

On the Preservation of Societal Values: The Role of Indigenous Languages

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ABSTRACT

Societal values constitute an essential component of intangible cultural heritage and provide the ethical foundations upon which communities organize social relationships, transmit knowledge, resolve conflicts, and sustain collective identity. In many indigenous communities, these values are transmitted predominantly through oral traditions, with indigenous languages serving as the principal vehicles through which histories, philosophies, moral teachings, ecological knowledge, customs, and communal expectations are communicated across generations. The endangerment of indigenous languages therefore represents not only a linguistic concern but also a threat to the continuity of the societal values and knowledge systems embedded within them. This paper examines the relationship between indigenous languages and the preservation of societal values, identifies the principal forces contributing to language endangerment, and proposes strategies for safeguarding the values transmitted through endangered languages. Drawing on a descriptive qualitative review of scholarly literature, policy documents, and established approaches to language documentation and revitalization, the paper argues that language preservation should be understood as both a cultural and social-cohesion imperative. The analysis demonstrates that globalization, linguistic homogenization, intergenerational language shift, urbanization, migration, institutional marginalization, and sociopolitical inequalities contribute significantly to language loss. At the same time, documentation and archiving, digital technologies, language revitalization, education, supportive legal and policy frameworks, and community-led intergenerational engagement offer viable pathways for preserving linguistic and cultural heritage. The paper argues that sustainable preservation requires a multidimensional, community-led approach that recognizes indigenous languages not merely as communication systems but as living repositories of communal wisdom, identity, ethical principles, and social memory. The paper concludes that sustainable preservation must move beyond the mere recording of endangered languages to the restoration of their social functions and the agency of their speakers. Indigenous communities must therefore remain central to decisions concerning what is documented, how knowledge is represented, who has access to it, and how linguistic and cultural resources are transmitted to future generations.

Keywords: societal values; indigenous languages; endangered languages; language revitalization; cultural heritage; documentation; digitization; intergenerational transmission; community involvement; Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Societal values constitute the ethical and cultural framework through which communities regulate behaviour, establish social relationships, define responsibilities, and develop shared understandings of right and wrong. Values such as respect, tolerance, empathy, honesty, justice, integrity, fairness, solidarity, and responsibility contribute to social trust, cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and collective identity. They provide communities with a moral vocabulary through which social expectations are articulated and transmitted from one generation to another. Where shared values become significantly weakened, communities may experience social fragmentation, declining trust, intergenerational conflict, and loss of cultural identity.

Societal values are also an important dimension of intangible cultural heritage. They are not preserved only in written laws or formal institutions; they are embedded in stories, songs, proverbs, rituals, ceremonies, kinship practices, customary law, greetings, names, metaphors, ecological knowledge, and everyday patterns of interaction. In predominantly oral societies, language is consequently central to the continuity of cultural knowledge. Indigenous languages are particularly significant because they encode the worldview, historical experiences, social categories, environmental knowledge, and ethical principles of the communities that speak them (Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cruikshank, 1998; Hinton & Hale, 2001).

The relationship between language and culture is therefore considerably deeper than the function of language as a neutral instrument of communication. Language provides categories through which people describe social relationships, understand their environment, interpret historical experiences, and express moral expectations. Proverbs, folktales, songs, riddles, praise poetry, oral histories, and ceremonial discourse frequently contain ethical instruction and collective memory. Consequently, when a language ceases to be transmitted, the loss extends beyond vocabulary and grammatical structures to encompass forms of knowledge and culturally situated ways of understanding the world (Battiste & Henderson; Crystal, 2000; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

The problem has become increasingly urgent in the context of globalization. The expansion of dominant languages through education, employment, government, mass media, migration, commerce, and digital communication has created powerful incentives for linguistic shift. Austin and Sallabank (2011) observe that language endangerment can result from a range of forces, including political and economic dominance, cultural pressure, conflict, repression, and demographic change. Brenzinger (2007) similarly demonstrates that African languages are affected by complex historical and contemporary processes of language contact, marginalization, and unequal political power. This creates powerful incentives for speakers to shift away from indigenous languages. Language shift is also intensified by urbanization and migration, as speakers move into linguistically diverse environments in which dominant languages provide greater access to socioeconomic opportunities (Fishman, 1991; Mufwene, 2008).

Globalization should not, however, be interpreted as an inherently destructive force. It facilitates cultural exchange, multilingual communication, technological innovation, and access to educational resources. The central problem arises when global languages acquire such disproportionate economic, political, and educational value that indigenous languages are progressively excluded from important domains of social life. In such circumstances, speakers may abandon their ancestral languages not because they cease to value their cultural heritage, but because dominant languages provide greater access to education, employment, social mobility, and political participation (Bamgbose, 1991; Mufwene, 2008).

The Kenyan context illustrates these tensions particularly well. Kenya is characterized by considerable linguistic diversity, but the distribution of linguistic functions is unequal. English has historically occupied powerful positions in education, government, employment, and socioeconomic advancement, while Kiswahili has developed an important national and international role. Many other indigenous languages, however, have comparatively restricted institutional domains. Oduor (2010) observes that Kenya's language-in-education policy contains both opportunities and weaknesses for indigenous languages, noting particularly the limited institutional provision for indigenous languages other than Kiswahili. Oduor (2015) subsequently argues for a practical multilingual model in which indigenous languages can be used alongside English in education, while also highlighting inconsistencies in the implementation of language policy across schools. More recently, Oduor and Kipsang (2024) demonstrate that historical language-policy developments continue to influence the position of indigenous languages across education and other domains of Kenyan public life.

The situation has significant implications for Kenya. The Constitution of Kenya recognizes the country's linguistic diversity and directs the State to promote and protect that diversity and the development and use of indigenous languages. It also guarantees individuals the right to use their language and participate in the cultural life of their

choice (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). This constitutional recognition provides an important foundation, but the existence of legal provisions alone does not guarantee sustained intergenerational language transmission.

Internationally, the issue has also acquired increasing policy attention. UNESCO's 2003 Language Vitality and Endangerment framework emphasizes intergenerational transmission, domains of use, speaker populations, institutional support, documentation, and community attitudes as important considerations in assessing language vitality. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples further recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit their languages, oral traditions, histories, and philosophies to future generations (United Nations, 2007). UNESCO's International Year of Indigenous Languages in 2019 and the subsequent International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) have further reinforced the global imperative to preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages.

Against this background, this paper examines the role of indigenous languages in preserving societal values. It focuses specifically on the relationship between language and cultural identity, the mechanisms through which values are transmitted, the principal causes of language endangerment, and strategies for preserving societal values when the languages that traditionally carry them are themselves endangered.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Societal Values and Their Cultural Significance

Societal values are shared beliefs, principles, and standards that guide behaviour within a community. Although the precise values emphasized vary across societies, commonly recognized values include tolerance, empathy, honesty, justice, unity, respect, integrity, fairness, responsibility, and solidarity. These values perform several interconnected functions.

First, they guide ethical behaviour by establishing expectations concerning acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Second, they promote mutual respect by providing shared standards through which individuals negotiate differences. Third, they strengthen social bonds by creating a sense of belonging and collective identity. Fourth, they enhance cooperation and trust, allowing communities to pursue shared objectives. Finally, they provide continuity between generations, enabling communities to preserve lessons derived from historical experience.

Societal values should therefore not be regarded merely as abstract moral concepts. They are enacted through everyday social practices. A community's understanding of respect, for example, may be expressed through particular forms of greeting, kinship terminology, age-based forms of address, ceremonial practices, or expectations concerning obligations between generations. Similarly, ideas about justice and reconciliation may be embedded in customary narratives and traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution.

This relationship between values and social practices is important because it demonstrates why the disappearance of a language can have consequences beyond communication. If a language ceases to function as the medium through which particular social practices are learned and enacted, the values associated with those practices may also become weakened or transformed.

Language as a Vehicle of Cultural Transmission

Language is one of the primary mechanisms through which communities transmit knowledge across generations. Indigenous languages are especially significant because they embody cultural categories and systems of knowledge developed through long historical interaction between communities, their social institutions, and their environments (Battiste, 2000). Cultural transmission occurs through multiple linguistic forms, including: oral histories, folktales and legends, proverbs and riddles, songs and praise poetry, prayers and ritual language,

customary-law discourse, personal and place names, kinship terminology, ecological and environmental vocabulary, and everyday conversations between elders and younger people.

Cruikshank (1998), for example, demonstrates how oral narratives can function as repositories of historical knowledge, social memory, ethics, and environmental understanding. The significance of oral traditions therefore lies not simply in the stories themselves but also in the social contexts in which they are performed, interpreted, and transmitted. Similarly, Battiste and Henderson (2000) argue that indigenous knowledge is inseparable from the cultural and linguistic contexts in which it is produced and transmitted. Language preservation must consequently be considered part of a wider effort to protect cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge.

Language, Cultural Identity, and Sense of Belonging

Language is also a powerful cultural marker. Speaking a community's language can create a sense of belonging and continuity, particularly where language functions as a symbol of ancestry and collective identity. Bamgbose (1991) demonstrates that language choices in African societies are closely related to questions of national integration, education, development, and identity.

The relationship between language and identity is not necessarily exclusive or static. Individuals may possess multiple identities and use several languages for different purposes. Multilingualism can therefore be a resource rather than a problem. The concern arises when multilingualism develops under conditions of unequal power in which one language is associated with education, employment, prestige, and political authority while another is restricted to private or ceremonial domains.

Fishman (1991) emphasizes the importance of intergenerational continuity in maintaining threatened languages. His approach highlights the significance of family and community domains in which language is actually used rather than merely taught. This distinction is critical because a language may be present in school curricula while simultaneously disappearing from everyday family interaction.

Indigenous Languages as Repositories of Societal Values

Oral Traditions and Moral Instruction

Indigenous languages provide the linguistic infrastructure for oral traditions through which communities communicate moral principles. Proverbs, folktales, riddles, songs, and narratives frequently contain lessons concerning honesty, courage, respect, cooperation, responsibility, hospitality, leadership, and conflict resolution. The value of oral tradition lies partly in its ability to communicate moral lessons indirectly. Instead of presenting ethical principles as abstract rules, narratives place values within memorable situations involving characters, conflicts, choices, consequences, and social relationships.

When such narratives cease to be transmitted in their original linguistic and cultural context, translation may preserve part of their meaning but cannot always reproduce the full social significance of culturally specific expressions, metaphors, humour, symbolism, or performance conventions. Consequently, documentation should preserve not only textual content but also context, performance, interpretation, and community ownership (Cruikshank, 1998).

Ethical Norms and Social Relationships

Indigenous languages also encode social relationships. Kinship terms, honorifics, greetings, pronouns, and forms of address may distinguish relationships according to age, status, gender, kinship, or social responsibility. Such linguistic distinctions can reinforce social values such as respect for elders, responsibility toward relatives, hospitality, and communal solidarity. The decline of the language does not automatically eliminate these values, but it can weaken one of the principal mechanisms through which they are learned and practiced.

This is particularly important in societies where social knowledge has traditionally been transmitted through participation rather than formal instruction. A young person may acquire cultural expectations not through a written textbook but through repeated interaction with parents, grandparents, elders, and other members of the community.

Spiritual and Ritual Knowledge

Language is central to many ritual and spiritual practices. Prayers, blessings, initiation ceremonies, songs, praise names, oral genealogies, and ritual formulae may contain linguistic forms that have no direct equivalent in dominant languages. The replacement of an indigenous language may therefore affect not only ordinary communication but also the ability of younger generations to participate meaningfully in particular cultural and spiritual practices. Preservation efforts must consequently distinguish between simply recording linguistic forms and maintaining the social environments in which those forms continue to have meaning.

Environmental Knowledge and Relationship with Land

Indigenous languages may also contain extensive environmental knowledge concerning plants, animals, seasons, landscapes, weather patterns, agricultural practices, medicinal resources, and ecological relationships. Battiste (2000) and Battiste and Henderson (2000) emphasize the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems as repositories of knowledge developed through long-term relationships with specific environments.

The loss of such linguistic knowledge can therefore have implications for environmental stewardship. The connection between linguistic diversity and ecological diversity has also been recognized within UNESCO's work on endangered languages (UNESCO, 2003).

Language Endangerment and the Threat to Societal Values

Language endangerment is rarely caused by a single factor. Rather, it results from interactions between demographic, economic, political, educational, cultural, and technological processes. Austin and Sallabank (2011) emphasize that language endangerment is associated with political, cultural, and economic dominance as well as demographic disruption and repression.

Globalization and Linguistic Homogenization

Globalization has increased the dominance of languages with extensive international economic and political functions. English, French, Mandarin, Spanish, and other major languages offer access to international education, employment, commerce, science, diplomacy, and digital communication. Bamgbose (1991) demonstrates the importance of language policy and language choice in African national development. Similarly, Ostler (2010) examines the historical and contemporary power of lingua francas and the changing dynamics of global language dominance. The problem is not the existence of global languages themselves. Rather, the danger arises when dominant languages become associated with modernity and socioeconomic advancement while indigenous languages become associated with rural life, limited education, or backwardness. Such perceptions can influence parents' decisions concerning the language in which children are raised.

Intergenerational Language Shift

Intergenerational transmission is one of the most critical factors in language vitality. UNESCO's framework explicitly identifies intergenerational transmission as a central consideration in assessing language endangerment. Fishman (1991) similarly places intergenerational transmission at the centre of language maintenance and reversal. When parents increasingly use a dominant language with their children, the indigenous language may survive among older speakers but lose its function as a community language.

The shift can become self-reinforcing. As fewer children learn the language, there are fewer peers with whom the language can be used. As domains of use shrink, the language may acquire less practical value. Younger speakers may consequently become less motivated to learn it, accelerating the cycle of decline.

Institutional Marginalization

Institutional support strongly influences language vitality. Indigenous languages that are absent from education, government, media, and public administration may become increasingly restricted to private communication. Bamgbose (1991) highlights the central role of language policy in education and national development. UNESCO's language vitality framework likewise emphasizes institutional support and language attitudes as important components of language vitality.

Institutional marginalization can also affect perceptions of prestige. When a language is rarely encountered in formal settings, speakers may internalize the idea that it is inappropriate for education, professional communication, science, or public life.

Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization and migration can create new multilingual environments. Rural-to-urban migrants frequently encounter dominant languages that are necessary for employment, education, administration, and social integration. Mufwene (2008) emphasizes the importance of language contact, competition, and social networks in processes of language change. Language shift is therefore not simply a matter of speakers choosing to abandon their languages; it is often a response to changing social environments and unequal distributions of opportunity.

At the same time, migration does not inevitably produce language loss. Migrant communities can maintain their languages through family networks, cultural organizations, religious institutions, schools, digital platforms, and community events. The challenge is therefore to create conditions under which indigenous languages remain socially useful across changing environments.

Colonial Histories and Sociopolitical Inequality

Many contemporary patterns of language inequality have historical roots in colonial education, administration, religion, and governance. Colonial language policies often elevated European languages while assigning indigenous languages lower institutional status. Battiste (2000) and Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) situate language and knowledge within broader questions of power, representation, and decolonization. From this perspective, language revitalization is not merely a technical exercise in vocabulary preservation. It also concerns cultural sovereignty, community agency, and the right of communities to define and transmit their own knowledge systems.

Technological and Media Influences

Technology presents a paradox. Digital media can accelerate language shift by increasing exposure to dominant global languages, but it can also become a powerful instrument of revitalization. UNESCO has emphasized the potential of language technologies to support linguistic diversity while also recognizing the digital divide affecting lesser-used languages. The critical issue is therefore not whether technology should be used, but who controls the technology, what content is produced, who has access to it, and whether technological interventions correspond to community priorities.

Language Policy and the Kenyan Context

Kenya provides an important context for examining the relationship between language policy, education, cultural identity, and language preservation.

Historical and Institutional Development

The position of indigenous languages in Kenya has developed within a multilingual environment in which English and Kiswahili have occupied particularly influential roles. Oduor (2010) notes that Kenya's educational language policy has provided important recognition for Kiswahili while offering comparatively limited formal space for many other indigenous languages.

Oduor and Kipsang (2024) provide a broader historical perspective, examining language policy from the pre-independence period to the contemporary era. Their analysis considers language practices in schools, media, government spaces, businesses, religious settings, transport environments, and digital communication. They observe that English continues to dominate much of the education system, even as Kiswahili expands its national and international role. This demonstrates that language preservation must be considered across multiple social domains rather than within education alone.

Multilingual Education

Education represents one of the most powerful mechanisms for reversing language shift. Schools can either contribute to language loss by privileging dominant languages or support linguistic diversity by incorporating indigenous languages into teaching and learning.

Oduor (2015) proposes a practical multilingual model in which indigenous languages can be used alongside English as media of instruction. Her study also identifies inconsistencies in the implementation of Kenya's language-in-education policy and highlights the need to strengthen the position of indigenous languages while maintaining competence in international languages.

This approach is important because language preservation should not necessarily be framed as a choice between indigenous and international languages. A sustainable multilingual model can enable learners to acquire international languages while maintaining their indigenous linguistic and cultural heritage.

Implications of Language Loss for Societal Values

Language loss does not automatically result in the disappearance of all cultural values. Communities are capable of translating, adapting, and reconstructing values through other languages and institutions. Nevertheless, language loss can weaken particular forms of cultural knowledge and reduce the contexts in which traditional values are practiced including:

First, loss of cultural memory. Historical narratives often preserve collective memories of migration, conflict, leadership, environmental change, and social transformation. When the language in which these memories were originally expressed disappears, future generations may have more limited access to culturally specific interpretations of their history.

Second, weakening of intergenerational relationships. Language facilitates communication between generations. When grandparents and grandchildren do not share a language, opportunities for transmitting oral knowledge may diminish. This can produce an intergenerational disconnect even where younger people continue to express interest in their heritage.

Third, transformation of ethical concepts. Some ethical concepts are culturally specific. Their meaning depends on social relationships, institutions, and historical experiences. Translation can communicate approximate meanings, but culturally embedded concepts may lose nuance when detached from the linguistic system and social context in which they developed.

Fourth, loss of social cohesion. Shared language can create belonging and solidarity. Where a community becomes linguistically fragmented, particularly under conditions of unequal language prestige, existing social divisions may become more pronounced. Nevertheless, multilingualism can also strengthen cohesion when supported through inclusive language policies. The objective should therefore not be linguistic uniformity but equitable multilingualism that permits indigenous languages to coexist with national and international languages.

Strategies for Preserving Societal Values Through Endangered Indigenous Languages

The preservation of societal values requires a multidimensional strategy. No single intervention is sufficient. Documentation without transmission produces archives that may no longer be socially used; education without community participation may produce classroom knowledge without everyday use; and technology without linguistic resources may reproduce existing inequalities.

Documentation and Archiving

Documentation provides an essential foundation for preserving endangered languages. It involves recording linguistic structures, oral histories, traditional narratives, songs, ceremonies, ecological knowledge, and other forms of cultural expression.

Documentation should include: audio recordings of fluent speakers, video documentation of storytelling and cultural practices, dictionaries and lexical databases, grammatical descriptions, collections of proverbs, riddles, songs, and folktales, oral histories and genealogies, culturally significant place names, traditional ecological knowledge, and community interpretations of recorded materials.

Conathan (2011) emphasizes the importance of professionally managed archives, metadata, standards, and appropriate access arrangements in language documentation. Documentation, however, should not be treated as an endpoint. A language that exists only in an archive is not equivalent to a language that continues to function within a community.

Digital Technology and Media

Digital technologies provide opportunities for endangered languages to enter domains from which they have historically been excluded. Communities can develop: mobile language-learning applications, digital dictionaries, online repositories, podcasts, films and documentaries, social media content, digital storytelling platforms, online language courses, electronic books, speech and text corpora, and language-learning games.

Recent work on African language technology demonstrates the growing potential of computational approaches while emphasizing the importance of developing technologies according to the needs of local communities rather than imposing externally designed technological solutions (Adebara & Abdul-Mageed, 2022). Digital preservation should also incorporate appropriate cultural protocols. Not all traditional knowledge should necessarily be publicly accessible. Some knowledge may be sacred, restricted, gender-specific, community-owned, or subject to customary rules concerning access.

Language Revitalization and Reconstruction

Documentation preserves evidence of a language, while revitalization seeks to restore or strengthen its use. Grenoble and Whaley (2006) emphasize the importance of assessing community needs, resources, goals, language materials, and available expertise before designing revitalization programmes. Hinton and Hale (2001) provide examples of community-based revitalization approaches, including immersion, language planning, and mentorship. Revitalization may involve: language immersion programmes, community language classes, master-

apprentice programmes, children's language nests, development of literacy materials, teacher training, production of children's literature, language camps, cultural mentorship, community radio, and opportunities for everyday use of the language.

Fishman's (1991) emphasis on intergenerational continuity is especially important here. Revitalization should seek to restore the language to family and community life rather than restricting it to formal lessons.

Education

Education can either accelerate language shift or contribute to language revitalization. Where indigenous languages are excluded from formal education, children may perceive them as less valuable than dominant languages. A more inclusive approach involves multilingual education in which indigenous languages are used alongside national and international languages. Such programmes can allow learners to acquire global competencies without disconnecting them from their linguistic heritage. Education should also incorporate traditional knowledge, oral literature, local history, environmental knowledge, and ethical teachings. In this way, language education becomes cultural education.

Legal and Policy Support

Sustainable preservation requires institutional commitment. Governments can support endangered languages through: official recognition, multilingual education policies, funding for language documentation, support for community media, teacher-training programmes, language research institutes, public-service communication, cultural heritage legislation, and incorporation of indigenous languages into national development programmes.

Kenya provides an important constitutional example. Article 7 of the Constitution directs the State to promote and protect linguistic diversity and the development and use of indigenous languages, while Article 44 protects the right to use one's language and participate in cultural life (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

At the international level, UNDRIP recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to revitalize, use, develop, and transmit their languages and oral traditions and to establish educational systems and institutions using their own languages (United Nations, 2007).

Community Engagement and Intergenerational Dialogue

Community participation is arguably the most important condition for sustainable preservation. Language belongs to its speakers, and preservation initiatives are unlikely to succeed if communities are treated merely as sources of linguistic data. Community-based initiatives can include: storytelling festivals, cultural celebrations, elder-youth mentorship programmes, intergenerational dialogue forums, community language committees, local publishing projects, oral-history programmes, cultural clubs in schools, and, community radio programmes.

Cruikshank (1998) demonstrates the importance of treating oral narratives as living social practices rather than simply as texts to be collected. Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) similarly emphasize approaches to research that challenge extractive models and give greater recognition to Indigenous knowledge and community agency.

Cultural Festivals and Public Visibility

Festivals and cultural events provide spaces where language can be used naturally and publicly. They can combine storytelling, music, dance, food, crafts, oral history, traditional knowledge, and language learning. Public visibility also influences language attitudes. A language that is heard on radio, seen on social media, used at cultural events, and taught in schools is more likely to be perceived as relevant to contemporary life.

Economic Incentives and Language Domains

Language revitalization cannot be separated entirely from socioeconomic realities. If young people perceive that learning an indigenous language provides no educational, professional, or social benefits, they may prioritize dominant languages. Language planning should therefore create opportunities for indigenous languages in: tourism, cultural industries, broadcasting, publishing, education, local government, cultural research, translation and interpretation, and digital content production. This approach recognizes that language survival depends partly on whether speakers can use the language meaningfully in contemporary life.

A Critical Perspective on Existing Language-Preservation Approaches

Although language documentation and revitalization literature provides valuable frameworks, existing approaches also have limitations that should be acknowledged.

The Limits of Stage-Based Models

Fishman's (1991) model of reversing language shift has been highly influential because it places intergenerational transmission at the centre of revitalization. However, a stage-based approach may not capture the complexity of multilingual communities in which speakers possess different competencies, identities, migration histories, and patterns of language use.

Adult learners, diaspora speakers, semi-speakers, second-language users, and digitally connected communities can all contribute to language revitalization. Contemporary revitalization therefore needs to recognize multiple pathways to language maintenance rather than assuming a single linear progression.

The Risk of Treating Languages as Static Objects

Documentation can inadvertently transform living languages into museum-like objects. A recording of an elder telling a story may preserve valuable information, but it does not necessarily preserve the social circumstances in which the story traditionally functioned. Cruikshank's (1998) emphasis on the social life of stories is particularly relevant here. Documentation should therefore preserve context, performance, interpretation, and community ownership alongside linguistic content.

The Limitations of Technological Solutions

Digital technology can make language resources accessible, but technology cannot substitute for speakers. A mobile application cannot by itself recreate family transmission, community interaction, cultural authority, or social belonging. Technological interventions can also reproduce inequalities where communities lack reliable internet access, digital skills, equipment, funding, or control over data. UNESCO's work on language technologies similarly emphasizes the importance of addressing the digital divide. Technology should consequently be viewed as an enabling instrument rather than as the foundation of revitalization.

The Problem of External Control

Some preservation projects have historically been designed by researchers, institutions, or funding agencies with limited community participation. Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008) provide a broader critique of research practices that extract knowledge from communities without sufficiently addressing questions of power, ownership, and representation. A sustainable model should therefore move from research on communities toward research with and, where appropriate, by communities.

The Tension between Standardization and Linguistic Diversity

Revitalization often requires dictionaries, orthographies, curricula, and teaching materials. These tools can strengthen language use, but standardization may also marginalize dialectal variation. Mufwene (2008) reminds us that languages are dynamic systems shaped by contact, competition, and social networks. Revitalization should therefore avoid treating linguistic variation as a defect. Variation can be part of the vitality of a language.

Language Preservation and the Wider Social Environment

One of the most important lessons from the literature is that language cannot be preserved in isolation from the socioeconomic conditions of its speakers. Grenoble and Whaley (2006), Fishman (1991), Bamgbose (1991), and Austin and Sallabank (2011) collectively point toward the importance of domains, institutions, resources, and community participation.

A community struggling with poverty, displacement, discrimination, limited educational opportunities, or inadequate political representation may have limited capacity to sustain language programmes. Language policy must therefore be connected to broader cultural, educational, economic, and social policies.

DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this paper establishes a strong conceptual relationship between indigenous languages and societal values. Indigenous languages do not merely label cultural practices; they participate in the transmission and reproduction of those practices. They provide the medium through which moral narratives are told, social relationships are negotiated, historical experiences are remembered, and ecological knowledge is communicated.

The significance of this relationship is particularly evident in oral societies. A proverb, for instance, may communicate a principle concerning honesty or social responsibility, while a folktale may teach children about courage, cooperation, consequences, or respect for elders. Such knowledge is transmitted through repeated participation in linguistic and cultural practices. Language loss can therefore interrupt a chain of intergenerational transmission.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that societal values disappear automatically whenever an indigenous language declines. Communities are capable of translating values, adapting traditions, and incorporating new cultural influences. Language change is also a normal feature of human history, and multilingualism can generate creativity and cultural exchange. Mufwene (2008) demonstrates that language change emerges through complex processes of contact and competition rather than through simple processes of cultural decline.

The concern, therefore, is not language change itself but unequal and coercive language shift. Where speakers voluntarily become multilingual while retaining their heritage language, linguistic diversity may coexist with globalization. Where indigenous languages are displaced because they lack institutional recognition, economic value, educational support, or social prestige, language shift becomes a mechanism of cultural marginalization.

This distinction has important implications for preservation policy. The goal should not be to isolate indigenous languages from global languages. Rather, the objective should be to establish conditions under which communities can become multilingual without being required to abandon their ancestral languages.

The literature also indicates that successful preservation requires an integrated strategy. Documentation provides the evidence base; digitization increases accessibility; education supports acquisition; policy creates institutional

space; community engagement sustains social use; and intergenerational transmission reproduces the language as a living practice.

The international policy environment increasingly supports this approach. UNESCO's International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) seeks to mobilize stakeholders and resources for the preservation, revitalization, and promotion of Indigenous languages. The Global Action Plan for the Decade emphasizes continued engagement among Indigenous Peoples, states, civil society, academia, and other actors.

The Kenyan context provides a particularly useful setting for applying these principles. The constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity provides a formal foundation for indigenous-language promotion. Yet the effectiveness of such recognition ultimately depends on implementation through education, media, public administration, cultural programming, research, and community initiatives.

A central implication of this paper is therefore that preservation should move from a language-as-object model to a language-as-practice model. The first asks: How can we record this language before it disappears? The second asks: How can we create conditions in which speakers continue to use this language with one another? Both questions are important, but the second is essential for long-term vitality.

An Integrated Framework for Preserving Societal Values

Based on the literature reviewed, this paper proposes an integrated framework consisting of five mutually reinforcing dimensions. First, document: communities and researchers should record oral traditions, vocabulary, grammar, narratives, songs, environmental knowledge, ceremonies, and historical accounts. Second, digitize: documented resources should be converted into accessible digital formats while respecting community-defined cultural and intellectual-property protocols. Third, revitalize: language programmes should focus on increasing actual language use through immersion, community classes, mentorship, children's programmes, literacy, and culturally relevant education. Fourth, institutionalize: governments and educational institutions should provide formal recognition, funding, curriculum space, public-service opportunities, and media support. Fifth, intergenerationalize: most importantly, preservation should reconnect elders and younger generations through sustained interaction. The objective should be to make the language a living medium of family life, cultural expression, learning, and community participation.

These dimensions should not operate independently. Documentation without revitalization may create archives without speakers. Education without community participation may create learners without communicative environments. Policy without implementation may create rights without practical opportunities. Technology without community ownership may create digital resources that communities do not use. Sustainable preservation therefore requires the five dimensions to function as a mutually reinforcing system.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous languages are more than systems of communication. They are repositories of collective memory, cultural identity, moral principles, traditional knowledge, social relationships, environmental understanding, and communal worldviews. Through oral traditions, proverbs, stories, songs, rituals, and everyday interaction, indigenous languages provide important mechanisms through which societal values are transmitted from one generation to another.

The endangerment of indigenous languages therefore presents a significant challenge to cultural continuity and social cohesion. Globalization, linguistic homogenization, intergenerational language shift, urbanization, migration, institutional marginalization, technological change, and historical inequalities all contribute to the vulnerability of indigenous languages. Yet these processes do not make language loss inevitable.

The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that effective preservation requires deliberate, multidimensional, and community-centred action. Documentation and archiving can preserve linguistic and cultural records; digital technology can increase visibility and accessibility; revitalization programmes can restore language use; education can strengthen intergenerational transmission; policy can create institutional support; and community engagement can ensure that preservation remains connected to the lived realities of speakers.

The central argument is therefore that the preservation of societal values should not be separated from the preservation of the languages through which those values are lived and transmitted. At the same time, preservation should not romanticize languages or treat cultures as static. Indigenous communities must have the authority to decide which values they wish to retain, reinterpret, adapt, or transmit.

For Kenya and other multilingual societies, the appropriate objective is not to reject national or international languages but to promote equitable multilingualism in which indigenous languages have meaningful social, educational, cultural, and institutional functions. This approach would enable communities to participate fully in the globalized world while retaining linguistic resources through which their histories, identities, knowledge systems, and societal values can continue to evolve.

Ultimately, preserving an endangered indigenous language means preserving possibilities for future generations to access their cultural inheritance on their own terms. Sustainable language preservation is therefore simultaneously a linguistic, educational, cultural, social, and ethical undertaking. The continued vitality of indigenous languages can contribute to communities that are culturally grounded, socially cohesive, linguistically diverse, and resilient in an increasingly interconnected world.

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