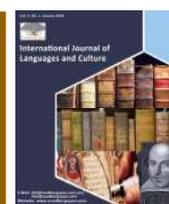




International Journal of Languages and Culture

Publisher's Home Page: <https://www.svedbergopen.com/>



Research Paper

Open Access

The Threat of Endangerment and Extinction of Alago Language of Nasarawa State, Nigeria

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Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 1, June 2025

Received : 29 January 2025

Accepted : 11 May 2025

Published : 25 June 2025

doi: [10.51483/IJLC.5.1.2025.1-6](https://doi.org/10.51483/IJLC.5.1.2025.1-6)

Abstract

Language is the first identity marker of an individual, or a group of people, coming next to their racial identity. The socialization of a child begins with the learning of his/her language which is necessary for communication and social interaction. Just as languages develop through deliberate processes, they also go into extinction due to neglect and avoidable inferiority tendencies that may not be by design. This paper examines the historical condition of the Alago language of Nasarawa State in the light of the dynamics of inter-group and multi-ethnic co-existence and concludes that the Alago language and culture are endangered with a severe consequences of possible extinction sooner than later if deliberate steps are not taken by the owners of the language to reverse the untoward trend.

Keywords: *Racial identity, Socialization, Social interaction, Alago language, Nasarawa state*

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1. Introduction

About twelve years ago when this writer was on a one-year sabbatical leave at the then Kogi State University, Ayingba, a bosom friend and class mate at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, invited him to his younger sister's wedding in their village. It was a church wedding. Amazingly, all the proceedings were entirely conducted in the Igala language. As if that was not enough, only recently, on the 14th April, 2024, this writer honoured an invitation to attended a friend and colleague's Thanks giving Service and Reception at the Gboko South NKST Church in Gboko, Benue State of Nigeria. As it was characteristic of the Tiv people, all the proceedings were also conducted in the Tiv language. All the singing groups (male and female) dressed in the Tiv attires; the Bible reading and all the songs were rendered in the Tiv language. Both the Igala and the Tiv experiences sent me wandering and thinking if this all-out native language rendition can ever be enacted in any religious, social or cultural event in Alago land.

The above scenarios tend to pose a pertinent question of: Who are the Alago people? This question may sound rhetorical because it is known that Alago is both an ethnic nationality and a language that are found in Nasarawa State of Nigeria. Without sentiment, and to call a spade a spade, Alago as an ethnic group is little known outside the boundaries of Nasarawa and Plateau states. I had several embarrassing encounters with friends and academic colleagues outside Nasarawa and Plateau who have never heard of a people called Alago. As a result of this, one has to always go

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through the historical and anthropological pains of locational explanation. Alago are said to one of the major members of the Kwararafa confederation, a fifteenth century Nigerian empire, yet apart from the Jukun, Goemai, Koro, Agatu, Eloyi, most other members of this legendary family group do not know who the Alago are. When an Alago person meets an Idoma person with whom they claim to share close affinity with and introduces himself/herself as Alago, the Idoma does not know of Alago as a people, except one refers to oneself as, "Idoma-nokwu" (meaning, greater Idoma) which is commonly known among the Otukpo Idoma group of Benue State of Nigeria. The most embarrassing experience is encounter with the Igala whom both groups lay claim of close historical fraternity in the ancient days. The Igala living outside Nasarawa state hardly know Alago as people that have close ties with them.

Seriously speaking, there has been little or nothing worth academic value has been written about the Alago people, except the usual mandatory students' projects, thesis, and dissertations, that are often times not Alago-centred in scope and content. They never get to be published for academic consumption either, thereby rendering them irrelevant which amounts to what one may describe as wasted academic exercise. Notable Alago publications are Amirikpa Oyigbenu (2005). *The Story of Agwatashi and Alago, Otu bi, Ebe nya* and Musa (2015). *The History of Obi: Chronicle of an Heritage*. With a large population of educated men and women academics—historians, creative writers, journalists, linguists, political scientists, sociologists, among others, Alago people lag far behind in comparison with other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Surf the internet on information about the Alago people and one can hardly find beyond a one-page document which has been negatively skewed to suit the interest of the author who is certainly not an Alago person.

However, despite their low visibility as a people, Alago are civilized, cosmopolitan and urbane people with very rich culture and tradition that date back to the first appearance of *homo sapiens*. When the European explorers, missionaries and administrators came into contact with Africans, most African tribes were either naked, half-naked or wore leaves, but the Alago people were met wearing hand-woven clothes. From time immemorial, Alago people were never known to have gone about naked nor clad in leaves. In addition, in pre-colonial times they had centralized administrative and political system of governance such that when the European colonial masters came into their areas they not only admired what they saw, but they did not tamper with the existing system.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multilingual nation. According to Omachonu (2017), "Nigeria is known for its extreme linguistic diversity with a multiplicity of languages whose exact number cannot be given with a high degree of certainty" (20). This national linguistic canvass is equally reflective of the linguistic geography of Nasarawa State. Apart from the acclaimed major national languages of Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, and others, there are panoply of minority languages that abound in the Nigerian nation seeking for visibility and recognition. Few of these languages include but not limited to the following: Alago, Eggon, Kataf, Irigwe, Anaguta, Ndola, Mumuye, Igede, Etulo, Bassa, among numerous others. Within the confines of the national geographical boundaries of Nigeria, all the minority languages are indigenous because they own their existence to the very locations that they are found. In the context of Nasarawa state with over fifty (50) languages, these languages can be considered as minority and indigenous, but with a little exception to Eggon, Alago, Mada and Gwandara. Despite this delineation, these ethnic groups also are vulnerable to endangerment and likely extinction over time.

At the level of Nasarawa State, Alago people are the most dominant ethnic group in the southern senatorial zone of Nasarawa state, with controlling presence in Obi, Doma, and Keana local government areas, as well as Lafia East, Giza, Azara and Ekye development areas, respectively. Campbell-Irons, *et al*, cited in Temple (1965), admit that, Alago "people are of peaceful disposition and of fairly good physique" (28). This position has been reinforced by Amirikpa Oyigbenu in the statement that, "Alago are a people that are peaceful and accommodating to strangers that come to settle among them" (3-4). Who are these strangers that the Alago people accommodate? What has been the nature of their relationship with these strangers over time? These shall be addressed later in the course of this paper.

2. Conceptual Clarification

The concepts that require explication are: Endangerment, Extinction, and Language.

2.1. Endangerment

Endangerment refers to anything that is susceptible to danger, and to vagaries of discomfort, injury and risk. Commonly referenced as endangered are languages, tradition, or the civilisation of a people. It is a process that can be corrected if the people are conscious of it, but if allowed to go unchecked, it could go into complete extinction. Here again, Omachonu corroborates the above assertion in the argument that endangerment is, "...a linguistic state in which a particular speech community finds itself in a situation where its language...faces degradation and threat of extinction"

(29). Since the Alago language has not yet gone into extinction/death, the concern in this paper largely dwells on the possible threats of endangerment of the language. There are factors that are partly or wholly responsible for this condition, which shall be discussed in the course of this conversation.

2.2. Extinction

This is a term that is synonymous to obliteration, annihilation or death. It is the irreversible end of life. So, for a language to go into extinction presupposes that the owners and users of such a language have equally been obliterated or are dead. Extinction or death of a language does not apply to the physical cessation of breath and the decomposition of the body, but the cessation of communicating in the language by the original owners of a language. As it were, a language is a living organism that has sustainable life; meaning that it can die off if not properly preserved and nourished by the users. Once again, Omachonu reinforces this argument that, "...a language does not live all by itself. It lives through the speakers and yet it is the carrier of the history, culture, heritage and the identity of the speakers" (26).

2.3. Language

The primary and most powerful human identity is language because it is the first feature that defines a human being. It is the basis of human civilisation and socialisation. It is the system of vocal and physical mode of communication and interaction between and among humans through which messages are transmitted. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, defines language as, "a system of communication by written or spoken words, which is used by the people of a particular country or area" (902). Language also shapes individual and group or ethnic identity; thereby, it is an expression of culture just as culture is language because language is the essence of human existence and the conveyor of a people's civilisation and cultural identity. In this light, Peter Metcalf (2005) submits that, "language neatly demonstrates the relationship between biology and culture. That is to say, language is clearly both biological and cultural at the same time" (94). Alago language is both biological and cultural because the primary identity of the people is the language which is equally demonstrated in their culture. Obviously, without the language, there would be no people called Alago, and without the cultural manifestations in dressing and naming systems, along with other related cultural attributes such as religious practices, there would be no people called Alago. As such, language is central to the identification, classification and survival of human beings.

3. Is Alago Language Endangered?

The answer to the above question is in the affirmative because; Ayewa (2022), asserts that, "A language is susceptible to extinction if it is not consciously transferred from one generation to another", and "The easiest way to kill a language, therefore, is to refuse to speak it" (2). Before the advent of colonialism and Hausa Islamic missionaries, the ancestors of Alago people spoke what could be described as unpolluted and undiluted Alago language devoid of code-mixing or code-switching or language shifting. First to migrate into Alago land were the Hausa Islamic preachers and traders who had not only exported and established the new religion (Islam) and the Hausa language as a means of communication and proselytization, they also brought with them their culture which they considered as 'superior' to the culture of their host communities. As aliens who needed to be accepted by their host communities, they adopted the strategy of close alignment with the traditional royalty and their immediate family members who more often than not became their first converts. Alago people started to learn the Hausa language for social, commercial and religious communication and interaction with the strangers.

Historical and sociological factor that has been responsible for the threat to the Alago language is that the Hausa/Kanuri settlers in Alago land did not come with women at the time of their arrival and eventual settlement in Lafia in 1770. Consequent upon this and as they interacted among the native population, they gradually courted and married Alago women and begot children who eventually lost the Alago identity for Hausa/Kanuri identities. These offspring lost the language and cultural identity of their mothers thereby speak Hausa as their first language. The women inevitably communicated more in Hausa to their husbands and children. Over a prolong period of about two hundred and fifty four years (1770-2024), of this relationship, Alago language became endangered with the attendant threat of eventual extinction. Rahman and Al-Bishak (2021) in their assertion confirm the position that the Kanuris did not come to Lafia area with women. According to them, "Dunama arrived the present site of Lafia with fifteen male companions without a woman or wife (emphasis mine). Eventually they had to marry from the local inhabitants including Alago, Koro (Migili), Eggon, Hausa, Fulani, etc." (3). The initial marriages were with the Alago and Migili, while the marriages with the latter group came up later as they also migrated to the Lafia in the course of time.

From the forgoing, it can be discerned that the domain of social interaction with the Kanuri/Hausa dealt the most irreparable damage to the Alago language, tradition and culture. The English language which was introduced later

through the colonial and Christian missionary school system equally played a pivotal role in the furtherance of the erosion of Alago language as much as Kanuri/ Hausa did. The Hausa language which was/is spoken by these new comers also became the official language of interpretation and conveyance of information from the colonial administrators to the locals with the Hausa and Kanuri people serving as interpreters, messengers and tax collectors. So, the Hausa language gained prominence and recognition over and above Alago language. As it is today, the Hausa language has equally subdued the Kanuri language in such a way that there is hardly a Kanuri man/woman that can communicate in the language other than the Hausa language.

In the same situation, it is often difficult to find an Alago person, whether learned or illiterate, that is able to sustain a conversation in the language without introducing Hausa lexicons and phrases. This is so much that in such a given conversation, even among children, adults and the elderly, Hausa language seeks to take prominence over the native language. What this unfortunate situation portends is a gradual and steady drift into eventual extinction because already what obtains on the ground is the endangerment of the language.

Another factor that is responsible for the language endangerment is the absence of a system of documentation and preservation which should begin with the orthography of the language. Orthography is the bedrock upon which spelling, writing, and pronunciation are formulated for the standardisation of a language. It also makes the documentation and translation of a language easier and acceptable.

Language endangerment and eventual death do not affect language alone. Language as a conveyor belt of a people's culture and civilisation is the first expression of a people's essence and cultural identity. There are other related accoutrements of language which include naming system and dress culture. In these two areas Alago are not only endangered, but are fast gravitating into extinction. Here, the two religions of Islam and Christianity are catalysts for the fostering this state of affairs largely because Alago people are fast abandoning their cherished traditional dress culture in preference for Hausa/Arabic and western European dresses. Alago traditional rulers, the traditional title holders and the educated elites are collectively guilty of this state of affairs. For example, when one visits any Alago palace today one wonders whether he/she is in the right place or lost somewhere in the palace of a Hausa emir or chief because everyone from the traditional ruler, the title holders, and the courtiers dresses in Hausa attires. Even the palace guards are not exempted from this trend as one sees them adorned in multi-coloured (red and green) patched flowing gowns that are reminiscent of the oppressive exploits of the Hausa royal oligarchy. Even at social, religious or political gatherings, Alago men and women seldom portray and project their dress culture, unlike some of their immediate neighbours who take pride in showcasing their cultures through the wearing of their native attires at every occasion.

In the same vein, Alago people have jettisoned their meaningful and beautiful names for foreign names that mean absolutely little or nothing but identification with the adopted foreign religions and cultures. There is undue identification with the imposed foreign religions than with the traditional religion and culture of the people. Dying dressing and naming systems further accentuate the endangerment and extinction of a language. A rider to the above developments is the sad reality that Alago educated elites, for whatever reason(s), no longer speak the language to their own children at home. More often than not, this class of people prefer to communicate with their children either in Hausa, English, or both as the situation suits them, thereby forgetting the dictum that the decline of a language is the collapse of a people. Johnson (2023) captures this truth in the following words, "the truth that a people without a culture, are lost, and that we must preserve and promote our cultures" (29). This is the only way to go because there can never be another way—even a shortcut option.

4. The Way to Go

Alago people have a great chance and opportunity to retrace their lost language and cultural path. What are needed are tenacity of purpose, conscious efforts and love for the ethnic nation devoid of religious affiliation. In order to save Alago language from its present state of endangerment and possible annihilation, the following steps must be taken and for implementation:

- a. The development of a standard orthography that is unanimously acceptable to the diverse Alago family regardless of differences in dialects. This has been achieved through the efforts of Ayitonu Ayewa and his team under the aegis of the Alago Christian Association of Nigeria (ACAN). Although this effort has been achieved in principle, the document must be approved by the regulatory body which is the Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), whose mandate is to authenticate and approve all language orthographies nationwide. The essence of orthography is to formulate standard and acceptable spelling, wording/lexicon, and pronunciation and notational system for a language.

- b. Having successfully developed a standard, acceptable and approved orthography, the next activity in the quest to save a language from endangerment and extinction is documentation and description. This is exactly what Aliyu Amegwa Omama has successfully accomplished in the publication of the *Alago Dictionary (Omage)*. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2007)*, a dictionary is, “a book that gives a list of words in alphabetical order and explains their meanings in the same language, or another language” (432). A dictionary is not a static or dormant document because it must be enriched regularly through review, the creation and loaning of words from other subjects and languages as well as innovations. This means, therefore, that there has to be in place an editorial team that is made up of language experts that can handle this aspect if the dictionary itself must survive and remain competitively relevant.
- c. The Alago language dictionary, or *Omage*, should be bilingual; i.e., Alago with English translation the same way as Neil Skinner’s Hausa-English dictionary, *Kamus Na Turanci Da Hausa (1965)*; translated into English, the title reads: English-Hausa Illustrated Dictionary. This illustrated dictionary contains words in the Hausa language, but the meanings are provided in both Hausa and English.
- d. Another language survival/revival strategy is translation. Already there is in place an Alago Bible translation team that is working on the translation of the Holy Bible into the Alago language, and work has reached 85% completion. Apart from the Bible translation, Alago people have wide array of folk tales that can be documented in the language to serve as primer readers for children. This is another way of saving the language from extinction. Most importantly, however, a lot of the foreign (Hausa and English) words that are in use can be translated into the Alago language. Translation approach has been successfully adopted by both the Hausa and the English languages. As a result of this, both languages are considered as the world’s most ‘living languages’, because in this way both languages are developing exponentially.

There is nothing wrong with borrowing or loaning words from other languages so long as these loaned words are domesticated by the loaner-speakers because this is how languages grow and survive. Let us draw few examples of how Hausa enriches itself through adopting English words: bokiti (bucket), burodi (bread), soja (soldier), bariki (barrack), among many others. Recently also, the Oxford English Dictionary adopted some Nigerian Pidgin words and phrases such as: yahoo yahoo, agbero, amebo, 419, japa, among others. This is how languages grow and develop. To achieve this, therefore, there is the need for the Alago nation to establish an Alago Language Translation and Documentation Bureau with language experts who can adequately handle this task. This is a challenge for the Alago Development Association (ADA) to consider if the Alago language is to be saved from its present state of endangerment.

- e. The National Policy on Education provides that a child up to primary three (3) should be taught in his mother tongue. This component of the policy should be domesticated across all the primary schools in Alago land. In addition to the language being taught at this level, there should be a deliberate policy and action in teaching Alago children their culture and history.
- f. The efforts of the Nasarawa Broadcasting Corporation (NBS), radio and television, must be commended for the laudable Alago language programmes. The effort of the owners of Alago Home Video must also be appreciated, although much still needs to be done. For them to succeed, they need patronage as entrepreneurial stimulus. As a complement to these, Alago nation needs to have language news bulletin/newsletter to be published either quarterly or bi-annually.
- g. In addition to the above suggestions is the need to constitute annual short stories writing competition that will stimulate interest in the creative writing and documentation of the language in the same way as the BBC Hausa short stories competition for young Hausa ladies, the *Likaya ta*. This will not only encourage creative writing among the young men and women, it will also ensure the preservation of the Alago language in the long run as a trope for survival and promotion.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is expected that Alago as a people shall wake up to the challenges of the time by the realisation of the dangers and the concomitant damages that foreign languages, religions and cultures have inflicted on their language, culture and tradition. As stated in this paper, no people make any appreciable progress by wholly relying on other people for direction, or whole sale adoption of other people’s language and culture. The people must embrace cultural and social literacy, deliberate enlightenment and functional education as *sine qua non* for the survival of their language, religion, culture and tradition.

Educated Alago elites and scholars should take up the challenges of research and publication of Alago literature, history and culture for the projection, preservation and documentation of the rich reservoir of the people's knowledge system and language. This is the way to go as anything short of this is a call to total annihilation of the language and its manifest cultural identity.

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Cite this article as: Amirikpa Oyigbenu (2025). *The Threat of Endangerment and Extinction of Alago Language of Nasarawa State, Nigeria*. *International Journal of Languages and Culture*. 5(1), 1-6. doi:10.51483/IJLC.5.1.2025.1-6.