

# **Urban Diasporas and intergenerational transmission of vernaculars in east-Africa.**

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## **1. Statement of the problem**

It is a decade since the United Nations' Department of Economics and Social affairs raised the alarm regarding the ever increasing rate of urbanization in the world. In particular, Africa and Asia are undergoing the highest and fastest rate of urbanization compared to other regions. According to the UN estimates, by 2030 Asia and Africa are each expected to have much bigger urban population than any other region and Asia alone is expected to account for more than half of the world urban population (UN 2003: 5). The annual increase of urban population in the Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 5% and if the trend continues by 2030 more than half of Africans (54%) will live urban settings (UN 2003).

The net rural–urban migration, natural population increase, and the reclassification of some rural important settlements into urban ones are the most salient factors fueling urbanization (UN (2004:55). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo for example, in 2012 the national government published a decree (n°001/MININTERSECDAT/2012 du 23 février 2012) reclassifying 70 rural settlements as urban. Though this administrative decision may not result in a massive influx of rural dwellers to the newly created towns, the legal changes relatives to the new administrative statuses of these settlements will certainly upset the existing sociolinguistic balances. The control over the settlement confers them an upper hand with regard to the social-cultural competition that results from many social-cultures communities sharing settlements. The loss that power weakens their capacity to properly channel outside influences.

In the DRC, rural settlements are administratively controlled by the communities who have legal custody of the land. By the law, everyone living on a customary land is expected to comply with the local customary law, although an individual may refer to the national judiciary in a case he or she feels wronged by the system. Nevertheless, such a decision implies taking the local leaders to the court and very few would go on this road as the plaintiff faces a strain of the relationship with the locals.

Potts (2012) disagrees with the UN and World Bank estimates alleges that they are based on flawed and erratic data. With time fictitious data are taken for facts as they are re-stated over and over again. Censuses in Nigeria have been contested since 1952 and no reliable census has ever been taken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1984. Though recent publications from the UN-habitat recognize errors in previous data, no steps have been taken in order to correct published figures she argues. The predictions that by 2030 the majority of Africans in the Sub-Saharan Africa will live in towns are unsubstantiated by evidence. Africa will remain rural for a foreseeable future she concludes.

Although Potts' criticism may true particularly with regard to flaws in data collection, she nevertheless does not take into account the movements of rural dwellers towards towns and cities in search of safety. In the DRC, eastern border cities and towns such as Bunia, Beni, Goma, Bukavu and others have grown beyond recognition between 1997 and 2013 due to civil wars in repetition and militia activities. For instance, the population of Bunia has increased from 72,000 in 1996 to over 300,000 in 2006. Ethnic conflict that followed the civil war in 1999 forced thousands of people to leave their villages for Bunia which was perceived a safe haven. Similar

trends were observed in Uganda, and rapid growth can be observed in many countries with chronic security problems.

Whereas the UN agencies and other international institutions such as the World Bank (2005) are carefully analyzing the consequences of rapid increase in urban populations in the less developed regions of the world and planning to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the changes, very little is being done in order to understand what the sociolinguistic impact of a massive and rapid urbanization of African (and less developed region in general) rural communities may entail. Sociolinguists generally agree that urban settings bring into contact people from different ethno-linguistic communities and the need to accommodate to one another arises. Consequently, the particularities of minority cultures may give way in favor of the majority ones (Tandafelt 1994).

This research focuses on east-Africa and seeks to answer the following questions:

1. As minority language groups move into urban settings or are swallowed by expanding cities, are they able to transmit their heritage languages to their offspring?
2. If yes, what strategies have they developed for the purpose?
3. If not, what are the mediating factors?
4. What is the attitude of city dwellers toward their heritage languages?
5. What is the influence of city dwellers on their respective communities as far as language loyalty is concerned?

This presentation summarizes the findings of the first pilot study conducted by Dr. Bagamba Araali among the Northern Hema of the North-East of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The studies among the Alur in Bunia and Tembo in Goma are also mentioned.

## **2. Research design, sampling and data collection tools**

### **2.1. Background about Bunia and the Northern-Hema community**

This presentation is based on an ongoing research project of which we have accomplished one out two planned pilot studies. The two main cases studies were conducted in Bunia, in the north-east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2012. A small study was also conducted among the Tembo diaspora in Goma.

Based on the socio-ethnic make-up of cities (towns) in east-Africa we have divided them into cities with ethnic dominance and the one without ethnic dominance (melting-pot cities). Bunia is the administrative and economic capital of the Ituri district. The population of Bunia is estimated at 300,000 (Obedi 2007, Ministère du plan de la RDC 2005). No ethnic group is dominant in Bunia though the Northern Hema and the Alur appear to have the most noticed presence in town. In addition to members of the 21 ethnic groups native to Ituri District, Bunia has a sizable presence of ethnic communities from neighboring districts and all over the country. Therefore, Bunia has been chosen as a representative of melting-pot cities in the pilot study.

Until 1997 Bunia was a very slowly growing city. Since 1999 however, the city grew-up very rapidly as internally displaced people, foreign armies, and the UN civil and military personnel poured in.

The Northern Hema is one of the important minority ethnic groups in Ituri. The community originally spoke Oruhuma (ethnologue code: nix) but underwent language shift a few decades ago and now speaks Baledha (ethnologue code: led). Due to the closeness of the Northern Hema homeland to the town of Bunia (about 20 km), the community has a visible

presence in the city. The northern Hema diaspora in Bunia increased rapidly as wave after wave of villagers moved into Bunia in search for safety between April 1999 and 2005. However, only individuals born in Bunia participated in this research.

## 2.2. Sampling and data collection

Investigating intergenerational transmission of vernaculars in an urban setting poses a number of methodological challenges. First, members of an ethnolinguistic community one is investigating are generally interspersed within the social constellation of the city. In many African countries, sociolinguistic information is not collected during census. Thus, the use of established random sampling techniques is not an option.

Faced with these difficulties, we used the Respondent-Driven Sampling technique which we adapted from the original method developed by Erickson (1997) for the study of hidden population. The rationale is that ethnic or minority population-based sociolinguistic investigations in urban settings share a number of challenges with hidden population investigation but also differ in many ways. Similarly to hidden populations; ethnic minorities are interspersed among others and are not easy to identify and locate. Contrary to hidden populations, public acknowledgment of ethnic membership is rarely a threat for sociolinguistic studies target populations (at least in East-Africa). Therefore, masking is of little concern while conducting sociolinguistic investigations. Nevertheless, how to draw a representative sample from a population with unknown sampling frame and interspersed among members of other ethnic groups (see the report for details) in urban milieu asks for a specific sampling technique

First, the town of Bunia was divided into four ethno-geographical units: Bigo, Mudzipela, Lembabo and Simbiliabo. These areas were identified as having significant presence of the Northern Hema community. Then, native interviewers were asked to identify seed-households to serve as starting point in each ethno-geographical unit. At the end of each interview, an adult was asked to point the interviewers to the next closest Northern Hema household. When a household did not have children of the age we were interested in, even if adults were available no interview was conducted in those places. Nevertheless, the household was kindly requested to help the interviewers find another Northern Hema household.

A total of 152 children aged 5-18 and 52 parents were interviewed across the town of Bunia. All interviews with children were conducted in family settings so as to allow for parental consent. With regard to adults, either of the two parents found home was interviewed. Once parental authorization was obtained, care was taken to distance the child a bit from the rest of the family to avoid distraction and family members' suggesting answers to interviewees. Often, the second interviewer interviewed the parent at the same time. Some parents declined to be interviewed but accepted their children to be spoken to.

Self-reported language behaviors are generally hard to interpret. When an interviewee claims to know or speak a language; the self-reported competence may range from a passive knowledge to a native-like competence (Bagamba 2007: 114). Therefore, instead of asking interviewees whether they speak Badha, this research project developed a procedure by which a native speaker-interviewer interviews an individual and evaluates the interviewees' linguistic competence. An interview schedule with thirteen probes was designed for child-interviewees and the one for adults had 18 probes. Items on the child interview schedule investigate language use within family home as well provide speech sample for the interviewer to evaluate. Interviewers coded their judgments as follows: (1) Does not understand the vernacular, (2) understands but does not speak the vernacular, (3) speaks the vernacular but not fluently, (4) speaks the

vernacular fluently. Adults' interview schedule on the contrary simply aimed at providing information regarding the linguistic behavior of parents towards children within family homes.

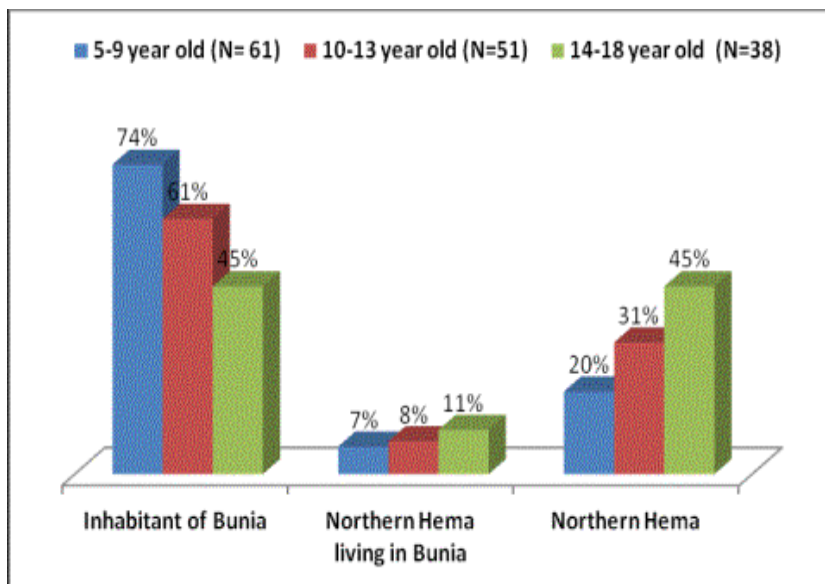
### 2.3. Research results

The findings are organized according to seven research questions. The general research questions are presented first then follow questions specific to this pilot research. Brackets [] mark questions specific to the pilot research.

1. *As minority language groups move into urban settings, are they able to transmit their heritage languages to their offspring?*

*[Are Northern Hema people who live in the Town of Bunia able to pass on Badha to their children?]*

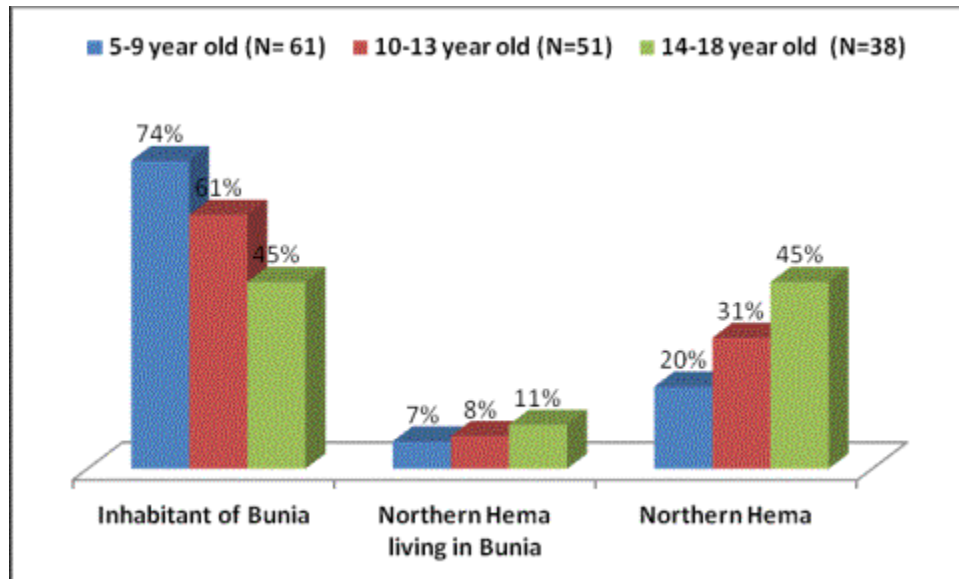
This research show that the intergenerational transmission of Badha in an urban setting is very minimal. Only 32% of child interviewees spoke Badha fluently while 34% of them neither understood or spoke Badha. 15% of the participants understood Badha but could not speak it and the remaining 18% spoke Badha but not fluently. In the homeland the Northern Hema community is very successful in passing on Badha to their children. Moreover, maturation with regard to the acquisition of Badha was found to be statistically significant factor with Chi-squared of 16.56 and  $p < 0.001$ . The 14-18 age group has significantly better knowledge of Badha than younger groups (see graph #1). Those who spoke some Badha but who could not carry on ordinary conversations were added to those who understand but cannot speak Badha.



Graph#1: *Competence of Northern Hema children in Bunia in Badha*

When the sample is divided into participants who do speak some Badha and those who don't speak it at all, the importance of maturation becomes very apparent as shown in graph# 2 below. The results show that 50% Northern Hema children living in Bunia speak some Badha. As they approach adulthood 76% of them have some competence in the vernacular. The concomitant use

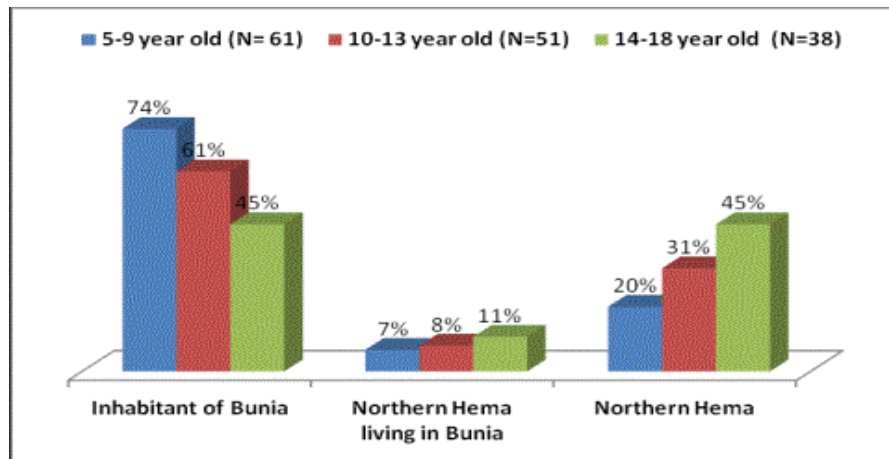
of Swahili and Badha however overshadows the fact that a sizeable proportion (36%) of those who speak some Badha actually have extremely low competence in the vernacular. As a result, the community is lead to believe that the vernacular is being maintained. This may explain why in bilingual communities signs of shift are often noticed too late. Additional research may be needed in order to determine how many of children who speak some Badha may in future fully acquire.



**Graph #2:** Here all those who speak at some competence are compared to those who don't speak at all.

2. *If yes, what strategies have they developed for the purpose of passing on their language? [If the Northern Hema community living in Bunia does pass on Badha to their children, what strategies have they developed for the purpose?]*

Speaking the vernacular to children appears to be the *only overt language* transmission strategy practiced by Northern Hema families in Bunia. In this regard, 62% of parents claimed to make an effort to pass on Badha to their children. However, this effort does not go beyond simply speaking Badha to children. For instance, only 28% of parents who speak Badha to each other speak Badha to their children. Most of them (48%) exclusively speak Swahili (the LWC) to their children, while 27% speak both Badha and Swahili to their children. Parents' claims however do not much their actual language use patterns. Therefore, their claims may be an expression of wishes or irregular dropping of Badha sentences to children rather than a purposeful transmission of the vernacular.



**Graph#3: Parents' language use patterns**

3. *If not, what are the mediating factors?*

Parents' perceived lack of cooperation from children (lack of responsiveness), insufficient competence of parents in Badha, lack of motivation to pass on a vernacular (perceived as backward language) and exogamous marriages are the four most salient factors hampering effective transmission of Badha from the Northern Hema parents to their children in Bunia.

33 couples out of 52 interviewed maintained that they were making efforts to pass on Badha to their children but the lack of cooperation and interest from their children curtailed their efforts. Some parents argued that it was hard to speak consistently Badha to children for the latter are not responsive. Therefore, parents are forced to shift to Swahili to get the required action from their children. 6 of 19 parents who reported not making efforts to pass on Badha to their children said they did not have a good mastery of the vernacular.

With regard to the impact of linguistic exogamy on the transmission of Badha, only one child out of 24 whose mothers did not speak Badha spoke the vernacular fluently. On the other hand, 13 of them (71%) neither spoke nor understood Badha. Although we do not have the statistics relative to linguistic exogamy among the Northern Hema in the homeland, based on our insider's knowledge exogamous marriages seem to progress faster among town dwellers compared to the Northern Hema living in their homeland.

The community does not offer enough incentives to the young generation to acquire Badha either and exogamous unions are not despised as strongly as they are in rural areas. Whenever there are community meetings and social gatherings (such as funerals, parties...) translation in Swahili is readily available, thus not knowing Badha is not a handicap to community participation. Thus, these facts are consistent with the findings and confirm that the Northern Hema diaspora may not be able to maintain the vernacular in the urban milieu.

Although all adult interviewees showed remorse for the young generation losing the vernacular, the vast majority however believe that the problem is beyond their capacity. Therefore, they count on their children to make personal efforts to acquire the language.

4. *What is the attitude of city dwellers toward their heritage languages?*

*[What is the attitude of Northern Hema city dwellers toward Badha?]*

First, most northern Hema parents in Bunia see Badha as the marker of their northern Hema identity. Secondly, Badha is perceived as the language that allows Northern Hema families to communicate secrets in the presence of the members of other communities. However, a minority of parents see Badha as a language their children can do without and don't therefore put effort into passing it on.

5. *What is the influence of city dwellers on their respective communities as far as language loyalty is concerned?*

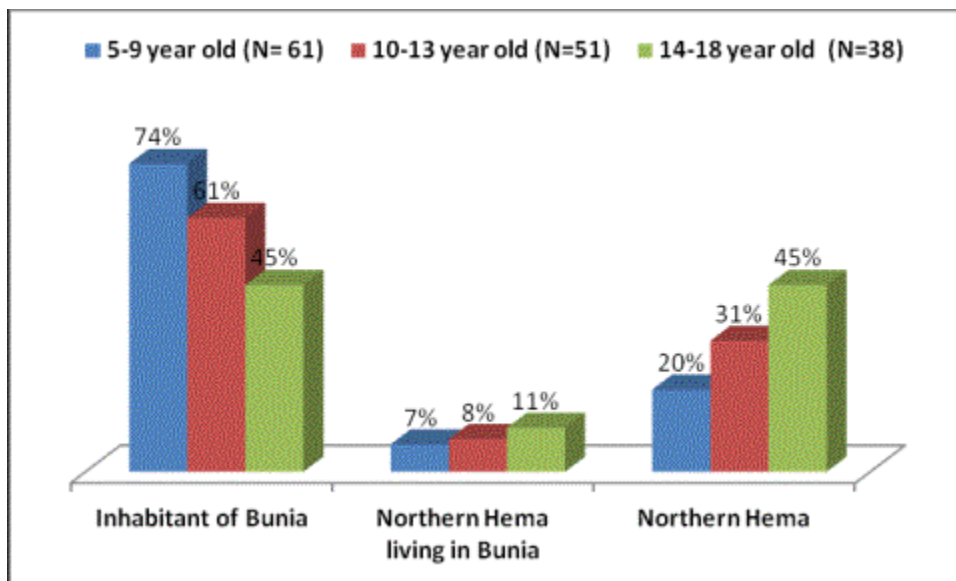
*[What is the influence of Northern Hema city dwellers on the larger Northern Hema community as far as language loyalty is concerned?]*

The Northern Hema community living in Bunia has no negative impact on language loyalty of their homeland community. 88% of interviewees (parents) maintained that people in their home villages don't imitate the speech patterns of visiting city dwellers. A few interviewees mentioned that the use of Swahili by city dwellers in the Northern Hema homeland is perceived as pride and may negatively impact the relationship between the city dweller and villagers. Moreover, the majority of Northern Hema city dwellers have no intention of relocating to the homeland. The city is seen to be much safer than the homeland where terrible massacres happened a few years ago.

6. *To what extent are ethnic identities maintained in urban settings?*

*[To what extent does the Northern Hema community living in Bunia maintain their ethnic identity?]*

The perception of identity among northern Hema children in Bunia evolves with age. The majority (74%) of children aged 5-9 have very little conscientiousness of their northern Hema identity. Among teenagers however, almost half (45%) of them confess to have northern Hema ethnic identity. A minority of children of all ages claimed to have both Northern Hema and city dweller identities.



**Graph #4: Identity perception by the Northern Hema children living in Bunia.**

Identity conscientiousness seems to impact positively the acquisition of Badha. There were significant differences ( $P < .000$ ,  $df=3$ ) between the interviewees who claimed northern Hema identity and those who did not. Only 19% of the latter spoke fluently Badha compared to 56% among those who claimed northern Hema identity. Nevertheless, we are aware that more robust statistic tests are needed in order to determine the interaction between maturation and identity conscientiousness and the acquisition of Badha.

7. *What is the resulting language ecology? Does it include new varieties which may need further examination?*

Although Northern Hema individuals born in Bunia may aspire to Badha-Swahili bilingualism, at the moment Swahili has become the dominant language of younger generations contrary to their parents. At the moment no new speech variety has been identified.



## **Case study 2:**

### **3. The Dhu-alur in Bunia**

#### **3.1. Background**

Trends similar to the Northern Hema case were observed among the Alur in Bunia (Bagamba and Ucuon 2012) and the Tembo people in Goma (Bagamba and Masumbo 2013). The Alur ethnic group is the largest in the District (about 2,000,000 individuals) and they speak one of the most vigorous languages in the DRC. The Dhu-alur is a spreading language and more than 3 other ethnic groups have undergone partial shift to it. In many cases shift to Dhu-alur is followed by identity shift.

For a MA research project, Ucuon (a native speaker of Dhu-alur) interviewed 150 children aged 3 to 18 born in Bunia. Similarly to the previous case study, the interviews were conducted in Dhu-alur with the aim to determine the interviewee's competence in Dhu-alur.

#### **3.2. Results**

The results showed that 48% of the interviews neither spoke, nor understood Dhu-alur. Only 23% of the interviewees spoke the vernacular fluently. Maturation was found to be a strong factor in the acquisition of Dhu-alur among the Alur children living in Bunia. 64% of the interviewees aged 3-7 had no understanding of the language compared to 40% among those aged 13-18. On the other hand, only 10% of interviewees aged 3-10 spoke the language fluently compared to 32% among teenagers (13-18).

The linguistic exogamy on the other hand impact negatively the acquisition of Dhu-alur. Children whose mothers spoke the Dhu-alur acquired the language much better than those whose mothers were from other ethnic groups. Among the latter, 83% neither understood nor spoke Dhu-alur and none of them spoke the language fluently. Conversely, 36% of the interviewees whose mother spoke the Dhu-alur spoke the language fluently.

With regard to the scope of linguistic exogamy, Members of the Alur community living in the urban setting practice it significantly more than those in the homeland. Interviews conducted by Ucuon with traditional leaders showed that cases of interethnic marriages are extremely few in the Alur homeland. There were clan leaders who did not know of a single case of interethnic marriage within their community. In Bunia however, out of 50 couples surveyed 17 were heterogeneous. Thus, this data suggest that members of the Alur community living in urban setting do not feel strictly bound by the sociocultural norms of their community.

### **Case study 3**

#### **4. The Chitembo in Goma**

##### **4.1. Background**

The Tembo people live in the North-Kivu province, about 200 km from Goma, the provincial capital. Due to prolonged unrest their homeland, more and more Tembo have been moving to Goma and Bukavu perceived safer than rural areas infested by rebel and self-defense groups. Goma is a much bigger and affluent city compare to Bunia and the Tembo diaspora in Goma is much smaller compared to the Northern Hema or Alur ones in Bunia.

In 2012, a trained Tembo translator interviewed 87 children aged 6-19. For reasons unknown to us were 33 interviewees aged 6-9 and 36 aged 10-13 and only 18 interviewees aged 14-19. It is possible that the imbalance within age distribution of the sample may have skewed the results; therefore, these findings are presented for informative purposes.

##### **4.2. Results**

Out 87 interviewees, only 8 individuals (approximately 10%) spoke Chitembo fluently. The bulk of interviewees (45%) did not understand their heritage language at all. 32% of them understood Chitembo but could not speak the language.

Contrary to the two first cases Among the Tembo children maturation seems not to have a significant influence on the acquisition their heritage language in the urban setting. None of 18 interviewees aged 14-19 spoke Chitembo fluently while 4 out 33 children aged 6-9 spoke the language fluently. It is possible that some of youngest children were born in the Tembo homeland. Interviewers reported that most parents spoke Chitembo to each other but felt that the overwhelming use of Swahili in the multiethnic city hampered their efforts to pass on their heritage language to their children.

## 5. Conclusion

These case studies give us an indication of the difficulties that the three diaspora communities have in transmitting their heritage languages to the next generations. As mentioned above, in the homeland, the Alur and Northern Hema communities are functionally monolingual and their heritage languages are the very first one children acquire. In addition, the Dhu-alur and Badha are the two killer languages of the Ituri District in the DRC. Though very strong and vigorous in the homelands, spoken by the most affluent and politically dominant ethnic groups in the District, none of the two vernaculars are successfully transmitted to younger generations in the urban setting. As a small community, the Tembo diaspora is even less effective in the transmission of their heritage in an urban milieu.

Though technically conclusions drawn from case studies cannot be generalized to other cases, the observed trends suggest a serious change of the linguistic and sociolinguistic landscape in a near future if the urbanization of Africa happens as projected. It would be prudent for SIL and sister organizations to carefully consider the implications of such a rapid sociolinguistic change for the future of the ministry of Bible translation and what an effective Scripture engagement will look like a decade from now.

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