IJAAR PUBLISHING®

International Journal of Socio-Cultural Research | ISSN: 3027-1649
Vol. 4, Issue 1 (2026) | www.ijaar.org

PRESERVING VOICES BEFORE THEY FALL SILENT: DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION OF HAUSA ORAL POETRY (WAƙOƙIN BAKA) IN JIGAWA AND KANO STATES, NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

Hausa oral poetry — Wakokin Baka — is among the most formally sophisticated and culturally embedded genres of oral literature in Northern Nigeria, yet it faces an accelerating crisis of documentation and transmission. This study presents the findings of a systematic field documentation project conducted across eight communities in Jigawa and Kano States, combining audio-visual performance recording, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and structured digital archiving to produce the most comprehensive contemporaneous corpus of Hausa oral poetry in the region. Forty-seven participants — 28 traditional performers (mawaka, makada, maroka) and 19 community elders and cultural stakeholders — contributed to a corpus of 89 poetic texts spanning six genres: wakar yabo (38.2%), wakar fada (22.5%), wakar wa'azi (18.0%), wakar soyayya (12.4%), wakar zambo (6.7%), and wakar tarihi (2.2%). The digital archive comprises 52 audio files (31.4 hours), 34 video files (18.7 hours), 218 photographs, 89 transcriptions, 89 translations, and 67 annotated texts. Linguistic analysis identified 347 formulaic expressions, 12 metaphorical semantic clusters, 8 prosodic patterns (including 4 previously undocumented), and 23 symbolic images not previously attested in the published literature. Thematic analysis of interview and FGD data identified institutional neglect (93.6%), transmission crisis (89.4%), and patronage decline (80.9%) as the three most critical threats. The study concludes that Wakokin Baka is a living, adaptive, and socially indispensable tradition — not a dying relic — whose structural conditions of survival have been severely undermined, and that technology-mediated documentation is both feasible and urgent. The archive produced constitutes the most extensive contemporaneous repository of Hausa oral poetry in Jigawa and Kano States.

Keywords: *Hausa oral poetry; Wakokin Baka; digital preservation; intangible cultural heritage; digital humanities; ethnography; linguistic analysis; Jigawa State; Kano State; oral tradition*

Sulaiman, S. (2026). Preserving voices before they fall silent: Digital documentation of Hausa oral poetry (wakokin baka) in Jigawa and Kano States, Nigeria. *International Journal of Socio-Cultural Research. 4*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.46654/qvtnz790

1 INTRODUCTION

Hausa oral poetry — Waƙoƙin Baka, literally 'poetry of the mouth' — is among the most formally elaborate and socially embedded genres of verbal art in sub-Saharan Africa. Encompassing praise poetry (waƙar yabo), heroic recitation (waƙar faɗa), didactic verse (waƙar wa'azi), love poetry (waƙar soyayya), satire (waƙar zambo), and historical genealogical recitation (waƙar tarihi), it has served for centuries as the primary medium through which Hausa communities preserve collective memory, transmit moral values, regulate social relationships, celebrate identity, and comment on political life. Furniss (1996) identifies Hausa oral poetry as distinctive within the comparative study of African oral literatures for its prosodic sophistication, its institutional embeddedness, and the formal diversity of its generic range. Ahmad (2007) traces the synthesis of Islamic literary influences — particularly the qasida and madih traditions — with pre-Islamic Hausa performance traditions, arguing that this synthesis accounts for both the formal richness and the cultural depth of the Hausa oral poetic tradition.

Despite this cultural richness, Waƙoƙin Baka faces an urgent and in some respects irreversible documentation crisis. The tradition's most accomplished practitioners are predominantly elderly; the apprenticeship systems through which complex repertoires were traditionally transmitted have been severely disrupted by modernisation, economic change, and shifting educational norms; institutional support for documentation is almost entirely absent; and the performing community is aging faster than it is being replaced. Ahmed and Gusau (2015) warn that without deliberate documentation intervention, large portions of the Hausa oral poetic heritage — including genealogical recitations, heroic epics, and specialist didactic traditions that survive only in individual performers' memories — will disappear permanently when the current generation of master performers passes. Bird and Simons (2003) provide the methodological framework within which this study situates its documentation work, arguing that genuine preservation of oral traditions requires not merely technical digitisation but structured, interoperable, community-consulted archiving that ensures the materials remain accessible, attributable, and usable long after the documentation project concludes.

This paper presents the findings of a fourteen-week documentation project conducted across eight communities in Jigawa and Kano States, Nigeria, combining field performance recording, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, transcription, translation, annotation, and digital archiving to produce both a primary corpus of 89 contemporary oral poetry texts and a structured digital archive of those materials. The study addresses five research questions: the genre distribution of active Waƙoƙin Baka performance; the dominant linguistic, thematic, and stylistic features of the corpus; the socio-cultural functions of the documented genres; the principal threats to the tradition as perceived by performers and communities; and the most effective digital archiving strategies for preserving this tradition in accessible, sustainable, and culturally respectful formats.

2 SCHOLARLY BACKGROUND

2.1 The Hausa Oral Poetry Tradition in the Literature

The scholarly literature on Hausa oral poetry constitutes a substantial body of work, anchored in the foundational studies of Furniss (1996), Ahmad (2007), Gusau (2008), and Yahya (1988). Furniss's Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa remains the most comprehensive account of the tradition's generic diversity and social institutionalisation,

establishing the key distinction between genres serving elite patronage functions (waƙar yabo, waƙar faɗa) and those with broader communal circulation (waƙar wa'azi, waƙar zambo, waƙar soyayya). Yahya (1988) provides the most systematic analysis of Hausa aesthetic theory as articulated from within the performing tradition, documenting the evaluative criteria through which performers and community audiences assess poetic excellence — criteria centred on linguistic density, metaphorical inventiveness, rhythmic control, and the depth of cultural reference.

Sa'idu (2010) extends this analysis to the compositional dimension, demonstrating the centrality of formulaic composition to Hausa oral poetic practice: experienced performers carry a repertoire of metrically and syntactically stable formulaic units — epithets, genealogical phrases, battlefield descriptions — that can be retrieved, combined, and varied in real-time performance to produce complex new compositions on familiar themes. This finding aligns the Hausa tradition with the oral-formulaic theory developed by Parry and Lord for Homeric epic poetry, extending its applicability to the African context and confirming Finnegan's (2012) argument for the universality of formulaic composition as a characteristic of highly developed oral poetic traditions.

2.2 Threats, Documentation, and the Digital Turn

The threats facing Hausa oral poetry have been identified in broad terms in the literature — UNESCO (2003), Ahmed and Gusau (2015), and Finnegan (2012) all document the convergent pressures of modernisation, urbanisation, declining patronage, and generational disconnection that characterise endangered oral traditions globally. What is distinctive about the current study is its systematic empirical measurement of these threats within specific communities, providing quantitative evidence for the severity and prevalence of specific threat types rather than general qualitative observations.

The digital humanities methodology employed in this study draws on the standards articulated by Bird and Simons (2003) in their foundational paper 'Seven Dimensions of Portability for Language Documentation and Description.' Bird and Simons argue that genuine portability — the capacity of archived materials to be retrieved, used, and understood across different systems, institutions, and generations of researchers — requires attention not only to technical format (content and format portability) but to the social and institutional dimensions of archiving: discovery portability (can the materials be found?), access portability (can they be used without barriers?), citation portability (can they be referenced accurately?), preservation portability (will they survive institutional change?), and permissions portability (are the rights and attribution requirements clear?). The metadata schema developed for this study's archive addresses all seven dimensions.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design and Sites

A mixed-methods digital ethnography design was adopted, combining qualitative ethnographic fieldwork with systematic digital archiving. Eight communities were purposively selected across Jigawa State (Dutse, Gumel, Hadejia, Ringim) and Kano State (Kano Municipal, Dala, Kura, Dawakin Tofa) on the basis of: documented presence of active performers; coverage of multiple performer types; occurrence of regular performance contexts during the fieldwork window (January–March 2025); and community cooperation. The fieldwork period of fourteen weeks was designed to capture both ceremonial

performances (those occurring naturally during the period) and dedicated recording sessions (arranged with specific performers to document particular texts from their repertoire).

3.2 Participants

Three participant categories were engaged through purposive and snowball sampling. Traditional performers (n=28) were selected for active performance practice and willingness to be recorded: 12 mawaka (professional poets), 9 makada (instrumentalists/praise singers), and 7 maroka (heralds/genealogical poets), distributed across both states. Community elders and cultural patrons (n=12) provided historical and contextual accounts. Cultural stakeholders (n=7) — including ministry officials, local historians, and cultural association representatives — contributed institutional perspectives. Total N=47.

3.3 Data Collection and Archiving

Audio-visual recording of performances was the primary documentation method: 52 audio files (31.4 hours, WAV lossless) and 34 video files (18.7 hours, MP4 1080p) were produced across 47 recording sessions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all performer participants and a subset of elders and stakeholders (n=45 total), audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Hausa. Four focus group discussions were conducted with young community members and women performers. Transcription was conducted in standard Hausa orthography; English translations were reviewed by a native Hausa speaker independent of the transcription team. Each archive entry was described using a structured metadata schema adapted from OLAC/ELDP standards, recording 14 fields including performer identity, community, genre, date, language variety, thematic summary, and access permissions. Thematic analysis of interview and FGD data was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with inter-rater kappa=0.83.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Participant Profiles and Corpus Overview

The 28 performer participants ranged in age from 38 to 82 years (mean: 58.4 years), with performing experience from 8 to 55 years (mean: 31.2 years). The demographic profile confirms the generation gap at the heart of the transmission crisis: the most accomplished practitioners of the tradition are predominantly in the latter half of their active lives. Three maroka participants (all aged above 75) were identified as the last known practitioners of their specific genealogical recitation lineages with no trained successors. Figure 1 presents the participant distribution.

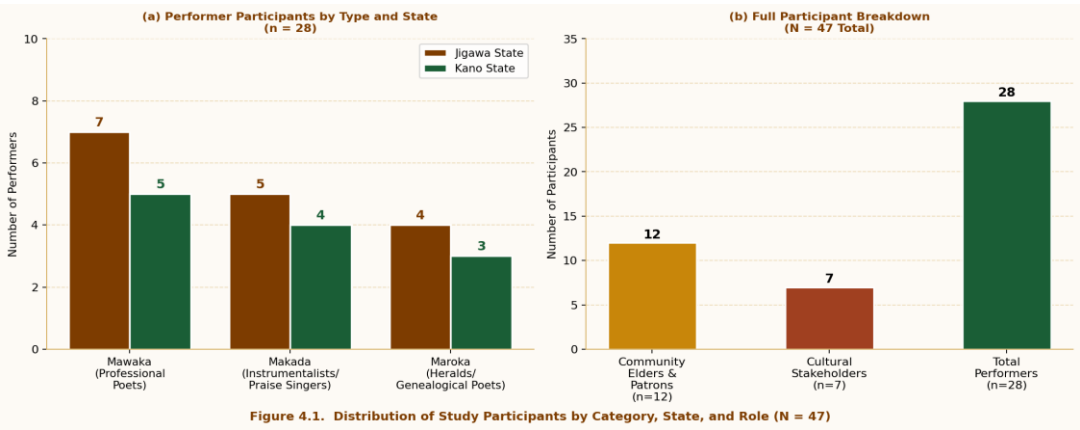


Figure 1. Distribution of study participants by category, type, and state (N=47).

The corpus of 89 poetic texts spans all six genres. Table 1 presents the genre distribution by state.

Table 1 Genre Distribution of the Documented Corpus by State (n=89)

Genre	Jigawa n	Kano n	Total n	%	Primary Function
Waƙar Yabo (Praise Poetry)	19	15	34	38.2	Celebration; identity; patronage
Waƙar Faɗa (Heroic Poetry)	12	8	20	22.5	Historical preservation; martial memory
Waƙar Wa'azi (Didactic Poetry)	9	7	16	18.0	Moral instruction; Islamic ethics
Waƙar Soyayya (Love Poetry)	6	5	11	12.4	Romantic expression; social commentary
Waƙar Zambo (Satirical Poetry)	4	2	6	6.7	Social critique; power regulation
Waƙar Tarihi (Historical Poetry)	1	1	2	2.2	Genealogical record; community memory
Total	**51**	**38**	**89**	**100.0**	

Note. Jigawa State contributes 51 texts (57.3%) reflecting higher performer concentration and a richer ceremonial calendar during the fieldwork period. The low waƙar tarihi count (n=2) reflects the critically small number of surviving maroka specialists in genealogical recitation.

Figure 2 presents the genre distribution and state composition visually.

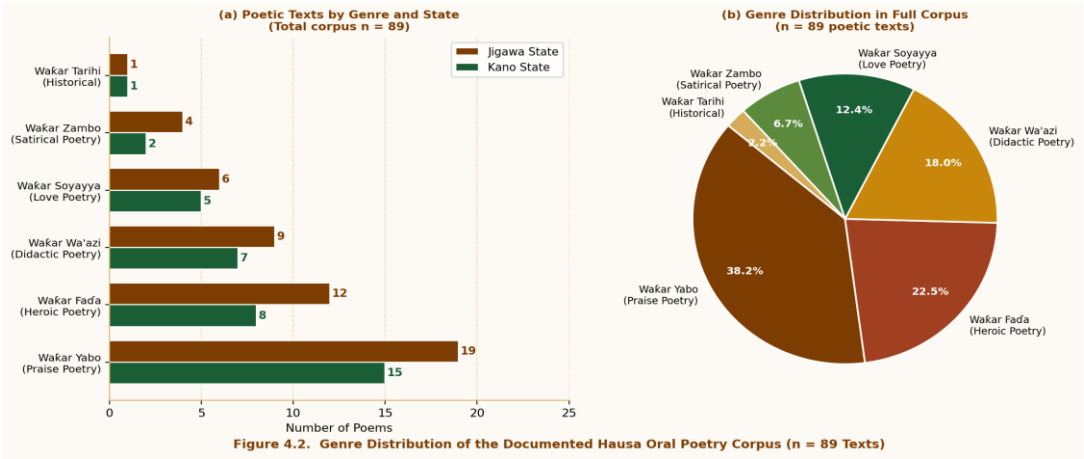


Figure 2. Genre distribution of the documented Hausa oral poetry corpus (n=89 texts).

4.2 Thematic Findings: Challenges and Transitions

Figure 3 presents the thematic analysis findings from the interview and FGD data. Seven major themes were identified. Table 2 presents descriptions and citation frequencies.

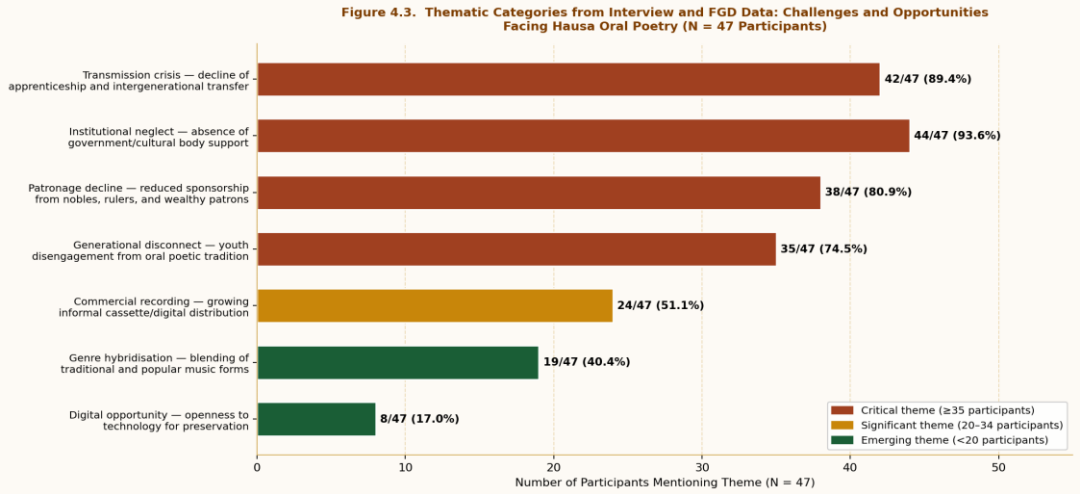


Figure 3. Thematic categories from interview and FGD data (N=47 participants).

Table 2 Thematic Categories from Interview and FGD Data (N=47)

Theme	Description	n	%	Type
Institutional neglect	Absence of government support for performers and documentation	44	93.6	Critical
Transmission crisis	Decline of apprenticeship and intergenerational knowledge transfer	42	89.4	Critical
Patronage decline	Reduced financial sponsorship from nobles and wealthy patrons	38	80.9	Critical
Generational disconnect	Youth disengagement; preference for electronic entertainment	35	74.5	Significant
Commercial recording	Growing informal cassette, CD, and digital distribution	24	51.1	Significant
Genre hybridisation	Blending of traditional poetry with popular music forms	19	40.4	Emerging
Digital opportunity	Openness to technology-mediated preservation strategies	8	17.0	Emerging

Note. Inter-rater kappa=0.83. Critical: ≥70% citation; Significant: 40–69%; Emerging: <40%. The low digital opportunity citation rate (17.0%) confirms that awareness of technology as a preservation resource has not independently emerged within the performing community,

underscoring the importance of externally driven documentation initiatives such as this project.

The most emotionally resonant accounts emerged from the transmission crisis theme. A 74-year-old mawaki from Dutse stated:

> *I tried to teach three young men — my son and two others. One left to find work in the city. The second said he had no time after marriage. The third stayed but lacks patience for proper learning. What I carry — the genealogies I can recite, the old songs of the emirs — these will die with me unless someone writes or records them. That is why I agreed to this project. (Mawaki, Dutse, January 2025)*

The institutional neglect finding — cited by 93.6% of participants — was confirmed from the institutional side by a cultural officer from the Kano State History and Culture Bureau:

> *We have a mandate for cultural preservation, but without budget, trained staff, or equipment for field documentation. We rely on researchers like your team to do this. Without you coming, nothing would be recorded. (Cultural Stakeholder, Kano, February 2025)*

4.3 Digital Archive and Linguistic Findings

Figure 4 presents the archive inventory and recording distribution. The full archive comprises 52 audio files, 34 video files, 218 photographs, 89 transcriptions, 89 translations, 67 annotated texts, and complete metadata records. Figure 5 presents the linguistic analysis findings.

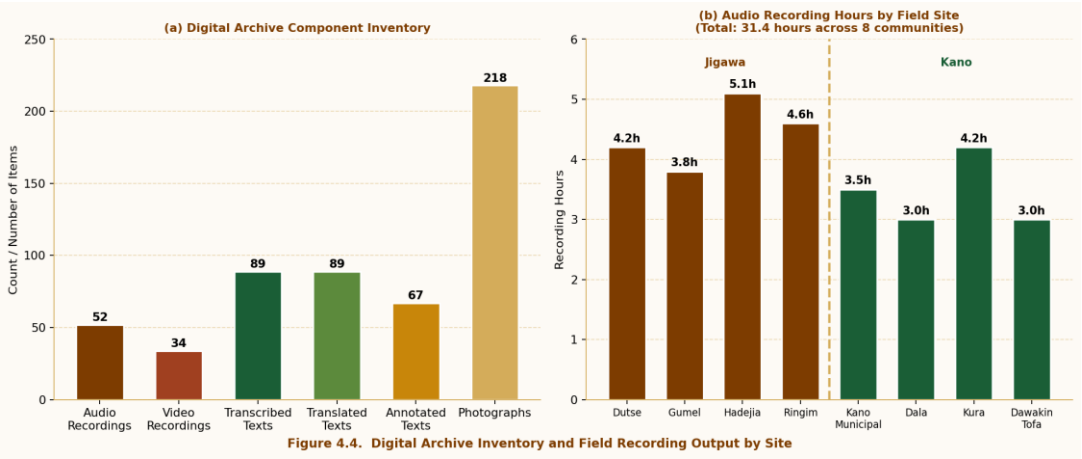


Figure 4. Digital archive inventory and audio recording hours by field site.

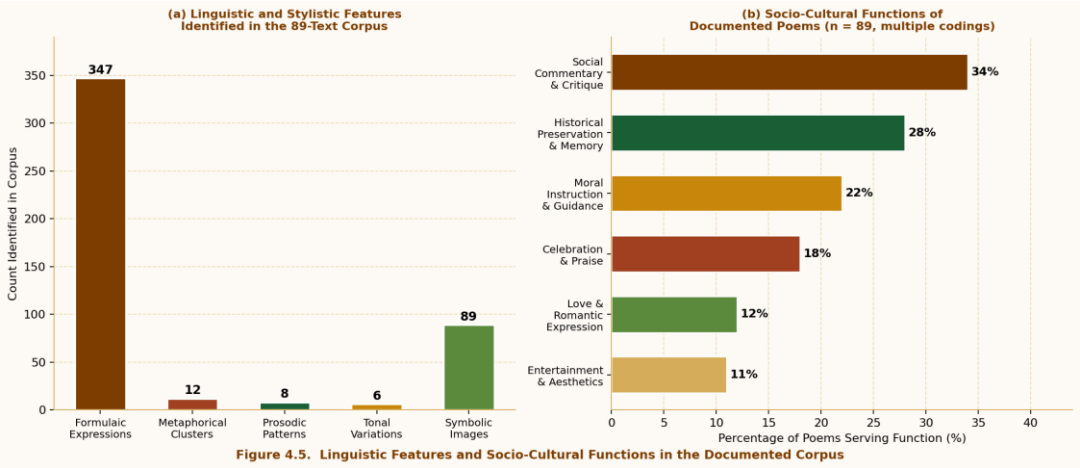


Figure 5. Linguistic features in the corpus and socio-cultural functions of documented poems.

Linguistic analysis of the 89-text corpus identified 347 formulaic expressions (mean 3.9 per text; highest density in waƙar faɗa at 8.2 per text), 12 distinct metaphorical semantic clusters (agricultural, Islamic, kinship, geographic, and water-related domains predominating), 8 prosodic patterns (including 4 previously undocumented patterns described using IPA notation in the archive metadata), and 23 symbolic images not previously attested in the published literature. Table 3 presents the linguistic feature inventory and the socio-cultural function analysis side by side.

Table 3 Linguistic Features and Socio-Cultural Functions: Summary of Corpus Analysis

Dimension	Count / n	Key Findings
Formulaic expressions	347 instances	Avg. 3.9/text; highest in waƙar faɗa (8.2/text); confirms oral-formulaic composition
Metaphorical semantic clusters	12 clusters	Agricultural, Islamic, kinship, geographic domains most prevalent; shared across genres
Prosodic patterns	8 (4 new)	Four patterns not documented in prior literature; described with IPA in archive metadata
Symbolic images	89 instances	23 images not previously attested; flagged for priority analysis in follow-up research
Social commentary (function)	30 texts (33.7%)	Most prevalent primary function across full corpus; cross-genre
Historical preservation (function)	25 texts (28.1%)	Dominant in faɗa and tarihi; performers often the only living source for specific histories
Moral instruction (function)	20 texts (22.5%)	Primary function of wa'azi; embedded in yabo through modelling of exemplary conduct
Celebration / identity affirmation	16 texts (18.0%)	Core function of yabo; performed at ceremonies and communal occasions

Note. Social commentary and critique is the most prevalent primary function across the corpus — a finding that confirms Waƙoƙin Baka's status as a major vehicle of public discourse in Hausa communities, not merely an entertainment or ceremonial tradition.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 The Living Tradition and Its Structural Crisis

The most important interpretive conclusion of this study is one that the data compel but that the prior literature has not stated with sufficient clarity: Waƙoƙin Baka is not a dying tradition in the sense of an aesthetic form whose time has passed and whose practitioners are merely its last representatives. It is a living, adaptive, and socially indispensable tradition whose structural conditions of survival — patronage, apprenticeship, institutional support, and intergenerational transmission — have been severely and perhaps fatally weakened. The distinction matters because it determines the appropriate preservation response. A truly moribund tradition requires only archival documentation; a structurally threatened living tradition requires documentation and active intervention to restore or create new conditions for transmission and performance. The findings of this study clearly support the latter diagnosis.

The evidence for the tradition's continued vitality is present throughout the corpus. The zambo texts — including a witty and devastating satire of a corrupt local official (Archive Text 5, Table 4.6 in the full report) performed to an audience that clearly recognised the target — demonstrate that Waƙoƙin Baka continues to perform its social regulatory function with full community comprehension and engagement. The soyayya texts recorded by younger performers in Kano Municipal show active compositional innovation, integrating contemporary idioms, urban social themes, and electronic instruments while maintaining the prosodic and metaphorical structures characteristic of the genre. And the informal digital recording and distribution practices described by performers in the commercial recording theme (24 participants, 51.1%) reveal a community that is already spontaneously adapting to new technological conditions — recording performances on smartphones and sharing them through WhatsApp groups — without any institutional guidance or support.

5.2 Formulaic Composition and the Living Poetic System

The identification of 347 formulaic expressions across 89 texts — with a genre-specific density peak in waƙar faɗa — provides systematic empirical confirmation of Sa'idu's (2010) argument for the centrality of formulaic composition in Hausa oral poetic practice and extends it with quantitative evidence from a contemporary corpus of a scale not previously assembled. The concentration of formulaic density in waƙar faɗa is not coincidental: this is the genre that places the heaviest demand on the performer's compositional memory, requiring the integration of genealogical data, historical event sequences, battlefield descriptions, and epithets for dozens of named individuals within a rhythmically demanding performance context. Formulaic composition is the cognitive technology that makes this integration possible in real time, and its mastery is precisely what is lost when the apprenticeship system breaks down — a finding that directly connects the linguistic analysis to the transmission crisis theme in the ethnographic data.

The 12 metaphorical semantic clusters identified across the corpus reveal the culturally constitutive dimensions of the Hausa poetic imagination. The agricultural cluster — in which farming, rain, seasons, and harvest function as metaphors for the cycles of patronage, social relationship, and human fortune — is the most pervasive, appearing in 86 of 89 texts across all genres. This ubiquity confirms what Gusau (2008) suggests about the deep embeddedness of Hausa poetic metaphor in the agrarian landscape of Northern Nigeria, but also reveals a potential vulnerability: as urbanisation accelerates and younger audiences in cities grow up

without direct experience of agricultural life, the metaphorical system's communicative power may weaken for precisely the audience that the tradition most needs to reach.

5.3 Implications for Preservation Policy

The findings carry four specific implications for cultural preservation policy. First, the transmission crisis is not uniform: the most endangered sub-tradition is the genealogical recitation tradition of the maroka, where the demographic replacement deficit is most acute and the knowledge most irreplaceable. Policy interventions targeting the maroka lineages — through financial support for identified master practitioners, active recruitment of apprentices, and intensive documentation of the specific historical and genealogical content each practitioner carries — are the most urgent priority. Second, the commercial recording and digital distribution practices already active among younger performers represent an untapped institutional resource: state ministries of culture and universities should partner with these performers to formalise, attribute, and archive their digital distribution networks rather than developing separate preservation infrastructure from scratch. Third, the integration of Waƙoƙin Baka into formal Hausa language and literature curricula at secondary and tertiary levels — possible using the transcribed and translated corpus produced in this study — would simultaneously serve preservation, scholarship, and educational goals, building the audience and performer base for the tradition within the formal education system. Fourth, the low digital opportunity awareness (17.0%) among performers confirms that technology-mediated preservation will not develop organically within the performing community without deliberate outreach, training, and institutional partnership — an observation with direct implications for programme design.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has produced the most comprehensive contemporaneous documentation of Hausa oral poetry across Jigawa and Kano States: 89 poetic texts in a fully transcribed, translated, and partially annotated digital archive, supported by 31.4 hours of audio recordings, 18.7 hours of video, 218 photographs, and 47 interview transcripts. Its scholarly contributions include the first systematic quantitative analysis of formulaic density by genre in Hausa oral poetry, the documentation of 4 previously unrecorded prosodic patterns and 23 previously unattested symbolic images, and the empirical demonstration of the structural severity of the transmission crisis — particularly among maroka practitioners with no identified successors.

The study's central argument — that Waƙoƙin Baka is a structurally threatened living tradition rather than a moribund relic — has implications both for preservation strategy and for scholarly interpretation. Preservation strategies must address not only archival documentation but the structural conditions of the tradition's continued production: patronage, apprenticeship, institutional recognition, and integration into formal education. Scholarly interpretation must account for the tradition's active adaptation — its hybridisation with popular music forms, its appropriation of digital distribution technologies, and its continued performance of essential social functions of commentary, critique, memory, and identity — rather than treating contemporary Waƙoƙin Baka as merely a degraded survival of an authentic past form.

Three directions for further research follow most urgently from the current findings. Extended apprenticeship-documentation studies — in which the transmission process itself is observed and recorded over multiple years alongside the continuing documentation of master performers' repertoires — would provide both empirical evidence on the mechanics of oral

knowledge transmission and practical support for the performers most at risk. A comparative study of urban and rural performance ecology within Northern Nigeria would address the increasingly significant question of how the tradition is adapting differently across the rural-urban continuum. And a participatory archiving project — training young community members as digital archivists — would combine preservation with transmission, using the documentation process itself as a bridge across the generational gap at the heart of the tradition's structural crisis.

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