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The Kalabari Language and Identity: *Preserving a Key Ijaw Dialect in a Globalized Age*

By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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The Kalabari Language and Identity: Preserving a Key Ijaw Dialect in a Globalized Age

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Language forms the backbone of cultural identity, communal memory, and historical continuity. Among the numerous linguistic groups in Nigeria, the Kalabari people of Rivers State stand out as one of the most culturally rich subgroups of the Ijaw ethnic nationality. The Kalabari language, often classified as an Ijaw dialect, is central to the people's identity, governance structures, oral traditions, and sociocultural expressions. However, globalization, migration, and the increasing dominance of English pose significant challenges to the survival, transmission, and vitality of the language.

01

Understanding Kalabari Language as an Ijaw Dialect

The Kalabari language belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, specifically within the Ijaw cluster spoken across the Niger Delta. Although sometimes referred to as a “dialect,” many scholars argue that Ijaw varieties, including Kalabari may be considered distinct languages due to their structural differences and deep historical roots. Kalabari retains unique phonological patterns, tonal distinctions, and lexical items that set it apart from other Ijaw varieties such as Nembe or Okrika.

The language is traditionally spoken in the Kalabari Kingdom, which includes communities such as Buguma, Abonnema, and Bakana. For

centuries, Kalabari has been a carrier of indigenous knowledge, maritime vocabulary, traditional religious expressions, and historical narratives passed down through oral traditions.

02

Language as a Marker of Kalabari Identity

For the Kalabari people, language is more than a communication system; it is a symbol of belonging. Cultural events, royal ceremonies, age-grade systems, and traditional governance rely heavily on the use of indigenous linguistic expressions. Proverbs, praise chants, and folklore known as akpa and tamuno furo, encode moral lessons, social expectations, and cosmological beliefs.

According to Finnegan, African oral traditions serve as the “voice of a people,” anchoring communal values across generations. In Kalabari society, naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals, and even market interactions are infused with idioms that reflect the people’s worldview. Thus, losing the language would mean losing a significant part of Kalabari identity, history, and spirituality.

03

Impact of Globalization on the Kalabari Language

Globalization brings socio-economic opportunities but also exerts pressure on minority languages. Three major factors endanger the Kalabari language:

Nigeria’s educational system prioritizes English as the language of

instruction. As a result, urban Kalabari children increasingly adopt English as their first language. Parents, seeking economic advantages, often discourage their children from speaking Kalabari at home.

Large numbers of Kalabari families live in Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja, and diaspora communities abroad. In these environments, English or Pidgin English commonly replaces indigenous language use.

Television, radio, social media, and popular culture promote global languages over local ones. Without strong representation of Kalabari in digital media, younger speakers often perceive the language as “old-fashioned” or irrelevant.

Scholars such as Batibo warn that minority languages without systematic revitalization strategies risk becoming endangered, and Kalabari is not exempt from this threat.

The image is a map of the Niger Delta region and the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, illustrating the different states and key locations within it. Photo credit; Research Gates.

04

The Role of Oral Tradition in Sustaining Kalabari

Despite modern challenges, oral traditions remain a crucial pillar of language preservation. Storytelling sessions, moonlight plays (furo piki), masquerade performances, and festival songs transmit vocabulary, moral lessons, and historical narratives. The Kalabari royal court, especially the Amanyanabo institution, still uses indigenous linguistic forms during rituals and governance processes.

These cultural practices reinforce community cohesion and remind younger generations of their ancestral roots. However, without deliberate educational and technological reinforcement, oral

traditions alone may not be enough to safeguard the language.

05

Community Efforts Toward Preservation

Several initiatives highlight emerging consciousness about language preservation:

Some Kalabari communities have introduced weekend schools where children are taught reading and writing in the language. These informal programs help bridge the gap created by English-based formal education.

Linguists and cultural organizations have begun compiling wordlists, grammar notes, and Kalabari folktales. Efforts such as the works of Kay Williamson and other Niger Delta scholars have provided foundational texts for continued research.

Annual events like the Ogbo and Ekine festivals showcase traditional performances heavily rooted in Kalabari language and storytelling. These festivals help renew pride and cultural awareness among the youth.

Community radio programs and church services conducted in Kalabari contribute to increased language visibility.

To thrive in the 21st century, the Kalabari language must fully embrace digital transformation. Useful strategies include:

Mobile applications can teach vocabulary, phrases, songs, and grammar, making language learning more accessible to younger generations.

2. Creating Online Dictionaries and Wikis

Digital databases allow instant access to word meanings, cultural concepts, and pronunciation guides.

Influencers, educators, and cultural advocates can promote Kalabari phrases, stories, and proverbs through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and podcasts.

Local schools in Kalabari-speaking regions should integrate the language as a subject, similar to how Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo are taught.

Video and audio recordings of elders, storytellers, and traditional leaders will preserve irreplaceable knowledge for future generations. These efforts demonstrate how technology can be harnessed to promote linguistic resilience.

The Kalabari language occupies a vital place within the Ijaw cultural landscape, serving as a vessel of communal memory, identity, and traditional wisdom. Although globalization poses serious threats to its continuity, the language can be preserved through deliberate cultural revitalization, educational reforms, and digital innovation. As a key part of Nigeria's linguistic heritage, Kalabari deserves sustained attention from scholars, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Preserving it is not merely a linguistic task, it is a commitment to safeguarding the identity and legacy of the Kalabari people for generations to come.

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