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Indigenous People Education and Cultural Education in Bayelsa State, Nigeria: Preserving Ijaw Identity in the Age of Globalization

OYABA Asueni, Ph.D.

Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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***Corresponding Author:** OYABA Asueni, Ph.D.

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

This study examines the relationship between Indigenous Education and Cultural Education of Ijaw (Izon) people from 2023 to 2026 in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The Ijaws are the fourth largest ethnic group of Nigeria and the majority in Bayelsa. But despite their size and presence their culture and language is slowly vanishing. Western formal education, globalization, and the environmental degradation taking place in the Niger Delta are driving many youths away from their home culture; from the language spoken at home, the stories passed on by the elders and the values that have shaped Ijaw identity for generations. The purpose of this paper is to examine the efforts being made by Bayelsa State to ensure that the Ijaw language is not lost through documents, policy records and previous ethnographic studies. Izon is now taught compulsorily in schools. The state has built the Ijaw National Academy in Kaiama. In 2024, it recruited over 500 teachers specifically to teach the language in the local tongue. It also holds Annual Izon Language Awareness Campaign Summit, same year. It has launched Dayamo Demo Ijaw Language App, bringing the language closer to the young people where they already are, on their phones. Yet, despite these state-level initiatives, there are still cultural preservation and implementation gaps. In 2024, UNESCO highlighted the importance of blending Indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary pedagogical approaches as a key element in effective Indigenous Education. This paper suggests three Integrative Model for Ijaw Cultural Education Sustainability (TIM-ICES) as a possible framework for mainstreaming Indigenous Knowledge in formal curriculum decolonization, teacher capacity building and community based digital pedagogy in the quest for sustainable cultural education.

Keywords: Indigenous Education, Cultural Education, Ijaw Language, Ijaw, Bayelsa State, TIM-ICES, Dayamo App, Decolonial Education.

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Introduction

Bayelsa State came into being on October 1 1996, when it was carved out of the old Rivers State (Kabi,2026; Premium Times, 2026). For many Ijaw people, that moment was more than an administrative change, it was the birth of a homeland. That is why Bayelsa State is proudly called the Jerusalem of the Ijaw Nation, a name credited to former governor, Henry Seriake Dickson for capturing the state as a spiritual and cultural centre for Ijaw people everywhere (Nwosu, 2025). The State is home to a rich mosaic of Ijaw subgroups, including the Kolokuma, Opokuma, Nembe, Ogbia, and Epie-Atissa people. Together, they give Bayelsa

its distinct voices, as Ijaw the most predominant language spoken across its eight local government areas (Soluap, 2023). At Ekpetiama Okolede New Yam Festival in Gbaranturu, Bayelsa State, Governor, Diri, represented by his deputy, spoke with visible worry about what the community was slowly losing (Puch, 2026). He pointed to the fast declining of Ijaw language and the fading interest in traditional farming, which seems a serious threat to the Izon cultural heritage, driven largely by a growing preference for foreign ways of life. Language, he stressed, is the soul of any culture; to lose it, the people have lost their identity of self. Globalization has pushed many Nigerian indigenous languages to the background and threatened their very existence (Ogwudile, 2023). The dominance of English in education, governance, and media has accelerated language shift towards language death (Samuel & Akujobi, 2024). As Igbokwe (2024) puts it, "language is the soul, the pivot and the nucleus of people's culture." The dangers are visibly here among young Ijaw speakers; many young are growing up without adequate exposure to or proficiency in the Ijaw language (Raphael, 2025). The period marked the activities for Bayelsa's 30th anniversary where government backed the Ijaw language App and ordered revival in schools (AIT, 2024). The fear expressed in this paper is occasioned by how formal education and globalization have historically marginalized indigenous languages in Bayelsa, Epie and Nigeria at large.

Aims of the Study

1. To explore how indigenous education worked among the Ijaw people of Bayelsa State between 2023 and 2026, what was thought? how it was taught? and what it meant to the community.

ii. To investigate the State's actions towards cultural education beyond the policy level, from 2023 to 2026, such as the hire of more than 500 Vernacular teachers and development of the Dayama App.

iii. To understand the problems affecting the teaching of cultural education in Bayelsa State.

IV. Creating a new model called TIM-ICES to help cultural education last, and then checking if it actually works.

Theoretical Framework

The paper will adopt the inputs of three related theories to address the topic/title of the paper: Cultural Transmission Theory (Dewey & Bruner), Decolonial Theory (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986), and Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and UNESCO 2024 Blended Model: UNESCO (2024) and MTB-MLE framework drawing on the principles of integrating indigenous languages into formal educational spaces.

Cultural Transmission Theory

Dewey argues that a group only stays alive when its immature members are gradually initiated into the interests, purposes, skills and practices of its mature members. If it is not initiated, the group cannot renew itself and it will eventually lose the life which made it unique. Dewey's view of society is a process of transmission.

Language, culture, habits and values are transferred and not taken over by default. The role of the school is thus unique. They're not supposed to just copy what is there in society, warts and all. They should offer a sanitized surroundings that meticulously chooses those cultural characteristics that can contribute to a better society. Such a fear is very close to home in modern day Bayelsa State. If schools do not do this selection of work, or if transmission fails within the school, or between the school and the home and community, then young people are caught between worlds. They don't have a clear idea of their own culture, nor do they have the tools to make it better, and the community is in danger of losing what Dewey had feared: continuity. This assertion has been affirmed by Bruner.

Today, the culture and language passed from one generation to another in Bayelsa State is under serious threat from globalization. Many families at home are going on a step by step process of transitioning from Ijaw to English. English is rewarded through examinations in school. English is

a key to unlocking doors in the workplace. In the media, English prevails and is what children watch, listen and imitate. This fear was echoed by Douye Diri at Ekpetiama, Okolede New Yam Festival, he said: if a language is not spoken, you will forget it, so families must make a deliberate effort to keep it alive at home and in their villages.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

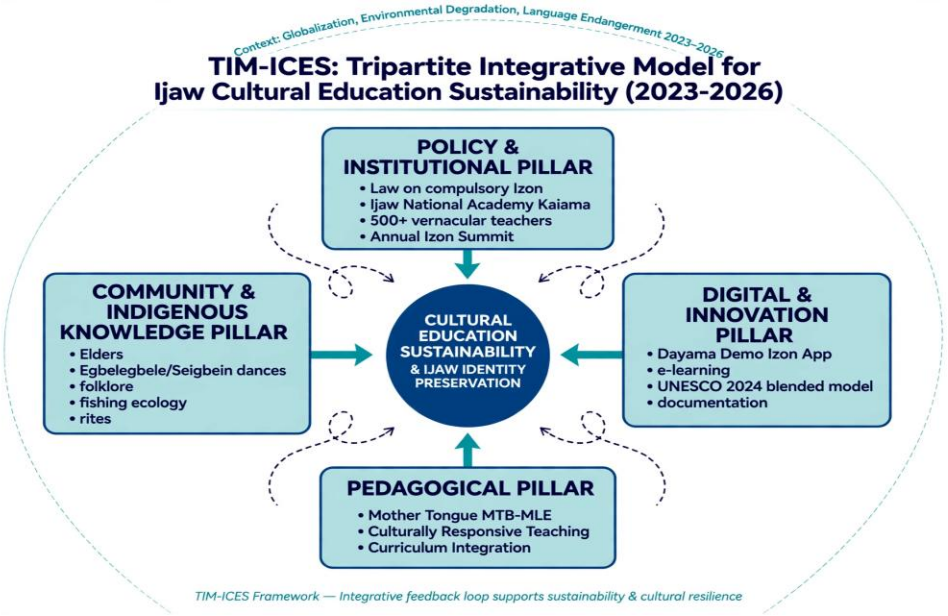
Colonial rule did not end when the flag changed, because it has already moved inside. It thought Africans to think, dream, learn, and judge themselves in English, and to treat their own language as unfit for serious thought. So long as African languages remain the language of home while European language remain the language of school, power, and prestige, the colonial hierarchy survives. Real decolonization must therefore begin with language, because language is where culture lives, where identity is formed, and where the mind is neither freed or capture. This is where Bayelsa find itself, which is becoming worse by every passing day occasioned by globalization on the region, there is visible language and culture lose as courageously started by Governor Douye Diri, which has informed his intervention strategies as stated in his Ekpetiama, Okolede Yam Festival speech.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and UNESCO 2024 Blended Model.

Drawing on Mother Tongue-Based Education (MTB-MLE) and UNESCO's 2024

This framework is based on Blended Model, which is rooted in integrating indigenous languages into formal education. It brings indigenous languages into the classroom where they belong. In doing so, it connects what communities already know, teaching that respects culture, and how learners actually succeed, all within the wider goal of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2020). This paper adopts this model to reverse Ijaw language "dearth" as noted by Douye Diri because of the language's fading due to lack of formal education and globalization which is bringing the impact of language fade to Ijaw vernacular.

Theoretical Model: TIM-ICES



The Tripartite Integrative Model for Ijaw Cultural Education Sustainability (TIM-ICES) as illustrated in figure 1 is proposed in this paper to bridge the identified gap of 2023-2026. It is inspired by UNESCO's (2024) blended model and developed by the author in 2026, consisting of four pillars which are interdependent. Together, they lead towards a common goal: The maintenance of the cultural education and the protection of Ijaw identity in the face of globalization, environmental degradation and language endangerment.

Pillar One: Policy and Institutional

We were quietly losing the sound of a child greeting his grandmother properly in Izon, so Bayelsa decided to fight it. In 2018 a law making the language compulsory in nursery, primary and junior secondary was passed, making the language compulsory, 500 vernacular teachers were employed in 2024, building of National Izon Academy in Kaiama, a historic town, home of Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, legend Ijaw freedom fighter. An effort reinforced by Annual Izon Summit, held since 2024 to date.

Pillar Two: Community and Indigenous Knowledge

The elders teach without books in Egbelegbele and Seigbein. They transmit their fishing knowledge, moral codes and community memory through dance, folklore and rite and every show is a dialogue between generations and a living archive of indigenous knowledge.

Pillar Three: Pedagogical

Children learn best when school starts in the language they already speak at home. That is the heart of Mother Tongue-Based Education, or MTB-MLE. Instead of asking young learners to master new ideas in an unfamiliar language, let them build reading, math's, and science on their language, stories, and knowledge they bring from home, then add other language gradually as they grow more confident. This happen when teaching is culturally responsive. Proverb, songs, wisdom of elders and parents incorporated in the curriculum, their everyday lesson. This approach aligns with UNESCO demonstration project, allowing indigenous groups to adapt a certain proportion of the curriculum to their own cultural context.

Pillar Four: Digital and Innovation

True revival is a mixture. The Dayama Demo Izon App combines e-learning and learning in the classroom with Song, Proverb and Oral History documentation and home conversation, aligned with UNESCOs call for indigenous languages in 2024. This is illustrated by the support of Douye Diri for online Ijaw platforms that youth themselves can build and use for free.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative descriptive approach that span the period 2023 to 2026 and looked at Bayelsa State Ministry of Culture and Ijaw National Affairs policy documents, media reports in Vanguard, Punch, AIT.live and Trumpeting newspapers in 2024, UNESCO reports in 2023 and 2024, and ethnographic accounts. Recurring patterns were identified from these sources by content and thematic analysis. Bayelsa State with eight LGAs was randomly selected as the only homogenous Ijaw State in Nigeria.

Literature Review / Concept Clarifications:

Indigenous People's Education in Africa

Indigenous education never took place in a classroom, on a timetable or at one point in life. It was holistic, community based, life long, and enmeshed in the work and worship, the stories and celebrations. Learning was by observation, listening, participation and progressive responsibility, leading to a development of knowledge, character, and belonging (Imoh & Omidiji 2026, p.7). Such learning was ubiquitous among the Ijaw (Izon) of the Niger Delta. Elders would meet with children under the light of the moon to tell them tales to entertain,

and unwittingly to impart the values of honesty, courage, respect, and the repercussions of greed and/or disobedience, (Olugbemi-Gabriel & Ukpi, 2023; Olatunji, 2025).

Boys learned to fish and to patiently craft a canoe on the creeks, where these skills became a way of life, a way of self-definition, and a way of learning about cooperation and care for the river. The moral world of Egbesu, god of war and justice, was transmitted through sacred songs, chants, and oral poetry, which formed part of the community's oral tradition and ritual (Igbe & Zuokemefa, 2024). During rites of passage, like Iria, young people were introduced to the responsibilities, conduct, and norms of a woman or a man as they transition into adulthood (Oko-Jaja et al., 2026).

This pattern is not unique to the Ijaw. In a systemize review of global research from 2010-2024, Liu et al. (2024) found that indigenous cultural dance education consistently threats local cultural identity and character formation as intertwined goals, rather than treating dance as mere techniques or performance. In other words, to learn the dance, the story, the craft, or the rite was also to learn who you were and how you were expected to live with others.

Cultural Education in Bayelsa State: Interventions

Language Education and Teacher Recruitment

When Professor Benjamin Okaba rose to address the 2026 Ijaw National Convention, he did not speak about language preservation in abstract terms. He referred to what was already going on in classrooms across Bayelsa. He applauded the recruitment of over 500 vernacular teachers by the administration of Governor Diri and their deployment to schools in the State for the teaching of Ijaw language, as proof that the State was not only committed to saving its mother tongue but had done something about it (Niger Delta Herald, 2026).

This praise was not for nothing. Diri himself had expressed the same commitment on an international platform in Houston, a year ago, saying that his government had already recruited more than 500 Izon language teachers and supported the efforts through of the enactment of a law compelling Izon language to be taught in Bayelsa schools (First Daily News, 2025, July 6).

The two moments portray a continuous upward trend instead of a single announcement; in 2023, 272 Ijaw teachers reported (Nwaoko, 2023) and in 2026, it was over 500. The government was not only announcing policy, but were slowly moving teachers into classrooms, training more teachers (Oyadongha, 2025) and by 2026, they were not just in classrooms but in the extension of the revived programme with the Ijaw language application and school competition (Punch, 2026). The governor said it was a deliberate effort to ensure Izon is not forgotten, with teachers being trained to properly teach the language, and children learning it from early age in public primary schools, according to Punch.

Institutionalization and Digital Innovation

The Ijaw National Academy was established at Kaiama in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area not to be a school but with a set purpose. It was meant to keep Ijaw heritage alive by teaching it, so that language, values, history and identity are passed on through education rather them left to fade (Hansard Times, 2025).

That concept didn't end at the front gate of the school. Bayelsa created a stand-alone Ministry of Culture in August 2023, the new commissioner described culture as the starting point of communal life and promised a deliberate programme to revive what was being lost, including making Izon compulsory in primary schools and secondary schools (Erevision Media TV, 2023). By 2025 that push had become more concrete. Governor Diri named gospel musician Asu Ekiye as Izon Language Ambassador for using music to preserve the language (Vanguard, 2025), announced plans for a Department of Izon Language at Niger Delta University during the 2025 Boro Day celebration (Nigeria's NewsDirect, 2025). Government effort reached a new public peak at the maiden Ijaw Language Awareness Summit, held at the DSP Alamieyeseigha Memorial Banquet Hall in Yenagoa.

As part of the activities marking Bayelsa State's 30th anniversary, the Summit was themed "Reviving the Izon Language: Heritage, Our Identity, Our Future" (New Telegraph, 2026). Diri there and then pledge his support for a newly developed Ijaw Language App, codenamed Dayama Demo App, and pledge to make the summit an annual event to be anchored by Ministry of Culture and Ijaw National Affairs (The Trumpet, 2026; New Telegraph, 2026). He also directed the conduction of Izon language debates and urged parents to speak Ijaw language at home, stating that the responsibility of teaching children the language lies squarely with families (The Trumpet, 2026; New Telegraph, 2026).

Higher Education

Good news from home. NDU, Wilberforce Island and Federal University Otuoke now offer courses in Ijaw history and linguistics. Our history is been taught; our language is been preserved.

Challenges (2023–2026)

Too Few Materials to Learn From

For most families, learning the language still depends on memory, not materials. A parent wants to teach a child at home, a teacher wants a lesson plan for Monday morning, a young adult in the city wants to learn what they heard from grandmother or grandparents, there is almost nothing to pick up and use. We have only a handful of instructional books for the whole language, including Izon Fie (Speak Ijaw) launched in 2023. One good book is a milestone, but cannot carry a lesson, a home, diaspora etc. Without graded readers, workbooks, audio, and teachers guides, learning stops and starts with whoever happens to remember, and teachers are left to improvise, photocopy, and translate on the spot.

Linguistic Fragmentation

A child in Nembe learns one word at home, sees it spelled a different way in her textbook, and gets marked wrong for saying it the way her grandmother says it. It is not that Kolokuma, Nembe, and Ogbia cannot understand each other. Across Izon, about thirty dialects abound, all mutually intelligible, but with no settled common orthography because of conflicting dialectal interest. We are yet to agree on how to hold the variants together.

Globalization, Media and Young People

Walk into any compound, classroom or bus park you will hear it in seconds. A teenager switches from American slangs on Tik Tok, Hollywood, Netflix, Premier League, Spotify, funny Pidgin with friends, then back to proper English when a teacher walks past, they stop temporality, and continue later. It sounds like confusion; young people are losing their culture.

Sustainability of 500 Teachers

Is not all about employing 500 plus vernacular teachers, if we want them to stay, grow and keep doing good work year after year, is beyond funding. It is about how teachers are treated, supported, and seen. Teachers are the worst treated civil servants in Bayelsa State.

Underfunding

Our culture sector is struggling and the reason is human, it is underfunded. Creative practitioners, cultural workers and community custodians are engaged in important work, yet they are receiving very little support. To achieve this, the Ministry of Culture must increase their investment in the Orientation and Sensitization Programmes in a more deliberate manner to raise awareness of the benefits of culture, how to protect culture and how to access the opportunities within culture amongst the staff, artist, community leaders and the public.

Conclusion

When a child in Yenagoa learns to count in Izon before he or she learns to count in English, he or she is not learning less. She's learning to a greater extent.

She is discovering that her grandmother's stories, her mother's tongue songs and her teacher's lessons all are in the same classroom. This is what indigenous education really is. It is NOT a substitute for "real school. This is its base. When a child is comfortable in her own language she acquires other language more quickly. A child who does not feel that her culture is respected when she is in school, will not remain in school. A child who has an understanding of her origin will have a solid foundation on which to venture anywhere.

As from 2023-2026, Bayelsa demonstrated that this isn't just theory. The recruitment of more than 500 vernacular teachers again propelled Izon into the mouths of the trained teachers, not just in policy making documents. It was placed in the hands of children, in a form that children know, by the Dayama App. With its annual Izon summit, it was thrust into the public spotlight, where it was possible to argue, celebrate and plan with elders, teachers, parents and policy-makers. As a whole they provide a model for Africa that can be replicated: Culture is taught, not just declared.

That's the work structure of the TIM-ICES. The four pillars prompt us to remember Cultural

Sustainability can't be based on just one festival, one textbook or one app. It requires language in the classroom, trained teachers are paid, technology is available to the village and to the city, and community ownership that will survive any administration.

Cultural Education now has to go beyond symbolic policy to pedagogical and digital reality for the Ijaw to survive as a distinct people by maintaining their culture. It's not just words, it's action.

Recommendations

This paper calls for the rising of Traditional Indigenous Methods for Inclusive Cultural Education in schools, in plain language teach Ijaw as a special reed subject, use Ijaw ways of teaching inside the subjects we already have, make Ijaw a core subject from Primary 1 to JSS 3 in every public school in Bayelsa State. The variant of Ijaw dialect should be harmonized to avoid conflict, the unified orthography should cover all Ijaw varieties, which should be incorporated in the Dayama App as a standardized Ijaw language.

A special college department of Ijaw Language Studies should be sustained in Niger Delta University, Amassoma to sustain the training of the employed 500 teachers to teach Ijaw vernacular. Make Izon a compulsory WAEC/NECO subject for Bayelsa State origin by 2027 and mandate Izon language summit as research conference.

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