LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The a-Chewa, a-Nyanja and a-Mang’anja have rich traditions of folktales, historical narratives, music-making, dancing, and craft making. As agriculturalists, the a-Chewa, a-Nyanja, and a-Mang’anja live in villages that consist of several huts led by a village headman, nyakwawa.

The people engage in a variety of activities when they are not working in the fields. Women tell folktales in the evenings. Sometimes children play games in the early part of the evening, before they go to sleep. Other times young people, boys and girls, organize traditional dances, which are usually done in circles. The main instruments are drums and a variety of percussive instruments, including rattles and maseche.

Upon arriving in the Malawi region, the Kalonga and his followers developed an elaborate system of worship to ensure that their agricultural efforts were successful. It was a system of belief that placed Chauta, the supreme being, who was symbolized by the rainbow, as the creator, and ancestors as spirits who interceded on behalf of people. Central to this system of worship was Makewana, “the mother of children,” the great mother figure who oversaw the welfare of the people. Associated with her was the python, a symbol of fertility.

Associated with the cults of worship is the nyau or masquerade. Also known as Gule Wamkulu, literally “the big dance” or “the dance of the elder,” nyau is a secret society that is central to the education of male youth and in ritual ceremonies. On ceremonial occasions such as the graduation of initiates, funerals of important people and weddings, a variety of masked figures representing man, spirit, and animal enact moments of creation to bring harmony to the world. The dancing is intense and energetic, patterned by a variety of drums along with calls and responses between the masked figures and parts of the audiences consisting of initiated men and women. Nyau emerged as a powerful rallying anticolonial institution as the British worked to spread Christianity at the expense of traditional systems of worship during the colonial period. A number of masks that were fashioned during that period satirized popular biblical and colonial figures such as Joseph, Maria, and district officers. Today, a substantial percentage of a-Chewa, a-Nyanja and a-Mang’anja are Christian, but Gule Wamkulu remains an important part of the lives of their communities.

STUDYING CHICHEWA/CINYANJA IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of universities in the United States that currently offer Chichewa. For further information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu.

Michigan State University
Stanford University
University of California, Berkeley

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WHO SPEAKS CHICHEWAA?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Chichewa/Chinyanja is a language of the Bantu family, and is thus one of the significant languages of Bantu speaking peoples of southern Africa. More than 65% of Malawi’s population of 11 million have active command of Chichewa, and perhaps as many as 80% have some knowledge of the language. In Mozambique, out of a population of 18 million, approximately 5.3%, mostly in the Tete Province in the lower Zambezi Valley and Niassa Province in the northeast of the country, speak Chinyanja. In Zambia, with a population of 10 million, approximately 16% are native speakers, and they live mostly in the Eastern Province, near the border with Malawi. However, Chinyanja is widely spoken beyond the Eastern Province, and it is estimated that as many as 42% of Zambians have basic communication skills in the language.

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

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

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