

Culture Preservation Through Language Maintenance Among Linguistic Minority Groups: A Case Study of the Shona Speakers of Kenya

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Abstract

This study addressed the issue of culture preservation among linguistic minority groups through language maintenance practices. The main objective of the study was to investigate the various language maintenance strategies used by linguistic minority groups in Kenya to preserve their culture. The minority linguistic group that was investigated in this study is the Shona language community in Kenya originally from Zimbabwe. Language is an integral part of culture in any community and so maintaining a language is synonymous to maintaining a culture. Language maintenance efforts, especially among linguistic minority groups like the Kenyan Shonas, thus go a long way in maintaining their culture as this study set out to illustrate. The study was guided by the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) and Landweer (2000). The theory shows how a linguistic group is able to maintain and protect its identity, language and culture in a multilingual society setup. Data for this study was obtained from the library and also from the field in Shona residential settlements using questionnaires, interview, observation and focused group discussion method. Analyzed data was presented qualitatively and quantitatively. The study findings shows that the Shona speakers of Kenya have employed various strategies in maintaining their language and culture as a minority linguistic group from around late 1950s, when they first entered Kenya from their motherland Zimbabwe as missionaries. These strategies include use of Shona language at the home, religious, marriage and work domains as tools of culture and language maintenance. Other strategies of Shona culture and language maintenance include use of Shona elders to teach younger generations their language and culture, use of social interaction networks, community meetings and Shona traditional ceremonies. This study came to a conclusion that the Kenyan Shonas, one of the minority linguistic group in Kenya, have been able to preserve and maintain their culture in Kenya through language maintenance strategies listed above since they landed in Kenya in the late 1950s. However, the study recommends that similar studies should be carried out in order to find out whether other linguistic minority speakers of Kenya have been able to maintain their culture through language maintenance practices. Presently the Shonas of Kenya are listed as the 45th tribe of Kenya after being awarded Kenyan citizenship status in 2020 by the Kenyan Government.

Keywords: Linguistic Vitality, Linguistic Minority Group, Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, Language Maintenance and Revitalization, Language Shift

Introduction

This study investigated language maintenance strategies as a tool of culture preservation by the Kenyan Shona community which is one of the linguistic minority groups in Kenya. The paper starts by giving the historical background of the Shona speakers in their motherland Zimbabwe followed by their migration history into Kenya in the late 1950s as missionaries under the Gospel of God church. After Kenya attained her independence in 1963, the Shona speakers of Kenya found themselves a stateless group who had no Kenyan Citizenship and also a group of foreigners who could not travel back to their motherland nation of Zimbabwe due to lack of valid international travel documents.

It's not until 2020 that the Shona Speakers of Kenya were awarded Kenyan Citizenship status thus making them the 45th tribe of Kenya after the 43rd tribe of the Makonde people (another minority foreign immigrant group from Mozambique living in the Kenyan coast was issued with Kenya citizenship in 2016) and the Kenyan Asians as the 44th Kenyan tribe in 2017. Over this period of time, the Shonas of Kenya have employed various strategies in a bid to maintain their language and culture as shown in this study.

A Brief History of the Shona Language

Maho (2009) documents that Shona with an estimated population of 9.8 million people are Bantu speakers found in the Eastern region of Zimbabwe, north of river Lundi. Another population of the Shona people is found in the Southern region of Zambia, the central region of Mozambique and parts of Botswana. Shona is a major language in Zimbabwe and one of their 16 official languages as per the Zimbabwe 2013 constitution. The other official languages are Chewa, Chibarwe, English, Kalanga, Koisan, Nambya, Nda, Ndebele, Shangani, Sign language, Sotho, Tonga, Tswana, Venda and Xhosa. Gordon (2005) lists five dialects of the Shona language which comprises of Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Nda and Korekore. However, Simons & Fennig (2018) lists Nda and Manyika as independent languages from Shona. Other native languages spoken in Zimbabwe include Chibarwe, Koisan, Nambya, Shangani, Tonga, Kalanga, Sotho, Tswana, Chewa, Venda, Xhosa and Ndebele (Hachipola 1998).

Shona Speakers of Kenya and their Citizenship Crisis.

In 2018 and 2019, the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) carried out a study of the Shona speakers of Kenya with an aim of establishing, among other issue, their origins, social economic and cultural status as a stateless minority linguistic community for over five decades living in Kenya. According to Moraa (2024), KHRC (2019) did the study in collaboration with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

This study shows that the Shona speakers have their roots in Zimbabwe situated in the Southern part of the African continent. The study further explains how the Shona people started migrating from Zimbabwe to other African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s as missionaries under the *Gospel of God* church. Their missionary work took them to countries like Zambia, Malawi and Tanzania where some of them settled and started mission works there.

Some of the Shona speakers continued with their journey and found their way into Kenya in the late 1950s. The KHRC (2019) report documents that the first lot of missionaries to arrive in Kenya in the 1959-1961 period comprised of 16 evangelists and their families. They were Arthur Dirorimwe Robinson

Sichaya, Phillip Muregera, Samuel Chinyanga, Enoc Gavaza, Steven Motsi, Cripem Boka, Edward Manogara, Sensly Gavara, Manjoe, James Mgugu, Martin Zambe, Nxumalo, Mkuta, Kephas Nyandoro and Richard Mpofu. The report continues to show how the group split into two groups with one group settling in Ngong area and the other settling in Juja. The group in Ngong was hosted by Joshua Kiarie, Timothy Muiruri and Gerald Njuguna Mwathi. The group in Juja was hosted by Peter Muigai Kenyatta (the eldest son of President Jomo Kenyatta) who was a close friend of Mzee Arthur Dirorimwe.

Wagalla (2019) also points out that the Shona missionaries were so much more intrested in establishing their Gospel of God church in Kenya due to a prophecy by their leader, Prophet Johanne Masowe (Shoniwa Masedza) that Kenya was their promised land and so setting foot in Kenya would be a prophecy come true.

By the time of their arrival, Kenya was at the height of agitating for her independence from the British colonialists. After Kenya got her independence in 1963, all travel documents issued under the British colonial rule including those of the Shonas were nullified. As KHCR (2019) report puts it,

“The Shona community arrived in Kenya from Zimbabwe (then known as Southern Rhodesia and later Rhodesia) as Christian missionaries in the 1960s. They carried British passports and were registered as British subjects”

(KHCR 2019)

The Shona’s British passports being annulled meant that they could not travel back to Zimbabwe and they were also lacking Kenyan citizenship. Simply put, their statelessness state in Kenya had begun until the year 2020 when they got their Kenyan citizenship.

Currently, the population of the Shonas in Kenya is estimated at 3,000 – 3500 people spread in over 900 households (KHCR 2019). Most of them reside in Kiambu county in settlements like Kikuyu, Kinoo, Kiambaa, Gitaru and Githurai with their Gospel of God main church located along Valley Road in Nairobi.

Language Maintainance and Language Revitilization.

According to Bradley & Bradley (2002), language maintenance refers to the ability of a linguistic group to continue using their language amid competition from other more linguistically powerful languages. Bradley & Bradley further notes that language maintenance is usually a response to language shift. Language shift occurs when a section of a speech community starts to gradually replace their language with another over several generations. In addition, Fishman (1991) opines that language maintenance for endangered languages is also referred to as language revitalization.

Fishman (1991) & Batibo (2005) explains that a well maintained language stand a high chance of protecting itself from adverse effects from more linguistically powerful language like language shift. Using data collected from the Shona speakers of Kenya, this study set out to expound on how a minority linguistic group can employ different strategies to maintain their language and culture amidst powerful dominant languages.

Language and Culture

A speech community uses various ways to express their culture. One of the most salient one is language. Other ways of expressing a people’s culture include religion, dressing, food, ceremonies, architectural

forms, handicrafts among others. The relationship between language and culture is largely intertwined and can also be described as complex. Fuller & Wardhaugh (2014) points out that on one hand, the language spoken by a society is influenced by the society's culture and on the other hand culture is also influenced by their language. This then implies that language and culture are inter-dependent in that when you learn a language, you also start interacting with the culture of the speakers of that language (Wardhaugh 2002).

In the unfortunate instances of language shift, endangerment or even death, it follows that the affected linguistic group risk losing key cultural heritage. It is therefore paramount for language communities, especially the minority linguistic groups, to be at the forefront in maintaining and revitalizing their languages as one vital means of preserving their culture. This study investigated how the Kenyan Shonas, a minority linguistic group in Kenya, have made efforts of preserving their culture through various language maintenance strategies. In essence, language maintenance goes hand in hand with preserving a linguistic group's culture as this study demonstrates.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory by Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977). Giles, Bourhis & Taylor describes ethnolinguistic vitality as the demographic, institutional control, and status factors that make a linguistic group to behave as a collective entity in a multilingual set up. Simply put, Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory gives guidelines on how a language equips itself to avoid being dominated by other languages. Giles, Bourhis & Taylor postulates that the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory is dependent on three variables. The first one is the status variable which points to the linguistics group economic status, social status and language status. There is also the demographic variable referring to the absolute numbers of a linguistic group and their distribution throughout the territory. Institutional support is the third variable implying the extent to which a linguistic group is formally and informally visible in areas such as mass media, education, government services, industry, religion among others. Landweer (2000) Intergenerational Language Transmission variables were also key in guiding this study. Landweer describes intergenerational language transmission as a situation where a language is passed down from one generation to another, that is from parents to children, over time through formal and informal sociolinguistic domains of language use like family, friendship, religion, education, work among others.

This theory was helpful to this study as it offered a guide showing the various strategies that the Shona minority speakers in Kenya have put place over decades in a bid to maintaining their language and culture and as such fending off complete linguistic dominance from dominant languages in their settlements especially Kiswahili and Kikuyu.

Study Population, Sample and Data Collection Tools.

The population of this study is drawn from the Kenyan Shona community that is mostly domiciled in Kiambu county of Kenya in several settlements which include Kinoo, Kiambaa, Kikuyu, Gitaru and Githurai. The UNHCR (2019) Socioeconomic Survey of the Stateless Shona in Kenya puts the total number of Shonas living in Kenya to be between 3,000 and 3,500 people. The main data collection tools for this study included focused group discussion, interviews and questionnaires. Purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used to identify the sample for this study which was to participate in interviews and focused group discussions sessions and filling of the questionnaires. This sample size of this study was

70 in total drawn from the Shona adult, youth and children social groups. The sample size for the focus group discussion, which was one of the main data collection tool for this study, was composed of 10 participants from the adult, youth and children categories making a total of 30 participants. This included two participants from each of the five key Kenyan Shona settlements of Kinoo, Kiambaa, Kikuyu, Gituru and Githurai for the three categories of adult, youth and children who previously had not known each other. A focus group discussion and interview, according to Krueger (1998) is a method for collecting qualitative data that gathers community members together to discuss a specific topic using open-ended questions aimed at stimulating an informal discussion and investigating people's views in more detail than is possible through a survey. Again, another different set of 30 participants drawn from the adult, youth and children's categories across the five key Shona settlements were sampled out to fill up the study questionnaires. Finally, some 10 elders, 2 drawn from each of the five Shona settlements were interviewed providing more qualitative data for this study.

Data Collection, Analysis and Presentation

Data for this study was collected in the field in five key Shona settlements namely Kinoo, Kiambaa, Kikuyu, Gituru and Githurai in Kiambu county. Data collection tools, as mentioned earlier, included questionnaires, interviews, observation and focused group discussions. The collected data was analysed and guided by the tenets of the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory. Finally the results of this study are largely presented qualitatively in descriptive form and to a small extent quantitatively using tables and pie charts in an attempt to show various strategies used by the Shona speakers of Kenya in maintain their language and culture as shown in section 4.0.

Language Maintenance Strategies among the Shona Speakers of Kenya

Language maintenance strategies can be described as techniques put in place by a linguistic group in a bid to maintain vitality of their language and pass it down to its future generations. As O'Riagain (1994) puts it, each an very generation of speakers creates strategies of passing down its language and culture to its future generations. Shona speakers of Kenya have over the years, since late 1950s when they came to Kenya, tried to maintain their language despite the fact they live in areas where dominant languages like Kiswahili and Kikuyu are spoken. Data collected especially from the adult Shona speakers shows that the Shona linguistic minority group in Kenya have put in place different strategies in order to maintain their language. In this section, this study discusses various strategies used by the Shonas in Kenya to maintain their language.

Use of Shona Language at the Home Domain

Landweer (2000) is among sociolinguists who stress on the importance of language use in the nuclear family home domain as a major strategy of language maintenance and revitalization. This is due to the fact that this is where the real intergenerational language transimission takes place. Kircher (2019) defines intergenerational transmission as a process by which language, culture, and social values of a linguistic group are passed down from one generation to another.

Through an interview session with Shona elders at the Gospel of God Church compound along Valley Road in Nairobi, it was clear that the Shona parents speak the Shona language while conversing with their children at home as a way of making sure that their children get to learn the Shona language. Extract 1 illustrates this fact clearly:

Extract 1

"I speak Shona language to my children and grand children at home. I try to teach my children our language at home, we dont speak any other language apart from Shona. Even though my children speak Kiswahili, i personally insist on use of Shona at home."

Source:Field Data

Extract 2 further shows the Shona parents efforts to teach their children and youth the Shona language despite the fact that they have also learnt other languages like Kiswahili and Kikuyu.

Extract 2

"Our families live together with our children until they attain the age to start their own families. All this time, we speak to them in Shona language at home. So our children learn our language as they continue to grow up. Despite this, it seems our grand children have learnt Kiswahili too because when you speak to them in Shona they will answer you back in Kiswahili or just stare at you."

Source:Field Data

Again, following a focused group discussion session with Shona youths, Extract 3 emphasises more on how Shona youth learn their language.

Extract 3

Researcher: *"How did you learn the Shona language?"*

Youth 1: *"I learnt Shona at home. My parents and grand parents speak to me in Shona and so it makes me answer them back in Shona."*

Researcher: *"And you, how did you learn Shona?"*

Youth 2: *"Even now I am still being taught Shona by my parents especially my mother who we are with at home most of the times. My siblings also speak to me in Shona while at home...."*

Source:Field Data

From the above three extracts, its evident that parents speak Shona language to their children at home as way of transmitting the language to them. The home domain is ideal as its not official and various range of topics are discussed freely from home chores, dressing, food, discipline among others. Therefore, such a social environment gives children and youth a chance to learn their native Shona language and to an extent their culture.

Table 1 below shows the responses from Shona children and youth when asked where they learn how to speak Shona language.

Table 1: How Shona Children and Youth Learn Shona Language

	Repetitions	Percentage
Learning from parents	19	67.9%
Learning from agetates	9	32.1%
Total	28	100.0%

Source: Field Data

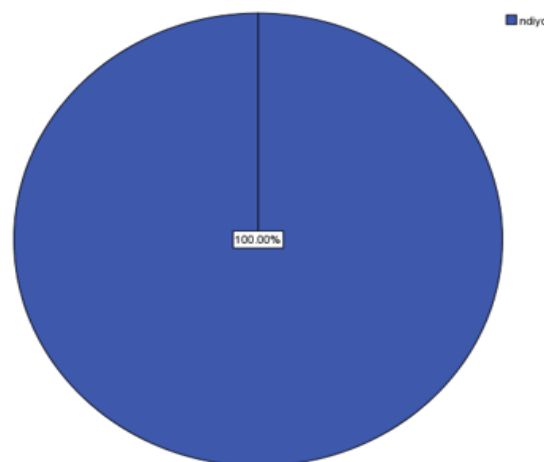
Table 1 above is able to show that most Shona children (67.9%) learn Shona language from their parents mostly at home through normal day to day conversations. On the other hand 32.1 % of the children learn Shona language from their agetates as they go about thier daily interactions.

From the data and discussions in section 4.1, its is evident that the home language use domain is one key strategy that the Shona linguistic minority speakers of Kenya have largely relied on to maintain and revitalize their language amid other dominant languages in Kenya especially Kiswahili and Kikuyu. This has helped them over decades to maintain their culture as a linguistic minority group living in Kenya since the late 1950s.

Shona Language Maintenance through Religion

Another social domain of language use where Shona children and youth get to learn Shona language is through Church gatherings and activities. Various sociolinguistic researches have established that religion also plays a significant role in language maintenance and revitalization. For example, Baker (2011), while investigating the use of Arabic language in the Islamic religion asserts that religion is reliable strategy of language maintenance among the linguistic minorities groups and even among the majority ones. He found out that the Islamic religion have played a key role in the maintenance of Arabic language around the world.

In this study, most Shona respondents across all ages who formed the sample of this research, confirmed that their religion through the Gospel of God Church was an important strategy of maintaining their Shona language and culture in Kenya. Table 2 below shows the response of respondents when they were asked if Shona language was used in their Gospel of God Church along Valley Road in Nairobi.

Chart 1: Use of Shona Language in Church.

Source: Field Data

As per table 2 above, a 100% of the respondents confirmed the use of Shona in their Church services and activities. This shows that the Gospel of God Church is an ideal religious language use domain in maintaining the Shona language and culture amid a multilingual environment where they reside.

This research further established that all Church service proceedings at their Gospel of God Church were conducted in Shona language based on the Holy Bible written in Shona. At times Kiswahili is used in their Church service when they are joined by worshippers from other Kenyan communities around them. Through interviews with Shona adult men and women, it is evident that Shona children and youth learn Shona language in their Church. Extract 3, 4 and 5 below confirms this fact as follows:

Extract 3

“Our children and youth continue to learn the Shona language in Church because our services are conducted in Shona language and then translated to other languages...”

Source:Field Data

Extract 4

“We learn our language through different Church ceremonies for example the celebration of the birth of our church founder which happens on 1st October of every year which is conducted in Shona language and translated into Kiswahili because of the non Shonas in attendance.”

Source:Field Data

Extract 5

Researcher: “Young one, how did you learn Shona language?”

Youth II: “Even though we mostly speak Kiswahili and at times English, we have also learnt Shona language in Church because it is the mostly used language and also the Bible that we read is written in Shona.”

Researcher: “Are the Church songs in Kiswahili or Shona language?”

Youth I: “First of all the Bible that we use is written in Shona. Secondly, almost 99 % of the songs that we sing in church are in Shona language but I have never seen where they are written. There are also Church teachings and rules written in Shona but they are very few.”

Source:Field Data

From the extracts above, it is clear that the Gospel of God Church offers a good environment for the Shona children and youth to learn their language and culture. The maintenance of the Shona language and culture in Kenya is continuously dependent on their religion through Biblical teachings based on the Shona Bible written in Shona language, sermons, songs, Church meetings and Church members home visitations all done using the Shona language. The rules and regulations of the Gospel of God Church are also in Shona. However, this study was able to establish that there was serious shortage of written religious texts like songs in Shona language and this works against the spirit of maintaining the Shona language and culture in Kenya using religion.

Efforts of Shona Elders in Maintaining the Shona Language and Culture.

In every linguistic group, the elders are the custodians of language and culture. As such, elders are so much relied on when it comes to the issue of language and culture maintenance around the world. Sangili (2014) says that using community elders as a language maintenance strategy has been in use among language communities across the world aiming at maintaining their language and culture. Obiero (2013) while investigating about the Suba language maintenance in Kenya, discovered that the Suba elders played a vital role in trying to maintain and revitalize the Suba language which is extremely endangered by seeking institutional support and also by teaching the Suba language to younger generations starting from the home domain.

Likewise, the Shona elders in Kenya have been in the forefront in offering much needed support for the Shona language and culture maintenance especially by passing on the language to the younger Shona population in Kenya. Extract 6 exemplifies this clearly as follows:

Extract 6

Researcher: "Why do you continue speaking the Shona language for many years despite there being other more popular languages in Kenya that you can speak?"

Elder: "We have been trying to maintain our language for a period of about sixty years even though there have been challenges like lack of citizenship and identity that could have easily made us stop using our language. However, our Shona language and culture is the only important thing we are left with for the period we lived without valid citizenship documents in Kenya"

Source: Field Data

From the above extract, it is clear that the Shona elders in Kenya have been a strong pillar of maintaining the Shona language and culture in Kenya.

Apart from clinging to their language and culture, this study also established the fact that the Shona elders in Kenya were at the forefront of passing their language and culture to the younger Shona generation. They are able to do this through different ways like speaking to the young Shona using the Shona language and through directly teaching the Shona language and culture to them especially in the home and religious language use domains.

The Marriage Institution and Shona Language Maintenance.

The marriage institution has been found to be a variable language and culture maintenance strategy especially among immigrant minority language groups. Holmes (2013) opines that marriages within the linguistic group can have positive effects in language and culture maintenance while intermarriages can have negative effects to language and culture maintenance efforts.

Extract 7 shows how marriages within and outside the linguistic group have affected Shona language and culture maintenance practices in Kenya.

Extract 7

Researcher: "Are there non Shona speakers who speak the Shona language in Kenya?"

Respondent: "Yes. A few of them. Firstly, there are those that have been married by our Shona men, those ones have learnt their husband's language(Shona)and they speak it fluently. Secondly, we have our friends who have learnt Shona language voluntarily. Thirdly, our language is maintained through Shona to Shona marriages."

Source:Field Data

Its evident on one hand that marriages within the Shona speakers and when Shonas men marry from outside their community are some of the ways in which the marriage institution have helped in maintaining the Shona language and culture in Kenya. This is because marriages increase the number of speakers of a given language. On the other hand, intermarriages may negatively affect the ethnolinguistic vitality especially of minority linguistic speakers like the Kenyan Shonas.

However, this study was able to establish that there are just very few Shona men who have married from other Kenya communities and also very few Shona girls that have been married into other Kenyan communities. Interviews with Shona elders on the marriage issue is shown in extract 8:

Extract 8

Researcher: "Is there ways in which inter marriages have affected the Shona language in Kenya?"

Mzee I: "There are some of our girls who have been married by non Shonas. They have gone to learn outside languages. In this way, the Shona speakers decline in numbers and may make our language endangered. But there are those that we have married and are not Shonas. Those are the few ones who have learnt our language."

Source:Field Data

From the findings of extract 7 and 8, it is evident that inter marriages between Shonas and other language communities in Kenya pose a threat to Shona language and culture maintenance in Kenya especially owing to their low population.

To counter this, this study was able to establish that the Shona community in Kenya have put in place stringent measures to guide how their youth go about selecting their marriage partners. However, this has not been fully successful as some of their youth marry or get married outside the Shona community. According to the Shona elders, this group of such youths who get married outside their Shona community expose the Shona language to endangerment as they get to learn other languages and abandon their Shona language.

Social Interraction Networks and Shona Language Maintenance.

Stoessel (2002) points out that social network have a big influence on local language maintenance. Stoessel continues to argue that immigrant minority linguistic speakers use social networks as one of the strategies of maintaining their language and culture away from their countries of origin. Social networks become stronger through visiting each other as a way of maintaining their language and culture.

When Shonas arrived in Kenya in the late 1950s, they were very few in numbers and one thing that kept them together was through social networking by regularly visiting each other to just hold conversations that kept their language and culture alive and vibrant. Even after getting Kenyan citizenship in the year 2020, the Shona language community which is now estimated to be about 3000 to 3500 in population, still continue to maintain strong social ties as a safeguard to their language and culture. Everytime they gather together they converse in Shona language as a show of their unity and strength. Extract 9 from a respondent brings out this fact as follows:

Extract 9

“I visit my mother twice a week to greet her. Even though I am married with two kids and reside a bit far from her, I visit my mother because there we speak our language. I also visit Zeph in Kitengela oftenly to greet him, know more about our future, language and culture among other social-economic issues.”

Source:Field Data

This study was able to establish that Shonas of Kenya visit each other oftenly so as to get a chance to speak in their indigenous language. Such social networks go along way in maintaining their language and culture as one of the minority linguistic groups in Kenya. Landweer (2000), notes that a stable social network within a linguistic group is a key strategy of maintaining their language.

Community Meetings and Shona Language Maintenance

Community meetings create ideal opportunities for community members across the age groups to meet. They may gather together over different social, religious or official meetings. Such meetings create a conducive environment to interact freely and speak in their own language which goes a long way in helping to maintain their language and culture (Aswegen 2008). Extract 10 below shows that the Shona speakers of Kenya usually hold community meetings as a strategy to maintain their language and culture.

Extract 10

Researcher: “Do you hold community meetings? If yes, which language do you use?”

Woman I: “Okay. We usually hold various community meetings and events. First of all many of the meetings we had before the year 2020 were about laying strategies on how to get Kenyan citizenship. In those meetings, we were using the Shona language as we were the ones who were in trouble in this country. However, if we happened to have non Shonas in our meetings we used to converse in Kiswahili because they did not understand Shona.”

Researcher: “Which are the other meetings?”

Man II: “During Church days, we as elders usually meet early before the first church service starts to lay strategies on how to get funds for our Church development. When we hold such meetings, we use Shona language only. This has really helped in maintaining our Shona language.”

Source:Field Data

From extract 10 above, it is clear that Kenyan Shonas hold different types of meetings where they insist on using their Shona language with an aim of maintaining it. Through observation method, it was clear that such communal meetings happened regularly across all Shona age groups especially in their Gospel of God Church, Valley Road in Nairobi. It was further noted that men and women above 40 years of age predominantly used Shona language only in their gatherings despite them being fluent in other languages like Kiswahili and Kikuyu. In their meetings, youth between 20-30 years of age mostly use Kiswahili and Shona at times while children between 3-13 years use Kiswahili only even when spoken to in Shona language.

Shona Traditional Ceremonies as a Tool of Culture and Language Maintenance

Different traditional and religious ceremonies are usually a common occurrence in many language communities. Such ceremonies help the linguistic group in various ways, one of them being maintaining their language and cultural heritage and passing it on to future generations (Lazear 1999). Extract 11 below, from a focused group discussion session, gives evidence on how the Shona speakers of Kenya use traditional and religious ceremonies to maintain their language and culture.

Extract 11

Researcher: "What are your views concerning the progress of Shona language in Kenya?"

Woman 1: "We know and speak our language. For example, at Church during the founders day celebrations on October 1st of every year, we use Shona language and interpret into Kiswahili for those that are non Shonas."

Researcher: "Who will tell us about Shona traditional ceremonies and the languages that are used?"

Man I: We have three important ceremonies. Our ceremonies are religious and they are celebrated through our Gospel of God Church. The first ceremony is that of childbirth, whereby, when a child is born, the mother and the new born child are not allowed to be seen by anybody else outside the family except her helper. After eight days, a big child-naming ceremony is done and the name must be from the father's clan. In this ceremony, it's only the Shona language that is used because our language is part of our culture."

Man II: "Another ceremony is that of marriage between Shonas only. The Shona language is used in all wedding activities. But nowadays we also use the Kiswahili language because we now have many non Shona friends and we are forced to use a language that they will understand."

Man III: "In the burial ceremonies we use two languages, Shona and Kiswahili, because there are usually visitors amongst us in attendance."

Source: Field Data

The focused group discussion session with Shona elders clearly depicts that the Shonas in Kenya have some important traditional and religious ceremonies where they largely communicate in Shona language as part of their culture. It is therefore notable that the Shona religious and traditional ceremonies form another strategy of maintaining the Shona language and culture in Kenya.

Use of Shona Language at the Work Domain

According to KHRC (2019), more than 52 per cent of the Shona population in Kenya are poor. This is due to the fact that they lacked Kenyan citizenship until the year 2020 which denied them valid documentation. This made most of them to miss out on opportunities in the educational, formal employment and business sectors. As such, Shonas have been engaged in informal trades like carpentry for men and basketry for women as their source of livelihood. This two informal trades have been part of their culture passed down generations since they arrived in Kenya. As Moraa (2024) notes, Shona women and men have special centers for basketry and workshops for carpentry where they congregate to carry on with the two informal trades. In this basketry centers and carpentry workshops, which also serve as apprenticeship centers for their younger generations, Shona language is used as the main media of communication. Extract 12 below provide prove that the Shona speakers of Kenya also use their basketry and carpentry training centers to also teach their young generation their Shona language.

Extract 12

Researcher: "Where else do you use your Shona language?"

Woman I: "We meet twice a week at our granny's house at Kinoo to do the work of making baskets which we sell. We have trained our young girls to make the baskets and sell them for a living. We do this in a group. We talk our language as we do this work."

Mzee I: "We do alot of carpentry around Kinoo and Kikuyu. We have our workshops where we have engaged young men to train and do carpentry work for a living. When we dont have a customer who is a non-Shona, we speak our language so as the young ones can learn. Infact we start training our young boys carpentry work using Shona."

Youth III: "We train carpentry at a workshop in Kinoo. During that training and while working there, we mostly use our Shona language because our elders who train us speak to us in our mother tongue."

Source:Field Data

The above extract shows clearly that the Kenyan Shonas have been able to get yet another suitable strategy of maintaining their language and culture. In this way, the Kenyan Shonas have not only been able to maintain their language and preserve their cultural trades, but they have also been able to pass down their language and culture to their future generations over the years.

Conclusion

This study set out to find out the strategies that the Shona speakers of Kenya have been using in a bid to preserve their culture through maintenance of their language. The study has successfully shown the different strategies used by the Shona minority linguistic group in Kenya to maintain their language since they landed in Kenya in the late 1950s. As language forms an important component of any linguistic group's culture, then we can aptly conclude that through their language maintenance efforts, the Shona speakers of Kenya have also been able to preserve their cultural heritage.

It is evident that the Shona religious practices under the Gospel of God Church, among other language maintenance strategies, have offered them with a very suitable forum for preserving and maintaining their language and culture amidst a multilingual enviroment with other dominant languages like Kiswahili and

Kikuyu. It also emerged out that the elderly members of Shona community use Shona language at home and work domains while conversing with their children and grand children as another key strategy of maintaining their language and culture.

In Kenya, there are other minority linguistic speakers such as Makonde, Nubians, Kenyan Indians and Wapemba tribes. Others include Ilchamus, Terik, Watta, Yaaku, Ilyana, Konso, Njemps, Leysan among others. As such, this study recommends that similar studies should be carried out in order to find out whether other linguistic minority speakers of Kenya have been able to maintain their culture through language maintenance practices. The study also recommends detailed linguistic studies on the phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics of the Kenyan Shonas to check if the Shona language has been linguistically affected by the Kenyan languages in its midst or not

After being awarded Kenya citizenship as the 45th tribe of Kenya in 2020, we can only hope that the future of Kenyan Shonas in maintaining their language and culture in Kenya can only get brighter. A famous quote from an American prolific writer *Rita Mae Brown* sums it up aptly;

“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going”.

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