

PAINTING AS A TOOL FOR PRESERVING NGAS CULTURE

Zinbe Sabo Gushi PhD

National Gallery of Art, Nigeria
zinbesabogushi22@gmail.com

Akila Yusuf Gunok

Fine and Applied Arts Department, University of Jos
yusufakila247@gmail.com

Abstract

Culture refers to the shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that characterise a particular group of people. It encompasses the language and communication of a people, as well as how they live and interact with one another in a given society. Language is a system of communication that conveys meaning between individuals or groups. It enables the sharing of ideas, thoughts, emotions and information. Language can be spoken, written, or signed, and it plays a fundamental role in human interaction and understanding. The Ngas language and culture in Plateau State, Nigeria, like many other indigenous systems of knowledge, face significant threats of extinction due to globalisation, urbanisation, and the dominance of languages like English and Hausa. Some authors attempt to document certain aspects of Ngas culture and tradition, but the preservation of these through painting is largely underutilised. This paper highlights the role of painting as an art form, and other artistic interventions function as repositories of the Ngas language, history, philosophy, and social values. The analysis demonstrates that such paintings in public spaces can spark an endless conversation about the culture and traditions of the Ngas people, more than any book on a shelf. The essay concludes by emphasising the importance of supporting artistic practices that promote the preservation of the Ngas language as a strategy for continuity and a unique cultural identity for future generations.

Keywords: Ngas, culture, tradition, language preservation, painting, visual art.

Introduction

Anthropological history of humans has left us with evidence of different civilisations that existed and have since passed away, along with their languages, cultures and traditions. For example, according to Woods (2010), the Sumerian civilisation (5300 BCE to 1940 BCE) became extinct and was eventually absorbed into the Babylonian Empire around 1940-1750 BCE. Eberhard et al. (2023) assert that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2021) estimates that at least 43% of the world's approximately 6,000 languages are endangered, with a language disappearing on average every two weeks, taking with it an entire universe of knowledge, tradition, and identity. In Nigeria, a nation of extraordinary ethnic and linguistic variety with over 500 languages, this threat is acutely felt. Although several studies have documented the history, language, and tradition of the Ngas people, limited attention has been given to the role of painting as a medium for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. This study addresses the gap by examining how contemporary paintings serve as visual archives of Ngas culture.

Ngas people

Among these endangered languages is the Ngas language spoken primarily by the Ngas people of Plateau State in central Nigeria. Nengel (2012) asserts that "A brief history of the Ngas people classified them as of West Chadic origin and language within the Afro-Asiatic family; it is

considered a vigorous language by some metrics but is nonetheless pressured by the pervasive influence of Hausa as a lingua franca and English as the language of education and officialdom.”

The Ngas people are a predominant ethnic group on the Jos Plateau, primarily located in the Pankshin and Kanke Local Government Areas of Plateau State, Nigeria. They are renowned for their agricultural prowess, particularly their organised farming systems on the hills and slopes of the Plateau, and for a rich cultural heritage encompassing vibrant festivals, intricate social structures, and a deep philosophical worldview rooted in their language, Ngas, which is central to their identity.

Language is a system of communication that conveys meaning between individuals or groups. It enables the sharing of ideas, thoughts, emotions and information. Language can be spoken, written, or signed, and it plays a fundamental role in human interaction and understanding. Language is an important aspect of every culture. It promotes effective communication, fosters a sense of oneness, and builds relationships among people. The Ngas language reflects the Ngas people's value system, philosophy, belief system and heritage. The loss of a language would mean the loss of identity.

A Threat to an Identity

English is the official language in Nigeria and is widely used in urban communities in Northern Nigeria, especially in the Middle Belt. The English language is common in homes with interlingual marriages, which forces parents to speak a common language. Urbanisation and several socio-economic factors attract younger generations to bigger cities, where economic opportunity is tied to communicating in other, more dominant languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and English. Blench (2018) opines that the formal education system, predominantly conducted in English, further marginalises indigenous languages, often implicitly or explicitly framing them as inferior or irrelevant to modern success. Bodo (2017), says, “Furthermore, the media landscape, saturated with Nollywood films, Western content, and Hausa-language broadcasting, offers little space for Ngas, reducing its domains of use primarily to the home and traditional ceremonies.” Fishman (1991) argues that a gradual constriction of a language's functional spaces is a classic precursor to language shift, in which a community gradually abandons its native tongue for a more dominant one. The adoption of modern architectural designs and materials has also contributed to the steady decline of cultural practices such as low reliefs on the walls of traditional houses and mural design. The introduction of Western wares has also discouraged the production of traditional clay pots, which were adorned with motifs rooted in the culture.

According to Nengel (2012), the gradual extinction of the language is not merely about words. The Ngas language is the primary vehicle for their history, oral literature (proverbs, folktales, songs), and ecological knowledge, including a sophisticated understanding of local flora and fauna, as well as agricultural cycles. When the language declines, this entire system of knowledge developed over millennia becomes inaccessible. Therefore, preservation efforts must extend beyond lexicons to encompass the entire cultural ecosystem that the language sustains and is sustained by.

A Need for Identity Preservation

The efficacy of painting as a preservation tool rests on robust theoretical ground in cognitive psychology and semiotics. Nelson et al. (1976) posit in a semiotic theory that pictures are perceptually more distinct from one another than words, thereby increasing their chances of

retrieval and retention in human memory. Paivio (1991) asserts that when linguistic elements like words, proverbs, or narratives are paired with vivid visual imagery, they become more accessible and memorable. This principle, known as the picture superiority effect, has been empirically validated across numerous studies demonstrating that visual information is processed and retained more effectively than verbal information alone.

The theoretical foundation has been successfully applied in cultural preservation contexts; for example, Kumangtum and deGraft Yankson (2023) demonstrated how digital paintings could be employed to preserve the Kasem proverbs of the Kasena people of Ghana. Their research created culturally specific visual elements that incorporated architectural details, traditional clothing, and household objects, making oral traditions more attractive and memorable for viewers. The visual encoding of proverbs transformed ephemeral spoken words into permanent visual records accessible across generations and geographical distances.

Kannok (2025) analysed Thai mural paintings depicting the Naga and revealed how specific colours (gold for sacredness, red for power) and formal elements (zigzag lines separating human and divine realms) convey layers of spiritual and cultural meaning beyond simple word-image pairing. Painting can be used to construct and communicate complex cultural worldviews through visual language. According to Kay & Kempton (1984), "To understand how visual art can preserve language, one must first acknowledge the profound interconnection between these domains. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its less deterministic forms, suggests that language shapes our perception of reality and influences thought." This implies that the unique concepts, classifications, and worldview of the Ngas people are embedded in their linguistic structures.

Traditional methods of language preservation, often archived in academic circles, linguistic dictionaries, grammatical sketches, and transcribed oral histories, exist as static records that are sometimes disconnected from the targeted, breathing community they aim to serve. Visual art practice encompassing traditional crafts, bodily adornment, and contemporary artistic innovations like paintings is aimed at reminding the people about their rich cultural heritage that may be diminishing. They serve as a powerful, multifaceted, and sustainable tool for the preservation of the Ngas language and culture, functioning as a dynamic repository of vocabulary, a narrative medium for myths and history, and a participatory process that ensures intergenerational transmission. Geertz (1973) asserts that art is not merely decoration; it is a cultural system, a vehicle for meaning through which people represent and understand their world.

Over the years, the Ngas Nation has employed a range of measures to promote love and unity among the Ngas people and to preserve the use of the Ngas language. The measures include: the establishment of the Ngas Centre for Research and Documentation; the translation of the Holy Bible and other literature into the Ngas language; promotion of Ngas indigenous festivals, music and dance; introduction of the Pusedung festival, which is celebrated annually in Pankshin; Ngas attire and costumes; patronising Ngas food and cuisines, etc. Today, apart from the National Pusedung that is held annually in Pankshin, Pusedung is celebrated almost anywhere Ngas people reside. It is a festival that brings the Ngas people together.

The Ngas Village Market, established within the premises of the National Museum in Jos, offers an existing institutional framework for promoting the Ngas culture. The market recreates a traditional village setting with bamboo stalls, huts built to replicate the rocky terrain of Ngas villages, and vendors preparing authentic foods like mun kas (millet swallow), puk fori, puk lengdeng, with mwir pet (local soup), and mos kas (local beer). The establishment of an art gallery within the village could systematically document these elements and many more, like the woven

bante and animal-skin garments, the bat (knitted Ngas cloth), the calabashes and cooking vessels, the architectural details of traditional huts, and the musical instruments, etc. Painting serves as a visual dictionary, preserving the components of the Ngas vocabulary for future generations who may no longer encounter these objects in daily life.

Painting is an important medium that is recognised but underutilised as an avenue for the cultural preservation of Ngas culture. The Palaeolithic period left us evidence of man's desire to communicate and decorate his environment, which has helped in shaping history. The intervention by Ngas artists towards projecting and promoting the Ngas nation cannot be overemphasised. Artists have drawn inspiration from Ngas musical instruments, costumes, dance, festivals, masquerades, etc., to create works of art. Lately, there has been a conscious effort to use painting not just as an art form to promote Ngas culture and intergenerational transmission of tradition, but also as a tool for social justice and political emancipation. Simpson (2014) asserts that, "Art-making is experiential, kinesthetic, and multi-sensory, creating stronger cognitive and emotional bonds to the knowledge being transmitted."

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative art historical approach. Five paintings produced by the author were purposively selected because they depict important aspects of Ngas culture, language, festivals, identity, and contemporary social experiences. The paintings were analysed using formal analysis, focusing on elements such as line, colour, texture, composition, symbolism, and cultural meaning.

Case studies



Fig. 1 Title: Ma'kwem Mwa. Medium: Acrylic on Canvas Size: 41 x 46 cm Date: 2026 Author,s Collection

Ma'kwem Mwa

The painting is an imaginative composition of female dancers dressed in Ngas costumes, accompanied by a drummer and Sombi dancers. The background, which transitions from warm alizarin and orange to a blend of yellow that meets the green foreground, reflects the exciting

atmosphere, flora, and fauna of the Ngas land. Dance is central to every Ngas festival, whether Moslun, Mostar, Morgi, Moswong, etc. After all the rituals in sacred places that may not be accessible to the public, it culminates in a community dance. There is a popular saying among some friends of the Ngas people that, “Where Ngas people gather, there is PUSDUNG.”

The solemn images of the female dancers who are in their puberty suggest calmness and chastity, a virtue that every Ngas family holds high. At this stage, Ngas ladies are ushered into womanhood and their families and the community are expected to remind them of their roles as persons who are to live responsibly, with good character that will attract good suitors. The white-tailed ornament made from a horse's tail is both a dance costume and a symbol of purity. The combination of female and male figures in the composition depicts the strength of Ngas men and support for women.



Fig. 2 Title: Naru Medium: Acrylic on Canvas Size: 60 x 90cm Date: 2026 Author's Collection

Naru

Naru is a generic name for a female (mother) masquerade. The image is a semi-abstract rendition of the Naru using linear elements, combining colours and creating textures that define the composition. The lines hanging from the middle top of the painting create an array of bands running from top to bottom of the canvas, which suggests gravity. These are representations of the popular hand-woven costumes tied on the head of some Ngas masquerades and the body of Ngas men, which is called (Mbat). The direction of the flow of colours, mainly shades of olive green, cadmium yellow, orange and red, forms the composition against a tint of blue background. Although never worn by the masquerade, the blue band with red and white stripes, Ngas attire, adorns the painting from the top right to the middle, creating a balance. Shades of blue beneath the bands depict layers of woven leaves as worn by the masquerade. The Naru is a friendly, beautifully adorned masquerade with skillfully crafted costumes, a masquerade in Ngas land that does not carry a whip or any weapon, but is known for its exquisite dance steps, exciting voice, and rendition.



Figure 3 Title: Triumph Medium: Acrylic on Canvas Size: 80 x 110 cm Date: 2026 Author's Collection

Triumph

The painting depicts traditional horsemen dressed in Ngas costumes and armed with automatic weapons advancing. The background indicates a depth achieved by tints of yellow, a perspective that suggests the horsemen riding from a distance, indeed, the Ngas nation has sojourned. The tints of red, yellow and orange background blends with the purple, blue and green tints of colours in the foreground. The focal point of the painting is the horseman in the foreground dressed in an Ngas costume, and holding an automatic weapon, advancing as if in a war situation.

It depicts a need for self-defence, especially amongst minority groups and villages that are constantly being attacked by insurgents. The horses are all adorned with regalia in a style that looks similar to horses used during Durbar festivals in most parts of Northern Nigeria, except that these are in Ngas costumes. It reminds us of the fact that so many traditional communities that have been displaced by insurgents are scattered in different places. Those displaced may not be able to practice their traditions in lands other than their own. This and other reasons may further lead to the loss of language and tradition of a people.

Ngas Butom

The composition is a graffiti rendition of overlapping texts. Beneath the texts are two pairs of eyes; one by the top right corner and the other in the middle of the canvas. A blue band with red and white stripes representing Ngas woven attire runs from the top right angle towards the middle to the left bottom, forming the focal point of the text being letter 'A'. It is a combination of a "tag" and a "throw up" laid over a "piece," all three different styles of graffiti writing. The letters are executed in their simple forms for easy articulation. The text from top to bottom reads: Top, First, Butom, NGAS, laid over a mask situated in the middle of the canvas.



Figure 4 Title: Ngas Butom Medium:
Acrylic on Textured Canvas Size: 80 x 100
cm Date: 2026 Author's Collection

The inscription, which reads NGAS BUTOM, is a campaign for the Ngas people to remember themselves, especially when they are in a position to help. Unfortunately, some people use the slogan only when it suits their purposes. The politicians are quick to say Ngas Butom when they need support, but quick to abandon the people from whom they derive their power. The tints of the yellow band against the greys cascade across the canvas from top to bottom, increasing in size as it descends, forming the texts at the intersections.



Figure 5 Title: Sieged Medium: Acrylic on Canvas Size: 87 x
99 cm Date: 2026 Author's Collection

Sieged

The painting is a deeper reflection on how the government use state apparatus to influence traditional institutions. It depicts a man armed with an AK 47 whose face is covered with a scarf commonly used by bandits, he wears a green cap commonly used by politicians; in the middle is a

portrait of Ngolong Ngas the traditional ruler over Ngas land which is painted in grey; on the right are a pair of bound hands with an Ngas scarf but holding a Permanent Voters Card (PVC). It is a description of how the traditional institution is constantly subjected to the dictates of the government. The government now formally recognize or codifies traditional leadership structures, determining their authority. Appointment outcomes are shaped and approved by the government; the government can install or depose a traditional ruler and thereafter provide oversight. There are cases where due process was not followed in certain appointments of traditional rulers, and feuds from such tears the community apart. A divided community may not coexist, and it may lead to loss of identity and a gradual loss of language.

The government defines the roles, powers, and limitations of traditional institutions, for example, in land administration and dispute resolution. Funding and resource allocation give the government leverage over traditional institutions. State laws may override or limit traditional authority, especially on criminal justice or constitutional rights, sometimes exposing them to security threats, as they cannot constitute measures to arm and defend their communities.

Politicians have always schemed and twisted situations to their advantage; they have used traditional institutions as platforms for their campaigns, especially those they installed. At the end of every political cycle, the masses are left with their PVCs to decide.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, the paintings examined in this study reveal that visual art can function as a cultural archive. Through symbols, costumes, festivals, language inscriptions, and historical references, the artworks preserve aspects of Ngas culture that may otherwise be forgotten. The paintings also encourage public engagement and intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge. To preserve the Ngas language is to preserve the culture that speaks it, and to preserve that culture, supporting its visual art practices is not optional but essential. Artists working in painting, sculpture, installation, digital art, and photography can draw directly from the forms, textures, patterns, and motifs found on Ngas traditional objects and incorporate these elements into their works to preserve them. There is a need to reclaim Ngas visual culture from the realm of anthropology and reposition it within contemporary global art discourse to encourage its evolution beyond the walls of the museum.

Ngas artists should create works that will ignite conversation about identity, heritage, and change within the Ngas community and beyond. The process of creating these works often involves research, conversations with elders, and learning traditional terms, thereby actively engaging with and preserving the language. Exhibitions of such work serve as educational tools, with tags and catalogues that explain cultural heritage.

Cultural festivals like Pusedung should support art workshops, artist residencies, and exhibitions that centre on producing artworks that promote the Ngas language and tradition. Efforts should be made to create markets for traditional and contemporary Ngas art through cultural festivals, cooperatives, and online platforms, ensuring artists can derive sustainable income from selling their works.

References

Blench, R. (2018). An atlas of Nigerian languages (4th ed.). Kay Williamson Educational Foundation.

- Bodomo, A. (2017). African languages and ICT in education: The case of Ghana and Nigeria. In A. Batibo (Ed.), *The role of language in the empowerment of the African people* (pp. 123-145). CASAS.
- Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2023). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (26th ed.). SIL International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.
- Kannok, J. (2025). Thai auspicious animals in ideal symbols, beliefs the creation of contemporary Thai paintings. *Fine Arts Journal: Srinakharinwirot University*, 29(2), 143–162.
- Kay, P., & Kempton, W. (1984). What is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis? *American Anthropologist*, 86(1), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1984.86.1.02a00050>
- Kumangtum, R. T., & deGraft Yankson, P. (2023). Kasem proverbs as digital paintings. *Arts and Design Studies*, 103, 1–12.
- Nengel, J. G. (2012). *Precolonial African intergroup relations and the Ngas of the Jos Plateau in the Nigerian central lands*. Lambert Academic Publishing.