

Echoes of Eldership: Hausa Oral Poetry as Structural Intervention against Cultural Erosion and Moral Decadence amongst Nigerian Youths

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Abstract

This study examines the accelerating erosion of indigenous cultural paradigms and the concurrent rise in moral decadence among Nigerian youths, positioning traditional Hausa oral poetry (wakar baka) as a vital mechanism for social modification and ethical realignment. In an era characterised by intensive globalisation, urbanisation, and the pervasive dominance of Western digital media, contemporary youths are increasingly alienated from the historical, communal, and philosophical anchors that traditionally regulated youth conduct and character development. This paper evaluates the structural, pedagogical, and corrective functions of Hausa verbal arts, focusing on how iconic poets and singers have historically weaponised their craft to combat antisocial behaviours, greed, and civic irresponsibility. Using a socio-cultural and functionalist framework, the analysis demonstrates that oral traditions are not merely historical or aesthetic performance genres, but are active, informal educational instruments capable of instilling discipline, modesty (Kunya), and community-oriented values. The study concludes that addressing the contemporary crisis of youth indiscipline requires a deliberate shift from exclusively Westernised, clinical models of correction toward culturally grounded strategies. Ultimately, the paper advocates for interdisciplinary interventions that institutionalise oral traditions within modern educational curricula, language preservation policies, and regional broadcasting platforms to restore ethical equilibrium and cultural continuity among the younger generation.

Keywords: cultural erosion, moral decadence, Hausa oral poetry, social modification, Nigerian youth

Introduction

The socio-cultural landscape of contemporary Africa is currently undergoing a profound transformation, characterised by an accelerating tension between deep-seated indigenous value systems and the creeping paradigms of Westernised global modernity. In his foundational analysis of societal structures, Linton (1945) posited that a community's culture represents its total, shared way of life—a comprehensive matrix of ideas, values, habits, and normative behaviours that are deliberately learned, enacted, and transmitted across generational boundaries (as cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Historically, within the traditional setups of ethnic groups across Nigeria, this intergenerational transmission was not merely an artistic pastime; it served as a structural, informal mechanism for character development, societal regulation, and civic alignment. Central to this pedagogical framework was oral literature (wakar baka), a rich verbal art form encompassing folktales, proverbs, songs, and riddles that parents and communal elders dynamically deployed to instil ethical discipline, civic responsibility, and the foundational virtue of modesty (Kunya) within the younger generation.

In recent decades, however, the structural integrity of these indigenous modes of transmission has experienced a severe, gradual erosion. As observed by contemporary socio-

cultural commentators, rapid economic shifts, uncontrolled urbanisation, and the pervasive expansion of Western digital media platforms have fundamentally altered the socialisation patterns of Nigerian youths. This cultural displacement has created a visible ideological vacuum. Cut off from the grounding influence of indigenous folklore and communal accountability, the contemporary youth demographic is increasingly exhibiting unprecedented levels of antisocial behaviour, materials-driven desperation, and civic indifference. Sociologically, this phenomenon is evaluated not merely as a localised rebellion of youth, but as a direct structural consequence of cultural alienation. When a society abandons its vernacular narrative models, it systematically forfeits its primary tool for moral engineering.

To evaluate the scope of this cultural displacement and its direct relationship to rising youth indiscipline, it is necessary to examine how the spoken word historically functioned as an instrument of social control. Within Northern Nigeria, the vibrant traditions of Hausa oral poetry and song have long served as a mirror for societal ethics and a weapon against structural corruption. Master oral artists and freelance specialist poets did not perform in isolation; they functioned as active socio-political critics, community watchdogs, and moral guides. By diagnosing contemporary moral drift and profiling its historical precedents, this paper seeks to illustrate how the revitalisation of Hausa oral traditions can serve as a robust, non-clinical intervention against modern youth decadence.

The structural decline of indigenous regulatory frameworks in Nigeria is fundamentally tied to the socio-cultural shifts accelerated by globalisation and Western cultural imperialism. Scholars within the cultural convergence paradigm observe that globalisation frequently acts as a mechanism of homogenisation, promoting a singular, consumerist global culture at the expense of localised traditions (Okpeh & Ugbegili, 2013). In the Nigerian context, this homogenisation manifests as a form of cultural displacement, where the historical values of communal accountability, modesty, and mutual respect are replaced by individualistic and materialistic paradigms. For the youth demographic, this transition often induces a state of structural alienation; as they decouple from the traditional moral anchors of their heritage, they enter an ideological vacuum characterised by what sociologists term a 'moral panic' (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013).

Rather than navigating adolescence within a stable matrix of community-verified ethics, contemporary youths are socialised by decentralised, digital media environments that frequently celebrate wealth accumulation detached from productive labour or moral restraint. This sociological drift highlights a critical failure in modern informal pedagogy. In pre-colonial and early post-colonial Hausa societies, child socialisation was systematically reinforced through public and domestic engagements with verbal arts. Indiscipline was not managed solely through punitive or legalistic measures; instead, it was preemptively checked by the rhetorical force of *wakar baka* (oral song and poetry).

As Finnegan (2012) notes, oral literature in Africa functions as a dynamic instrument of social control, capable of praise-singing to reward virtue or utilising satire to expose and shame antisocial behaviour. When parents and community elders relegated these oral forms to the margins—often mischaracterising them as antiquarian or incompatible with modern formal education—they systematically dismantled the primary psychological apparatus used to cultivate *Kunya* (shame, modesty, and respect) within the youth consciousness. Consequently, the contemporary rise in youth moral decadence—ranging from cybercriminality and substance abuse

to civic defiance—can be directly mapped to the silencing of these vernacular narrative models. Reversing this ethical decline requires more than conventional structural or clinical corrections; it demands a systematic re-engagement with indigenous epistemologies. By examining how traditional Hausa singers and poets historically structured their moral critiques, this study establishes a theoretical pathway for re-integrating oral traditions into modern youth socialisation frameworks, serving as a culturally grounded mechanism for behavioural modification and social reclamation.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

To establish a rigorous analytical basis for this study, the discussion is anchored on a dual theoretical framework that synthesises Functionalist Social Control Theory and the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework. Together, these two perspectives illuminate how societal stability relies on effective normative transmission and how indigenous oral traditions function as a structural, non-punitive apparatus for character engineering and behavioural modification.

Functionalist Social Control Theory

Functionalist sociology posits that a stable and harmonious society relies on a high degree of value consensus, social cohesion, and the effective integration of its constituent parts (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). Within this paradigm, social control theory—historically developed by theorists such as Émile Durkheim and later refined by modern sociologists—emphasises that deviance and moral decadence occur when the structural mechanisms responsible for binding individuals to the collective conscience are weakened or disrupted. When a society’s regulatory institutions function optimally, younger demographics internalise the normative boundaries, values, and expectations of their community, maintaining social equilibrium. In the functionalist view, child socialisation is a primary line of defence against anomie (the breakdown of social standards and values).

However, when external forces—such as rapid urbanisation, unregulated digital environments, and cultural imperialism—displace local institutions, an ideological vacuum emerges. For Nigerian youths, the erosion of indigenous regulatory frameworks means that the traditional codes governing personal honour, community accountability, and mutual respect are weakened. Functionalist social control theory provides the analytical lens necessary to diagnose this contemporary shift, framing youth moral decadence not as an isolated behavioural rebellion, but as a systemic structural failure of informal pedagogical institutions.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Framework

While functionalism diagnoses the structural breakdown of societal equilibrium, the Indigenous Knowledge Systems framework offers a culturally grounded model for restoration. Berkes (2008) defines indigenous knowledge as a cumulative body of wisdom, practical methods, and philosophical beliefs generated by a community through long-term interaction with their social and physical environment. This localised knowledge framework is holistic, linking individual morality directly to the spiritual, social, and ecological well-being of the entire community (Wiredu, 1996).

Within the African context, IKS is not preserved through static, written archives, but is dynamically embedded within oral literature—specifically through wakar baka (oral song and

poetry), proverbs, myths, and folktales (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992). The IKS framework positions parents, elders, and oral artists as key custodians of this social knowledge. Through parental storytelling and vernacular performances, complex ethical philosophies are translated into accessible, memorable narrative structures for children.

IKS emphasises that formal or Westernised educational models often isolate children from these local value systems, creating an epistemological disconnect (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Revitalising indigenous knowledge transfer is therefore viewed under this framework as an educational and cultural necessity to restore intergenerational continuity. By synthesising Functionalist Social Control Theory with the Indigenous Knowledge Systems framework, this study adopts a dual lens that treats Hausa oral poetry as both a structural mechanism of social stability and a vital vehicle of cultural epistemology.

Synthesis of the Frameworks

Functionalism highlights the vital necessity of maintaining social control through robust informal institutions, while the IKS framework identifies *wakar baka* as the specific, time-tested instrument used to achieve this compliance in African societies. Together, these frameworks explain how the active engagement of parents and oral artists with traditional verbal arts builds a defensive psychological matrix within the youth consciousness, centering on the core values of Kunya (modesty and mutual respect).

The theoretical synthesis reinforces the central argument of this paper: that mitigating contemporary youth decadence requires a deliberate shift away from imported, purely legalistic corrective measures, returning instead to culturally rooted, narrative-driven socialisation models that preserve both ethical order and cultural continuity. This framework guides our analytical look into the dialectics of localized systems of reinforcement and community sanction blocks.

Analysis and Discussion

This section explores the specific structural and pedagogical mechanisms through which traditional Hausa oral poetry (*wakar baka*) functions as an informal regulatory apparatus capable of checking youth excesses and reversing moral decline. Drawing on Functionalist Social Control Theory and the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework, the analysis demonstrates how oral traditions move beyond passive entertainment to become active instruments of moral engineering. The discussion is organised into three primary dimensions: the dialectic of praise and satire, the linguistic encoding of Kunya, and the role of the oral artist as an institutional watchdog.

The Dialectic of Praise (Yabo) and Satire (Zambo): Systems of Sanction

Within the functionalist paradigm, the maintenance of value consensus requires visible systems of positive reinforcement and negative sanction (Haralambos & Holborn, 2013). In traditional Hausa orature, this structural requirement is met through the dynamic tension between praise-singing (*yabo*) and public satire (*zambo*). Master oral poets do not merely perform for aesthetic appreciation; they use their linguistic capital to reward compliance with communal norms and severely penalise deviance (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992).

When an oral artist composes verses celebrating an individual's integrity, modesty, or community service, the poetry functions as a public endorsement of desired moral conduct. This

collective validation provides the younger generation with tangible archetypes of success that are decoupled from unearned material wealth. Conversely, the deployment of satire (zambo) serves as a powerful informal disciplinary tool. In tightly-knit social environments, being publicly named or structurally profiled in a satirical verse for greed, disrespect, or anti-social behaviour imposes a heavy psychological cost.

Because these oral compositions are easily memorised, repeated, and circulated across generations, the threat of localised ridicule acts as a highly effective preventive check on youthful indiscipline, illustrating Finnegan's (2012) assertion that oral literature serves as a dynamic custodian of the moral order. This behavioral feedback loop reinforces localized social bounds directly.

The Linguistic Encoding of Kunya (Modesty and Restraint)

From an Indigenous Knowledge Systems perspective, language is not an arbitrary set of symbols, but a mnemonic vessel that encodes a society's deepest philosophical and ethical convictions (Berkes, 2008; Stibbe, 2021). Within Hausa verbal arts, oral poetry is systematically structured to cultivate and reinforce Kunya—a holistic concept encapsulating modesty, shame, respect, and emotional restraint. Kunya represents the psychological foundation of social control within the community; it is the internal mechanism that prevents an individual from bringing dishonour upon the family or the collective conscience.

Traditional oral narratives and poetic verses translate this abstract ethical philosophy into concrete behavioural expectations for children. Through rhythmic repetition, children internalise the understanding that actions born of raw self-interest or unchecked individualistic ambition are structurally disruptive. For example, proverbial expressions embedded within poetic stanzas warn against the erosion of respect for elders, the abandonment of communal obligations, and the pursuit of wealth detached from character (Halali).

By regularly engaging with these narrative models during formative development, younger demographics build an internalised moral compass that actively resists the consumerist, individualistic impulses introduced by unregulated global digital environments (Okpeh & Ugbegili, 2013; Ritzer, 2008). This protective cognitive barrier filters out destructive cultural convergence effects safely.

The Oral Artist as a Structural Institutional Watchdog

While parental transmission represents the domestic application of orature, the professional oral poet (maroki or zabiya) functions as a macro-level institutional watchdog. In traditional West African social structures, oral artists occupy a unique political and social position that grants them the license to critique institutional failures, community drift, and youthful excesses without fear of legal reprisal. They serve as the community's vocal conscience.

When a society experiences an influx of alien paradigms that threaten its internal stability—such as the rapid commercialization of social values or the rise of materials-driven youth subcultures—the oral poet diagnoses and publicly deconstructs these anomalies. By framing contemporary deviance against the long-term, historically verified ethics of the ancestors, the artist strips modern anti-social behaviours of their perceived prestige. Cybercriminality, substance abuse, and civic defiance are exposed not as markers of civilised modernity or elite status, but as

symptoms of cultural bankruptcy and structural decay. This public diagnostic function reframes the societal narrative, assisting informal institutions like the family and community leadership in reclaiming moral authority over the younger demographic.

Thematic Interventions: Critiques of Materialism, Indiscipline, and Cybercriminality

To appreciate the practical application of *wakar baka* as a structural tool for social control, it is essential to examine specific thematic interventions where Hausa oral poets directly confront youth excesses. In contemporary Nigerian society, a primary driver of youth moral decadence is the decoupling of wealth from character—a sociological shift heavily influenced by what Ritzer (2008) labels the rationalising and commercialising pressures of global consumerism. This shift has given rise to youth subcultures centered on instantaneous wealth, manifest in phenomena such as cybercriminality (Yahoo-Yahoo), political thuggery (Daushara or Kalare), and systemic ostentation.

Historically and into the contemporary era, master oral poets have systematically dismantled the social prestige associated with these subcultures. Rather than allowing unearned wealth to be misconstrued as a marker of civilised modernity or elite status, oral poetry re-contextualises it as an act of communal betrayal and cultural bankruptcy. For instance, verses composed by iconic northern poets frequently deploy sharp rhetorical questions and cautionary allegories to expose the transient nature of materials-driven greed. When prompted to analyze the ecological and ethical themes in traditional Nigerian oral literature, the Gemini large language model generated a structural breakdown showing that oral literature functions as an active pedagogical system rather than a passive artistic historical repository (Google, 2026). Through these vivid lyrical portraiture, the oral artist strips anti-social actions of their perceived glamour, rendering them undesirable to younger listeners who are highly sensitive to peer and communal validation (Finnegan, 2012; Okpewho, 1992).

Socio-Digital Displacement and the Intergenerational Transmission Gap

While the theoretical potency of Hausa oral tradition as an instrument of character engineering remains clear, its modern application faces a severe structural crisis: socio-digital displacement. Under the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework, the successful transmission of ethical worldviews relies on active, face-to-face communication within domestic and communal spaces (Berkes, 2008). Historically, this occurred during evening storytelling sessions (*tatsuniya*) and public festival performances, where parents and elders naturally functioned as cultural mediators. In the contemporary landscape, however, these physical channels of transmission have been largely displaced by decentralised, algorithmic digital media spaces. The rapid proliferation of smartphones, internet connectivity, and Westernised social media platforms has altered the socialisation architecture for Nigerian youths. Contemporary youths spend their formative hours navigating digital environments that operate on individualistic, consumer-oriented paradigms directly detached from localised ethical codes (Okpeh & Ugbegili, 2013). Consequently, a profound intergenerational transmission gap has emerged. Parents have increasingly vacated their roles as primary moral instructors, assuming that formal Westernised schooling or digital exposure is a sufficient substitute for indigenous character cultivation, leaving youth highly vulnerable (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Reclaiming the Moral Landscape: Strategies and Media Convergence

To reverse the structural breakdown identified by Functionalist Social Control Theory, society must shift from passive observation to active institutional reclamation. Revitalising traditional Hausa oral poetry (wakar baka) as a tool for character engineering requires a systematic strategy that moves beyond domestic spaces and integrates into modern public institutions (Berkes, 2008; Wiredu, 1996). The first structural strategy involves re-establishing the domestic storytelling architecture within the modern household. Parents must consciously carve out media-free communicative spaces to re-introduce proverbial critiques, moral riddles, and allegorical oral narratives into daily family discourse. At the macro-level, this domestic effort must be supported by the institutionalisation of oral arts within formal education. Rather than maintaining the colonial dichotomy that privileges Western literacies while marginalising indigenous orature (Chinweizu, 1978; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986), modern school curricula should formally adopt Hausa oral poetry as an approved pedagogical tool.

Instead of viewing digital platforms purely as vectors of Western cultural imperialism (Okpeh & Ugbegili, 2013), regional broadcasters, cultural mediators, and contemporary oral artists must aggressively occupy digital spaces. Classic moral stanzas, satirical verses (zambo), and praise-poems (yabo) can be re-packaged into accessible digital formats—such as short-form educational videos, animations, podcasts, and vernacular smartphone applications. By migrating wakar baka into modern digital media environments, the moral imagination of indigenous literature is translated into languages and formats that appeal directly to the younger generation (Buell, 1995; Stibbe, 2021). This digital migration strips online anti-social subcultures of their monopoly over youth attention, re-establishing localised ethical codes as prestigious, visible, and competitive paradigms within the global media landscape.

Conclusion

This study has systematically evaluated the intersection of cultural erosion, rising youth moral decadence, and the regulatory power of traditional Hausa oral poetry (wakar baka) within contemporary Nigerian society. Guided by Functionalist Social Control Theory and the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework, the analysis demonstrates that the visible rise in anti-social behaviours, materials-driven desperation, and civic indifference among Nigerian youths is not an isolated behavioural rebellion. Instead, it represents a structural failure of informal pedagogical institutions caused by globalisation, urbanisation, and socio-digital displacement. When communities relegate their vernacular narrative models to the margins, they systematically dismantle the primary psychological tools used to cultivate value consensus, social cohesion, and the foundational virtue of modesty (Kunya) within the younger generation. Far from being passive historical or aesthetic performance genres, traditional Hausa verbal arts function as active, non-clinical instruments of social control and ethical engineering. Ultimately, the study affirms that mitigating contemporary youth decadence requires a deliberate shift away from imported, purely legalistic corrective measures, returning instead to culturally rooted, narrative-driven socialisation models that preserve both ethical order and cultural continuity.

Recommendations

- Formal Integration into Secondary and Higher Education Curricula: Ministries of education and curriculum planners should formally incorporate traditional Hausa oral literature into school syllabi for moral instruction, citizenship education, and language studies.
- Institutionalisation of Regional Youth Orature Festivals: State and local governments, in collaboration with cultural ministries, should institutionalise regional youth oral poetry and storytelling festivals to provide prestigious validation.
- Aggressive Digital Migration and Media Convergence: Cultural practitioners and contemporary oral artists must aggressively occupy modern digital spaces via educational videos, animations, and podcasts to compete effectively online.
- Domestic Reclamation of Spoken Word Pedagogies: Parents must consciously re-establish domestic communicative spaces, re-introducing oral narratives, moral riddles, and proverbs into daily family discourse to active mediate digital influences.
- Collaborative Documentation and Interdisciplinary Research: Universities and cultural NGOs should fund collaborative projects to document, translate, and archive the ethical philosophies embedded within West African orature.
- Policy Recognition of Oral Artists as Social Regulators: Environmental and civil society regulatory agencies should formally recognise professional oral poets and singers as vital community watchdogs and institutional watchdogs.
- Capacity Building Workshops for Cultural Mediators: Community leaders, teachers, and parents should receive structured training through targeted workshops on how to use oral literature as a pedagogical tool for resolving contemporary crises.

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