

LANGUAGE PRESERVATION THROUGH TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS: REVISITING THE *KALANKUWA* FESTIVAL OF NORTHERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language is so important to human existence that man cannot live without it. Thus, a society without language is without culture and identity. Hence, language preservation is a critical component of cultural heritage, facilitating the continuity of identity and tradition within the community. Festivals are part of our traditions, which are longstanding customs and beliefs handed down from our forefathers. They are part of our identities that shape our ways of thinking and behaving within the society. This paper explores the role of the *Kalankuwa* festival in northern Nigeria as an avenue and mechanism for the preservation of the Hausa language. The *Kalankuwa* festival is practiced in different parts of northern Nigeria. It is not religious-oriented but a festival showcasing the agricultural expertise of Hausa communities. The paper reveals that *Kalankuwa* festival helps preserve the Hausa language through socialization and bonding, propagation of cultural heritage, serving as a medium for intergenerational transmission of language, sharing of oral histories, a source of entertainment, and cultural conservation. The *Kalankuwa* also supports the enrichment and preservation of the Hausa language lexicon. Thus, it is important that this festival is celebrated annually as it is an avenue for Hausa language preservation.

Keywords: Language Preservation, Festival, Hausa, *Kalankuwa*

Introduction

Language is an integral part of human societies. It plays a significant role in identity formation and sense of place. Language is a crucial element of human existence and an essential aspect of a community, serving as a marker of identity. It acts as a repository of a people's culture and lifestyle. This is why Bloch and Trager define language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates" (1945:5). Language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a vessel of cultural identity (Baker, 2011). Every language embodies unique worldviews, traditions, and histories, contributing to the cultural fabric of a community. However, with the rapid pace of globalization and the dominance of major world languages, many indigenous languages are experiencing significant erosion, leading to concerns for their survival and revitalization. The issue of language loss or endangerment thereby promotes the need for effective preservation efforts to protect linguistic diversity as a vital aspect of cultural heritage (Krauss, 1992).

Language preservation refers to the conscious efforts that are made to ensure a language's survival, adaptability, and history (Sonowal & Dimapur, 2024). Communication through language is one of the most fundamental needs of human beings. As social creatures, we crave the connection that language provides. However, languages are rapidly disappearing due to factors like globalization, urbanization, and intergenerational transmission gaps. As the world becomes more interconnected, we rely heavily on a few common languages more and more. While this works for internal corporations, it leaves many world languages vulnerable to extinction. Preservation of languages is the active attempt to keep languages from extinction.

Festivals are organized events celebrated by communities to commemorate, promote, or enjoy cultural, artistic, religious, or social activities. Festivals provide an avenue for effective language use, acting as vibrant expressions of cultural identity that can foster the use of native languages. Smith (2010) explains that cultural festivals often encapsulate the traditions, beliefs, and social practices of a community, making them instrumental in reaffirming collective identities and cultural continuity. They create spaces for language use, offering opportunities for the younger generations to engage actively with their linguistic heritage. In this regard, Thomason and Kaufman (1988) opine that languages can survive and thrive in environments that promote cultural expression, thereby serving as a form of resistance against linguistic homogenization.

The *Kalankuwa* Festival in Northern Nigeria is a model for language preservation, particularly in the context of the Hausa-speaking population. The Hausa language is a prominent Chadic language within the Afro-Asiatic family. It has historically been the medium of communication for millions of people in northern Nigeria. The *Kalankuwa* festival is an ancient post-harvest event celebrated annually. It not only marks significant agricultural milestones but also serves as a platform for language, culture, and community members to come together.

Kachru (1992) emphasizes the role of regional and local cultures in language dynamics, suggesting that festivals revitalizing local languages can play a crucial part in broader language preservation. The *Kalankuwa* festival exemplifies this interaction, demonstrating how cultural festivities can effectively engage participants in using the Hausa language through traditional

performances and communal interactions. By exploring the linguistic activities associated with the festival, this study aims to shed light on the potential of cultural events in mitigating the effects of language endangerment, thus contributing to the scholarly dialogue on language preservation strategies. In line with the above, this paper seeks to highlight the significance of cultural festivals, particularly the *Kalankuwa* festival, in the sustainable preservation of Indigenous languages like Hausa, proposing that such celebrations can bolster community identity and linguistic vitality in the face of modern challenges.

Language Preservation: Importance and Challenges

Foundation for Endangered Languages defines Language preservation as all efforts made to protect, maintain, and revitalize endangered languages and also prevent them from becoming extinct. Language preservation is becoming a serious issue as many languages around the world face the threat of extinction. Several instances of language loss have occurred around the world. Ethnologue, the most authoritative source on languages of the world, corroborates this by stating that fewer than 10,000 people speak 52 percent of languages, 28 percent are spoken by fewer than 1000, and 83 percent are spoken only in single countries, and so are particularly exposed to the policies of a single government.

One good example of language decline is the case of Latin, which was once a dominant language in Europe but has since declined in usage due to the rise of other languages such as French, Spanish, Italian and German. Other examples are the cases of Native American languages, many of which have become endangered due to colonialism, forced assimilation policies, and cultural genocide. Similarly, in Africa, many indigenous languages are also facing extinction due to globalization, urbanization, and colonization. One of the countries facing this problem is Nigeria.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with around 550 languages (Akindele 2019). Most of these languages remain undocumented and undescribed, with many highly endangered and some already extinct. Also, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization UNESCO (2003), from facts published in their Atlas of endangered languages, 7000 languages are spoken around the world, and about 2500 or more are endangered. Among these, 29 Nigerian languages are listed as endangered (Gaji and Lawn 2024). However, this number may not accurately reflect the current situation due to the lack of updated and comprehensive data. Based on these outcomes, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/135 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples declared 2022–2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022–2032), with UNESCO as the lead agency. The importance of language as an expression of culture, of who we are as a people, must be upheld by each individual, each family, each community, and each nation. As Fishman (1996) states, language is the mind, spirit, and soul of a people. Language and culture are woven together. Language reflects what is important to those who speak it. In turn, language adapts as societies grow and change. When languages are lost, culture is lost with them. Hence, every effort must be made to protect and preserve languages.

Preserving Languages encode complex systems of thought, worldviews, and significations; they are bearers of environments, histories, literature, ethics, and geographies. Similarly, Riehl

(2019) observes that language loss is also related to community identity, collective purpose, and self-determination. While hard to quantify, such losses have real, detrimental effects on health and quality of life. Conversely, the ability of community members to speak their indigenous language together enhances well-being. Hence, the disappearance of a language may seem like an unfortunate loss only to the people involved. However, the impact on everyone is real and substantial.

Based on this, there have been language preservation efforts around the world, such as the establishment of language centers, the production of educational materials, and the promotion of multilingual education systems (Maalouf, 2024). These initiatives aim to protect and promote the local language while also providing access to education for all students regardless of their first language. However, other ways to preserve language are through cultural events like festivals.

Even though language preservation is important, it is not without challenges. Smith (2024) explains that language preservation is riddled with problems, such as economic globalization, which has reduced the need for small communities to rely on their indigenous languages. As a result, the domain of indigenous language use is weak. Urbanization is shifting global population patterns, and most indigenous peoples have been assimilated into the dominant culture.

An Overview of Hausa Language and Culture

Hausa is classified as a member of the Chadic group of the Afro-Asiatic family of languages (Kraft and Kirk-Green 1994). Cole & Mark (1991) explain that Hausa is one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa and is spoken by 50 million people, as a first language by about 25 million people, and as a second language by about 18 million more. Hausa is one of Africa's most commonly spoken languages after Arabic, French, English, Portuguese, and Swahili. It is a lingua franca and a language of trade in West Africa. It is spoken in countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Mali, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Eritrea, Germany, Ghana, Sudan and Togo. In Nigeria, the Hausas comprise the largest ethnic group. As a result of this, they are in an inevitable position as partners in trading activities (Limbs & Amp; Fort 2000). Today, 25 million Hausas live in Northern Nigeria, and they reside in states like Kaduna, Kano, Jigawa, Katsina, Zamfara, and Sokoto, where they speak it as a first language (Ogundiran 2012). The language is also used as a lingua franca in parts of the north, like Kebbi, Kwara, and Borno. Hausa culture and the environment are based on Islamic settings. The introduction of Islam into the Hausa land has really influenced their material and non-material culture in terms of family matters, clothing, arts, architecture, housing, human habitation, and tradecrafts (Zalanga 2000). However, the primary occupations of the Hausa community are trading, agriculture, and commerce.

The *Kalankuwa* Festival and its Significance in the Hausa Community

A lot of festivals in the Hausa communities are celebrated for specific purposes within a stipulated time. The *Kalankuwa* Festival, celebrated by the Hausa community, is a vibrant cultural event that showcases the communities' heritage. It is an ancient post-harvest celebration that marks the end of the farming season. It brings together farmers, traditional

leaders, and agricultural stakeholders to honour the rich heritage of farming and food production. It is celebrated annually after the harvest season, called *Kaka*, around November-December. In addition, the festival showcases a vibrant display of traditional performances, cultural exhibitions, and community celebrations that portray the deep-rooted connection between agriculture and tradition. *Kalankuwa*, as explained by Kofoworola and Lateef (1987), is characterized by imitation play or dramatization in the Hausa tradition performed in an open space. The *Kalankuwa* festival is a cultural festival and, as such, has no relation to the Islamic religion. It is a festival that lasts a week and is filled with interactive, entertaining, and educative cultural activities. The festival is a community-based event that is mainly organized by the *matasa* (youth) of the community.

Hausa Language Preservation through *Kalankuwa* Festival

Festivals play a crucial role in preserving language by providing vibrant platforms for cultural expression and linguistic diversity. They are more than just celebrations; they are vital cornerstones of cultural heritage that play an essential role in the utilization and preservation of language. Newell (2013) explains that language is the roadmap to culture. When a language disappears, unique ways of knowing, understanding, and experiencing the world are lost forever.

The *Kalankuwa* festival serves as a dynamic platform for the natural and dynamic use of the Hausa language, fostering a sense of inclusion and oneness among the members of the community. People from different neighbouring communities visit and also participate in the celebration. The festival usually takes place in a large open space to allow people to showcase their wares and other activities. It is like a life stage, where you have a court, a police station, market men participants, and an audience mingling together. The planning of the festival starts at the beginning of the rainy season. The *matasa maza* (male youth) requests for *gayauna* (a portion of farmland) from their parents in order to plant what they will need for the celebration while the female youth *yanmata* rear animals, which they sell for the event. *Goron gayata* (invitations) are shared with people to attend the event. Some of the activities that take place in the *Kalankuwa* festival include:

As part of the celebration, *yanmata* (female youths) present their *Samari* (boyfriends) with *Badago* (varieties of cooked food), which they reciprocate by giving them different types of gifts.

Manoma (local farmers) from within and outside the community exhibit their best farm produce for sale to the audience.

Yan dambe (local boxers) and *yan kaukowa* (local wrestlers) from within and outside the communities take part in wrestling and boxing competitions.

Makada (local drummers) and *mawaka* (singers) from the community also entertain the audience with drumming and praise singing.

Display of skills by the *yan tauri* (knife-resistant individual) who have inherited the skills of brandishing and playing with sharp knives from parents.

Mafarauta (local hunters) displayed their skills with many dogs and hunting tools, such as *kwari da baka* (bow and arrow), *wukake* (knives), and *takubba* (spears).

Maroka (praise singers) also display their chanting and singing, praising the *yan dambe* and other festival participants.

Yan babule (fire warriors) also participate by playing with life fire, showing their skills. *Wan san kwaikwayo* (dramatization) by the youth on societal issues to entertain the audience.

All the above-mentioned activities are presented through the use of the Hausa language. Thus, the *Kalankuwa* festival is an essential cultural event for the community, serving as a platform for language preservation and cultural expression. According to Crystal (2000), language preservation is critical in maintaining cultural identity, specifically in the current face of globalization, which poses a significant threat to indigenous languages. Hence, the *Kalankuwa* festival plays a pivotal role in this regard as it showcases the Hausa language through songs, dances, acting, and communal interactions, where the language is vibrantly used and cherished. The *Kalankuwa* festival also acts as a dynamic avenue for intergenerational transmission of language. Fishman 1991 posits that cultural events serve as arenas that promote the use of minority languages in public and social contexts, thereby reinforcing their vitality. At the *Kalankuwa* festival, people not only engage in traditional performances but also share oral histories and proverbs that enrich the Hausa language lexicon. Enriching the lexicon helps preserve the language. As a communal celebration, *Kalankuwa* festival fosters a sense of pride and oneness among the speakers of the Hausa language, encouraging the younger generation to accept and use the language in everyday life. This can be seen in the partnership between the Institute for Agricultural Research (IAR) Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and *Bomo Samarin Manoma* (young male farmers) from the Bomo community in Zaria in the just concluded *Kalankuwa* festival held in February 2025. The collaboration was between the youth and the university. Similarly, the *Kalankuwa* festival enhances the community's awareness of their linguistic heritage through traditional practices and communal values. Through traditional practices such as dramatization, singing, praise singing and other cultural activities at the festival, the Hausa linguistic heritage is preserved. Thus, the *Kalankuwa* festival shows how cultural celebrations shape language attitudes, ensuring that the Hausa language remains a living entity within its community.

Conclusion

The *Kalankuwa* festival serves as a powerful tool for language preservation, promoting the Hausa language and culture through active participation and community engagement. It is an example of an important medium for Hausa language preservation in Northern Nigeria. By reinforcing cultural identity and linguistic pride, such festivals are essential for sustaining and preserving languages in this rapidly globalizing world. In light of this, it is imperative that festivals like *Kalankuwa* are celebrated and maintained in the community.

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