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PRACTICES OF PRESERVING NATIVE NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND CULTURE FOR SEVERAL GENERATIONS

Dr. Joshua Orabiyi, Ph.D
Department of European Languages and Integration Studies
University of Lagos, Nigeria
orabiyijoshua@gmail.com
&
Prof. Aigbovia Kessington, Ph.D
Department of European Languages and Integration Studies
University of Lagos, Nigeria
kaigbovia@unilag.edu.ng
&
Dr. Harrison Imafu Okao, Ph.D
Department of Public Administration
University of Benin, Nigeria
kessingtonaigbovia@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria, a nation of immense linguistic and cultural diversity, faces increasing challenges in preserving its indigenous languages and traditions amid globalization and modernization. This article examines the various mechanisms through which native Nigerian languages and cultures are sustained across generations. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology drawing from historical analysis, sociolinguistic theory, and cultural studies the study explores cultural practices, oral traditions, religious systems, literature, diaspora engagement, institutional frameworks, and technological innovations as key preservation tools. By analyzing both historical contexts and contemporary strategies, the study highlights the resilience and adaptability of indigenous identities. The findings reveal that effective preservation depends on a multi-dimensional, community-driven, and institutionally supported approach. The study concludes that sustained intergenerational transmission, supported by education, diaspora involvement, and digital innovation, remains essential for safeguarding Nigeria's linguistic and cultural heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Preservation, Nigeria, Identity, Education.

Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a repository of a people's history, worldview, philosophy, and identity. Culture, on the other hand, represents the total way of life of a people, encompassing beliefs, values, customs, arts, and social institutions. In Nigeria, language and culture are deeply intertwined, forming the bedrock of communal identity and continuity across generations. However, in the face of globalization, urbanization, and the increasing dominance of global languages such as English, many indigenous Nigerian languages face the risk of extinction.

Nigeria is home to over 500 indigenous languages, making it one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world (Ethnologue, 2023). Despite this richness, many of these

languages are endangered due to declining intergenerational transmission. Younger generations, especially in urban areas, are increasingly adopting English or Nigerian Pidgin as their primary means of communication, often at the expense of their native tongues. This shift is not merely linguistic but cultural, as the loss of language inevitably leads to the erosion of cultural practices and traditional knowledge systems.

The preservation of native languages and cultures is therefore not only a cultural imperative but also a developmental necessity. Languages carry indigenous knowledge systems, including agricultural practices, medicinal knowledge, and social governance structures. Losing these languages means losing invaluable knowledge accumulated over centuries.

This article explores the various practices that contribute to the preservation of Nigerian languages and culture across generations. It examines traditional methods such as storytelling and cultural rituals, as well as modern approaches including formal education, diaspora engagement, and digital technology. By analyzing these mechanisms, the study aims to highlight sustainable strategies for maintaining Nigeria's linguistic and cultural heritage.

Nigeria as a Multicultural and Multilingual Nation

Nigeria's identity as a multicultural and multilingual nation is one of its most defining characteristics. With over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages, the country represents a vast mosaic of cultures, traditions, and linguistic systems. This diversity is not accidental but is the result of centuries of migration, trade, conquest, and cultural interaction. Before colonial rule, the geographical space now known as Nigeria consisted of numerous independent ethnic groups and kingdoms, each with its own language and cultural system. These groups developed distinct identities shaped by their environment and historical experiences. For instance, the Hausa states in the north were heavily influenced by trans-Saharan trade and Islamic scholarship, which contributed to the spread of the Hausa language as a regional lingua franca. In contrast, the Yoruba civilization in the southwest developed around city-states such as Ife and Oyo, with a rich tradition of art, religion, and oral literature. The Igbo society in the southeast, characterized by its decentralized political structure, exhibited significant linguistic diversity, with numerous dialects reflecting the autonomy of different communities. Similarly, minority groups across the Niger Delta, Middle Belt, and other regions developed unique languages and cultural systems that contribute to Nigeria's diversity.

The colonial period marked a turning point in Nigeria's linguistic landscape. The introduction of English as the language of administration, education, and commerce created a hierarchy of languages, with English occupying a dominant position. While this facilitated communication across diverse groups, it also marginalized indigenous languages, which were often excluded from formal domains.

Post-independence Nigeria has struggled to balance its linguistic diversity with the need for national unity. Efforts have been made to promote major languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo in education and media, but many minority languages remain under threat. Urbanization and migration have further complicated the situation, as people from different linguistic backgrounds interact and often adopt more widely spoken languages for convenience.

Despite these challenges, Nigeria's multilingualism remains a source of cultural richness and resilience. It fosters creativity, adaptability, and a deep sense of identity among its people. However, preserving this diversity requires deliberate and sustained efforts at both individual and institutional levels.

Historical Background of Selected Nigerian Languages

The history of Nigerian languages is deeply intertwined with the broader history of the peoples who speak them. Understanding the origins and evolution of these languages provides valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of Nigerian society.

The Hausa language, one of the most widely spoken languages in West Africa, belongs to the Afroasiatic language family. Its history is closely linked to the rise of the Hausa city-states and the trans-Saharan trade network. Hausa developed as a lingua franca due to its use in trade and Islamic scholarship. The introduction of Islam brought Arabic influence, leading to the development of the Ajami script, which was used for writing Hausa before the adoption of the Latin alphabet during colonial rule.

Yoruba, a Niger-Congo language, has a rich history rooted in the ancient city of Ile-Ife, regarded as the spiritual and cultural center of the Yoruba people. The language evolved alongside the political and cultural expansion of the Oyo Empire. Yoruba is known for its tonal system and its extensive use of proverbs, poetry, and oral narratives. The development of a standardized orthography in the 19th century by Christian missionaries facilitated its use in written literature and education.

Igbo, also part of the Niger-Congo family, is characterized by its numerous dialects, reflecting the decentralized nature of Igbo society. Efforts to standardize the language began in the 20th century, leading to the development of Standard Igbo. The language has a rich oral tradition, including folktales, proverbs, and songs, which play a crucial role in cultural transmission.

Other languages, such as Tiv, Kanuri, and Efik, also have significant historical importance. These languages have evolved through interactions with neighboring groups, trade, and migration. Each language carries unique cultural knowledge and historical experiences, making their preservation essential for understanding Nigeria's past and present.

Cultural Practices

Cultural practices remain one of the most effective and enduring means of preserving native Nigerian languages across generations. These practices are embedded in everyday life and social structures, ensuring that language is not only spoken but lived. Among these, endogamy, or internal marriage within ethnic groups, plays a critical role. When individuals marry within their cultural group, the likelihood of maintaining the native language within the household increases significantly. Children raised in such environments are more likely to acquire the language as their first language and internalize the associated cultural norms.

Beyond marriage, naming ceremonies are vital cultural events that reinforce language use. In many Nigerian societies, names are not arbitrary but carry deep meanings, often reflecting circumstances of birth, family history, or spiritual beliefs. These meanings are best understood within the linguistic context in which they were created. Thus, naming ceremonies become opportunities for linguistic education and cultural reinforcement.

Festivals also play a central role in language preservation. Events such as the New Yam Festival among the Igbo or traditional Yoruba festivals serve as platforms for communal gathering, storytelling, music, and dance, all conducted in the native language. These festivals create immersive environments where younger generations experience their culture firsthand.

Rites of passage, including initiation ceremonies, weddings, and funerals, are equally important. These events often involve traditional songs, chants, and speeches delivered in indigenous languages. They serve as practical contexts in which language is used meaningfully and memorably.

Traditional governance systems, such as councils of elders and chieftaincy institutions, also contribute to language preservation. Deliberations and judgments are often conducted in the native language, reinforcing its authority and relevance.

In essence, cultural practices ensure that language remains an integral part of social life. They provide natural and continuous opportunities for language use, making them indispensable tools for preservation.

Stories and Myths

Oral tradition is one of the oldest and most powerful methods of preserving language and culture in Nigeria. Stories, myths, legends, and folktales serve not only as entertainment but also as educational tools that transmit cultural values, moral lessons, and historical knowledge from one generation to the next.

In many Nigerian communities, storytelling is a communal activity often conducted in the evenings. Elders narrate stories in the native language, using expressive techniques such as gestures, songs, and audience participation. These storytelling sessions create an engaging learning environment where children acquire language skills naturally.

Myths and legends often explain the origins of a people, their customs, and their relationship with the natural and spiritual worlds. For example, creation myths among various ethnic groups provide insight into their worldview and belief systems. These narratives are deeply embedded in the language, making translation into other languages inadequate for capturing their full meaning.

Proverbs are another essential component of oral tradition. They encapsulate wisdom and cultural values in concise and memorable forms. Mastery of proverbs is often seen as a mark of linguistic competence and cultural maturity.

Oral tradition also adapts to changing contexts. While traditional storytelling may be declining in some urban areas, modern media such as radio, television, and social media are being used to revive and disseminate these narratives.

Thus, stories and myths serve as living archives of language and culture, ensuring their continuity across generations.

Religious Practices

Religion plays a crucial role in the preservation of native languages in Nigeria. Indigenous religious practices, in particular, rely heavily on native languages for rituals, prayers, and ceremonies. These practices require precise linguistic expressions, as meanings are often tied to specific words and phrases.

Even with the spread of Christianity and Islam, indigenous languages remain relevant. In many churches and mosques, sermons, hymns, and teachings are delivered in local languages to ensure accessibility and engagement. Translations of religious texts into indigenous languages have also contributed to literacy and language preservation.

Religious festivals and ceremonies provide regular opportunities for language use. They bring communities together and reinforce shared beliefs and cultural identity.

In essence, religion serves as both a spiritual and cultural institution that supports language preservation.

Books and Literature

Written literature is a critical tool for preserving language beyond oral transmission. The development of orthographies for Nigerian languages has enabled the production of books, educational materials, and literary works in indigenous languages.

Authors and scholars have contributed significantly to this effort. Literature written in native languages not only preserves vocabulary and grammar but also reflects cultural themes and perspectives. Translations of global texts into indigenous languages further enrich their literary landscape.

Educational systems also play a role by incorporating indigenous languages into curricula. Textbooks, dictionaries, and language guides support formal learning and documentation. Thus, literature ensures the longevity and accessibility of languages across generations.

Diaspora Ethnic Groups and Intergenerational Transmission Abroad

Diaspora communities represent one of the most dynamic and evolving spaces for the preservation of Nigerian languages and culture. As migration increases due to education, employment, and globalization, millions of Nigerians now reside across Europe, North America, Asia, and other parts of Africa. While migration can pose a threat to language retention, especially among second- and third-generation children it has also given rise to intentional and structured efforts to preserve linguistic and cultural identity outside Nigeria. Organizations such as Ohaneze Ndi Igbo, Yoruba cultural associations, Hausa community unions, and various ethnic development groups play a crucial role in this process. These organizations often function as cultural anchors, organizing festivals, language classes, naming ceremonies, weddings, and traditional celebrations in host countries. However, beyond organizing events, their most critical function lies in ensuring that children born and raised abroad do not lose connection with their linguistic heritage.

One of the primary strategies used is structured language teaching for children. Weekend schools, community classes, and informal home tutoring are increasingly common among

diaspora families. Parents and community leaders deliberately create environments where children are encouraged or required to speak their native language. In many cases, rules are established within households where indigenous languages are spoken at home while English or the host country's language is used outside.

Cultural immersion is also reinforced through participation in traditional events. Children are dressed in traditional attire, taught cultural greetings, and introduced to songs, dances, and folklore. These activities are not merely symbolic; they create emotional and social connections that reinforce identity. Language, in this context, becomes a lived experience rather than an abstract concept.

Another critical strategy is the use of digital diaspora networks. WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, Zoom classes, and online storytelling sessions now connect children across continents. Elders in Nigeria can interact directly with diaspora children, telling stories, teaching proverbs, and correcting pronunciation in real time. This digital bridge has significantly reduced the gap between homeland and diaspora.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Children born abroad often face identity conflicts and may prioritize the dominant language of their environment. Peer pressure, school systems, and societal integration can reduce motivation to learn indigenous languages. However, when parents and communities adopt consistent and intentional strategies, the results are significantly improved.

Ultimately, diaspora communities demonstrate that language preservation is not limited by geography. Instead, it depends on intentional transmission, structured engagement, and emotional connection. When children abroad are actively taught, involved, and immersed, they become not just passive inheritors but active custodians of Nigerian linguistic heritage.

Institutional Support and Educational Frameworks

Institutional support remains one of the most critical pillars in the long-term preservation of Nigerian languages and culture. While informal transmission within families and communities is essential, sustainable preservation requires structured systems backed by educational institutions, government policies, and cultural organizations.

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education emphasizes the importance of mother-tongue instruction, particularly in early childhood education. The policy recommends that children be taught in their first language during the formative years, as this enhances cognitive development, comprehension, and cultural grounding. However, despite this policy, implementation has been inconsistent due to factors such as inadequate teacher training, lack of instructional materials, and the dominance of English in formal settings.

Universities and higher institutions play a significant role by offering degree programs in Nigerian languages such as Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Tiv, and others. These programs contribute to the standardization, documentation, and academic study of indigenous languages. Linguistic research conducted in these institutions helps preserve endangered languages by recording grammar, vocabulary, and oral traditions.

Cultural institutions, including museums, language institutes, and research centers, also contribute to preservation efforts. Organizations such as the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) focus specifically on promoting the study and use of indigenous languages. These institutions develop curricula, publish materials, and organize conferences that bring attention to language preservation.

In addition, primary and secondary schools increasingly incorporate cultural studies into their curricula. Cultural clubs, drama societies, and language competitions provide practical avenues for students to engage with their heritage. When students perform plays, recite poems, or debate in indigenous languages, they gain confidence and competence.

Religious institutions also function as informal educational centers. Churches and mosques often provide literacy programs and teachings in local languages, reinforcing their use among both children and adults.

However, for institutional support to be truly effective, there must be policy enforcement, funding, and modernization. Teaching materials need to be digitized, teachers need specialized training, and languages must be integrated into modern disciplines such as science and technology.

Ultimately, institutions provide the structure, legitimacy, and continuity needed to sustain language preservation efforts. Without them, preservation remains fragmented; with them, it becomes systematic and scalable.

Media, Technology, and Social Media Expansion

The rise of digital media and technology has revolutionized the preservation and spread of Nigerian languages in unprecedented ways. Unlike traditional methods that rely on physical proximity and direct interaction, modern technology enables languages to transcend geographical boundaries and reach global audiences instantly.

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) have become powerful tools for language promotion. Content creators now produce videos, skits, tutorials, and commentary in indigenous languages, making them appealing and accessible to younger audiences. For example, comedy skits in Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa not only entertain but also normalize the use of these languages in modern contexts.

Language learning apps and online platforms further support preservation efforts. Mobile applications now offer vocabulary lessons, pronunciation guides, and interactive exercises in Nigerian languages. These tools are particularly valuable for diaspora communities and urban youth who may not have direct access to native speakers.

Radio and television remain influential, especially in rural areas. Indigenous language broadcasting ensures that communities continue to hear and use their languages daily. News programs, talk shows, and cultural documentaries reinforce linguistic relevance and provide a sense of identity.

One of the most significant impacts of technology is the creation of digital archives. Oral histories, folktales, songs, and proverbs are now recorded and stored online, ensuring that they are not lost. Scholars and cultural organizations are digitizing manuscripts and audio recordings, making them accessible to future generations.

Social media also fosters interactive engagement. Users can comment, share, and participate in discussions in their native languages, creating virtual communities that sustain linguistic practice. Hashtags, challenges, and trends in indigenous languages encourage widespread participation.

However, technology also presents challenges. The dominance of English and other global languages online can overshadow indigenous languages. Additionally, many Nigerian languages lack standardized digital tools such as keyboards and spell-check systems.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities far outweigh the limitations. Technology has made language preservation more inclusive, dynamic, and youth-driven. It ensures that indigenous languages are not confined to tradition but evolve alongside modern communication trends.

Travelling Home Periodically and Intergenerational Immersion

One of the most practical and impactful strategies for preserving Nigerian languages and culture especially among diaspora families is periodic return to the homeland and intentional intergenerational immersion. While digital tools and diaspora organizations play significant roles, nothing replaces the depth of cultural experience gained through direct exposure to the native environment.

Travelling home periodically allows children born and raised abroad to experience their culture in its most authentic form. Language, in this context, is not taught artificially but acquired naturally through daily interactions. Children hear the language spoken in markets, homes, religious centers, and social gatherings, reinforcing both comprehension and usage.

A particularly effective approach is the deliberate decision by parents to allow children to spend extended periods with grandparents or relatives in Nigeria. This immersion creates a powerful linguistic and cultural learning environment. Grandparents often serve as custodians of tradition, possessing deep knowledge of language, proverbs, stories, and customs. Through daily interaction, children absorb not only vocabulary but also cultural nuances, respect systems, and social values.

This practice also strengthens emotional and identity connections. Children who experience life in their ancestral communities develop a sense of belonging that cannot be replicated through virtual means. They begin to understand their heritage not as an abstract concept but as a lived reality.

Moreover, immersion exposes children to cultural practices such as festivals, ceremonies, and communal living, which are often absent in diaspora settings. Participation in these activities reinforces language use in meaningful contexts.

However, this approach requires intentional planning and commitment. Travel costs, academic schedules, and safety concerns can pose challenges. Nevertheless, many families consider it a worthwhile investment in their children's identity and future.

In essence, periodic return and intergenerational immersion provide a holistic preservation method, combining language acquisition, cultural education, and emotional connection. It bridges the gap between generations and ensures that heritage is not only remembered but lived and sustained.

Conclusion

The preservation of native Nigerian languages and culture is not a passive process but a deliberate, continuous, and multi-layered effort that spans generations, institutions, and geographical boundaries. As this study has demonstrated, Nigeria's linguistic diversity while a source of immense cultural wealth faces increasing pressure from globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of global languages such as English. These forces, if left unchecked, could lead to the gradual erosion and eventual extinction of many indigenous languages. However, the resilience of Nigerian communities, both within the country and in the diaspora, offers a strong foundation for sustainable preservation.

One of the most important insights from this study is that language preservation thrives best when it is integrated into everyday life. Cultural practices such as marriage systems, festivals, naming ceremonies, and traditional governance structures ensure that language remains functional and relevant. Similarly, oral traditions, stories, myths, and proverbs continue to serve as living archives of cultural knowledge, transmitting values and identity from one generation to the next.

Equally significant is the role of religion and literature, which provide structured and enduring platforms for language use. Religious institutions, through sermons, hymns, and teachings, reinforce the use of indigenous languages, while written literature ensures their documentation and accessibility. These formalized expressions of language help bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

The role of diaspora communities cannot be overstated. Nigerians living abroad have demonstrated remarkable commitment to preserving their linguistic heritage, particularly through intentional transmission to children born outside the country. By organizing cultural events, establishing language schools, and leveraging digital platforms, these communities ensure that distance does not equate to disconnection. More importantly, practices such as periodic travel to Nigeria and extended stays with grandparents provide immersive experiences that deepen linguistic competence and cultural understanding. These intergenerational exchanges are invaluable, as they allow children to experience their heritage in its most authentic form.

Furthermore, institutional support remains a cornerstone of sustainable preservation. Educational systems, government policies, and cultural organizations provide the structure, resources, and legitimacy needed to promote indigenous languages. However, for these efforts to be effective, there must be consistent implementation, adequate funding, and

adaptation to modern realities. Integrating indigenous languages into science, technology, and digital education will ensure their relevance in contemporary society.

In the modern era, media and technology have emerged as transformative tools for language preservation. Social media platforms, digital archives, and online learning resources have expanded the reach of Nigerian languages beyond physical boundaries. They have also made language learning more appealing to younger generations, who are increasingly engaged in digital spaces. By embracing technology, Nigerian languages can evolve and thrive rather than become relics of the past.

Ultimately, the preservation of Nigerian languages and culture requires a holistic and collaborative approach. Families, communities, institutions, and governments must work together, supported by technology and sustained by cultural pride. Language must not only be taught but lived, experienced, and valued.

In conclusion, the future of Nigerian languages lies in intentional transmission, adaptive innovation, and deep cultural commitment. When these elements come together, preservation becomes not just possible but inevitable. By strengthening these interconnected systems, Nigeria can ensure that its rich linguistic and cultural heritage continues to flourish, not only within its borders but across the world, for generations yet unborn.

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