, as he came to accept my attention to his local linguistic variety, he derived confidence from this and began to tell people that I was working with him because he had the "right Bilin" which was the "Halimäntäl Bilin."

(12) Bilin speakers have some negative attitude towards their language on account of its lack of a written tradition. For recent developments on Bilin writings, see Fesshaseyon (1992), and Kiflä Maryam (1996).

social interaction and, to a certain extent, by the use of these two languages in schools ⁽¹³⁾.

Bilin Weakness

The Bilin live in close contact with the nomadic and pastoral Tegrä and the urban and semi urban Tegreñña who live in and around Kärän, with whom they have a symbiotic relationship and whose languages they also speak apart from their own language. Such a language use condition has put Bilin in an extremely weak position. The following discussion shows why this is the case. First, the inherent weakness of the existing Bilin speech communities is illustrated by the fact that some individuals within these communities frequently dissociate themselves from the Bilin language, behaving as if they were virtually Tegrä and/or Tegreñña speakers, and many others, particularly in the *Bét Täwqé* areas, use the language but rarely. Second, the number of resident Bilin Tegrä and/or Tegreñña speakers has itself increased as a result of returning *émigrés* from towns and from the Sudan, and people who have grown up in homes in which the Bilin language is no longer spoken. This linguistically mixed composition of the surviving Bilin speech communities means that it is not always clear to outsiders, or even to the oldest members of the Bilin communities who can speak the traditional Bilin language and who cannot. Likewise, the youngest speakers, who have ever more limited opportunities to practice the language, may not themselves always be aware of the full extent of their linguistic abilities.

The phenomenon referred to above of the Bilin in many ways opting out of their native speech community is, of course, directly related to the economic and cultural power of Tegrä and/or Tegreñña by which they are surrounded. According to one elderly Bilin woman, “the line of multilingualism runs through several Bilin homes and meeting places.” In more than one Bilin household in and around Kärän where the Bilin are a minority I have spoken to young Bilin boys and girls whose parents would communicate with them as children in Tegrä and/or Tegreñña, whereas communication between the parents themselves would be largely in Bilin. These days pressure on young Bilin men and women and on school going

(13) There is a provision in the Eritrean Constitution that elementary education must be given in the mother tongue or vernacular language. Today Bilin is used as a medium of instruction in preparatory and elementary schools in areas where the language is predominant and Bilin children have benefited from it since 1999. This is facilitated by an already existing work on the Bilin alphabet and a book on the grammar of the language. See Täklä Giorgis (1992).

Bilin children to opt for Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña as their everyday language originates in the school environment where the instruction is still given either in Tegrä or Tegrēñña. In the Bilin homelands this is visible in places, such as *Täwqé* / Tegrä border areas, where there are insufficient number of Bilin speaking children in a school catchment area or where the instruction may be given in Bilin but where the presence of a handful of Tegrä or Tegrēñña speaking children is often sufficient enough to induce Bilin children generally to employ Tegrä or Tegrēñña as their language of play.

There is a tendency for many native Bilin speakers to judge the relative strength and health of Bilin by its freedom from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña borrowings. While such loanwords can to some degree be shown to have existed in Bilin in the past, and indeed they do also prevail vigorously in Bilin of the present day, the length of time Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña loanwords have been in use is often difficult to assess in view of the inclination of Bilin speakers to employ even colloquial Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña words, apparently for stylistic purposes or from motives of maintaining prestige within the community⁽¹⁴⁾. But this is not to suggest that all Bilin speech communities are not free from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña loanwords. Indeed the ability to speak Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña is often a status marker for the Bilin people, as is clear not only from their eagerness to competently speak these languages whenever the opportunity arises but also from the number and nature of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña loanwords in modern Bilin. Such loanwords and the apparent inability of Bilin to deal with the range of thought and activity of the larger Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña world has led to loss of confidence among some Bilin speakers⁽¹⁵⁾.

As in other cases of prolonged language contact, there is not only a modern technical element in the Bilin vocabulary but also a number of everyday Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña usages in the form of inflections. The borrowing by Bilin of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña vocabulary has thus increased apace since the early decades of the second half of the twentieth century and as virtually many Bilin are now also Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña speakers there is no comprehension barrier to employing Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña term(s)

(14) Some speakers tend to avoid Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña loanwords when talking to Bilin they consider educated speakers of Bilin, so that the minimal occurrence of these loanwords in speech is, therefore, an indicator of formality with certain speakers. On one memorable occasion in the home of a young Bilin couple I noted only few such Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña loanwords during an entire interview which lasted more than one hour.

(15) The status of Bilin speakers in the eyes of their Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña speaking neighbours is sometimes also lowered by unsuccessful Bilin efforts to locate appropriate Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña word(s) for incorporation into Bilin phrases or sentences. This practice is so prevalent that it often is mentioned by consultants.

for a new object ⁽¹⁶⁾. Another area in which I myself have noted a particularly strong impact from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña is the new “cassette culture”, to use the phrase of Manuel (1993), purveyed mostly through the omnipresent media of the radio and the tape recorder transmitting Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña songs ⁽¹⁷⁾. There is no doubt then that Bilin suffers from a lack of prestige as a medium of media communication but is associated rather with a traditional folk culture ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Intermarriage between members from different ethnic groups further complicates the relation between language and ethnicity. For example, descendants from intermarriage between the Bilin and their neighbours claim their father's ethnicity, and their primary language is that of the father. Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña men marry Bilin women who become Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña in this way, but the reverse match does not by and large seem to be taking place. In other words, Bilin brides who marry Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña men learn these languages in their husbands' households, and children of such mixed marriages usually take the ethnic and linguistic identity of their paternal parents. The Bilin are thus diminishing in number as a linguistic group because of intermarriage. Indeed, the domains in which either Bilin or Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña are spoken are beginning to overlap, a situation abelted by intermarriage. By the same explanation, the contexts in which Bilin is used among adults are decreasing, and the acquisition of Bilin as a first language has become less frequent because it strongly depends on the social network of which the parents are part. The Bilin language is therefore also losing ground as a result of shift in language loyalty due to marital and social networks.

While Tegrä and Tegrēñña, though not mutually intelligible, are closely related linguistically because they belong to the northern branch of the Ethio-Semitic languages (Hetzron 1972, 1976), Bilin, a language of a minority to the Central Cushitic group of languages which makes it unimportant and more

(16) This is all the more true of the increasing number of young Bilin opting for Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña altogether. A *Tärqé* Bilin consultant is of the conviction that this is a result of an identity crisis of some educated Bilin of the “serf” stock who intentionally opt for Tegrēñña for their children claiming that this was the original language of their ancestors. A topic not discussed in this essay is the massive influence of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña on the naming system of Bilin which is bound to have had an adverse effect on attitudes of young Bilin speakers to their language. For an extended discussion of such a view, see Kiflä Maryam (1986).

(17) The presence of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña bilingualism within the Bilin speech communities as an everyday phenomenon, especially since the arrival of the radio and some newspapers written in these languages, has greatly affected the existence of Bilin. The dramatic effect this has had on the linguistic behavior of Bilin youth has not been systematically studied, to my knowledge, but is quite evident even to the casual observer. For similar observations using other case studies, see Grillo (1989).

(18) This is now changing because of government radio programmes in Blean.

difficult to learn by the Tegrä and/or the Tegreñña. When the Bilin are among themselves, they speak their own language, but many are also fluent in either Tegrä or Tegreñña, depending on whom they are in closer contact with. At present many Bilin speak Tegrä and/or Tegreñña as their primary and first language and there are evidences that, at least in the urban centres, suggest that the younger Bilin generations are Tegrä and/or Tegreñña-dominant and use Bilin as a second language. But there are variations in the degree of Bilin proficiency and competency in Tegrä and/or Tegreñña. That is perhaps why Bilin language proficiency of some young Bilin does not seem to go beyond the level of a limited corpus of lexical items and phrases. Clearly the Bilin are in the process of losing linguistic identity as they are melting into Tegrä and/or Tegreñña linguistic pots, and their linguistic loyalty is thus now tilted towards these societies. The disparate linguistic position in this sociolinguistic situation therefore explains that the Bilin speak both their own language and the languages of the Tegrä and the Tegreñña while the latter two tend not to speak Bilin. Since a large number of the Bilin speak Tegrä and/or Tegreñña it is safe to say that many Bilin are bilingual. It is because the Bilin interact with the Tegrä and/or Tegreñña whose languages are viewed as more prestigious, that their language is therefore particularly threatened.

This linguistic state of affairs may give rise to the erroneous conclusion that economic transformations provide the decisive incentives for processes of language shift. The gradual linguistic expansion of Tegrä and/or Tegreñña as languages of prestige offsets this claim by showing how a confrontation with new social values leads to the imposition on and substitution of Bilin by Tegrä and/or Tegreñña. First and foremost these two languages are spoken by approximately 1,200,000 people in the regions of Sämhar, Sänhit, Sahel, Barka, and parts of Dämbäzan. Clearly the Tegrä and/or Tegreñña are socially, economically and politically so well organized that the Bilin use the terms *däškli* and *šeli* to despise and resent them. Although the current Tegrä and/or Tegreñña communities are rather heterogeneous, the various groups do share common cultural features in terms of kinship and marriage, and in terms of subsistence production that range from pure pastoralism to agriculture and commercial culture. What the Bilin case shows is the adoption of the Tegrä language by a group which predominantly subsists on traditional farming, an activity regarded with some contempt by the Tegrä pastoralists ⁽¹⁹⁾. Changing subsistence patterns

(19) The Bilin are agriculturalists, a practice incompatible at least with Tegrä ethos, and which distinguished the Bilin from the latter group. This division of language use is typical for Bilin cultivators interacting with Tegrä pastoralists. Some Bilin are employed as herders by the Tegrä pastoralists and Bilin knowledge of the language of livestock owners facilitates the acquisition of material benefits and advantages.

are not therefore the only causal mechanisms of language shift; instead changes in social values and attitudes may lead to language shift in favour of the one spoken by a prestigious group (Dorian 1980). In this environment Tegrä, if not, Tegrēñña is a *lingua franca*; along with Tegrēñña, its expansion is probably due to the fact that it has been a dominant-culture language in terms of being the language of trade, justice and administration, if not education, for some time. The Bilin see no advantage in transmitting their own language in their interaction with the Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña. Instead knowledge of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña seem to be a prerequisite for social mobility whereas Bilin is used as a secret code to exclude the Tegrä and/or the Tegrēñña from communication during commercial transaction or personal interaction.

Other processes of language contact in the area of study include the convergence phenomena (Heine 1976). One such convergence area, in this case a semantic one, is found in places where the Bilin and the Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña languages or their speakers have been in close contact with each other over a long period of time. Here Bilin shows profound linguistic effects from its contact with Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña and most changes have been in the direction of convergence with the latter two languages. Predominance of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña in Sänhit resulted in change of Bilin vocabulary not so much by abandonment but by modification through long term interference from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña mastered by Bilin speakers ⁽²⁰⁾. Contraction is further facilitated by: (a) geographical proximity to both Tegrä and Tegrēñña, (b) presence of schools operating in these two languages, (c) absence of any major religious differences between the Bilin and their neighbours and (d) Bilin and Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña economic interdependence and market interactions these factors were and still are all favourable for the contraction of Bilin ⁽²¹⁾.

(20) Such a convergence may, of course, come about through borrowing without language shifting. This point has been raised by Mulugéta (1985) who using Amharic notes that linguistic expansion must ordinarily be accompanied by a roughly corresponding amount of linguistic contraction. By implication, limitation in the amount of speech community area sheds light on the extent to which languages are in the process of contraction. Yet the complexity of language shift forces us to refrain from such rash generalizations about their causes, let alone from making predictions about when some of these is supposed to take place. Sänhit is still awaiting investigation from scholars interested in language contraction from a linguistic or social point of view. I hope that the present contribution serves to spur on those in search of such social and linguistic foundations of Bilin in Eritrea.

(21) We know very little about the actual process of language contraction in Bilin. The question of whether Bilin language contraction is comparable to convergence or, instead, to changes in the natural language itself still remains to be studied. But that doesn't mean it is impossible to investigate the contraction of Bilin as a process, and to observe the process as it continues.

In addition to the weakening of Bilin due to the process of contraction, there is a further general dimension of death which extends throughout the urban Bilin speech communities. This is the failure of the younger speakers to benefit, as previous generations did, from interaction with the oldest generation of speakers — precisely those speakers who normally have the widest range of Bilin linguistic skills within the communities. The reasons for this relate largely to the fact that the acquired wisdom of such old folk is not generally highly regarded by modern Bilin whose preoccupations lie mainly outside the scope of these old Bilin people's experience and who also may lead much of their daily lives in Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña ⁽²²⁾. Furthermore, as more and more of the older generation die off, taking with them many untransmitted lexicon in the local store of Bilin, the language is increasingly becoming less of use. Even traditional Bilin greetings and blessings are often unfamiliar nowadays to younger Bilin speakers in many Bilin communities. All of the above factors have the cumulative effect, then, of restricting the young speakers' level of functioning in Bilin; thinning out of the speech community of the oldest generation of Bilin speakers with the widest linguistic range; increasing the number of speakers opting for use of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña in everyday speech; and eroding Bilin vitality even in domains where traditionally it was strong. In some cases this progressive restriction has brought young Bilin speakers to the point where only a limited selection of topics can be discussed satisfactorily by them in Bilin. Thus, whenever a subject more complicated than ordinary Bilin community activities is raised, individuals can be heard switching over into Tegrä and/ or Tegrēñña in order to deal with it adequately.

Because great economic and social changes are taking place in these areas, some occupations have gradually been lost to a large number of the Bilin population — indeed in certain areas particular occupations have all but disappeared ⁽²³⁾. Alternatively, where traditional practices such as cultivating and trading continue, new terms from Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña sources replace Bilin terminologies, with the result that these realms of

(22) Although this problem is pressing among the urban-dwelling where there is a Bilin tendency to abandon their language more readily and quickly than those who live in the country, this trend is nowadays changing because a considerable Bilin traders' use of the language among children and with adults is gaining a foothold in towns like Kärän and Hāgaz. For an extended discussion of this sort, see Kiflä Maryam (1984).

(23) On account of the fundamental nature of the changes which have affected Bilin speech communities in recent decades, it was often extremely difficult, if not down right impossible, to explore whole ranges of vocabulary relating to now defunct Bilin cultural practices, observances and beliefs.

vocabulary are swept into oblivion while whole new lists of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña words are substituted. In Ḥalimäntäl, for example, the traditional roofing material was a thatch of straw or bent grass so that the Bilin normally spoke of roofing the house in their own language. As thatching is now becoming obsolete, it is the term of Italian origins *zingo* which appears to be most commonly used in referring to roofing. Needless to say, new ways of living have been introduced into the various Bilin speech communities and Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña vocabulary relating to the work and craft carried out in these tasks makes a strong impact on the Bilin language.

Yet linguistic assimilation does not necessarily imply social or cultural assimilation. Similarly language loss does not necessarily mean loss or modification of cultural norms ⁽²⁴⁾. Once an ethnic group has become incorporated into the dominant culture(s), its social status may be one of equality (Koenig 1980). This means that situations of stable bilingualism may exist when the functions of particular languages are complementary, as in the case of trade languages. When there is no longer a strict social division of functions one language may expand at the expense of another. The Bilin are tolerant to foreign cultures and languages for survival purposes. They welcome their assimilation into Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña groups in order to strengthen their position as a community. Bilin men and women have to thus have fluency and command of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña as an adaptive strategy of becoming integrated within the latter speech communities. The fact that the Bilin strongly identify themselves with these two languages and shift their language allegiance is probably not due to the negative prestige of Bilin but, rather, to the importance of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña ethnic group(s) in the social hierarchy and, by consequence, of the Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña language(s).

Bilin Strength

Bilin speech community in Sänhit has been in a state of decline for quite sometime but it is not yet on its last legs ⁽²⁵⁾. When people give up one

(24) One striking feature of Bilin cultural identity is personal body decoration ranging from braided hair dressing to jewelry wearing through body piercing. The Bilin may be facing loss of language through contact with the Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña linguistic environment but are perpetuating rudiments of traditional culture through body adornment. In addition the use of Bilin among those still adhering to the traditional way of life is flourishing because of cultural ceremonies and rituals.

(25) In a series of visits between 1997 and 1999, I have found several locations where the language is still regularly used even in the presence of the Tegrä and/or the Tegrēñña.

language for another they may consciously or unconsciously also transmit part of their former language into their new mother tongue (Gumperz et al. 1990). Prominent features of their cultures are reflected in the lexicon; accordingly, one may expect to find a substratum in the newly acquired language. For example, in the shift from Bilin to Tegrä and Tegrēñña, the original Bilin lexicon pertaining to agriculture and body adornment and place names such as Wäkkidebba, Wasdämba, Kwandäbba and Säräjjäqa largely survived unscathed. Similarly there are various loanwords appearing in Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña whose traces go back to Agaw in general and Bilin in particular. The gradual disappearance of Bilin seems more often than not to be due to horizontal spreading of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña and not due to death as a result of actual genocide.

Giles et al. (1977) claim that ethnic group members identify more closely with someone who hares their language than with someone who shares their cultural background. Such a position seems far too strong in the context of the Bilin and their neighbours. For them language may not be as important a potential symbol of ethnic identity as some are led to believe. The Bilin I met in Kärän identified themselves as Bilin, and they were known as such, despite the fact that several of them had Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña as their first language. Hence a common language is not always an immutable part of group identity. Instead ethnicity and ethno-linguistic identity may be seen as something flexible and negotiable (Hansell 1990; Eriksen 1993). A characteristic feature of Bilin peoples in those communities of Sänhit where the number of speakers has been reduced to a relatively small group is that they often practice traditional marriage systems, wear Bilin costumes, participate in Bilin dances accompanied by Bilin music, and display exclusive Bilin body decorations including hairdos. Indeed the Bilin of the communities where Bilin is spoken by a smaller or greater percentage of their members recognize the speech community as the total culture of the communities in question, and not on the basis of who can or cannot speak the traditional Bilin language. Bilin speakers do not, on the whole, feel the need to define themselves according to language, possibly because the linguistic distinction is more incidental than essential to the basic functioning of the rural Bilin communities⁽²⁶⁾. In Sänhit such people are often characterized by strong loyalty to Bilin cultural values and

(26) In urban centres many Bilin seem to be particularly motivated in support of the revival of the language through cultural organizations or through the involvement of their children in projects that facilitate education in the native tongue of the parents. Attempts to set up such organizations and schools to cater for Bilin interests are hampered and brought to a naught by the presence of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña as dominant languages in these urban centres.

norms. Yet at least at the household level, the use of Bilin in the family and during interfamily visitations ensures the survival of Bilin (27).

At present Bilin has a recognized status under the Eritrean Constitution as a national language. Such an official recognition of Bilin means that most speakers, who are also aware that their language was once widely spread in most of today's Särayä and Hamasén in general and Karnäšim and Dämbäzan in particular, are of the opinion that it is still of relevance to the Bilin population as a whole (28). Although these Bilin individuals, including those in key posts at schools and administrative offices, are comparatively few in number, the presence of such persons and their allegiance to Bilin does help to counterbalance the prevailing movement away from Bilin and restore confidence in the language to some extent. The Bilin have, however, no illusions about their linguistic position and are unwilling to make inordinate sacrifices in depriving their children of a knowledge of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña which in Sänhit are languages of administration and transaction. Bilin speaking parents in Halhal have reported to me on several occasions the reluctance of their children to speak to them in Bilin, a phenomenon also noted by Kiflä Maryam and Pawlos (1992) and other observers. Yet Bilin seems to inspire large numbers of its native speakers with a degree of attachment and affection that revives and emblemizes Bilin nationhood and bond brotherhood. Bilin who view the Bilin language as the language of their ancestors are reinforced in their thinking by non-Bilin who feel that efforts to maintain "little languages" are a waste of time. This feeling of Bilin as a badge of trust is portrayed in an anecdote related to me by a Bilin octogenarian in Kärän. It recounts how a cousin of her's, having traveled to Kärän from Hälīmāntäl during her old age, allowed herself to be assisted only when met by a Bilin speaking stranger. The same sentiment is echoed in a statement made to me by a neighbour of the above consultant's, a young woman with only a passive knowledge of the language, "because we have a liking to any one who speaks Bilin, it draws us together like a magnet."

Another area in which Bilin has traditionally been strong is religion. This has always played an important part in the social life of at least the Christian Bilin among whom the coming together is expressed through local rituals and ceremonies. In Bilin parishes where Christianity is

(27) Amanuel (1996) has an interesting brief description on Bilin women's traditional family occupation, but such a discussion is short of an observation of the Bilin language as medium of transmission of these traditional functions in everyday discourse in the households.

(28) The fact that several present day place names in Dämbäzan and Karnäšim are Bilin in origin indicates that these Tegrēñña areas have a strong Bilin substratum. This historical truth upholds the previous extent of Bilin throughout Eritrea. For details, see Michael (1993).

professed and Bilin is still the daily language of a large number of parishioners, the language received boosts, for example, when Sunday Masses and other church ceremonies are carried out in the vernacular in place of the previous Geez and Tegrēñña services ⁽²⁹⁾. Similarly, religious festivities which, like the Maryam Dä'arit pilgrimage day, attract both Christians and Muslims are by and large organized in the Bilin language in a Bilin venue using Bilin songs and dances, and this facilitates the maintenance of their language. In Bilin areas where Bilin is spoken by a smaller number of the inhabitants, however, and services and ministry of the clergy generally is in Geez or Tegrēñña, the traditional prayers and other devotional pieces, with their specialized religious terminology, in Bilin have largely fallen into disuse and been forgotten. This deprives Bilin of a domain of expansion amongst the contemporary generation. In short, Bilin is still employed in worship in those regions which remain strongly Bilin speaking, but in others where Bilin has seriously declined this is no longer the case. In the former case old Bilin men and women can still recite Bilin Catholic catechisms learned by heart during childhood. This has strengthened Bilin cultural and religious life locally. The strength reflects the active involvement of Bilin parishioners who using Bilin minister to the spiritual needs of the congregation, including the composition of prayers and sermons *ex tempore*.

Connected with matters of religion in the lives of Bilin Muslim and Christian communities are the pre-Islamic and pre-Christian practices, sorcery and witchcraft accusations, spirit possession and exorcism sessions, and evil eye beliefs each of which had its own lore and observances which now persist only vestigially among the older Bilin generation in Bilin localities where Bilin has survived. In addition to these domains, religious matters in Bilin speech communities are also characterized by a category of magical spells and charms. Used, for example, in treating illnesses and diseases, they are the preserve of tradition by way of shamanistic healing and curing. The Bilin inherited them from members of the previous generation in a Bilin language that is spoken only in secret, so that the effect

(29) I have been told on various visitations that the Bilin used for the composition of hymns and/or prayers reflects the standard language very largely. I have myself heard a native Bilin-speaking Catholic cleric adapt certain features of the Sunday Mass in order to make them comprehensible to his predominantly Bilin congregation. See also Kiflä Maryam (1977a, 1977b); Wäldä Yohannes (1982); Yaqob (1983); Kidanä (1991). The pastoral language of the Catholic Church among the Bilin still remains to be Geez even though the majority, if not all, of the people do not understand the language. Many of the Bilin I met were very positive towards the use of their mother tongue in their religious rituals and ceremonies. In a seminal study Ferguson (1982) discusses such issues using a different case work.

of their survival on the Bilin language as a whole is notably great. This subject is, of course, intimately linked with the use of traditional herbal medicine, a practice which entailed a knowledge of large number of plant names and of particular processes employed in preparing the plants for use. As the state is unable to provide medical services to every Bilin community because of distance from main roads and centre points, traditional medical practitioners and their herbal lore and likewise the knowledge of plant names associated with it have become commoner in the more remote rural Bilin areas⁽³⁰⁾. Thus, knowledge of native flora in the native tongue has increased the rate of survival of Bilin. Since the ethnographic setting, as explained above, is virtually exclusively rural, a large percentage of the inherited vocabulary naturally relates to flora and fauna, geographic features, and the institutions of rural life such as markets, craftworks and agricultural practices. Each of these settings and traditional means of earning a living have their own specialized Bilin vocabulary, as well as songs and lore associated with it.

Verbal virtuosity has traditionally been much prized in Bilin society, as in other societies where the oral tradition has been primary and much cultivated. The wealth of Bilin folk tradition has always thus been strongly oral. Within this tradition, story telling and singing are two main legacies used for the transmission of cultural information. Bilin story telling is a very popular pastime, and to this day most places where Bilin has survived contain some individuals noted for story telling. In this context, a story teller's repertoire includes many and various types of tales. I once met a celebrated Bilin teller of traditional tales whose son took pains to learn tales from his father's repertoire. It is commoner, however, for the children of Bilin story tellers or indeed for others who have had the opportunity of frequent association with such tradition bearers to pick up shorter, less complex items from the story tellers' repertoires. Such pieces are, it seems to me, more readily appreciated by children nowadays principally because they are shorter and many Bilin are not prepared any more to devote large amounts of time to participating in the longer version of traditional forms of entertainment. Some of these traditional oral tales are known to contain obscure items of Bilin vocabulary and other archaic Agaw linguistic features of the language. Although during story telling sessions part of the Bilin audience will not be thus fully capable of comprehending or understanding the language of the pieces, it is still one way of retaining the language in some form or another.

(30) For a large *compendia* of traditional terms referring to religious practices and ethnobotanical systems, see Kiflä Maryam & AL. (1990, 1992).

Singing, as an art form, has survived better than story telling. Bilin songs are very ornate and have various modes of rendition held in high esteem in some areas than in others. The popular varieties are often learned and sung by young and old alike and are enjoying something of a revival now in modern idiom at the hands of contemporary Bilin singers and school musical groups. Bilin rhythm and cadence is even visible in Mänsa' Tegrä songs. In general, there exists a declining number of traditional bearers preserving a limited repertoire of examples in a variety of older genres of Bilin songs; but other, more popular songs are known by much larger numbers of the population and sometimes receive the same sort of up-dated treatment from present performers and musicians. These seem to owe a great deal to current Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña exemplars. Finally, other simpler oral pastimes in the form of riddles, proverbs and games with full use of Bilin traditional terminology still survive and are exceedingly popular ⁽³¹⁾.

Similarly, current activities of Bilin mother tongue education in elementary schools are often of crucial importance in assisting the survival of Bilin in speech and verbal art forms such as singing and story telling, as well as in developing some of the more modern performance activities like drama and debate, in that they not only provide a platform and a stimulus for young local talents and a focal point for children speakers of the language but they also give the larger Bilin communities access to skilled Bilin teachers and Bilin instructional materials (Ministry of Education 1997).

Conclusion

Among Bilin bilinguals Bilin still remains the language of interaction and communication, gradually abandoned as contacts with Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña institutions and individuals increases. This is not a sudden change, but one that affected Bilin individuals differentially, through the schools, change of residences, new occupations, intermarriage, improved communications, urbanization, etc. The Bilin used in urban centres already represented a first step toward acculturation by being heavily interlarded with Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña, and by being also inflectionally full of Tegrä and/or Tegrēñña terms and phrases. A "drift" toward Tegrä in rural areas and Tegrēñña in urban places has been more apparent since recent times but this has not yet led to an ultimate and complete "shift". Bilin development from "drift" to "shift" is still more or less represented by a

(31) For examples of such oral pastimes, see Kiflä Maryam (1987, 1989).

bilingual content. It is in this sense that the Bilin experience may be regarded as a typical bilingual profile for the Tegrä and/or Tegrēña penetration in the Bilin region.

Bilin is a geographic, cultural and political identity which is both ascribed and achieved, and “being Bilin” ultimately involves the use of cultural markers in the everyday life of a Bilin community. The acquisition of culture, is of course, closely tied to ancestry and residence, but geographic mobility and increasing communication with the world around or outside Bilin country by way of markets, courts, schools and administrative offices has meant that cultural borders have grown indistinct. Whether or not the borders are clear, a return to the *pays* in recent years shows that cultural identity, and consequently linguistic competency, is still important in defining Bilin ethnicity. The renaissance of pays-level cultural expression is based on a nostalgic reintroduction of traditional Bilin customs, belief systems, herbal medicinal practices, and aesthetic estates. Finally, Bilin is the language of one’s ancestors and descendants and a symbol of the persistence of a “small” people against all odds in a world which seems to favour “big” peoples, cultural standardization and linguistic hegemonization. Useful or not, Bilin is at present a language with enough positive symbolism to justify a lot of optimism for its survival. The feedbacks to the government radio programmes and newspaper editions strongly support this position. The future of this language will, I think, depend on its symbolic strength, the belief of young Bilin that a Bilin identity can be a positive one and that the Bilin language is an irreplaceable element in that identity. The introduction of Bilin as vernacular or mother tongue language in elementary schools in Bilin surroundings, a provision of the Eritrean Constitution, and the literary competition in the form of poetry and short stories are the right roads in that direction.

ABBEBE KIFLEYESUS

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RIASSUNTO

In Eritrea il bilin, una delle nove lingue nazionali riconosciute dalla Costituzione di quel Paese, è un dialetto agaw parlato attualmente da poche migliaia di persone, in comunità sparse lungo la valle del fiume 'Ansäba, nella regione del Sänhit. Per azione di diversi fattori economici e sociali il numero dei parlanti bilin va rapidamente riducendosi, poiché le nuove generazioni stanno abbandonando la lingua dei loro padri in favore del tigrè e del tigrino. Tuttavia, non sembra che tutta l'eredità linguistica del bilin sia destinata a scomparire in virtù di questi processi epocali. In primo luogo, infatti, essa sopravvive nell'ambito della politica di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche varata dal Governo Eritreo, che prevede espressamente

il diritto all'apprendimento del bilin nella scuola primaria. Inoltre, l'uso di questa lingua resiste sorprendentemente all'interno di gerghi e linguaggi settoriali usati proprio con lo scopo di limitare la diffusione di certi messaggi fuori della comunità. Infine, l'identità dei Bilin, anche di coloro che attualmente non parlano più la lingua avita, appare destinata a resistere come strumento di autodefinizione di alcuni gruppi all'interno della moderna società multiculturale eritrea, e proprio quest'ultimo elemento fornisce la più solida delle premesse per il mantenimento del bilin come strumento di comunicazione.

RÉSUMÉ

En Erythrée le bilin, une des neuf langues nationales reconnues par la constitution de ce pays, est un dialecte agaw parlé actuellement par quelques milliers de personnes, clairsemées en communautés le long de la vallée du fleuve Ansaba, dans la région du Sanhit. A cause de différents facteurs économiques et sociaux le nombre de ceux qui parlent le bilin va rapidement se réduire car les nouvelles générations sont en train d'abandonner la langue de leurs parents en faveur du tigré et du tigrine.

Toutefois, il ne semble pas que l'héritage linguistique du bilin soit destiné à disparaître totalement à cause de cette évolution épocale. Tout d'abord, en effet, il survit dans le cadre de la politique de tutelle des minorités linguistiques promulguée par le gouvernement érythréen, qui prévoit expressément le droit à l'étude du bilin dans l'école primaire. En plus, l'usage de cette langue résiste de façon surprenante à l'intérieur d'argots et langages sectoriels employés surtout avec le but de limiter la diffusion de certains messages à l'extérieur de la communauté. Enfin l'identité des bilin, même de ceux qui actuellement ne parlent plus la langue natale, semble destinée à résister en tant qu'instrument d'auto-définition de quelques groupes à l'intérieur de la moderne société multiculturelle érythréenne, et c'est ce dernier élément qui représente la plus solide des prémisses pour le maintien du bilin comme instrument de communication.