

## LANGUAGE AS A CARRIER OF CULTURE: PRESERVING NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS HERITAGE THROUGH LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

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### **Abstract**

*Language and culture share a profound and inseparable connection, as explored in this article. Beyond functioning as a mere tool for communication, language serves as a vital carrier of indigenous knowledge systems, ethical frameworks, and worldviews. As the loss of indigenous languages accelerates worldwide, there is increasing concern about the erosion of cultural identity and the power dynamics that give pre-eminence to dominant languages. This article adopts an interdisciplinary approach to investigate how languages preserve cultural content, the consequences of their disappearance, and practical measures (educational, technological, and policy-driven) to revive endangered tongues. Focusing on Nigeria's linguistic marginalization alongside global case studies, it reveals how languages act as repositories of heritage, embodying centuries of collective memory and sociocultural wisdom. Preserving them is essential not only for maintaining diversity but also for ensuring future generations access the rich cultural tapestry encoded within these linguistic systems. The article underscores proactive revitalization efforts as key to safeguarding humanity's shared legacy.*

**Keywords:** *Language, Culture, Indigenous, Revitalization, Heritage, Nigeria*

### **Résumé**

Cet article examine le lien indissociable entre la langue et la culture, en soutenant que la langue n'est pas simplement un outil de communication, mais un vecteur essentiel des savoirs autochtones, des valeurs éthiques et des visions du monde. Face au déclin mondial des langues autochtones, leur érosion menace l'identité culturelle et renforce la domination des langues majoritaires. L'étude explore comment ces langues préservent une sagesse naturelle unique, les croyances spirituelles et les traditions sociales, servant d'archives vivantes du patrimoine culturel. En se fiant à la diversité linguistique du Nigéria, elle analyse les conséquences de la disparition des langues et les stratégies de revitalisation, notamment l'éducation en langue maternelle, la préservation numérique, les réformes politiques et les initiatives communautaires. Les proverbes, les traditions

orales et les termes intraduisibles renferment des savoirs spécialisés, comme en médecine et en agriculture, souvent absents des langues dominantes. L'article affirme que la revitalisation linguistique ne vise pas seulement à préserver la culture, mais aussi à protéger la diversité intellectuelle de l'humanité, à favoriser le dialogue interculturel et à transmettre aux générations futures la sagesse ancestrale pour relever les défis contemporains. Une action urgente est nécessaire pour sauvegarder les langues menacées avant leur disparition.

**Mots-clés** : Langue, Culture, Autochtone, Revitalisation, Patrimoine, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Language and culture are deeply connected. Language goes beyond being just a means of communication - it holds the collective memory, identity, and worldview of a people. Culture, on the other hand, includes the everyday customs, beliefs, values, and ways of life that shape a community. In this close relationship, language not only conveys culture but also reflects and shapes it. As Nigerian linguist Ayo Bamgbose (1991) points out, African languages serve as “repositories of communal memory and conceptual worldview.” This reminds us that language doesn't simply echo culture - it plays a central role in shaping how people understand their world and relate to it.

This article argues that language should be seen as more than just a tool for passing on information - it is an effective way to share cultural identity. Indigenous languages, in particular, hold traditional knowledge, local history, and ways of thinking passed down through generations. In Nigeria, where more than 500 languages are spoken across a rich blend of ethnic groups, each language reflects its own worldview, values, and social structures. Upon the death of a language, it's not only the words that are lost, but an entire way of understanding the world.

This issue is more pressing than ever. UNESCO (2022) reports that nearly 40% of the world's languages are at risk of disappearing - and a large number of these are spoken in Africa. In Nigeria, languages like Ukaan, Ikaan, and Mpotovori are already on the verge of extinction. Factors such as globalization, rural-to-urban migration, and education systems that prioritize colonial languages like English are accelerating the decline of native tongues. As these languages decline, so too does the cultural wisdom they carry. Without timely, locally triggered efforts to preserve them, a whole body of indigenous knowledge could be lost forever.

This article is organized into four main parts. The first section, "Language and Cultural Identities," looks at how language shapes the way people see the world and interact with others. It draws from linguistic anthropology and African philosophy to show that language is more than words - it's a framework for understanding life. The second section, "Knowledge Systems Embedded in Language," explains how indigenous Nigerian languages pass down traditional values, customs, and knowledge across generations. The third part, "Threats to Indigenous Languages and Cultures," examines the current challenges these languages face, including the impact of policy choices, economic pressures, and weakened institutional support. The final section, "Revitalization and Policy Responses," offers practical approaches to help preserve endangered Nigerian languages. It focuses on community-driven efforts and the importance of using local languages in schools and the media. All together, these sections highlight why language matters in keeping cultural identity and heritage alive.

## **Language and Cultural Identity**

### ***Language as a Cultural Lens***

The power of language goes beyond spoken words - it influences how we understand and interpret the world. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity, suggests that the way a language is structured can influence how its speakers think and perceive reality (Whorf, 1956). Although scholars debate the extent of this influence, there is a broad consensus that language plays a strong role in upholding cultural patterns. A word or expression that exists in one language and which does not have a direct translation in another often reflects a culturally distinct way of thinking or living with that culture.

In Nigerian languages, lexical gaps (untranslatable words) are not random; they function as cultural markers. For instance, the Igbo word “*umūnna*,” which technically refers to a kin group bound by common male ancestry, also conveys deeper meanings tied to unity, mutual obligation, and collective identity - far richer than the Western idea of an “extended family” (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1994). In Hausa, the term “*kunya*” is often translated as “shame” or “modesty,” but it represents much more - it’s a moral code that shapes how people show respect, especially across age and gender lines (Abdullahi, 2001). In Yoruba, the word “*Àṣẹ*” goes well beyond a simple “so be it.” It conveys spiritual authority and reflects a wider belief in the power of words to shape reality and uphold cosmic balance (Oyèṭádé & Luke, 2008).

These expressions illustrate how language carries cultural frameworks - deeply rooted ways of thinking that influence how people interpret life and behave within their communities. They’re not hard to translate because they’re vague or unfamiliar, but because they come with built-in histories, values, and social expectations that are specific to the cultures

they come from. To accurately comprehend how a people perceive the world, one must first understand their language.

### ***Oral Traditions and Collective Memory***

Oral traditions have been the principal intermediary means of diffusing communal history, values, and cultural memory, in many African societies, particularly among Nigerian communities. Proverbs, idioms, folktales, and praise poetry are not merely forms of entertainment; they are storehouses of wisdom and identity commonly shared within a community.

For instance, among the Yoruba, the proverb “*Bí a kò bá gbó, a kò lè mọ*” (“If we do not hear, we cannot know”) highlights the importance of learning from the elders - which is a source of intergenerational knowledge transfer. In the Igbo culture, the saying “*The onye metere ka o ga-erite*” (“What one sows is what one will reap”) conveys moral accountability and a worldview founded in justice and reciprocity (Okolo, 2007).

In the same vein, Hausa oral narratives known as *tatsuniya* communicate encoded instructions on social harmony, resilience, and moral conduct. These accounts, often expressed by the community elders, serve as soft learning tools, imparting common values from a young age. Within these accounts are linguistic codes that strengthen identity - metaphors, tonal shifts, and standard expressions that are challenging to reproduce in other languages without eroding their cultural principle.

Furthermore, oral tradition plays a central role in supporting communal memory. In the absence of written records for many precolonial Nigerian societies, language was the reference point of the people - used to preserve family trees, migration accounts, royal ancestries, and astral

beliefs. Similarly, nowadays, town criers, griots, and traditional storytellers continue to serve as living libraries, ensuring intergenerational continuity despite modernization.

Thus, through these oral forms, language transcends mere speech to become a cultural pathfinder- one whose erosion risks severing ties to ancestral wisdom. The moment indigenous languages decline, this intergenerational knowledge vanishes or is distorted, and with it, the distinctive moral and philosophical structures that define a people.

## **Knowledge Systems Embedded in Language**

### ***Ecological and Medicinal Knowledge***

Indigenous languages are not merely channels for daily communication; they are intricate systems of organization for environmental and medicinal knowledge refined over generations. In many African societies - including those in Nigeria - language expresses a detailed understanding of local ecosystems, flora, fauna, and healing practices. This knowledge system serves dual practical and epistemological roles: it enables communities to navigate and interpret their natural surroundings while preserving vital environmental expertise across generations.

For example, among the Hausa, the term “maganin gargajiya” denotes indigenous medicine but also covers a holistic viewpoint, combining herbal pharmacology, spiritual diagnosis, and ancestral knowledge. This perspective is mirrored in plant classification, where names - far from being arbitrary - express both utility and cultural meaning. The plant “ganyen zogale” (moringa leaves), for instance, is valued for its nutritional and medicinal uses as well as for its significance in oral traditions that prescribe it for spiritual cleansing or ancestral rituals (Abdullahi, 2003).

In Igbo society, the term “*ogwu*” refers to both “medicine” and “charm”, illustrating how the frontier between physical healing and metaphysical protection is culturally fluid. Traditional healers (*dibia*) often learn specific chants and ritualistic naming systems for plants, many of which are undocumented in modern pharmacopoeia but effective in community practice (Umeasiegbu, 1988). For instance, “*ogirisi*” (*Newbouldia laevis*) is widely known in south-eastern Nigeria not just for its medicinal uses - treating fevers, wounds, and infections - but also for its significance in purification rituals.

These naming systems are coated with contextual information that modern scientific classifications often fail to notice. Language, in this context, serves as an active inventory of biodiversity and environmental history. As Okedara (1997) notes, when indigenous languages decline, there is an accompanying erosion of eco-cultural literacy - an inability to identify, name, and appropriately use local species.

### ***Spiritual and Ritual Significance***

In indigenous Nigerian societies, language is intricately tied to spiritual and ritual life. Sacred words, chants, invocations, and naming ceremonies often carry symbolic significance beyond their normal meaning. Language here is performative; it is not just descriptive but transformative. To say is to perform.

For the Yoruba people, sacred words hold deep spiritual power. Oriki (praise poetry) - more than just praise poetry - acts as a bridge between people, their ancestors, and the divine. Even personal names carry weight. A name like Ifáyẹmi (“Ifá suits me”) or Ọlájídé (“wealth has come again”) isn’t just a label - it declares hopes, blessings, or ties to the gods. During Ifá divination, priests use special ritual chants believed to connect the physical and spiritual worlds (Abimbola, 1976).

In Igbo cosmology, sacred words play a key role in ceremonies like initiations, offerings, and honouring ancestors. Special speech patterns - call-and-response, pauses, and changes in tone - help awaken the divine and keep community history alive. A quiet moment before calling on the ancestors is not a mere theatrical performance; it marks a shift from everyday life to the sacred (Nwachukwu, 1995). Even the exact wording of prayers is significant and performed sacredly, as a single mistake could disrupt the intended spiritual effect.

In Hausa Islamic traditions, Arabic religious terms have blended with local language to create a unique spiritual vocabulary for worship and Quranic recitations. However, native Hausa words like *"aljannu"* (spirits) and *"ruhi"* (soul or spirit) remain significant in traditional spiritual narratives often woven into folk Islamic beliefs. The way healers chant special prayers - with particular rhythms and tones - shows how sound itself can evoke spiritual forces.

Thus, language acts as a spiritual mechanism - a means to connect with, influence, and maintain a community's sacred worldview. The sound of words - their tone, rhythm, pauses, and even their order - is not just about style; these elements carry deep meaning in religious practice. When native languages die, more than vocabulary disappears. Entire systems of belief, feeling, and understanding fade away with them.

## **Threats to Indigenous Languages and Cultures**

### ***Drivers of Language Loss***

The decline of native languages doesn't happen by chance. Powerful historical, social, and economic pressures push communities to abandon their mother tongues. In Nigeria and other former colonies, this shift happens both through systemic exclusion and personal choices in a changing world.

Colonial history has greatly affected indigenous languages, making them weaker and more likely to disappear. This influence is still seen today in the ongoing efforts to protect and revive local languages. When the British governed Nigeria, they made English the official language of government, schools, and business. While some missionary schools initially taught local languages for basic education and religious conversion, these practices faded as modern Nigeria developed. English became the key to better jobs and status, while indigenous languages came to be perceived as holding people back (Oyetade, 2007). Over time, English displaced local languages out of important public spaces.

Today, globalization has worsened this problem. Major world languages, particularly English, French, Arabic and increasingly Mandarin, dominate the internet, universities, and international media. Young people now associate these global languages with success and modern life, while viewing their ancestral tongues as outdated. As social media and streaming platforms spread Western culture, urban youth in cities like Lagos, Abuja and Port-Harcourt often drop their native languages to fit into this global system.

Government approaches - both direct and indirect - continue to shape language attitudes in ways that favour cultural assimilation. While Nigeria's constitution formally acknowledges the country's diverse linguistic heritage, actual language policies maintain English as the dominant official language. The three largest languages - Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo - receive minimal official recognition, while the more than 500 minority languages struggle without any meaningful institutional support.

In practice, most schools use English as the medium of instruction from the outset, while indigenous language instruction remains largely neglected (Bamgbose, 1991). Educational policies requiring mother-tongue instruction in early primary grades exist mostly on paper. This

gap between policy and reality reflects deeper systemic biases that continue to marginalize Nigeria's linguistic diversity while reinforcing English as the language of privilege and access.

Beyond official policies, subtle social attitudes contribute significantly to language decline. An increasing number of parents, particularly in cities and interethnic households, deliberately speak only English to their children, convinced this provides better future opportunities. Young people who speak their native languages with noticeable accents or imperfect grammar often face mockery, like being called “*ajepako*” (local or unsophisticated) in Yoruba-speaking urban areas. These social criticisms create strong disincentives for younger generations to embrace their ancestral tongues.

This social pressure combines with systemic institutional failure. While countries like Tanzania successfully promoted Swahili as a national and educational language, Nigeria has never made comparable investments in its indigenous languages. Critical resources - including textbooks, teacher preparation programs, and standardized curricula for native languages - remain inadequate or completely unavailable. Even national media outlets fail to consistently feature local language programming in respectable formats.

Without this essential infrastructure, even determined communities struggle to preserve language proficiency across generations. The absence of formal support systems means family and social transmission become the only fragile lines of defence against complete language disappearance - lines that are rapidly weakening under contemporary pressures.

A troubling communication gap is widening between age groups in Nigerian families. Many grandparents now struggle to share meaningful

conversations with their younger relatives, as language barriers grow increasingly severe. In middle-class households across the country, children either cannot speak their ancestral language at all, or possess only a limited, broken version of it. This language barrier represents more than just words lost - it signifies a broken chain of cultural inheritance. The rich oral traditions that once flowed naturally from elders to youth - including wise sayings, traditional expressions, and family histories - are disappearing as older generations pass away.

When we consider all these factors together - from government policies to social pressures to economic realities - indigenous languages face multiple threats from all sides. They are being displaced from official spaces, devalued in daily life, and abandoned in homes. If this pattern continues without meaningful action, experts warn that many of Nigeria's native languages could effectively disappear before the century ends, taking with them irreplaceable cultural knowledge and identity markers.

### ***Consequences of Language Extinction***

When a language dies, not only words are lost, but an entire way of understanding the world. Each language holds special knowledge about nature, human connections, spiritual beliefs, and life's deeper meanings. As languages vanish, these unique perspectives disappear forever.

Perhaps the most tragic loss is the disappearance of whole systems of knowledge. Native languages contain ideas that cannot be fully translated. Take Igbo's "*nwunye di*" (describing a wife's complex role in the family concept) or Hausa's "*kaakaki*" (meaning both a royal trumpet and its symbolic power). In the bid to explain these in English, layers of meaning are lost. These are not just vocabulary gaps; they represent entire ways of thinking about community life that may vanish completely.

The threat extends to oral traditions too. Songs, stories, sayings and ceremonies weaken when their original language declines. Consider the Yoruba proverb: “Eni tí ò mò itàn, yóò rà padà” (“Those who forget history will relive it”). This isn't just a catchy phrase - it teaches the value of remembering, warns against repeating mistakes, and connects people to their past. Translated or simplified, such wisdom loses its cultural power and emotional depth.

Cultural erosion follows closely. A people's identity is deeply rooted in their language. When communities can no longer speak their native tongue, they lose vital connections to their heritage and homeland. As English monolingualism spreads, cultural diversity weakens. Traditional dances, songs, festivals, and naming ceremonies lose their deeper meaning when the language that conveys it vanishes. For example, the true significance of Igbo “*iwa akwa*” (a rite of passage) or Hausa “sharo” (a test of courage during youth initiation) relies on the specific words and phrases used in these rituals. Without the original language, these practices become hollow shells of their former selves - preserved in form but stripped of their essence.

Identity fragmentation is another sneaky consequence. For many young Nigerians, especially those abroad or in privileged urban circles, losing their mother tongue creates deep cultural alienation. They find themselves stuck between worlds; never fully accepted in their adopted cultures, yet increasingly distant from their roots. That which should connect them to their heritage, their language, instead becomes a wall separating them from it. This barrier often creates insecurity, identity struggles, and a lost connection to their lineage. Without the language that once tied them to their ancestors, they drift in cultural limbo, unable to fully claim either their past or present.

When native languages are not supported, many communities get left out of important public conversations. Government debates, court systems, and social movements mostly use English or a handful of major languages. Groups that don't speak these dominant languages struggle to make their voices heard, leaving their needs ignored by those in power. This language exclusion often goes hand-in-hand with economic and political disadvantages, creating cycles of inequality that are hard to break (Emenanjo, 2006). Without equal language access, true democratic participation remains out of reach for many.

The disappearance of indigenous languages carries significant financial consequences. Traditional expertise, from farming methods to herbal medicine to artisanal crafts, is deeply tied to native speech patterns. As these languages weaken, entire heritage industries risk disappearing:

- Traditional healing practices lose their precise terminology
- Unique weaving and textile patterns fade with their descriptive language
- Sustainable farming techniques become harder to teach to new generations
- Oral storytelling traditions (and their tourism potential) diminish

When communities can no longer share knowledge in their mother tongue, local innovation suffers. Breakthroughs that could grow from traditional wisdom get lost in translation, leaving entire sectors of cultural economies vulnerable to collapse. Lost language means lost unique ways of understanding life's deepest questions. How do we describe the sacred? What explains suffering and wellness? How do we pass down moral wisdom? Each language offers distinct answers, and when they vanish, humanity's collective knowledge and creativity suffer permanent damage.

For Nigeria, this danger is very real. UNESCO warns that over 30 local languages, including Basa, Izere, Mambila and Kpasham, are at risk of disappearing. Some like Ajawa (once spoken in Bauchi) have already been lost forever. Others such as Itsekiri and Efik may soon fade from daily use if there is no immediate action to preserve them.

### **Revitalization and Policy Responses**

#### ***Education and Technology as Tools for Language Revival***

Bringing native languages back to life is not just about holding onto the past - it's a smart way of helping cultures survive and thrive. Schools and new technologies offer strong ways to stop languages from disappearing. When native languages are made part of classroom learning and things like apps and websites are used to teach these languages, then, young people would learn the languages of their ancestors while still living in today's world. This approach enables children to grow up knowing both their traditional culture and modern ways of communicating.

**Mother-tongue instruction** - Using a student's native language for schooling helps them learn better, think more clearly, and stay connected to their culture. This approach works because children understand difficult concepts easiest when taught in the language they have known since birth. Based on UNESCO's 2003 findings and Africa's language experts (ACALAN, 2014), studies have shown to this effect, the following clear advantages:

- Students become better readers
- They gain more confidence in their abilities
- Learning additional languages later becomes easier

In Nigeria, the official education guidelines (National Policy on Education, 2013) clearly state that Nigerian children should be taught in

their local language during their first four years of school. Yet in practice, this rarely happens as intended. In city schools especially, English often replaces local languages from the very start. When native languages are taught, they get minimal class time and resources. This poor implementation creates two problems:

- Children don't learn as effectively
- Local languages get viewed as outdated and unimportant

The Ifè Primary Education Research Project conducted in south-western Nigeria during the 1970s provides compelling evidence for mother-tongue education. This ground-breaking study found that students taught exclusively in Yoruba for their first six years of primary school achieved better results across all subjects, including science, mathematics, and literacy, than their peers taught in English from the beginning. Remarkably, the Yoruba-medium students even demonstrated superior performance in English language skills compared to their English-taught counterparts. Despite these demonstrable successes, the project's findings were never implemented nationwide due to political inaction and inadequate long-term funding (Afolayan, 1976). This represents a significant lost opportunity for Nigeria's educational development, as the results clearly showed the academic advantages of sustained mother-tongue instruction in early schooling.

For true language revival to succeed, we must recognize teaching in native languages as an essential right for all children, not just an optional program. This demands concrete actions: First, we need to prepare teachers who are truly proficient in local languages and can teach effectively in them. Schools require well-designed textbooks and learning materials in these languages, along with lesson plans that weave in traditional wisdom - like folk stories, sayings, and ancestral knowledge - making lessons both educational and culturally meaningful. Beyond

primary schools, we should offer these languages as elective courses in high schools and universities. This approach helps young people see their ancestral languages as valuable and worth learning by choice. When students can select these courses voluntarily, it boosts the status of native languages and encourages more young people to embrace them naturally.

Digital technology is opening new pathways for preserving and revitalizing indigenous languages, particularly through widely accessible smartphone platforms. Beyond traditional classroom settings, innovative tools like language-learning applications, comprehensive online dictionaries, and social media networks are being creatively adapted by educators and cultural advocates to promote native tongues. These digital solutions enable interactive, engaging ways for younger generations to connect with their linguistic heritage, from gamified learning modules that make acquiring language skills enjoyable to social platforms that facilitate daily practice in informal contexts. Such technological approaches not only complement formal education efforts but also help embed indigenous languages into modern digital communication spaces, ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society while preserving them for future generations.

A growing number of mobile applications now support Nigerian language learning, offering accessible tools for cultural reconnection. Platforms like Genii Games' Yoruba101 teach fundamental vocabulary and phrases through interactive games, stories, and songs designed for engaging education. Parallel offerings such as Igbo "*Amaka*" and Hausa "*Koya*" provide introductory lessons tailored for young learners and diaspora communities seeking to rediscover their linguistic heritage. These digital resources create convenient avenues for exploring indigenous languages outside formal settings.

Social media platforms have become powerful tools for promoting indigenous languages through engaging content. Creators on YouTube,

TikTok, and Instagram are producing language tutorials, comedy sketches, and musical content in native tongues, helping reshape perceptions of these languages as vibrant and contemporary. Popular examples include Nwafo TV's humorous Igbo-language skits and Apata TV's Yoruba drama series, which have attracted large audiences - particularly among youth and overseas Nigerians - demonstrating the modern appeal of traditional languages when presented through digital media.

Digital language tools are playing a crucial role in preservation efforts. Initiatives such as the Kasahorow Language Project and PanLex are creating comprehensive multilingual dictionaries and word databases for African languages with limited resources. Concurrently, preservationists are working to convert historical documents into digital formats, assemble spoken word collections, and establish consistent writing systems for Nigeria's vulnerable native tongues. These multifaceted projects go beyond simple documentation - they provide enduring frameworks that enable both current use and future study of endangered languages.

However, technology alone cannot sustain language revitalization - human connections remain essential. Languages thrive through daily interactions: parents conversing with children, friends sharing stories, and elders passing down wisdom to younger generations. While digital tools provide valuable support, they work best when reinforcing these natural social bonds rather than replacing them. True language preservation requires both technological aids and authentic cultural practice in community settings.

#### ***Community-Based and Policy Solutions***

Starting at the community level, real change in language preservation must be backed by strong government support. While schools and digital tools play important roles, lasting success comes when people actively

use their native language in daily life - at home, in local businesses, and during community events. True language revival happens when the people themselves value and promote their mother tongue, not when it's forced upon them. At the same time, national policies need to protect these languages through education systems, media representation, and official recognition. Together, grassroots enthusiasm and institutional support create an environment where indigenous languages can naturally flourish across generations. This balanced approach - combining personal commitment with policy frameworks - offers the most sustainable path forward for keeping languages alive.

Community-based solutions are flourishing across the globe. Local communities are finding successful ways to revive their native languages, methods that multilingual countries like Nigeria could learn from. One effective approach is the “language nest”, first created in New Zealand during the 1980s to help bring back the Māori language. These are special preschools where young children hear only the traditional language from older community members throughout the day, learning it naturally just like they learned their first words at home. This simple but powerful idea played a major role in helping Māori children grow up speaking their ancestral language fluently again (Spolsky, 2003). The model shows how surrounding children with a language in their earliest years can breathe new life into fading tongues.

In Nigeria, communities are already creating their own versions of language revival programs. Some neighbourhoods run weekend Igbo classes for kids in churches or community halls, like those starting in Enugu and Aba. Other places, including parts of Oyo and Lagos, host Yoruba storytelling nights and culture clubs for young people. While these grassroots efforts show promise, they could do much more with proper support and funding from local governments and organizations. The basic model works - elders and teachers sharing their language with

children in familiar settings - but needs to grow beyond scattered local projects to make a real nationwide difference.

Community gatherings that feature traditional stories, songs, and performances offer powerful ways to keep languages alive. When elders share folktales, proverbs, and poems in their native tongue, they pass down both language and culture in engaging ways. These events work best when young people take active roles - performing skits, singing songs, or telling stories themselves rather than just watching. A storytelling festival where children act out traditional tales in Yoruba or a moonlight play where teens perform Igbo riddles does more than entertain. It makes speaking one's mother tongue feel natural, relevant, and even appealing among younger generations. The key is creating spaces where using indigenous languages feels like a celebration rather than a classroom lesson.

For community-led language efforts to succeed nationwide, governments must support them through clear policies and sustained funding. International examples demonstrate how this can work. In New Zealand, Māori gained official language status in 1987, leading to the establishment of a dedicated commission to promote Māori education and media. Similarly, Canada's 2019 Indigenous Languages Act allocates funding to revitalize and teach First Nations languages. South Africa's constitution recognizes eleven official languages and mandates equitable treatment in education and media, though implementation still falls short of legal requirements.

Nigeria's approach falls short. Although the constitution ambiguously acknowledges "indigenous languages," it offers no enforceable support. Only Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo receive marginal recognition, while over 500 other languages are systematically excluded. Unlike New Zealand, Canada, or South Africa, Nigeria lacks a comprehensive strategy to

integrate local languages into education, governance, or public media. Without strong and decisive policies, grassroots revitalization efforts will remain an uphill battle against linguistic extinction.

To address Nigeria's language policy gaps, the government should establish a National Language Commission to coordinate nationwide revitalization efforts. This central body would focus on creating standardized writing systems for indigenous languages, training educators in mother-tongue teaching methods, supporting documentation projects for endangered languages, and expanding local-language media programming. Alongside this national effort, existing regional language organizations like the Yoruba Academy and Igbo Studies Association require increased funding to develop teaching materials, conduct linguistic research, and implement community-based language programs across state lines. Such a two-tiered approach - combining strong national coordination with empowered local institutions - would provide the necessary framework to protect not just Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, but all of Nigeria's 500+ indigenous languages currently lacking institutional support. This systematic solution mirrors successful models from other multilingual nations while adapting to Nigeria's specific linguistic landscape and educational needs.

To strengthen language preservation through policy, local governments should have the authority and resources to support community media in indigenous languages. This could include funding for local radio stations, podcasts in native tongues, cultural publications, and mobile library services that promote linguistic heritage. At the same time, targeted initiatives like language awards, youth writing contests, and translation funding could motivate younger generations to create and engage with content in their mother tongues. Most crucially, broadcasting regulations should mandate - rather than merely suggest - indigenous language programming across all licensed media outlets, both public and private.

These combined measures would ensure local languages thrive in everyday communication while gaining prestige through formal recognition and creative expression.

Finally, Nigeria's diaspora communities offer a powerful but overlooked opportunity to strengthen indigenous language preservation. Millions of Nigerians abroad actively seek meaningful connections to their cultural roots, creating a ready network for collaborative language projects. Existing initiatives like the Yoruba Cultural Institute in New York and various Igbo Union schools across Europe demonstrate how community-run language programs successfully serve diaspora populations. These efforts could be dramatically expanded through formal partnerships between overseas groups and Nigerian institutions - with universities providing standardized curricula, cultural ministries offering teaching resources, and state governments facilitating cultural exchange programs. By systematically engaging its global diaspora through funded language schools, digital learning platforms, and shared archival projects, Nigeria could transform scattered individual efforts into an organized worldwide movement for language revitalization. Such cooperation would not only preserve linguistic heritage but also strengthen national identity across borders, giving new generations abroad the tools to maintain living connections to their ancestral tongues.

Language revitalization is not a one-size-fits-all undertaking. It demands a multifaceted strategy integrating educational reform, digital innovation, community mobilization, and political commitment. In Nigeria, where linguistic diversity represents both a cultural treasure and a societal challenge, the urgency is clear. Reviving indigenous languages exceeds mere preservation; it equips future generations with the tools to assert their identity, interpret their world, and engage meaningfully in a pluralistic global future.

For Nigeria, success requires a quick, multifaceted approach adapted to its complex linguistic ecosystem. No single intervention suffices. Instead, coordinated efforts are essential: updated school curricula, adaptive digital platforms, grassroots activism, and robust governmental policies must converge. Here, where hundreds of languages coexist yet many face extinction, the stakes extend beyond cultural heritage. This is about empowering young Nigerians to access their roots while thriving in a diverse world. Keeping these languages alive does more than rescue words from oblivion, it grants future generations the capacity to attach themselves to their history, perceive the world from diverse perspectives, and contribute authentically to local and global dialogues. The vision is a Nigeria where languages weave together into both a living network and a vibrant tapestry, dynamic yet rooted. But realizing this demands immediate, strategic action across all sectors.

### **Conclusion**

Language is the living pulse of culture, it carries our identity, safeguards our history, and holds the wisdom of generations. This discussion has shown how native tongues do much more than help us communicate; they preserve unique ways of understanding the world, from intricate social values to deep ecological knowledge. Proverbs, oral traditions, and untranslatable words encode entire worldviews, offering insights no textbook could replicate. Yet these treasures are disappearing. Centuries of colonial policies, modern globalization, and neglect in schools have pushed indigenous languages to the brink. When a language fades, we don't just lose words—we lose a people's way of seeing, solving, and celebrating life. The erosion is stark in Nigeria, where languages that once shaped communities now whisper where they once spoke.

However, all hope is not lost. Around the world, from Māori immersion schools in New Zealand to grassroots Yoruba storytelling clubs in Lagos,

people are proving that revival is possible. Success demands action on all fronts: classrooms teaching in mother tongues, apps making learning engaging, laws protecting linguistic rights, and communities passing down pride in their heritage. This isn't wishful thinking - it's a practical approach to helping young Nigerians connect with their roots while confidently engaging the world.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Every language lost is a library burned, a perspective erased from humanity's collective wisdom. Protecting them isn't about preserving the past—it's about enriching our shared future. The work begins now, with policymakers, educators, families, and technology all playing vital roles. Our languages are more than grammar and vocabulary; they're the heartbeat of who we are. To let them fade would silence some of humanity's most vital stories—and that's a loss none of us can afford.

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