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The impact of oral Bible translation on spiritual formation in Malawi, with special focus on the Malokotela and Mihipiti Languages

ABSTRACT

Bible translation plays an important role in spiritual formation, as it allows people to access God's Word in their mother tongue languages. In Malawi, although the Bible has been available in Chichewa, a widely spoken language, for over a century, spiritual formation remains largely unfulfilled. Various ungodly cultural practices indicate that the message of the Bible is not rooted in people's hearts. This gap is mainly due to the fact that the Bible has existed in written form; yet many Malawian cultures are mostly oral, with a significant proportion of the population, especially in rural areas, lacking literacy skills. This study surveys different scholars on spiritual formation and Bible translation to argue that translation efforts must take into account the communication preferences of the targeted audience. The research further examines oral Bible translation projects in Malokotela and Mihipiti languages, assessing their impact on spiritual formation. Based on field findings, the study offers conclusions and practical recommendations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malawi is a southern African country bordered by Mozambique in the south and east, Zambia in the west, and Tanzania in the north. It is estimated that over 80 per cent of Malawi's population is Christian (Philips 2024; Ross & Mlenga 2022).

Christianity was introduced in Malawi by European missionaries in the last half of the 19th century (Ross 2020:16).[1] In the 1880s, missionaries, with the help of local people, began translating the Bible into native languages to help the Gospel take deeper root among the local population. The Chichewa language received the most attention, due to its widespread use across all regions of Malawi. By 1919, the first complete written Bible in Chichewa, titled *Buku Lopatulika Ndilo Mawu a Mulungu* (The Sacred Book is the Word of God), was published in 1922 (Wendland 2020:8). Since 1922, there has been significant progress in Bible translation in Malawi, as evidenced by the availability of written Bible translations in most of the local languages.

While one of the expectations of translating the Bible in local languages is to have transformed lives (Foster 2021:12), moral decay and spiritual problems persist in the vast majority of communities in Malawi (Malawi Roman Catholic 2024). This raises a question as to whether the Gospel has truly taken root in the hearts of many, despite the fact that the first Bible translation was completed over a century ago. One of the factors that have made it difficult for the Gospel to take deep root in most of the communities in Malawi is poor Bible engagement. The reason for this is that Malawi is mainly rural, with most of its population living in rural areas where information access is done orally; yet Bible translation efforts have mostly focused on the production of written texts. Banda (2024:260) examines the potential of oral Bible translation as a means of enhancing Bible engagement in rural areas. Based on his study findings, he recommends the introduction of oral Bible translation as a means of enhancing Bible engagements in oral communities in Malawi. In response to his recommendations, the Word for the World International organisation launched several oral Bible translation (OBT) projects in Malawi in the last half of 2024.

This study focuses on two specific OBT projects within the Malokotela and Mihipiti languages in Phalombe District, situated in southern Malawi along the border with Mozambique. Its primary aim is to examine the role of oral Bible translation in spiritual formation, particularly in rural communities, where communication and information-sharing are predominantly oral. To achieve this aim, the study employs a twofold approach: first, a review of existing scholarly literature on spiritual formation and Bible translation; secondly, field research investigating how the oral Bible translation projects in the Malokotela and Mihipiti languages contribute to spiritual formation. The study concludes with key findings and recommendations.

1 At that time, Malawi was known as Nyassaland.

2. SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Spiritual formation as a concept is understood in different ways depending on one's religious and philosophical perspective. However, this article explores the term from a Christian point of view. Teo (2017:139) observes that spiritual formation as a concept has its roots in the Roman Catholic tradition, particularly within the context of pastoral training. In this tradition, it refers to the practice of various spiritual disciplines such as Bible engagement, prayer, meditation, and fasting as part of the training process for full-time ministry. Howard (2018) points out that, in order to understand this concept, it is important to note that the idea of "formation" has its origins in the New Testament, where it conveys the notion of developing a Christ-like character. Over time, the concept evolved and became associated with the term "spiritual", particularly in the training of nuns, monks, and priests, to foster a deeper relationship with God. This process took place within monasteries and/or seminaries, where spiritual directors were assigned to guide seminarians through their spiritual journey (Second Vatican Council 1966:444). In Protestant circles, the phrase "spiritual formation" emerged in the 1960s in institutions of higher learning, where the main focus was to establish programmes that would lead to character development among students (Howard 2018).

It can be observed that, in both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, the concept of "spiritual formation" was first used in educational institutions. At present, the idea of spiritual formation is no longer limited to students; it includes every Christian. The current belief is that everyone who comes to faith in Christ should, with the help of God, experience spiritual growth. This is the reason why Brandt and Frederick (2021) view spiritual formation as the change that every believer must experience because of his/her relationship with Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and for God's glory. Howard (2018) argues that spiritual formation should transition from the individual to the community level, where both individuals and communities experience growth and bear the fruits of the Gospel through their faith in God through Christ. He acknowledges that individual spiritual formation drives community-level formation.

In the Bible, the metaphor of a fruit tree is frequently used to describe the Christian life, particularly in relation to spiritual formation. A productive Christian life is compared to a tree that bears fruit, while an unproductive life is likened to a tree that bears no fruit or bad fruit (see Mt. 7:17-20; Lk. 13:6-9; Jn. 15:1-6). Just as a tree is expected to grow and bear fruit, so too is a believer expected to grow in faith and produce fruit that honours God. From this perspective, spiritual formation can be understood as a process of growth in faith, becoming more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit, and living according to God's values for his glory. In this sense,

spiritual formation is the work of God in the life of a believer, bringing about the transformative changes that testify to the power of the gospel (Mizzell & Henson 2020:94-95).

2.1 Bible translation and spiritual formation

It is widely accepted among scholars that there is a significant connection between Bible translation and spiritual formation. Foster (2021:iii) argues that "Bible translation should produce transformation – it should transform communities and individuals and create noticeable change people can see". According to Boaheng (2022:8), the reason for this is that Bible translation enables people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to engage with the Word of God in their own languages, allowing them to make the Bible part of their life and apply its message. This application of the biblical message in one's life is a crucial step in the process of personal spiritual formation. Both Banda (2024) and Alawode (2024) agree that early missionaries in Africa took Bible translation seriously, because they believed that the Bible is an important mission tool that fuels the spread of Christianity. As Hubing (2020:40) rightly puts it, the chief purpose of the mission of the church is not only to convert people to Christianity, but also to instil in them the values of Christ and his kingdom which happens to be the goal of spiritual formation. Fanwong (2013) also argues that Bible translation has played a huge role in moral transformation in Africa. While the continent still grapples with many moral issues, the availability of the Bible in different African languages has helped transform lives. According to Fanwong (2013:120),

> Scriptures in the vernacular give room for the common person to know God better, to read His Word, meditate on it and put it into practice.[2]

Averbeck (2010) argues that the Bible plays an important role in spiritual formation within the Christian context, as it provides the spiritual disciplines necessary to prepare an individual for spiritual growth.

> Spiritual formation is based upon the Bible as God's reliable and authoritative revelation. The Bible, our primary source of truth, guides and informs the use of spiritual disciplines and models of spirituality as they have emerged worldwide and throughout time … we can know the truth about spiritual formation in the Bible. The Bible as a whole, and everything in it, is designed to contribute in some way to our individual and communal spiritual formation, including what it says about the so-called spiritual disciplines (Averbeck 2010:275, 279).

2 This engagement with the Bible positions believers on the path of spiritual formation.

While Averbeck does not directly mention Bible translation, his argument is important because, without Bible translation, people in a language group cannot access the Bible. This implies that Bible translation plays a significant role in spiritual formation.

Agreeing with Averbeck, Tang (2010:1-6) discusses three ways in which the Bible plays a crucial role in spiritual formation. First, the Bible reveals who God is, what he does, and his expectations. Secondly, the Bible outlines guidelines for believers on the journey of faith. Thirdly, the Bible conveys the Christian story, by giving a background of the faith that people have in Christ. When the Bible is translated in another language, the speakers of that language have access to the full account of God's self-revelation, his expectations on those who worship him, and guidelines for a godly life. Fanwong (2013:47) cites one of the participants in his study:

> As people have access to the Word of God in a language, they understand better, they engage with it in meaningful ways for transformation to take place in their lives.

All these scholarly views highlight one important point about the relationship between Bible translation and spiritual formation. Bible translation plays a crucial role in spiritual formation, because it allows people to hear God speak to their hearts in their everyday language. As a result, God is no longer viewed as distant or foreign, but as one who speaks to each people group in their own language. Given the vital role Bible translation plays in spiritual formation, a critical question arises: Why, after over a century of Bible translation efforts, is there still widespread spiritual decline in Malawi? What approach should be adopted in modern Bible translation in Malawi, in order to enhance both individual and community spiritual formation?

2.2 Contextualised Bible translation

While the translation of the Bible into many African languages has undeniably contributed to spiritual formation, an important element has been largely overlooked, namely the spiritual formation of people with oral orientation. These individuals, as defined by Moon (2010:127), "learn best and are most likely to experience life transformation when instruction is delivered in oral forms". Despite the progress in translating the Bible into written languages, insufficient attention has been paid to the needs and learning styles of people with oral orientation – those for whom oral communication, rather than the written text, is the primary mode of learning and accessing information.

Alawode (2024:3) makes an important point in observing that "the translation of the Bible into different cultures is typically accompanied by efforts to educate people in basic literacy". While literacy is a significant skill, Alawode's observation highlights an important distinction: learning to read and write does not automatically translate into a developed reading culture. This is the reason why Maxey (2010:181-182) argues that:

> [t]he benefits of literacy should not be neglected. Yet, postcolonial studies question whether the oral ethos of communities has been sacrificed in the pursuit of literacy. The situation ought not to devolve into another dichotomous discussion of literacy vs. orality. However, there is a significant myopia in ignoring the riches of oral communities and theologies. This has been particularly true with BT because it has historically set its goal as a literary conversion of the population. Whereas literacy offers significant benefits, it should not be at the expense of oral denigration.

Maxey's point is that, while it is important to have literacy programmes that should assist people in developing reading skills that would help them engage with the Bible, it is important to understand that the issue of orality is culturally bound. This issue is particularly significant in some Malawian communities, where literacy levels have increased, but the practice of reading is not culturally embedded in people. Banda's (2024:258) study on Bible engagement in oral communities in Malawi highlights this challenge, showing that, even among individuals who can read and write, Bible engagement is often limited. Makutoane *et al.* (2015:157) also discover that, although a written Bible translation exists in Sesotho, some individuals do not engage with it, because they are unable to read, while others can read but struggle to understand its content. This implies that Bible translation must consider the oral orientation of the target audience.

2.3 Bible translation and communication

Given the consensus among scholars that Bible translation plays a critical role in spiritual formation, and how oral learners have been neglected in Bible translation, a key question arises: How should Bible translation be approached in oral contexts, in order to achieve meaningful spiritual formation? This question requires a shift in thinking, from focusing on literacy-based translation efforts to considering how oral learners can best be engaged with the Bible in ways that align with their cultural and learning preferences (Frost *et al.* 2023:2).

For Bible translation to be effective in spiritual formation, it must consider the communication preferences of the targeted audience. In other words, it must be modelled to the preferred modes and styles of

communication of the people it aims to serve (Rick 2002:12). This means that Bible translation must be understood as a form of communication which, like any other form of communication, must be contextualised. For Bible translation to truly serve as a vehicle for spiritual formation, it must not only focus on linguistic accuracy but also consider the cultural and social contexts in which the communication occurs. Kome (2021:121, 126) emphasises this, stating that,

> [f]or information to flow smoothly, it must be communicated in the context of the recipient. Bible translation is a form of communication. The first principle of communication is to be receptor oriented. As a result, the communicator needs to know the audience. The missional goal for translating scriptures in the context in which it finds itself is for communities to access God's Word in a language that speaks to them, so they can develop their own means of theological understanding and spiritual training.

It is not sufficient to simply translate the Bible into a language; the translation must be in line with the audience's world view, cultural practices, and preferred communication styles. According to Rick (2002:12), it is imperative that, at the onset of any Bible translation programme, translators must know the audience, by understanding their preferred mode of communication – whether they are oral or literate communicators. This is the reason why Maxey (2010:178) views Bible translation as a form of inculturation which signifies adapting the Bible to different cultures without changing its message. This ensures that the translation remains faithful to biblical teachings, while being relevant and meaningful to the cultural context of the people receiving it.

> Before a translator begins his work, he or she should determine what types of communication are already in place in the respective culture. When the translator determines the type of communications available in a particular context, he or she is likely to find oral communication to be one of the preferred mode[s] of communication, for even where literacy is present, oral communications continue to be predominant in many cultures (Maxey 2010:179).

While Maxey suggests that the decision to choose which mode of translation suits a community, I believe that the community is best positioned to make this decision. This would help avoid the translators imposing their translation preferences on the community. For oral communities, particularly within Malawian contexts, where oral traditions are predominant, this means considering how the message is not only transmitted in written form, but also how it can be effectively communicated through oral means such as storytelling, drama, or other oral traditions.

By contextualising Bible translation to the communication preference of a targeted group, Bible translation can move beyond linguistic accuracy to ensure that God's Word is communicated in a manner that is relevant, meaningful, and accessible to the target community. The goal is spiritual transformation, where individuals and communities engage with the Scriptures in ways that are culturally appropriate and personally impactful.

3. ORAL BIBLE TRANSLATION PROJECTS IN MALOKOTELA AND MIHIPITI LANGUAGES

The study focuses on the Malokotela and Mihipiti languages in Phalombe District, located in southern Malawi near the Mozambique border. These languages are selected because they are directly involved in ongoing OBT projects conducted by the Word for the World organisation. Neither the Malokotela nor the Mihipiti languages have written Bible translations or any other literature, as both languages currently lack a developed writing system. They are also considered minority languages, mainly due to their relatively small speaker populations (Maseko & Nkomo 2024).[3] While there is literature available in Chichewa language, in his research on the levels of Bible engagement in rural areas in Malawi, Banda (2024) found that there is limited Bible engagement in rural areas in Malawi, due to oral orientation of the vast majority of cultures in Malawi.

3.1 Literacy and communication in Malokotela and Mihipiti languages

Both Malokotela and Mihipiti are classified in *Ethnologue* as dialects of the Lomwe language of Malawi (ISO 639-3:lon), not separate languages (Eberhard *et al.* 2025). While linguistically these varieties are considered dialects, due to mutual intelligibility within Lomwe,[4] they represent sociolinguistically and culturally distinct speech communities. Since the goal of Bible translation is to make the Word of God accessible to all, the Word for the World treats both dialects as distinct languages to make the Bible accessible to both communities. The Word for the World (2025) reports that Malokotela has approximately 13,100 speakers, primarily in

3 There are different views on the definition of minority languages (Limberger *et al.* 2020:1). For the purposes of this study, I define minority languages as those spoken by relatively few people and not as widespread as languages with larger speaker populations in geographical areas.

4 One common approach to defining a language is through mutual intelligibility, which says that language variants that are mutually intelligible should be classified as a single language, whereas those that are not mutually intelligible should be considered separate languages (Wichmann 2021:824).

the Nambadzo community within the area of Traditional Authority Chiwalo, while roughly 12,000 people speak Mihipiti, mainly in the area governed by Traditional Authority Pheremwe near the Malawi-Mozambique border in the far southern region.

Both Chiwalo and Pheremwe are predominantly rural areas with relatively low literacy levels – approximately 50 per cent in Chiwalo (where Malokotela is spoken) and 40 per cent in Phweremwe (where Mihipiti is spoken). Oral communication remains the preferred mode of interaction in these communities (Mukumbwa 2025). The fact that these communities have low literacy rates suggests that there is a great need for the Bible to be presented in oral formats that community members can easily understand and internalise, especially for those who cannot read the written Bible translations. This means that making the Bible available in oral format is not only practical, but also essential for spiritual formation in these communities.

3.2 Study methods

3.2.1 Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the role of OBT in spiritual formation in Malawi, with a particular focus on Phalombe District. The research examines two active OBT projects in Malokotela language in the area of traditional authority, chief Chiwalo, and Mihipiti language in the area of traditional authority, chief Pheremwe. The purpose of the study is to assess the impact of the OBT projects on spiritual formation at both the individual and community levels. A combination of case study and descriptive approaches is used. The case study approach focuses on two specific communities where OBT projects are implemented. The descriptive approach helps examine how the OBT projects are impacting spiritual formation within these communities and among the individuals involved.

3.2.2 Data collection

To gather qualitative data, this study used a combination of focus group discussions and interviews. The focus group was preferred, because it is considered an effective method when there are time and financial limitations (Bloor *et al.* 2002:13). An unstructured questionnaire was provided to participants to guide the discussion. Each group was assigned one data collector to facilitate the discussion and guide the groups in signing the questionnaires. The participants discussed the questions together, and their collective answers were recorded on the questionnaire, showing their common experiences gained from their involvement in the OBT projects.

In addition to the focus group discussions, interviews were conducted via telephone calls with individuals who could not participate in the focus groups but had valuable information relevant to the study. With the informed consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded for accuracy and later analysis. These interviews provided supplementary data to the focus group discussions. In addition, secondary data was gathered from project reports related to the two ongoing OBT projects. The combination of primary data (from focus group questionnaires and interviews) and secondary data (from project reports) provided a picture of the impact of OBT on spiritual formation within these communities and among the individuals involved in the projects.

3.2.3 Sampling methods

The study used a convenience sampling method to select participants for the focus group discussions. Participants were chosen based on their active involvement in the OBT projects and availability. Since reports showed that each project engaged approximately 50 participants, a total of 35 representatives were selected from each group.

3.2.4 Data analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data collected through focus group discussion questionnaires, interviews, and project reports. In qualitative study, thematic analysis examines the content of the data to identify themes related to the issue under investigation and draws conclusions based on the common themes (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013: 400). Applied in this study, the discussion examines themes that highlight how OBT contributes to spiritual formation among both translation teams and communities. This involves identifying and examining themes related to spiritual formation that emerge from the responses in the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and project reports.

3.2.5 Ethical considerations

All ethical considerations were followed while gathering data for the study. Informed consent was obtained at multiple levels, namely from the Word for Life organisation Africa regional offices, the national director, and project coordinators, ensuring that the study had the necessary organisational and leadership approval. In addition, individual consent was obtained from all participants. They were also informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of their participation.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

What follows is an analysis and discussion of qualitative data collected through structured questionnaires administered during the focus group discussions, project report, and interviews in two OBT projects in Malawi in Malokotela and Mihipiti languages. The analysis and discussions provide a picture of how the OBT projects are impacting spiritual formation in the Malokotela- and Mihipiti-speaking communities of Phalombe District, Malawi. Given that the study focuses on two distinct projects, the analysis will end with a triangulation. The responses from questionnaires and interviews, along with the project reports from each project, are compared to identify similarities and differences in the perceived impact of OBT on spiritual formation in the communities under study.

4.1 Team selection and community engagement in oral Bible translation projects

Mukile Gondwe, the Mihipiti OBT project team leader, explained that the project involves a diverse group of community members, including pastors, elders, chiefs, and villagers. She highlighted that storytelling ability was a key criterion in selecting team members, which led to the inclusion of some non-Christian participants, due to their strong storytelling skills (Gondwe, personal interview, 17 May 2025). After reviewing the training provided to the translation teams, I observed that both OBT projects generally follow the process outlined by Floor (2021). According to Henry Kansonga, team leader of the Malokotela OBT project, once the audio recordings are completed, the team visits local communities and churches to play sections of the translated Bible books.[5] During this phase, they gather feedback on areas needing improvement (Kansonga, personal interview, 23 May 2025). The Malokotela project report shows that the local community actively participated in reviewing the translated passages to ensure clarity, accuracy, naturalness, and cultural acceptability (Malokotela Focus Group Interview 2025). This participatory review enables the translation to reflect local linguistic nuances and cultural meanings. In both projects, it was reported that involving the community not only strengthens linguistic and cultural faithfulness, but also provides the communities with opportunities to hear the Word of God. In the Malawian context, the high level of community and local church involvement makes OBT projects different from traditional written Bible translation methods that have been followed in the translation of written Bibles in Malawi, which typically involved

5 As of 20 May 2025, the Malokotela OBT project had completed the translation of the book of Luke and was working on the book of Mark, while the Mihipiti OBT project was working on the final section of the book of Luke.

less community engagement. Both Gondwe and Kansonga highlighted in the interviews that, due to the high level of community and local church engagement, there is a great sense of ownership and anticipation for the final OBT products in the communities.

4.2 The spiritual impacts of the oral Bible translation projects

Interactions with members of the two OBT project teams revealed that both projects are having a significant spiritual impact on their communities. Some of these impacts are outlined below.

4.2.1 Evangelistic impacts of oral Bible translation

Data from interviews revealed two key ways in which the OBT projects serve as effective tools for evangelism. First, the inclusion of non-Christian members in the translation teams – selected for their oral storytelling skills – has led some to commit their lives to Christ. Mukile Gondwe noted in an interview that a significant impact of the OBT project has been helping these non-Christian participants come to faith, as the process of internalising Bible passages has transformed their lives and increased their understanding of who Jesus Christ is (Gondwe, personal interview, 17 May 2025).[6] Henry Kansonga explained that, beyond getting feedback, involving communities and local churches in the OBT process serves an evangelistic purpose, by providing opportunities for people to hear God's Word in their own language. Many have committed their lives to Christ during these community and local church involvement sessions, as the emotional aspect of OBT helps people connect more with the Word of God (Kansonga, personal interview, 23 May 2025). Gondwe also emphasised the importance of emotional tone in OBT, explaining that the process captures feelings such as joy, sorrow, and hope in the oral recordings. This emotional aspect helps listeners connect with the message on a personal level, making the Word of God more connected with their hearts rather than simply their minds as it is in written texts (Gondwe, personal interview, 17 May 2025).

4.2.2 Strengthened trust in God

During a focus group discussion within the Mihipiti project, participants revealed that the OBT project has strengthened their trust in God. For instance, individuals who previously sought help from traditional healers

6 The increased understanding of who Jesus is can be attributed to the fact that the OBT projects in both languages have started with the synoptic gospel books which are more centred on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

when ill now go to hospitals and trust God for healing. In addition, many members mentioned that the project has helped them in their understanding of forgiveness. Since the OBT projects have focused on the book of Luke, they highlighted two key passages from the book that helped them develop a better understanding of biblical forgiveness: the story of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32) and Jesus' forgiveness of the sinful woman (Lk. 7:36-50).

4.2.3 Scripture engagement and understanding

The data from both Malokotela and Mihipiti projects show that OBT has led to an improvement in Scripture engagement and understanding among those involved. The Malokotela team specifically reported that the various stages of OBT, including the internalisation of biblical passages and repeated engagement, have allowed members to develop their interaction with the Bible, making it become part of their daily lives (Malokotela OBT Project, 2025). Mihipiti project reports mention the role of daily devotions conducted alongside translation activities as offering an opportunity for regular Bible engagement (Mukumbwa, personal interview, 11 May 2025). Such daily interaction with the Bible is playing an important role in helping members experience the transforming power of the Word of God.

4.2.4 Involvement in leading group and church worship services and individual prayer life

The Mihipiti team noted that, after some months of involvement in the OBT project, the vast majority of the members gained confidence to lead team devotions. They also reported a marked improvement in their prayer lives, with team members regularly praying for one another and engaging in personal prayer at home (Mihipiti Focus Group Discussion, 2025). Similarly, the Malokotela team highlighted frequent prayer sessions and increased dedication to God's work (Malokotela Focus Group 2025).

Evidence from the Word for the World's quarterly report for the first quarter of 2025 indicates a significant improvement in group devotional life in both projects. In the beginning of the projects, some participants were often hesitant to speak in public, resulting in only a few individuals leading devotions during translation sessions. However, the oral nature of the OBT process, which requires active verbal participation, has helped members overcome this shyness and develop confidence in leading devotions (Mukumbwa 2025). This confidence has extended beyond the translation teams. For example, one pastor interviewed from the Mihipiti language community testified that involvement in the OBT project has enhanced preaching skills among some of his church members, as it equipped them

with the confidence to speak publicly. He reported that some of the people involved in the projects are now involved in the preaching programme of the church (Mihipiti Focus Group 2025).

4.2.5 Community transformation through improved relationships and Scripture engagement

Another significant impact of the OBT projects is the transformation of communities through improved interpersonal relationships. Data from focus group discussions in both projects indicate that the OBT projects are leading to transformation among those directly and indirectly involved. In the Mihipiti project, the growing understanding of biblical forgiveness has contributed to improved relationships within the community. Stories such as the prodigal son and the lost coin have particularly played a significant role in helping people understand the importance of forgiveness in building strong and lasting relationships (Mihipiti Focus Group 2025). The Word for the World Malawi OBT report for the first quarter of 2025 shares a testimony highlighting this impact:

> Mr Matchado, a community elder, shared how the OBT translations helped him understand God's message for the first time. Inspired, he started a Bible study group in his neighborhood, encouraging others to explore their faith. This not only strengthened the church community but also sparked deeper discussions about Scripture in many homes, demonstrating how God is transforming lives through our work (Mukumbwa 2025).

This testimony shows that OBT projects not only help people in the community grow spiritually, but also bring them together and share God's Word. As a result, people are now building good relationships and break away from cultural practices that have previously caused division.

Another way in which the OBT projects are leading to community transformation is by making people realise that the power to heal is with God, not witchdoctors. Consulting witchdoctors often damages relationships, as they tend to attribute sickness to harm caused by another community member through magic or sorcery. This practice causes suspicion and conflict which ultimately breaks relationships (Archibong *et al.* 2017: 25).

4.3 Triangulation of insights

Both communities involved in the OBT projects show that OBT contributes positively to spiritual formation, although the specific indicators of this growth vary between them. In the Malokotela project, spiritual formation

is primarily evidenced by increased scriptural knowledge and increased commitment to God's work. This has led to more frequent prayer meetings and higher participation in worship services (Malokotela Focus Group 2025). By contrast, the Mihipiti project shows more behavioural transformation. Key changes include an increased practice of forgiveness and a move away from traditional healing practices toward faith in God's healing power. These shifts are inspired by biblical teachings such as the parable of the prodigal son and Jesus' forgiveness of the sinful woman (Lk. 15:11-32; 7:36-50) (Mihipiti Focus Group 2025; Mukile Gondwe, personal interview, 17 May 2025).

Triangulated data from both projects highlight the importance of community involvement in ensuring that the OBT products are contextually appropriate and embraced by their audiences. This involvement causes a stronger emotional and relational connection with the translated texts, aligning with Mukile Gondwe's emphasis on storytelling and emotional tone as important elements in spiritual formation (Mukile Gondwe, personal communication, 17 May 2025).

Overall, while Malokotela's spiritual formation is reflected in increased engagement with the Bible and devotional life, in the Mihipiti project the formation is marked by affective and behavioural changes rooted in faith. These findings mean that OBT plays an important role in both cognitive and affective spiritual formation through emotional oral storytelling and daily devotional practices (Francis Mukumbwa, personal interview, 2025).

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of OBT on spiritual formation in Malawi, with a focus on the ongoing OBT projects in the Malokotela and Mihipiti languages in Phalombe District in the areas of traditional authorities Chiwalo and Phweremwe. After reviewing various scholarly works on spiritual formation and Bible translation, the study found that written Bible translation efforts in Malawi have yielded limited results in spiritual formation, because they do not consider the communication preferences of oral audiences. The study then examined the Malokotela and Mihipiti OBT projects, led by The Word for the World International, to assess how OBT impacts spiritual formation in these communities. The findings reveal that OBT has significant potential to improve spiritual formation at both individual and community levels. Several key indicators support this conclusion. In both projects, it was reported that some individuals have come to faith in Christ through their direct or indirect involvement in OBT. In addition, the projects have helped in improving

personal relationships and relationship with God, due to the growing understanding of forgiveness and reliance on God for healing rather than traditional witchdoctors. Based on these findings, the study concludes that OBT deserves increased attention and support for its potential to contribute meaningfully to spiritual formation in oral communities.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*	*Mantswe a bohlokwa*
Scripture engagement	Skrifbetrokkenheid	Mokgwa wa phetolelo wa kgokahano le Beibele
Oral communication	Mondelinge kommunikasie	Puisano ka molomo
Internalisation	Internalisering	Ho kenya ka hare kapa ho amohela
Community transformation	Gemeenskaps-transformasie	Phetoho ya setjhaba