



# SiPhûthî narratives:

Documenting  
oral accounts on  
the past and  
present of the  
language and its  
speakers

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**GBS final report**



## SiPhûthî and its speakers

SiPhûthî (S404, Maho 2009) is a severely endangered South-Eastern Bantu language. It is spoken by baPhûthî communities who live scattered in rural parts of Lesotho and to a lesser extent in adjacent areas in South Africa. Most baPhûthî live in two marginalised and poorly developed districts in south-western Lesotho, namely Quthing and Qacha's Nek. Access to electricity and running water, if available, is often limited; and infrastructure such as housing, roads and schools in this part of Lesotho is very poor.



*Bird's eye view (left) and close-up view (right) of Ha Ramokakatlela, a predominantly siPhûthî-speaking village in the Qacha's Nek district.*

It seems that there has been a drastic decline in the number of siPhûthî speakers in the last 60 years. The estimated number of siPhûthî speakers in the late 1940s, according to Damane (1948:1), was 200,000. The most often quoted current figure suggests 20,000 speakers, however, this is not based on any language census (cf. Donnelly 2007:7). My own impressions based on visits to almost all siPhûthî-speaking villages in Lesotho in 2016 suggest that the actual number of fluent siPhûthî speakers is much lower.

Sesotho – also referred to as Sesotho sa Borwa or Southern Sotho, latter in contrast with Northern Sotho/Pedi – is together with English the official language of Lesotho. SiPhûthî has no official status and does not receive any governmental support.

The decline of siPhûthî and the lack of intergenerational language transmission among an increasing number of households are in large part due to the dominance of Sesotho and intermarriage of baPhûthî with Sesotho speakers. With the notable exception of the Daliwe River Valley, mixed marriages usually trigger a switch from siPhûthî to Sesotho in the home domain. Another important factor that led to the decline of siPhûthî is the religious mission work which started in the first half of the 18th century. BaPhûthî received the word of God through Sesotho and this neglect of siPhûthî by the missionaries resulted in language shift to Sesotho among many baPhûthî communities.

With the exception of a few religious texts, no written materials exist in the language. SiPhûthî is not taught, not even informally. Most teachers allocated to the siPhûthî-speaking areas neither speak nor understand siPhûthî. Today, Sesotho and English are the media of instruction in Lesotho's formal education system. All baPhûthî are fluent in Sesotho, much less so in English. Sesotho is the mother tongue of most baPhûthî and also has a significant impact on the siPhûthî spoken by the younger siPhûthî speakers in the Daliwe River Valley.



***Students at the Daliwe Primary School, Quthing district. The ones standing identified themselves as baPhûthî (left).  
School children from the Daliwe Primary School heading home (right).***





*Map of the siPhûthî-speaking areas in Lesotho and South Africa (Donnelly 2007:2).*

The Daliwe River Valley (marking of Mpapa on map) in the Quthing district is the core area of siPhûthî speakers today. The baPhûthî communities in this valley seem to be the last speakers using siPhûthî on a daily basis. In most

settlements in the valley, siPhûthî is still acquired by children and is often exclusively used in the homes. Other siPhûthî-speaking settlements are dispersed in the Quthing district (predominantly in the Sinxôndô River Valley) and in the Qacha's Nek district. These communities live in language contact settings which are dominated by either Sesotho or Thembu-isiXhosa. It seems that most children in these areas no longer speak siPhûthî but have shifted to Sesotho.

While all baPhûthî have lost their ancestral traditions and culture by adopting Basotho culture, including male and female initiation ceremonies, lifestyle, economy, art, etc., only some baPhûthî have retained the siPhûthî language. The ancestral language siPhûthî is the core marker of baPhûthî identity only in the Daliwe River Valley. Elsewhere, community members assume baPhûthî identity based on ethnic ancestry without reference to language competence in siPhûthî.



*SiPhûthî speakers in Ha Hlaela, Quthing district (left and centre), and in Mosenekeng, Qacha's Nek district (right).*

## The GBS siPhûthî project

The baPhûthî communities in Lesotho asked for support in having their oral narratives and history documented. This was the main objective of the GBS project. Oral narratives were recorded with half a dozen speakers of different ages and gender from various villages in the Quthing and Qacha's Nek districts using audio and video devices. The recordings include diverse topics such as migration, language, culture, education, daily life, songs and prayers. Audio and video files have been edited, transcribed, analysed, glossed and translated into Sesotho and English. They have been archived at the Endangered Languages Archive / ELAR (<https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1102118>). Some

audio/video files are still being processed. The transcriptions, translations and annotations are expected to be completed by the end of 2018. A printable version of the narratives including photos will be produced, and copies will be printed and handed over to the baPhûthî communities in 2019.



*Working with language consultants in Ha Hlaela, Quthing district (left), and Mosenekeng, Qacha's Nek district (right).*

The printable version of the narratives will support literacy in siPhûthî among the still predominantly non-literate baPhûthî. At present, as far as I know, only two community members are writing in siPhûthî. The narratives will help to strengthen ethnic and linguistic self-awareness, but most of all they will be a vital tool in the communities' language maintenance efforts. The narratives will be distributed to schools, community centres, the baPhûthî society (*Ibadlha le baPhuthi*), and all those who have personally contributed to the project and have shown interest. The Morija Museum and Archives as well as the University of Lesotho in Roma will also receive copies.

## Budget

The GBS budget of 1,497 Euros was spent as indicated in the proposal, approx. 1,000 Euros for travel, daily subsistence and accommodation and approx. 500 Euros to compensate language consultants and interpreters.





***One of the main roads in the Qacha's Nek district (left).  
Horses are the most common means of transport in mountainous Lesotho (right).***

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