

Language and Ethnicity in Nigeria: Exploring the Interconnections and Implications in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the intricate relationship between language and ethnicity in Nigeria, focusing particularly on Northern Nigeria, a region characterized by its rich linguistic diversity and pluralistic society. Language serves as a fundamental component of cultural identity and heritage, enabling the transmission of cultural values and experiences across generations. The study emphasizes the significance of indigenous languages in Northern Nigeria, highlighting their role in preserving cultural identity amidst threats of extinction. Additionally, the paper explores the dynamics of migration, the interplay of ideology in language planning, and how these factors influence ethnic relations within the region. A case study from North Eastern Nigeria illustrates these complexities. Through comprehensive analysis, this research aims to elucidate the complexities surrounding language use and ethnic identity in Northern Nigeria.*

Keywords: Language, Ethnicity, Northern Nigeria, Cultural Heritage, Migration, Language Planning

1. Introduction

Language is an essential component of every society's cultural heritage. It acts as a deeply rooted cultural characteristic that plays a pivotal role in communication and the transmission of culture. Oluwabamide (2007) emphasizes that language is the primary vehicle for conveying cultural heritage. Similarly, Oyelaran (2015) argues that language distinguishes humans from other species. The evolution of culture is inextricably linked to language, as it allows individuals to share their experiences and learn from others (Oyelaran, 2015, as cited in Greenberg, 1948). Thus, language serves a unique function within the broader framework of cultural patterns, as it interacts with various other cultural behaviors.

In Nigeria, particularly in Northern Nigeria, language—especially indigenous languages—stands out as a significant cultural attribute. Indigenous languages form a vital part of the nation's cultural identity, having endured through the ages. While many indigenous languages in Northern Nigeria face the risk of extinction, it is noteworthy that they continue to be spoken by a substantial portion of the population. Elugbe (1990) reinforces this point by stating that “language is the most enduring artifact of culture. Unless forced by conquest or by superior numbers, or by social, economic, and political domination to give up their language, a people can always have their history traced through their language.”

Northern Nigeria is rich in linguistic diversity, housing a multitude of ethnic groups and languages. Each ethnic community exists within its unique social and cultural context. The historical regional tendencies have created strong ethnic affiliations and linguistic loyalties, as noted by Adekunle (1990, as cited in Oluwabamide, 2007). The major ethnic groups in Northern Nigeria include the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and others, each possessing its distinct language. In addition to these major ethnic groups, there are several minority cultures, each with its language, contributing to the region's rich tapestry of linguistic diversity.

2. Language and Ethnicity in Northern Nigeria

Language serves as a vital aspect of ethnic identity in Northern Nigeria. The relationship between language and ethnicity is complex, as language not only functions as a communication tool but also signifies belonging to a particular ethnic group. Each ethnic community in Northern Nigeria utilizes its language to express its cultural values and identity. This linguistic diversity enhances social cohesion and fosters a sense of community among members of ethnic groups. The preservation of indigenous languages is crucial for maintaining cultural heritage, as these languages embody the history and traditions of their speakers.

2.1 The Ethnic Groups in Northern Nigeria

The ethnic groups in Nigeria

Despite the fact that Nigeria is currently divided into six geopolitical zones, it may be more convenient to see the ethnic groups in the country from the perspective of the previous three regions. More than seventy-five percent (75%) of total land area in Nigeria falls within the Northern Region, as it is commonly referred to (Coleman, 2000). More than sixty percent (60%) of the people in Nigeria live the northern region. In addition, the region is home to five of the ten biggest ethnic groups in the country (Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Tiv, and Nupe).

People in the Northern Region were divided into three major political groups before the British began to rule the region in 1900. First, the Kanuri-speaking inhabitants of Bornu and the Lake Chad region, who were under the Shehu of Bornu. The Fulani aristocracy, which recognized the religious leadership of the Sultan of Sokoto (Sarkin Musulmi), ruled a large number of semi-independent emirates in the west that were composed of the Fulani and Hausa-speaking people. Third, there were more than 200 other language groups scattered over the bottom part of the region, including the pastoral Fulani, the Tiv, the Berom, and the Gwari. These groups could be found in the Middle Belt, on the Jos Plateau, and elsewhere in the Middle Belt.

The Fulani people are the most widespread ethnic group in the Northern Region. According to Onwuejeogwu (1985) in *Africa Today* (2005), they actually spread over North and West

Africa. The Hausa people are really just a linguistic group that encompasses a wide range of physical kinds and cultural traditions (Coleman, 2000). They are plentiful across the northern region. However, they are predominantly concentrated in the states of Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna, and Zamfara. Generally speaking, the Hausa language distinguishes the majority of other ethnic groups in the north because the righteous Hausa people have historically incorporated them. It is important to mention that Hausa is the mother tongue of more than sixty percent of the people in the Northern Region.

The Kanuri-speaking people make up another significant ethnic group in the Northern Region. They can be found primarily in the Chad Basin. The collective name "Kanuri" refers to allies who originated in Kanem. Islam is the religion they have been practicing for decades which make up the Kanuri people. The Northern Region is also home to the Nupe. They are the smallest and fourth-largest minority in the Northern Region that is dominated by Muslims. They live in the basin of the Niger River, above the point where it meets the River Benue. The Tiv, commonly referred to as the Munchi, are another significant ethnic group in the Northern Region. The Tiv are unique group that primarily live in a small region south of the Benue River.

There are other minority ethnic groups in the Northern Region in addition to the dominant ethnic groups mentioned above. Thirty five percent of the people in the area are members of these minority groups. Bachama, Jukun, Bade, Igbirra, Warji, Nunji, Gwari, Berom, Bura, Ganawuri, etc. are a few of them.

In Eastern Region, there are three main ethnic groups (Igbo, Ibibio, and Ijaw) and additional minor tribes (Leyigha, Yako, Ogoni, Andoni, etc.), which is a region with a lot of forest cover. Six hundred and ninety-nine (699) clans, thirty (30) sub-tribes, and a few relatively autonomous villages or village groups constitute the Igbo community (Coleman, 2000). The Onitsha, Ngwa, and Arochukwu are three prominent Igbo clans.

The only other significant group in the Eastern Region is the Ibibio. The social structures of the Ibibio and Igbo people are very similar. However, these parallels do not imply that the two groups have deep cultural or linguistic linkages (Ekong, 2005). They do constitute two distinct ethnic groups. Both the Western and Eastern regions of Nigeria are home to the Ijaw people. In other words, they are equally split between the Western and Eastern regions. With the exception of the little enclave of "Jarki" whose language has little to no connection with any other ethnic group in Nigeria. The Ijaw make up the majority of the Niger Delta's population.

In the Western Region, Yorubas are the predominant ethnic group. While there are other ethnic groups in the area, they are in the minority. According to Coleman (2005), the Yoruba people have a history of political unification and a shared historical legacy, making them the largest cultural group in West Africa. The Yoruba people in Nigeria underwent the most extensive westernization of any ethnic group in the country, with the exception of the Efik in

Old Calabar and a small portion of the Ijaw in the Niger Delta. In 1841, Christian missionaries arrived in the region, and Lagos, a metropolis predominately made up of Yoruba people, became a part of the British Colony in 1861. Lagos subsequently served as the country's capital for many years. These and other factors differentiate the Yoruba people markedly from other ethnic groups.

Northern Nigeria is home to over 120 ethnic groups, each with its unique language, customs, and traditions. The three dominant ethnic groups are the Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri. Each of these groups has its cultural practices and linguistic heritage, which play a significant role in shaping Nigeria's national identity. The Hausa language, being one of the most widely spoken in Nigeria, serves as a lingua franca in many parts of Northern Nigeria, facilitating communication among various ethnic groups. According to Ethnologue (2021), Hausa is spoken by over 60 million people across Nigeria and neighboring countries.

Additionally, numerous minority ethnic groups contribute to the country's cultural diversity. Despite their small population sizes, these minority groups play an essential role in enriching Nigeria's cultural landscape. For example, the Margi, Gwandara, and Bura peoples, each with their unique languages, traditions, and histories, collectively enhance the region's cultural tapestry.

2.2 Relationship Between Language and Ethnicity

Language assimilation, linguistic pluralism, vernacularization, and inter-nationalism are four common ideologies that may influence actual decision-making in language planning in a specific community (Cobarrubias, 1983). The idea of linguistic assimilation holds that all people, regardless of origin, should learn the official language of the country. This is the approach that France has taken. It is clear from this that the minority languages are being suppressed. Such circumstances frequently lead to language change and, ultimately, language extinction.

Language recognition is referred to as linguistic pluralism. This can come in a variety of shapes. To perform its business, some regions of a broader civilization might need to speak more than one language. It can be full or partial, allowing for the conduct of all or simply some aspects of life in that society in more than one language. Belgium, Singapore, South Africa, and Switzerland are a few examples. In actuality, this is the driving force behind the recommendation of the three main languages in Nigeria. As we've seen, there is an implementation issue. Consequently, none of these States' Houses of Assembly have used any of the widely spoken languages in their respective states.

Vernacularization, such as Hebrew in Israel and Tagalog in the Philippines, is the revival or expansion of an indigenous language and its designation as an official language. Internationalization is the use of a non-native language for more widespread communication, either as an official language or for things like trade or education. This is demonstrated by the situation in the majority of African and Asian countries. In Nigeria,

notwithstanding the tacit recognition of the three principal languages and other languages of state importance, the pre-eminent position of English as official language, language of education, judiciary and higher commerce is unchallenged. There have been several arguments in its support as regard its role in the national life of Nigeria (Bamgbose, 1985); it is of no use repeating them here.

But it must be stressed that proper language planning in a plural society as Nigeria must realistically confront the problem of ethnicity and come up with a policy that will cater for the yearnings and aspirations of all segments of the nation. This can be made possible in the context of a solid ideology that will respect the linguistic rights of all citizens of the country no matter the number of the speakers of such languages. The present situation of tolerance of the minority is unhealthy for their future survival.

At this point, one is tempted to agree with Adegbija (1994), who proposes a type of socialism that places an emphasis on linguistic egalitarianism in African nations that have many official languages. He said this:

“All languages in a multilingual context whether major or minor, should be seen as resources that need to be effectively harnessed for the total national good and that language policies need to respect, support and encourage the mutual harmonious coexistence of all languages, no matter their origins and the political or economic power or numerical strength of their speakers”

Every citizen will feel a feeling of belonging and have an equal opportunity to contribute to the development of the country if this kind of mindset is accepted. In some other nations, minority languages are recognized. Minority languages, like Guarani in Paraguay and Quechua in Ecuador, are utilized to some extent in basic education in various South American nations. Frisian is accepted alongside Dutch in administration in Friesland, in the northern part of the Netherlands (Appel and Muysken 1987). Such minority language treatments are frequently developed in order to preserve minority languages.

Here, we could learn from the scenario in Canada. The majority English-speaking population and French-speaking minority in Quebec coexist as the two largest ethnic groups in the country. The majority of employment opportunities and the labor market in Canada are skewed in favour of English speakers due to the size of the English-speaking population. As a result, the French-speaking Canadians were compelled to learn enough English to effectively compete for the country's economic, political, and cultural resources. This angered French-speaking Canadians, who had a number of disputes as a result, particularly in Quebec, where, according to Rousseau (1993), "two thirds of them speak no English." They were arguing for their language rights not just in their province but also across Canada.

The connection between language and ethnicity in Northern Nigeria is deeply intertwined. Language serves as a marker of ethnic identity, facilitating the expression of cultural values and collective memory. Indigenous languages carry the histories and traditions of their

communities, enabling individuals to connect with their heritage. For instance, the use of the Hausa language not only serves practical communication needs but also fosters a strong sense of belonging and cultural pride among the Hausa people.

The relationship is exemplified in a 2020 study by Alabi, who noted that “the vitality of indigenous languages is essential for the survival of the cultures they represent” (p. 132). Furthermore, language acts as a means of asserting identity in a multicultural society. The use of one's mother tongue fosters a sense of belonging and pride among members of an ethnic group, reinforcing their cultural identity.

2.3 Migration

Migration has a profound impact on language and ethnicity in Northern Nigeria. As individuals and families migrate from one region to another—often in search of better economic opportunities—they bring their languages and cultural practices with them. This movement can lead to the blending of languages and the emergence of new dialects, enriching Nigeria's linguistic diversity. For example, urban centers like Kano and Kaduna attract migrants from various ethnic backgrounds, creating a multilingual environment where different languages coexist.

A case study of North Eastern Nigeria illustrates these dynamics. North Eastern Nigeria, comprising states such as Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, has been significantly affected by both internal displacement and migration due to conflicts and economic opportunities. According to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021), over 2 million people have been displaced in the region, leading to the emergence of diverse linguistic interactions among displaced populations and host communities.

This migration contributes to the interaction between different ethnic groups, facilitating cultural exchange and the formation of new identities. However, it can also lead to language shift and loss, as minority languages may be neglected in favor of more dominant languages in urban areas. For instance, the Kanuri language, traditionally spoken in Borno State, has seen a decline in usage among younger generations who increasingly prefer Hausa or English in educational and professional settings (Ibrahim, 2022). Individuals and families move from one region to another; they carry their languages and cultural practices with them. This migration can lead to the blending of languages and the emergence of new dialects, further enriching Nigeria's linguistic diversity. Additionally, the movement of people often results in the mixing of ethnic groups, which can challenge traditional notions of identity and belonging.

2.4 Ideology in Language Planning

Language planning in Nigeria involves the policies and strategies implemented to manage the country's linguistic diversity. This planning is influenced by ideological perspectives that prioritize certain languages over others, often reflecting power dynamics within the society.

The promotion of specific languages can marginalize minority languages, threatening their survival. Ideology plays a crucial role in shaping language policies, as it determines which languages are recognized and valued within the educational system and public life.

Language planning in Northern Nigeria involves the policies and strategies implemented to manage the region's linguistic diversity. This planning is influenced by ideological perspectives that prioritize certain languages over others, often reflecting power dynamics within society. The promotion of specific languages, particularly Hausa and English, can marginalize minority languages, threatening their survival. For instance, Hausa has been promoted as the lingua franca in educational settings and media, overshadowing local minority languages.

In a study by Nwankwo (2018), it was found that “language policies in Nigeria often reflect the interests of dominant ethnic groups, leading to the erosion of smaller languages” (p. 56). Ideology plays a crucial role in shaping language policies, determining which languages are recognized and valued within the educational system and public life. Additionally, the influence of colonial history and post-colonial governance in Nigeria shapes the current language landscape, affecting how languages are perceived and utilized.

For example, English, as a remnant of colonial rule, continues to dominate the education system and government affairs, relegating indigenous languages to secondary status. This power dynamic often leaves minority languages vulnerable, as seen in North Eastern Nigeria, where the Kanuri and other indigenous languages struggle to compete with the more widely spoken Hausa and English.

3. Case Study: North Eastern Nigeria

The case study of North Eastern Nigeria highlights the complexities of language and ethnicity amid ongoing socio-political challenges. The region has a rich linguistic landscape, including languages such as Kanuri, Shuwa Arabic, and various Chadic languages. However, the Boko Haram insurgency and subsequent humanitarian crises have disrupted traditional patterns of language use and ethnic identity.

3.1 The Impact of Conflict on Language Use

The conflict in North Eastern Nigeria has led to massive displacement and the breakdown of social structures. As communities have been uprooted, many people have migrated to urban areas where they are exposed to new languages and cultures. This has resulted in a blending of linguistic practices. In many internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, for example, Hausa serves as a common language for communication among people from different ethnic backgrounds.

3.2 Language Shift and Loss

In these new environments, there is often a shift away from indigenous languages. Younger generations, influenced by the dominance of Hausa and English in education and media, may abandon their mother tongues. This trend poses a significant threat to the survival of indigenous languages like Kanuri. A study by Gana (2023) indicated that “the younger generation’s preference for Hausa over Kanuri among IDP youth is alarming, as it threatens the intergenerational transmission of their cultural heritage” (p. 74).

3.3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

To mitigate the loss of indigenous languages, it is essential to implement inclusive language policies that promote multilingual education, incorporating both dominant and minority languages in the curriculum. The Nigerian government, alongside NGOs and local communities, should work collaboratively to develop language preservation programs that support the teaching and usage of indigenous languages in both formal and informal settings.

Additionally, initiatives that raise awareness about the cultural significance of indigenous languages can help foster pride among younger generations, encouraging them to maintain their linguistic heritage. Community engagement programs that celebrate cultural festivals and language days can serve as platforms for the revitalization of indigenous languages.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between language and ethnicity in Northern Nigeria is complex and multifaceted. Language serves as a fundamental aspect of cultural identity and heritage, enabling the transmission of cultural values and experiences across generations. The linguistic diversity of Northern Nigeria reflects its rich ethnic tapestry, with each group contributing to the region's cultural landscape. However, challenges such as migration, conflict, and language planning pose threats to the survival of indigenous languages. To preserve Northern Nigeria's cultural heritage, it is essential to recognize and promote linguistic diversity while implementing inclusive language policies that support minority languages.

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