

**METHODOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY IN COMMUNITY-DRIVEN LANGUAGE RESEARCH:
A DECOLONIAL MIXED-METHODS APPROACH TO THE REVITALISATION OF TONGA
LANGUAGE IN ZIMBABWE**

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Abstract

This paper advances a framework of methodological sovereignty in community-driven language research through a decolonial mixed-methods study on Tonga language revitalisation in Zimbabwe. Despite constitutional recognition of Tonga among the country’s sixteen official languages, its marginalisation persists in education, governance, and public life. The study employed questionnaires and focus-group discussions (FGDs) across four Tonga-speaking districts to assess patterns of language use, intergenerational transmission, and grassroots activism. Quantitative findings ($n = 100$) show strong home use of Tonga (79 %) but weak institutional presence (41 %). Qualitative FGDs ($n \approx 6$) established intergenerational pride alongside youth ambivalence and structural neglect. Guided by the Indigenous philosophies of Ubuntu and Sankofa, the research treated data collection as relational, ethical engagement rather than extraction. *Ubuntu* emphasises collective dialogue and mutual care in questionnaires and FGDs, while *Sankofa* grounds interpretation in historical return and cultural restoration. Together, these approaches illustrate that decolonial research requires both methodological and epistemic transformation. By embedding Indigenous worldviews in empirical practice, the study contributes to linguistic justice and reclaims agency in how Indigenous languages are studied and sustained.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Tonga, language revitalisation, epistemic transformation

1. Introduction

Language revitalisation research in Africa increasingly demands methodological frameworks that reflect Indigenous epistemologies, ethics, and political realities. This paper explores how community-based research on the revitalisation of the Tonga language in Zimbabwe could embody decolonial principles through Indigenous methodologies. The study advances the concept of methodological sovereignty, defined here as the collective right and capacity of Indigenous communities to design, conduct, and interpret research using frameworks that reflect their epistemologies, values, and social realities. It moves beyond methodological decolonisation by asserting that knowledge production itself must be governed by the communities it represents. In the context of Tonga revitalisation, methodological sovereignty entails aligning research tools, ethics, and analysis with the principles of Ubuntu and Sankofa, ensuring that data collection and interpretation serve communal renewal rather than academic extraction.

This framework allows for a reimagining of research not as an act of observation but as a form of social participation, where the process itself contributes to revitalisation. It situates the Tonga case within broader debates on epistemic justice, demonstrating that Indigenous research designs can yield both empirical depth and ethical accountability.

Research on Indigenous and minoritised languages often reflects power-laden knowledge systems that privilege Eurocentric methodologies while relegating Indigenous epistemologies to the margins (Smith, 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2007). Even within postcolonial African states, the persistence of these epistemic

hierarchies means that constitutional recognition of Indigenous languages rarely translates into genuine sociolinguistic equity (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). In Zimbabwe, the 2013 Constitution formally recognises sixteen official languages, including Tonga. Yet despite this legal recognition, the language remains marginalised in schools, governance, and the media. This paradox of official recognition without practical revitalisation reveals the limitations of policy approaches that overlook community agency and Indigenous epistemologies.

This study responds to that gap by presenting an empirical, community-based investigation of Tonga language revitalisation across the four principal Tonga-speaking districts of Binga, Hwange, Nyaminyami (Kariba), and Gokwe North. The research used questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore how Tonga speakers use and transmit their language across generations, the role of grassroots activism in sustaining linguistic vitality, and the ways in which Indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa* can inform ethical, participatory research practice.

Methodologically, the study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) grounded in Indigenous and decolonial paradigms. This approach integrates statistical breadth with narrative depth, combining quantitative questionnaires that measure patterns of language use and attitude with qualitative focus group discussions that capture lived experiences and collective reflections. Conceptually, the study treats Tonga not merely as a linguistic code but as a living ontology *maponeno achibantu* that embodies ecological, spiritual, and ancestral relationships.

The Indigenous philosophies of *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa* underpin this orientation. *Ubuntu* stresses relational ethics, reciprocity, and communal accountability, while *Sankofa* emphasises the need to recover and reinterpret ancestral wisdom to guide contemporary and future renewal. Grounding the research in these philosophies enables the study to resist extractivist and Eurocentric designs and to advance what is referred to here as methodological sovereignty. This concept highlights the need for Indigenous peoples and communities to control not only what is researched but how it is researched and for whose benefit.

This paper, therefore, contributes to the field of language revitalisation in two main ways. First, it demonstrates how embedding *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa* in empirical methods transforms research practice into an act of epistemic justice and community engagement. Second, it presents original quantitative and qualitative data derived from questionnaires and FGDs that reveal both the persistence and precarity of the Tonga language. The findings show that while Tonga remains resilient within the home and community domains, its institutional and educational presence remains limited. By situating these results within a decolonial framework, the study illustrates how community-driven activism continues to play a central role in sustaining the language amid systemic marginalisation.

2. Indigenous methodologies and consent

Indigenous methodologies challenge the universalising tendencies of Western positivist and interpretivist traditions by affirming pluriversality, the coexistence of multiple epistemic worlds rather than the dominance of a single paradigm (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). Knowledge is situated within specific histories, ecologies, and moral orders, and its legitimacy depends on how it contributes to communal well-being. This approach rejects both assimilation and isolation, valuing analytical tools from diverse traditions while grounding them in Indigenous moral and ontological frameworks.

Within this paradigm, research is an ethical relationship, not a neutral procedure. Chilisa (2012) and Wilson (2008) describe Indigenous inquiry as a ceremony of relationship that demands respect for community protocols and recognises knowledge as living and relational. Validity is achieved through reciprocity, accountability, and mutual benefit rather than external objectivity.

Guided by these principles, the study integrated Indigenous and Western methodologies in a complementary manner. Quantitative instruments, such as structured questionnaires, were combined with qualitative

approaches including talking circles, storytelling, and collective reflection. This convergence enacted methodological sovereignty by balancing analytical rigour with ethical responsibility.

Two Indigenous philosophies anchored this design. Ubuntu, expressed in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (“a person is a person through other persons”), emphasises interdependence, humility, and shared responsibility (Mbiti, 1990; Ramose, 2003). Sankofa, from the Akan tradition, means “return and fetch it,” symbolising the retrieval of ancestral wisdom to guide present and future practice (Wane, 2008). In this study, Ubuntu shaped interpersonal ethics and collaborative engagement, while Sankofa informed historical consciousness and restorative reflection.

i. Community protocol and legal framework

Fieldwork followed community protocols derived from Tonga customary law and recognised under the Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17) of Zimbabwe, which grants chiefs and headmen custodial authority over communal lands and cultural practices. Access to participants was negotiated through these traditional structures. Chiefs and headmen in each district reviewed and authorised the study after consulting their councils, ensuring that community consent preceded individual participation. This process satisfied both Indigenous ethical expectations and Zimbabwe’s statutory framework for community research.

ii. Sampling strategy and participant selection

Participants were chosen through purposive and criterion-based sampling to ensure depth, diversity, and cultural representation rather than numerical generalisation. Traditional leaders, teachers, activists, church figures, and youth representatives assisted in identifying potential participants who were knowledgeable about language practices and revitalisation activities. Eligibility required individuals to (a) be 18 years or older, (b) identify as Tonga or have long-term residence in Tonga-speaking communities, and (c) possess relevant experience in teaching, activism, leadership, or cultural work. These criteria ensured that participants contributed from lived and relational knowledge.

All participants were adults, in line with the Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) and the Age of Majority Act (Chapter 8:07), which recognises persons aged 18 and above as having full legal capacity to consent. This excluded minors, consistent with Section 81 of the Constitution defining a child as any person below 18.

Generational diversity was central to the research. Following the National Youth Policy (2013), youth are defined as persons aged 15–35 years, but only those 18 and older participated. In Tonga society, youth are valued as emerging custodians of cultural renewal bridging ancestral heritage and modern livelihoods through education, technology, and activism. An elder, meanwhile, is understood not primarily by age but by social and epistemic authority. Battiste (2002) defines elders as “the keepers and teachers of Indigenous knowledge who embody the principles, experiences, and moral codes of their communities.” Similarly, Kovach (2009) and Wilson (2008) describe elders as relational knowledge holders whose wisdom derives from community recognition and lived experience. Within Tonga epistemology, elders sustain oral traditions, moral order, and linguistic memory. In this study, they generally included individuals aged 50 and above who were locally recognised as cultural custodians and interpreters of memory.

iii. Consent procedures and relational ethics

Due to historical exploitation of Indigenous communities by political and academic actors, written consent alone was deemed insufficient and culturally alienating. Instead, oral consent was obtained collectively at the beginning of each session in the presence of all participants, witnessed by traditional leaders. These leaders, exercising authority under the Traditional Leaders Act, signed formal documents confirming community approval. This process reflected Tonga relational ethics, where permission arises through dialogue and shared responsibility rather than individual contracts.

Ubuntu guided the atmosphere of respect and reciprocity that characterized all interactions. Sessions opened with greetings or prayer to acknowledge communal unity. Questionnaires and focus-group discussions were conducted in Tonga or in mixed codes familiar to participants, and community venues such as schools, churches, and meeting grounds were selected for accessibility and cultural resonance. Sankofa inspired reflection on intergenerational continuity: questionnaire items traced transmission patterns, while focus-group discussions revisited storytelling, initiation, and communal education. Many participants referred to the process as *tujokezye kutunsiya nsiya twachiindi* “we go back to the roots” underscoring the restorative purpose of remembering.

The integration of Ubuntu, Sankofa, and statutory community governance created a relational-temporal ethics that framed research as co-creation rather than extraction. This pluriversal framework allowed Indigenous and Western epistemologies to coexist in mutual respect, aligning with current movements for epistemic justice that seek to decolonize knowledge production through community authority, relational accountability, and historical consciousness (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021; Olko, 2024).

In the context of Tonga language revitalisation, this ethical and methodological framework demonstrates that legitimate research must emerge from dialogue among multiple knowledge systems, legally recognised community governance structures, and ancestral philosophies that continue to sustain Indigenous life.

iv. Integrative ethical practice

Across both instruments, the study operationalised a relational ethics grounded in *Ubuntu*. Questionnaires and FGDs were designed and conducted collaboratively with local stakeholders to ensure reciprocity, inclusiveness, and transparency. Oral consent procedures were followed throughout, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymising participants in transcripts and reports.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods reinforced the study’s commitment to methodological sovereignty, where community partnership and empirical rigor coexist. Questionnaires captured measurable trends in language vitality, while FGDs provided narrative depth and cultural insight. Together they produced a holistic portrait of Tonga language revitalisation one that honours Indigenous epistemologies while meeting academic standards of validity and reliability.

3.0 Data collection procedures

Data collection followed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design grounded in Indigenous and decolonial ethics. The process was carried out between March and April 2025 across the four Tonga-speaking districts of Binga, Hwange, Gokwe North, and Nyaminyami (Kariba). The two instruments structured questionnaires and focus-group discussions (FGDs) were designed to complement one another by combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth. Both tools were developed through community consultation to ensure cultural relevance, linguistic accessibility, and epistemic respect.

Fieldwork adhered to community entry protocols recognised under the Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17) of Zimbabwe. Research assistants introduced the project to traditional leaders, who convened meetings with community representatives to confirm participation. Chiefs and headmen granted permission after these deliberations, marking the beginning of data collection in each district. This preliminary engagement not only fulfilled ethical obligations but also reflected *Ubuntu*’s relational accountability, ensuring that research participation emerged from collective understanding and consent.

4.0 The tools

4.1 Questionnaires

The questionnaire constituted the first stage of data collection. It was designed to elicit measurable information on language use, intergenerational transmission, policy awareness, and attitudes toward revitalisation and activism. The instrument was administered in both Tonga and English to accommodate linguistic diversity and literacy levels. A total of one hundred participants completed the questionnaire forty through printed copies and sixty through community mediators or online links.

Local research assistants, trained in ethical conduct and translation accuracy, facilitated the process, particularly in rural areas with limited digital access. Questionnaires were not treated as impersonal tools but as conversational encounters. Respondents were encouraged to discuss questions, clarify meanings, and elaborate on experiences in their preferred language. Notes on these spontaneous reflections were recorded as supplementary qualitative observations, enriching the interpretive context of quantitative findings.

Quantitative data focused on five domains central to language revitalisation: language use and vitality, intergenerational transmission, language attitudes, policy awareness, and grassroots activism. Descriptive statistics indicated that Tonga remains robust in domestic and community life but marginal in formal institutions. Approximately 79% of respondents reported daily use of Tonga at home, while only 41% used it regularly in formal spaces such as schools, workplaces, or government offices. About 68% of parents stated that they communicated with their children primarily in Tonga, though many noted increasing bilingualism with Shona or English. Support for official recognition of Tonga was strong (83%), yet only 36% perceived tangible policy outcomes. Nearly half of respondents reported involvement in grassroots initiatives such as church translation projects, radio programmes, or local cultural festivals. These findings illustrate how community-based activism sustains language vitality where state policy remains limited.

4.2 Focus-group discussions (FGDs)

The second stage of data collection consisted of thirty focus-group discussions conducted across the four districts. Each group comprised between six and twelve participants drawn from elders, youth, teachers, traditional leaders, NGO officers, activists, and faith leaders. The FGDs were designed to deepen understanding of the patterns revealed in the quantitative data and to foreground collective interpretations of linguistic experience.

Discussions were conducted in Tonga and recorded with collective oral consent in the presence of traditional authorities. They were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Sessions took place in accessible community venues schools, churches, and cultural centres to promote comfort and inclusivity. The conversational rhythm of FGDs was shaped by *Ubuntu*, which encouraged equal participation, attentive listening, and respect for all voices regardless of age or social position.

Participants explored topics such as intergenerational language transmission, policy disillusionment, linguistic hierarchies, and the moral responsibilities of activism. Elders described the erosion of oral traditions following displacement from the Zambezi Valley, while youth reflected on navigating the tension between identity and social mobility. Teachers and NGO officers highlighted policy gaps, and women's church groups emphasised their role in nurturing Tonga literacy and song translation. These narratives illuminated the socio-cultural meanings of revitalisation, framing language as a site of belonging, spirituality, and resistance.

Throughout fieldwork, *Sankofa* infused the research process with a reflective and restorative dimension. Participants frequently evoked ancestral values, collective memory, and the idea of "returning to the roots" as moral imperatives for revitalisation. FGDs thus became spaces of remembrance and renewal rather than data extraction. As one participant from Binga noted, "When we speak Tonga, we remember who we are and where we came from." Such expressions exemplified the principle that revitalisation is not only a linguistic project but also a cultural and spiritual journey.

5.0 Data analysis procedures

The analysis process combined Indigenous interpretive traditions with established analytical frameworks in both qualitative and quantitative research, reflecting the pluriversal methodological stance of this study. Data from questionnaires and focus-group discussions (FGDs) were first analysed separately and then brought together through convergence to provide an integrated understanding of patterns, meanings, and community interpretations. This approach allowed Indigenous reasoning, community validation, and statistical precision to coexist within a single analytical framework.

5.1 Quantitative analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods to summarize frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-district comparisons. The analysis focused on identifying trends in language use, intergenerational transmission, attitudes toward officialisation, and involvement in grassroots activism. The data were manually verified and processed using Microsoft Excel to maintain transparency and traceability.

The findings confirmed both resilience and vulnerability in Tonga language practices. Daily use of Tonga was reported by nearly four-fifths of respondents, while less than half reported its use in formal domains such as education or administration. Cross-tabulations by age and gender showed that women reported slightly higher rates of Tonga use at home, and youth displayed greater linguistic flexibility, alternating between Tonga, Shona, and English depending on social context. Participants with formal education demonstrated stronger support for constitutional recognition but expressed frustration with the slow pace of policy implementation.

Although descriptive statistics offered clarity, interpretation did not rely solely on numerical outcomes. Instead, results were discussed with community research assistants, teachers, and elders during validation meetings, where participants provided cultural explanations for observed patterns. This process upheld *Ubuntu*-based relational validity, ensuring that interpretations reflected collective reasoning rather than detached analysis. Statistics were thus treated as social reflections of lived experience rather than abstract variables.

5.2 Qualitative analysis

The second stage of data collection consisted of thirty focus-group discussions conducted across the four districts. Each group is comprised of between 4 and 6 participants drawn from elders, youth, teachers, traditional leaders, NGO officers, activists, and faith leaders. For analytical depth and representational balance, four of these groups each representing a key stakeholder category (elders, youth, teachers, activists, women's church groups, and NGO or policy representatives) were selected for detailed thematic analysis. The remaining sessions provided contextual background and confirmatory data, ensuring triangulation and cross-verification across all districts. The FGDs were designed to deepen understanding of the patterns established in the quantitative data and to foreground collective interpretations of linguistic experience.

Discussions were conducted in Tonga and recorded with collective oral consent in the presence of traditional authorities. They were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Sessions took place in accessible community venues schools, churches, and cultural centres to promote comfort and inclusivity. The conversational rhythm of FGDs was shaped by *Ubuntu*, which encouraged equal participation, attentive listening, and respect for all voices regardless of age or social position.

Qualitative data from the six focus groups were analysed thematically following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), adapted to Indigenous ethical and interpretive principles. Transcripts were read repeatedly in both Tonga and English to maintain semantic accuracy. Initial open coding was conducted manually to capture key expressions, metaphors, and shared experiences. These codes were then grouped

into categories that evolved into broader themes through iterative reflection and discussion with community co-researchers.

Five overarching themes emerged across the six focus groups: intergenerational continuity and rupture; institutional silence and policy disillusionment; youth ambivalence and linguistic aspiration; grassroots activism and collective resistance; and faith, gender, and language care work. These themes encapsulated how participants linked language vitality to moral identity, historical memory, and social justice. The analysis was therefore both interpretive and restorative, recovering silenced narratives through collective dialogue.

The analytic process was also deeply reflexive. As both a researcher and member of the Tonga community, I maintained continuous reflexive journaling to record evolving interpretations, emotional responses, and ethical reflections. This practice recognised that meaning-making in Indigenous research is reciprocal: the community interprets the researcher as much as the researcher interprets the data. Reflexivity thus became a form of accountability, ensuring that findings honoured participants' intentions and cultural integrity.

5.3 Integrative and relational interpretation

After separate analyses, quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through a process of triangulation and community validation. Patterns revealed in the survey such as the gap between home use and institutional representation were explored in focus groups to uncover their cultural and historical dimensions. Conversely, themes that emerged from FGDs, such as institutional neglect and the moral weight of activism, were supported by survey trends showing limited state implementation and strong community engagement.

Integration occurred not only at the level of data but also through the ethical principles of *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa*. *Ubuntu* framed analysis as a collective interpretive act that values consensus and mutual respect, while *Sankofa* connected interpretation to ancestral continuity and remembrance. Validation sessions were held in each district where preliminary findings were presented to participants for feedback and correction. Adjustments were made to reflect community interpretations accurately, embodying a circular model of knowledge production rather than a linear one.

6.0 Limitations and epistemic considerations

The study also recognised the limitations of applying Western models of vitality assessment to African linguistic contexts. Global frameworks such as UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment scale often prioritise literacy, standardisation, and institutional presence while overlooking Indigenous indicators such as ritual performance, oral transmission, and community belonging. These metrics can misclassify African languages as endangered when, in reality, they remain vibrant within culturally significant domains what participants referred to as "*safe spaces*" such as homesteads, markets, churches, and ceremonies.

This research therefore employed a plural lens, treating vitality as a socially embedded process rather than a purely linguistic measurement. By integrating community-defined indicators frequency of storytelling, intergenerational teaching, and language use in ritual the analysis provided a more accurate representation of Tonga vitality that aligns with Indigenous epistemological priorities.

7.0 Reflexivity and validation

Analytical reflexivity and community validation were embedded throughout the process. Field notes, post-session reflections, and feedback from local assistants documented shifts in interpretation and perspective. Findings were shared in dissemination meetings across the four districts, allowing participants and traditional leaders to confirm, refine, or challenge emerging insights. These discussions strengthened the reliability and cultural authenticity of the results while transforming research into a dialogical act of co-interpretation.

This integrative analysis exemplified *methodological sovereignty* the capacity to combine Western analytic precision with Indigenous relational ethics. Quantitative clarity provided structural insight, while Indigenous interpretive practices restored meaning and moral depth. Together, these approaches revealed Tonga revitalisation as both an empirical and spiritual process rooted in the collective memory and agency of the community.

8.0 Findings

The data obtained from questionnaires and focus-group discussions (FGDs) provide an empirically grounded view of the contemporary vitality of the Tonga language across the four study districts Binga, Hwange, Gokwe North, and Nyaminyami (Kariba). The evidence illustrates both endurance and erosion: Tonga remains the language of the home and community, yet its institutional and educational presence remains limited. The results are presented in two parts: quantitative findings from the questionnaire survey and qualitative insights derived from the FGDs.

8.1 Quantitative findings

A total of 100 respondents completed the questionnaire. Respondents were almost evenly split by gender (52 % female, 48 % male) and represented a broad age range from 18 to 75 years. Table 1 presents the age and district distribution of respondents.

Table 1. Demographic distribution of questionnaire respondents (N = 100)

District	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
Binga	14	18	32	32
Hwange	10	12	22	22
Gokwe North	12	12	24	24
Nyaminyami	12	10	22	22
Total	48	52	100	100

The majority of respondents (79 %) reported using Tonga as the primary language at home. Regular use drops sharply in public and institutional settings (Table 2), reflecting the gap between private vitality and public marginalisation.

Table 2. Reported domains of Tonga language use

Domain of Use	Regular Use (%)	Occasional Use (%)	Rare/Never (%)
Home/Family	79	17	4
School/Work	41	36	23
Church	62	27	11
Local Markets/Community Meetings	58	30	12

Intergenerational transmission remains strong in households but weakens in peer domains. Table 3 summarises parental and youth responses concerning home-language use.

Table 3. Intergenerational use of Tonga in households

Age Group	Always use Tonga (%)	Mix Tonga + Other (%)	Rarely use Tonga (%)
Parents (30–59 yrs)	68	24	8
Youth (18–29 yrs)	43	49	8
Elders (60 + yrs)	72	21	7

Attitudes toward language policy and activism reveal high symbolic support but limited satisfaction with implementation. Table 4 summarizes these attitudes.

Table 4. Language attitudes and policy awareness

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
“Tonga is essential to our identity.”	91	6	3
“I am satisfied with government efforts to promote Tonga.”	36	22	42
“I participate or have participated in language-revitalisation activities.”	47	19	34
“The constitutional recognition of Tonga has improved its status.”	39	28	33

The quantitative data therefore depict a pattern of partial vitality. Tonga remains central to domestic and community life but has not achieved full functional parity with dominant languages in education and administration. The results also suggest that revitalisation efforts are community-driven rather than policy-driven, with women and local activists playing the most consistent roles.

8.2 Qualitative findings from focus-group discussions

Six focus groups were purposively selected from the broader dataset to illustrate the diversity of experiences and interpretations across stakeholder categories and districts. Each group comprised between 4 and 6 respondents and reflected a balance of gender and age. The discussions revealed the affective, ethical, and political meanings attached to the Tonga language and its revitalisation. Analysis identified five interconnected themes that cut across all six groups.

8.3 Intergenerational continuity and rupture

The elders’ group in Binga described a visible weakening of intergenerational transmission since the 1950s displacement from the Zambezi Valley. One elderly man explained, *“Before they moved us from the river, our language was our home. Around the fire, the children learnt through stories and songs. Today they learn English from the radio.”* Similar nostalgia surfaced in Nyaminyami, where elders said that migration and schooling in dominant languages had “broken the teaching chain.” Youth in the Hwange group confirmed that they often alternate languages, especially in formal spaces. A young woman reflected, *“At school I speak English because teachers expect it, but when I come home my grandmother scolds me if I forget Tonga.”* These accounts reveal a fragile continuity: Tonga endures emotionally and morally but is losing everyday communicative dominance among the younger generation.

a. Institutional silence and policy disillusionment

Teachers and NGO officers in the Gokwe North group highlighted a persistent gap between symbolic recognition and implementation. They argued that language policy remains “paper without practice.” One teacher commented, *“The syllabus includes Tonga only in name. We have no books, no exams, and no training.”* An NGO representative added that schools often treat Tonga lessons as optional. Respondents linked this neglect to broader hierarchies that privilege English and Shona in education, civil service, and

media. The group's collective sentiment was that constitutional recognition in 2013 raised expectations that have yet to materialise, leaving communities dependent on local initiative rather than state structures.

b. Youth ambivalence and linguistic aspiration

The youth group in Hwange demonstrated a mixture of pride and pragmatism. Respondents valued Tonga as a marker of belonging but also associated English with mobility and opportunity. A twenty-two-year-old university student summarised this ambivalence: *"I love speaking Tonga at home, but English opens doors."* Peers agreed that they code-switch strategically depending on the audience, sometimes introducing Tonga phrases into English sentences as identity signals. While some saw bilingualism as empowerment, others feared that everyday mixing dilutes linguistic purity. Their reflections captured the tension between cultural affirmation and economic aspiration in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

C. Grassroots activism and collective resistance

Activists and traditional leaders in Binga and Nyaminyami viewed revitalisation as inseparable from struggles for recognition, dignity, and land. One senior activist declared, *"When Tonga disappears, the people disappear."* Respondents described ongoing initiatives under organisations such as the Tonga Language and Cultural Committee (TOLACCO), the Zimbabwe Indigenous Languages Promotion Association (ZILPA), and Basilwizi Trust. These groups organize cultural festivals, radio programmes, and translation projects that promote local pride and inter-district solidarity. Traditional leaders recounted using community meetings to encourage parents to name children in Tonga and to speak the language in public offices, calling such acts *"fighting with words, not weapons."* The discussion revealed activism as both a cultural revival and a political strategy for asserting visibility within a state dominated by majority-language ideologies.

d. Faith, gender, and language care work

The women's church-group discussion in Gokwe North illuminated the gendered dimensions of revitalisation. Respondents described their role as informal teachers who preserve Tonga through hymn translation, Sunday-school storytelling, and prayer meetings. One woman explained, *"In church, women teach the children Tonga songs this is how the language lives."* Others compared their role to that of their grandmothers who once taught folktales by moonlight. For them, faith provided both structure and legitimacy for cultural work. These activities demonstrate how women's unpaid and often unacknowledged labour sustains the linguistic and moral fabric of Tonga communities.

e. Cross-group synthesis

Across the six groups, revitalisation emerged as a moral, cultural, and political process rooted in the ethics of *Ubuntu* and the restorative philosophy of *Sankofa*. Respondents framed language recovery as an obligation rather than a technical project, emphasising collective responsibility and the interdependence of past and present. The ethic of *Ubuntu* shaped how discussions unfolded respondents listened, corrected, and affirmed each other while *Sankofa* infused the discourse with remembrance, the conviction that reclaiming ancestral speech heals historical displacement.

The qualitative findings therefore depict a multilayered reality. Tonga continues to thrive in domestic, religious, and activist spaces yet remains marginal in formal institutions. Communities respond to state inertia with creativity and moral conviction, turning revitalisation into an Indigenous project of self-determination and epistemic renewal. The six focus groups collectively affirm that the strength of Tonga lies not only in linguistic usage but in the relational and ethical values that sustain it.

9.0 Conclusion

The study demonstrates that methodological sovereignty anchored in Indigenous philosophies of *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa* is both a theoretical stance and a lived practice in community-driven research. Integrating questionnaires and focus-group discussions (FGDs) produced an empirically grounded understanding of Tonga language revitalisation in Zimbabwe, revealing endurance and vulnerability within contexts of structural marginalization.

Quantitative findings confirmed that Tonga remains the dominant language of domestic and communal life, used regularly by nearly four-fifths of respondents in their households. Institutional presence, however, is limited, with fewer than half of participants reporting regular use in schools, government offices, or workplaces. Intergenerational transmission continues mainly within families and churches, yet younger speakers alternate Tonga with English and Shona in public domains. Qualitative evidence enriched these statistical patterns, exposing the emotional and social pressures shaping multilingual life in Tonga-speaking districts.

Across Binga, Hwange, Gokwe North, and Nyaminyami (Kariba), participants portrayed revitalisation as a moral and political process grounded in communal ethics. Elders and activists viewed the recovery of Tonga as remembrance and restoration, resonating with the temporal philosophy of *Sankofa*, which urges communities to draw guidance from ancestral knowledge. Youth and teachers highlighted systemic barriers within education that maintain linguistic hierarchies, while women's church groups and local NGOs emerged as central actors in sustaining literacy, song, and oral heritage. These community structures uphold the vitality of Tonga through persistence and care rather than through state policy.

A central insight of this study concerns the limitations of Western frameworks used to measure language vitality. Global indices such as UNESCO's vitality scale or Fishman's GIDS frequently equate strength with institutionalisation, literacy rates, and digital presence. Such metrics often label African languages as "endangered," overlooking domains of vitality that exist beyond formal institutions. In the Tonga context, vitality is maintained through *safe spaces* homes, markets, churches, initiation rituals, and storytelling gatherings where the language is spoken, sung, and remembered. These living contexts remain invisible to conventional assessment tools yet constitute the foundation of linguistic resilience.

Western vitality models, when applied without adaptation, risk perpetuating deficit narratives that depict Indigenous languages as failing. Evidence from this research demonstrates that vitality in African settings must be conceptualised pluriversally rather than universally. Community-defined indicators such as intergenerational use, ritual performance, and moral transmission offer more accurate measures of linguistic well-being. Within Tonga epistemologies, vitality is not counted through printed materials or official documentation but through the continuity of idioms, songs, and kinship speech that sustain social cohesion and memory.

The ethic of *Ubuntu* shaped the research as both method and moral stance. Each stage of the process reflected respect, reciprocity, and shared validation among researcher and participants. *Sankofa* added a temporal dimension that connected contemporary revitalisation to ancestral memory, transforming inquiry into an act of healing and reclamation. Through these interwoven philosophies, research became a collaborative ceremony rather than an extractive exercise.

Two broad conclusions arise from these findings. First, the revitalisation of Tonga, and of other Indigenous languages in Zimbabwe, is sustained primarily through community agency and ethical responsibility rather than through policy intervention. Second, decolonial research requires a shift from universalist measurement toward *pluriversality*, where multiple epistemic traditions coexist and inform one another. Analytical rigour and Indigenous accountability can therefore converge within a framework that values relational, historical, and spiritual dimensions of language use.

Tonga revitalisation represents more than the preservation of a language; it embodies a wider pursuit of epistemic justice and cultural sovereignty. The study affirms that *Ubuntu* and *Sankofa* are not peripheral philosophies but central foundations for re-imagining research and assessment in Africa. Linguistic vitality, when viewed through this pluriversal lens, is revealed not as a fragile relic but as a living continuum sustained through community relationships, sacred memory, and collective hope.

10. Recommendations

The findings point to the need for language policy frameworks in Zimbabwe and Africa that recognize *pluriversality* in defining and measuring linguistic vitality. Current national and global assessment models rely heavily on Western indicators literacy, official usage, and technological visibility while overlooking Indigenous criteria such as ritual presence, oral transmission, and intergenerational solidarity. Policymakers should therefore adopt multidimensional evaluation systems that value *safe spaces* where languages live through storytelling, faith practices, and communal exchange.

Future research should prioritise collaborative methodologies that integrate community voices into vitality assessment and revitalisation planning. This includes the development of participatory language-mapping tools and qualitative vitality indices co-designed with elders, teachers, youth, and traditional leaders. Comparative studies across African and Indigenous contexts could further refine pluriversal metrics that reflect both structural and spiritual dimensions of language survival. Grounding policy and scholarship in such approaches would move linguistic research beyond diagnosis toward empowerment affirming that Indigenous languages are not endangered relics but evolving expressions of cultural sovereignty.

11. Summary

This paper examined the revitalisation of the Tonga language in Zimbabwe through the lens of methodological sovereignty, a framework asserting the right of Indigenous communities to define how research about them is conducted and interpreted. Using a decolonial mixed-methods approach, the study integrated quantitative surveys ($n = 100$) and qualitative focus-group discussions ($n \approx 6$) conducted across the four Tonga-speaking districts of Binga, Hwange, Nyaminyami (Kariba), and Gokwe North. The findings revealed a complex picture of linguistic resilience and structural marginalisation. While 79 percent of respondents reported daily use of Tonga at home, only 41 percent used it regularly in formal domains such as education and administration, demonstrating a strong private vitality but weak institutional presence.

Qualitative evidence enriched these patterns by revealing intergenerational continuity, youth ambivalence, gendered language care, and the pivotal role of grassroots activism. Elders and activists framed revitalisation as a moral and spiritual duty rooted in Ubuntu (relational ethics) and Sankofa (ancestral return), while youth and teachers highlighted the tension between cultural pride and economic aspiration. Women's church groups emerged as central actors in sustaining Tonga through hymn translation, storytelling, and moral education. Across these narratives, language revitalisation appeared not as a technical policy task but as an ethical project of epistemic justice, linking linguistic survival to collective dignity and identity.

Methodologically, the study demonstrated that embedding Indigenous philosophies within empirical research transforms data collection from extraction to collaboration. Oral consent, community validation, and iterative interpretation anchored the research in Tonga customary protocols and the Traditional Leaders Act (Chapter 29:17), ensuring both statutory and cultural legitimacy. The mixed-methods convergence upheld analytical rigour while maintaining relational accountability, illustrating how Ubuntu and Sankofa can coexist with established analytical frameworks.

The study concluded that revitalisation of Indigenous languages in Zimbabwe depends primarily on community agency rather than state policy. It called for pluriversal frameworks of vitality assessment that recognize oral transmission, ritual use, and intergenerational solidarity alongside institutional measures. Ultimately, Tonga revitalisation exemplifies a broader movement toward decolonising research and

reclaiming epistemic sovereignty, showing that Indigenous languages persist not as relics of the past but as dynamic, living expressions of cultural continuity and hope.

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