

European Journal of Linguistics

(EJL)

Assessment of the Linguistic Vitality and the Status of OluZemba
as Spoken in Namibia



Assessment of the Linguistic Vitality and the Status of OluZemba as Spoken in Namibia

 Haileleul Zeleke Woldemariam

Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of Communication and Languages,
Namibia University of Science and Technology



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4237-9472>

Abstract

Purpose: The main purpose of this study was first to assess and then to determine the linguistic vitality and the status of OluZemba as spoken in the northern part of Namibia.

Methods: The study followed a mixed methods approach and guided by the pragmatist paradigm. Above 167 elders in nine rural villages including Ombuumbu, Etunda, Otjovanatje, Etoto, Otjiyandjamwenyo, Okamboola, Etotoa West, Etoto East and Okadhandu were purposively selected following snowball and purposive sampling methods for in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and completing questionnaires. During the FGDs and interviews, OvaZemba elders chose Etanda and Oniyando (circumcision and its ritual) as previously the most cherished cultural practice of the tribe but currently the most endangered cultural value. Following UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire (2003), and Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory of Giles and et al (1977) and Linguistics Citizenship Theory of Stroud (2001).

Findings: The study team investigated Etanda rituals and produced the first theatrical play in OluZemba. The study concluded that an observable language shift exists amongst this vibrant community which requires further investigation. The OvaZemba people use their language in an increasingly negligible and reduced number of communicative, business and administrative domains and might cease to pass it on to the next generation. Children are not taught in the language at schools, and many do not know how to read and write. Overall, the investigation has concluded that OluZemba is not a dialect of Otjiherero but a language of its own with its own orthography. It's highly marginalised in the Namibian context.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy, and Practice: This study will contribute to the implementation of language endangerment, marginalisation, and revitalisation theories. These theories guided the mainstream of the research. Presenting fresh data and evidence from the field, the study will contribute to the Namibian language planning and policy dialogue and so as to table endangered and marginalised languages as policy agenda. Practically, the research recommends OluZemba as a medium of instruction at the primary level. If government fund does now support OluZemba as the medium, Otjiherero should be the next closest language as the medium of primary education.

Key words: *Ovazemba/ Oludhimba, Cultural Rights, Endangerment, Marginalization, Linguistic Rights, Linguistic Citizenship, Dialect, Etadna/Oniyando*

1.1.Contexts of the Study

The OvaZemba/OvaDhimba community members have largely engaged in a combination of agriculture, livestock production, and small scale enterprises and wage employment as seen in the Ruacana and Opuwo areas of Namibia. Some Zembas are destined to be hunter-gatherers. Speakers of the language also are widely spread and reside in villages such as Otjitungathitu, Omindamba, Eundo (Eunda), Olwaziva, Omakuva, Omaenene, Omikuyu, Ontoko, Otjozongunde (Etunda), Okapa-KaHangula, Olyonyime, Okapika, Ondjombo Tjihitwa, Ozonawa, Omindjove, Ozondenge, Okazandu, Ozongalahi, Ouhongo, Omuzu-uahauuanga, Ombuumbuu, Okatjene, Otjovanatje, Omangundi, Otjaandjamwinyo, Omunawatjihozu Otjimanangombe, Etoto Okombungu, Otjekwa, Ovitwambu, Okawapehuri, Orupaka, Okalele, Ozombu and Orue. The Namibian Census Report of 2023 (p.91) estimated a total of 35, 684 (18,668 male and 17,016 female) as potential speakers of OluZemba/OluDhimba in Namibia.

According to Ethnologue (2025), the OvaZemba people are identified as part of the Ovaherero ethnic group, and it is believed that they are mountain dwellers who stayed in the hinterland during the Bantu migration, whereas the Ovaherero people moved to the most modern central part of Namibia. It is also believed that they speak a pure or deep version of Otjiherero, but the OvaZemba people claim that their language is different.

Zembas, as the old member of Bantu ethnic group, have distinct cultural practices such as the unique hairstyles and attires of women who decorate their hair and attire with artistic beadworks that distinguish them from other tribes in Namibia, while some of these cultural practices are like those of the Himba ethnic group who reside in the adjacent farmlands. Women are known for their intricate iron and copper jewellery and clothes made of animal hides. Traditionally Zembas perform male circumcision and remove four of the lower front teeth and file two of the upper front teeth as a sign of Zemba ethnic group identity. They have their own distinct style of singing and dancing to commemorate matrimonial ceremonies and other cultural events. Elderly women do not cover the upper part of their body including their breasts.

When the Europeans invaded Africa, they divided the borders of the current Angola to the north and Namibia to the south. Prior to this division, Zembas lived in both sides of the Kunene River. Traditionally, Zemba chiefs ruled over the people on both sides of the Kunene River, but now the borders are clearly demarcated and do not allow free association with the relatives on both sides of these artificial and colonial borders.

During the field work, elders told us that in the schools their children are instructed to remove the old traditional Zemba attires. There is no provision for the introduction of mother tongue instruction and the children are being taught in other languages such as English, Oshiwambo and Otjiherero. They are left behind academically and their linguistic identity is being endangered and marginalised. Children drop out of schools and those who are at primary school do not fully understand what is being taught at primary and kindergarten levels.

Zemba elders melancholically told us that in 1997, Zembas nearly succeeded as their application to establish OvaZemba Traditional Authority (ZTA) and inaugurate a Zemba traditional chief was approved by then Government of Namibia. However, as the Zembas

were preparing the ceremony of chief's inauguration, the Uukolonkadhi Traditional Authority (UTA) petitioned the Government of Namibia to reject the inauguration of the chief though it was already approved. We were informed that most disturbing and humiliating for the Zemba community at large were that the withdrawal of the prior authorized recognition of the ZTA was banned by the police forces. During the day of the inauguration of the Zemba chief, the entire ceremony was embezzled by the Uukolonkadhi tribe members. It was reported Zembas were beaten, foods and beverages were looted, and some people were kept hostage and Zemba private properties were confiscated. The withdrawal was based on claims by the Uukolonkadhi tribe's leader, who claimed that the Zemba people were subjected to his rulership.

UNESCO (2005) promotes the need to recognise linguistic diversity in society to promote cultural diversity, which is necessary for a full realisation of human rights and fundamental freedom. Namibia has adopted the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The Namibian Arts and Culture Policy is using these conventions as a framework for the implementation. The Namibian Government in general and the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in particular, clearly positions itself to promote unity in diversity, give all Namibians a sense of unity, identity, and pride in their own creative talents, and improve the quality of life.

There are several other stakeholders who are involved in the protection, preservation and promotion of indigenous languages and culture. The National Heritage Council of Namibia (NHC) is a statutory organisation of the Government of Namibia and has been in existence since 2005 when it replaced the National Monuments Council. The mission focuses on the identification, protection, and management of the natural and cultural heritage of Namibia, as well as public education, and in accordance with the law and international conventions to ensure that the heritage benefits the current and future generations. The National Library of Namibia supports education and research by providing all Namibians and Namibian libraries access to national and international information resources.

Onesmus (2011) argues that because of the remote nature of Kunene region and its isolation, the OvaHimba, OvaZemba and other nomadic people who live there are amongst the most marginalised groups in Namibia, especially in terms of access to education. They maintain and guard fiercely a highly individual tribal culture in terms of mode of production, dress, hairstyles, and ornaments which delight tourists and anthropologists from all over the world. Whether marginalisation is equivalent to poverty, however, is a matter for speculation and how poverty is defined in the context of a developing country like Namibia (p.133).

In Namibia, selected indigenous languages are included in the school syllabus at primary level. From secondary level, English is the medium of instruction. Afrikaans is the only language that comes close to a *lingua franca* in Namibia and is spoken by most black townspeople together with English and other native languages. Although speakers of such minority languages have a deep attachment to their cultural identity and history embedded in their language, the language itself proves unsustainable for economic reasons. Therefore, it is essential to bring about the revitalisation of indigenous languages for the preservation of

culture. This action will also lead to a greater understanding between the diverse cultural groups and promote unity in diversity. All in all, this study was conducted with the assumption that the OvaZemba cultural practices are endangered and OluZemba is marginalised and not yet the medium of instruction.

1.2. The Objectives of the Study

The field work for this study was aimed at investigating the linguistic rights and the cultural identities of the OvaZemba people of Namibia and specifically, the study was designed to:

- Determine the status of OluZemba as spoken in the northern Namibia.
- Investigate the level of endangerment of OluZemba as spoken in Namibia.
- Collect the cultural expressions of the OvaZemba tribe.
- Assess the methods of revitalizing OluZemba as spoken in Namibia.

2. A Conceptual Framework

During the field work, this research implemented UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire (2003) as the main empirical tool and evaluated the status of OluZemba as spoken in Northern Namibia. This task was unbelievably valuable. Secondly, in line with the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) of Giles and et al (1977), the study investigated the status of sustainability, strengths and institutional support systems for OluZemba and OvaZemba cultural practices. Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) developed a three-level structural analysis to investigate the vitality of a variety and its speakers: status, demography, and institutional support. These three variables allow an ethnolinguistic group to survive and behave as an active, collective, and distinctive group in intergroup situations and ensure the survival of a variety (pp.307-348). EVT helped us to assess the strength of OvaZemba ethnic group amongst the most strong ethnolinguistic groups: Ovambo and Herero. The theory helped us strategize OluZemba vitality and reclaim some of the cultural practices including circumcision.

Third, the additional emphasis of the research was not only meant to determine the level of the peril of OluZemba but to recommend strategies of advocacy and the revitalization for higher status and inclusion of OluZemba as the medium of instruction for the OvaZemba school going children and as a subject at primary level in Northern Namibia.

This study also followed Linguistics Citizenship (LC) Theory in order to promote and protect OvaZemba language and culture in the Namibian context. LC guided the advocacy and inclusivity argument of the project. Fundamentally, the theory addresses the very real materiality of language in minority politics by attending to the fact that linguistic minorities suffer from both structural and valuatinal discrimination (Stroud, 2001, p.351). LC has given us the following guidelines:

- *Marginal language communities participate in the design and the implementation of their own language provisions.*
- *The sociopolitical rights and obligations should in fact follow from, and be defined by, the representations, practices and ideologies of language and society that circumscribe*

communities of speakers in their everyday associational networks, or 'sites of mediation.'

- *The criticism that the legitimacy of main-stream, majority speaking, official-language society to delimit and characterize language practices solely in terms of formal and public spheres (Stroud, 2001, p.350).*
- *The notion of linguistic citizenship links language, subject position, and issues of redistribution by looking at language as a political and social concept firmly into discourses of welfare and equity.*
- *The term linguistic citizenship captures the idea that representations of citizens as speakers and members of speech communities also carry political implications (Ibid).*

Linguistic citizenship denotes the situation where speakers themselves exercise control over their language, deciding what languages are, and what they may mean, and where language issues (especially in educational sites) are discursively tied to a range of social issues--policy issues and questions of equity (Ibid. pp.339-355).

3. Methods and Procedures

This study followed a mixed method research approach which was guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire (2003), an Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory of Giles and etal (1977) and Linguistics Citizenship Theory of Stroud (2001). As illustrated and summarized in the diagram below, we followed a Participatory Action Research Design (PAR) which allowed OvaZemba elders and educated tribal folks to contribute to the study, translate stories, digitize stories, and produce a theatrical play in OluZemba.

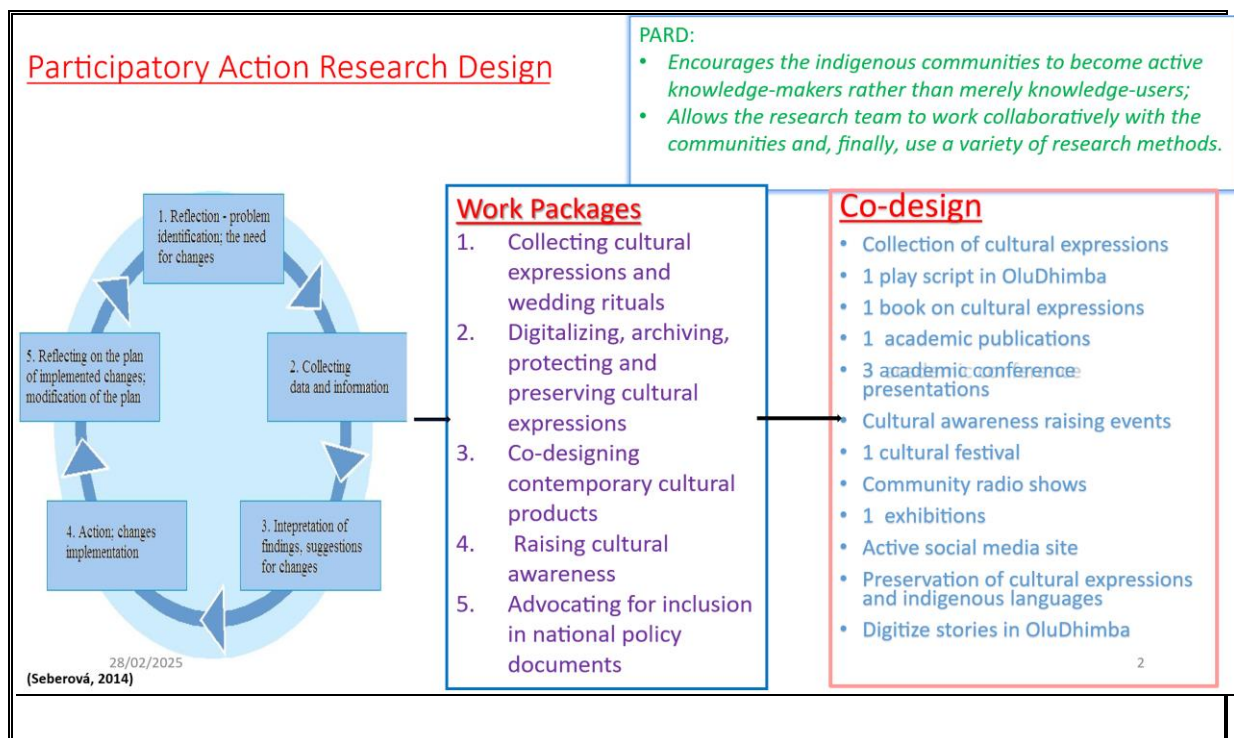


Fig1: Research Design

The study team purposively selected 163 elders who were information rich in nine rural villages including Ombuumbu, Etunda, Otjovanatje, Etoto, Otjiyandjamwenyo, Okamboola ‘ Etotoa West, Etoto East and Okadhandu. We selected these elders following a snowball sampling framework for in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and completing questionnaires. The study team investigated these endangered cultural practices and produced the first theatrical play about circumcision (Etanda/ Oniyando) and its rituals in OluZemba. The team collected a total of 76 stories: 59 cultural expressions from OvaZemba elders and 17 from learners. The stories were told to these learners by their grandmothers as fire side tales and the team published a story book for the children. This will assist first language instruction in OluZemba in the near future. The following section presents a summary of our major observations. The theatrical production and the publication of the story book in OluZemba will enhance cultural participation, position the ethnic group and transform the language.

4. Major Findings

4.1. The Cultural Identities of the OvaZemba Tribe

Five research assistants who can speak OvaZemba interviewed elders and conducted focused group discussions focusing on the following major questions with the main aim of singling out the most endangered cultural practice. (Refer also: <https://p3icl.nust.na/launch-books-and-closure-project>). The assistants were guided by a renowned Namibian playwright: Keamogetsi Josph Molapong who restructured the rituals and composed the story line. During the field work, major questions raised include:

1. Which cultural practice is unique to the OvaZemba tribe in this locality? Are you proud of this cultural practice and why? Can you narrate some of the procedures and the rituals? How should we revitalize the practice?
2. Within the OvaZemba community, do social, political, and economic factors threaten the plurality of identities and cultural expressions?
3. For the OvaZemba, are identities and cultural expressions strongly being reshaped by globalisation, standardisation and intellectualisation?
4. Are there best ways to preserve, protect and promote the cultural expressions of the OvaZemba?
5. How can we enhance the cultural awareness of OvaZemba in Namibia and abroad?
6. Is OluZemba locally endangered, marginalised, threatened or safe? If yes, how?
7. What kind of moral, economic support and institutional support should be provided to individuals and institutions to promote OvaZemba folklore and the culture?
8. How do we bring positive changes of knowledge and attitude of other Namibians towards OvaZemba cultural expressions, identities, rights and language?
9. How do we increase institutional capacity on indigenous cultures and languages in your localities?

10. How do we ensure OvaZemba cultural practices and language are an integral part of the medium of instruction and social media in Namibia? Is OluZemba a language of its own or a dialect of other dominant languages?
11. What do you recommend for protecting, promoting and preserving the OvaZemba cultural expressions, identities and subsequently and the Linguistic rights in Namibia adequately?

During these interviews and FGDs, OvaZemba elders identified Etanda and Oniyando (circumcision and its ritual) as the most cherished cultural practice of the community but currently the most endangered cultural identity of the cultural group. The team designed a theatrical production which was performed and video recorded. Refer the picture gallery at <https://p3icl.nust.na/gallery>

4.2.The Linguistic Rights of the OvaZemba Tribe

According to Ethnologue, the OvaZemba people are identified as part and parcel of the OvaHerero people, and it is believed that they are mountain dwellers who stayed behind during the Bantu migration, whereas the OvaHerero people moved to the central part of Namibia. Their striking cultural similarity specifically with the OvaHimba community nearby often leads other communities to make this generalizations. It is believed that they speak a pure or deep version of OtjiHerero, but the OvaZemba people claim that their language is different and practice their own culture differently. Many of the elders whom we interviewed spoke three languages: OluZemba, Otjiherero and Oshiwambo. As a result, language policy makers assume that the OvaZemba children can be exposed to the most dominant mediums of instructions in the country: Otjiherero and Oshiwambo. Refer the picture gallery at : <https://p3icl.nust.na/gallery>. The team visited two schools to investigate the status of OluZemba and other medium of instructions. With the assumption to position OluZemba as the medium of primary instruction, the research team compared the lexical and semantic similarities of the languages widely used in the schools.

4.2.1 Lexical Comparison

A visit was made to Otjekua Primary School, Ruacana Circuit, in Omusati Region to study the medium of instruction and compare the status of the three languages widely spoken in the locality. Out of 241 learners in this school, 125 spoke OluZemba as their mother tongue, 106 OtjiHimba/Otjiherero and 10 Oshiwambo. In this pre primary school, the medium of instruction from Grade 0 upto 3 is OtjiHerero and from Grade 4-7 is English. Learners were asked to translate randomly selected words from English to OluZemba, OtjiHimba/OtjiHerero and Oshiwambo as presented in the tables below:

Table 1: Mixed Words

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
1. Take	Ithapo	Toora	Kuthapo
2. Give	Yandja	Yandja	Gandja
3. Come	Indjo	Indjo	Ila
4. Go	Enda	Kaende	Inda
5. Sit down	Kapoohi	Haama	Kutuumba
6. Write	Soneka	Tjanga	Shanga
7. Greet	Okulipundula/Okiliuhaleka	Korisa	Popitha
8. Drik	Nwaa	Nwa	Nwa
9. Chair	Otjipundi	Otjihavero	Oshipundi
10. Clothes	Ovikutu	Ozombanda	Openguwo/ iikuta
11. Pot	Ombiya	Onyungu	Ombiga
12. Spinach	Ombidhi	Ombowa	Omboga
13. Read	Okutanga	Okuresa	Okulesa
14. Ash	Omuto	Omutue	Omutoko
15. Soil/Sand	Eheke	Ehi	Evi
16. Hair	Ozondjutji	Ozondjise	Omafufu
17. School	Ondongetho	Osikore	Osikola
18. Clinic	Otjihakulilo	Otjipangero	Okapangelo
19. Learner	Omulongethwa	Omuhongwa	Omunasikloa
20. Teacher	Omulongethi	Omuhonge	Omulongisikoloo

Out of 83 mixed words denoting kinship, domestic and wild animals, colours, cultural expressions, numbers and pronouns, only 13 (Boldfaced) lexical items are pronounced and spelt identitically in OluZemba and OtjiHerero. Out of these 83 randomly selected words, only 10 words (boldfaced) are pronounced and spelt identitically in Oshiwambo and OluZemba. Refer the classification and comparisons of randomly selected 83 words in the tables below and above. It's obvious that OluZemba has borrowed vocabularies from the two most dominant languages in Namibia: Oshiwambo and OtjiHerero. Are these three languages syntactically similar? There are a number of words which mean and signify the same thing but pronounced and spelt slightly differently in OluZemba and OtjiHerero like Olukupo/Orukupo, Omulongo/Omurongo, Ame/Ami, Nte/Ete and Tjo/ Otjo. These lexical and phonological analysis positions OluZemba closer to OtjiHerero in these localities. However, the team suggests a corpus linguistic study of the phonological and syntactic analysis of the two languages.

The team conducted a similar kind of visit to Omudhuwauwanga Primary School in a nearby locality where 9 learners spoke OtjiHerero, 196 OluZemba, 123 Oshiwambo and 1 Damara. In this primary school, the medium of instruction from Grade 0 up to 3 was Oshindonga and from 4-7 was English. Teachers told us that the dropout rate for OvaZemba learners was very high. The school faced a very critical shortage of OtjiHerero speaking teachers. We requested learners to translate and pronounce the following words (as in Table 2 up to Table 8) into OluZemba, OtjiHerero and Oshiwambo:

Table 2: Kinship Vocabulary

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHimba	Oshiwambo
21. Mother	Meme	Mama	Meme
22. Father	Tate	Tate	Tate
23. Sister	Omunitjandje	Erumbi Wandje	Omwanememe Kadhona
24. Brother	Olumbi Lyandje	Omutenak Wanje	Omwanememati
25. Uncle	Omo	Omo	Tatekulu
26. Aunt	Honkadhi	Hongaze	Meme
27. Grand Father	Tate Ombwale	Tate Mukururume	Tatekulu
28. Grand mother	Tjikukai	Mama Mukurukaze	Memekulu
29. Nephew	Omulamwandje	Omuramwandje	Omwanemegona

Table 3 Domestic Animals

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
30. Dog	Ombwa	Ombwa	Ombwa
31. Cat	Ongato	Okambihi	Okambishi
32. Chicken	Ofufwa	Ohunguriva	Ondjuxa/ Ondjuhwa
33. Cow	Ongombe	Ongombe	Ongombe
34. Donkey	Ondongi	Okasino	Ondoongi
35. Horse	Onkambe	Okakambe	Okakambe
36. Mule	Otjimulutia	Otjimori	Emulutiya
37. Ox	Ongombe/ Ondumendu	Onduwombe	Ongombe-ndumendu
38. Hen	Onlcondombolo	Ekondomboro	Ekoondombolo
39. Sheep	Ondu	Ondu	Onzi
40. Goat	Onkombo	Ongombo	Oshikombo

Table 4: Wild Animals

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
41. Lion	Onkeyama	Ongeyama	Onghashi
42. Hyena	Ombungu	Ombungu	Embungu
43. Fox	Ombandje	Ombandje	Kaandje
44. Oryx	Onduno	Onduno	Oholongo
45. Elephant	Ondjou	Ondjou	Onjamba
46. Rhino	Okapulukuta	Ongava	Ondjambameya
47. Cheetah	Etotongwe	Otjitotongwe	Ongwe
48. Leopard	Ongwe	Ongwe	Ongwe
49. Snake	Onyoka	Onyoka	Eyoka

Table 5: Colours

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
50. Red	Otjithilantu	Otjiserandu	Oshitilgane
51. White	Otjipembadhi	Otjivampa	Oshitokele
52. Black	Otjindholodhu	Otjizorundu	Oshiluudhe
53. Blue	Otjihini	Otjimbura	Oshimbulau
54. Yellow	Otjidumbu	Otjingara	Oshishunga
55. Brown		Otjihoni	Oshindjimbi
56. Green	Otjifwi	Otjingirine	Oshizizi

Table 6: Cultural Expressions

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
57. Wedding	Olukupo	Orukupo	Ohango
58. Marriage	Olukupo	Orukupo	Ondjokana
59. Death	Omukoti	Ondiro/ Omutambo	Eso
60. Birth	Okuyumukwa	Ongwatero	Evalo
61. Market	Komalandethelo	Oruveze	Omatala
62. Money	Ozombongo	Ovimariva	iimaliwa
63. Funeral	Okupaka	Ombakero	Efuviko
64. Meat	Onyama	Onyama	Onyama
65. Sour Milk	Omavele	Omaere	Omayale

Table 7 Numbers

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
66. One	Mothi	Imwe	Yimwe
67. 2	Vali	Imbari	Mbali
68. 3	Tatu	Indatu	Ndatu
69. 4	Kwana	Iine	Ne
70. 5	Tano	Indano	Ntano
71. 6	Epandu	Hamboumwe	Hamano
72. 7	Epanduvali	Hambouvari	Heyali
73. 8	Epandutatu	Hambodatu	Hetatu
74. 9	Omvoovi	Muvyu	Omugoyi
75. 10	Omulongo	Omurongo	Omulongo
76. 100	Ethele	Esere Rimwe	Ethele
77. 1000	Eyovi Limo	Eyori Rmwe	Eyovilimwe

Table 8: Pronouns

English	OluZemba	OtjiHerero/OtjiHerero	Oshiwambo
78. I	Ame	Ami	Ngaye
79. He	Ye (Omuthanku)	Eye (Omuzandu)	Omumati
80. She	Ye (Omakathona)	Eye (Omukazona)	Omukandhona
81. You	Ove	Ove	Ngweye
82. We	Nte	Ete	Tse
83. It	Tjo	Otjo	Sono

4.3.The Linguistics Rights of the OvaZemba Tribe

The current research team was recruited by the EU to investigate the linguistics status of the ethnic group and determine the level of endangerment of the language as spoken in Namibia. The team framed few questions to guide the basic stream of the field work. Is OluZemba endangered, safe, vulnerable or marginalised in the Namibian context? How should we revive the language if it is endangered or vulnerable? Is OluZemba a language or a dialect? Is OluZemba a medium of instruction in Namibia? To answer these research questions, following UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Questionnaire (UNESCO 2003), the study team considered six factors: intergenerational language transmission, absolute number of speakers, the proportion of speakers within the total Namibian population in Namibia, trends in the existing language domains, response to new domains and media, and materials for language education and literacy. The team also considered UNESCO's classification system which shows how 'in trouble' the language is:

1. Vulnerable - most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).

2. Definitely endangered - children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' at home.
3. Severely endangered - language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
4. Critically endangered - the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently.
5. Extinct - there are no speakers left
(<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/apr/15/language-extinct-endangered>)

4.3.1. Demographic Information

As presented in the graphs below, 82 male and 35 female and 19 (others) respondents (totaling 136) completed the survey questionnaire and over 66 % of the respondents aged above 40 years. Purposively, we targeted the elderly members of the community with the assumption that they are sol repositories of the culture, tales and the language. See Fig 2—Fig 5 below for more demographic information about the respondents.

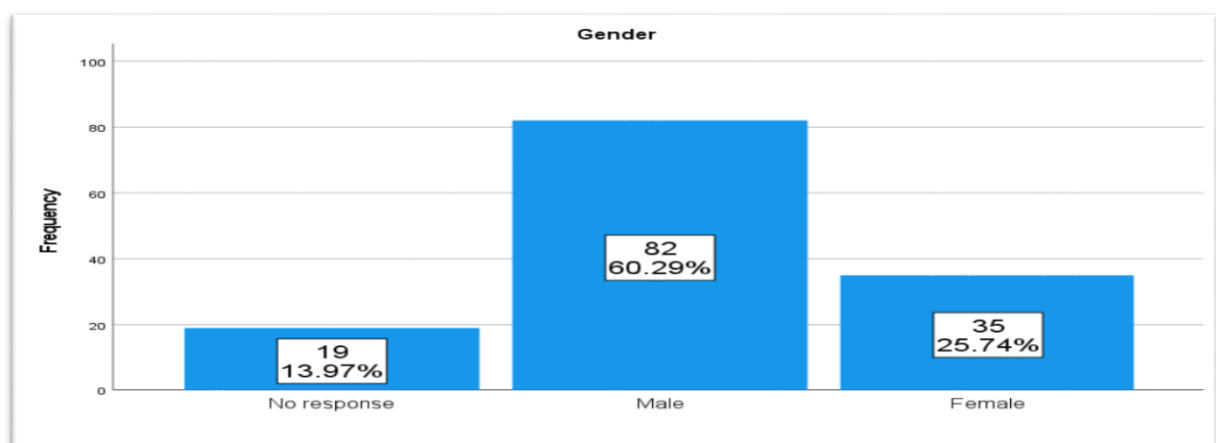


Fig 2: Gender

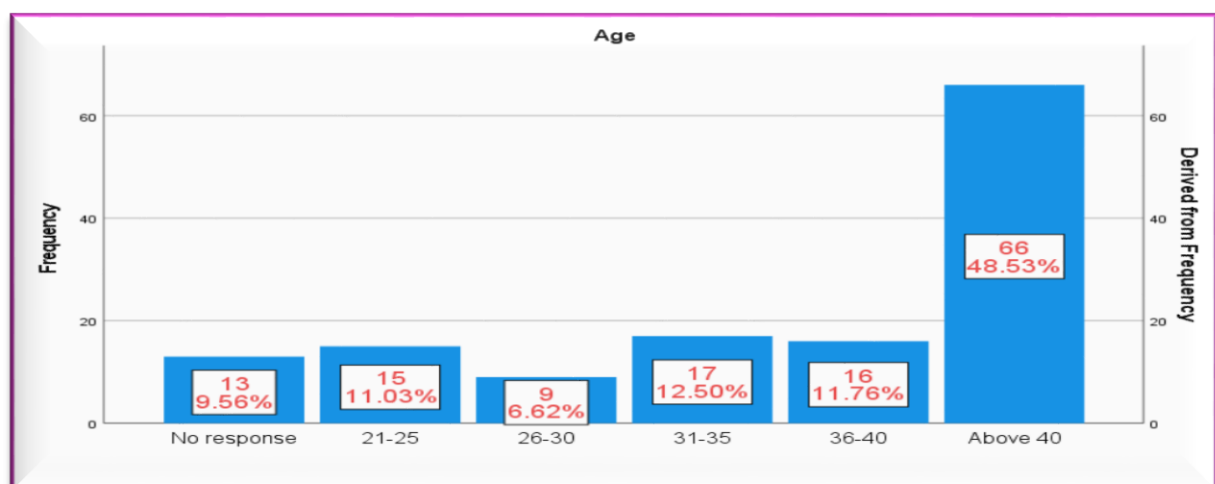


Fig 3: Age

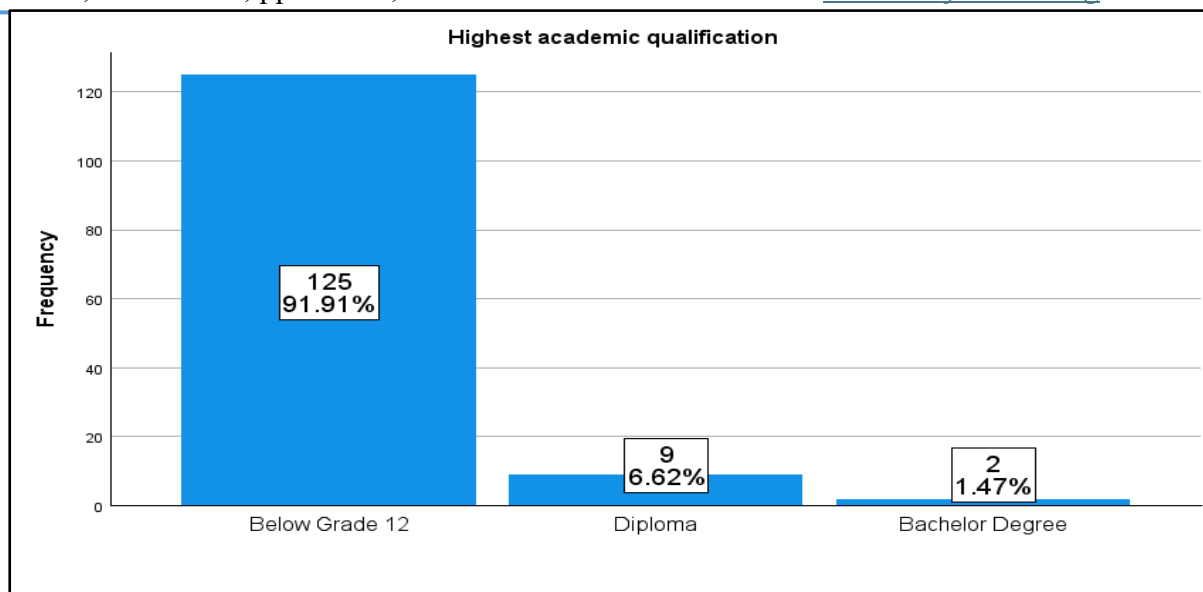


Fig 4: Highest Qualification of the Respondents

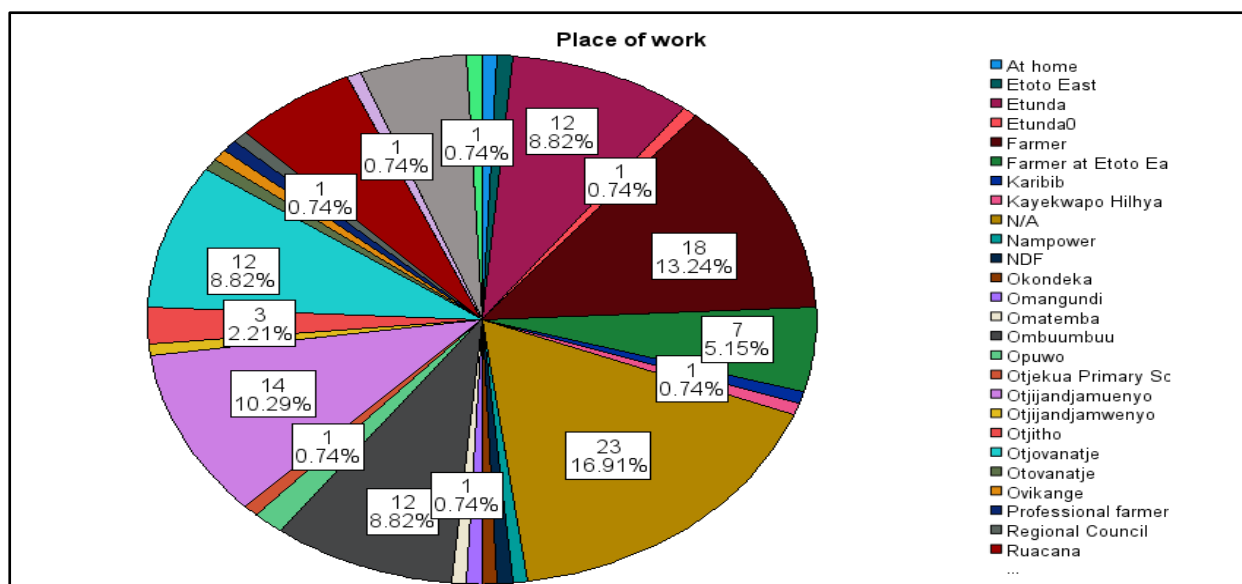


Fig 5: Place of Work

4.3.2. The Status of OluZemba

1. Is the language endangered or safe/vibrant?

As the sum of the figures below shows (Fig 6), above 65.42 % (89) the OvaZemba elders assume that their own language is no safer as it is not widely spoken by most of its clan members due to various reasons including politics, education, business, technology, administration and ethnicity. Dominant languages such as Oshiwambo and Otjiherero are used as the languages of business and administration. Therefore, specifically, 44.12% (60) of the respondents think that the language is unsafe and 3.68% (5) assume the language is severely endangered, 11.03% (15) definitely endangered, 5.88 (8) critically endangered, 0.74 % (1) extinct, 2.21% (3) remained silent and 32.35% (44) assume the language is safe as presented in Fig 6 below:

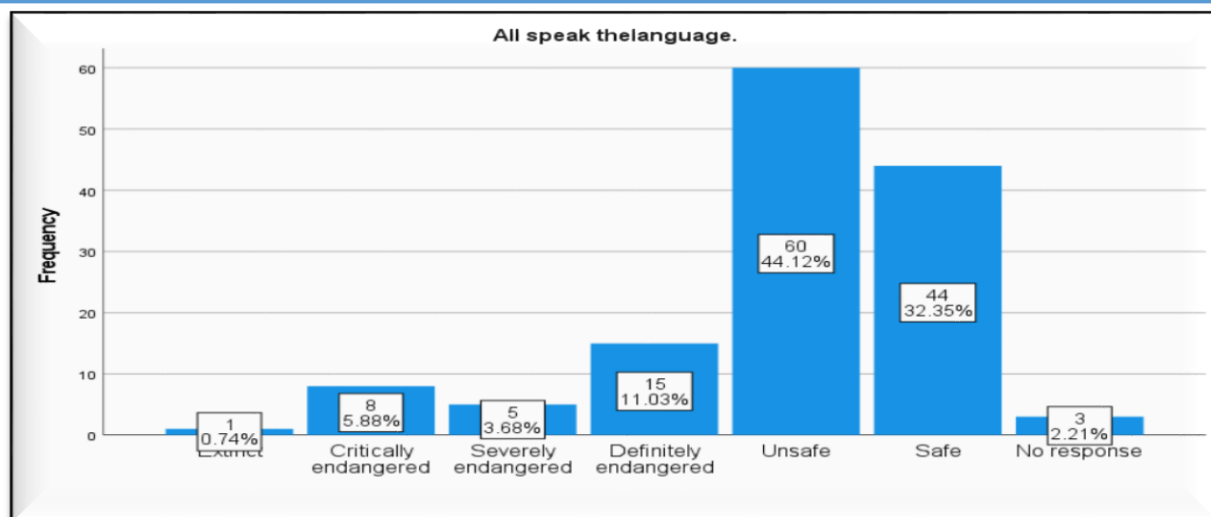


Fig 6: Do all speak the language?

2. Universal Use of OluZemba

OvaZemba elders unpacked the universal functions of their own language in their localities. They assume that the language is used quiet often at home domains. It has not been used for universal functions. The most dominant languages including Oshiwambo, Otjiherero, Afrikaans and English have begun to penetrate even home domains. As presented in the figure below, 21.32% (29) OvaZemba speaking respondents assume that the language is highly limited to home use, 26.47 % (36) formal domains, 17.65% (24) dwindling domains, 19.85 (27), multilingual parity, 9.56% (13) universal use and 0.74 % (1) gave no response to this question and 4.41 (6) assume that the language has died already. Native speakers sparing use the language in social media and local newspapers.

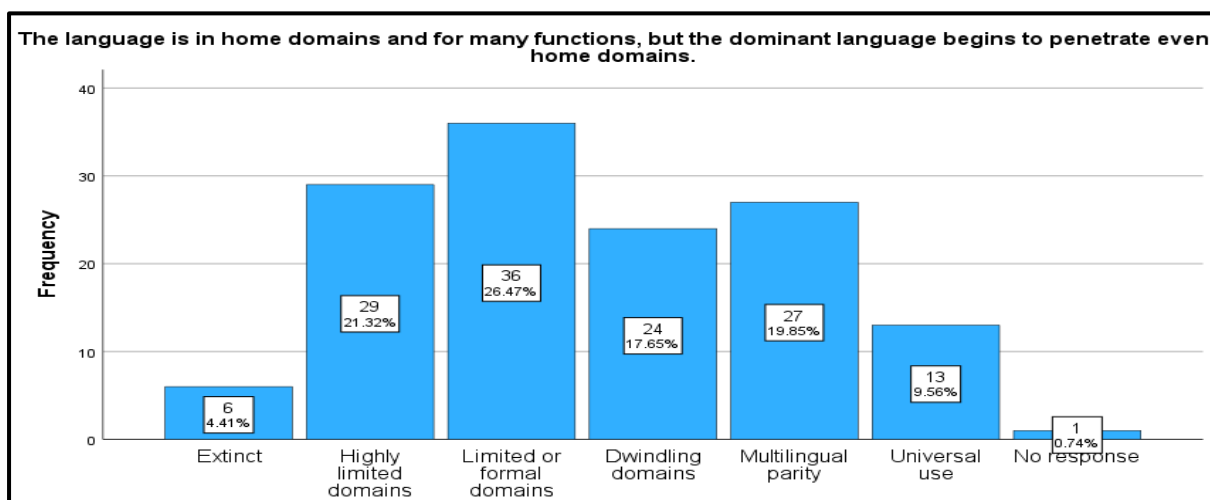


Fig 7: Where do OluZemba speakers use the language?

3. Is OluZemba the medium of instruction at primary school level?

A visit was made to Otjekua Primary School, Ruacana Circuit in Omusati Region to study the meduim of instruction and compare the status of the three languages widely spoken Inagauges

in the locality. Out of 241 learners in this school, 125 learners spoke OluZemba as their mother tongue, 106 OtjiHimba and 10 Oshiwambo. In this pre primary school, the medium of instruction from Grade 0 upto 3 is OtjiHereero and from Grade 4-7 is English. As the graph below briefly presents, mother tongue instruction in OluZemba is not part of the school's primary curriculum yet. OluZemba is not yet the medium of instruction even where OvaZemba population is relatively high. In order to revitalise both the language and culture, formal institutional support is urgently needed.

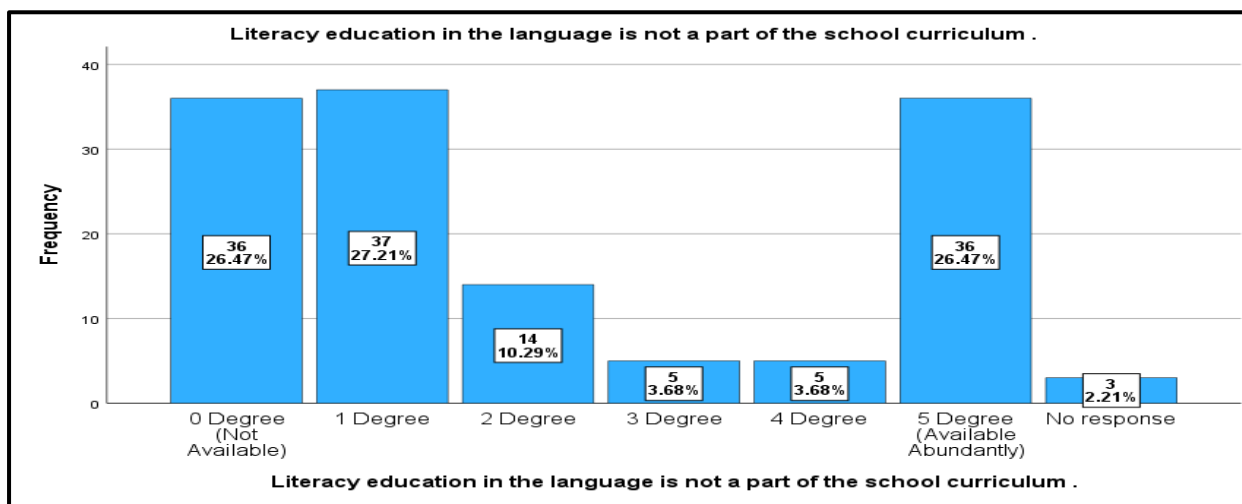


Fig 8: Is OluZemba a medium of instruction?

4. Orthography Accessible to OvaZemba Community

With the support from the Church, a pastor translated the Bible from English into OluZemba. However, the Bible was completely rejected by some OvaHerero experts in the nearby localities saying that the two languages are the same and translation is not needed at all. Therefore, there is an established orthography with negligible or no literacy tradition with grammar, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is not used in administration and education at all as clearly indicated in the graph below:

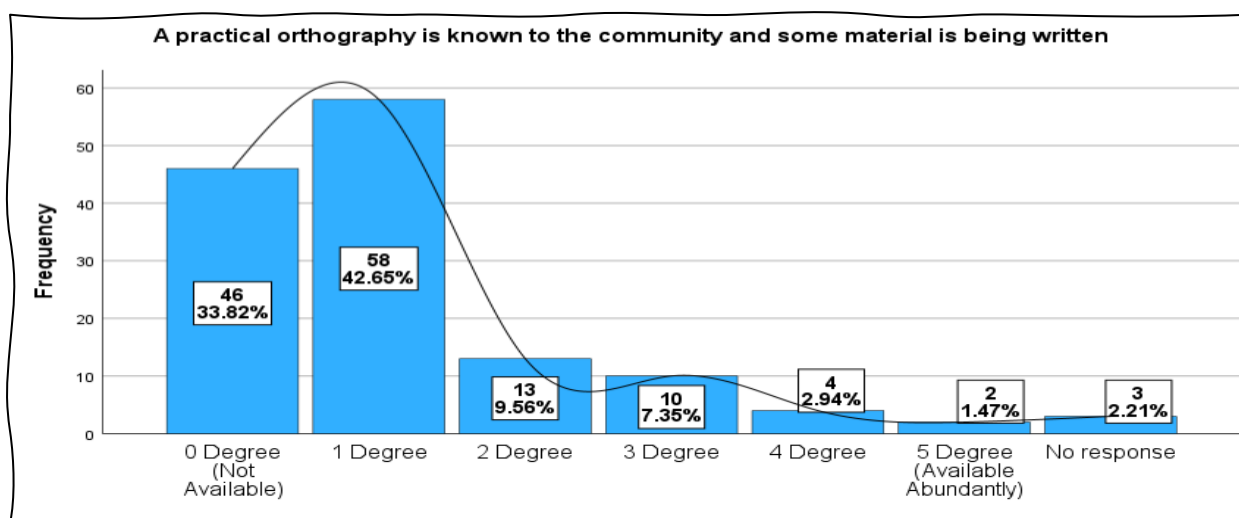


Fig 9 Is there any practical orthography already known to the community?

Written materials do not exist, and at school, children are not developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration as indicated in the graph below.

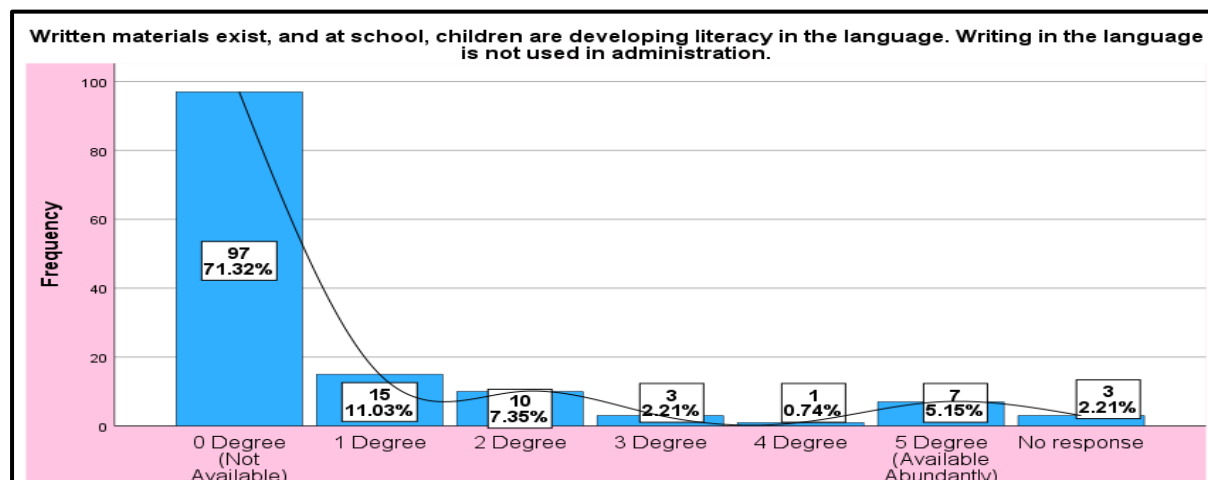


Fig 10 Is there any written material in OluZemba known to the community at all?

4.1.7. Challenges Facing OvaZemba Namibia

During the interview and focused group discussions, elders also raised the following concerns:

- *Our language is endangered. At school level, the curriculum will not include our language as the medium of instruction in the nearest future.*
- *Our children do not have enough materials for teaching and learning purposes.*
- *Our cultural practices have not been promoted and widely practised by the growing youth population.*
- *We want our language to be taught in schools and be given a radio station by all functions.*
- *Othe speakers of dominant languages in our localities hate our language to the extreme.*
- *Government often assigns traditional chiefs from the most dominant language groups who often work against our culture and language.*
- *Teaching job opportunities have been created for other speakers of the most dominant languages. These teachers do not promote research into our culture and language.*
- *We even do not have local media houses to promote our language and culture,*
- *We want people to be fair when employing teachers for our schools.*

Conclusions

The research team concluded that OluZemba is in a stable and safe condition which is spoken by 35,684 people in Namibia. However, the language is not sustained by formal institutions and is not even the medium of primary instruction. Significant of all, the study team concluded that OvaZemba is a language of its own and it is not a dialect of Otjiherero or Oshiwambo at all. The language often borrows lexical items predominantly from Otjiherero and Oshiwambo and many of the speakers of the language are multilingual in these languages. The study team followed a participatory action research design and concluded that Etanda/ Oniyando is the

most endangered cultural practice of the community. An observable language shift exists among this language community which requires further investigation. The OvaZemba people use their language in an increasingly reduced number of communicative, business, media and administrative domains and might cease to pass it on from one generation to the next generation.

Recommendations

With the aim to revitalize, protect and promote OluZemba, another research team can be deployed to collect cultural expressions and write several story books in OluZemba. My small team also investigated the most endangered cultural practice and at a later stage produced a theatrical production. This practice should continue to help revitalise the language. The study team proposes formal support from NGOs and churches to upgrade OvaZemba and cultural practices. Children should learn the language at school and can be trained to read and write in OluZemba. The team visited a school where 9 learners spoke OtjiHerero, 196 OluZemba, 28 Oshikwanyama, 95 other dialects of Oshiwambo and 1 Damara. In this primary school, this study proposes OluZemba as the medium of instruction from Grade 0 upto 3.

References

- Ethnologue. (2025). Namibia Languages, Literacy, Maps, Endangered
<https://www.ethnologue.com/language/dhm/>
- Hailombe, Onesmus (2011). Education equity and quality in Namibia : A case study of mobile schools in the Kunene region. Chapter 5. The Himba and Zemba People (PDF). Pretoria, Gauteng, South Africa: Thesis, University of Pretoria. pp. 118–134.
- Giles, H., Bourhis, R.Y. & Taylor, D.M. 1977. Towards a Theory of Language in Ethnic Group Relations, in Giles, H. (ed.). Language, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations. London: Academic Press. 307 – 348.
- Namibia 2023 Population and Housing Census Main Report
<https://census.nsanamibia.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2023-Population-and-Housing-Census-Main-Report-28-Oct-2024.pdf>.
- Onesmus. (2021). The Himba and Zemba People.
<https://repository.up.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/04b15e00-6732-4918-b174-d13d659dba34/content>
- Seberová, A. and Malčík, M (2014). Information system “diagnostic” as a tool of action research. ICTE journal. 3(1), 57--65.
<https://periodicals.osu.eu/ictjournal/dokumenty/2014-01/ictjournal-2014-1-article5.pdf>.
- Stroud, C. (2001). Mother-tongue programmes and the politics of language: Linguistic citizenship versus linguistic human rights. *Journal of multilingual and multicultural development*, 22 (4), 339-355.
- UNESCO. (2003). Language vitality and endangerment.
<https://kinasevych.ca/2018/12/29/unesco-2003-language-vitality-and-endangerment/>
- UNESCO. (2005). The 2005 convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.
<https://en.unesco.org/creativity/sites/creativity/files/passeport-convention2005-web2.pdf>



©2025 by the Authors. This Article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)