

# **Oral traditions among the northern Malawi Ngoni<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

It has been widely believed that Ngoni culture has to be talked about in the context of the past (see Read, 1936 for example). The many changes which have taken place in the nature and structure of Ngoni culture and its manifestation are due to a number of forces: the missionaries and colonialism, the interaction with surrounding cultures and languages, Western education, the politics of nation-building, and national language and cultural policies.

Since the mid-nineteenth century when they occupied Mzimba District, after their long trek from Zululand in South Africa, the Ngoni have had to compromise their way of life with that of the Tumbuka and other autochthonous groups that they found. In the process, their culture, language and oral traditions have all suffered a certain amount of corrosion. This is to the extent that a hybrid culture of the old forms the Ngoni brought with them from South Africa, aspects of Tumbuka culture and elements of modernism, has emerged.<sup>2</sup> This paper considers several aspects of Ngoni culture and shows the extent to which their preservation has been threatened by external forces. The critical influence of ChiTumbuka on the Ngoni language is also discussed.

The paper discusses elements of Ngoni culture that have been preserved and considers some factors which have significantly affected Ngoni traditions. This is followed by a brief examination of how the Ngoni language has undergone some changes and some conclusions.

## **Ngoni traditions**

It is now apparent that the Ngoni, though militarily and politically dominant, had no real policy on the development of their traditions.<sup>3</sup> As long as they maintained their political dominance over the different peoples they defeated and assimilated, they felt secure and complacent about everything else.

One of the researchers to have taken an early interest in the study of Ngoni culture during the first half of this century was the anthropologist Margaret Read.<sup>4</sup> She concluded that Ngoni society was in a state of transition due to rapid social change under colonialism. She based this conclusion on her examination of such aspects of Ngoni culture as socio-political organisation, rituals, economic activities, dances and songs. Although Read made this observation, Ngoni culture has survived and our extensive field work has shown that there are many oral traditions which are purely Ngoni.

The Ngoni themselves like many other traditional African societies were illiterate and hence depended on oral traditions to preserve their past and to have them transmitted from one generation to the next, as Margaret Read (1936) observed:

Before I made my first camp in a Ngoni village, many Europeans had said to me, there are practically no Ngoni left today. They are all hopelessly mixed with other tribes. None of them keep to the Ngoni customs any longer... After living among them for nearly a year I am convinced that it is correct to speak of the Ngoni as a distinctive group; that they themselves are very conscious of their separate identity as a people, and that they can point to certain of their institutions which distinguish them from the people among whom they settled.<sup>5</sup>

Despite efforts to preserve Ngoni traditions, there is evidence that they are being eroded to the extent that the Ngoni language, for instance, can be described as in decline (see Kishindo, 1995).

The Ngoni definitely have a rich cultural heritage which can be traced several generations back to Zululand as shown in the following oral traditions in (1) below; these are still being practised by the Ngonis.

- (1)
  - a) Ngoni traditional marriage and weddings (*umthimba*)
  - b) Folktales
  - c) Proverbs
  - d) Riddles or puns
  - e) Praise lyrics (*izibongo* or *izithakazelo*)
  - f) Similes
  - g) Ingoma group of dances (*Mgonxo, Hlombe, Mgubo, Isigiyo, Msindo* etc.)
  - h) Legends
  - i) *Incwala* dance (just revived: 1988, 1992)

- j) Naming of villages, people, cattle, dogs
- k) Beer drinking rituals (*mkontho*)
- l) Usangoma or vyanusi possession dances.
- m) Initiation rites (for both boys and girls)

Below, is a brief discussion of some of these traditions.

## Folktales

As in many other societies, the oral performance of tales is very important among the Ngoni: they consider it a crucial factor in shaping their society. Having a war-based economy, the Ngoni were very strict on discipline because they wanted to be always victorious in battle and folktales were used as a way of teaching and learning thereby encoding 'culturally approved behaviour patterns, attitudes, beliefs and so forth'.<sup>6</sup>

Even today, long after the days of tribal wars, the folktale has adapted itself to the new situation in order to carry on its role of advising members of the society through a kind of mimesis. The tales in ChiNgoni are recited in similar conditions as in other societies, i.e. in the evening and they obey similar stylistic rules.

## The proverb

The proverb is complementary to the tale. Proverbs are a medium of communication which require the hearer to have undergone a form of initiation in order to be able to comprehend its coded symbolic meaning. Pongweni (1983) has defined proverbs as 'learned, pithy expressions of the wisdom and knowledge of the elders'. In Nigeria and other West African countries there is a further qualification and people refer to proverbs as 'palm oil with which words are eaten, just as one can eat yam with oil'<sup>7</sup> meaning that proverbs add savour to the language. Indeed, for the Ngoni, the use of proverbs in conversation is taken as an indication that the speaker has an exceptionally fluent command of the language.<sup>8</sup> This is often witnessed during marriage (*lobola*) negotiations with the go-between (*mathenga*). A good speaker, well-versed in proverbs, at these negotiations will easily win favour for the suitor. The bride's party tends to accord more attention and respect to men or women who know how to blend their conversation with proverbs because it is a sign of wisdom. They are assured of handing over their daughter to worthy people. It is even claimed that elders who are sent on this mission are well advised to memorise a few proverbs before they go.

So many themes are found in Ngoni proverbs that it is impossible to deal with them comprehensively in this paper. Among them are those dealing with misfortunes, leadership, youthfulness, governance, morals, advice, heroism, marriage, endurance, parenthood, etc. It would be interesting, however, to compare the proverbs of the Ngoni with those of the Zulu in Natal to determine the extent to which they have a common origin. The distinctive picture that emerges of Ngoni proverbs as a whole is one of a complex structural composition.

## **Riddles**

Riddles also form an important aspect of Ngoni oral traditions. They are normally used as curtain raisers before the narration of folktales. The riddle seems to be used to train the youth to decipher coded language. This, of course, is part of the process of traditional education such as occurs in the *jando* initiation ceremonies.<sup>9</sup> In these, the initiates learn the language spoken by adults, in other words, a word may have two meanings, the surface meaning which is intended for children and the deeper one which is only understood by elders.<sup>10</sup> Examples of common riddles among the Ngoni are given below in (2).

(2)

- a) *Imbido nedwa, chijeza nedwa, zilukuni nedwa*  
I am relish, but I am also hard porridge and firewood.  
Response: Cassava (manioc)
  
- b) *InjumbulaIndlu yami yine mzati wunye Inkhowane*  
My house has only one pillar  
Response: Mushroom
  
- c) *Imbuzi yethe lapa yilala kona kuze loyu ayazepo Ilanga (ngubani ayazi lapa lingenakona?)*  
No one knows where our goat puts up.  
Response: The sun (does anyone know where it puts up?)

The children who normally participate in riddle sessions learn how to transpose one reality onto another. This is also an exercise in the vision of the world of the Ngoni.

## Praise poetry

A discussion on praise poetry is essential in so far as this traditional genre is a daily occurrence. Praise poetry is a complex genre using a blanket term *izithokozo* (*izibongo* in Zulu) with distinct stylistic features which necessitate some form of classification of the different sub-categories.<sup>11</sup>

Five major categories of *izithokozo* may be distinguished as in (3) below:

(3)

- a) praises of a clan: *viwongo*
- b) praises of self: *isiqiyo*
- c) praises of other: *vihayo*
- d) praises of a community: *imihubo*
- e) praises pertaining to nation: *imidabuko*

A brief description of the last category, *imidabuko*, is relevant here as an introduction to the Ngoni epic as performed by a custodian of such a genre among the Mzimba Ngoni.

The *imidabuko* are usually long praises for kings. In the circumstances, the poetry acts as a medium of political expression. It records and comments on important events that took place during the epic journey the Ngoni made from Zululand to Malawi.<sup>12</sup>

To render it more authentic this performance by a praise poet often includes very old compositions by earlier praise-poets. This type of *imidabuko* is essentially about Zwangendaba, the original Ngoni leader; his successors, the M'belwas, are just mentioned in passing. Occasions for the performance of the *imidabuko* are the installation of the *Inkosi ya Makhosi M'belwa*, the *incwala* ceremony (which has taken place only about four times this century), commemorative days of the Ngoni, such as their entry into Malawi at Mabili and Chief Mthwalo's sixtieth anniversary of his chieftainship held in 1956 at Mount Hora. In this way, the oral tradition of praise poetry is transmitted. The praises remind the people of their historic past. Unfortunately, like the other types of praise poetry listed above, it is a dying tradition and very few people learn the art today.

In (4) and (5) below, we present, for purposes of illustration, two citations from an epic. The first one shows some evidence of the use of imagery; and the second how Zwangendaba became so great in the eyes of his people that he acquired mythical attributes and began to be compared to the prophet Moses of the Old Testament.

(4)

*Inkosi yona eyakulisa nimisitu yakonale kubosokolo  
Ukaquqa wathokoza kwa mangelengele  
Wati zandla zinolusendo njenje ngubo  
Yena uwathata ukuhlawa wakubeka ezandleni  
Wati ukusa kuzanilandela mina uwalawala. Baedeee.*

**Free translation**

The King's strength and heart were as tall as trees  
Kaquqa started to speak Greek (in his mother tongue, a language no one understood)  
He said hands appear in different colours as do clothes, although you can also match them.  
He was the one who placated darkness (night) and put it in his hand. (Putting darkness in his hands refers to the catching of slaves).  
He said light will follow me. Hail.

(5)

*Wadla maZembezi  
Inkosi Zwangendaba yena  
Uwashaya uZembezi noumqwayi  
Amanzi yaqamukana Abantu nezinyamazana bawela kanye*

**Free translation**

He ate the people along the Zambezi river (war cry)  
King Zwangendaba  
Who beat the waters of the Zambezi with a short staff  
And the waters parted.<sup>13</sup>

In the final analysis this *imidabuko* praise poetry serves as a rallying point for the Ngoni at the level of their socio-cultural identity.<sup>14</sup>

The translation of praise poetry into another language by a researcher, unfortunately, does not always carry the depth of emotions and the relevant context within which the performance of praise poetry is supposed to be understood. In translated texts, researchers may not take the trouble to provide additional comments which explain the context and the conditions in which they were collected. Innes (1981: 1) puts the point succinctly:

A bard's performance is a complex artistic creation and it would be difficult to determine what factors in the total performance combine to produce the audience reaction ... at least four aspects of a bard's performance which we would need to consider relevant here. These are the content, the language, the modes of vocalisation and the musical accompaniment.<sup>15</sup>

Innes further points out that having successfully translated the narrative part and the account of events of oral epics, he failed to convey to the English reader the emotive force of the formulae. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to expect of any translation that it should evoke in a foreign reader the same response as that which an indigenous text would evoke in its audience.

## **Factors affecting Ngoni culture**

### **The influence of ChiTumbuka**

It is clear that although the Ngoni dominated militarily, they did not have a policy regarding their own language. Furthermore, as the Ngoni continued to enjoy political domination over those people they had come into contact with and had assimilated, they regarded their future as assured. They felt much at ease and there seemed to be no other priorities for them.

Naturally, all the people the Ngoni captured learnt to speak the Ngoni language. However, this assimilation proved later to be disastrous as soon as the Tumbuka and all the other people outnumbered the Ngoni.<sup>16</sup> Thus by the 1920s it was evident that the Ngoni language was not being used by most people in the region. The missionaries were quick to translate hymns from Ngoni to Tumbuka (*Izingoma zoBukristu* into *Sumu za Ukristu*) and prayers were to be said in Tumbuka. The colonial government adopted Tumbuka as a medium of expression at the courts and in the schools (see Kishindo, 1995 for details).

Since then Tumbuka has completely replaced Ngoni in most areas in Mzimba district, with the exception of the Mphelembe chiefdom where Ngoni is still intact. Consequently, the use of the Ngoni language has been localised and many people in the area cannot express themselves at all in Ngoni now. The extent to which Ngoni linguistic structure has been affected by ChiTumbuka will be discussed in the next section, **The language of the Ngoni**.

However, there are grounds for claiming that the Ngoni language has through the same interaction also greatly enriched the Tumbuka language in vocabulary and other lin-

guistic expressions which are now well entrenched in ChiTumbuka. Even at the cultural level, the Ngoni have also influenced the Tumbuka in most traditions.

## Missionaries

The missionaries were the ones who stopped Ngoni raids on the surrounding tribes and they quickly introduced their religion thereafter. As the number of converts grew among the Ngoni, most of their religious beliefs and practices were discarded. One such important ritual which died a natural death was the *Incwala*, still practised in Zululand and Swaziland. The *Incwala* is the rain-dance in which the Ngoni elders had to assemble at a village which was identified for this particular ceremony at least every rainy season. During the prayers a black bull is sacrificed to the spirit of Hlatshwayo, Zwangendaba's father. If the bull urinates during the prayers, it is a good sign that the spirit has acquiesced to their request and the rains will certainly come if there was a drought.

By discouraging war-mongering, the whole military structure of the Ngoni was destroyed, along with the rituals that went with it. This included the role of the *sangoma* or diviner who predicted the future for the King (*Inkosi*) and the herbal medicine he prescribed for the battles. The missionaries also brought the word 'superstition' and taught the people not to believe in witchcraft and ancestral spirits. Thus, gradually, with the coming of the colonial administration, *sangomas* were forbidden to practice and if they did, they were jailed.

We can therefore note that missionary work in Northern Malawi contributed to the decline of some aspects of Ngoni culture.

## Colonialism

In the 1890s the Ngoni were still sending out armies to loot other smaller tribes because they depended on food supplies obtained in this way. But once the territory of Nyasaland was declared a British protectorate, this war-mongering came to a halt. The war machinery was greatly weakened in that it became increasingly irrelevant in the new administration. At the same time, the status of the Ngoni king (*Inkosi ya Makosi*) was also reduced to that of paramount chief. It was explained that since there was already a Queen Victoria in England there could not be a king in any of the colonies or protectorates. The power of the Paramount Chief thus declined considerably. For instance, when he refused to send his men to participate in the First World War in East

Africa, he was arrested and put in the Southern Region district of Nsanje (Port Herald) although the chief apparently claimed he had based his refusal on christian principles.

## **The language of the Ngoni**

### **Tone and structure**

In the discussion above we examined the role and status of oral traditions among the Ngoni and shown how they have been influenced by external forces. We now turn to a consideration of the structure of the Ngoni language. We briefly consider the tonal characteristics of languages in the Nguni group and then show the extent to which Northern Malawi Ngoni has changed.

During the past 15 years, our understanding of tone has been greatly assisted by research advances in autosegmental and other related theories of phonological representation. Tonal phenomena which were previously not fully understood or whose behaviour was not easily accounted for within the existing theories have received adequate treatment within these current theoretical frameworks. One group of languages for which such theories have been particularly illuminating is Bantu languages.

Although most of the tonal characteristics of Bantu languages had been fully catalogued in previous tone studies (see Hyman, 1973; Fromkin, 1978), a fuller explanation of these phenomena has been provided in recent years by the theoretical insights of autosegmental theory. In this section, we offer a brief exposition of tone in northern Malawi Ngoni as spoken largely in Mzimba. It is shown that in comparison with its typological neighbours in the Nguni family of languages where such southern Bantu languages as Xhosa, Zulu, Siswati and Ndebele are found, Malawian Ngoni has retained some aspects of Nguni tonology, but it has also undergone significant structural changes which make it different from these related languages. An exposition of the source of this influence is also presented. We now turn to a discussion of the first point and give a brief account of the areas of similarity between Malawian Ngoni (hereafter MN) and one of the Nguni languages, Zulu, which is arguably closer to MN than any of the other Nguni languages.

There have been a lot of interesting and revealing studies on Zulu (see, for example Cope, 1970; Khumalo, 1981; Laughren, 1981, 1984; Roycroft, 1963, 1979, 1980 among others) and almost all of them recognise the facts which are commonly attested in the languages in the Nguni family although they differ in their analyses of those characteristics. We examine first the issue of tone representation in Zulu.

It has been argued particularly by Laughren (1984) and Khumalo (1981) that tone in Zulu nouns and verbs is best represented in the form of tone melodies. Zulu stems (for both nouns and verbs) and prefixes have lexically idiosyncratic tone melodies. Nominal and verb stems have four basic tone melodies which are illustrated in (6) below (from Lieber, 1987) for 'person', 'school', 'cord' and 'time' respectively. The acute accent '´' on a vowel represents a high (H) tone and low tones (L) are not marked.

- (6)
- |   |                    |               |             |
|---|--------------------|---------------|-------------|
| a | L tone Class:      | ntu<br>L      | 'abántu'    |
| b | HL - 1 tone Class: | Kole<br>HL    | 'ísikóle'   |
| c | HL - 2 tone Class: | bopho<br>HL   | 'ísibóphó'  |
| d | LHL tone Class:    | khathi<br>LHL | 'ísíkhathí' |

Similarly, there are two basic tone melodies for prefixes in Zulu as shown in (7) whose selection is determined by the number of syllables in the prefix.

- (7)
- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| a | ísi<br>HL |
| b | ába<br>HL |
| c | mu<br>L   |
| d | nga<br>L  |

The correct assemblage of these tone melodies is achieved by concatenating the prefixes with the stems and invoking universal association conventions which link the tones with their tone-bearing units (vowels) in a manner stipulated by autosegmental theory. In some cases, tone shifting rules apply accordingly and assign the tones to the relevant segments in the stem. Sample derivations are provided below for the forms 'sikole' and 'isibopho'.

(8)

a     $\begin{array}{c} \text{isi - kole} \\ \text{H L HL} \end{array}$       b     $\begin{array}{c} \text{isi - bopho} \\ \text{H L HL} \end{array}$

The derivation of forms like 'abántu' and 'isikhathi' illustrates the application of a rule which Lieber (1987) calls Prefix Tone Shift. Laughren (1984) proposes a rule of stem initial tone metathesis to handle the same facts but we will not venture into an evaluation of the two proposals since details of analyses are not relevant to our discussion. In these forms, the prefixes *isi* and *abá* appear with a low-high (LH) tone melody instead of the expected high-low (HL) melody for which they are underlyingly specified as shown in (7) above. Lieber's analysis then accounts for these facts by the rule shown in (9) which shifts the HL melody one step to the right when it is followed by a low-tone stem. This explains why the forms in (8) which have H-toned stems fail to undergo the rule. The rule of Prefix Tone Shift is formulated in (9) below:

(9)

Prefix Tone Shift     $\begin{array}{c} \text{V} \\ \text{H} \end{array}$       (c)     $\text{V} \rightarrow \text{V}$     (c)     $\begin{array}{c} \text{V} \\ \text{HL} \end{array}$      $\left[ \begin{array}{c} \text{Stem Co} \\ \text{V} \\ \text{L} \end{array} \right.$

It has been shown in the literature on Nguni languages that rule-governed prefix tone reversal as shown above is a common feature of these languages.

Now, Malawian Ngoni data, both nominal and verbal, clearly shows that the best way of representing tone in stems and prefixes is to posit lexically idiosyncratic tone melodies just as it is the case in Zulu. Consider the following:

(10)

a	abámtwána	children
b	abántu	people
c	abáfazi	women
d	izíhlalo	seats/chairs
e	isibédlela	a bed
f	izíndlú	houses
g	amándondo	beans
h	íchílwányana	an animal
i	ínhlázi	fish
j	íziinjá	dogs

In (10) the prefixes *aba, izi, isi, ama, ichi* and *i* which are attached to the relevant stems show the following tone melodies: LH, L, H and HL and the stems have the tone melodies H, L, HL. The claim being made here is that as in Zulu the tone melodies will be associated with the relevant segments through autosegmental association conventions which are constrained by well-formedness conditions as shown in the samples in (11) below for the forms *ichilwanyana* and *abafazi*.

- (11)
- |   |                       |   |                  |
|---|-----------------------|---|------------------|
| a | <u>ichi</u> -lwanyana | b | <u>aba</u> -fazi |
|   | H    HL               |   | L H L            |

Another aspect of Zulu phonology which is also reflected in MN is the phenomenon of syllable lengthening. In Zulu, as in most Bantu languages, penultimate syllables are stressed and lengthened prepausally (see Laughren, 1984 and Lieber, 1987 for examples). In MN, the same phonological characteristic is also attested as shown in (12) where lengthened vowels are represented as double occurrences of the same vowel:

- (12)
- |   |                      |                 |
|---|----------------------|-----------------|
| a | íinjá                | a dog           |
| b | íthuúmba             | a bag           |
| c | ímísfwéénzi          | works/jobs      |
| d | amáhiíya             | pieces of cloth |
| e | amácaási             | sleeping mats   |
| f | ukúhlábélélá         | to sing         |
| g | ukúsííná             | to dance        |
| h | kuhaamba             | to go           |
| i | kuphákámeérá         | to climb        |
| j | kuphákámérá phézuulu | to climb up     |
| k | úkúbóóná             | to see          |
| l | kúbóná imbuuzi       | to see a goat   |

Note that when the forms occur prepausally their penultimate vowels are lengthened and not when they occur phrase-medially as in (12j) and (12l) where the forms *kuphákámérá* and *kúbóná* respectively occur with short penultimate vowels.

The final feature which MN shares with Zulu is depressor consonants. Work on southern Bantu languages like Shona, Zulu and Xhosa shows that some consonants, normally obstruents which are voiced and breathy, have the effect of lowering surround-

ing tones. Thus, if one of these consonants occurs between high tones, the H tone after it is pronounced at a slightly lower pitch than that of the preceding H. Depressor consonants also lower surrounding L tones to a pitch lower than the normal level thus making them extra-low. Although the theoretical analyses proposed for this phenomenon vary according to authors, the common effect of depressor consonants has never been doubted.

MN also shows evidence of depressor consonants. The data given below contains the relevant examples. (Depressor consonants are underlined, '!' shows a down-stepped H tone and the symbol 'ˆ' stands for a rising tone).

(13)

a	ín <sup>ˆ</sup> y <sup>ˆ</sup> úndlá	a rabbit
b	mín <sup>ˆ</sup> y <sup>ˆ</sup> úndlá	rabbits
c	zǐmpaka	cats
d	íchígǔgu	a fence
e	izǐgǔgu	fences
f	ín <sup>ˆ</sup> h <sup>ˆ</sup> ya	a piece of cloth
g	ukú <sup>ˆ</sup> dónsá	to pull

In the data in (13) the depressor consonants lower the pitch of the following high tones and these appear either as rising (gliding) tones as in (13a-f) or as a lowered or down-stepped high as in (13g). We will assume (following Leiber, 1987 and others) that this lowering effect comes from a low tone which is pre-specified on the depressor consonants which is then spread to a following consonant bringing a 'spill over' effect.

The similarities which Zulu and MN share as observed above obviously result from their common ancestry and their concomitant typological homogeneity. There are, however, certain areas where MN differs from Zulu due to its heavy influence from ChiTumbuka, the dominant language surrounding it. We now examine these aspects.

It has been observed above and indeed by several researchers on Ngoni (see for example Soko, 1986) that some aspects of Ngoni are either dying out or have changed significantly due to its geographical proximity to Tumbuka culture. This influence is not only in the domain of oral tradition but in language as well. The lexicon of MN shows some Tumbuka influence in the sense that words which are of ChiTumbuka origin have found their way into MN with appropriate tonal adaptations to fit its phonological structure. Consider the forms given in (14) below:

(14)

<b>MN</b>	<b>ChiTumbuka</b>	
ichípinda	chipínda	a room
lúswazo	luswázo	a whip
ichíwúmba	chiúmba	a wall
vyúmba	viúmba	walls
íbara	bára	porridge
lúlimi	lulími	a tongue
chíwáya	chiwáya	a cattle house
izínjinga	njínnga	bicycles

The influence which Tumbuka has exerted on Ngoni has resulted in MN losing the original words for those items and thus exhibiting significant lexical differences when compared with Zulu which does not have such forms.

The other difference which is noticeable between MN and Zulu is the number of tonal melodies needed for prefixes and stems (both verbal and nominal). As we noted above in (6), Zulu stem tones can be fully accounted for by using four tone melodies namely L, HL (two types) and LHL while only two melodies (HL and L) are required to adequately account for the prefix tones. In (10) above, we noted that four tone melodies, L, HL, LH and H are needed for prefixes in Ngoni as compared to the two required for Zulu. This observation points to the fact that MN has undergone tonal restructuring which has made it to be very close to a true tone language with lexically specified tones as is the case with most southern Bantu languages. It is also worth noting that apart from the differences in the total number of melodies required for these languages, there is also a difference in the actual realization of the tone itself on some of the prefixes. In Zulu, the prefixes *ísi* and *ába* have an HL melody while in MN the same prefixes are realised with the melodies L and LH respectively. Furthermore, while in Zulu bi-syllabic prefixes always bear a two-tone melody, in MN the number of syllables does not predict the melody it will have since even bi-syllabic prefixes such as *isi* can take a single-tone melody, L in this case.

Finally, one major significant difference between Zulu and Ngoni is that while the former has the rule of Prefix Tone Shift as noted in (9) above, MN does not have that rule. This is indeed very surprising since most of the Nguni languages tend to show this tendency of prefix tone reversal. Whatever explanation one can advance to account for this, the result is that we do not find regular prefix tone alternations such as *abá*, *\*ába*, *izí* and *\*ízi* in Malawian Ngoni.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the status of language and oral traditions among the Northern Malawi Ngoni. It has been shown that despite being threatened by other dominant ethnic groups like the Tumbuka, Ngoni oral traditions in most of their different facets and manifestations have survived and are readily distinguishable. The influence which some of the Ngoni traditions have had from Tumbuka culture collaborates with our findings on Malawian Ngoni linguistic structure where one aspect of its grammar, namely tone, has been shown to have notable differences with another typologically related language, Zulu. Linguistic areas in which Malawian Ngoni and Zulu share common characteristics have also been highlighted.

## **Notes**

1. This is a revised version of paper which was presented at the Second Conference of the University of Malawi Research and Publications Committee held in April, 1993 in Zomba. Sincere gratitude is hereby given to the Research and Publications Committee (RPC) for providing funding for the research on which this paper is based. We would also like to acknowledge with thanks comments made by participants at the RPC meeting and an anonymous *Journal of Humanities* reviewer. Needless to say that all errors are ours.
2. The Ngoni, who are largely found in the Northern and Central Regions of Malawi in such districts as Mzimba (Northern Region), Dedza, Ntcheu, and Mchinji (Central Region) are an ethnic group belonging to the Nguni family of South Africa in which are also found the Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Swazi and other related clans. They are recorded in history as having migrated from Zululand, Natal, South Africa under a clan leader Zwangendaba due to tribal wars which were started by a Zulu leader called Chaka. Their long trek northwards eventually took them to Malawi in the mid-nineteenth century. This study concentrates on Northern Malawi Ngoni.
3. It appears that their counterparts, the Ndebele of Zimbabwe under Mzilikazi and Lobengula, did not mix easily with the Kalanga among whom they settled. They lived in villages that were separate from those of the peoples they assimilated into their system of government. Those who married Kalanga women had to build separate units for them. Even the children born of these marriages are said to have lived among the Kalanga. In that way there was no real interaction between the Ndebele and the Kalanga. Ndebele is today one of the national languages in Zimbabwe.

4. Margaret Read carried out research among the two groups of Ngoni: the Gomani Maseko Ngoni of Ntcheu (from Swaziland) and the Zwangendaba Jere Ngoni of Mzimba (from Zululand).
5. See Read, M. 1936, p. 453.
6. J. M. Foley. 1990. Introduction.
7. See Makoju, G. A. E. 1985, p. 4.
8. See Ugochukwu, F. 1983.
9. Jando is an initiation ceremony usually conducted among the Yaos of Southern Malawi and serves the purpose of inculcating into the youth the principles of manhood. The symbol of graduation into manhood by the initiates is circumcision. For more details, see Soko, B. J. 1988. Traditional forms of instruction: the case of the Jando initiation ceremony. In Sienaert, E. and Bell, N., *Catching Winged Words: Oral Tradition and Education*. Durban: Natal University Oral Documentation and Research Centre.
10. See Corbeil, J. J. 1982.
11. Moyo, S. 1978, p. 211.
12. See Mamba, G. N. 1987.
13. Extracts from the *izithokozo* recorded at Zimema Village, August 1986. Berama P. C. Jele.
14. See Kunene, M. 1981, p. ix.
15. Innes, G. 1981.
16. On their own, the Tumbuka are not numerous. There are only four clans which claim to be Tumbuka: Nyirongo, Nkhonjera, Mtonga and Kumwenda. These names may also feature as Tumbuka surnames, but they can always be traced back to the original four clans. All other surnames which pose as Tumbuka are either

Balowoka, Tonga, Chewa, Senga, Biza, Bemba, Chikunda, Makhabango, Sukuma, etc. (names like Gondwe, Mkandawire, Munthali, Nyirenda, Kayira, Chima, Chisi, Chipeta, Lungu, Zgovu, etc. are not Tumbuka).

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