

## **Challenges of Language and Cultural Extinction: A Case Study of Tera (Nymalti) Language of North-East, Nigeria**

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**Abstract.** *This paper explores the viability of Tera (Nymalti) language and culture in North-Eastern Nigeria and its tendency to be endangered. Tera (Nymalti) has about more than 101,000 native speakers yet UNESCO classifies it as one of the threatened language that stands the risk of possible extinction by the end of the 21st century. In order to effectively view this assertion, questionnaires were administered in 15 districts out of the 33 districts in Tera land. The data collected were analyzed by using simple percentage method to clarify the issue. The results of the findings revealed that Tera (Nymalti) language and culture is really facing the challenges of extinction. It was recommended that parents and traditional rulers who are the custodian of the Tera (Nymalti) language and culture should adopt the use of the language in homes and palaces.*

**Key words:** *Challenges, Language and Cultural Extinction.*

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### **Introduction**

An extinct language is a language that no longer has any speaker, (Lenore, Lindsay & Whaley 2006), especially if the language has no living descendants. (Byram & Hu, 2013). In contrast, a dead language is one that is no longer the native language of any community, even if it is still in use, like Latin (Matthews, 2007). A dormant language is a dead language that still serves as a symbol of ethnic identity to a particular group. These languages are often undergoing a process of revitalization ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)). Languages that currently have living native speakers are sometimes called modern languages to contrast them with dead languages, especially in educational contexts.

In the modern period, languages have typically become extinct as a result of the process of cultural assimilation leading to language shift, and the gradual abandonment of a native language in favour of a foreign lingua franca, largely those of European countries. (Byram & Hu, 2013).

As of the year 2000, a total of roughly 7,000 natively spoken languages existed worldwide (UNESCO 2000). Most of these are minor languages in danger of extinction; one estimate published in 2004 by UNESCO expected that some 90% of the currently spoken languages would have become extinct by 2050. David (2004). Normally, the transition from a spoken to an extinct language occurs when a language undergoes language death by being directly replaced by a different one. For example, many

Native American languages were replaced by English, French, Portuguese, Spanish or Dutch as a result of European colonization of the Americas.

In contrast to an extinct language, which no longer has any speakers, or any written use, a historical language may remain in use as a literary or liturgical language long after it ceases to be spoken natively. Such languages are sometimes referred to as "dead languages", but more typically as classical languages. The most prominent Western example of such a language is Latin. But comparable cases are found throughout world history due to the universal tendency to retain a historical stage of a language as the liturgical language.

Historical languages with living descendants that have undergone significant language change may be considered "extinct", especially in cases where they did not leave a corpus of literature or liturgy that remained in widespread use, as is the case with Old English or Old High German relative to their contemporary descendants, English and German.

Some degree of misunderstanding can result from designating languages such as Old English and Old High German as extinct, or Latin dead, while ignoring their evolution as a language. This is expressed in the apparent paradox "Latin is a dead language, but Latin never died." A language such as Etruscan, for example, can be said to be both extinct and dead: inscriptions are ill understood even by the most knowledgeable scholars, and the language ceased to be used in any form long ago, so that there have been no speakers, native or non-native, for many centuries. In contrast, Old English, Old High German and Latin never ceased evolving as living languages, nor did they become totally extinct as Etruscan did. Through time, Latin underwent both common and divergent changes in phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon and continues today as the native language of hundreds of millions of people, renamed as different Romance languages and dialects (French, Italian, Spanish, Corsican, Asturian, Ladin, etc.). Similarly, Old English and Old High German never died, but developed into various forms of modern English and German. With regard to the written language, skills in reading or writing Etruscan are all but non-existent, but trained people can understand and write Old English, Old High German and Latin. Latin differs from the Germanic counterparts in that an approximation of its ancient form is still employed to some extent liturgically. This last observation illustrates that for Latin, Old English, or Old High German to be described accurately as dead or extinct, the language in question must be conceptualized as frozen in time at a particular state of its history. This is accomplished by periodizing English and German as Old; for Latin, an apt clarifying adjective is Classical, which also normally includes designation of high or formal register.

Minor languages are endangered mostly due to economic and cultural globalization, cultural assimilation, and development. With increasing economic integration on national and regional scales, people find it easier to communicate and conduct business in the dominant Lingua Francas of world commerce: English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish and French. (Malone, 2008) In their study of contact-induced language change, American linguists Sarah Grey Thomason and Kaufman (1991) stated that in situations of cultural pressure (where populations are forced to speak a dominant language), three linguistic outcomes may occur: first - and most commonly - a subordinate population may shift abruptly to the dominant language, leaving the native language to a sudden linguistic death. Second, the more gradual process of language death may occur over several generations. The third and most rare outcome is for the pressured group to maintain as much of its native language as possible, while borrowing elements of the dominant language's grammar (replacing all, or portions of, the grammar of the original language). (Thomason, Sarah & Kaufman 1991).

Institutions such as the education system, as well as (often global) forms of media such as the Internet, television, and print media play a significant role in the process of language loss. (Malone 2009). For example, when people migrate to a new country, their children attend school in the country, and the schools are likely to teach them in the majority language of the country rather than their parents' native language.

### **Historical Background of Tera (Nymalti)**

Tera language is a Chadic language which belongs to Afro-Asiatic language family (Blench, 2006), which was believed to have migrated from the Middle East, Yamen with other tribes like the Babur,

Jukun, Bolewa, Tula, Waja, Tangale, Kanakuru, Kare-Kare and Kanuri among others to the present day Tera land located in Akko, Yamaltu/Deba and Funakaye Local Government Areas, Gombe State, and Bayo and Kwaya Local Government Areas of Borno State. The speakers of the language are called Terawa (Nymalti). According to the 2006 National Population Census, Tera language has more than 101,000 native speakers. Tera is endowed with rich cultures ranging from unique cultural and dancing steps, cultural festivals, cultural dishes, tribal marks and lots more. Tera land covers an area of 1,177.8 square kilometer and is endowed with fertile land suitable for agriculture which make the Tera people take farming as their main occupation. Animal rearing is also common among the Tera people. The famous vegetables market in Kwadon served as the Gombe State soup pot. Bima Hills and Dadin Kowa Dam are also found in Tera land.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Within and outside linguistic scholarship, many attempts have been made to define language. However, no linguist definition can be said to be comprehensive. This is probably due to broader and almost infinite coverage of language. Nwoke (2002) sees language as “a systemized combination of sounds which has meanings for all persons in a given cultural community.” Language is a system of human expression by means of words. It is a set of rules which allows a speaker or a listener to associate meaning with a sequence of sounds; what Egbohware (2011) would call ‘the sound of meaning’. To Crystal, (2010). “Language is system of communication used by a particular community or country, consisting of a vocabulary and set of general rules for their combination.” While Yule, (2010). Sees language as something that can be written, spoken, or signed, and there are thousands of different languages used around the world. Despite the fact that all these definitions explain language to an applicable degree, they cannot be said to be adequate. It is in this light that Allen and Conder (1973) conclude that no one way of looking at language is uniquely right, nor is one way of looking at it is sufficient. By and large, language is seen as a powerful symbol of groups’ identity which keeps a peoples’ culture and civilization alive.

Culture is a blend of thoughts, patterns and characteristics of group of people. Usually, the term culture is defined using external aspects such as languages, traditions, religions, arts and cuisines. But culture is something deeper than these factors. It refers to the way we think and interacts with those around us. The most important aspect of cultural heritage of any ethnic group is its language. Indeed, people preserve their culture by promoting their language(s). In Nigeria, there are various ethnic groups, each having its own peculiar language and dialects being spoken in different communities.

Arowolo (2010) posits that “Culture is about people’s total way of life; the way people live, eat, worship, produce, create and recreate.” Culture and language are intertwined and closely related. Language reflects the culture of its speakers; one cannot be separated from the other. Therefore, once a particular culture is being regarded as outdated, the language begins to decline. Since language is an important part of any society because it enables people to communicate and express themselves. When a language dies out, future generations lose a vital component of the culture that is necessary to complete how a culture is understood. This makes language a susceptible aspect of cultural heritage and there is the need to protect it.

Where culture is the total way of peoples’ life, language is a means of transmitting cultural heritage from generation to generation. Once a Language is lost, the norms and values of that culture is also lost. Survey has shown that in the past century, around four hundred languages –about one every month have gone into extinction, and most Linguists estimated that 50% of the world remaining six hundred and fifty (650) languages will by the end of the century go into extinction Blench, (2006).

### **Research Questions**

1. Is Tera language and culture facing the challenges of extinction?
2. What is the level of extinction?
3. What is the linguistic implication of the extinction?

## Methodology

The design adopted for this research was descriptive survey design. This is because, according to Creswell and Creswell, (2018). “Descriptive research is a type of quantitative research that involves making careful observations and detailed documentation of a phenomenon of interest.” They went ahead to state that, “The primary purpose of a descriptive survey is to describe the current state of variable or phenomenon, rather than to establish causal relationship or make predictions.” Sambo (2015), a survey research design is one in which group of people or items are studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered being representative of the entire group. The larger population consist of all Tera people in North-Eastern Nigeria. The respondents were all natives of Tera land. Work of this nature cannot cover the whole population, therefore a sample representation of the population was taken. Random sampling was used for gathering information from the sampled Districts selected in the study. Fifteen Districts were randomly selected and 350 questionnaire were issued to the respondents, which at the end 315 questionnaire were retrieved.

A well designed questionnaire which was given to panel of experts for validation were used in the collection of data for the study and was found reliable. The questionnaire comprised of ten items dwelling of the variables of study. The yes and no response format was used on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A consisted of the demographic data of the respondents, while section B consisted of ten items to elicit information on the challenges of extinction facing the Tera (Nymalti) language and culture.

Copies of the questionnaires were personally administered to the respondents by the researchers. The researchers were present to make clarifications where necessary. The respondents were being given enough time to complete the questionnaire. The data collected from the instrument were discrete ones, therefore simple percentages were used for analysis and present the results on tables.

### Demography Data of Respondents

**Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents.**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	195	61%
Female	120	39%
Total	315	100%

**Table 2: Age distribution of respondents**

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-30	110	35
31-40	125	39
41-50	80	26
Total	315	100

### Data Analysis and Results

**Research Question One:** Is Tera language and culture facing the challenges of extinction?

**Table 3: Respondents’ response on whether Tera language facing extinction.**

S/N	RESPONSES STATEMENT					TOTAL
		YES	%	NO	%	
1	Are your parents both of Tera tribe?	284	90%	31	10%	315
2	Do you live in any of the Tera towns?	299	95%	16	5%	315
3.	Can you speak Tera language fluently?	69	22%	246	78%	315

**Source:** Field Survey 2024

The table 3 above shows the result of research question one. From the result 284 which represent 90% of the respondents have both paternal and maternal Tera background with only 31 (10%) who have either father or mother of the tribe. 299 (95%) reside in Tera land while a negligible number of the respondents which is 16 (5%) live outside Tera land. Despite having both parents from Tera and living on Tera land, yet 246 (78%) of the respondents cannot speak the language fluently, and 69 (22%) can speak the language fluently.

**Research Question Two:** What is the level of extinction?

**Table 4:** Respondents' responses on the level of extinction.

S/N	RESPONSES	YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL
	STATEMENT					
1.	Can you understand Tera language?	66	21%	249	79%	315
2.	Does your parents communicate in Tera Language at home?	116	37%	199	63%	315
3.	Can your younger ones speak Tera language fluently?	50	16%	265	84%	315

**Source:** Field Survey 2024

The table 4 above shows the result of research question two. From the result 249 which represent 79% of the respondents cannot understand Tera language with only 66 (21%) who can understand the language. 199 (63%) said their parents doesn't communicate in Tera language at home while 116 (37%) said their parents do communicate in Tera language at home. 265 (84%) of the respondents' younger ones cannot speak the language fluently, and only 50 (16%) can speak the language fluently.

**Research Question Three:** What is the linguistic implication of the extinction?

**Table 5:** Linguistic implication of the extinction.

S/N	RESPONSES	YES	%	NO	%	TOTAL
	STATEMENT					
1.	Can you dance any of the Tera dancing steps	41	37%	274	87%	315
2.	Had you ever witnessed any of the Tera annual festivals?	50	16%	265	84%	315
3.	Had you ever participated in any of the tribe communal labour?	25	8%	290	92%	315
4.	Is there any with Tera tribal mark living with you?	11	4%	304	96%	315

**Source:** Field Survey 2024

The table 5 above shows the result of research question two. From the result 274 which represent 87% of the respondents cannot dance any of the Tera dancing steps with only 41 (37%) who can dance the dancing steps. 265 (84%) said they have never witnessed any of the Tera annual festivals, while only 50 (16%) said they one occasion or another witnessed. 290 (92%) of the respondents had never participated in any of the tribe communal labour, and only 25 (8%) affirmed to their participation. 304 (96%) said there is none of those bearing the Tera tribal mark living with them, and only 11 (4%) agreed that there still exist those with the Cultural tribal mark living with them.

### Discussion of Findings

This study sought to examine the challenges of extinction facing the Tera (Nymalti) language and culture in North-East, Nigeria. The main reason our indigenous languages and cultures should be safeguard is that they are the strength of human existence. The death of one is the death of the other. "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." Gen 11:6 (NIV). And this is affirmed by Omachonu (2023). That



said, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head, if you talk to him in his own language, it goes to his heart.”

From the research question one which states that “Is Tera language and culture facing extinction?” Has shown that despite the fact that majority of the respondents have both parents from the tribe, and live in Tera land, yet a very significant number of them cannot fluently communicate in the language.

From the research question two which states that “What is the level of extinction?”, the research found out that Tera language is speedily heading into extinction. This can clearly be seen from the responses gathered on this question. The responses show that only few can hear and understand the language, most parents only communicate within themselves as they do not speak the language to the younger generation. Thus, leaving the younger ones at the mercy of themselves when it comes to speaking Tera language.

From the research question three which states “What is the linguistic implication of the extinction?” Tera is a culturally rich tribe with a lot of cultures ranging from unique dancing steps which has taken the Tera Traditional Dancers (‘Yan Club) now called Ngorda outside the country to go and perform. Today, majority of the respondents cannot dance even one step out of the seven dancing steps namely; Lew-lew, Damburti, Gamto, Dan-ali, Bare, Garwa and Bansuwe. Though Bansuwe is seen as a borrowed dancing step from Babur. However, the Tera people and Babur are neighbours and have the same ancestral background and shared some words. Therefore, what is good for the gander is also good for the goose. Tera is well known for organizing annual festivals, mostly after the harvest where people come together from far and near to thank God for this harvest and pray for a bountiful harvest in the year to come. At this gathering where it was done mostly at the hosting village palaces, there were always drumming and dancing that use to last for about seven days or so. The research has found out that this annual festivity is now almost a bygone. The clear identity of the Tera people is their tribal mark which cuts from the head down to the chin and all over the face. Though this was labeled as a harmful practice, the few carrying this mark of identity are not helping matters, as they are doing less in safeguarding the language and cultures of Tera land. Farming is the pre-dominant occupation of the Tera people. One of the good cultures of these people is self-help through communal labour. It is through this communal labour that a whole community will gather on one person’s farm and weed it and the next day another’s. So also shall it be during harvest and building of a house and a lot of activities. This practice has help the Tera people in bearing one another’s burden, but today as Achebe. (2008). Put it, “Things are fallen apart.” As most of the respondents has testify that they have never participated in any communal labour. The major finding of this study is that Tera is an endangered language which is drifting toward extinction.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, it was observed that Tera Language and culture are on the endangered list going into extinction.

Though the language is being documented with the efforts of the Tera Christian Community who were able to translate the New Testament (Mewar Alqawarng) and now working on the Old Testament after some series of publications like; the four gospels, Tera Hymns (Lagarkati Tazi Me Nymalti) , Lagarkati Shogar Me Nnymalti etc. But this effort apart from being one-sided where are the readers?

## **Recommendations**

1. The language should be mandatory in the Tera palaces.
2. Government should adopt the teaching of Tera Language in its own curriculum.
3. The declining sprit of togetherness through annual festivals should be reawaken.
4. Parents should encourage their younger ones to speak the language by speaking it to them.
5. All religious institutions should adopt the use of the language during their religious activities.

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