INTERCONNECTED ROLES OF LANGUAGE, ARTS, AND CULTURE IN FOSTERING CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Language, arts, and culture play a vital role in expressing and preserving collective identity, especially as globalisation threatens local traditions. In Africa and globally, these elements serve as powerful tools for maintaining heritage, transmitting values, and shaping cultural perspectives. This study addresses the declining presence of indigenous cultural expressions caused by global influences and weak policy frameworks. While previous research often treats language, arts, and culture separately, this work bridges that gap by offering an integrated, interdisciplinary perspective. This paper examines the interaction of language, arts, and culture in supporting identity and resilience, using African and global case studies, employing qualitative methods such as literature reviews and case study analysis, also grounded in theoretical framework of George Herbert Mead's Cultural Symbolic Interactionism to analyse meaning through social interaction and shared symbols. The findings highlight that grassroots efforts preserve heritage, and inclusive policies are vital for safeguarding indigenous languages and arts. Furthermore, the thesis asserts that integrating language, arts, and culture in development strategies is the key to combating cultural erosion and fostering sustainable identities. However, to address these challenges, the study recommends that: Governments and Policy Makers should adopt inclusive cultural and language policies to protect indigenous traditions, Educational Institutions should embed local languages and arts in curricula, Creative Industry Stakeholders should support and promote culturally rooted content, and Local Communities and Cultural Practitioners should engage in preserving and sharing traditions through digital and local initiatives. These recommendations benefit governments, schools, creative sectors, and communities involved in preserving culture.

Keywords: Arts and culture, cultural identity, heritage sustainability, indigenous knowledge, language preservation

Introduction

Language, arts, and culture are closely connected in shaping and reflecting human societies, yet their academic study often remains fragmented across separate disciplines, limiting a comprehensive understanding of their interdependence. Language, central to human identity, sets us apart from animals and is seen across cultures as the source of life and power (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003, pp. 25-40). It is a human system for expressing thoughts and feelings through symbols. However, the arts use symbols to communicate emotions, ideas, and history, connecting people across cultures and experiences (Ahmed 2023, pp. 50–62), while the intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions and artistic expressions are handed down through generations (Al-Zadjali 2017, pp. 297-308). For instance, dance, music, and performance reflect distinct cultural identities through unique rhythms and movements. Sociologically, culture is shared knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours passed down as norms (Aina & Morakinyo 2011, pp. 278–285) It thus

includes a people's language, beliefs, religion, values, arts, customs, and all elements that support communal life.

Although previous researches have examined linguistic identity, artistic expression, and cultural heritage individually, there is a noticeable lack of integrative frameworks that address their intersections. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing language as both a communicative medium and a vessel for artistic and cultural expression, underscoring its relevance in modern cultural scholarship. It investigates selected cultural texts and practices across linguistic and artistic fields to highlight their interconnected roles, with the aim of fostering cultural sustainability, informing policy, and supporting identity formation in a globalised world. The objectives of the study are: 1) To explore the interrelationship between language, arts, and culture as mutually reinforcing elements of human expression and identity; 2) To analyse how language functions as a medium for artistic creation and cultural transmission across different societies; and 3) To identify patterns of interaction among these domains, evaluate their influence on cultural sustainability, and propose frameworks for interdisciplinary scholarship. By giving insights into the importance of language, arts, and culture in maintaining identity and heritage amidst globalisation, this paper will be useful to academicians in their academic inquiry, policy makers in policy formulation and providing community-driven initiatives that support cultural diversity and inclusive development.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism to explore how shared symbols like language and art shape cultural identity through social interaction. Mead's symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals continuously shape and reshape experiences through social interactions, emphasising the unique nature of human interaction (Carter & Fuller, 2015, pp. 1-17). Most importantly, symbolic interactionism is a micro-level sociological theory that explains how individuals construct and sustain society through everyday interactions.

Literature Review

Language as a Cultural Repository

Language is a powerful carrier of culture, encoding values, beliefs, and worldviews while shaping identity and fostering continuity and belonging. Indigenous languages, in particular, hold rich ecological, spiritual, and social knowledge that is often inexpressible in dominant languages, making their preservation vital for the survival of traditional wisdom and local epistemologies. Language acquisition naturally evolves from oral (concrete) to written (symbolic) forms, with oral language learned informally in specific environments (Gardella & Tong, 2002, pp. 185–195), and it is a human communication system that is arbitrary, socially created, spoken, creative, and complete for its native speakers (Uduak & Akpan, 2020, pp. 28–46). Language as a cultural repository preserves oral traditions and reflects indigenous worldviews. In Nigeria, *Yoruba* proverbs, *Igbo* naming ceremonies, and Hausa praise poetry express cultural identity and values. Through folktales and traditional sayings, languages pass down moral teachings and community laws, keeping culture alive in everyday life.

Moreover, language acts as a symbolic framework through which communities articulate their histories, rituals, and cosmological views, anchoring identity in everyday cultural life. Some dismiss hermeneutics and distrust rhetoric, but since Plato opposed the Sophists' misuse, rhetoric has remained central to social life (Gadamer & Krajewski, 1992, pp. 345–352). The decline or disappearance of indigenous languages often results in the erosion of cultural narratives and a break from ancestral legacies. English–*Yorùbá* contact since colonial times has led to lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic changes, creating a distinct language variety (Olofin et al., 2024, p. 135). *Yoruba*, *Igbo* and *Hausa*, though widely spoken in Nigeria, face decline among the urban youths due to English language dominance. Revitalisation efforts should include digital tools, education, cultural events, and documentation to promote its use and preserve heritage. Also, the *Ainu* language of northern Japan is critically endangered, but recent efforts; like official recognition, the Upopoy Museum, and community classes aim to revive it and restore cultural pride. Japan's language contact includes *Ainu* revitalisation, Korean and Ryukyuan use, English immersion, and language shifts among immigrants and bicultural children (Anderson & Iwasaki-Goodman, 2001, pp. 45–67). This paper, therefore, underscores the urgency of revitalising endangered languages to protect cultural diversity and uphold the continuity of indigenous knowledge systems.

The Expressive Power of the Arts

Visual, performing, and literary arts serve as vital expressions of culture, using symbolic and creative forms to reflect and transmit a society's values, challenges, and hopes across generations and regions. Distinctive Nigerian cultural arts include *Yoruba* talking drums used in ceremonies, *Igbo Mmanwu* masquerades blending music, dance, and costume, *Tiv A'nger* fabric with symbolic stripes, and Hausa-Fulani wall murals featuring geometric Islamic designs; all reflecting identity, tradition, and storytelling. Art also reflects cultural values and ideals, serving as a medium for self-expression and a lens for understanding societal traditions, emotions, and changes. It also plays a key role in preserving and transmitting heritage, including history, language, and rituals (Sosnytskyi et al., 2024, pp. 1–7). Often blending poetry with performance or visual elements with storytelling, these intersections create layered cultural expressions that resonate through generations. By engaging with diverse artistic practices, communities assert their identities, challenge prevailing narratives, and promote alternative perspectives, while also preserving and evolving their cultural heritage.

The arts are symbolic languages that express ideas, emotions, and history, serving as powerful tools for visual, oral, and written communication that bridge human experiences across divides. Also, art fosters cross-cultural dialogue, preserves heritage, and invites new interpretations through audience interaction (Pletsan, 2022, pp.194–209). Additionally, the arts play a vital role in encoding and transmitting intangible cultural knowledge, such as myths, rituals, and shared values, particularly in cultures with strong oral traditions. They provide a platform for both personal expression and collective memory, amplifying marginalised voices and reshaping cultural

narratives using arts' transformative power in preserving cultural meaning and fostering cross-community dialogue.

Culture in Transition

Culture is continuously evolving as traditional practices intersect with modern influences in a rapidly globalising world. This ongoing negotiation shapes cultural identities, with communities striving to preserve their heritage while adapting to global trends. Amid globalisation and tech change, an arts-based cultural approach helps preserve diversity and foster cross-cultural understanding (Rozman & Yakym, 2021, pp. 93–97). As cultures interact with global forces, they often engage in selective appropriation, merging elements of both traditional and modern influences to form hybrid identities. This fusion of the past and present creates new forms of cultural expression that remain relevant while reflecting contemporary realities.

In Nigeria, cultural transition is reflected in modern Ankara fashion, Nollywood's fusion of local and global styles, and the evolution of Afrobeats from traditional genres like Fuji and Highlife. These shifts show how tradition adapts to modern trends while preserving cultural identity. Furthermore, the shift from tradition to modernity often leads to a redefinition of cultural boundaries, as global influences challenge long-established norms and values. Recent research on socio-economic development shows two views: one sees modernisation replacing traditional values with modern ones (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, pp.19–51), but the other view holds that traditional values endure despite economic and political shifts (DiMaggio, 1994. pp. 27–57). In this process, cultural identity becomes fluid, shaped by both external forces and internal negotiations within communities.

Semiotics and Symbolism

Semiotics and symbolism are essential in meaning-making across cultures, where signs and symbols act as channels for conveying complex ideas, values, and identities. Semiotics and symbolism help to decode how signs and language shape cultural meanings and perceptions (Turdiyev, 2021, pp. 443–451). Through artistic narratives, these symbols create frameworks that allow individuals and communities to interpret their world, communicate shared beliefs, and express cultural realities. Semiotic analysis models like Greimas's square and Williams's cultural types help marketers interpret and apply cultural meanings to brands (Lemon, 2018, pp. 371–398). Organisms rely on semiosis, the innate ability to produce and interpret signs, to build internal models (Sebeok & Danesi, 2000, p. 6), it is also the core process through which meaning is created (Kull et al., 2011, pp.1-21). Most importantly, signs and symbols operate in different cultural settings, highlighting their role in shaping collective consciousness and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

In Nigeria, semiotics is seen in the *Yoruba* talking drum and *Igbo Uli* art, which convey cultural messages, while symbols in clothing and architecture; like white for purity, red caps for chieftaincy, and *Hausa* arches; express identity and values. Communication is an adaptive interaction that influences behaviour between organisms, driven by the human need for connection and social

survival (Weitzman, 2013, pp. 185–198), and it also, relies on shared beliefs and functions through interactions between individuals (Kurcz, 2001). This study explores how visual, verbal, and performative symbols shape and reinterpret cultural narratives, revealing deeper cultural values and norms. However, these symbolic systems evolve over time, adjusting to social changes, technological progress, and global interactions, ensuring their continued relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Language, Arts, and Cultural Policy

Language, arts, and cultural policy shape national identity and heritage through government support, institutional promotion, and community engagement that reflects local values. Nigeria's cultural policy supports indigenous languages in schools and Nollywood's growth to preserve heritage and identity. Also, institutions like National Council of Arts and Culture (NCAC) and the Lagos Theatre Festival promote local arts, native storytelling, and cultural pride. Cultural policies reflect hegemony, as dominant groups use education, art, and belief systems to normalise their control (Miller & Yudice, 2002, p. 9), though, language evolves, policies often control it to enforce dominant ideologies (Shohamy, 2006). Whereas, cultural democracy involves both ideals and practice, with public cultural policy subject to democratic accountability unlike private patronage (Mulcahy, 2006, pp. 319-330).

Arts educators show that combining language and art boosts communication, builds confidence, and deepens cultural understanding through creative expression. Arts educators examine how learning language and art enhances communication and empowers marginalised student voices (Chappell & Faltis, 2013; Rodríguez-Valls et al., 2012, pp. 96-111), offer emotional support for language learning (Craffey, 2009) and create a safe space for developing language skills (Eubanks, 2002:40-45). Therefore, effective cultural policy depends on collaboration among government, institutions, and communities, balancing global trends with indigenous preservation to ensure cultural vitality and unity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and case study approach. In this sense, the adaptive and resilient functions of language, arts, and culture in select countries of the United Kingdom, United States, South Korea, South Africa, Mali, and Nigeria are described. The focus is on the policies, community practices, and creative expressions that support cultural sustainability.

Case Studies

Revitalisation of the Welsh Language: Wales' government has implemented policies like mandatory Welsh-language education and media support to revive the language, particularly among younger generations. In the United Kingdom, Welsh language progress has stemmed from grassroots efforts, focusing on education, services, and media, now facing migration and usage challenges beyond schools under Welsh Assembly oversight (Williams, 2014:242–272). However, the Welsh Language Act of 1993 marked a major shift by legally promoting equality between Welsh and English, establishing the Welsh Language Board and requiring public bodies to provide

bilingual services (HMSO, 1993). Within ten years, the WLB became the lead agency for promoting Welsh, launching major initiatives in education, family language transfer, community development, IT, and the private sector (Campbell, 2000, pp. 20-30; Williams, 2000, pp. 130–154). These initiatives have shown success, though challenges persist in achieving fluency across all age groups, especially in urban areas. The case underscores the importance of ongoing community involvement and policy backing for language preservation.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA): The NEA has been instrumental in the United States of America in supporting arts initiatives that promote cultural diversity through grants for local and national projects. Furthermore, major cities have built downtown cultural centres to boost tourism, enhance city image, and support the arts, leading to new alliances between marketers and arts institutions. In all the designated cities, downtown cultural institutions were developed to boost tourism and city image, aligning arts and marketing goals, though the "culture as development" structures vary by city (Strom, 2003, pp.247-263). Despite facing financial challenges, the NEA has helped sustain a vibrant arts scene that highlights both traditional and contemporary American culture, demonstrating the impact of institutional support in preserving the arts.

South Korea's Creative Industries and Cultural Diplomacy: South Korea has successfully used its creative industries, like K-pop and film, as tools for cultural diplomacy, with government backing facilitating international recognition. Between the 1980s and 1990s, South Korea adopted neoliberal reforms and a state-led cultural policy to boost its economy (Heo, 2015, pp. 351-364; Jin, 2016, pp. 15-35), also recognised cultural promotion as a national duty, with the 1988 Olympics highlighting its global relevance (Kim, 2016, pp. 10-21), allowed direct Hollywood film distribution to its cinemas (Jang & Paik, 2012, pp. 196–202). In the 1990s, President Kim Young-Sam launched a five-year cultural plan and the Segyehwa globalisation policy to counter U.S. pressure and global competition (Kim, 2000, pp. 41 -50.

Despite the influx of U.S. products harming local industries, South Korean and American cultures blended, giving rise to hybrid K-pop. However, from 2003–2008, the Roh Moo-hyun administration promoted culture to boost South Korea's soft power and global image. The South Korean chaebols invested heavily in media to produce cultural content. However, after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, South Korea began exporting culture to boost its economy, and policymakers sought to use culture as a resource and make the Korean Wave economically sustainable (Hae-Joang, 2005, pp.147-182). While this has led to global success, debates continue about balancing commercialisation with cultural authenticity, highlighting the complexities of state-supported cultural export.

Promoting IsiZulu in South Africa: *IsiZulu*, one of South Africa's official languages, has gained prominence through government initiatives supporting multilingual education and media. The 1997 Higher Education Act permits South African universities to develop their own language policies in line with the goal of a multilingual society (Naidoo, Gokool & Ndebele, 2018, pp. 356-368), but English is widely preferred for education due to its perceived economic advantages, even

by native speakers of indigenous languages (Kamwangamalu, 2004, pp. 131–146). Due to slow progress in developing African languages for education, Minister Blade Nzimande in 2011 urged universities to strengthen language departments, promote multilingualism, and advance African languages as mediums of instruction and academic use (Nzimande, 2011). Despite increased usage in public services and education, challenges remain due to the dominance of English and *Afrikaans*. This case highlights the complexity of promoting linguistic diversity in a multilingual society.

Integrating African languages into ICT and education in South Africa would boost their status. Osborn & Osborn (2010, pp. 40-60) argue that "ICT cannot reproduce or share local knowledge without indigenous languages", and given South Africa's multilingual diversity and ICT growth, integrating African languages into education technology is essential to promote multilingualism and reverse historical marginalisation (Gumbi, 2019, pp. 204–210). Nonetheless, expanding *isiZulu* in digital media, academia, and education is progressing, but challenges like limited resources and negative perceptions persist. However, strengthening its status requires strong policy support, community-academic partnerships, and youth engagement through technology. True multilingualism in South Africa depends on equal recognition and investment in all indigenous languages.

Afrobeat's Global Rise in Nigeria: Afrobeats, which emerged in early 2000s West Africa, fuses traditional rhythms with Western genres like R&B and Hip-Hop, building on Fela Kuti's Afrobeat legacy (Ndineyi, 2024, p. 4), while, young black musicians continue Afrobeat's influential legacy by blending it with diverse genres, expanding its global reach and cultural impact (Chukwu, 2024). However, the commercialisation of Afrobeats raises concerns about its authenticity, even as the genre; championed by artists like Burna Boy and Wizkid, gains global traction with backing from the Nigerian government through music and cultural diplomacy.

Modern Nigerian artists globalised Afrobeats by fusing it with pop, hip-hop, and dancehall, aided by platforms like YouTube and TikTok, has turned it into a major cultural export and soft power tool for Nigeria. Global stars like Beyoncé and Drake have boosted Afrobeats' global status, leading major labels to invest in Nigerian talent and reshaping views of African creativity. Music evolves by reworking past styles, with sampling and remixing blurring originality and influence (Kostka et al., 2021), while, goodwill fosters cultural diplomacy by promoting understanding, respect, and peace through intercultural acts like aid and exchange programs (Aruku et al., 2025, pp. 58–69). Despite global interest in Afrobeats, Nigeria's music industry faces regulatory hurdles, though new copyright laws signal progress (Udogba, 2023). Notwithstanding, this case study demonstrates the role of music as an economic and cultural force on the global stage.

Preserving Traditional Art Forms in Mali: Cultural heritage reflects a nation's history and identity, embodying its values, traditions, and distinct worldview. With decolonisation and globalisation, protecting cultural heritage has become vital, especially as illicit trade in heritage was valued at up to $2 billion annually by 2003 (Forrest, 2003, pp. 592–593). Mali's government, in partnership with local communities and UNESCO, is preserving griot music and oral storytelling through

support for apprenticeships and festivals, reinforcing cultural identity and promoting tourism. Also, the efforts aim to include traditional art in education to engage youth and ensure continuity, using digital archiving in preserving oral histories, music, and crafts for future generations. Most importantly, these strategies, despite challenges, promote pride in Malian culture and boost its global visibility.

Mali hosts four UNESCO World Heritage sites: Djenné and Timbuktu (designated in 1988), the Tomb of Askia in 2004, and the Cliff of Bandiagara in 1989, also recognised as a mixed cultural site (Sacko, 2021, p. 26). Paradoxically, the Benin artifacts in Nigeria highlight repatriation challenges, while Mali's conflict since 2012 has led to the destruction of cultural sites, prompting UNESCO's concern (Klesmith, 2013, p.45). However, political instability threatens the survival of these traditions, traditional arts face threats from conflict and globalisation, requiring education, community support, and global aid to preserve them. This case emphasises the challenges of safeguarding cultural heritage in conflict zones.

Discussion of the Findings

Language, arts, and culture are intricately linked, shaping identity, promoting unity, and passing cultural knowledge across generations. Their synergy preserves heritage by balancing tradition and modernity, with interdisciplinary approaches supporting cultural sustainability and inclusive development. Furthermore, language drives artistic expression and cultural continuity, while the arts reflect shared histories and values, making their integration into education, policy, and community efforts vital for preserving identity and promoting social cohesion.

Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of language, arts, and culture in shaping collective identity and preserving heritage amid globalisation. Through case studies and theoretical analysis, it highlights how cultural expressions evolve under modern influences while maintaining traditional values. The research contributes to academic discourse by offering an interdisciplinary perspective on cultural resilience, continuity, and transformation.

Recommendations

1) Governments and policymakers should implement inclusive cultural and language policies to preserve indigenous traditions. Such measures reinforce national identity and safeguard heritage amid the pressures of globalisation.
2) Educational institutions should embed local languages and arts in school curricula to promote cultural pride and facilitate intergenerational knowledge transfer.
3) Creative industry stakeholders should promote culturally rooted content to preserve authenticity, boost global visibility, and drive growth in the creative economy.
4) Local communities and cultural practitioners should preserve and share traditions through digital and local initiatives to ensure sustainable heritage preservation and foster community ownership.

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