



LANGUAGE AS A REPOSITORY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM THE KILBA (HƏBA) OF NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA SINCE C. 1250 AD

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Abstract

Language constitutes one of the most enduring repositories of cultural heritage, serving as the primary medium through which societies preserve and transmit their histories, identities, values, beliefs, and indigenous knowledge across generations. Despite growing concerns about language endangerment and cultural homogenisation, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the historical role of the Kilba (Həba) language in safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Kilba people of Northeastern Nigeria. This study examines how the Kilba language has functioned as a repository of cultural heritage from the emergence of the Kilba Kingdom around c. 1250 AD to the present. Employing qualitative and historical research methods, the study draws on oral interviews, historical records, and published and unpublished scholarly works to explore the relationship between language and cultural continuity. The findings reveal that the Kilba language has remained central to the preservation of indigenous knowledge through oral traditions, personal naming systems, folklore, proverbs, riddles, songs, ritual performances, traditional governance, festivals, religious expressions, and community-based language initiatives. The study further demonstrates that, despite the transformative influences of colonialism, Christianity, Islam, migration, urbanisation, and globalisation, the language continues to reinforce cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational transmission of cultural values among both homeland and diaspora communities. However, increasing language shift, intergenerational decline in mother-tongue transmission, and inadequate institutional support pose significant challenges to its continued vitality. The paper argues that sustained documentation, educational integration, community participation, and supportive language policies are essential for preserving the Kilba language as a living repository of cultural heritage and for strengthening indigenous knowledge systems in Nigeria.

Keywords: Cultural heritage; Heba (Kilba); Indigenous language; Language preservation; Northeastern Nigeria; Cultural identity.



Introduction

Language is far more than a medium of communication; it is a repository of a people's history, identity, worldview, and collective memory. It embodies the experiences, beliefs, customs, values, and indigenous knowledge that define a society and distinguish it from others. Through language, societies transmit their cultural heritage from one generation to another, thereby ensuring continuity in their social, political, religious, and economic life. This explains why Otunba Biodun Aiboye (2024:1–2) argues that language is a fundamental aspect of human identity because it reflects the shared experiences, histories, and values of a people. Similarly, Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma (2024:3) observes that language, as a component of culture, serves as both a medium of communication and a vehicle through which cultural values are transmitted across generations. In this regard, indigenous languages remain indispensable to cultural preservation, national identity, and sustainable development.

The inseparable relationship between language and culture has long attracted scholarly attention. Ralph Leon Beals and Harry Hoijer (1962:1) contend that language constitutes the principal medium through which culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Likewise, Ebiegbere Joe Alagoa (2008:60) maintains that a people who lose their language invariably lose an important aspect of their historical consciousness and cultural identity. Language therefore functions not merely as an instrument of communication but also as the storehouse of indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, philosophies, customs, and social institutions that have evolved over centuries. Consequently, the survival of indigenous languages is fundamental to safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of societies.

Nigeria's remarkable linguistic diversity illustrates this relationship between language and culture. With over 500 indigenous languages spoken across more than 250 ethnic groups, the country possesses one of Africa's richest linguistic landscapes. These languages preserve diverse systems of knowledge, oral histories, artistic expressions, customary laws, and indigenous technologies that collectively constitute Nigeria's cultural heritage. However, increasing urbanisation, migration, globalisation, formal education dominated by English, and the growing influence of digital communication continue to threaten the vitality of many indigenous languages. Patrick (2025:43) observes that language remains indispensable to explaining a people's norms, values, and worldview while facilitating social, cultural, economic, and technological development. Equally, Samuel Wycliff (2018:236–252) argues that the growing dominance of foreign languages and cultures has increasingly overshadowed many indigenous Nigerian languages, thereby posing serious challenges to cultural continuity and identity.

Among the numerous indigenous languages of Nigeria is Həba, commonly known as **Kilba**, spoken predominantly in Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State in Northeastern Nigeria. Beyond its communicative function, the Kilba language represents a significant repository of the historical experiences, cultural values, traditional institutions, and indigenous knowledge systems of the Kilba people. Historical evidence indicates that the Heba (Kilba) Kingdom emerged around c. 1250 AD, developing into one of the notable indigenous political formations in Northeastern Nigeria. Throughout its historical evolution, language remained central to governance, kinship relations, oral traditions, religious practices, conflict resolution, and the preservation of collective memory. Gudumbul (2024:1–27) demonstrates that the history of the Heba Kingdom cannot be separated from its language because both evolved simultaneously as instruments of political organisation, cultural continuity, and social cohesion.



The close relationship between language and culture is equally evident in the linguistic structure and social functions of the Kilba language. Marjah (2024:1–21) explains that the Həba language embodies the worldview, cultural practices, social organisation, naming systems, and ecological knowledge of its speakers. The language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a repository of oral literature, indigenous philosophies, customary laws, and traditional knowledge that continue to define Heba identity across generations. Likewise, Kadala (2020:1–15), through *Shall Uwada*, illustrates how the Kilba language encapsulates indigenous moral values, communal solidarity, traditional governance, spirituality, agricultural life, and historical consciousness, thereby reinforcing the intimate relationship between language and cultural identity.

Despite its historical resilience, the Kilba language increasingly faces challenges associated with urbanisation, migration, inter-ethnic marriages, formal education, religious transformation, and the growing dominance of English, Hausa, and Fulfulde in public life. These developments have contributed to declining intergenerational transmission of the language, particularly among younger generations residing outside the ancestral homeland. Nevertheless, recent developments, including the codification of Həba orthography, language documentation initiatives, the establishment of the Həba Language Development Association, and growing scholarly interest in Kilba history and language, demonstrate renewed efforts towards language revitalisation and cultural preservation (Balama, 2024:1–3; Shallpella, 2024:1–2).

Although previous studies have examined aspe

cts of Kilba history, folklore, oral literature, personal names, and linguistic structure, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the Kilba language as a historical repository through which diverse forms of cultural heritage have been preserved for nearly eight centuries. Existing studies often discuss language, history, literature, or culture independently without adequately demonstrating their interconnectedness within the broader framework of cultural preservation. This study addresses that gap by examining the historical role of the Kilba language in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kilba (Həba) people from the emergence of the Heba Kingdom around c. 1250 AD to the present.

The study adopts qualitative and historical research methodologies, drawing on oral interviews, historical documents, published and unpublished scholarly works, and relevant archival materials. Through the triangulation of these sources, the paper investigates how the Kilba language has functioned as a repository of oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, customary institutions, cultural values, religious expressions, naming practices, and collective memory. It further examines the contemporary challenges confronting the language and proposes practical strategies for strengthening its preservation, documentation, and transmission to future generations.

To achieve these objectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions: Who are the Kilba (Həba) people? How did the Kilba language emerge and evolve within its historical context? In what ways has the language contributed to preserving the cultural heritage of the Kilba people? What challenges threaten its continued vitality? Finally, what practical measures can strengthen the preservation and promotion of the Kilba language as a repository of indigenous cultural heritage?

Accordingly, the paper is organised into six major sections. Following this introduction, the study discusses the theoretical framework underpinning the research, examines the historical and sociolinguistic context of the Kilba people, analyses the role of language in preserving their cultural heritage, identifies the major challenges confronting the language, and concludes by proposing recommendations for language maintenance, cultural preservation, and future research.



Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored principally on Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Language and Cognitive Development, complemented by insights from Usage-Based Theory. These theoretical perspectives provide a suitable framework for understanding how language functions not merely as a medium of communication but as a repository of cultural knowledge through which societies preserve, transmit, and reproduce their cultural heritage across generations.

The sociocultural theory, developed by Lev Vygotsky, posits that language develops primarily through social interaction and cultural participation. Rather than viewing language solely as an individual cognitive achievement, the theory emphasises that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction within a cultural environment. According to Gowrie (n.d.:1–2), Vygotsky argues that language serves as the principal cultural tool through which individuals acquire social values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and collective knowledge. Consequently, language functions as a bridge connecting one generation to another, ensuring continuity in the transmission of cultural practices and community identity.

The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in its explanation of how the Kilba (Həba) language has historically mediated cultural continuity. Through everyday communication, storytelling, folktales, proverbs, riddles, ritual performances, songs, naming ceremonies, traditional governance, religious practices, and indigenous knowledge systems, successive generations of the Kilba people have acquired not only linguistic competence but also the values, historical consciousness, and worldview of their society. In this regard, language operates as a social institution through which cultural identity is continuously negotiated and reproduced.

Complementing Vygotsky's perspective is Michael Tomasello's Usage-Based Theory of language, which argues that language emerges, develops, and is sustained through repeated patterns of social use and interaction rather than through fixed grammatical structures alone (Michael Tomasello, 2003:3–4). The theory maintains that language survives because communities continue to use it in meaningful social contexts. Consequently, the vitality of any language depends largely on its continued use in family life, community interactions, education, religious activities, ceremonies, and other domains of everyday life.

This perspective provides important insights into the historical development of the Kilba language. For several centuries, the language has remained the principal medium through which oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, customary laws, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, folklore, kinship relations, personal names, rituals, and communal values have been transmitted among the Kilba people. As Gudumbul (2024:1–27) demonstrates, the historical evolution of the Heba Kingdom was inseparable from the development of institutions whose continuity depended substantially on language. Similarly, Marjah (2024:1–21) explains that the Həba language embodies the community's worldview, social organisation, ecological knowledge, and cultural identity, thereby serving as a living archive of the people's historical experiences and collective memory.

The literary reflections contained in *Shall Uwada* further reinforce this theoretical position by illustrating how language preserves indigenous philosophies, communal ethics, spirituality, agricultural traditions, and historical consciousness within Kilba society. Through literary representation, Kadala (2020:1–15) demonstrates that language functions not only as a



communicative system but also as an enduring repository of cultural values that continue to shape communal identity across generations.

Although other theories of language development—including Skinner's Behaviourism, Chomsky's Nativism, and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory—offer valuable explanations concerning language acquisition, their principal concern lies in explaining how individuals learn language. The present study is less concerned with the acquisition of linguistic competence than with the historical and cultural functions of language within society. Consequently, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, supported by Usage-Based Theory, provides a more appropriate conceptual lens for explaining how the Kilba language has functioned as a repository of cultural heritage, a vehicle of indigenous knowledge transmission, and a marker of collective identity from c. 1250 AD to the present.

Accordingly, these theoretical perspectives provide the analytical foundation for understanding the central argument of this paper: that the continued vitality of the Kilba language is indispensable to the preservation, transmission, and revitalisation of the cultural heritage of the Kilba (Həba) people in Northeastern Nigeria.

Study Context

The Kilba language, known to its native speakers as **Həba**, is spoken predominantly by the Kilba ethnic group of Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State in Northeastern Nigeria. Beyond serving as a medium of communication, the language constitutes a vital repository of the people's history, cultural values, worldview, and indigenous knowledge systems. Linguistically, Kilba belongs to the Bata–Marghi subgroup of the Central Chadic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family, a classification that underscores its historical relationship with several neighbouring languages in Northeastern Nigeria (Hamza Tukur Ribadu, Garba Ibrahim, & Amina Ramat Said, 2021:75–88; Muhammed Aminu Muazu, 2016:1–5; Marjah, 2024:3–8). While the British colonial administration popularised the name **Kilba**, the people continue to identify themselves as **Həba**, and they refer to their language as **Nya-Həba**, reflecting their enduring cultural identity (Marjah, 2024:5–7). This distinction is important because language and identity remain inseparable within the community's historical consciousness.

Historically, the Kilba people occupy a prominent position among the indigenous societies of Northeastern Nigeria. Evidence from oral traditions and historical records indicates that the Heba Kingdom emerged around **c. 1250 AD**, gradually developing into one of the notable precolonial political formations in the region. Over the centuries, the kingdom established enduring institutions of governance, social organisation, defence, religion, and economic production, all of which were mediated through the Kilba language. Gudumbul (2024:4–18) observes that the growth and consolidation of the Heba Kingdom were accompanied by the preservation of a rich corpus of oral traditions, customary institutions, and indigenous knowledge that continued to shape the identity of the people across successive generations.

The historical development of the Kilba people equally reflects centuries of interaction with neighbouring ethnic groups through trade, migration, diplomacy, and occasional conflicts. Such interactions facilitated cultural exchanges without fundamentally displacing the Kilba language as the principal medium through which communal values, customary laws, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge were transmitted. According to Gudumbul (2024:8–16), despite these external contacts, the Kilba people retained a distinct linguistic and cultural identity that



differentiated them from surrounding communities. This resilience partly explains why the language has remained central to the preservation of the community's historical memory and cultural heritage.

Colonialism and subsequent post-colonial developments, however, significantly altered the demographic and sociolinguistic landscape of Kilba society. The expansion of Western education, Christianity, modern healthcare, wage employment, military service, commerce, and government administration encouraged migration from the ancestral homeland to urban centres across Nigeria. Consequently, Kilba-speaking communities became established in cities such as Maiduguri, Gombe, Jalingo, Bauchi, Zaria, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Port Harcourt, Enugu, Ibadan, Lagos, and Abuja. Although migration exposed the people to multilingual environments, it also facilitated the emergence of organised diaspora associations committed to preserving the Kilba language and culture among succeeding generations (Samuel Wycliff & Afordia Barmi Wajiga, 2022:209–225).

Of equal importance is the historical evolution of the name **Kilba** itself. According to Johnson Haniel Pongri (2017:45–65), Samuel Wycliff (2025:143–166), Emmanuel Cletus Sharndama and Jamila B. A. Suleiman (2013:166–173), the people originally identified themselves as **Həba**, while the present name **Kilba** became widely adopted during the colonial period. Marjah (2024:5–7) explains that the variation emerged largely through the pronunciation of the name by neighbouring Fulfulde speakers and its subsequent adoption by British colonial officials in administrative records. Despite this historical adaptation, the indigenous designation **Həba** continues to enjoy widespread acceptance among native speakers and remains an important symbol of ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

Today, the Kilba language continues to perform multiple social and cultural functions within both the ancestral homeland and diaspora communities. It remains the principal medium through which oral traditions, kinship relations, indigenous religious expressions, traditional institutions, folklore, customary practices, personal names, songs, proverbs, riddles, and historical narratives are transmitted across generations. As Marjah (2024:12–18) observes, the language continues to embody the cultural worldview of the Kilba people and serves as one of the strongest markers of their collective identity despite increasing pressures from urbanisation, migration, formal education, and globalisation. Consequently, understanding the historical and sociolinguistic context of the Kilba language provides an essential foundation for appreciating its enduring role as a repository of the cultural heritage of the Kilba (Həba) people.

Kilba Language, Diaspora Community Associations, and Cultural Identity

Nigeria is a multilingual nation endowed with immense cultural diversity, with each indigenous language serving as a repository of the history, values, and identity of its speakers. Within this broader linguistic landscape, the Kilba (Həba) language has continued to play a significant role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kilba people, particularly through the activities of community-based organisations both within and outside their ancestral homeland. One of the most remarkable contributions of the language has been its ability to sustain ethnic identity and social cohesion among Kilba communities dispersed across different parts of Nigeria.

The migration of Kilba people to urban centres during the colonial and post-colonial periods, occasioned by expanding educational opportunities, civil service employment, military service, commercial activities, religious engagements, and other socio-economic factors, created both opportunities and challenges for the preservation of the indigenous language. As Kilba men and women settled in cities such as Maiduguri, Gombe, Jalingo, Bauchi, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Port



Harcourt, Enugu, Ibadan, Lagos, and Abuja, they encountered increasingly multilingual environments where English, Hausa, and other dominant languages became the principal means of communication. Under such circumstances, there was a growing concern that younger generations born outside the ancestral homeland might gradually lose proficiency in the Kilba language and, by extension, become detached from important aspects of their cultural heritage.

Rather than allowing these changing circumstances to undermine their linguistic and cultural identity, the Kilba people responded by establishing organised community associations in several Nigerian cities during the 1970s and 1980s. These associations, widely known as the **Kilba Development Association (KDA)** or **Həba Development Association (HDA)**, became important cultural institutions dedicated to promoting unity, mutual support, and the preservation of Kilba language and culture among members residing outside Hong Local Government Area (Samuel Wycliff, 2022:149–169). Their activities extended beyond social welfare to include deliberate programmes aimed at strengthening cultural consciousness and sustaining the use of the indigenous language among both adults and children.

Oral interviews conducted with Alfred Dauda (2025), Ayuba Bello Dalatu (2025), and Ishaku Sunday (2025) revealed that these associations deliberately conduct their meetings, cultural ceremonies, annual celebrations, and other communal activities largely in the Kilba language. In many diaspora communities, members are encouraged to communicate freely in Kilba during meetings, thereby creating an environment in which language remains the principal medium of social interaction and cultural expression. Such deliberate use of the language not only reinforces ethnic solidarity but also enables members to remain connected with the customs, values, and historical experiences that define Kilba identity.

A particularly significant initiative undertaken by many of these associations is the organisation of special language classes for children born or raised outside the ancestral homeland. According to the interviewees, weekly or monthly instructional sessions are often incorporated into community meetings to teach children how to speak, understand, read, and appreciate the Kilba language. These informal educational programmes have become increasingly important because many children growing up in multilingual urban centres have greater exposure to English and Hausa than to their mother tongue. Consequently, the community associations have assumed responsibility for complementing the efforts of parents in ensuring that younger generations acquire functional competence in the language while simultaneously learning the cultural values embedded within it.

This community-driven approach reflects the broader understanding that indigenous languages serve as more than instruments of communication; they are repositories of collective memory and cultural continuity. As Ahmed and Murtala (2020:330–337) observe, indigenous languages preserve the traditions, beliefs, oral histories, and knowledge systems that define the cultural identity of their speakers. Their continued use strengthens communal attachment, promotes cultural pride, and encourages younger generations to appreciate their ancestral heritage. Similarly, Marjah (2024:12–18) notes that the vitality of the Həba language depends not only on the number of its speakers but also on the willingness of the community to create social spaces in which the language is actively used and transmitted across generations.

The historical experience of the Kilba people equally demonstrates that language functions as an enduring marker of identity, particularly in situations of migration and displacement. Gudumbul (2024:19–24) observes that throughout the historical evolution of the Heba Kingdom, language



remained one of the strongest unifying elements among dispersed members of the community, preserving a shared sense of origin, ancestry, and collective memory despite geographical separation. This historical continuity explains why contemporary diaspora associations continue to place considerable emphasis on promoting the use of Kilba language as a means of strengthening social cohesion and preserving cultural heritage among members living outside their ancestral homeland.

The activities of these associations therefore extend beyond cultural celebrations or social networking. They represent deliberate efforts at language maintenance and cultural revitalisation within an increasingly multilingual society. Through regular interaction in the indigenous language, the organisation of language classes, the celebration of traditional festivals, and the promotion of indigenous customs, the associations have contributed significantly to ensuring that the Kilba language remains a living repository of the people's history, values, worldview, and cultural identity. In this respect, the experience of the Kilba diaspora demonstrates that community participation remains one of the most effective mechanisms for sustaining indigenous languages and preserving cultural heritage in contemporary Nigeria.

Publications of books, journal articles, magazines, orthography, and so on have been another major role of Kilba language in not only enriching, promoting, and preserving its cultural heritage. One of such roles is the **translation of the Christian Holy Bible—The New Testament and Christian Hymn Book to Kilba language in the year 2016** (Balama, 2024:1-3). This not only advanced the evangelical work of the Christian missionaries in Kilba society but also promoted cultural pride of the people through reading, writing, and speaking fluently in Kilba language. Secondly, the **successful publication and launching of Həba (Kilba) Orthography on October 5, 2024**, under the leadership of Həba Language Development Association (HLDA), which was granted by the National Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) Abuja (Shallpella, 2024:1-2), was another milestone. According to Hassan Umar Shallpella (2024:1-2), this development has made Həba (Kilba) language the first indigenous language to be taught in Primary up to Secondary School education level in Adamawa State. To be precise, at the launching of the Həba (Kilba) Orthography, the sum of ₦12,659,000.00 was realized (Shallpella, 2024:1-2). This had made Kilba language an example as the surest way of sustaining the language and encouraging people to speak their mother tongue at home and wherever they found themselves. Alhaji Abba Abdulhameed Saleh, who serves as chairman of the Həba Language Development Association (as at the time of this study), noted that forty individuals were trained to prepare four hundred pioneer teachers to teach the Həba (Kilba) language in schools (Saleh, 2024:1). This major landmark is in line with the section 1:10 and section 1:8, 2:11, and 3:15(4) of the National Policy on Education (2009:9-10) which emphasised that apart from English language, the medium of instruction in the primary and secondary school education should be the language of the immediate environment; meaning the mother tongue or the language of the area in question. To buttress this fact, Rose Jummai Musa and Omawumi Doreen Osa-Omoregie (2020:134-143) cited by Ayakoroma (2024:1-27), noted that research indicates that children learn better in their native languages, which can lead to improved literacy and cognitive skills.

Further to this development was the launch of the first indigenous Kilba Film under the auspices of *24Dots Media Limited* and *A Wassh Production* in 2019. The title of the film was *Kwa'ala* acted in Kilba language, based on the true-life story of what happened to a lady named Kwa'ala in the Kilba society. The lady who refused to listen, and obey her parents and the community's godly advice over premarital sex, which led to her being a victim of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This subject exposed her and her entire family to all forms



of stigmatization that People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) usually face in Nigerian societies (Kwa'ala, 2019; Tadesse et al., 2024:4).

Furthermore, the **Kilba language speech** competition is typically organized to determine who can speak the Kilba language for one hour without mixing it with English, Hausa, or Fulfulde. This competition has been an annual event organized by Bishop Amos Elisha Gaya Bukata, the Bishop of Arewa Diocese of the Lutheran Church of Nigeria (LCCN), Adamawa State. Oral interviews with Eli Barnabas (2025), Bijida Christopher (2025), and William Titus Gaya revealed that the Kilba language played a vital role in promoting its cultural heritage. The event usually gathers Kilba people across different villages and towns of the Hong Local Government Area of Adamawa State as participants and witnesses of the historic events. This reveals that language is a key factor in building communities. Indeed, the use of the Kilba language fosters connections within the community, allowing members to engage in culturally relevant activities, share stories, and strengthen social bonds.

Oral traditions, which comprise folktales and myths, proverbs and idioms, speeches, as well as songs and chants, are another important way through by which the Kilba language enriches and preserves its cultural heritage. According to Samuel Wycliff and Afordia Barmi Wajiga (2020:145-158) and Emmanuel Cletus Sharndama and Justman Kwadas Bumna (2023:44-56), it was through folktales and myths that elders narrate stories in the Kilba language that explain origins, morals, and cultural beliefs. In proverbs and idioms, the Kilba language is rich in sayings that carry wisdom and guide social behaviour. This was made possible because proverbs and idioms have been one of the various linguistic devices often used to facilitate communication and in order to achieve desired effects (Sharndama, 2014:97-105). Commenting on Kilba proverbs, Emmanuel Cletus Sharndama (2014:97-105) noted that “most of the imageries embedding the proverbs are closely linked to the people's experiences with the world of nature and cultural heritage. The use of proverbs as a tool of communication and transmission of the people's culture, therefore, cannot be over emphasized.” This shows how Kilba proverbs which encapsulate beliefs, social norms, human values are employed in dispute resolution, moral teaching, and social cohesion.

In fact, **proverbs** in Kilba society are an integral part of everyday discourse. They are frequently quoted in interpersonal communications, at communal meetings, village council meetings, marriage arrangements and celebrations, and burial ceremonies, among others. Proverbs are used to advise, to react to a fellow's comment or decision, or to support facts. It is common for elders, especially, to present ideas, respond to comments or statements in proverbs. As such, proverbs are commonly referred to among the Kilba as “bwanya njira wawa'a”, meaning the talk or speech of elders. They are not spontaneously created but are created as an aftermath of an incident or long-time observation of a natural or social phenomenon (Sharndama, 2014:97-105). According to Adebayo Lawal, Bade Ajayi, and Wumi Raji (1997:635-652), in I. O. Sanusi and R. K. Omoloso (2008:57-77), proverbs across languages and cultures form part of the codes of behaviours and exemplify their uses for the transmission of tribal wisdom and rules of conduct.

In the area of **songs and chants**, Kilba language has played a vital role in preserving its cultural heritage because traditional songs and chants at Kilba festivals, marriages, and funerals reinforce cultural identity. For example, Emmanuel Cletus Sharndama and Jamila B. A Suleiman. (2013:166-173) noted that:

A traditional funeral song is a sub-genre of sung-poetry rooted in the history, culture, and traditions of the various clans forming the tribe. Among the Kilba ethnic group,



songs in this category are performed when a deceased is laid in state awaiting burial or at later organised funeral ceremonies such as *dləḍəu* (grave cleansing ceremony) or *tiwi* (final funeral). These songs are composed using carefully selected words, phrases, or sentences to create powerful and soothing effects. Funeral music enables relations and close associates of the deceased to convey feelings and messages that may be difficult to express in words.

Riddle game is another way Kilba language played a vital role in preserving its cultural heritage. The riddle games are one of the genres of oral literature in Kilba society. The folk riddles have peculiar organizational and syntactic structures, which include invitations to play riddle games, challenging, unravelling, penalizing, and turn-taking (Sharndama & Bumna, 2023:44-56). Actually, among the Kilba people, riddles are mostly in form of statements or direct questions (test knowledge) requiring the answerer to provide the connotation. Sometimes, the solutions or answers to a framed riddle may not be straight forward as they may be ambiguous—having more than one meaning (Sharndama & Magaji, 2014:1-12). The riddling called '*pək'ətə-pəkətiya mbal*' translated as 'tales of tie' in Kilba society was done simultaneously with shelling groundnuts (Sharndama & Magaji, 2014:1-12). The game was mainly played by children. Elders only intervene where there is a contradiction over the solution to a riddle. The questioner demonstrates his wisdom by challenging the answerer with a riddle that he assumes a solution will not be found. The Kilba, like many other Nigerian ethnic groups, draw their riddles from different sources, especially natural phenomena, e.g., heavenly bodies, landscape features, animals, plants, human body, daily activities, or experiences. This relates to A. C. Jordan's (1975:56) assertion that the subject may be anything within common experience—man, parts of the human body, animals, plant life, the heavenly bodies, etc.

Furthermore, the riddle acts are highly standard expressions that permit little or no variations. The art of riddling constitutes part of the ancient educational and recreational systems of the Kilba people. This is in addition to riddling functions as the means of transmitting oral traditions and values of the language/ethnic from one generation to another. As a society art, riddle-telling enhances cognitive development, as well as promotes social cohesion and unity among the children (Sharndama & Magaji, 2014:1-12; Sharndama & Bumna, 2023:44-56). This shows that riddle games have recreational and educational functions among the Kilba people, and also one of the means of transmitting their social and cultural values from one generation to another.

Rituals and ceremonies serve as an additional avenue through which language plays a vital role in enriching, promoting, and preserving Kilba's cultural heritage. This is made possible because language is central in naming ceremonies, initiation rites, and marriages, where blessings, prayers, and rituals are performed in the Kilba language. Notably, sacred and spiritual expressions retain their power when spoken in the indigenous tongue. A good example is the various incantations made during the initiations and the practice of Totem (Mutu) among Kilba society where wild animal such as Baboon (Mbulam or Blam), Fox (Gaku), Leopard (Mapula'u), Hippopotamus (Luhah), Hyena (Mabulang), Lizard (Ghali), Monkey (Gadizhe), Lion (Luvuri), Chimpanzee (Gau-Bulum), Crocodile (Karam), Snakes (such as Pwapu-Chiwar (Python)), Hurlibiri, and GuMbal Vami), Hawk (such as Tuwangali), Mbuthla (Dove), Vulture (Kwaduga), and lots more are initiated into a human being through traditionally spiritual synthesis (Wycliff & Wajiga, 2020:145-158). The man and the animal, thereafter, become so identified that each will be the alter ego of the other in such a way that whatever happens to one of them will simultaneously affect the other. The totem practice among the Kilba people was done for the purpose of information and intelligence gathering, discipline of children, and also to ensure the security of lives and properties of the society.



Another example is **naming systems** among Kilba (Kilba personal names), which display cultural, social, and familial significance. According to S. LaBelle (2011:173-188), the most obvious way in which we negotiate the world through language is by what we choose to call ourselves. This naming is a primary way of identifying someone. Maalej posits that “the objectivity of every act of naming is to make what is named knowable and communicable” (Maalej, 2009:35-63). In Kilba society, people identify and address one by name. A name means something—not just in an etymological sense but in a synchronic sense. Names carry important pragmatic meanings which colour and even shape the character of human interaction (de Klerk & Bosch, 1996:525-541). This shows that in preserving society’s culture and identity, there is much in name, and besides that, there are different names for different occasions. Besides, the Kilba society, in their belief in God (Hyella), for providence through fertility and health of humans, cattle, and fields, as well as through many children, food, and other goods, teaches their children that God is the one who gives men life and prosperity (Kefas, 2012:67; Ndonya, 2019:134-135). As such, they incorporate God’s name into their children's names, and they recognize that children come from God (Hinjar, Aworo-okoroh, & Isuwa, 2024:748-755). Examples of such names are the Kilba names, recognizing God's blessing, favour, and answers to prayers:

Hyellnaati	—	God has given me
Hyell-da	—	There is God
Hyell-sikya	—	I waited on God
Hyellaamada	—	God walks before me
Hyellapiari	—	God’s comfort
Hyella-Lugguda	—	God is my shield
Hyellandiyandu	—	God is greater than man
Hyellafia	—	God establishes
Hyelllaiti	—	God so willed
Hyell-ya-ndou	—	God creates man
KusnlHyell	—	Easy for God
Gyekur-Hyell	—	God omnipotence
Pappaakur-Hyell	—	God’s mercy of kindness
Damar-Hyella	—	Nothing in front of Him
Damar-Hellwa	—	Nothing is obstacle to God

Naming is an important occasion among the Kilba people and is often marked by ceremonies that usually take place seven days after child’s birth. In fact, the naming of the children is mark by the occasions or circumstances leading to the child’s birth. Below are some of the examples:

Hyellatodu	—	God has destined it
IkkurHyella	—	The love of God
NachaHyell	—	He is God
Nachaida	—	He loves me
Fal Hyell	—	Praise God
Falnyi	—	Praise Him

Other example of names associated with God are:

MonakkurHyell	—	The goodness of God
NeHyell	—	It belongs to God
Hyellneyi	—	God give him/her



AneHyell	–	For God
NeyenHyell	–	Given to God
NdadaHyell	–	It depends on God
UsakutiyaHyella	–	I thank you God

Some names are questions asked by the father to the society. For example:

Mindoukurda?	–	Meaning, how human am I?
Midimkuraya	–	Meaning, how bad am I to people?

Other names given to children may come from the living-dead—ancestors, great-grandparents and grandparents believed to be reincarnated—who might be thought to have been partially “re-incarnated” and certain trait(s) is/are common between the child and a particular living-dead or grandparents. Examples are:

Aj iegwandi	–	that grand-child Gwandi
JivalGwandi	–	great grand-child of Gwandi
JirmarGwandi	–	great great great child of Gwandi

Further to this, some names describe the personality of the individual, or his/her character, or some key events in his/her life. These are:

Falama	–	Praise be to him
Salnaki	–	a house holder
Jirnuya	–	I followed the truth
Adarki	–	the head of the household
Anuwa	–	for whom he is?
Bala	–	a name for the first-born twin
Gwandi	–	a name second born twin

Cultural festivals provides another means through which the Kilba language plays a great role in preserving its people’s cultural heritage. In Kilba society, on an annual bases within and outside her ancestral land, a series of cultural festivals are held, such as traditional festivals (e.g., harvest celebrations), Həba (Kilba) Day, and End of the Year Party/Get Together, Sport Tournament, which is usually organized by the diaspora community across different states capital cities of Nigeria (Nadamanya, 2025; Dallatu, 2025; Dauda, 2025). Thus, the traditional festivals being observed are not only important drivers of social and cultural enrichment, and economic growth, but relied on deeply reliant on native traditional cooking utensils, dishes, attires, as well as songs, dance, chants, and speeches, ritual utterances, and traditional oratory, which were made possible through the use of Kilba language for centuries. Thus, speaking the language during the cultural festivities fosters unity and belonging (identity and solidarity), especially among younger generations who may be drifting toward Hausa, Fulfulde, or English. As such, it distinguishes the Kilba people from neighbouring groups and strengthens ethnic pride.

Transmission of indigenous knowledge functions as an alternate strategy through which Kilba language plays a critical role in enriching and promoting the society’s cultural heritage. For example, oral interview with Musa Abalis (2025) and Eli Barnabas (2025) reveals that agricultural practices, hunting skills, food preparation, and traditional medicine are taught in Kilba language. Thus, this repository of knowledge is passed from one generation to the next for over seven centuries in Kilba society. Moreover, specialized vocabulary tied to farming, flora, fauna, and healing



practices keeps ecological knowledge intact. This shows that indigenous languages like Kilba often contain specific and intricate knowledge about the natural world, traditional skills, and historical experiences that are not found in other languages. This knowledge, encoded in the language, is crucial for the community's understanding of its environment and history.

Challenges

Despite its enduring role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Kilba (Həba) people for several centuries, the Kilba language is increasingly confronted with numerous socio-cultural, educational, religious, and institutional challenges that threaten its continued vitality. These challenges, if left unaddressed, may weaken the language's capacity to function as a repository of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity.

One of the foremost challenges is the increasing rate of **inter-ethnic marriages**, which, although they promote national integration and cultural diversity, often influence language choice within the family. Oral interviews conducted with Ayuba Bello Dalatu (2025), Alfred Dauda (2025), Ishaku Sunday (2025), Bijida Christopher (2025), and Mary Papa'a Markus (2025) reveal that many Kilba men who marry women from other ethnic groups such as the Bura, Bachama, Birom, Bajju, Ibibio, Idoma, Igbo, Igala, Ijaw, Kanuri, Marghi, Tiv, Urhobo, and Yoruba communities frequently raise children who communicate predominantly in their mothers' languages or in English and Hausa. Consequently, many of these children possess limited competence in the Kilba language and are often less familiar with the cultural traditions, oral histories, and indigenous values associated with their paternal heritage. This gradual shift in language use within the family has become one of the major obstacles to effective intergenerational transmission of the language.

Closely related to this challenge is the growing impact of **urbanisation and migration**. As increasing numbers of Kilba people relocate to urban centres in search of education, employment, and improved living conditions, many families adopt English, Hausa, or other dominant languages as their principal means of communication. According to William Titus Gaya (2025), Eli Barnabas (2025), Amos Clifford (2025), and Douglas Haniel (2025), many parents residing outside the ancestral homeland rarely speak Kilba with their children because they consider English or Hausa more useful for educational attainment and socioeconomic mobility. Gongse John Daber and Gaksu Danjuma Faith (2022:125–132) observe that such language shift significantly reduces opportunities for younger generations to acquire proficiency in their indigenous languages, thereby weakening cultural continuity. Marjah (2024:17–21) similarly notes that sustained language maintenance depends largely on consistent use within the family and community, particularly during childhood when language acquisition is most effective.

Another significant challenge is the **negative perception of indigenous languages** among sections of the educated population. In many homes, parents discourage their children from speaking Kilba on the assumption that doing so may hinder their ability to communicate effectively in English. Markus Papa'a Nadamanya (2025) and Deborah Umar (2025) affirmed that some parents deliberately prohibit the use of Kilba at home because they associate English with educational success, social prestige, and better career opportunities. Cultural Digest (2010:1) similarly observes that some teachers discourage the use of indigenous languages in schools in the mistaken belief that exclusive use of English promotes better academic performance. Ironically, such attitudes have contributed to a situation in which some young people proudly claim that they neither speak nor



understand their mother tongue, thereby distancing themselves from an important aspect of their cultural identity. Ayakoroma (2024:8–9) argues that it is largely the continued use of indigenous languages in rural communities that has prevented many Nigerian languages from disappearing completely.

Religious transformation has also influenced language use within Kilba society. The spread of Christianity through the Danish branch of the Sudan United Mission in 1922 and the subsequent introduction of Islam in 1935 brought English and Arabic into wider religious use (Samuel Wycliff & Afordia Barmi Wajiga, 2020:109–126; Samuel Wycliff, 2018:161–178). Although both religions have contributed immensely to the social and educational development of the Kilba people, they have also influenced naming practices and aspects of cultural expression. Increasingly, many parents now prefer English or Arabic personal names to traditional Kilba names, thereby reducing the visibility of indigenous naming traditions that historically reflected religious beliefs, family history, and cultural identity. As Gudumbul (2024:20–24) observes, indigenous names historically served not merely as personal identifiers but also as important expressions of ancestry, spirituality, and communal values.

Limited institutional support remains another major challenge. Although recent achievements such as the development of the Həba orthography and the activities of the Həba Language Development Association represent important milestones, sustained government support for indigenous language development remains inadequate. Funding for language documentation, curriculum development, teacher training, linguistic research, and instructional materials is still limited. Consequently, much of the responsibility for promoting the language continues to rest with community organisations and individual enthusiasts. Adaora Maudline Eze and Roseline Onyinyechi Uka Egwu (2024:229–237) observe that without consistent institutional commitment, indigenous language development programmes often remain fragmented and unsustainable.

Closely associated with this challenge is the shortage of qualified teachers, language specialists, translators, writers, and educational materials necessary for effective language instruction. While recent efforts to standardise the orthography have created new opportunities for teaching the language in schools, there remains an urgent need for sustained investment in teacher education, curriculum implementation, and scholarly research. Marjah (2024:18–21) emphasises that documentation, literacy development, and educational integration are indispensable to the long-term vitality of minority languages.

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of digital communication and global media continues to reshape patterns of language use among younger generations. Social media platforms, entertainment industries, and digital technologies are overwhelmingly dominated by English and a few major Nigerian languages, leaving relatively little digital space for minority languages such as Kilba. Consequently, younger speakers increasingly consume information, entertainment, and educational content in languages other than their mother tongue. Unless deliberate efforts are made to expand the digital presence of the Kilba language through online publications, mobile applications, audiovisual content, and social media engagement, this technological shift may further accelerate language decline in the coming decades.

Taken together, these challenges demonstrate that preserving the Kilba language requires more than community goodwill. It demands sustained collaboration among families, traditional institutions, educational authorities, researchers, community organisations, religious bodies, and government agencies. Only through such collective efforts can the language continue to fulfil its historical role



as a repository of the cultural heritage, collective memory, and indigenous knowledge of the Kilba (Həba) people.

Recommendations (Way Forward)

In view of the foregoing challenges, deliberate and coordinated efforts are required to strengthen the role of the Kilba (Həba) language in preserving the cultural heritage of its people. The continued vitality of the language depends not only on community commitment but also on sustained institutional support, effective language policies, and active participation by all relevant stakeholders. The following recommendations are therefore proposed.

Firstly, greater priority should be accorded to the integration of the Kilba language into the formal education system. Building on the recent development of the Həba orthography, government at the federal, state, and local levels, in collaboration with traditional institutions, educational authorities, and the Həba Language Development Association (HLDA), should facilitate the effective implementation of language policies that promote mother-tongue education. The teaching of Kilba should commence at the early childhood and primary school levels, with opportunities for progression to secondary education. Such efforts are consistent with the provisions of the National Policy on Education (2004) and the National Language Policy (2022), both of which recognise the importance of indigenous languages in promoting effective learning and preserving cultural identity.

Secondly, greater investment should be directed towards the documentation, standardisation, and scholarly development of the Kilba language. This should include the preparation of comprehensive dictionaries, grammars, literacy materials, children's books, and digital corpora that will facilitate teaching, research, and wider language use. Marjah (2024:18–21) observes that systematic documentation remains one of the most effective strategies for safeguarding minority languages and ensuring their transmission across generations. Such documentation will not only preserve linguistic knowledge but also protect the oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural expressions embedded in the language.

Thirdly, the training and continuous professional development of Kilba language teachers should receive greater attention. The successful implementation of language programmes requires qualified teachers who possess both linguistic competence and appropriate pedagogical skills. Government agencies, teacher education institutions, and community organisations should therefore collaborate in organising regular training workshops, certification programmes, and instructional support for teachers involved in Kilba language education. In addition, scholarships and research grants should be provided to encourage further studies on the language, its literature, and its historical development.

Fourthly, greater efforts should be made to expand the presence of the Kilba language within contemporary media and digital communication platforms. Television and radio programmes, documentaries, podcasts, websites, mobile applications, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube provide valuable opportunities for promoting indigenous languages among younger generations. The production of films, educational videos, cultural documentaries, and digital storytelling projects in Kilba would not only increase language visibility but also preserve oral traditions and indigenous knowledge in formats that are accessible to contemporary audiences. As demonstrated by recent community initiatives, language revitalisation is more sustainable when indigenous languages remain relevant within the digital environment.



Fifthly, cultural festivals and community-based language activities should be further strengthened both within the ancestral homeland and among diaspora communities. Existing programmes such as Həba Day celebrations, language competitions, cultural festivals, storytelling sessions, traditional music performances, and youth engagement activities should receive greater institutional and financial support. Such initiatives create practical opportunities for younger generations to speak the language in authentic social settings while simultaneously learning the customs, history, and values associated with Kilba culture. Gudumbul (2024:19–24) demonstrates that communal institutions have historically played a central role in sustaining the cultural identity of the Heba people, making their continued revitalisation particularly important in the contemporary period.

Sixthly, increased funding and policy support are essential for the long-term development of the Kilba language. Government agencies, development partners, private organisations, philanthropic foundations, and community associations should invest in language documentation, curriculum development, educational materials, cultural research, archives, museums, and digital preservation initiatives. Such investments will contribute significantly to safeguarding the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Kilba people while creating opportunities for future scholarship.

Finally, responsibility for preserving the Kilba language should not rest solely with government institutions or cultural organisations. Families, community leaders, religious institutions, educators, and individual speakers all have indispensable roles to play in ensuring the continued use of the language within everyday life. Parents, in particular, should be encouraged to speak Kilba with their children from an early age, since the home remains the primary environment for language acquisition and cultural socialisation. Kadala (2020:9–15) illustrates that the enduring strength of the Kilba language has always been rooted in everyday communal life, where language serves as the medium through which values, beliefs, history, and identity are naturally transmitted from one generation to another.

The implementation of these recommendations will contribute significantly to sustaining the Kilba language as a living repository of cultural heritage. More importantly, they will strengthen ongoing efforts to preserve the historical memory, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural identity of the Kilba (Həba) people within an increasingly multilingual and globalised society.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Kilba (Həba) language has, for nearly eight centuries, remained one of the most enduring repositories of the cultural heritage of the Kilba people of Northeastern Nigeria. From the emergence of the Heba Kingdom around **c. 1250 AD** to the present, the language has functioned not merely as a means of communication but also as the principal medium through which the people's history, worldview, indigenous knowledge, social institutions, religious beliefs, customs, and collective memory have been preserved and transmitted across successive generations. The study therefore reaffirms the inseparable relationship between language and culture, illustrating that the survival of one is intrinsically linked to the continuity of the other.

The findings reveal that the Kilba language continues to play a significant role in sustaining cultural identity through diverse cultural practices and institutions, including oral traditions, folktales, proverbs, riddles, songs, naming systems, festivals, rituals, traditional governance, indigenous knowledge systems, and community-based initiatives within both the ancestral homeland and diaspora communities. These cultural expressions have enabled the Kilba people to maintain a distinct ethnic identity despite centuries of social, political, and religious transformations. As



Gudumbul (2024:19–24) observes, the historical resilience of the Heba people has been closely connected with the continuity of their language and indigenous institutions. Similarly, Marjah (2024:12–18) demonstrates that the Həba language remains central to the preservation of the community's cultural identity and worldview.

At the same time, the study has shown that the continued vitality of the Kilba language cannot be taken for granted. The combined effects of urbanisation, migration, inter-ethnic marriages, language shift, formal education dominated by English, religious transformation, and inadequate institutional support present significant challenges to the intergenerational transmission of the language. Unless deliberate and sustained interventions are implemented, these factors may gradually erode aspects of the linguistic and cultural heritage that have defined Kilba society for generations. The findings therefore underscore the urgency of strengthening community participation, expanding language documentation, promoting mother-tongue education, and enhancing institutional support for indigenous language development.

Beyond its contribution to the study of the Kilba people, this paper contributes to wider scholarly debates on language preservation, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural heritage in multilingual societies. It demonstrates that indigenous languages should not be regarded merely as instruments of everyday communication but as living archives through which societies preserve their histories, philosophies, identities, and collective experiences. Consequently, efforts to safeguard endangered or minority languages represent not only linguistic interventions but also important investments in the preservation of cultural diversity and historical memory.

Finally, the future of the Kilba language depends upon the collective commitment of families, community organisations, traditional institutions, educational authorities, researchers, religious bodies, and government agencies. The recent development of the Həba orthography, community-driven language revitalisation initiatives, and growing scholarly interest in Kilba history and language provide encouraging foundations for future progress. If these efforts are sustained through effective collaboration, sound language policies, and active community participation, the Kilba language will continue to serve as a vibrant repository of the cultural heritage, identity, and indigenous knowledge of the Kilba (Həba) people for generations to come.

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