

WHY STUDY CHICHEWA?

Chichewa or Chinyanja is a language of the Bantu family of languages that is widely spoken in parts of East, Central and Southern Africa. It is the most widely-spoken language in Malawi where, from 1968 until the mid-1990s, it was the national language. It is also spoken in Mozambique; Zambia, and Zimbabwe, where it is the third most widely used local language.

When the Malawi Government designated Chichewa the national language in 1968, it established, among other things, a Chichewa Board, which oversaw and coordinated research into usage, grammar, spelling, linguistic structures, folklore, and other aspects. Students in Malawi schools were required to study Chichewa throughout the primary school years. Although no longer the sole national language in Malawi since 1994, Chichewa is still taught in schools and used widely in media and other activities. In addition, Chichewa is used widely in Zambia.

The adoption of Chichewa as a national language by the Malawi government in 1968 promoted Chichewa through active educational programs, media usage, newspaper and creative writing and publishing, and research activities carried out under the auspices of the Chichewa Board. The prevalence of the language shows that visitors to these famous South African countries will need a knowledge of the Chichewa/Chinyanja language to be able to get around.

Moreover, researchers in various disciplines, including linguistics, folklore, anthropology, history, art history and verbal art have a lot to learn in this South African culture and will find the knowledge of the Chichewa/Chinyanja language to be quite handy and essential.

Studying Chichewa/Chinyanja is important for a number of reasons. First, command of Chichewa/Chinyanja provides the lingua franca that allows communication in this part of southern Africa. Secondly, command of Chichewa/Chinyanja would enable scholars in varied fields, including linguistics, anthropology, history and art history to conduct research into this part of Africa. Knowledge of Chichewa would enable critical understanding of its career as national language in Malawi from 1968 to 1994 as a means for thinking about various aspects of language planning. Command of Chichewa/Chinyanja would also provide scholars with possibilities for comparative Bantu linguistic analysis.

WHO SPEAKS CHICHEWA?

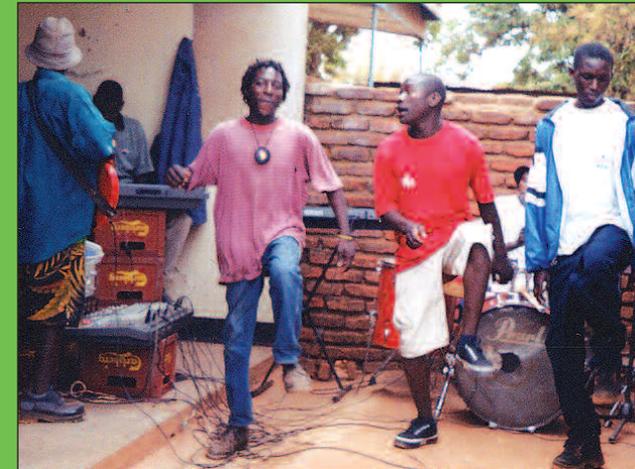
PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Chichewa/Chinyanja is a language of the Bantu family, and is thus one of the significant languages of Bantu speaking peoples of southern Africa. More than 65% of Malawi's population of 11 million have active command of Chichewa, and perhaps as many as 80% have some knowledge of the language. In Mozambique, out of a population of 18 million, approximately 3.3%, mostly in the Tete Province in the lower Zambezi Valley and Niassa Province in the northeast of the country, speak Chinyanja. In Zambia, with a population of 10 million, approximately 16% are native speakers, and they live mostly in the Eastern Province, near the border with Malawi. However, Chinyanja is widely spoken beyond the Eastern Province, and it is estimated that as many as 42% of Zambians have basic communication skills in the language.

Chichewa-speaking or Chinyanja-speaking people are known as a-Chewa or a-Nyanja, respectively. Starting in the mid-fifteenth century, a number of ethnolinguistically related groups including the a-Chewa, the a-Nyanja, and the a-Mang'anja, led by a leader who was called the Kalonga, migrated from the lower Congo basin into the Lake Malawi and Shire River valley regions.

The Kalonga and his followers named the land west of the Lake Malawi where they settled "Malawi," which means "flames," after the vision of shimmering flames that one saw over the lake in the heat of the day. Having settled near a beautiful lake, others among the group called themselves a-Nyanja, or "people of the lake," "nyanja" being the Chichewa/Chinyanja/Chimang'anja word for "lake." Still others gave a slight variation to the name to distinguish themselves, calling themselves a-Mang'anja. In these ways, the dispersion and ensuing diaspora of the Chichewa/Chinyanja speaking peoples resulted in a proliferation of the language in the region.

Dr. Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, chose Chichewa as a national language in 1968 apparently for the sake of unifying the country under one language. However the national language policy was also controversial, as it promoted the language as spoken by the a-Chewa, who live in Central Malawi, at the expense of both other versions of the language as well as other native tongues of Malawi. Thus, since the end of Dr. Banda's presidency in 1994, Malawi has developed a language policy that promotes all local languages as well as English in the media, schools and creative work. Even then, Chichewa still remains the most widely spoken language in Malawi.



A band performing a pop song in Chichewa



Children playing in a village in Central Malawi (above)



Chewa mother and baby in Lilongwe, Malawi (left)



Malawian Chewa woman at work.