

The Role of the Berom Language in Fostering Cultural Resilience and Sustainable Development in Jos, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The Berom language, spoken by the largest autochthonous group in Plateau State, Nigeria, plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity and development practices in the ethnically diverse and conflict-prone city of Jos. This paper examines how Cèn Bèrom fosters cultural resilience and supports sustainable development through its influence on spirituality, education, mental health, and cultural tourism. As a marker of identity, the Berom language strengthens community cohesion amid ethno-religious tensions, such as the 2001 Jos crisis, through festivals like Nzem Berom and oral traditions. Spiritually, it bridges Christian and traditional practices, facilitating culturally sensitive mental health interventions via traditional healing at behwol shrines. In development practice, Berom enhances mother-tongue education, promotes cultural tourism, and informs inclusive policy design, yet faces challenges from urbanization and Hausa linguistic dominance. By analyzing these dimensions, this paper argues that the Berom language is a vital asset for aligning traditional practices with modern development goals, fostering social cohesion, and promoting sustainable progress in Jos. It concludes with recommendations for leveraging Berom in education, mental health, and cultural preservation initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Berom language, cultural resilience, sustainable development, spirituality, Jos Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

The Berom, the largest indigenous ethnic group in Plateau State, Nigeria, inhabit the local government areas of Jos North, Jos South, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom, with a population estimated at 1.4 to 3.5 million (Davies, 2017). Their language, Cèn Bèrom, a Plateau branch of the Benue-Congo family, distinguishes them from the Hausa and Chadic linguistic influences prevalent in northern Nigeria (Blench, 2004). Jos, a cosmopolitan hub shaped by colonial tin mining and ethnic diversity, has also been a site of ethno-religious conflicts, notably the 2001 crisis between Berom and Hausa/Fulani communities over land and resource control (Ostien, 2009). Within this complex socio-cultural landscape, the Berom language emerges as a cornerstone of cultural identity, spiritual expression, and community resilience, influencing development practices in education, mental health, and cultural tourism.

This paper explores how Cèn Bèrom fosters sustainable development by reinforcing cultural cohesion and bridging traditional and modern practices. Through festivals like Nzem Berom and spiritual practices tied to Dagwi worship and behwol shrines, the language sustains community identity and supports mental health interventions (Gonen & Dakat, 2019). However, challenges like urbanization and Hausa dominance threaten its vitality (Ajani, 2021). This analysis argues that the Berom language is a critical asset for aligning cultural heritage with development goals, promoting social cohesion, and advancing sustainable progress in Jos. By examining its role in spirituality, education, and policy, the paper highlights pathways for leveraging Berom in development practice (Sele & Jumangong, 2025).

2. BACKGROUND: THE BEROM PEOPLE AND THEIR LANGUAGE

The Berom (or Birom) are the largest autochthonous ethnic group in Plateau State, Nigeria, and they predominantly live in Jos North, Jos South, Barkin Ladi, and Riyom Local Government Areas, and some parts of southern Kaduna State, Nigeria (Davies, 2017). **SOURCES OF THE JOS PEOPLE** According to history, the ancestral history of the Jos people stemmed from the Emirate of Futtumajor-Keana lands in which traces of their lineage have inevitably been established in the North Africa and Ethiopia region, so some of them, perhaps migrated from the place to Jos as a resourceful place with much fertile land to farm and higher strategic elevations to be safe and ease of defensibility (Gotan, 2018). Their language, Cèn Bèrom, falls within the Plateau branch of Benue-Congo and is unrelated to the Hausa / Chadic languages spoken through much of northern Nigeria (Blench 2004). Cèn Bèrom is characterized by its rich oral traditions, including proverbs, storytelling, and naming practices often tied to hunting and agricultural heritage, such as names like Bot or Tok, meaning "hare" or "antelope" (Gonen & Dakat, 2019).

Culturally, amongst the Beroms, their language is embedded in festivals such as the Nzem Berom, [a yearly] harvest festival and identity, and religious practices around Dagwi (Almighty God) and behwol shrines, which mix the traditional with Christianity influenced beliefs from colonial times (Nyam 2020). Jos's position as a British colonial tin-mining town drew in a variety of ethnic groups and thereby became a cosmopolitan yet contested space in which the Berom struggled over land and/or ethno-religious conflicts, such as the 2001 Jos crisis (Ostien, 2009). These tensions, along with urbanization and the rise of Hausa as a lingua franca, challenge the endurance of Cèn Bèrom, esp. amongst the younger urban Jos populations (Ajani, 2021). Despite these challenges, the language remains a vital tool for preserving cultural heritage and fostering community resilience, serving as a foundation for development practices that honor Berom identity and values (<https://selemedia.org/berom-diaspora-coalition-drops-horror-report-10000-berom-killed-151-villages-displaced-by-radical-armed-fulani-herdsmen/#growSource=search&growReferrer=true>).

3. BEROM LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Considering the ethnic diversity and conflicts that define Jos city, the Berom language is very important for cultural preservation and renewal, construction of identity, and social integration. Cèn Bèrom is a name that marks the Berom ethnic group from the Hausa, Fulani, and others from Plateau state. With the rise of ethno-religious violence in Jos, during the 2001 Jos crisis which claimed to be about land and political representation grievances, the Berom language served as a medium of interaction and solidarity during the crisis (Ostien, 2009). It allows Berom elders and leaders to mediate and resolve conflicts in a culturally unified way, which undermines outside attempts to impose discord on the community (Higazi, 2011).

The language's role in preserving oral traditions further underscores its contribution to cultural resilience. Proverbs, songs, and storytelling in Cèn Bèrom transmit historical knowledge and values, such as respect for the land and communal labor, which are rooted in the Berom's agricultural heritage (Gonen & Dakat, 2019). For instance, naming practices, where children are given names like Bot ("hare") or Tok ("antelope"), reflect a deep connection to the environment and hunting traditions, reinforcing cultural continuity (Nyam, 2020). The annual Nzem Berom festival exemplifies this resilience, serving as a vibrant platform where Cèn Bèrom is spoken, sung, and celebrated through dances and narratives that honor the harvest and communal identity (Gotan, 2018). This festival not only strengthens intra-community bonds but also asserts Berom presence in Jos's multicultural landscape.

However, the vitality of Cèn Bèrom faces significant challenges. Urbanization and the dominance of Hausa as a regional lingua franca have led to language shift, particularly among younger Berom in urban Jos, who increasingly adopt Hausa or English for education and economic opportunities (Ajani, 2021). Despite these pressures, community initiatives like the La'la Berom project, which promotes language documentation and cultural education, demonstrate proactive efforts to sustain Cèn Bèrom (Berom Youth Moulder Association, 2022). By fostering pride in linguistic heritage and facilitating dialogue in conflict settings, the Berom language remains a cornerstone of cultural resilience, enabling the community to navigate Jos's complex socio-cultural dynamics while preserving its identity.

4. SPIRITUALITY AND THE BEROM LANGUAGE

Berom language is a building block for the formulation and sustenance of spiritual practices that syncretize traditional beliefs with Christianity and inform community health and development practices in Jos. Cèn Bèrom is important for expressing Berom spirituality, especially for the reverencing of Dagwi, the Everlasting God and rituals at behwol shrines, deemed to be sacred spaces that provide healing or protection (Nyam, 2020). These folkloristic traditions, which are deeply laced into the oral canvas of the language, cut across prayers (or incantation and songs) to invoke ancestral spirits and divine guidance, and characteristically consolidating a sense of spiritual continuum in the Berom (Gonen & Dakat, 2019). With the arrival of Christianity among the colonists, Cèn Bèrom incorporated Christian hymns and sermons and became a syncretic spirit world through which biblical thought could be expressed in terms meaningful to the culture (Gotan, 2018). For example, Christian prayers translated into Berom employ traditional dagwi imagery to represent divine authority, promoting inclusive and culturally relevant worship.

The mediatory function of the language also has an implication in the function of spirituality in the area of mental health which is an important facet in the practice of development in Nigeria because there are limited practitioners of the psychological service, with less than one psychologist to a million of Nigerians (Adewuya and Makanjuola, 2008). In Berom culture, mental health problems are often understood through spiritual lenses, attributed to ancestral displeasure or supernatural forces, and addressed through traditional healing at behwol shrines (Gonen & Dakat, 2019). Cèn Bèrom facilitates these practices by providing precise terminology for symptoms and rituals, enabling diviners and healers to diagnose and treat conditions in a culturally sensitive manner. For example, terms for emotional distress or spiritual imbalance are uniquely expressed in Berom, ensuring that healing practices resonate with community beliefs (Ebigo, 2015). This linguistic specificity supports the integration of traditional healing into modern mental health interventions, aligning with global calls for culturally appropriate care (World Health Organization, 2013).

Moreover, the use of Cèn Bèrom in spiritual contexts fosters community cohesion, as shared linguistic practices during rituals and church services reinforce collective identity (Nyam, 2020). However, the shift toward English and Hausa in urban churches poses a challenge, as younger generations increasingly engage with Christianity in non-Berom languages (Ajani, 2021). Despite this, efforts to translate hymns and scriptures into Cèn Bèrom, supported by local churches and cultural organizations, sustain the language's

spiritual role (Berom Youth Moulder Association, 2022). By bridging traditional and Christian practices and supporting mental health interventions, Cèn Bèrom serves as a vital link between spirituality and development, offering a model for culturally grounded approaches to well-being in Jos.

5. BEROM LANGUAGE IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The Berom language, Cèn Bèrom, significantly influences development practice in Jos by enhancing education, supporting mental health interventions, and promoting cultural tourism, while also informing inclusive policy design. In education, mother-tongue instruction has been shown to improve literacy and cognitive development, particularly in multilingual contexts like Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2000). However, the dominance of English and Hausa in Jos schools marginalizes Cèn Bèrom, limiting its use in formal education (Ajani, 2021). Despite this, initiatives like the La'la Berom project have introduced Berom-language materials in primary schools, fostering cultural pride and improving comprehension among young learners (Berom Youth Moulder Association, 2022). For instance, teaching basic literacy in Cèn Bèrom enables students to grasp concepts in a familiar linguistic framework before transitioning to English, aligning with UNESCO's advocacy for mother-tongue education to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2017). Expanding such programs could address educational disparities in Jos, where Berom children often face linguistic barriers in English-dominated curricula.

In the realm of mental health care, a Cèn Bèrom specialist can provide care among the community's patients needing his or her attention within the scope of Nigeria's minimal mental health resources. With a population of over 200 million Gureje and Lasebikan (2006), pointed out that there are less than 200 psychiatrists in Nigeria. A bare minimum. As we Berom practitioners trace back the behwol shrines, they articulate emotional and spiritual grievances in language that makes sense to the community so that mentally distress patients can be traditionally healed (Gonen & Dakat, 2019). Incorporating this ease of access via community based counseling in Cèn Bèrom and modern methods would help to incorporate traditional and biomedical methods of mental health care (Ebigbo, 2015). Such local health initiatives could also empower community leaders to train in Berom terminology mental health to educate the public, thus lessening stigma and aiding in the encouraging of the help-seeking behavior (Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2008)

Yet another area in which Cèn Bèrom advances sustainable development is through cultural tourism. The Nzem Berom festival, is also an important cultural event. It celebrates Berom culture, and it is held every year using the Berom dialect through songs, dances and narratives. It also has a sustainable economic development impact (Nyam, 2020). Nzem Berom also has the potential to be promoted. Just like Argungu Fishing Festival in Kebbi state, Nzem Berom can be used as a cultural tourism asset to provide revenue which can go directly into development of community projects such as schools or health centers (Eze-Uzomaka, 2010). By promoting Cèn Bèrom in festival signage, guides, and promotional materials, Jos could enhance its appeal as a cultural destination, aligning with Nigeria's tourism development goals (National Tourism Development Plan, 2018).

To sustain these contributions, policy implications are equally essential. Cèn Bèrom's inclusion in education, healthcare, and tourism could be employed to counter the neglect of the Hausa and English languages and ensure the relevance of the language in development (Ajani, 2021). For example, Plateau State may grant Berom language classes in pre-primary education and preserve Berom oral histories through digitization funded by the state. These policy options have been implemented to other indigenous languages (Blench, 2004). Engaging Berom elders in the policy-making process enhances sensitivity towards cultural factors, deepens community ties, and ensures the alignment of development planning within local standards. Thus, Jos can utilize Cèn Bèrom to foster sustainable development as it balances the preservation of cultural heritage while meeting contemporary needs.

6. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While lacking robust policy frameworks to enable the practice of sustainable development in Jos, some considerations Berom languages and multiculturalism are capable of achieving cultural resilience through the preservation and revitalization of the Berom language. There are, however, some significant barriers to this revitalization. These include the ethnolinguistic dominance of the Hausa language, utilized as a lingua franca, shifting the language of the younger Berom population in urban Jos (Ajani, 2021). The rural movements to urban areas for work and education only deepen these problems as Cèn Berom to domestic or ceremonial contexts (Blench, 2004). Additionally, limited institutional support for minority languages in Nigeria's education and policy frameworks marginalizes Cèn Bèrom, with few resources allocated to its documentation or teaching (Bamgbose, 2000). The legacy of ethno-religious conflicts, such as the 2001 Jos crisis, further complicates language preservation, as social fragmentation and displacement disrupt community-based transmission of Cèn Bèrom (Higazi, 2011).

Building upon the Berom language's role in development presents several promising opportunities, including the use of digital technology for Cèn Bèrom's oral traditions, such as the documentation of proverbs and songs through mobile applications and internet archives. This has been successful in the revitalization of other African languages (McIlwain, 2019). Furthermore, community-centered projects such as La'la Berom Berom culminate in the self-driven development of Berom language culture and educational materials which showcase community driven potential (Berom Youth Moulder Association, 2022). These initiatives can

be expanded with the support of NGOs and educational institutions, in line with UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) (UNESCO, 2022).

Opportunities at the policy level include the integration of Cèn Bèrom language in the education and health policy of Plateau State. For example, the introduction of mid primary mother tongue instruction as UNESCO (2017) recommends can be an effective approach towards increasing literacy and cultural pride for Berom children. Furthermore, the use of Berom language in promoting mental health services, which incorporates traditional healing at the behwol shrines (Ebigbo, 2015) can increase community participation. Tourism centered around culture provides a great chance for economic growth as well, notably with the Nzem Berom festival, which could serve as a national marketing asset, like other Nigerian cultural festivals (Eze-Uzomaka, 2010). Engaging Berom elders in policy design ensures that development initiatives remain culturally sensitive, fostering community ownership (Gotan, 2018).

To take advantage of these areas, suggestions such as better funding for Berom-language materials, including teacher training, teaching aids, and digital archives, as well as collaboration with local units to implement Cèn Bèrom in tailored to the school, health, and tourism sectors, have been made (Sele & Zongo, 2025). If these challenges are taken up and these opportunities are optimized, Cèn Bèrom can continue to serve as a fundamental strategy for fostering sustainable development in Jos, ensuring the cultural heritage of Jos actively shapes and enriches contemporary development.

7. CONCLUSION

Fostering cultural resilience and sustainable development in Jos, Nigeria, the Berom language, Cèn Bèrom weaves identity, spirituality, and community-oriented development. As this paper has shown, Cèn Bèrom nurtures Berom identity with Jos ethnoreligious diversity, fostering dialogue and oral tradition preservation through Nzem Berom festivals (Davies, 2017; Nyam, 2020). Its spiritual role spans from traditional Dagwi worship and behwol shrine rituals to Christian mental health supportive expressions in a culturally scoped aid in under-resourced regions (Gonen & Dakat, 2019; Adewuya & Makanjuola, 2008). In the context of development practice, it covers the enhancement of mental health frameworks, mother-tongue education, and cultural tourism, all of which fall under the sustainable development goals (UNESCO, 2017; Eze-Uzomaka, 2010). But, the vitality of the language is under threat because of the dominance of Hausa, limited institutional support, and urbanization, all of which require proactive preservation intervention (Ajani, 2021; Bamgbose, 2000).

To maintain the relevance of Cèn Bèrom, it is crucial to ensure that all development stakeholders maintain and incorporate the language into education, health, and tourism frameworks and policies. Other than extending projects like the La'la Berom, leveraging digital means for language documentation as well as positioning Nzem Berom as a tourism asset would be beneficial (Berom Youth Moulder Association, 2022; McIlwain, 2019). Including Berom elders in the policy-making process helps in respecting the culture which enables the community to adopt the developmental policies (Gotan, 2018). Integrating Cèn Bèrom as a cultural asset enables Jos to integrate traditional knowledge and contemporary advancements, thus creating a paradigm for sustainable multicultural development. There needs to be further investigation into the language preservation and community well-being interrelations to ensure that the Berom language can thrive as a cultural and developmental pillar in Jos.

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