

ECHOES FROM THE MOTHERLAND: HERITAGE LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION WITHIN THE MALAWIAN COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores heritage language transmission among immigrant families in South Africa. Such research is essential to maintaining language for educational purposes and family interactions. This is a very important topic in a multilingual and multicultural country such as South Africa, and it adds new knowledge to the current research on family language policies and heritage languages. Family interactions are central to language transmission. The available literature shows family units as central to language maintenance and sustenance among immigrant families. Research on immigrant language practices in South Africa is sparse, with available research mainly focusing on school experiences. No available research specifically addresses heritage language transmission within Malawian immigrant families in South Africa, which this study aimed to investigate. The research employed a sociolinguistic approach to explore the language transmission of Chichewa within Malawian immigrant families. The theoretical framework positions Chichewa as mainly used in family circles and less at religious and social gatherings. Data were collected through interviews and observations at family and social gatherings. The study finds that the family context is the main domain within which children are exposed to parental heritage language to a consequential degree, whereas social gatherings contribute to a lesser extent. The data show that parental efforts at transmitting heritage language are insufficient for sustainable levels. Although parents wish to preserve some elements of their identities and culture, a signifier of ethnic identity, their children seem not keen to do so. The study uncovered two major reasons for children's disinterest: fear of anti-foreign sentiments and a lack of attachment to the parental home country. The paper concludes with the identification of an emerging 'indelible' heritage language speaker, a phenomenon that could motivate further research in this field.

KEYWORDS: anti-foreign sentiments, Chichewa, heritage language transmission, Malawian immigrant families in South Africa, language socialisation, multilingual and multicultural country

INTRODUCTION

The global movements of people are framed within the notion of transnationalism, which refers to the movement of people between two or more social spaces while preserving cultural attachments across geographical borders, time and generations (Hirsch & Lee, 2018; King, 2016). Terminology, such as *first-generation* and *second-generation immigrants* (Lee & Suarez, 2009), reflects increasing international mobility across generations. As studies show,

relocating to a new country is not only a life-changing experience for first-generation migrants but also establishes a multilingual and multicultural home environment for second-generation transnationals (Wilson, 2020). Transnationalism has led to the formation of transcultural families and the appearance of linguistic superdiversity (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). For immigrant parents, raising children in the host country while maintaining their heritage language is an intricate challenge (Okita, 2002), which immigrants in South Africa also face.

Immigration from neighbouring countries is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. As Southern Africa's largest economy, South Africa has historically received migrant workers from neighbouring countries. Before becoming a democratic state in 1994, South Africa was host to migrant labour, primarily from Botswana, Lesotho, Nyasaland (Malawi), Mozambique, South-West Africa (Namibia), Swaziland (Eswatini), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Migrant labour was recruited through the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), the labour recruiting agency of the Chamber of Mines (South Africa) (Chirwa, 1996; Johnson, 2017). After the first democratic elections in 1994, the government formulated a series of amnesties granting permanent South African residence and citizenship to certain migrants from the region who had been in the state for certain lengths of time (Crush & Williams, 1999).

Some Malawian migrants, on which this study is based, also benefited from these amnesties. Census 2011 showed that there were over 2,1 million international immigrants in the country, 75% of them from the African continent, of which about 4% were from Malawi (Statistics South Africa, 2015). Unofficial reports estimate a considerable number of Malawian migrants living in South Africa, with unconfirmed media reports claiming that almost a third of Malawi's population live and work in South Africa (Africa Check, 2017), whereas the official 2011 census indicates that 86,606 people who had been born in Malawi lived in South Africa. However, the presence of undocumented migrants makes it difficult to estimate the exact number of Malawians living in South Africa.

Unofficial estimates indicate that South Africa and Zimbabwe have the highest number of Chichewa speakers outside Malawi. Malawian migrants started settling in the (then) Southern Rhodesia in the early 1900s. During the colonial era, Southern Rhodesia was highly dependent upon foreign migrant labour (Groves, 2020). According to Groves (2020), people of Malawian origin and descent have constructed a sense of belonging in Zimbabwe's urban communities while at the same time continuing to identify with their Malawian heritage and speaking their language, Chichewa. In Southern Rhodesia, Chichewa was widely spoken in conglomerate mining and farming communities where most Malawian migrants were employed. Because of its historical and widespread presence, the Zimbabwean constitution recognises Chichewa as one of its 16 official languages (Constitution of Zimbabwe Amended (No. 20) Act, 2013). However, although a significant number of Malawians live in South Africa, Chichewa is not officially recognised in the country, making for a markedly generative ethnography of language and cultural community.

Chichewa, also known as Chinyanja, is widely spoken in Malawi and commonly regarded as Malawi's national language, with an estimated 40–57% of speakers (Reilly, 2019; Kayambazinthu, 1998, 2003; Malawi Population Census, 2018). A sociolinguistic analysis of Chichewa must begin with an interpretation of the political processes that empowered it to the detriment of other languages. In its quest to create unity among Malawians, the early government of the Malawi Congress Party adopted the slogan 'one Kamuzu (Banda), one flag, one nation, one language and one Party' (McCracken, 2002: 86). The one language, hereafter, referred to Chichewa, was the language spoken by the Chewa tribe to which President Banda belonged (Moyo, 2001; Mchombo, 2014). This policy led to the 'dominance of Chichewa in

the cultural fabric of Malawi' (Mchombo, 2017: 195). Throughout the dictatorial period of Kamuzu Banda, the success of different indigenous languages was unequal, with Chichewa gaining much recognition and growth (Reilly, 2019). The rapid expansion of Chichewa throughout Malawi led the way to the type of linguistic dominance that can also be seen among Malawians living in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article engages with contentious debates around ethnolinguistic identity, drawing heavily on the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and colleagues (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory addresses how social identities affect people's attitudes and behaviour regarding their in- or out-groups. According to Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982: 7), 'social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language'. Heller (1982, 1987, 1988) has shown how language and ethnicity interact because 'language is a symbol of ethnic identity' (Heller (1982: 308) and a salient marker of group membership and identity (Giles & Johnson, 1981, 1987). Specifically, ethnicity can enable or limit individual ability to participate in some social situations and networks with shared ethnic backgrounds, behaviours, values, languages and lifestyles (Heller, 1982). According to Fishman (1989), the home, family and neighbourhood constitute a natural process of intergenerational language transmission. Parental attitudes towards the heritage language impact language transmission in the family significantly, including the linguistic environment (Schupman, 2009). The term 'linguistic environment' refers to language transmission strategies and supporting measures, such as the frequency of contact with the country of origin or exposure to heritage language outside the home, which is important for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Heritage Language

Originally coined in Canada and broadly used in the 1970s and 1980s, the term *heritage language* was introduced in reference to the languages of immigrants (Cummins, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2012). Over the years, many other synonyms have emerged, such as languages of origin (Makarova, 2014), ethnic languages (Saint-Jacques, 1979), community languages (Wiley, 2005), mother languages or mother tongues (IAMTE, 2014), ancestral languages (Eisenlohr, 2004), home languages (Yeung, Marsh & Suliman, 2000), minority languages (Cummins, 2005), and immigrant minority languages (Extra & Yagmur, 2002). Some scholars find the notion of heritage problematic, arguing that there is no syntagmatic relationship between heritage and language (Makoni & Brutt-Griffler, 2005). The term heritage is connotatively associated with 'past traditions rather than acquiring language skills' (Cummings, 2014: 2). Such conceptualisation seems mostly to attach language to history, inconsequential to the present or the future (Makoni, 2018). The more insidious aspect of this connotation is its association with backwardness, 'tradition and obsolescence' (May, 2001: 14; 2006). Fishman (2001) proposes three categories of heritage language, namely immigrant, indigenous and colonial. The immigrant category is most relevant to my study because it is concerned with the intricacies of heritage language maintenance, which are profoundly connected to immigrants' cultural and social identity in their home countries (Fishman, 1999). Without an associated cultural identity, immigrants and their descendants lose their ethnic ties and experiences (Fishman, 1989; Fishman et al., 1999). Thus, 'retaining a native language is a crucial index of the preservation of cultural roots after immigration' (Sears et al. 2003: 427).

To preserve their heritage languages, some immigrant parents adopt the one-language-one-parent policy, whereby each parent only speaks their first language to the child to avoid confusion. Other immigrant parents decide to speak only their heritage language at home, while the local language is learnt at school. As Lee (2013: 1576) notes, 'Failure to maintain heritage language leads to the inability to maintain cultural identity'.

Family language transmission

Drawing on Fishmanian sociolinguistics, the family is considered a linguistic and cultural domain that sets parameters for and thus constrains how one uses and chooses language with family members (Fishman, 1991). Language is crucial for identity and belonging, which immigrant parents consistently negotiate in their homes. Heritage language maintenance among immigrant families has received much scholarly attention in many countries (Diskin, 2020; Kupolati, 2021; Liang & Shin, 2021; Makoni, 2018). However, extensive research has been conducted in Europe and America (Park & Sarkar, 2007; Nesteruk, 2010). Research gaining traction has mainly focused on family language policy and heritage language transmission and conservation among immigrant families in Europe, Asia and America (Yazan & Ali, 2018; Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2017). Notably, language acquisition through socialisation within the home environment has received little attention. Fortunately, the emerging field of Family Language Policy (FLP) is drawing attention to transnational children's potential for dual language acquisition through family language practices (Wilson, 2020). Even though an increasing number of publications are examining the efficiency of given parental language management strategies in the field of FLP, the impact of such language strategies and their concomitant expectations have rarely been studied (Piller, 2002), particularly in South Africa.

Family Language Policy

Family Language Policy (FLP) has been defined as the explicit and implicit planning of language and literacy practices within the home and between family members (King et al., 2008; Curdt-Christiansen, 2009). Spolsky (2004) highlights family language policy (FLP) as of paramount importance to heritage language transmission, as also shown by scholars such as Purkarthofer, Lanza and Berg (2021), Berardi-Wiltshire (2017) and Palviainen and Boyd (2013). FLP is key to 'determin[ing] the maintenance and future status of minority languages' (King et al., 2008: 907). Extensive research has sought to understand minority language settings and FLP among immigrant families and the strategies they employ to negotiate the host country's linguistic repertoire and the need to maintain their heritage languages (Hua & Wei, 2016; Revis, 2016; Seloni & Sarfati, 2013).

However, research on this phenomenon is relatively sparse in Africa, particularly in South Africa. Existing literature on African immigrants in Southern Africa has mainly focused on migration trends (Daimon, 2021, 2017; Groves, 2011, 2012, 2020; Johnson, 2017), illegal migration (Martin, Abella & Kuptsch, 2006) and migrant literacy practices (Kajee, 2011; Ergul & Kajee, 2014; Ngoh & Kajee, 2018; Mbembi-Mafandala, 2014). A few South African-based studies have focused on language maintenance and transmission among African immigrant families. An early study by McDuling (1995) provided an account of factors influencing language maintenance and shift within the Portuguese community in Johannesburg. A different study conducted by Yu and Vivier (2015) demonstrated how the Chinese community in Pretoria established strategies to transmit their language and culture to their children. The authors describe how the Chinese community established schools in Pretoria, which emphasised the importance of sustaining heritage language (Edwards, 1985). Some studies report parents enrolling their children in mother tongue courses in an attempt to compensate

for the limited use of the ethnic language at home (Chatzidaki, Maligkoudi & Mattheoudakis, 2015). However, there is no research on heritage language transmission among Malawians living in South Africa, a lack this study attempts to address.

RATIONALE AND AIM

Against the backdrop of the identified dearth of literature, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of heritage language transmission within the Malawian migrant community in South Africa. As Portes and Rivas (2013) suggest, most migrant parents wish their children to preserve some elements of their own identities and cultures. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to explore how the Malawian migrants in South Africa maintain and transmit their heritage language to their children. Thus, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How do parents within the Malawian immigrant community in South Africa transmit their heritage language to their children?
2. Which sociocultural practices facilitate heritage language transmission and maintenance?

METHODOLOGY

This article draws on a case study of a Malawian immigrant community living in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Methods of data collection and ethics

All relevant institutional steps were followed to obtain permission to conduct this research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's institution to ensure adherence to ethical principles. Participants were informed of their right to voluntarily participate or withdraw from the study without consequence. The researcher obtained participant consent to observe and record information. In addition, parental consent was sought for children under 18 years old to participate in the study. The observations happened at the participants' homes and different social and religious functions in which they participated. The interviews were conducted with parents and children in their preferred language to address the main research question: *How do the Malawian immigrant community in South Africa maintain and transmit their heritage language to their children?* All data were anonymised to protect the identity of participants and analysed through thematic content analysis (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Thematic content analysis was used because it allowed for grouping data into themes. The representative quotations were arranged in table form to allow for a comparison of the data from different participants.

Population sample

Purposive sampling (Creswell, 2015) was used to identify participants through personal contacts; further referrals were then requested using a snowball sampling strategy (Patton & Cochran, 2002). Three families with both parents of Malawian origin were selected to participate in the study. The participants were parents and their children born in Malawi or South Africa and other household members. The concept of 'child' does not necessarily denote age but being an offspring. The following are the profiles of families that participated in this study:

The Maseko family

The Masekos are from Nsanje, Malawi. Mr Maseko migrated to South Africa in 1981, and his wife followed in 1984. The Maseko family live in the servants' quarters in a suburban house

where Mr Nkhondo Maseko works as both a housekeeper and gardener. His wife, Tiese, at times assists him. However, Mr Maseko's employers could not hire her because she could not speak English. The Masekos have three children: Mavuto, Chikondi and Sally, all of whom were born in South Africa.

The Banda family.

Mr Japhet Banda is a tailor from a village near Blantyre. Although the Banda family speaks Chichewa, Mr Banda revealed that he was of the Sena ethnic group, also found in Mozambique. His wife is Ngoni. Mr Banda came to South Africa in 1971; his sister, who was in the same Catholic Church village choir as his (now) wife, arranged his marriage. Of their five children, two were born in Malawi, and three, Tenepa, Chisoni and Kalota, were born in South Africa. Tenepa is a student at one of the local universities.

The Zulu family

The Zulu family is originally from Zomba. Mr Mphepho Zulu informed me that he had first settled in Bulawayo in (then) Rhodesia. He migrated to South Africa with his white employers in 1982. His wife and elder son, Jam, born in Malawi, joined him the following year. His twin daughters, Loza and Lizy, were born in Johannesburg in 1993. Mr Zulu spoke fondly of Zimbabwe as his second home because he had a well-established network of friends and relatives in that country. He confessed that had it not been for the poor economic conditions in Zimbabwe, he would have returned because the officials and ordinary people there were more tolerant of Malawians than in South Africa. He commended the Zimbabwean government for recognising Chichewa as one of the official languages and the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) and for promoting Chichewa through radio programmes such as *Zimene mwatipempha* (songs that you have requested), a 1980s Chichewa music request radio programme.

Data analysis and validity

The data analysis for this study was conducted using a constant comparative method (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). After each interview and observation, summarised notes were made, and key findings were highlighted. The information from each interview or observation was compared with the previous for commonalities and differences. The study addressed the accuracy of the data description and analysis using verbatim transcripts to minimise misinterpretations. Some of the interview data were translated into English. Further, a competent Chichewa speaker checked the quality of translation and spelling to enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of the study.

DATA DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The interview and observation data are presented and analysed in the following emerging themes to answer the pertinent question of the study: *How do the Malawian migrant community in South Africa maintain and transmit their heritage language to their children?*

Language and cultural transmission within the family unit

Berardi-Wiltshire (2017) highlights the significance of the home domain for the maintenance and revitalisation of minority languages, specifically focusing on the role of family language policies in supporting the process of intergenerational transmission of language. According to Pauwels (2005: 25), the family is the 'cornerstone for acquisition and maintenance of (heritage language)'. Several studies show that language and culture are intimately related. For Shin

(2010: 216), 'successful language learning and maintenance strategies usually [...] start with language transmission at the level of the family'. Language transmission within immigrant families has drawn much attention. Whether a family has been in a country for only a few years or generations, they aspire to pass on their language and cultural heritage to their children through conversations, stories, music, prayers and more (Iris Center n.d). Therefore, to uncover the interconnection between the transmission of language and culture, the study conducted observations and interviews with different family members to answer the research question: *How do parents within the Malawian community in South Africa transmit their heritage language to their children?* The family language policy is an essential strategy employed in heritage language transmission and maintenance.

The current study revealed that the migrant families in this study had overt language policies inclined toward heritage language transmission and protection. As in some studies, the migrant parents in this study were trying to resist adopting the majority language by speaking their ethnic language at home and exposing their children to the ethnic language, even to print versions, e.g., the Chichewa Bible and hymn books, etc. (Borland, 2006; Gogonas, 2009; Wright & Kurtoğlu-Hooton, 2006; Yağmur & Akinci, 2003).

All the children in this study revealed that they were compelled to speak Chichewa in their interactions with their parents or relatives, including greetings. I observed that all the families conducted prayer sessions in Chichewa, including reading a Chichewa Bible. The following selected children's views demonstrate the strict adherence to family language policy: 'If I try to speak to my dad in Zulu, he just pretends not to hear', 'I am forced to speak Chichewa because my parents can barely speak English or Zulu', 'My father can rebuke me in front of strangers', 'If my parents hear us speak English they give us that killer look', and 'My uncle deliberately speaks Chichewa in the presence of my university friends, just to embarrass me'.

Language and culture

This study established a strong interconnectedness between language and cultural practices. All the families maintained that it is customary for Malawians to offer a visitor food. For example, during my data collection visits, the families courteously offered me food. They revealed that, according to their culture, it is considered disrespectful for a visitor to refuse a host's food. In this regard, they offered me food on different occasions during my visits to their homes to conduct observations. Their meals mostly consisted of traditional staple food, *nsomba* (fish) and *nsima* (thick maize porridge), commonly known as *pap* in South Africa.

Furthermore, linked to culture and lifestyle, the study uncovered a common language policy among all the families. It found that, as a sign of respect, the Malawian parents insisted their children used the plural pronoun when addressing someone older, a practice also common among the Pedi, Sotho, Tswana (South Africa), and the Shona (Zimbabwe) and Kalanga (Zimbabwe/ Botswana). For example, they say *ulibwanji* (*o kae* in Tswana; how are you) when greeting a young person and say *Mulibwanji* (*le kae* in Tswana), which is the plural used when greeting older people. Both the young and the older participants addressed me as *bambo* (father/sir) or *ampfumu* (chief), which is a title used to denote respect rather than royalty. The title *bambo* (sir) is like *ntate* (father/sir) in Sesotho. The participants used terms of endearment among themselves, such as *nzanga* (my friend), loosely translated *tsala yame* in Setswana, and *mbale wanga* (my relative), loosely translated *mhlobo wami* in isiXhosa. Most men called each other *achimwene* (brother-in-law), as in colloquial *s'bali* in South Africa. Women often referred to each other as *apongosi* (mother-in-law).

Again, the study found that parents in Malawian migrant families considered it disrespectful for any member of the family not to greet a visitor. They socialised the children always to greet visitors. Regardless of where they were, the children were summoned, *bwelani mudzapeleke moni kumulendo* (come and greet the visitor). The Malawians' greeting usually denoted the time of the day, *Mwadzuka bwanji* (Good morning) or *Mwachoma bwanji* (Good afternoon/evening). After greeting me, the adults often exchanged pleasantries and asked after the health of my family, *Alibwanji ena kunyumba?* (How are others at home?). This was followed with comments about the weather, *kukuzizila lero* (It's cold today) or *kwatentha lero* (It's hot today) and *Mvula ikufuna kugwa* (It wants to rain). It was observed that after every meal everyone expressed gratitude, *zikomo kwambili magwila nchito* (Thank you very much. You have done a great job). I also witnessed parents in all the homes insisting that children must stretch out both hands when receiving anything from someone older. When leaving the home, the children would say *basi tapita / tili mnjira* (we are leaving / we are on our way), loosely translated as *nisale kahle / sesiyindlela* in Zulu. Most language transmission occurred in ordinary family interactions, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

Transcription 1

- Mrs Maseko: *Simunaphike nsima? Kodi inu simukuzindikira kuti nthawi yapita?* (You haven't cooked *nsima*. Don't you realise that time is gone?).
- Chikondi: *Kulibe magetsi. Ndinali kudikira Mavuto kuti akateme nkhuni* (There is no electricity. I was waiting for Mavuto to cut firewood).
- Mrs Maseko: *Iyayi, sitikufuna kudya usiku ngati afiti* (No, we don't want to eat late at night like witches).
- Mr Maseko: *Chikondi, vala moyenera. Sindifuna mwana oyenda maliseche ngati azimayi amuHillbrow* (Chikondi, dress decently. I don't want a child who walks naked like those women in Hillbrow).
- Mrs Maseko: *Khala bwino. Chikondi. Usakhale ngati ulikuteya maliwa* [reprimanding] (Sit properly, Chikondi. Don't sit as if you are setting mice snare[s]).

Transcription 2:

- Mr Banda: *Osayiwala kutseka mawindo, udzudzu ulowa* (Don't forget to close the windows, mosquitos will be going to enter).
- Mrs Banda: *Chisoni, mwana akulira chifukwa chiyani?* (Chisoni, why is the child crying?).
- Kalota: *Sakufuna kundipatsa sweet* (She doesn't want to give me a sweet).
- Mrs Banda: *Chisoni, pasa mwana switi imodzi. [Aside] Iyayi, mwana uyu ngowoma ntima ngati galu opanda mnchila* (Kalota, give the child a sweet. No, this child is heartless like a dog without a tail).
- Chisoni: *Damupatsa, koma akufunabe zina. Amadya mwaumbombo ngati mkango* (I gave her, but she still wants some more. She eats ravenously like a hungry lion).
- Mr Banda: *Iwe Chisoni, umalankhula kumwamba ngati munthu ali pamtengo. Ana amavuta* (You speak so loudly as if you are on a treetop. Children are a problem).

The two extracts exemplifying family interactions demonstrate an artistic use of idioms in speech patterns dominated with similes: *kudya usiku ngati afiti*; *ngowoma ntima ngati galu opanda mnchila*. The use of *ngati* (like) in every simile demonstrates the participants' comparative perspective of the world. When reprimanding Chikondi for not sitting like a lady,

Mrs Maseko creates imagery of boys carelessly squatting when setting snares to catch mice. Besides using a rural context of mice catching, she demonstrates how girls are socialised to be ladies. In addition, girls are taught to dress decently; like the older women, the girls in this study wore *ntsaru* or *chitenje* (a cloth that women tie around themselves as a traditional African way of dressing). To demonstrate disapproval of indecent dressing, Mr Maseko uses the analogy of scantily dressed sex workers in Hillbrow, a place in central Johannesburg notorious for prostitution and other social ills. Children in the study also used Chichewa idioms in their speech, as Chisoni demonstrated, *amadya mwaumbombo ngati mkango*. The children attested to trying to learn the contexts of idioms in their language. According to Nwokolo, speaking idiomatically is important in retaining thought patterns enforced by the linguistic structures of one's language (Interview with Nkeokelonye, 2019). In addition to linguistic transmission, the study found that the naming of children in Chichewa was a common practice among Malawian migrants. For Nwokolo, naming children in African languages was a vehicle for retaining languages (Interview with Nkeokelonye, 2019). In addition, the migrants in this study demonstrated situational ethnicity (Okamura, 1981; Wilson, 1984, 1987) as a means of explaining how migrant women negotiated the complexities of femininity in a foreign land (pp. 19–21). For example, Mr Maseko constructs 'Malawiness when portraying stereotypical images of a moral, upright woman.

As Portes and Rivas (2013) suggest, most migrant parents wish their children to preserve some elements of their culture. Thus, the Malawian migrant community in South Africa initiates their children to their culture. On one occasion, I found Mr Zulu's father, who had travelled from Malawi to attend the *chinamwali* (coming of age) ceremony for Mr Zulu's daughter. All the interviewed families highlighted the importance of observing this customary ceremony, which is a rite of passage to adulthood and the initiation of a girl to womanhood. Upon my encounter with Mr Zulu senior, I observed him teaching his grandchildren a Chichewa traditional song, *Nyamakwenje kuyemba mbo nkhwiyoy* (You, without teeth, can also whistle). He also taught the children other songs he said he had learnt at the Catholic mission school when he was young, such as the following, whose tune resembled the nursery rhyme 'I hear thunder':

Bambo Paulo (2x) (Father Paul)

Chorus: *Yembani mabela* (2x) (ring the bells)

Nga...nga...nga!

Many writers highlight the importance of song in language maintenance and cultural transmission. For example, Stadler (2021) describes the transmission of songs as a fundamental cultural practice by which 'members of the older generations introduce both musico-linguistic rules and affect-regulative means to the younger ones' (p. 1). Traditional song transmission is embedded in various prescriptive claims and interests, such as preserving cultural heritage and representing collective and national identity. However, African governments have tended to prioritise the transmission of indigenous languages through education and research over dance and music traditions (Viriri, 2003; Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2021). Nonetheless, dance and music traditions as components of the living heritage have been overlooked because of the widespread assumption that indigenous performing arts rely on the language of their practitioners to survive.

Storytelling is another transmission mechanism observed in this study. I observed Mr Zulu senior telling his grandchildren stories with moral lessons, such as *Chisoni chinapha nkhwali* (being merciful, led a guineafowl to his death). In addition, the children in this study revealed that their parents recounted the painful experiences of growing up in abject poverty in (the then) Nyasaland.

Another cultural custom among the Malawian Sena ethnic group involved having decorative traditional tattoos on the faces or backs of women. Mrs Zulu indicated that the tattoos were a series of needle incisions made by a cultural expert they call *ntsayi*. The process was described as painful. Therefore, the initiates would sing throughout the process to overcome the excruciating pain. As reported, they sang the following song:

Ungava kulila lemba (even if you hear the cry, continue marking) (2x)

Chorus: *Lemba ntsayi* (2x) (mark *ntsayi*)

Parents transmitted language through family interactions. When observing family interactions, two interesting linguistic features were noticed: the parents' use of 'deep' Chichewa and antonyms. For example, they used words such as *udzudzu* (mosquito), *nchelo* (salt) and *mpando* (chair). The older participants' use of antonyms was quite enriching to the children's vocabulary, such as *mbuyo-ntsogolo* (backward-forward); *kumwamba-pasi* (up-down). An interesting finding was the lexical and phonetical resemblance of some Chichewa words to some South African languages. This was noted in words such as *mvula* (Chichewa for rain) and *imvula* in Zulu; *mamuna* (man)-*monna* in Tswana/Sotho, *pansi* (down)-*phansi* in Zulu and *kufuna* (to want/seek) *ukufuna* in Zulu. Despite some lexical similarities, Chichewa speakers, among other Southern African migrants such as Ndebele/Sotho/Venda (Zimbabwe) and Tsonga (Mozambique), seemed to encounter the most difficulty in acculturating and moving to South African languages. From my perspective, a lack of acculturating and language shifting could enable heritage language maintenance to a certain extent. Contrary to Pauwels' (2016) observation that linguistic similarities can prevent language maintenance because they make it easier for minority language speakers to acquire and shift to dominant languages, this established that Malawian migrants cannot fully shift to local languages. To a large extent, the Malawians' strong sense of group cohesion is strengthened by the phrase *ndi akwathu* (is from our country) could be a strong deterrent to language shift.

Maintaining connections with the motherland

In addition to having strong links with each other in South Africa, the participants in this study reported that they maintained strong connections with their families back home. According to Nyirongo (2019), Malawian migrants typically maintain strong personal connections with back home to earn the respect of village elders. The dreaded term among the Malawian migrants is *muchona*. In South Africa, the equivalent Zulu term is *ibhubuha*. Both terms refer to one who has not been to their village for a lengthy period. In Africa, the village is associated with one's roots 'where your ancestors lived or are buried' (Nyirongo, 2019, p. 8). From my perspective, not visiting one's village is like severing ties with ancestors, which can upset ancestors and relatives and is likely to bring misfortune. All the older participants in this study maintained that although they did not often visit home, they maintained close links with their kin back home. They revealed that they regularly wrote letters to relatives back home and sent them money, some form of 'black tax'¹ (Mhlungu, 2015). This finding is consistent with Nyirongo's (2019) finding that Malawian migrants are compelled to send money back home for fear of losing their good standing with relatives, who may not welcome them when they return home. This reminds us of the lyrics of the song, *A Phiri Anabwera*² by Nashil Pitchen Kazembe. In addition, the participants revealed that maintaining connections with relatives back home was beneficial because they helped them to import goods to sell in South Africa, such as rice and

¹ A financial responsibility and obligation of providing for extended family.

² The song tells the story of one who returns home to Malawi with nothing.

chitenje/ ntsaru (a cloth wrapped around the lower part of the body by women) and *Matemba* (small, dried fish), an observation also made by Nyirongo (2019).

Language transmission at religious and social gatherings

According to Yagmur and van de Vijver (2012) and Yagmur and Bohnacker (2022), the retention of a heritage language is more likely when the ethnic group is large, and the heritage language is held in high esteem by its speakers. This study established that the Malawian community in South Africa had formed compact cultural and religious groups to ‘inspire communal cohesion and cultural strengthening’ (Nkeokelonye, 2019: 333). They have also established different religious associations. At these social gatherings, members shared vital information such as reporting a death, *mlongo wanga anamwalila kumudzi* (my sister passed away back home); parents introducing their children, *uyu ndimwana wanga wankulu* (this is my eldest child); reporting sickness, *wujeni akudwala* (so and so is sick); or reporting an achievement, *wujeni agula galimoto* (so and so has bought a car). These practices were found to enhance social cohesion among the Malawian migrant community. The migrant community also formed social groups such as burial societies to assist members with funeral expenses in the spirit of *kuthandizana* (helping each other). The study found that the names of burial associations were carefully selected to resonate with the stark realities of life. For example, some names served as constant reminders of the inevitability of death: *Chawona nzako chapita* (What your friend experienced (when still alive) is over), *Kufa ndikugona* (death is like falling asleep) and *Malilo ndikulilisana* (mourning is about sharing bereavement). All burial society meetings were conducted in Chichewa, and the minutes were taken in Chichewa. The study found that at all gatherings, proceedings were punctuated with song and dance. Joint singing is universal in all human cultures (Jordania, 2011) and is a cultural practice through which the musico-linguistic lore is transmitted between generations (Stadler, 2021).

Language transmission was also witnessed in ethnic organisations such as burial societies. In addition to belonging to burial societies, this study found that the migrants belonged to religious organisations. Sridhar (1988) has highlighted the importance of religion for language maintenance through ritual and prayer. Importantly, Piitz (1991) notes that in addition to promoting language maintenance, membership in a religious denomination underlines the combination of religion, ethnicity and language. All the participants in this study belonged to Christian organisations aligned with the churches they attended, mainly the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). The migrant members of the Catholic church reported that they attended Chichewa mass at their main cathedral in Johannesburg and held their community meetings after mass. Young people attended respective youth group meetings. At these church group meetings, communication was mainly in Chichewa. As was the case with burial society meetings, the religious meeting minutes were taken in Chichewa by *omphunzila* (the educated), who had attended school in Malawi and could read and write Chichewa competently. However, the South African-born members were encouraged to read the minutes, while ‘the educated’ constantly corrected their pronunciation. The participants sang Chichewa hymns at these religious meetings, and all prayers were in Chichewa. The Catholics recited catechism prayers in Chichewa, a practice they transposed to their homes. The study established that all Malawian homes prayed in Chichewa. The importance of using the mother tongue in church is highlighted in the Vatican's Apostolic Constitution, *Exsul Familia* (1952), whereby the Pope recognised the right of immigrant groups to be served by priests speaking their language (Kloss, 1971).

Besides direct language interaction as a medium of heritage language transmission, the role of creative arts in language maintenance and transmission has received considerable attention. In their study, Falola et al. (2008) demonstrate how heritage language use in dance, music and poetry contains linguistic cultural retentions. Because of reported hostility towards African migrants, Mr Zulu, who had lived in Bulawayo, lamented the lack of active cultural involvement among the Malawian community in South Africa compared to that in Zimbabwe. He recounted how the Malawian community in the Bulawayo townships, such as Sizinda and Tshabalala, freely spoke their languages and performed their cultural *Nyau* dance in public places. Thus, one could conclude that community and religious groups provided a social platform whereby children could interact with other Malawians. Research shows migrants share cultural practices and values and form a cohesive 'speech community' in cultural organisations (Lai, 2012). Importantly, in their studies of German-Australian communities, Clyne (1988) and Piitz (1991) concluded that not only do social organisations increase language maintenance, but they are also 'one of the most important domains promoting language maintenance in ethnic communities' (Piitz 1991: 487).

Maintaining cultural norms and customs

To elicit the voices of young heritage speakers and help them express their perspectives on their experiences, the question posed was, *What are your perceptions of your parents' cultural norms and customs?* All the South African-born children openly expressed disdain for arranged marriages. Among migrant groups, endogamy (i.e., marriage restricted to within the group) is common, which is believed to improve the chances of a family language being transmitted to offspring. In addition to marrying within their group, this study found that the Malawian migrants believed in arranged marriages. *Kukwatila mukadzi wakumuzi* (marrying a woman from home) is a common practice among Malawians living in South Africa. Men send money back home for relatives to marry them to a wife who is subsequently sent to join her husband in South Africa. The idea of *kukwatila mukadzi wakumuzi* emerged in every interview with both parents and children in this study. The older generation, in particular, expressed a preference for marrying within their community. They maintained that Malawian women are ideal wives because they speak their language and know their customs as opposed to *akazi amitundu ina* (women of other tribes). Although the term *amitundu* (other tribes) has a discriminatory connotation, the parents in this study consistently expressed disapproval of marrying within South African communities. Besides the substantial cultural differences, the parents maintained that it was unwise to marry people who not only despise Malawians but also virulently detest foreigners in general. In contrast, all the young participants in this study, except those born in Malawi, vehemently disapproved of the practice of marrying from home, citing incompatible sociocultural differences.

Despite having common ancestry with people from home, all the South African-born children maintained that they did not consider themselves Malawians or felt any attachment to their parents' country of origin. They confessed that they did not even relate well to their siblings who were born in Malawi. Wilson (2020) concurs that decisions regarding which language to speak in the family might influence the children's relationships with the extended family. The children seemed detached from their heritage country, as one 21-year-old noted, 'How can I have links with a country where my parents ran away from? Honestly, my parents have absolutely nothing positive to say about their country except abject poverty, disease and *ufiti* (witchcraft)'. Another boy stated that the low literacy levels of women from Malawi were unappealing to him, 'Just imagine, me marrying someone straight from *emakhaya* (rural areas), who can't even read and write or speak English. I will be a joke of the century among my

friends', which reminds us of Ocol in Okot p' Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. Significant low literacy levels are reportedly common among poor rural communities in Malawi, particularly among women (Watkins & Ashforth, 2019; Mussa, 2017; Kachiwanda, 2015; Watkins & Kaler, 2015).

Assigned sociolinguistic identities of Malawian migrants

In South Africa, identities assigned to Malawians are mostly derived from stereotypes. Ngozi Adichie (2019) makes a very interesting observation about stereotypes by saying, 'The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete'. Thus, Malawians are stereotyped as having reputable traditional healing powers and strong *muthi* (traditional charms) emanating from mystical stories of Chikanga³. Consequently, several South Africans reportedly fall prey to false prophets and fake healers who claim to be from Malawi (Makhoba, 2019; Makhubu, 2017), most of whom are not. One participant in this study, Mr Zulu, reported that he is known as Chikanga in his neighbourhood because of his traditional healing, which is a common practice in Malawi (Simwaka, Peltzer & Maluwa-Banda, 2007).

Contrary to positive stereotypes of the Malawian community, these migrants are not spared the derogatory terms assigned to foreigners. Malawians are called *ma-Nyasa*, *i-Nyasa*, or *le-Nyasa*. Although *Nyasa* is derived from Nyasaland (the colonial name of Malawi), it is mostly used pejoratively. The prefixes 'ma' (the), 'i' (it) or 'le' (the) portray Malawian migrants as having thing-like qualities. Different connotations are attached to 'Nyasa'. The positive connotation is being hardworking, honest, having strong *muthi* and being excellent tailors, whereas the negative connotation is associated with being uneducated and submissive. However, the older generation in this study seemed to embrace the 'Nyasa' label with pride as just an endearment, whereas the younger generation found it offensive. In addition, the Malawian community are also termed *amakwerekwere*, a derogatory term many South Africans commonly use to refer to African foreigners (Musengi, Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2013). One young participant in this study recounted an unpleasant encounter with the police at Johannesburg's Park Station, where people board long-distance buses to places such as Malawi. On hearing her speak Chichewa with her cousin, the police officers demanded to see their papers. Although she produced her South African identity card, the police seemed unconvinced that she was South African and questioned how she knew *sikwerekwere* (referring to Chichewa). They detained and subjected her to an embarrassing experience, loudly swearing at her as *le-kwerekwere*, much to the delight of passersby. They subsequently demanded a cool drink (bribe) while threatening to deport her to Malawi.

Other participants in this study who testified to having had such an experience resolved not to speak Chichewa in public. The South African-born participants asserted that they often consciously attempted to hide their Malawian ancestry. Two young participants, Chikondi and Tenepa, students at local universities, reported that they never revealed their ancestry to anyone on campus. Although they believed that a significant number of second-generation Malawians attended local universities, they were convinced that they hid their ancestry and never participated in university cultural functions, unlike students from other African countries such as Lesotho, Eswatini and Zimbabwe. In Chikondi's opinion, students with surnames such as Banda, Chirwa, Maseko, Masina, Mathe, Mhlanga, Phiri and Zulu are likely to be of Malawian descent. Although her assertion might be true, to a certain extent, it is contestable because the cited surnames, including others such as Dube, Khumalo, Mahlangu, Moyo, Nkosi, Ndlovu, Nxumalo, Sibanda, Sikhosana and Tshabalala, are common in the entire Southern African region, including South Africa. Due to the prevailing hostility, Malawian descendants are

³ A powerful and successful Malawian healer famous in the 60's and 70's in Southern Africa

compelled to hide their identity, which spells doom for sustaining their language and culture. Research suggests that a minority group with a publicly stigmatised identity is less likely to maintain its language over time (Hyltenstam & Stroud, 1996).

Language preferences and perceptions

Although a growing body of research relates to parental attitudes towards maintaining home languages, relatively little research has focused on the attitudes of children to heritage languages (Connaughton-Crean & Ó Duibhir, 2017). Extensive research alludes to the important role of parents and other family members in home-language maintenance and development (Kang, 2013; Melo-Pfeifer, 2015; Park & Sarkar, 2007). The dynamics that drive language evolution, including language endangerment and loss, reside in the behaviours of individual speakers (Mufwene, 2017). This study found that the Malawian migrants' children did not seem to have pride in their parents' heritage language, as depicted in the following remarks by some of the children from different families:

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| Mavuto Maseko: | Being Chewa ends as soon as I get out of this gate. When people hear you speak Chichewa, they look at you <i>snax</i> (in a funny way), with a talking eye! |
| Chikondi Maseko: | I don't only feel uncomfortable when my parents speak Chichewa in public, but fear for their lives. |
| Tenepa Banda: | With so much hatred for foreigners, it is dangerous to speak Chichewa. |
| Chisoni Banda: | I have to speak it because it is a policy at home. My dad keeps quiet if we speak to him in any language other than English. |
| Kalota Banda: | Speaking Chichewa outside my home is a big no! |
| Loza Zulu: | I am proud of my parents but not their language. |
| Lizy Zulu: | It's nice to know of my roots, but I don't think knowing my parents' language adds value to my life. |

As the remarks above show, during the interviews, all the South African-born children in this study questioned the relevance of Chichewa to their lives. The comments above portray the children's fear of the prevailing negative sentiments towards foreigners in South Africa, although they embraced their heritage language.

The children were asked to provide information about the language(s) they most often used with a variety of interlocutors, not only parents and siblings but also other relatives, friends of the family and Malawians in South Africa to establish their language choices. All the children in this study expressed a preference for English and some local indigenous languages, particularly when they communicated among themselves or with their siblings and people outside their family. However, they reported that they spoke their ethnic language far more frequently to their parents and relatives than to their siblings. According to the literature, interlocutors adapt to the language preference attributed to each speaker based on their generation (Chatzidaki, Maligkoudi & Mattheoudakis, 2015). The study observed that although the children preferred the local languages, their parents did not accommodate them, whereas the literature has shown that some parents can accommodate their children's preference for the majority language by using the majority language more often with them (Pauwels, 2005; Yağmur & Akinci, 2003; Wright & Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2006). Research has found that in such situations, children can eventually impose the majority language as a legitimate code in the family repertoire, irrespective of their parents' wishes (Schechter & Bayley, 1997; Tuominen, 1999). However, the children in this study maintained that they were compelled to speak

Chichewa to their parents, particularly their mothers and other female relatives because their parents insisted on speaking of Chichewa within the home environment.

The results of this study showed that the Malawian migrant women have limited knowledge of English and local languages compared to their male counterparts who have been in South Africa longer than them. The migrants in this study shared the same story of men arriving first and then being joined by women and children. In addition, men are more mobile than women because they are often out at work, whereas women mostly stay home. Men can mingle with local people from whom they acquire some local lingua. This is consistent with Demos' (1986) observation that the women of immigrant communities have minimal contact with the outside world; therefore, there is a limited shift in their language use. Therefore, the women in this study preferred speaking Chichewa during interviews, particularly upon realising that I could speak the language. For example, on my first visit to the Masekos, Mrs Maseko was surprised to hear me say, *Ndimaopa garu* (I am afraid of the dog). She beamed with excitement and remarked, *Choncho ndinu akwathu* (Oh, you are our kinsman) and greeted me *Mulibwanji bambo* (How are you, sir?), to which I replied, *Ndilibwino, amai. Kaya inu* (I am well ma'am and how are you?). All the participants in this study were surprised that, as a non-Malawian, I could speak Chichewa, which I had learnt in childhood from relatives who were married to people of Malawian origin.

During data collection, I noticed some uneasiness in some of the participants, particularly those who were said to be new arrivals from Malawi. However, they seemed to relax upon hearing me speak their language. In my view, the participants' discomfort could have been caused by their immigration status, which I never enquired about, or for fear of anti-foreigner sentiment. Anti-immigrant sentiment is a long-standing problem in South Africa, whereby the end of white minority rule has failed to deliver meaningful changes for many Black South Africans (Wroughton, 2022), resulting in local people accusing migrants of 'stealing' their jobs. Several studies and media reports suggest that most South Africans are intolerant of migrants, particularly African nationals (Gordon, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Teagle, 2019; Crush, Williams & Peberdy, 2005). Intolerance of migrants is often reflected in the media, government policies and the anti-foreigner rhetoric of politicians (Crush et al., 2005). Consequently, it manifests in Afrophobia attacks on African foreign nationals by vigilante and anti-immigrant movement groups such as the infamous *Operation Dudula*, of which the principles are founded on anti-foreigner sentiments, and they openly express virulent hatred for African migrants (Wroughton, 2022; Mutandiro, 2023). Operation Dudula has been blamed for intimidating and terrorizing migrants from countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia, who typically live in South Africa's black townships (Wroughton, 2022), informal settlements (shacks) and inner-city apartments.

Due to the general hostility towards migrants, it is common for migrants to attempt to disguise themselves as locals or hide their identities by not speaking their languages in public. In addition, some migrants feel the need to acquire some local languages (Mtumane & Mzoma, 2020) to avoid being ostracised. They see linguistic adjustment as a way of 'fitting in[to]' the host country (Tannenbaum, 2005). As Fase, Jaspaert & Kroon (1992: 214) observe, for many migrants and refugees, a shift to another language is not always voluntary but a matter of necessity, as documented in the current study. However, three of the children in my study disapproved of their parents' attempts at speaking IsiZulu, which they construed as trying to 'show off', particularly to relatives still new to South Africa. In one child's opinion, her father's attempt at speaking IsiZulu was an embarrassment, 'My father speaks Zulu so badly that people

have nick-named him Chirwali (a character in the local drama *Emzini wezinsizwa*⁴). All the children in this study experienced heightened sensitivity about personal identity because of the prevailing anti-foreign sentiments and the need to pay homage and allegiance to their heritage language. Interestingly, the new arrivals and some parents' inability to understand English and local indigenous languages could yield unintended consequences in fostering the retention of heritage languages.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study set out to investigate how and where heritage language transmission and maintenance occur within the Malawian community in South Africa. It concluded that language transmission mostly occurred within family units and at community and religious gatherings. Family life, especially parent-child relationships and interactions, served as a vehicle for transmitting heritage language and cultural values, which they attempted to foster in their children. The study established that the older generation prided itself on its roots and maintained strong links with the home country. For them, their heritage language provides some social identity, whereas their South African-born children perceive it as the other language, which serves no purpose outside the family unit. For the children, the heritage language was like 'echoes' from their parental home country to which they could barely relate. It can be concluded that despite an inherent feeling of pride in their ethnic roots and cultural heritage, the Malawian community felt that the maintenance and transmission of their language were threatened. There is a high possibility that many Malawians living in South Africa are undocumented illegal migrants owing to tighter immigration laws. Consequently, most Chichewa speakers maintain a public indelibility for fear of imminent attacks by local communities and exposing themselves to the authorities. Therefore, their identity remains anathema to the South African sociolinguistic terrain. The findings of the study provide insight into Malawian immigrant families' perspectives in South Africa regarding the way they perceive and respond to the issue of supporting and transmitting their heritage languages within the perceived hostile South African context. The study focused on the voices of the migrants to expose aspects of their complex sociolinguistic realities that can enable a better and deeper understanding of their views and experiences. The paper concludes by advocating for social development, primarily to encourage social change and promote tolerance towards migrants. The hope is that social and institutionalised acceptance and respect for migrants will be evoked.

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⁴ A multilingual situational comedy that was broadcast on SABC1 in South Africa between 1994 and 2004.

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