THE LANGUAGE OF ETHNIC CONTEMPT: MALAWIAN ZIMBABWEAN-SHONA RIVALRY

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ABSTRACT
The contact between the Shona and immigrants from Malawi dates back to more than six decades ago. Throughout this period, the ethnic relations of the two groups have been represented in fiction, drama and popular music as antagonistic. However, very little has been said about how these two ethnic groups express their attitudes towards each other through language, in particular, the names or labels that they use. I argue that the relations of the two groups have been largely antagonistic and are covertly or overtly reflected in the language that members of the groups use to refer or to name or label each other. This article demonstrates that names or labels both groups use to contemptuously refer to or name (insult) each other derive from the socio-cultural and historical context. These names or labels reflect the groups’ disapproval of and stereotypical attitudes towards each other.

INTRODUCTION
Zimbabwean research on language and ethnicity and onomastics have tended to shy away from topics on the correlation between language and ethnic (antagonistic) relations, perhaps understandably, in the interest of fostering national unity in a young independent country. In spite of this stance, language and ethnicity in Zimbabwe, as in most of sub-Saharan Africa are intricately bound together. As Obeng (2000: 291) observes of the Ghanaian situation, “language preferences and ethnic identity pull together.” Language is often a “passport to ethnic origin, just as ethnic background is [was] indexical of language” (Obeng and Adegbija 1999: 354).

This article has two aims. The first is to describe the “ethnic slur” Shona native speakers use to label Malawian Zimbabweans and vice-versa and to show that the ethnic slur and the ethnocentrism deriving from their use express prejudices and stereotypes and are serial consequences of specific historical situations. Attitudes of intolerance and ethnocentrism (and the vocabulary that express them) “appear as intervening variables
between structural situations and acts of overt [and covert] discrimination against victims” (Allen 1983: 8).

The symbolism, the stereotypes, and often the social meanings of the labels display the substance and tenor of intergroup struggles over resources, cultural influence, and status. Thus, the vocabulary that past social situations produced can tell us much about those situations and also about the tendency for similar situations to produce similar results in any historical period and, by implication, in any society. The second and related objective is to explain the development and function of the terms that the Shona and Malawian Zimbabweans use to express difference, contempt and hatred for each other.

Shona native speakers constitute more than seventy percent of the indigenous Africans of Zimbabwe and Malawian Zimbabweans are the major African immigrant minority ethnic group. The language and ethnic contact and conflict between these two groups were (are) phenomenal in the cities. Studies on the affiliation of language and ethnic identity (see Fishman 1989, Larkey, Hecht and Martin 1993, Obeng and Adegbija 1999 and Valdes 2000) have shown that language and ethnic enclaves are commonly created in big towns, because “members of the same ethnic and language group tend to flock together, like ‘birds of a feather’” (Obeng and Adegbija, p. 354). Sameness of language and ethnicity often creates a bond of acceptance and provides a basis for togetherness and separateness (Obeng and Adegbija 1999).

Ethnographic research for this study shows that the meanings that members of both ethnic groups hold for the terms and labels and their interpretations of these meanings are largely negative and derogatory. I attempt to argue that in spite of the Malawian Zimbabweans’ extent of linguistic and cultural integration into the mainstream Shona community, language use among members of both ethnic groups show resentful feelings, prejudices and stereotypes. The prejudices and stereotypes are reflected through ethnonyms, nicknames, jokes, insults and folk-stories. A brief theoretical description of stereotypes will help the conceptualisation of the ethnic attitudes between the Shona and the Malawians Zimbabweans.
Stereotypes and prejudices

The trading of ethnic labels is not unique to the Shona and Malawian Zimbabweans. Prejudices and stereotypes about various ethnic groups and their languages, are thus, entrenched in Zimbabwe. For example, the Ndebele are generally seen as proud and aggressive; the Manyika are seen as too polite but hypocritical; the Karanga are judged as arrogant and pompous, etc.

Definitions of stereotypes vary widely and cannot be considered in detail here. This study adopts Allport’s (1954:191) classic and succinct definition that, “…a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. It justifies (rationalises) our conduct in relation to that category. Categorisation is a cognitive process that involves the segmentation of the social world into social categories or groups. This is a cognitive process because typing entails filling in details about others according to “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922). This results in bias in favour of one’s own group and against the other groups, and the propensity for blaming others for our condition or mistakes and problems. As Amonoo (1989) rightly pointed out, prejudices “arise [among other things] out of flimsy knowledge or from no experience at all of people we do not like within our societies. Thus, such prejudices result in stereotypical and summary portraits of those people” (p.11).

Stereotyping is not unique to Zimbabwe or to sub-Saharan Africa for that matter. Katz and Braly’s (1933) and Khleif’s (1979) work provide a similar example in the United States while Moses (1999) presents stereotyping as a universal phenomenon. African Americans are seen by whites as superstitious, lazy, and happy-go-lucky; Chinese are seen as superstitious, sly and conservative; Turks are seen as cruel, very religious, and treacherous; and the English are seen as sportsmanlike, intelligent, and conventional (Obeng 2000: 294).

Taking into account the naturalist methods (interviews, observation, etc) adopted for this study and the emphasis on the function of the stereotypes, we have adopted Van Dijk’s (1984: 22) ‘sociocognitive’ approach. That is, we analyse ethnic stereotypes as a
cognitive phenomenon, but embedded within a broader social context. Ethnic stereotypical images and prejudices are acquired through the processes of socialisation and social interaction both with in-group and out-group members (see also Allport 1954; Katz 1976). While the cognitive approach is necessary, it is not sufficient because it does not offer insights into the functions of stereotypes. A purely cognitive approach “provides no explanations or why one particular minority group is singled out for discrimination…” (Hewstone and Giles 1997: 278). The sociocognitive approach is different from the cognitive framework in that it provides for a precise specification of the social representations, the strategies, and other cognitive processes involved. Katz (1976) developed a more systematic view of the functions of stereotypes. He identifies four functions of attitudes: instrumental, value-expressive, knowledge, and ego-defensive. This study will only use these as a guide to identifying the functions of the stereotypes that obtain in the Zimbabwean context, since this model is as applicable to stereotypes as to attitudes.

Most works on stereotyping classify them into positive and negative stereotypes. According to Saville-Troike (1982: 182), stereotyping is positive when it is a necessary and inevitable process for “establishing preliminary relationships” and for socialisation. But when stereotyping is based on incorrect and inaccurate information and is used in defense of a position in society, or disaffiliation or for propaganda, then it is negative. This article shows that the mutual stereotypes between the Shona people and people of Malawian origin are largely negative and their functions are dovetailed to help individuals or communities to achieve desired goals.

**Sociohistorical background**

The term ‘Malawian Zimbabweans’ (MZs) is coined here to refer to the first, second and third generations of people of Malawi origin resident in Zimbabwe. The first-generation immigrants resided in Zimbabwe as early as the 1930s. As Hachipola (1998: 55) rightly observes, there are no accurate figures available for the MZs but according to rough
estimates they are about 0.23\% (i.e. 26, 627)\textsuperscript{1} of the Zimbabwean population of 11 631
657 people (2002 National census).

Although the Shona loosely refer to all the MZs as \textit{maChawa} (Chewa speaking people),
ethnographic interviews revealed that about six ethnic groups exist in Zimbabwe:
Chewa/Nyanja, Yawo, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Lomwe and Tonga. The six ethnic groups are
not equally represented in Zimbabwe. It is not easy to approximate their representation
since national censuses only capture the generic category ‘Malawian’. However,
historical evidence seems to show that the Chewa constitutes the majority. One
ChiChewa speaking University student recalls that,

\begin{quote}

The economic crisis, unemployment and the imposition of tax by the
British in Malawi in the 1930s less affected the more educated Tumbuka
from the north. The less educated and poorer Chewa from the central
region walked all the way to Rhodesia to seek employment.
\end{quote}

Vail and White (1989: 161) similarly underscore the widespread migrations from Malawi
to Zimbabwe and South Africa and attribute these migrations mainly to sociopolitical and
economic factors. Some older Malawian informants said that many first-generation
immigrants walked from Malawi through Mozambique, along the railway line into
Zimbabwe.

Except for the Tumbuka and the Ngoni, the majority of the MZs, who are mainly Chewa,
are matrilineal. This is one noticeable source of cultural conflict and mutual stereotyping
with the patriarchal Shona. Among the Shona, as in all patrilineal societies, the man pays

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{1} The percentage provided in the national census under the heading ‘Malawian citizen’ reflects only the
number of first generation Malawian Zimbabweans, most of whom retained their Malawian citizenship. In
fact, if second and third generation Malawian Zimbabweans, most of whom are Zimbabwean citizen by
birth, are counted under the category ‘Malawian,’ then, the population figure should be far more than is
presented in the national census.
\end{footnotesize}
roora ‘bride-wealth’ to his bride’s parents and the bride goes to live with the man and his family. In contrast, Chewa men pay very little or no bride-wealth and it is the man who goes to live at his wife’s home. To the Shona men, this Chewa matrilineal custom makes Malawian men lesser men (than them) and threatens the former’s marriage customs and their authority over women. In addition, first-generation Malawian immigrants left their wives behind, yet most of them either stayed in Zimbabwe for a year or longer before returning to Malawi or settled permanently, thus posing a serious competition to Shona men for the few women in the cities in the late 1930s and 40s (see Schmidt 1992: 141).

Shona men, in spite of common regional dialect-based stereotypes, became united against the immigrants by creating and maintaining a preeminently political vocabulary and ethnic folklore. First, the vocabulary and folklore were meant to reinforce ethnic boundaries (Siegel 1989: 350), that is, segregate one’s own group members from socially inferior outsiders. Second, ethnic slur promulgated and enforced social norms by highlighting deviations from the cultural norms. Hence, nicknames that were meant for the immigrants were sometimes extended to deviant locals as a way of bringing their behaviour into line with the norms.

The creation of ethnic discourse together with other sociopolitical events in Zimbabwe’s urban area during the 1930s and 40s reinforced the development of a Shona identity, (Vambe 1976, Ranger 1989). Any ethnic interactions became opportunities for defining “insiders,” “ Outsiders” and “renegades” (Khleif 1979: 159). In the African locations, beer halls constituted a key interactive space for people of different ethnicities, and as the historian Lawrence Vambe (1976) records, concerts, verbal duels and ‘faction fights’ occurred here. Hence, the movement towards a unified Shona identity became irresistible. One sixty-five year old MZ man commented:

(Each time I got into the bar they (Shona men) would start insulting me. One could start, ‘brother, come here dull-face so that you buy us beer because you have no rural home to spend money on. Do you want a rural home? We could allocate you a home in our village then you stop flying to Malawi at night in your magic winnowing-basket.)

Strong links with the rural communities, traditional culture, the control of women and ethnic solidarity became prevalent cultural nationalist metaphors popularised through oral discourse, popular culture and creative writing. Evidently, some Shona novels published in the late 1970s and early 80s feature negative stereotypical images of both Shona women who date or marry MZ men and of the Malawian men themselves (Kahari 1990). These novels are still taught and examined at school as set books, thus acting as conduits for socialising children against MZs.

**Malawian Zimbabwean speech patterns**

Malawian Zimbabweans are essentially natural or circumstantial bilinguals as opposed to elite or elective bilinguals (Valdes 2000: 102). First-generation and sometimes second- and third-generation Malawian Zimbabweans whose parents are both of Malawian origin speak mainly ChiChewa as their first language and ChiShona as their second language. But, those of the second- and third-generation born of Shona mothers and Malawian fathers tend to speak ChiShona as their first language and ChiChewa as their second language. In the home both ChiChewa and ChiShona are fused in the sense that both parents cross freely between the two languages. Thus, there is no systematic instruction. In the public domain, as circumstantial bilinguals, those who have ChiChewa as their first language, on the one hand, acquired their second language in a natural context by having to interact with monolingual and bilingual ChiShona speakers in the work, church, school and neighbourhood domains. On the other hand, those with ChiShona as their first language pick ChiChewa in the home or neighbourhood domains.

As might be expected, there are different types of bilinguals in MZ communities. Some individuals are clearly ChiChewa dominant, (i.e. Chewa-Shona bilinguals) whereas others are ChiShona dominant, (i.e. Shona-Chewa bilinguals). Some individuals are
biliterate whereas others read and write in one of their languages. Some individuals are active bilinguals who speak both ChiShona and ChiChewa with some ease, whereas others are passive in one of their languages and can understand but cannot speak their ‘weak’ language.

What is apparent to a trained observer is that ChiShona and ChiChewa are diglossic. This means that ChiShona and ChiChewa have taken on specialised functions and are associated with certain domains of activity or subject matter. ChiShona is the “high” language of prestige; it is the language of the wider surrounding community, but it is also the language of many important domains: banking, political process and all service and official institutions that affect the lives of members of the community where an African language is required or used. ChiChewa, on the other hand, is the “low” language of intimacy, the language in which casual, unofficial interactions of the home and the in-group activities are conducted. The effects of the diglossic relationship can be seen clearly in the ways in which third-generation MZs acquire and develop proficiency in each of the two languages. ChiChewa speakers tend to avoid using ChiChewa in public or among the Shona since it is a source of disdain. Even the current language policies in Zimbabwe, especially language policy in education (see Nziramasanga Commission report, 1999), make minority language communities and speakers view their languages as inferior and less competent while holding English and the national languages (ChiShona and isiNdebele) with high esteem.

Many first-generation MZs, whose dominant and primary language is ChiChewa, have restricted proficiency in ChiShona and their speech sometimes involves what Rampton (1995, 1998) calls “language crossing.” Sometimes they use ChiShona seriously as a way to negotiate their identity in chiShona conversations. But, sometimes they use chiShona in a marked or derisory way. In either case they speak in a distinctly chiChewa accent and sometimes substitute chiChewa sounds for ChiShona sounds or code-switch in ways that have often been a source of humour and amusement for the Shona. However, ChiShona speakers tend to use ungrammatical ChiChewa, terms of depreciation and a very small selection of spoken formulae. Malawian Zimbabweans generally recognise
that the Shona use ChiChewa in a potentially disrespectful and offensive way, hence they view the behaviour as insulting and demeaning.

DATA COLLECTION
Data for this article were gathered between 2000 and 2005. The research is mostly based in Harare (the capital city) and in white commercial farms that are within the 40km zone of Harare. Harare is ideal for research on ethnic relations and interactions because of its metropolitan nature. It offers opportunities for interpersonal contact at work, in schools, beer halls and in some residential areas. These places provide experiences from which interpersonal relationships may develop. Hostilities, stereotypes, friendships, and intermarriages are possible outcomes of such experience. At the commercial farms, the people of Malawian origin constitute the majority of the workers and the management. Because of the threat and the discrimination involved in the land redistribution exercise, the mood on the farms is volatile and the conditions necessitate instances of ethnic verbal and physical violent encounters.

A total of sixty-five informants were interviewed. The sample was divided into three generations as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GENERATION 1: 50YRS +</th>
<th>GENERATION 2: 25-49 YRS</th>
<th>GENERATION 3: BELOW 25 YRS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shona men</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shona women</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malawi men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malawi women</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>10</td>
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No women of Malawi origin were sampled for generation 1 because it was assumed that most of the men of this generation did not bring their wives to Zimbabwe. All the Shona men in this generation reside in the African townships and their families stay in the rural areas for the greater part of the years. The Shona women in this generation are either those that live in temporary unions with, or are married to men of Malawian origin and live in Harare or on the farms, or those that were previously married to Shona men and remarried men of Malawian origin when they migrated to Harare. In generation 2 only men who have had any kind of interaction with in-group and out-group members were selected and interviewed. Generation 3 informants were chosen from people who went to school after independence in 1980 when an integrative education system was introduced in Zimbabwe. All the informants in this group resided in Harare and were, at that time, attending school at Dzivarasekwa and Gombo secondary schools and were randomly selected. These schools were chosen because there are in a multiethnic African location.

Both structured and unstructured interviews and observation were used. The interviews were recorded on tape and transcribed with the help of research assistants who are bilingual in ChiChewa and ChiShona. The key questions were on the informant’s biographical details, their reasons for using stereotypical labels with in-group and out-group members and their reactions to ethnic insults. The content of the questions varied with each sample.

The data gathering process took longer than was anticipated because, initially in the exclusively Malawian domains, the informants were rather apprehensive and reluctant to relate their experiences to the researcher, a bilingual speaker of Shona and English who speaks unpolished ChiChewa with a ChiShona accent. The researcher bolstered the informants by inviting a colleague who is a native speaker of ChiChewa and manager of a Malawian social soccer team in Harare. In spite of this strategy, the interviews took an average of five hours a day because of the following factors: (a) It appears that people of Malawi origin are naturally slow speakers and (b) there were a lot of intervening events since most of the informants were available to the researcher at social gatherings and at work places.
LABELS FOR SHONA SPEAKERS

Malawian Zimbabweans’ choice and use of ethnic slur to represent the Shona derives essentially from their anger and aggression to the way the Shona nickname, label, denigrate and discriminate against them for being outsiders. In other words, the major function of the nicknames or labels that MZs create and use for depicting the Shona people is resistance. Interviews with some MZs revealed that they use the word Zezuru in it’s bastardized form, Zuzuru to achieve affective effect and Masambadovi (lit. those consume a lot of peanut butter) to refer to all the Shona people, in spite of their awareness of the existing ‘ethnic’ or regional dialectal distinctions. One fifty-year old MZ-man living in Harare commented:


(When we refer to the Shona people as Zuzuru or Masambadovi we will be insulting them. We hate the way they insult us. Moreover, most Shona men that we interacted with in the beer halls spoke the Zezuru dialect and they liked peanut butter very much. They were from areas such as Murehwa, Domboshawa, Chiweshe, Mhondoro. Because these areas are near Harare these people preferred to cycle to and from home regularly to staying in Harare permanently. They would mock us saying that they do not stay in town permanently like “mabwidi”. But, the Shona people are lazy and cowardice. They shun working in mortuaries, for example because they are afraid of dead bodies.)

The insult is phonologically marked by the deliberate change of the initial vowel from the mid-front vowel /-e-/ to the high back vowel /-u-/ in the name ‘Zuzuru’. The Shona use
the term Zezuru in an unmarked and non-derogatory sense and at times they use it in teasing or joking insults similar to African-American dozens (Smitherman 2000:227) that are casually exchanged among familiar associates. As Schieffelin and Ochs (1986:185) note, “teases are uttered … where it is most plausible for the antagonistic statement to be framed and understood as play.”

The term Masambadovi (lit. bathing in peanut butter), denoting the Shona’s general love for peanut butter, is neither frequently used nor commonly known among the Shona. Ten Shona men between the ages fifty and sixty years interviewed in Harare on the basis of their frequent interaction with Malawian Zimbabweans at work places professed that they did not know the term. But, of the five Shona teenagers attending one high school in Harare, interviewed because they attend school with Malawian Zimbabwean children, three related experiences where fights almost ensued after the Malawian children called them Masambadovi in retaliation to being insulted as mabwidi. One of the students, a sixteen-year old boy recalled:


(We regularly insulted children of Malawian origin at our school as mabwidi, especially when they failed to spell some Shona words correctly. One day they started calling us Masambadovi. None of us knew what this word meant, but it was clear from the way these guys’ said it that they were insulting us. We felt insulted and decided to fight.)

In fact, as some members of the first generation of both the Shona and the Malawian ethnic groups reported in discussions with the researcher that during the 1960s, boxing matches were often arranged in Mbare (then Harare township) on ethnic lines. On the surface, these were just entertainment matches, yet the underlying motivation was to settle deep-seated ethnic hostilities. This became evident “when one was defeated. It was like embarrassing the group and declaring it inferior to the other. Other members of your
group would really be upset, falling short of beating you up themselves” (Interview with Mr. James, in Harare in 1999).

Interviews with some first generation Malawian Zimbabweans revealed that the term *Zuzuru* connotes laziness, cowardice and exploitative tendencies and *Masambadovi* suggests stupidity. It appears that these social meanings have been passed down to younger generations as folklore. One twenty-three year old Malawian Zimbabwean woman who works at a commercial farm on the periphery of Harare noted:


(We call the Shona people Masambadovi because they are stupid. There are many Shonas, particularly women of the Kore-kore tribe who stay at the farm where I work. The major preoccupation is picking potatoes; hence there are more women than men working at this farm. Most of the Kore-kore women prefer Malawian ritual dances to their own.)

Although this evaluation is rather generalised, and is perhaps, motivated by the anger of an invaded cultural space, historically, the Shona “crossed” to foreign cultures (including European cultures) more readily than the minority ethnic groups in Zimbabwe who guaranteed their survival and efficacy by keeping together and maintaining their identity. Of the Malawian Zimbabweans, Hachipola (Ibid: 54) says, “… Wherever a number of Chewa people are found the striking thing is that they have to a large extent kept their identity.” Several other Malawian Zimbabwean informants repeated reference to the Shona people as lazy (*usimbe*) and cowardly (*kutya*). An elderly man who works as an attendant at a Municipal public toilet in the city of Harare recalled:
MaZuzuru aiti akati seenze-seenze basa rakaoma otiza kuenda kumusha. Isu taiseenza kuchera migwagwa, murariwe, taiseenza mumochari tichipindura-pindura zvitunha, unotya chii munhu? Chidhumbu?

(The Zuzuru were in the habit of shunning difficult work. They would work for a short while then abandon the work and return to their rural homes. We did all kinds of jobs, including road construction, railways, and the mortuaries where we packed and arranged deceased people’s bodies. What is frightening about handling corpses? Fearing mere corpses?)

That the local people shunned menial and demeaning jobs, like working as toilet and mortuary attendants is fact, but reducing these tendencies to laziness or cowardly, is hackneyed. The immigrants’ representation of the Shona as lazy and cowardice could be attributed to the exasperation and offense resulting from the provocation embedded in the Shona people’s classification of these jobs as “mabasa emabwidi” (typical immigrants’ jobs). While the Shona workers had an option to choose lighter and more ‘pleasant’ jobs or go back to the communal area to work on their fields, the immigrants had little or no choice at all and many of them were not disposed to work as peasant farmers. One fifty-eight-year old MZ-man stressed in Chewa, “Sindina bwelela munda kuno ine. Ndina bwelela nchito yandalama kuazungu” (I did not come to Zimbabwe for a piece of land. I came to be employed by white people for money).

The nicknames that MZs use for the Shona provide a form of ridicule and repressed antagonism. As Gilmore 1982: 698) states, “When people experience deeply ambivalent feelings about neighbours, provocative nicknames are used not only as a displacement for conflicted hostile feelings, but also to damage rivals … to achieve a symbolic mastery…” In this case nicknames become a sort of human mirror in which we see reflected the intersection of individual lives and community experience (Holland, Jr.: 1990: 269).
Besides representing the Shona through nicknaming or labeling, Malawian Zimbabweans also use song and dance as safe and nonviolent methods of venting hostility and suppressed rage that often result from being treated as permanent strangers trapped in a Shona world. The following are examples of song and verbal wit that were recorded among some groups of Chewa and Ngoni living in Harare:

1. MaZuzuru kusadziwa
   Kunena
   Chisimu chakuti mabwidi
   Ndicho chimene
   Chobangiza kupusa kwawo
   The Zezuru (Shona) do not (know)
   (how) to talk properly (of other people)
   Their way of talking calling us Mabwidi
   It is a way of showing their stupidity

2. Mazuzu ndiwopusa
   Wovara sutu
   Alibe kusamba
   The Zezuru (Shona) are stupid
   They wear suits
   Without washing

Verbalising discontent and repugnance through poetic discourse or verse is consistent with what is known about the history of African people in the so-called ‘New World’ or in ‘enslavement’. They tap into “remembered cultural practices and verbal rituals from home and adapt them to life in a strange land” (Smitherman, Ibid: 225). Example 1 is a popular song involving a war dance that is sung by the Chewa and Ngoni, especially during social and ritual ceremonies (Interview, Phiri, 2000).

That such a song involves a war dance shows the amount of hostility that brews in the Malawian Zimbabweans’ hearts and how they feel insulted by the stereotypical representations created and sustained by the Shona, about them. Chiwome (1987:102) calls song an extended image because of its socialising role. In this case, when the Chewa or Ngoni perform this song it helps them disseminate and reinforce ethnic stereotypes and shared dislike of the Shona people’s insulting tendencies.

Compared to the song in 1, the words in the utterances in 2 are easily accessible to ChiShona speakers because they are simpler and quite similar to those in ChiShona. The explanation is that while the message in the song is directed at a specific Shona
hearer/audience, the message in the utterances in 2 is being indirectly communicated to a Shona hearer/audience who may be in a position to overhear it.

Other expressions or insults that Malawian Zimbabweans playfully or morally exchange among each other or direct to ChiShona speakers who are normally the ratified hearers but may not fully comprehend the message (because most of the Shona people neither speak nor understand any Malawian indigenous language), are quite severe. Some Shona speakers/hearers can only guess from the mood, that they are being insulted. Examples of such expressions are:

3. MaZuzuru sagula mowa (Zimbabweans/ Shona people don’t buy beer.)
4. Sindine muZuzuru (I am not Zimbabwean.)

The first generation of men of Malawian origin who came to Zimbabwe between the 1930s and 1950s involved mostly men who invariably left their families behind. They either married or lived in casual unions with Shona women. For most of the men from matrilineal groups (i.e. the Chewa, Yao and Lomwe) who were not used to the system of paying lobola in their own cultures they had a culture shock when their Shona in-laws asked them to pay lobola. They call the Shona men materialistic and greedy. One Malawian Zimbabwean man married to a Shona woman said:


(The Shona people charge lobola so exorbitantly that it amounts to selling their daughters. This custom is strange to us (the Chewa). They ask the in-laws to pay large sums of money, the mother’s cow, a cow claimed if the daughter is a virgin, the father’s cows. In addition, they expect the son-in-law to bring groceries. I paid all these things for my wife only because I love her, but this is sheer exploitation.)
Apart from the formal payment of lobola, the Shona people expect a son-in-law to always help his wife’s family or relatives in any way that he or they deem necessary. This role is regarded as an extended way of paying lobola or showing gratitude for the services the wife renders for him and his family. This role of the son-in-law may be extended to, or demanded by all men who share the same totem with the in-laws. The proverb, *mukuwasha mukuyu haaperi kudyiwa* ‘the son-in-law is a fig tree, he never stops being eaten’ (Hamutyinei and Plangger, 1974: 237), succinctly captures this relationship. Some of the in-laws or “fictitious” in-laws exploit the privilege enshrined in this custom by demanding help or tokens, including beer, from the sons-in-law whenever they meet.

Given the relationship explained above, theoretically, at ethnic level every Shona man may relate to any Malawi man as a son/brother-in-law. The expressions in 3 and 4 are therefore, a form of protest by the Malawian Zimbabweans to this ritualised dependence/exploitation.

**SHONA LABELS FOR MALAWIAN ZIMBABWEANS**

The Shona people’s demeaning representations of Malawian Zimbabweans have been passed from one generation to another since the 1930s. One forty-year old Shona man commented:

_Ndakangokurawo ndichingonzwa nyaya dzisingaperi maererano nevanhu vechiMalawi. Dzimwe nedzekupusa kwavakaita, dzimwe kudhererwa nevakadzi, dzimwe dzemishonga, ha-a dzakawanda._

(When I grew up in Shona society I heard many stories about people of Malawian origin. Some stories were about their stupidity, others about how they are dominated by women, and some on their magical powers.)

The bias or prejudice against the MZs occurs in stereotypical images expressed through name-calling or labeling, ethnic jokes and stories. While the people of Malawian origin use mostly indirect or subtle means for characterising the Shona people, the latter are often more direct and assertive making the terms that they use a form of what Zahn (1989) calls, ‘stereotypical powerful language’. Zahn describes stereotypical powerful language as “high intensity” language, which approximates expletive usage. There have
been several studies recently on the linguistic correlates of social power, particularly based on gender (e.g. Pauwels 1998; Holmes 1991; Frank and Anshen 1983).

The functions of the stereotypes that the Shona people use to address and refer to MZs are complex: they serve to indicate contempt or disregard for them, being used to defend the socio-cultural status quo, for ridiculing in-group members, for propaganda and for discrimination and exclusion. The labels or names the Shona use can be divided into two categories depending on their expressive effect on Malawian Zimbabweans. The MZs say that they consider the terms *maChawa* ‘the Chewa people’, *maNyanja* ‘the Nyanja people’, *marudzi* ‘foreigners,’ non-derogatory since they normally use these terms casually to refer to each other. The second category consists of terms that MZs regard as extremely debasing and prejudicial. These include; *Mabvakure* ‘aliens’, *Mateeranjanji* ‘those who came to Zimbabwe on foot following the railway line’, *Mabhurandaya* ‘people from Blantyre’ and *Mabwidi* ‘the stupid, homeless ones’.

The Shona use the terms; *maChawa*, and *maNyanja* referentially and sometimes derogatorily to distinguish and exclude the immigrants from the indigenous people. *Mabvakure* has the same meaning as alien used in America to refer to non-Americans. Its derogatoriness depends on where and how it’s used, but it stresses the concept of otherness. In the current political context of land ‘wars’ the MZs feel that the terms symbolise their exclusion from land allocation and a possible threat for expatriation. One elderly man of Malawi origin remarked:


(The situation is volatile these days. In the past ethnic insults were exchanged in the beer halls, sometimes, light-heartedly. These days, the mood is very unpredictable because of the land conflicts. We are often blamed for supporting the white farmers in fear of losing our jobs on the
farms if the government designates them. Most of us will be destitute, perhaps we may be told to go back to Malawi.)

The name *Mateeranjanji* connotes the inferiority and desperation of the MZs. Of all the terms that the Shona use to insult the MZs, the MZs themselves find the term *bwidi* most offensive. They prefer to be called *maChewa* ‘the Chewa’ or *maNyanja* ‘the Nyanja’. This is, in fact, what they call themselves. But, they sometimes joke among themselves mimicking the Shona people, and calling each other *mabwidi* or *mabhurandaya*. In this informal and relaxed atmosphere these terms function as nicknames and they imply an “in-group closeness or camaraderie (de Klerk 1998: 3). The use of these terms in this way renders the ethnic insult impotent.

Neither the Shona people nor the MZs know the etymology of the term *bwidi*, but both agree that it connotes stupidity, simple-mindedness and homelessness. Interviews with both the Shona and the MZs revealed that *bwidi* and *mabhurandaya* refer to the residence patterns of the immigrants. As one informant of Malawi origin explained,

Vanotitsvinyira mumabhawa vachiti handina mwana anororwa nemabwidi, mabhurandaya asina musha. Akafa tinoenda naye kupi tisingazivi hama dzake?

(They insult us in the beer halls saying that they will not let their daughters marry men of Malawi origin who have no homes. When he dies, how do we bury him without any of his relatives since no one knows any of his relatives?)

Although back home Malawians, like most African peoples, maintain strong rural ties or uphold their rural homes, in Zimbabwe most of the immigrants became permanent townsmen and cut links with their families and rural folk in Malawi. During the colonial period, the Shona people despised MZs for this because they believe that a properly
cultured African worked in town only to raise money for basic necessities, including *lobola*, and quickly returned to his rural home. Those who lived in towns, the mines and commercial farms were stigmatised as *zvichoni*, ‘permanent town dweller’, and no well-cultured girl was expected to marry such a man. As is widely portrayed in the Zimbabwean cultural nationalist and didactic literature, published mainly in Shona and Ndebele during the colonial era (the late 1960 and 70s), the city is depicted as unAfrican and the death-bed of the African culture and family (Mashiri 2001: 107, Chiwome 1996: 134). Metaphors of family disintegration and cultural alienation together with images of ‘Malawiness’ are used for reinforcing traditional patriarchy and as means of domesticating and subordination of women. Thus, marriages involving townsmen or men with no known rural home or extended family links were (are) perceived as taboo or rebellion.

The derogatory nature of the names and the stereotypical personalities associated with Malawians are, therefore highlighted in the socialisation processes so as to discourage Shona women and girls from crossing the ethnic boundary by dating or marrying men of Malawi origin. Even today, many Shona parents strongly object to their children marrying outsiders or people who have no known family background or rural home. The Shona people’s objection to marriage involving individuals whose family histories and/or backgrounds are not known to them is attributable to the fear of *ngozi* ‘avenging spirits’ and witchcraft, (real or imagined), and perhaps simply “fear and distrust of the outgroup” (Levine and Campbell, 1972:13). In African societies, the family or clan moulds the individual into a social being, hence the family offers a window into the individual’s personality. As Mbiti 1969: 106) asserts that the family therefore,

> Makes, creates or produces the individual …when he suffers he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone, …when he gets married, he is not alone, … whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group….
This restriction is a precaution against any eventualities that could destabilise or threaten marriage. Any union involving a man of Malawian origin was considered suicidal, as one MZ man who gave up on a Shona woman he intended to marry recalls:


(The Shona people refused to have men of Malawian origin marry their daughters. They would say you couldn’t marry a mubwidi who has neither a home nor known relatives. They were afraid that if one married such a man, in the event of death, that man would return as an avenging spirit and torment the in-laws. There was also the possibility of the man running away with his wife to his country of origin where her Shona parents would not find her. There was also fear of the man abandoning the Shona woman going back to his family in Malawi. These men are a bad omen.)

The absence of any known family members of the men of Malawian origin meant that marriages involving these men were individualised. Yet, to the Shona people, as Schmidt (1992:16) correctly observed, “marriage is a social act, the primary purpose is to create bounds between kin groups… it is not a contract between individuals but between two kin groups.”

In spite of the Shona people’s negative attitude towards MZ men and the popularisation of stereotypical images and stories about them, many Shona women perceived these men differently. To the women, the immigrant men, despised or not, offered an opportunity to escape from the general adversities of rural life to which Shona patriarchy and colonialism had jointly condemned them. One childless Shona woman living with a man of Malawian origin said,
I was married to a Shona man and I stayed in the rural areas most of the time. I would come to town only during the dry season. I would wait for my husband to invite me to town. If I came unannounced he beat me up. At home I toiled alone and my husband’s relatives, including his mother harassed me for being childless. Eventually I ran away and came to Harare where I moved in with this despised immigrant fiancée of mine. Yes, I love him because he does not abuse me, he has no rural home to send me to, he does not blame me for being childless, and so what is my worry? Should I worry about the stigmatization of marrying a bwidzi? That does not worry me at all. I am happy that we care for each other, in any case, am I the first Shona woman to marry a foreign man?

This testimony shows that some Shona women ran away from the rural areas in the 1960s and 70s, particularly, due to growing demands of intensified labour, intolerable domestic situations, such as harassment from the their husbands’ folks or their own parents, polygamy, divorce and childlessness. In the urban area, that is, the towns, mines and European farms, ‘run away’ as they were popularly known, preferred to form informal, often permanent, liaisons with immigrant workers from Malawi. As the testimony cited above also reveals, unions with immigrant men offered some form of security to the troubled women in several ways. Since the men were (are) permanent urban dwellers, the women attached to them would escape from the rural burdens. Most of the men of Malawi origin left their wives and children in Malawi and only visited them occasionally.
Shona women preferred immigrant men from matrilineal groups for three reasons. One Chewa man commented:

Isu tinoremekedza amai chaizvo, hatirovi mukazi zvinoita maZuzuru. Tinonyatsovada. Hatiite barika. MaZuzuru haadi mukadzi ane vana vake, isu hatina mhosva nokuti kwedu vana vagara vari vumukadzi.

(We Chewa man have high respect for women. We are not in the habit of abusing our wives as the Shona men do. We love them dearly. We are not polygamous. Shona men despise women with children from another marriage. We don’t mind since in our culture the children belong to the wife.)

As indicated in this quotation, first, the matrilineal marriage requires the man to settle at his in-laws after marriage and his wife and her family are in charge of the children. On divorce, the man normally leaves the children with the wife and returns to his home. Because of this background, MZ men tend to treat women as equals and with a lot of respect and happily and readily welcome the children that their Shona wives bring from previous marriages (a thing most Shona men are socialised against) and they are quite generous. The Shona men misinterpreted the prototypical attitude of the MZ men towards women as stupidity and blamed them for spoiling women. The terms *bwidi* and *bhurandaya* had their meanings extended to include negative labels for Shona men who are liberal with women. Even the Shona women who cohabit with or marry MZ men also view their tolerant and respectful nature as passiveness as evident from the use of the secondary commentary prefix /ch-, -ch-/ (cl 7 + derogatory) by the Shona childless woman quoted above, (e.g. *chimubhurandaya changu… ndinochida nokuti hachirovi…*). This attitude stems from socialisation against MZs within the Shona community.

Women who marry or live with men of Malawian origin, like those who marry across the racial divide, are generally classified as cultural renegades. A number of Shona novels
that deal with the theme of society’s stigmatisation of MZ men and the disapproval of their liaisons with Shona women reveal the Shona people’s negative attitudes towards women’s ‘rebellion’ to cultural conservatism. The conservatism is motivated by: (a) the Shona myth that MZ have no totems; (b) the temporary and individualised nature of the relationships; (c) the threat posed by the interethnic liaisons to the traditional patriarchal control of women and (d) the fear of cultural assimilation or hybridisation. Shona men tend to dismiss liaisons between Shona women and MZ men as mapoto ‘relationships of convenience’ or worse than prostitution. The researcher observed an incident in Dzivarasekwa involving a Shona middle-aged man, a Shona woman of almost the same age and a much older MZ man. The three were leaving a bar. The woman and the MZ man were walking ahead of the Shona man who exchanged insults with the woman for abandoning him for the MZ man. Part of the conversation went as follows:

Man: Iwe siyana nezimuteeranjanji iro mhani. Unoridiiko?
(You, I insist that you leave that pathetic man who came footing along the railway line. What do you want from him?)

Woman: Ndisiye, kana riri zimuteeranjanji nderangu, iwe wasvotwa nei. Unofunga kuti kunyenga kuita zvehasha?
(Leave me alone. If he is a pathetic man who came following the railway line, he is still mine. Do you have a problem with that? Do you think you can accost a woman by being violent to her?)

Man: Kunyenga chii? Unofunga ndashaya mahure here? Iwe hausi hure chete. Uri mbwa unoteererana nemabwidi!!
(What is there to accost? Do you thing I can’t get a prostitute? You are not just a prostitute, but a dog because you hangout with Malawi men.)

(The Malawi man is my problem not yours. You Zezuru men! You are not only abusive but also mean. Who would hangout with such men? Malawi men are very gentle and extremely generous.)
The Shona people’s stereotypical attitude towards people of Malawian origin has now shifted into what Van Dijk (1984: 1) calls “prejudiced talk”. This is an observable indication of assumed cognitive representations of ethnic attitudes and of strategies for the mental and social uses of such beliefs. The media and politicians in Zimbabwe use the exonyms for the MZs as strategies of oppression, propaganda and exclusion. Towards the 2000 Parliamentary elections, President Mugabe was quoted by Pius Wkatama in The Daily News of 17 April 2000, angrily denouncing residents of Mbare as “aliens without totems” (p. 10) for allegedly abandoning the ruling party that led the liberation struggle of the country, for a newly formed opposition party that enjoys the support of the white minority.

The use of the exonyms in this case serves to classify the MZs as ‘traitors’, ‘outlaws’ or ‘saboteurs’ in order to exclude them from national programmes. As Bosmajian 1995: 332) says, through the use of language of suppression, the human animal can seemingly justify the unjustifiable, make palatable the unpalatable, and make decent the indecent.

CONCLUSION

This study has asserted that one can determine a great deal about the inter-ethnic relations and attitudes of speakers by examining their linguistic usage. I concluded that for more than six decades, mutual hostilities, prejudices and stereotypes between the Shona people and the Malawian Zimbabweans developed from non-violent images of otherness to vehicles of political propaganda and discrimination. The prejudices are linguistically marked, serve social functions and they arise, largely from the historical circumstances of their contact and coexistence.

Being the majority and the hosts, the Shona tend to express their indignation of the MZs more overtly than the latter. The latter adopt indirect remarks, innuendo and other subtle strategies to avoid confrontation. But, from a glance of the derogatory labels, names or nicknames and insulting utterances that they use to represent the Shona people, one readily senses inherently negative and resentful attitudes.
Although no official intervention can effectively alter speakers’ capacity to creatively manipulate language to represent their attitudes, feelings or emotions, language development strategies that promote officially recognised multilingualism and multiculturalism could, in fact, lessen levels of interethnic contempt and prejudice. Since words derive their connotative meanings from the speakers’ social and cultural knowledge of their world, any change in that world could result in new meanings. It is this kind of meaning that allows speakers to use or interpret expressions or say things in new ways.

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