Was there ever a Southern Cushitic Language (Pre-) Ma'a?[1]

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1. Introduction

Diachronic reconstructions are based on synchronic analyses. As a consequence, a new synchronic analysis may lead to a different view on the linguistic history. In this article I will show how a different perspective on the present-day situation of the mixed language Ma'a has consequences for the assumptions and the methodology of the re-construction of its history. I will argue that because Ma'a is a register rather than an independent language, its lexical sources are manifold. Once we leave aside the assumption that the source for the Ma'a register is ideally one (Cushitic) language, we can recognise, among others, two distinct Cushitic sources: a Southern Cushitic language that is very close to Iraqw and an Eastern Cushitic source. Conflating these two distinct sources has lead Ehret to postulate an independent branch pre-Ma'a within the Southern Cushitic group but distinct from core Southern Cushitic. Distinguishing the two Cushitic sources for the Ma'a lexicon makes such a hypothetical language pre-Ma'a super-fluous.

The common picture of Ma'a is that of a language displaying an intruiging mixture of Cushitic roots embedded in a Bantu grammar. The Bantu element is mainly Pare. Pare is the area where the people used to live. Shambala (Bantu) is the dominant language where they live nowadays. Greenberg classified Ma'a as Southern Cushitic (Greenberg 1966:49). Thomason questioned the validity of such a classification on lexicon only when grammar points to another direction. But she does not disagree on the classification of PRE-Ma'a, because she too assumes an origin in a Southern Cushitic language, that is gradually but heavily Bantuised (Thomason 1983)[2] Ehret

[2] Essential in her argumentation is the evidence of supposedly Cushitic

collected for his reconstruction of Southern Cushitic a large amount of lexical data on the individual Southern Cushitic languages, including Ma'a. Assuming an original Cushitic speaking community he sees evidence for their former language in every instance of a Cushitic root in Ma'a. In an additional table, Ehret (1980:320-337) includes reconstructions of Southern Cushitic vocabulary on the sole evidence of an attestation in Ma'a only and an Afroasiatic language outside of the Southern Cushitic group. Thus Ma'a **m-harega** 'arm' and Oromo **harka** 'arm' brings him to the reconstruction of proto-SC ***haraka-** 'arm' despite the lack of cognates in Southern Cushitic. See our table (3).

As a matter of principle it makes of course sense to keep the number of factors involved as low as possible and to assume only one Cushitic source. The synchronic situation, however, is atypical enough to be cautious with the blind application of heuristic methods. A crucial factor is the relation between the so-called mixed language Ma'a and the non-mixed, Bantu language Mbugu, as explained in the next paragraph.

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morphology in Ma'a for which she relies on Ehret. I disagree with her and with Ehret on the Cushitic nature of these elements. It goes beyond the scope of this article to refute all the examples. Two will have to do. First, the pro-clitic locative **he-** is not the Southern Cushitic ***ha** 'this' in IR **hamí** 'now' (Ehret 1980:304) but the regular reflex of the Bantu locative class 16 in Pare.

Second, The non-Bantu non-lexical elements in Ma'a are not productive. Closest to productivity comes the causative suffix -ti. This suffix occurs in a number of Ma'a verbs where the Mbugu parallel has the Pare causative suffix -ij, which is also used for newly formed causatives. Ehret argues that -ti comes from a SC suffix -t expressing stative (or middle voice, which by itself makes verbs intransitive). This suffix SC -t can be followed by the causative suffix -iis. In such a combination the Ma'a causative must have arisen after loss of the final consonant and reinterpretation of the remaining -ti, cf. Ehret (1980:63). Although this scenario cannot be ruled out, it is subject to doubt. The combination -t-iis indeed exists in SC languages but it is very rare, while another combination with a causative suffix, -m-iis is common. Thus one would expect -mi rather than -ti for the Ma'a causative if it came about through this path. Moreover for none of the Ma'a verbs in -ti has a SC cognate with a such a derivation -t-iis been attested. One could just as well propose the Maasai causative prefix ita- as the source for Ma'a causative -ti.

2. A new synchronic view on Ma'a

So far, researchers have concentrated their attention to the mixed language Ma'a and have mentioned the existence of another, non-mixed Bantu language Mbugu only in passing. However, the two languages cannot be seen independent from each other for the following reasons:

1) All people speaking Ma'a also know Mbugu (but not the other way around).

2) Ma'a and Mbugu share the same grammar. This grammar is mostly Pare. The Cushitic morphology that is claimed for Ma'a is not productive (or non-existent or not Cushitic), see note 2. For an overview of the grammar in common of both Ma'a and Mbugu, see Mous (1994).

3) Lexical items in Mbugu and Ma'a are perfect parallels: two word forms (one Mbugu, one Ma'a) are linked to one shared meaning including metaphorical extensions, and one morphological subcategorisation such as noun class, verbal derivational suffix, semantic characterisation of complements, Aktionsart. For details on Ma'a as a register see Mous (to appear).

Thus, Ma'a and Mbugu are one language. The mixed language Ma'a is a lexical register of Mbugu. The word forms of this deviant register are:

(1) transformed Mbugu words, or

(2) loans from a range of other languages, or

(3) words of uncertain origin

Under (1), transformed Mbugu words, I categorise words such as **ndaté** (Ma'a) 'stick' from Mbugu (and Pare) **ndátá**. Ma'a words in category (2) are from Zigua, Sagala, Shambala (all Bantu), Maasai (Nilotic), or Cushitic. Both (1) and (2) are well-known strategies for register formation. Another strategy in creating a register is to coin completely new words. If that has happened at all in the case of Ma'a, such cases would fall under (3).

The major part of this paper will be about the Cushitic sources, but first we want to establish the multitude of sources for Ma'a lexis. For each non-Cushitic source language of Ma'a lexis the following table

contains a number of examples. The first item is Ma'a, the second the source language.[3]

<div align="center">Table (1) Ma'a loans from several sources</div>

Sagala [from Wray (1894)]:

i-hlarí (5/6) 'cloud' < **tlyara**
raó (9/10) 'arrow for bleeding cattle' < **ki-rao** 'barb of an arrow'
hla (v) 'ache' < **lya**

Shambala [from LangHeinrich (1925)]:

ki-haga (7/8) 'heel' < **kihagha** 'hoe'
hina (v) 'learn' < **hina**
mbuvá (9/10) 'field' < **mbuva** 'burned field'
konhta (v) 'hit' < **konta** 'knock'
gonda (v) 'carve, write' < **gonda**
mbúlú (9/10) 'python' < **mbulu** 'varanus niloticus'
hongéra 'thanks' < **hongera**

Zigua [from my own fieldnotes]:

gugúla (v) 'run' < **guluka**
ma-kalé (6) 'charcoal' < **ma-kála** (also in Mbugwe)
kalá (v) 'hunt' < **kala**
i-hóya (5/6) 'axe' < **hoya**

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[3] Indications such as (5/6) refer to the noun class; (v) stands for verb; morpheme boundaries are indicated by a hyphen; the meaning of a word in the source language is only given when it is not identical to that in Ma'a.
' is a glottal stop, but following stops it indicates glottalisation, hl is a lateral voiceless fricative, hh is a voiceless pharyngeal fricative and / its voiced counterpart.
SC stands for Southern Cushitic, WR for Westrift-SC (Iraqw-Gorwa-Alagwa-Burunge), IR is Iraqw, GO for Gorwa, BU for Burunge, EC for Eastern Cushitic, OR for Oromo, Sw for Swahili.
Oromo is from Stroomer (1995) unless indicated otherwise; Somali is from Agostini e.a. (1985); proto West-Rift Southern Cushitic reconstructions are taken from work-in-progress by Roland Kießling and myself. The Ma'a and Iraqw data are from my dictionary files.

Maasai [from Mol (1978)]:

i-diyé (5/6) 'dog' < **ol-die** (in Mbugwe **díyo**)
laha (v) 'loose' < **a-laa**
nyamálo (9) 'work' < **a-nyamál** 'be busy'
silú (v) 'borrow' < **a-isilen**
totóka (v) 'boil (intr)' < **a-itokitok**
zéu (v) 'herd' < **a-reu** 'drive cattle'

Comments on table (1):

– The interpretation of **tly** and **ly** in Sagala is not clear from Wray (1894). Ehret and Nurse (1981:145) argue that **tly** corresponds to the lateral fricative.

– The Shambala words are recent loans and these are not differentiated for the two registers. It is not often easy to pinpoint Pare or Shambala as the source language. For the cases mentioned here there are no similar roots in Pare, at least not in Kagaya (1989).

– The fact that Maasai and Zigua have influenced Ma'a is not surprising in the light of the oral history that recounts of the Ma'a living for some time as servants of the Maasai and escaping through the Zigua area to the Usambara's. Maasai influence on Ma'a was already noted by Meinhof (1906).

– The word **kalá** could also be from Shambala **ukala**, but in Shambala the word exists only as a noun for 'the hunt' and not as a verb. Another possible origin for this word is Oromo **kola** 'go hunting'.

Further evidence for the fact that a variety of languages have contributed to the Ma'a register lies in the existence of homonyms with a double etymology. Homonyms are remarkably common among the basic verbs of Ma'a:

– The verb **kú** 'be satisfied, draw water' is a conflation of Oromo **k'uufa** 'be satisfied' and Maasai **a-oku** 'draw water'

– Likewise, the verb **dúmu** 'want, agree' of the Sagala verb **dumusa** 'allow' and the Somali verb **doon** 'want'.

– In the Bumbuli area, **dé** and **wá** are a suppletive singular/plural pair for 'cow, cattle' reminiscent of **hlee** (sg), **hikwa** (pl) 'cow, cattle' in Iraqw. In the Maghamba area, however, there is no suppletive

singular/plural pair for cow. There is one word, **wá** (9/10) 'cow, cattle'; and the word **dé** (9/10) is used for 'goat' suggesting an Oromo origin from **ree** 'goat' in Boraana-Oromo.

– The word **i-'ahléta** 'room where the fire and the small stock is kept' is built on the word **ahla** 'fire', a Ma'a loan from Iraqw, following the pattern of the Maasai word **ol-aleta** 'place where small animals are kept'.

Recapitulating we can say that Ma'a is a register of Mbugu. One way of building this register is by borrowing words from a variety of languages. For these lexical borrowings we must assume some contact but not an intense and prolongued relationship. The crucial point is that because of this register character and the way it is formed there is no necessity to delimit the number of Cushitic sources to one out of principle when the data point to more. We will now concentrate on the Cushitic sources and show that there are at least two different Cushitic sources. One Southern Cushitic, one Eastern Cushitic.

3. Two Cushitic sources, not one

Words that are Southern Cushitic and not Eastern Cushitic are given in table 2. Many more words could have been given here. The selection is restricted to those words that give evidence for a particular West-Rift Southern Cushitic source.

Table (2) Some Ma'a words of West Rift SC origin

i-'ohlú (5/6) 'cheek' < IR: /**unhl**; WR: /**untla**

y-asemú (5/6) 'breast (female)' < IR: **iseemo** (pl) WR: **isamo**

lu-haremú (11/10) 'horn' (also **luxaremú**) < IR: **xareemi** (pl); WR: **xadamo**

wé (v) 'buy' < IR: **weer-iis** 'to sell (containing causative)'; WR: **beeriis**

'á (v) 'eat' < IR: /**ay**; WR: /**ag**

kwáha (v) 'be tired' < WR: **kwahh-as** 'rest'; not IR, but GO

lu-habi (11/10) 'firewood' < WR: **xaabi** 'charcoal', IR: **xa'awi**, GO: **xaawi**

ma-'ibá (6) 'milk' < WR: **'iliba**, IR: **ilwa**, Sw: **maziwa**

'ihlé (aj) 'unripe, bad' < IR: /**eetl** 'fresh'; no WR

búre (9) 'short rainy season' < IR: **buhare** 'rainy season'; no WR

m-lagé (1/2) 'woman, wife' < IR: **lage** cow-name for cow acquired in a war, also in Mbugwe; no WR

m-hé (1/2) 'person' < IR: **hee**; WR: **hiid-**

m-mú (1/2) (Bumbuli) 'person' < IR: **muu** 'people' no WR

sa'á (9/10) 'wind, cold' IR: **tsa'** 'be cool'; no WR

There are indications that the Southern Cushitic source is Iraqw, or pre-Iraqw. First, Ma'a shares some lexical innovations with Iraqw (the items marked with 'no WR'). Second, Ma'a seems to share with Iraqw the lenition of West-Rift voiced stops, **d > r, b > w, g > y**, cf. Ehret (1980:87) or Elderkin (1988:84), as we can see in **lu-haremú, wé**, possibly **m-hé** and **'á**, but not in **lu-habi, ma-'iba**. Third, the vowel **e** in **lu-haremú** and **yasemú** points to Iraqw as the source. Against Iraqw as the source language counts the item **kwáha** 'be tired', from WR **kwahh-as**, which does not exist in Iraqw, but it does in Gorwa, the closest relative of Iraqw – Iraqw and Gorwa are mutually intelligible. The Southern Cushitic source was most probably pre-Iraqw at the period when the lenition rule was less far advanced and when **kwahhas** was not yet replaced.

Table (3) presents some of the Eastern Cushitic cognates for Ma'a. The Ma'a words are taken from the Ma'a register only, not from Mbugu (Pare), which does contain some (Eastern-)Cushitic loans. For eaxample **kuri** 'dog' is Cushitic and Mbugu, but not Ma'a and is not of our primary concern here.

For comparison with Eastern Cushitic I took Kenyan Boraana Oromo from Stroomer (1994), or Oromo from Gamta (1989) or Gragg (1982). Only the latter two are indicated as such. The choice for Oromo is because it is the closest well-documented Eastern Cushitic language. I don't mean to claim that the source language for these Eastern Cushitic loans in Ma'a was Oromo.

Table (3) Eastern Cushitic words in Ma'a

fwaru 'sing' < **faaruu** 'song, poem'

waré 'kind of hyena' < **warabeesa** 'hyena'

m-harega 'arm' < **harka**

áro 'k.o. animal', 'elephant' in Farler (1885) < **arba**

-ká 'get up' < **kaa** 'stand up, rise'

fufa (v) 'strangle' < **fufa** 'add, extend, tie together'

hará (9/10) 'calf' < **halaa** 'young female camel'

i-laméto (5/6) 'broom' < **lammat'ee** 'k.o. stick' (Gragg)

i-tiráo (5/6) 'liver' < tiruu

i-hutáo (5/6) 'hoe' < hordaa 'digging stick, k.o. dibble' (Gamta)

koré (9/10) 'pot' < okotee

(m-)haráza (3/4) 'river' < huursaa 'waterfall' from hursu 'roar e.g. like water in waterfall' (Gamta, Gragg)

ráru (v) 'predict, devine' < raagaa 'fortune-teller'

dímu (also dimi) (v) 'descend' < d'immuu 'depth'

The first five items are taken from Ehret's table 2, numbers 19, 160, 149, 128 and 106 (Ehret 1980: 320-337). I have left out those proposals where I think other etymologies are possible, e.g. dumu (Ehret 1980:325) above; 'úle (v) 'milk' (Ehret 1980: 334) could be from Oromo elema, but WR-SC loom or Maasai a-lep are also possible.

I will now discuss how this proposal differs from Ehret (1980):

– kisálo (7/8) 'mud' is certainly cognate with EC, like Somali saalo 'dung' (Agostini e.a. 1985) as proposed in Ehret (1980:326 no.59). Also Arbore saal- 'plaster house with mud' (Hayward 1984) can be added. The word seems to be pre-Oromo given the specific Oromo sound shift s > f as in faala 'put dung on the tits of a cow'. But the word is also present in Pare as msau 'soil', Mbugwe (Bantu) salo 'soil'. Since these meanings are closer to the Ma'a word, entry into Ma'a is more probable through one of these Bantu languages.

– Ehret links ilameto 'broom' to his reconstructed proto SC *lam 'to mark, especially to scrape or cut mark' which is based on Ma'a and Asa: lama 'serpentine ochre marking on body' and Kw'adza: lamalito 'age-set'. The Asa and Kw'adza words may be related but I consider the semantic link with Ma'a too weak and I propose a loan from EC.

– Ehret derives itirao 'liver' from his proto SC *tyira 'liver' based on Ma'a and Iraqw dararamo 'spleen'. But for the WR-SC languages we can reconstruct *rooroo- 'spleen' and *da'ayee for 'liver', both based on Iraqw, Burunge and Alagwa, and consequently a loan from EC is more likely, all the more since Ilwana has the same loan tiraU (9/10) for 'liver' (Nurse p.c.).

– Ehret derives ihutao 'hoe' (or ixutao) from his proto SC *k'ut- 'to dig up the ground' based on a WR-SC root kut- 'mole' and the Oromo verb qot 'cultivate'. Again the semantics appear to me improbable.

The Eastern Cushitic elements in Ma'a still have to be compared to a similar Cushitic influence in various Bantu languages in the wider area (Sagala and otherwise Taita-Bantu, Ilwana), before we can re-evaluate the historical interpretation of this substratum. Ehret and Nurse (1981) proposed two now-extinct SC languages on the basis of loan words in Taita-Bantu languages. An indication that Oromo is not the Eastern Cushitic Source is the Ma'a word **ka-wahá** 'knife' from proto Eastern Cushitic ***warhhan** 'spear' – **warhhan** 'knife' in Rendille – but not from Oromo since Oromo has **woraana** (Sasse 1979:37). Nor is there evidence for an Southern Cushitic source for this root.

Eastern Cushitic, represented by Oromo, and Southern Cushitic are only distanctly related. The Eastern Cushitic cognates for Ma'a could theoretically be retentions of Cushitic that were lost in the rest of Southern Cushitic, as Ehret argues in his table 2, see introduction. Some of the Ma'a loans from EC have retentions in SC and these may serve to show that the Ma'a words are from the EC source rather than from SC. The following Ma'a words are in form or meaning closer towards EC than to the WR-SC cognate.

> **míndá** (9/10) 'house' < OR: **mana, mina**; WR: **mara**
> **m-mílo** (1/2) '(my) child' < OR: **miiloo** 'offspring from the
> same ancestor'; BU· **mela** 'unmarried man's hut'

Establishing etymologies for Ma'a words is a tricky business. Not only because of the wide range of possible source languages, but also because of the effect of one of the "adaptation" rules: truncate the last syllable(s). Such a rule has surely operated for a number of words in Ma'a and can even be evidenced from synchronic variation, for example Ma'a **kwa** 'path' alternates with **kwahli**. Due to this rule it is sometimes difficult or impossible to choose the best cognate, see (4). Such unclear cases are naturally not used in the argumentation above.

(4) Methodological difficulties because of the truncation rule:

> **rá** (v) 'dance' < Maasai: **a-rany**, WR: **raa** 'sing'
> **tú** (v) 'pound, dig' < IR: **tu'-uut**, OR: **tuma** 'beat'
> **'ú** (9/10) 'force' < WR: **/uuru**; Mbugu, Pare: **uvu**
> **bá** (v) 'tell' < WR: **baw**, OR: **baana** 'speak, say'

4. Conclusion

If one does not separate the two Cushitic sources, and if one considers all the Cushitic material of Ma'a to be of one source, the result automatically becomes a SC pre-Ma'a as a separate branch from core-Southern-Cushitic and somewhat half-way between core-SC and EC.

Whether one does or does not consider the possibility of separate sources for the non-Bantu vocabulary in Ma'a depends on one's view of the synchronic situation. Clearly my analysis of the present-day situation makes it easier to accept various lexical sources.

Separating the two Cushitic sources does not exclude the possibility that there once was a Cushitic language pre-Ma'a. If so, this language was most probably EC and the items indicated as EC loan in Ma'a would be EC retentions. On the other hand, there is no evidence for a separate branch pre-Ma'a within Southern Cushitic. Ma'a lexis should not be used as sole evidence in the reconstruction of proto languages.

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