

Cultural Modification and Sustainability: Examining the Evolution of Kăcé Kugwâ Ceremony of Bura People in North Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

Kăcé kugwâ is a cultural heritage of the Bura people located in Southern parts of Borno and Northern part of Adamawa States of Nigeria. This paper use primary and secondary sources of data to examine the modifications of this practice over time. The original Kăcé kugwâ was a send-forth organised for prospective brides a day before their wedding. It involved the washing and display of household items and utensils, gifts, advice giving session to brides, singing and dancing, and the preparation of chinchin for the wedding. Through interviews conducted, it is revealed to the author that, later modifications of the practice discarded all but the preparation of chinchin and cash donation replaced gift items. These modifications were caused by some factors such as religion and insecurity. Cultural, social, economic, and ecological challenges exist that undermine the sustainability of the practice, such challenges can be liken to how culture has evolved and has brought about new trends in cultures the Kăcé kugwâ has experienced such changes in the practice the social interactions has also taken new dimension as the pattern of socializing has taken a new turn due to the influences affecting the practice and the environment can be very challenging because of the insecurity confronting the area. The work concluded that, while the original practice of Kăcé kugwâ is more beneficial to the Bura land, its modification is necessitated by the insecurity situation affecting the people's cultural space and any sustainability effort must consider the challenges from the four dimensions of sustainability, cultural, social, economic and ecological.

Keywords: *Kăcé kugwâ; culture; cultural sustainability; insecurity; insurgency.*

Introduction

Cultural practices are not always static because they are exposed to many influencing factors that bring about changes. These influencing factors can be internal and external in nature. Internal factors, such as changes in the social structure of societies, can cause changes in cultural practices. External factors, such as conflicts in the cultural space of a people, can also cause changes in cultural practices. Religion has also contributed in the changes in the practice due to some church doctrines that kick against the normal structure of the *Kăcé kugwâ* practice it was argued that the practice has some financial demand therefore putting members under duress to respond financially to the needs of the practice some were of the view that it creates problems in homes as women will abandon their homes and duties to dedicate so much time and resources. However, some religious leaders kick against the practice because of the cultural dance performance some thick it is not a holy way to send forth their daughter rather there should be some sort of Christian worship not tradition performances. These claims and assumptions by religious leaders brought about conflict in the whole excess of the practice hence, the changes. These changes can have either positive or negative impact on the cultural practices in question. This means that some changes contribute to the sustainability of cultural practices while some do not, which may eventually lead to the loss of cultural practices.

Kăcé kugwâ is a cultural practice of the Bura people located in Southern parts of Borno and Northern Adamawa states of Nigeria. It is a form of send-forth ceremony for young ladies organised a day before they leave their homes for marriage. Over time, *Kăcé kugwâ* has evolved to an extent where very little of the original practice remains today. The practice has undergone major modifications that it is unclear whether it should still be referred as *Kăcé kugwâ*. This study examines the evolution of the practice and the challenges that face its sustainability. The paper begins by providing conceptual clarification before the examination of the original practice of *Kăcé kugwâ* and its

significance among the Bura people. This is followed by a look at the modifications that have been made to the practice over time as well as the causes of these modifications. Finally, the paper discussed the challenges that undermine sustainability of *Kacé kugwâ*.

Conceptual Clarification of Culture, Heritage and Sustainability

The concepts of culture, cultural heritage, and cultural sustainability have been used in this paper. It is therefore, necessary to clarify what these mean and the context of their use in this paper.

Culture: This concept is defined in different ways, which is not surprising when one considers the broadness of its meaning. However, many of these definitions see culture as either the construction of meanings or the manifestations of these meanings, or both. Thus, this paper adopts the view of Hawkes (2001) that many scholars define culture as:

“The social production and transmission of identities, meanings, knowledge, beliefs, values, aspirations, memories, purposes, attitudes and understanding; The ‘way of life’ of a particular set of humans: customs, faiths and conventions; codes of manners, dress, cuisine, language, arts, science, technology, religion and rituals; norms and regulations of behavior, traditions and institutions” (p. 3).

This means that the concept of culture involves the process of constructing meanings and the manifested products of these constructed meanings. As pointed by Hawkes (2001) culture has three components, which are:

1. Values and aspirations,
2. Processes and mediums of developing, receiving and transmitting values and aspirations,
3. Tangible and intangible manifestations of these values and aspirations. These all contribute to broadening the meaning of the concept of culture as well as its apparent ambiguity.

Cultural Heritage: This concept allows for further unpacking of the broad concept of culture. It refers to the tangible and intangible manifestation of culture. This paper adopts the definition offered by Fithian and Powell (2009), who see cultural heritage as “an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values” (p. 2). This definition is appropriate because it covers the manifestation of culture in both tangible and intangible forms. The *Kacé kugwâ* is a cultural practice which involve both tangible and intangible culture, the gifts displayed are cultural items used in the Bura culture which serves as the tangible culture while the intangible serves as the dances, songs and advices to the bride which covers the norms and values of the community are all attributes of the intangible cultural manifestations.

Cultural Sustainability: The idea of cultural sustainability is linked to the natural desire of human beings to pass down their cultures to later generations. This is often borne out of the desire to preserve identities, which would not be possible if their culture is not sustained. Cultural sustainability can be viewed from different perspectives but in the context of this paper, it means “the recovery and protection of cultural health, history, and the culture of indigenous knowledge in society. It is linked to previous traditional practices through celebrating local and regional histories and passing down cultural values to future generations” (Duxbury and Gillette 2007, p. 11). It is often a deliberate effort aimed at recovering and protecting culture by providing a bridge where values from past cultural knowledge are transfed to future generations.

The Practice of *Kəcə kugwâ* before Modifications

Kəcə kugwâ is a cultural heritage of the Bura people of northeast Nigeria. Bura land is located in southern Borno State within Biu Plateau and northern Adamawa State in Nigeria. Majority of Bura people are found in Borno within four LGAs - Biu, Hawul, Shani, and Kwaya-Kusar – and a few are found in Gombi LGA of Adamawa state (Mtaku 2020). *Kəcə kugwâ* in its original form was a form of send-forth ceremony which was organised for girls a day before they got married, mostly on Thursdays or Fridays if the wedding day was to be on Saturday. The phrase *Kəcə kugwâ* in Bura language can be translated to mean “dish washing.” It was an all-female ceremony organised by the mother of a prospective bride and attended by the mother’s female friends and relatives. As the name of the ceremony implies, it was an occasion where all the household items and kitchen utensils that the bride will take into her marital home were washed, cleaned and then displayed on a mat for everyone to see. Since mothers in preparation for their daughters’ marriage usually bought these items over a number of years, the items would usually be dusty and dirty, hence the need for cleaning them. Relatives of the bride (grandmothers and aunts) and friends of the mother would then present their gifts also consisting household items, utensils and foodstuff to the bride and the gifts were added to those displayed. An inventory of all the items displayed would then be taken and publicly announced as the items bought by the bride’s parents for her to take to her marital home (M. Augustine, personal communication, March 15, 2021).

The prospective bride and her friends were then invited to sit within a circle of elderly relatives who would then, one after the other, advise her on how to conduct herself in marriage and offer prayers for the bride. This was followed by the performance of *Hatha* dance where the bride would kneel on a grinding stone and simulate the process of grinding grains while musicians played. The women present would sing, praise and encourage the bride as she demonstrated her commitment to hard work and efficiency in managing her marital home. After this performance, the general dance would begin and everyone would join the singing and dancing. *Bansuwe* dance was often the dominant dance during this occasion. A popular snack called *chin chin* would then be prepared for the bride to take to her marital home, while some were set aside for the wedding ceremony and some would be packaged and distributed to the women present. Finally, all the household items displayed would be taken directly to the bride’s marital home and arranged for her. This marked the end of *Kəcə kugwâ* as practiced in the past, roughly about a decade ago (H. M. Wakawa, personal communication, March 17, 2021).

Significance of *Kəcə kugwâ* in Bura Land

The practice of *Kəcə kugwâ* has important significance in Bura land. First, it served as a farewell ceremony, which mothers organised for their daughters as they moved into marriage. This also served as a time where the female relatives and friends of the bride’s mother would present their support to her as she sent her daughter into marriage. Culturally the occasion was an indication that the parents had raised their daughters well and they were morally upright enough to have gotten to the stage of marriage. Since in Bura, society *Kəcə kugwâ* was synonymous with good parenting and girls’ moral uprightness, in a sense; it served as a sign for other members of the society to aspire to such respected status in order to organise the ceremony for their children. This aspiration in turn helped to sustain the practice of *Kəcə kugwâ*. This agrees with the perspective that “culture and society have to some degree an iterative and reciprocal relationship, in which culture constructs society but society also shapes culture” (Dessein, et al. 2015, p.25).

Another significance of the practice was to ensure that parents provided their daughters with the basic items they needed to start their marital homes successfully. These items usually included kitchen utensils, foodstuff, and even household furniture such as beds and chairs. Since these items were publicly displayed and inventoried, most parents strove to provide their daughters the

minimum required items to avoid public disgrace. Thus, it was normal for mothers to buy these items gradually over a period of ten years or even more in order to ensure their (parents and daughters) cultural well-being in Bura land was/is secured. Cultural well-being here, is conceptualised as “the vitality that communities and individuals enjoy when participating in entertaining, creative and cultural activities, as well as the freedom to maintain, interpret and express their art, history, heritage and traditions” (Sazonova 2014, p. 11).

Kăcé kugwâ was also an opportunity for friends and relatives to provide their support to prospective brides through gifts of additional household items, utensils and foodstuffs. The availability of many women meant the items prospective brides took to their marital homes were usually greater than what their parents had bought. The practice provided a chance for the community to participate in supporting the marriage of their daughters. This support was reciprocal because every woman who participated in other girls’ *Kăcé kugwâ* would be likewise supported during her own daughter’s *Kăcé kugwâ*. Thus, the motivation to support each other was strong among the women of Bura land because it brought about social cohesion. As Hawkes (2001, p. 18) asserts, “community cohesion is utterly dependent upon the capacity of the individuals within a community to understand, respect and trust one another. These qualities are built through cultural interaction.” This ceremony was no doubt a space for cultural interaction and community cohesion building.

An important function of *Kăcé kugwâ* was for providing advice and guidance to prospective brides by elderly women. This advice session was important because it was coming from women who had years of experience in marriage. They are considered to have had sufficient knowledge of the marital union from various perspectives since many women with various experiences were present. The advice session usually covered topics such as how best to live with their husbands, how to live with their in-laws, and how to manage their marital homes successfully. Thus, *Kăcé kugwâ* expressed the visions of Bura land for the future; it embodied what the people wanted to give to future generations, and helped to connect the present with the past and to the future that they imagined as a people (Sazonova 2014, p. 5).

Kăcé kugwâ was an occasion where culture was sustained in Bura land. As mentioned above, it was an opportunity for women of one generation to pass their cultural norms, values and traditions to the next generation. In addition to this, other cultural practices were also sustained during the process of *Kăcé kugwâ*. Bura cultural songs, instruments and dances found expression during this occasion. Dances like the *Hatha* and *Bansuwe* formed a part of *Kăcé kugwâ* and so their chances of being sustained are increased with each marriage ceremony. The importance of cultural songs and dance as media through which culture is expressed, communicated and transmitted is well established. As pointed out by Uji and Awuawuer (2014),

The relevance of dance in all cultures transcends mere recreation and entertainment. Thus, dance remains a relevant and potent tool of knowledge impartation in both traditional and modern set up. It is a vehicle capable of checkmating, conscientizing and sensitizing societies against incessant vices that result into social and moral decay (p. 252).

There is no doubt that the cultural songs and dances being performed during *Kăcé kugwâ* were not only for entertainment. *Hatha* dance for instance is performed to demonstrate hard work and the commitment of prospective brides to manage their marital home efficiently concerning the timely cooking of meals an ensuring that their new family members are fed well and in good time.

The coming together of Bura women during *Kécé kugwâ* enabled them to provide communal labour for the family giving out their daughters in marriage. The women worked together to wash and clean the items bought for the bride as they were often dusty during storage. They also worked together to prepare and package the large quantity of *chinchin* that was made for the bride, wedding reception, and the guests at the *Kécé kugwâ*. The women were also responsible for moving the items of the prospective bride to her marital home and arranging them accordingly.

The Modification of *Kécé kugwâ*

At present what passes for *Kécé kugwâ* in Bura land is different from the original practice because of the modifications that have taken place over time. The present practice is now called *chin chin* after the snack that is being prepared as part of the original process. It remains a farewell ceremony for prospective brides organised by mothers whose daughters are about to get married. It remains an all-female social gathering. However, there is no longer the display of the items bought for prospective brides to take to their marital homes. There is no longer any inventory or public declaration of the items bought for prospective brides to take into their marital homes. There is no longer the gifting of household items, utensils or foodstuff to the prospective bride by the relatives and friends of the families. In addition, there is little or no advice session by elderly women for prospective brides.

This ceremony currently involves the coming together of female relatives and friends of the mothers of prospective bride for the sole purpose of preparing *chin chin* for the wedding ceremony. When finished, some of the *chin chin* is packaged and given to all the women present, some is given to the bride to take to her marital home and some is set aside for use at the wedding reception. All the women present are obligated to give the mother a fixed amount of money, usually 500 Naira or more. This is often accompanied by music played on electronic sound systems. The music played is usually recorded Bura songs or modern pop music and the women dance to these.

Originally, *Kécé kugwâ* was organised from 10 am or later but this time was changed to around 2 am or there about because of security reasons. Since it was not safe for women to come to the venue at that time of the night they usually came much earlier and stayed overnight. This practice resulted in a number of problems such as cases of theft or fatal accidents (a woman once fell inside a well and died). These problems compelled a further modification of the time of the ceremony to around 6 am. Other ethnic groups in northeast Nigeria such as the Margi, Chibok and Gwoza identically practice this *chin chin* process. It has become a standard practice or a kind of popular cultural practice among these ethnic groups.

This activity is no longer restricted to the home of the prospective brides alone because some mothers of prospective grooms also organise *chin chin* at their homes. The reason for this is that they too want to raise money through the process. Organising *chin chin* has become a norm and parents who fail to organise this for their daughters' wedding are frowned upon by the society this is made know by most of the respondent they also added that it is a practice of "pay back" as such every family must make effort to organise the performance for their daughter. It is also compulsory for those attending this activity to donate the prescribed amount of money. This amounts to a form of commodification of culture. This concept, in common usage, refers to the practice of converting tangible or intangible cultural heritage into commodities that are tradable in the market. However, in the context of *Kécé kugwâ*, the aforementioned commodification simply means, "the notion of turning culture into a monetary asset" (Fithian and Powell 2009, p. 5). The main difference with the common usage is that in this context, the motive for commodification is not linked to trade or the international market but culture is utilised for personal monetary gain nonetheless.

Reasons for the Modification of *Kəcə kugwâ*

The modifications that the practice of *Kəcə kugwâ* has undergone are as a result of a number reasons. The insecurity situation in northeast Nigeria caused by the Boko Haram insurgency has had a negative impact on the culture of the peoples in the region including the Bura people. This armed conflict that has been raging for over a decade has led to the death of thousands of people and the displacement of over 2 million people just in the first five years (Imoh-Itah, Amadi and Akpan, 2016). The cultural space of the Bura people, like other groups in the north east, has been affected by the insecurity. Any gathering of people for social purposes were and still are potential targets for gunmen and suicide bombers. Gatherings for ceremonies, worship services in the church or mosque have been known to be attacked by Boko Haram leading to loss of lives (David, Asuelime and Onapajo 2015).

This insecurity situation has contributed to the reluctance of families to display the items bought for prospective brides because this might attract attackers. In addition, moving these items quickly to safety when under attack would prove challenging. There is also the fear that displaying items could attract criminals since robberies, burglaries and kidnappings are rampant due to the the insecurity situation. This situation is also largely responsible for the change in the time of organising *chinchin* to 2 am .This time is believed to be safer for women to gather than during the day but as earlier mentioned, this was later changed to around 6 am due to some challenges. The decision to gather late at night was not misplaced because tangible and intangible cultural heritage forms have been known to be targetted, it was a strategy to avert harmful attack sometimes deliberately, during armed conflicts .The change in timing was a decision borne out of the present realities and the experience of the people in northeast of Nigeria.

The use of sound systems to play music rather than the use of live cultural musicians is attributed to the high cost of hiring musicians Since the cost of hiring a sound system and Dj is much, lower than hiring traditional musicians many people prefer the cheaper option. It is also true that many families in the more conflict-prone rural areas simply cannot afford to hire live performance. The critical relationship between economic globalisation and cultural localization is also an important factor (Al-Hagla 2005). It is obvious that live cultural music of the Bura people is being replaced by not only recorded Bura songs but also by popular circular music. This is made possible by increasing access to modern communication technology and new media, which is greatly connecting the entire globe.

Challenges to the Sustainability of *Kəcə kugwâ*

There is not much doubt that most people wish their culture were passed down to future generations indefinitely. This is because culture is closely linked to identity and so cultural sustainability is often synonymous with preservation of identity. Nonetheless, cultural sustainability is not always possible especially where the cultural environment is not conducive, or where powerfully challenging factors are involved, or when people lack the required knowledge, expertise, or resources to engage in cultural sustainability. This is largely because cultural sustainability is not achieved through focusing on culture alone because other dimensions of sustainability, namely economic, social and ecological dimensions, are equally important. As observed by Jelinčić and Glivetić (2020), the pressure facing the sustainability of cultural heritage are mostly economic, socio-political, and ecological in nature. In the case of Bura land, the Boko haram insurgency that has been on-going for years in the general area has brought about social, economic and environmental challenges to the sustainability of culture. The consequence is that Bura cultural heritage and practices, such as *Kəcə kugwâ*, are going through modifications to in order to adapt to the existing situation. Any discourse on sustainability that does not consider the four dimensions – cultural, economic, social and ecological – of sustainability misunderstands the issue in focus (Kagan 2019). Thus, it is necessary to examine the challenges to the sustainability of *Kece kugwâ* from the perspectives of these four dimensions.

Cultural challenges to the sustainability of *Káčé kugwâ* rise from the fact that culture itself is never static and so it is constantly evolving over time. It is therefore a truism that, “culture is not a fixed end product, but rather a continuous process of creating, negotiating, and reflecting on social practice, which constantly needs to be revised and, subsequently, realigned” (Wagner and Andreas 2012). No doubt intangible cultural heritage is subject to change over time because these are passed from one generation to another in different ways and by different people. In addition, every generation exists within different social, economic, and environmental situations, which are bound to have different impact on culture. Consequently, there is always a tension between the natural changes that occur to culture and the concept of cultural preservation (Trotha 2011). Thus, it is almost impossible for intangible cultural heritage to remain static indefinitely. Even if this were possible, it may be an indication of cultural stagnation and underdevelopment.

Social challenges to the sustainability of *Káčé kugwâ* rise from the insecurity situation in northeast Nigeria because of the Boko Haram insurgency. Consequently, organising *Káčé kugwâ* or any form of social gathering is therefore a risky venture. People have witnessed an unprecedented breakdown of law and order and the reign of unreserved lawlessness. In this situation of insecurity and chaos there were executions of people, kidnappings, rape, forced marriages, armed robberies, burglaries, suicide bombings and other forms of attacks (Granville 2020, pp. 133-134). This volatile situation created by the Boko Haram insurgency has created both real and perceived threats to the people of this area who are rightly afraid to organise social gatherings unless necessary. Social gatherings are important spaces for the production, communication and transmission of intangible cultural heritage without which practices such as *Káčé kugwâ* risk becoming extinct. As earlier pointed out, Bura people responded to this threat by adapting their practice to the existing insecurity situation and some components of *Káčé kugwâ* were discontinued while the time of the event was changed.

Economic challenge to the sustainability of *Káčé kugwâ* rise from the economic difficulties that have accompanied the years of conflict in the northeast of Nigeria. A substantial number of people have lost their means of livelihood and are dependent on either humanitarian aid or relatives for survival. Predominantly agricultural, the economy of this region suffers from the inability of many farmers to cultivate because of the insecurity that plagues mainly the rural areas. In addition, majority of the people killed were in the productive age range of 18-40 years, most of which were males. The damage to the economy of this area can be illustrated in Borno State where in 2014 about 576 shops, 8 markets, 4 banks, 50,135 private buildings, 2453 cars, 72052 motorcycles, among others, have been destroyed by the insurgent (Mohammed and Ahmed 2015, p. 98). Empirical studies have established that Boko Haram insurgency has negative impact on the economy of not only the the northeast region but the entire northern Nigeria leading to over 5 million people facing food insecurity (Mshelizah, Lezuya and Jimoh, 2021). Thus, it will not be unusual for the people of Bura land to channel their dwindling economic resources towards more immediate needs than towards organising cultural ceremonies.

The ecological challenge to the sustainability of *Káčé kugwâ* rise from the physical damages to the cultural space of the Bura people because of the Boko Haram insurgency. Built environments form an important part of the tangible cultural heritage of people. Therefore, the destruction of markets, buildings, shops, mosques, and churches because of the insurgency greatly altered the environment where culture is made, practiced and lived. There is little doubt that “the eradication of a group’s tangible heritage often has detrimental effects on its members’ identity, flourishing, and so on” (Frowe and Matravers 2019, p. 22). This is because the built environments support the social networks that support the communication and transmission of culture. Material spaces are where experiences are made and memories reside. They provide the tangible evidence of events whether

pleasant or unpleasant over generations. Thus, there is always some connection between people's experiences and the materiality of their built environments (Sørensen and Viejo-Rose 2015, p. 7).

The destruction of built environments means the displacement of people, which alters the demographics of geographical spaces. The result is that many already established social networks are destroyed while new ones are made. The displaced people are likely to adapt to the culture of their new environments and social networks rather than continue their cultural practices in strange cultural spaces. Consequently, cultural practices such as *Kācé kugwâ* stand a possible risk of being abandoned entirely. This is because displaced people often lack the resources to feed and shelter themselves not to talk of sustaining their cultural heritage, which are secondary concerns.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of *Kācé kugwâ* over time. It began with a look at the original practice and its significance to the people of Bura land. This was followed by an examination of the modifications that have been done to the practice over time and some of the cause of these. The paper then discussed the challenges facing the sustainability of *Kācé kugwâ* from the perspective of cultural, social, economic and ecological dimensions of sustainability. It is the conclusion of this paper that although the original practice of *Kācé kugwâ* had much more benefit to the people of Bura land, its modification was necessitated by the insecurity situation affecting the people's cultural space. Since there is no knowing when the security situation of the area will improve, any effort to ensure the long-term sustainability of this practice is more likely to be effective if the challenges undermining it are considered from the perspective of the four dimensions of sustainability.

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