

Sustaining language, culture and family across borders

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Colonial border policies inadvertently dissected communities which shared the same language and culture, and in some cases also divided up family members. In South Africa in particular, the entrenchment of white minority rule and the introduction of wide-ranging apartheid legislation resulted in dispersal of communities, with some being internally displaced within the state whilst others migrated into the neighbouring countries. Some of these immigrant communities resettled in places that were contiguous with those from which they had migrated. Over the decades, these communities have generally maintained cross-border socio-cultural and economic ties, through which they have sustained linguistic, cultural, and family ties with their kith and kin. As a case study, this paper uses the Babirwa of the Tuli Block in Botswana and explores their cross border ties with their kith and kin in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. It examines the background to Babirwa settlement in present day Botswana, their interaction and relationship with the Bangwato and the consequences of this interaction for the Babirwa language, culture and identity. The paper also looks at the extent to which the elements of the language, culture and tradition have been sustained over time, and highlights some interesting issues about the linguistic continuity and change which form part of this dynamic socio-political process. It underscores the fact that family ties have been an important element in the sustenance of language and culture amongst the cross border Babirwa communities. The paper relies on document analysis, personal experiences and observation, and interviews with some ethnic Babirwa.