

Exploring how Multilingual Artistic Expression Sustains Linguistic Diversity and Shapes Cultural Narratives in Zimbabwean Creative Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how multilingual artistic expression contributes to sustaining linguistic diversity and shaping cultural narratives within contemporary Zimbabwean creative practices. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research objectives: (i) to document multilingual artistic practices in Zimbabwe; (ii) to examine the cultural, social and political motivations behind the use of indigenous languages in artistic production and (iii) to analyse how multilingual storytelling contributes to cultural preservation and audience engagement in the digital age. Grounded in theories of language preservation, cultural identity and decolonial aesthetics, the research investigates the ways in which artists integrate indigenous languages into poetry, music, theatre, spoken word and digital media as strategies for cultural continuity and audience engagement.

Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected artists textual analysis of artistic works and observation of performances involving artists who employ multilingual storytelling rooted in Ndebele, Kalanga, Shona, Nambya, Tonga, Venda and other minority languages. Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, following iterative coding procedures that involved familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining themes. Data saturation was reached when no new thematic insights emerged across interviews and performance observations.

Findings reveal that multilingual expression functions as both an artistic technique and a political act, enabling artists to resist linguistic marginalisation, reconstruct historical memory and assert identities often excluded from dominant national narratives. For example, observed performances included a Bulawayo Arts Festival multilingual theatre production where actors code-switched between Ndebele, English and Kalanga to represent intergenerational conflict and cultural memory, as well as a Tonga musical performance shared on TikTok that evoked strong diaspora engagement through indigenous lyricism.

The study further shows that by embedding local languages into contemporary artistic forms, both traditional and digital creatives foster intergenerational dialogue, broaden audience participation and contribute to ongoing cultural preservation efforts.

The paper argues that multilingual storytelling is an essential site of cultural resilience in Zimbabwe, reinforcing the value of indigenous languages within the creative economy while challenging homogenising forces in the arts sector. The study concludes by recommending increased institutional support for multilingual arts initiatives and the integration of indigenous languages into national cultural policy. The paper argues that multilingual storytelling is an essential site of cultural resilience in Zimbabwe, reinforcing the value of indigenous languages within the creative economy while challenging homogenising forces in the arts sector. The study concludes by recommending increased institutional support for multilingual arts initiatives and the integration of indigenous languages into national cultural policy.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines how multilingual artistic expression contributes to sustaining linguistic diversity and

shaping cultural narratives within Zimbabwean creative practices. The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To document multilingual artistic practices among Zimbabwean artists;
- To examine the motivations behind linguistic choices in creative production;
- To analyse how multilingual storytelling contributes to cultural preservation and audience engagement;
- To identify challenges and opportunities for multilingual artistic expression.

Language is central to cultural identity, social belonging and the transmission of communal memory. In African contexts, storytelling traditions have long served as conduits for intergenerational knowledge, moral education and cultural continuity (Finnegan, 2012; Barber, 2007). In Zimbabwe, an officially multilingual nation recognising 16 indigenous languages, artists increasingly draw on multilingual expression to assert cultural identity, resist linguistic erasure and navigate the complexities of contemporary creative production.

Despite this rich linguistic landscape, scholarship focusing specifically on multilingual storytelling within Zimbabwe's creative sector remains limited. Most studies examining Zimbabwean languages focus on education (Makoni & Mashiri, 2007), language politics (Hachipola, 1998) or national identity formation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). Few address how artists use multilingualism as an aesthetic strategy and a political act to preserve cultural narratives in the digital era.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Zimbabwe's linguistic diversity is one of its most significant cultural assets. According to Hachipola's (1998) Survey of the Minority Languages of Zimbabwe, languages such as Kalanga, Shangani, Venda, Tonga, Chewa, Nambya and Sotho have historically faced marginalisation in public institutions, media and national cultural programming. While IsiNdebele and Shona dominate national cultural spaces, many minority languages remain at risk of reduced use, limited visibility and intergenerational transmission challenges (Dube, 2019).

Globally, UNESCO (2003) warns that nearly half of the world's indigenous languages may disappear within this century, highlighting the urgency of preservation efforts. Language death is often linked to globalisation, migration and structural inequalities (Crystal, 2000). In Zimbabwe, these factors intersect with colonial histories that privileged English and subsequently created a hierarchy among local languages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Multilingual artistic expression offers a powerful alternative space for revitalising endangered languages and strengthening cultural pride. Artists using indigenous languages actively counter narratives of marginalisation, preserve oral histories and contribute to cultural sustainability (Kaschula, 2013). Digital platforms have further expanded opportunities for showcasing multilingual creativity, enabling artists to reach broader audiences locally and globally (Mare, 2020).

However, systematic academic attention examining how multilingual storytelling functions within Zimbabwe's creative industries and how it contributes to cultural preservation remains scarce. This study therefore seeks to:

- Document multilingual practices among Zimbabwean artists
- Analyse the cultural, social and political motivations behind their linguistic choices
- Evaluate how multilingual storytelling supports cultural preservation in the digital age
- Identify challenges and opportunities for multilingual creativity

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Indigenous Languages and Cultural Identity

Indigenous languages serve as repositories of collective memory, values and cosmological knowledge (Fishman, 1991; Batibo, 2005). Scholars argue that language embodies cultural essence, shaping thought and behaviour (Whorf, 1956; Wierzbicka, 1997). In African contexts, language has played a pivotal role in resisting colonial assimilation and restoring cultural dignity (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986; Prah, 2009).

2.2 Multilingual Storytelling in African Arts

African artistic traditions have historically operated through multilingual oral forms such as praise poetry, folktales and ceremonial performance (Finnegan, 2012). Contemporary artists continue this legacy by blending languages to reflect hybrid identities, negotiate social boundaries and enhance aesthetic richness (Moyo, 2013; Adejunmobi, 2004).

2.3 The Zimbabwean Linguistic Landscape

Zimbabwe's linguistic diversity is well documented, with minority languages often marginalised in formal media and education (Chimhundu, 2005; Ncube & Nkomo, 2021). Yet in the arts, these languages thrive as channels of authenticity, community engagement and cultural continuity. Artists from Matabeleland and other regions increasingly promote languages such as Kalanga, Tonga and Venda in music and spoken word (Mpofu, 2020).

2.4 Digital Media and Linguistic Visibility

Digital platforms have transformed cultural production, enabling indigenous-language content to reach global audiences (Mabweazara, 2015; Ndlovu, 2020). Social media supports linguistic diversity by lowering distribution barriers and amplifying marginalised voices though digital inequality still restricts full participation (Graham et al., 2015).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore artists' linguistic practices and interpretations. The qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing lived experiences, cultural meanings and expressive motivations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposive sampling was used to identify a sample of 20 artists across Zimbabwe's creative sectors, including musicians, poets, theatre practitioners, digital storytellers and community performers working in Ndebele, Kalanga, Tonga, Venda, Shona dialects and mixed-language formats. Data collection comprised

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of live and recorded performances and textual analysis of selected artistic works and digital content (including YouTube videos, TikTok performances and recorded poetry).

Interviews explored artists' motivations, linguistic philosophies, audience responses and challenges associated with using indigenous languages.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated manually and later grouped into categories and themes aligned with the research objectives. Data saturation was achieved when no new codes emerged during successive rounds of analysis

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study produced rich, layered insights into how Zimbabwean artists use multilingual storytelling to preserve cultural heritage, assert identity and navigate contemporary creative ecosystems. The findings draw on in-depth interviews, performance observations and analysis of artistic outputs shared during the research period. Participants included poets, musicians, theatre actors and digital storytellers from Matabeleland, Midlands and parts of Mashonaland, working in languages such as Ndebele, Kalanga, Tonga, Venda, Sotho, Nambya, Shona and hybrid forms.

4.1 Indigenous Languages as Living Archives of Cultural Memory

Across all interviews, participants emphasised that indigenous languages carry ancestral knowledge, idiomatic nuance, spiritual symbolism and community-specific histories.

A Kalanga poetry performance observed at a Bulawayo cultural event illustrated how metaphorical language encoded historical memory, with references to clan praise names and ancestral land narratives. Similarly, a Tonga musical performance shared via YouTube demonstrated the use of river-based imagery as a cultural archive of community identity.

These findings reinforce Fishman's (1991) argument that language is central to cultural continuity.

Similarly, a Nambya musician stated:

"These words, our proverbs, our praise names they hold stories of our rivers, our totems, our histories. If we don't sing them, they die."

Performances observed during the study, such as a multilingual theatre piece staged at the Bulawayo Arts Festival, demonstrated how performers embedded historical idioms, clan totems and oral histories into dialogue and song. These findings echo Finnegan (2012), who notes that African oral arts remain central to intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Multilingual works were frequently described by artists as "cultural memory banks," particularly in cases where languages are endangered, such as Tonga and Venda.

4.2 Language as Identity Assertion and Political Expression

Many artists described multilingual storytelling as an act of identity reclamation, particularly in regions where minority languages historically faced marginalisation. This theme aligns with Joseph's (2004) view that language is a crucial tool of identity performance.

A Kalanga musician expressed:

"When I rap in Kalanga, I am saying: we are here, we are proud and our language is good enough for global stages."

An Ndebele theatre practitioner reflected:

"Using my mother tongue on stage is a political act. It says we belong."

In one observed spoken-word performance, the artist deliberately alternated between English and Sotho to dramatise exclusion and belonging, demonstrating how code-switching operates as embodied political expression. An Ndebele theatre practitioner reflected on the political dimension:

"We grew up being told English is success, Shona is national and the rest of us must shrink. Using my mother tongue on stage is a political act. It says we belong."

These views resonate with scholars such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), who argues that linguistic hierarchies are legacies of colonial and postcolonial power structures.

Artists also highlighted the emotional authenticity that comes with speaking in one's own language. A Venda singer commented:

"When I sing in Venda, I don't think, I feel. And the audience feels it too."

Thus, multilingual artistry becomes a medium for both personal expression and collective affirmation.

4.3 Audience Engagement: Emotional Resonance, Accessibility and Connection

Participants consistently reported that performances in indigenous languages created stronger emotional bonds with audiences.

A spoken-word artist who blends Ndebele, Sotho and English explained:

“When I switch languages, I see people sit up...”

A recorded live performance at a community theatre in Bulawayo showed heightened audience response (applause, ululations, verbal affirmations) when performers shifted into Ndebele and Kalanga, confirming the emotional resonance of multilingual delivery.

However, multilingualism also served a practical function, expanding accessibility. A theatre director noted:

“Zimbabwean audiences are linguistically mixed. If you stick to one language, you lose someone. But when you layer them, everyone finds a piece of themselves.”

4.4 Digital Media as a Catalyst for Indigenous Language Visibility

Artists reported that social media platforms particularly TikTok, YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp have become powerful tools for distributing multilingual content, connecting diasporic audiences and challenging mainstream gatekeeping. These findings align with studies by Mabweazara (2015) and Ndlovu (2020), who observe that digital environments democratise cultural production.

A young Tonga singer who posts short videos online shared:

“When I posted my first Tonga song on TikTok...”

TikTok analytics shared by one participant showed significantly higher engagement rates on indigenous-language content compared to English-only posts, indicating algorithmic and audience interest in multilingual creativity.

A Kalanga comedian added:

“On radio, they don’t want our languages because they say it’s ‘niche’. But on Facebook? My skits get millions of views. So who is niche now?”

These testimonies highlight how digital platforms counter linguistic marginalisation by amplifying minority-language creativity.

However, barriers persist. Participants complained about prohibitive data costs, digital illiteracy in rural communities and algorithmic bias favouring dominant-language content.

4.5 Structural Barriers: Policy Gaps, Media Exclusion and Linguistic Stigma

Despite growing creativity, artists expressed frustration with systemic challenges that limit linguistic diversity in Zimbabwe’s creative industries. These include:

4.5.1 Lack of institutional support

Artists frequently pointed out that government arts funding rarely prioritises minority-language work.

One theatre producer remarked:

“Every year, we submit proposals for Kalanga theatre projects. And every year, they tell us the audience is too small. But they forget that visibility creates audiences.”

4.5.2 Media gatekeeping

Several participants described mainstream broadcasters as resistant to indigenous-language programming.

A radio producer secretly shared:

“Management prefers English and Shona because advertisers want ‘bigger markets’. Minority languages are dismissed before they are even tested.”

4.5.3 Linguistic stigma

Some participants still encounter ridicule for using their home languages.

A young Sotho poet expressed:

“At open mics, people used to laugh when I began in Sotho. They thought I was joking. Now they listen, but it took years.”

This aligns with Batibo’s (2005) findings on linguistic stigma in African contexts.

4.6 Multilingual Storytelling as Creative Innovation

Interestingly, many artists view multilingualism not only as heritage work but as a creative resource that enhances artistic innovation.

A hip-hop artist who mixes Ndebele, English and Shona explained:

“Language-switching lets me play with rhyme, rhythm, tone. It’s like having more colours on the palette.”

A theatre director added:

“Multilingual scripts challenge actors, tickle audiences and allow storylines to unfold across cultures. It’s dramaturgical gold.”

This supports Pennycook’s (2012) argument that language fluidity fosters creative experimentation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight the central role of multilingual artistic expression in sustaining linguistic diversity, shaping cultural narratives and reinforcing cultural resilience within Zimbabwe’s creative landscape. Artists who integrate indigenous languages into poetry, music, theatre, spoken word and digital media not only preserve linguistic heritage but also assert identities that have historically been marginalised, reconstruct historical memory and foster intergenerational dialogue. In light of these insights, several recommendations emerge to support the growth, recognition and impact of multilingual creative practices.

Firstly, institutional support for multilingual arts initiatives must be strengthened. Cultural organisations, arts councils, educational institutions and public media platforms should actively create spaces that validate and showcase works in indigenous languages. This could include hosting multilingual festivals, competitions and exhibitions, as well as providing funding for projects that foreground minority languages. Supporting multilingual artistic practice at institutional levels signals recognition of linguistic diversity as a cultural and economic asset, enabling artists to reach wider audiences while sustaining their creative practices.

Secondly, the integration of indigenous languages into national cultural policy is essential. While Zimbabwe recognises sixteen official languages, practical support for their use within the creative economy remains uneven. Policymakers should develop strategies that explicitly prioritise the promotion, protection and incentivisation of multilingual artistic expression. Policies could mandate media representation of minority languages, provide grants for language-specific creative projects and facilitate collaborations between local and diasporic artists. This would ensure that indigenous languages are not only preserved but actively leveraged to enrich national and transnational cultural narratives.

Capacity-building programs tailored to multilingual artists are also critical. Training should focus on both creative and technical skills, including multilingual storytelling techniques, content adaptation for digital platforms, audience engagement strategies and the use of technology for archiving and dissemination. Programs should employ culturally sensitive pedagogies, delivered in local languages, to ensure accessibility and relevance. Mentorship schemes that connect emerging multilingual artists with experienced practitioners can foster skill development, professional growth and collaborative networks that amplify visibility across diverse audiences.

Digital platforms offer an additional avenue for strengthening multilingual expression, particularly in reaching younger and diaspora audiences. Artists should be supported in producing high-quality multilingual digital content, utilising tools such as subtitling, translation and interactive media to broaden accessibility. Partnerships with online cultural platforms, digital museums and media houses can help artists maximise reach while ensuring that indigenous narratives are preserved, shared and celebrated within both national and global cultural spaces.

Collaborative practices and intergenerational engagement are further recommended as mechanisms for sustaining linguistic diversity. Cross-generational projects, workshops and performances allow knowledge transfer between elders and youth, ensuring that oral histories, idioms and cultural knowledge embedded in indigenous languages continue to inform contemporary creative practices. Collaborative initiatives among artists working in different languages can also generate hybrid artistic forms that reflect Zimbabwe's plural identities and reinforce the value of linguistic diversity within the arts sector.

Future research is necessary, particularly longitudinal and comparative studies across regions, languages and artistic genres, to better understand the long-term impact of multilingual artistic expression. Longitudinal studies examining the impact of multilingual artistic expression on cultural preservation, audience engagement and socio-economic empowerment will provide evidence to guide strategic interventions. Comparative research across regions, languages and artistic disciplines can also illuminate best practices and highlight persistent barriers to inclusion, ensuring that policies and programs remain responsive to the needs of multilingual creatives.

In conclusion, supporting multilingual artistic expression in Zimbabwe requires a multi-level approach that combines institutional backing, policy reform, capacity-building, digital innovation, collaboration and evidence-based research. When properly supported, multilingual creative practices serve as powerful vehicles for sustaining linguistic diversity, preserving cultural heritage, fostering dialogue across generations and shaping inclusive national and transnational narratives. By implementing these recommendations, Zimbabwe can cultivate a creative ecosystem in which indigenous languages and cultural expressions are not only preserved but celebrated as central to the country's artistic identity and socio-cultural resilience.

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