

## Exploring the Cultural Domain of Hausa Colour Terms

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### Abstract

*The study of colour terms has been an interesting phenomenon in linguistics. The power of colour terms to name and classify things, animals and persons in purely traditional way cannot be over emphasized across cultures. Of course, there are universal tendencies on the nature of colour naming across languages, but such universality does not apply to the socio-cultural aspect of all societies. This was supported Casson (1994, 1997), Downman 92003), Bature (2005), Danladi (2010) and Aujara (2021) who believed that the size of colour vocabulary is certainly a measure of its cultural complexity, the smaller the vocabulary, the simpler the society. Hence, this paper examines the socio-cultural domain of colours terms in Hausa societies. Hausa is a member of Afro- Asiatic family and is estimated to have about 1 billion L1 users according to ethnologue.com. Purposeful Random Sampling and survey method were used, and 160 research subjects were selected from the speakers of Hausa language in Sokoto state to source data for the study. The findings, from 154 respondents, reveal that colour is very significant to Hausa culture as it cut across every aspect of socio-cultural, economic, political and religious angles of a typical Hausa social group. It names and classifies traditional cloths and domestic animals on one hand and describes/classifies people or race on the other. The paper also reveals that colour terms are used in rituals and traditional epithet of Hausa society. Hence, it concludes that colour is an indispensable tool for expressing deep thought, ideas and powerful emotions in purely traditional Hausa way.*

**Keywords:** Socio-cultural, Colour terms, Hausa, cognitive linguistic theory Nigeria

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are several languages spoken across the world, each with its distinct system of colour naming and perception. So, basically colour terms among world speech communities vary accordingly. This could be as a result of the cultural and/or linguistic history of each community. For example in Welsh ‘glas’ represents ‘green’, ‘grey’, ‘blue’ and ‘silver’, while ‘ilyyd’ represents the ‘brown’ and ‘grey’ of English. Hungarian on the other hand has two words for ‘red’; ‘piros’ and ‘vörös’. Navajo has a single word for ‘blue’ and ‘green’ which is ‘grue’. These are colour terms whose distinction could be viewed not only in terms of their referents (meanings) but their socio-cultural status and application (Abdulsalam, 2014). This paper therefore examines the cultural attachment and relevance of colours and the various shades of meaning they convey in the Hausa language. In doing so, we first look at Hausa people and their language, several divergent views of scholars on Hausa colour systems and lastly, provide an over-view of the long-

standing socio-cultural relationship the various colours have in a typical Hausa cultural society.

### **1.1 Hausa People and their Language**

The Hausa people speak the Hausa language and are commonly found all over Nigeria in great number; Northwest. Others are those who occupied Kwantagora, Jos, and Ilorin in little number. In fact, the Hausa people are also found in Asia, Middle East, some parts of Europe, Central and West Africa as the case may be. According to Ethnologue.com, Hausa language is a member of Afro-Asiatic family and is used by about 1 billion L1 speakers. The Hausa people hardly abandon their culture and tradition anywhere they find themselves. The Hausa people are excellent farmers, traders and very popular in rearing stocks such as sheep, goats and fowls (Ahmad and Daura, 2010 and Danladi 2010). Balarabe (2016) on the other hand observes that the Hausa people develop a quality rare in true Hausa natives, a power of command and administrative capacity. They have very unique, rich and beautiful culture. However, as a result of the spread of Islam in the territory, the culture has gradually been subsumed in the religion. The dialects of Hausa are classified according to geographical boundaries and these include: Sakkwatanci, spoken in Sokoto, Zamfaranci in Zamfara, Kabanci in Kebbi, Kananci in Kano, Dauranci in Daura, Zazzaganci in Zazzau, and Gudaranci as well.

### **1.2 Colour Studies across Languages**

Theories about colour have been in existence since the time of Socrates in the fifth century B.C. But it came to the limelight when Aristotle's notion of seven basic colours – with primary hues, related to the four elements – held control through the Renaissance. However, the notable work that sways colour studies in language as well as culture is the famous work of Berlin and Kay (1969) that revealed how the colour terms are actually used by native speakers. Ronald (1957), also in his classical work explored the mythological meanings of colour terms where he claimed that colours have symbolic meanings that go beyond their literal description of objects. For example, he wrote about the cultural significance of "white" in French society, arguing that it was associated with purity, innocence, and goodness, and that these meanings are deeply rooted into the people's culture and beliefs.

The study of Berlin and Kay (1969) was a pioneer theory of colour terms studies where they surveyed one hundred and ten (110) languages using arrays of Munsell Colour Chips (a broad-scale inventory of colour perceived by the eyes that exist in the natural world) and report that the similarities and differences among languages in respect of the way in which they divide up colour spectrum are not as arbitrary as they had once been thought to be. They further emphasize on the importance of focal

meaning of a term, rather than its peripheral meaning.

Berlin and Kay (1969) further propose that the basic colour terms in a culture, such as black, brown, or red are predictable by the number of colour terms it has. According to them all cultures have terms for black/dark and white/bright. If a culture has three colour terms, the third is red. If it has four, it has others as yellow or green. Thus, they conclude that all languages appear to have between 2 and 11 basic colour terms. Lucy (1997) observes that the Berlin and Kay hypothesis aroused some controversies. First, is the universal and non-universal substructure in the vocabulary of colour and second, is on the saliency of some colour-foci and their universality.

Downman (2003) while supporting Berlin & Kay theory, remarks that “the size of colour vocabulary is certainly a measure of cultural complexity, the smaller the colour vocabulary, the simpler the society.” On the same vein, Abdulsalam (2009) reports that the smaller the colour terms of a society, the older and more sophisticated their culture. This is because richness of any language in terms of vocabulary depends on the nature of its cultural norms and values. These striking differences between colour terms of various languages prompted many researchers to conclude that each language has unique system in totally arbitrary way.

At this juncture, Casson (1994, 1997), on the evolution of Elaborate Colour Terms (ECT) in English, convincingly demonstrates that the language changed from a language that focused on lightness aspects to a hue-focused language especially in the Middle English period. He concludes that culture members, responding to increases in societal complexity and diversity, restructure their systems of colour categorization by differentiating new concepts and innovating new vocabulary. The colour shift from brightness to hue in the evolution of English Basic Colour Terms can be seen as a response to an increasingly complex colour world in the Middle English period (1150-1500). The development of secondary colour terms, beginning in the late medieval period (1350-1500) can also be attributed to this increasingly diverse array of culturally significant colours. The response of culture members to these changes was, according to Casson, cognitive refocusing.

However, Valera, Thompson and Rosch (1991) have earlier observe that colour categorization in its entirety depends upon a tangled hierarchy of perceptual and cognitive processes, some species specific and others culture specific which Casson (1994, 1997) did not aligned to. Colour categories therefore are not to be found in some pre given world that is independent of our perceptual and cognitive capacities. For example, the categories red, green, yellow, blue, purple, orange as well as light/warm, dark/cool, yellow-with-green, etc. are experiential, consensual, and embodied: they depend on our biological and cultural history of structural coupling. Casson (1994, 1997).

Colour terms in Hausa societies are capable of giving semantic interpretation and wide range of usages across socio-economic, religious and cultural aspects. It is an indivisible tool that keeps some historical diffusion of the societal norms and values together for a very long time and transmits them from one generation to another within a solidified entity of Hausa community. Studies of Colour terms in West African languages such as Hausa had been carried out by various scholars such as Zarru (1978), Bature (2005), Danladi (2012) and Aujara (2021).

Of course, millions of colours exist in the world, but no language is able to give name to all of them. Danladi (2012) reaffirms this claim when he observed that colour naming is tie to how complex is the societal cultural norms and values. The more sophisticated is the relationship between the culture and the colours, the more viable for those different colours to be named. He therefore concludes that a society gives name to colours that are captured only within the space limit of its culture.

Zarru (1978) on the other hand conducted a study on Hausa colour terms and revealed that colours are rarely used to visualize or romanticize sceneries, imaginations, or objects, purely on aesthetic and sentimental grounds. So, he concluded that the domain of most frequent colour application seem to revolve around the classification of cultural items of the most intimate historical relationship with the Hausa society. In particular, Zarru orders Hausa colour terms according to their importance as reported by Bature (2005) in the following.

jáa, bá}ii, fárii, shúu}í and kóorée = red, black, white, blue and green bá}í í

It should be noted that Zarru's classification and ordering of the above colour terms is judged purely on the basis of frequency of verbal usage he noted among his informants.

Bature (2005) thus argued that the universal hierarchy of colour terms proposed by Berlin and Kay (1969) is violated in Hausa and also Zarru's order of Hausa colour terms for ranking 'red' higher than 'black' and 'white' is not in conformity with the

Hausa basic colour hierarchy. He therefore, proposed a revised version that accommodates Hausa and other similar languages as below:

- black & white < red < green, yellow & blue < brown < purple, pink orange & grey

Bature (2005) further revealed that light green (algashi), yellow (raawayaa) and scarlet (jaawa) are not included in the Hausa basic colour terms simply because the meaning of light green for example is included in the meaning of green, while for yellow there is an entity by that name (i.e. a shrub powder used for dying, rawaya and minjiryaa) and lastly scarlet is derived from red colour. Based on these arguments, he concludes that a basic colour in Hausa must conform to the following criteria:

- i. they should be terms used with a single (monolexemic) lexical item or morpheme (i.e. excluding yellow 'ruwan dorawa -water of rawaya' or maakubaa),

- ii. they need to be in common use (e.g. excluding deep yellow ‘zabiibi’ or bright yellow ‘zarnihii’), applied to many objects (e.g. excluding Cambridge blue dye ‘usually for leather’),
- iii. they must be salient, that is universally shared and referentially stable across informants/speakers,
- iv. they must not be contained within another colour (e.g. excluding scarlet ‘jaawaa’ or light green ‘algashii’).
- v. And finally, they must refer to an abstract name of colour and not denote any entity in the language (e.g. chrome yellow ‘raawayaa’ is excluded)

However, both Zarru (1978) and Bature (2005) emphasized that colour forms the basis of naming and classifying such things as domestic animals, clothes, items in traditional occupations and so on.

Just like Zarru (1978) and Bature (2005), Aujara (2021) also conducted a study on colour terms in Hausa language on the title *Exploring meaning of Colour Terms in Hausa Language*. He used Berlin and Kay (1969) model of colour terms study as applied by both Zarru (1978) and Bature (2005) in their respective studies on colour terms. Aujara however, went beyond evolution of basic colour terms and their hierarchy to the various shades of meaning both basic and non-basic colour terms enjoy in Hausa language as well as how the Hausa culture influenced them to name and classify things, animals and persons in purely traditional ways. Aujara (2021) did not indicate the methods he used in data collection and data analysis. Nevertheless, he followed the pattern of Zarru (1978) in data presentation and analysis. As part of his findings, Aujara revealed that Hausa language has both basic and non-basic colour terms which have the same status with the English ones used by Berlin and Kay (1969). According to the findings of the study, some colour terms in Hausa are adopted from English with little modifications, such as: ‘yalo’ for ‘yellow’, ‘ash’ for the English ‘ash’, ‘faful’ for ‘purple’ and ‘burawun’ for ‘brown’.

The study also revealed that there are modernized colour terms in Hausa whose names were influenced by civilization. Similarly, the study discovered that there are some colour terms that name and classify persons, animals, things generally. Aujara concluded that every society has its unique way of colour naming and assigning literal as well as contextual meaning of the colour terms.

## 2 METHODS

This paper employs mixed design (qualitative and quantitative) to explore the cultural domain of colour terms in Hausa society. In doing this, questionnaire and interview techniques were used as instruments to collect data from 160 speakers of Hausa across Kofar Taramniya, Marinar Tsamiya, Bazza, Majemar Korino, Kanwuri, Atiku and Ruggar woru areas of Sokoto state. Stratified Random Sampling was used in the selection

of the informants. However, 144 questionnaire respondents were able to accurately complete and return the questionnaires. As such, only that number (144) was used in the analysis of the questionnaire respondents. Similarly, 10 people were interviewed on the place of colour terms in Hausa culture and the analysis was done on both instruments.

### **3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical frameworks used in this paper are the cognitive linguistic theory and The Whorfian hypothesis. The hypothesis, according to Kay and Kempton (1988), claims that the language a person speaks (independent of the culture in which it resides) affects the way he thinks. In other words, the structure of the language determines the way in which speakers of that language view the world. The theory consists of two associated principles. The first is 'linguistic determinism', which claims that "our thinking is determined by language" and the second principle is the 'linguistic relativity' which is of the opinion that "people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently." In fact, the Whorfian hypothesis maintains that the world is differently experienced and conceived in different language communities. Thus, the arguments for this theory were summarized by Olaoye (2007) as reported in (Butari 2010):

- That language may influence or determines our thought since concepts are formed only through language.
- That the more expose and competent a speaker is the better his reasoning faculty.
- That language allows us to categorize things, ideas or objects accordingly.
- That language may not have term for an item/object that does not exist in its culture.
- That language is a vehicle for cultural expression and transmission.
- that there are language universals and cross-cultural world experience which we share irrespective of the language we speak.
- that language does not rigidly determine thought.
- that speakers of the same language do not always share the same culture.
- that speakers of a particular language may have a very fair understanding of others even though they may not have the same picture of the world.
- that colour and other grammatical categories are cross-linguistic phenomena.

Generally the theory is in line with the earlier work of Ronald (1957) which revealed the underlying principle of mythological description of colour terms which symbolise diverse cultural beliefs.

### **4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study uses a mixed design to specifically triangulate its findings. The data for this paper was collected from the speakers of Hausa language in Sokoto state, one of the Northwest states of Nigeria. The study reveals that the culture of Hausa societies is

interestingly remarkable, and it covers virtually all precepts of human life. The socio-cultural setting of Hausa society was greatly influenced by Islam -the religion with large number of followers in the area. Despite this, there are some Hausa speakers with perceptible attachment to traditional religion. This category of Hausa speakers has been succinctly associating their lives to the socio-cultural patterns of the society. In terms of usages of Hausa colour terms, it is generally believed that some colours/colour terms are said to have been commonly used than the others because of their aged long historical relationship with the profession, religion and culture of the society. Nevertheless, the findings of this study have confirmed the earlier claim of Zarru (1978) and Bature (2005) that the domain of most frequent colour application seems to revolve around the classification of cultural items of most intimate historical relationship with the Hausa society. Hence, colour naming, perception and usages are enshrined in the socio-cultural patterns of Hausa society. Colours in Hausa language form the basis of naming and classifying such things as domestic animals, clothes, items in traditional occupations.

#### 4.1 Naming and Classifying Domestic Animals

Hausa culture has unique way of using colour terms to name and to classify animals in traditional sense. For example, ‘kìlì’ and ‘ákáwál’ are meant for any white and black horse respectively. Thus, in traditional Hausa society ‘kìlì’ takes the following combination:

##### **Hausa**

1. kílì kányà
2. kílì kwái

##### **glossary**

- an albino horse  
dark grey horse

While ‘ákáwál’ on the other hand is a generic term for all black horse and can be said to include the following:

##### **Hausa**

3. Kíyará
4. Cíccíró
5. Dándá cíccíró

##### **glossary**

- shiny black horse  
dull black horse  
black horse with five white dots

Other colour names for horses include:

##### **Hausa**

6. Húrdè
7. Héjì
8. Bìkìlì
9. Gúnyá
10. Bífí

##### **glossary**

- dappled grey horse  
red horse  
a beige horse  
a cream horse  
a dark grey horse

The above colour scheme was evenly represented by a famous Hausa musician ‘NarambaJa’ in one of his songs ‘Dokin iska Danhilinge’.

Similarly, the nomenclature of most domestic animals can be said to hinge mainly on the colour of their coats. This kind of nomenclature is found to be one of the richest colour schemes in Hausa culture. For examples:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>glossary</b>
11. Jákó	red goat
12. {yállà	dark red goat
13. Sáiwà	light brown goat with a few white dots
14. Gítsáwà	red goat with white irregular patches
15. Góhò	ash coloured donkey
16. Ján gòrà/ áuràkì	brown coloured donkey
17. ákázá	creame coloured donkey
18. ásáwàkì/ ásúwà	red donkey
19. Jaátàù	red dog
20. Dúnà	black dog
21. Dúrwà	dark grey roan dog
22. Báre	red and white skewbald dog
23. Gúdálè	pure Sokoto white bull
24. Jánáarè	red cow
25. Fólámà	an albino hen
26. Tsáwárwàrà	a leopard coloured cat

Garba Maitandu has presented a marvelous classification of donkeys using the colour of their skin in one of his songs ‘Sarkin duddular Kaya’.

## 4.2 Colour Terms for Clothes

‘Fárí’ and ‘Sá}ì’ in Hausa culture refer to all white and coloured clothes respectively that are woven in the traditional African looms. For example:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>glossary</b>
27. Lúré	white material with some black strips
28. Gwádò	white blanket
29. Sákálà	heavier and more decorated white blanket

While for ‘sa}i’ coloured material, the following are used:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>glossary</b>
30. Gámbarà	cloth with red-white, black-white alternate strips
31. Tsámíyà	greenish-grey cloth with white strips
32. Dúnhù	very black cloth

The above classification and naming of domestic animals and clothing material using colour has been a source of inspiration to account for interface of Hausa language and its culture.

## 4.3 Colour Terms for Describing or Classifying People or Race



Furthermore in Hausa culture, colour of the skin (body) of individual is the major means of classifying human race or describing complexion. Thus, the human race among Hausa societies is divided into two, and these are:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>glossary</b>
33. Bá}ár fátà (hwátà) (black skin)	black race
34. jár/fárár (hwárár) fátà (hwátà) (red/white skin)	white race

In a typical Hausa society, colour is used to describe complexion of individual as below:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>glossary</b>
35. ákawáli (m)	very dark complexion male person
36. ákawálà (m)	very dark complexion female person
37. dán bá}i (m) (son of black)	dark complexion male person
38. yár bá}à (f) (daughter of black)	dark complexion female person
39. dán fàrí (m) (son of white)	light complexion male person
40. yár fàrà (f) (daughter of white)	light complexion female child
41. wánkàn dárzà (bath of darza)	very high complexion
42. wánkàn tárwàdà (bath of a kind of fish)	medium complexion

**Note:** ‘tárwàdà’ is a species of fish and both 41 and 42 are generic terms used to name both genders.

#### 4.4 Colour Terms in the Customs, Traditions and Rituals of Hausa Society

It is pertinent to mention here that colour is used symbolically in the domain of customs and rituals in Hausa society. For example ‘bori’ cult in Hausa culture is associated with bá}i (black), fàrí/hwàrí (white) and já (red) colours. Black and white colours are commonly used for rituals and other ‘bori’ activities where they dress in black and white cloths to embark on serious meditation with the various evil spirits they relate with. For example:

43. Black he-goat or bull for war or hunting rites.
44. Black fowl for the spirit ‘álfándà’.

Bá}í (black) also symbolizes either danger, terror, prowess or treachery, weakness and loss in traditional Hausa society. It could also be associated with grief and evil as attested to by 90% of the respondents in the following:

<b>Hausa</b>	<b>gloss</b>
45. Bá}í dódón kárfè	The black, the terror of iron
46. Dúnhù báwàn sàrà	The invulnerable to cuts and thrusts, the terror.
47. Dúná ~álérì	The darkish black, the terrible
48. Bá}ín ~érà/kúsù	A traitor or informant
49. Bá}ín kái	dull person

50. Ba}ar zúcíyà hot temper  
 51. Ba}ar àníyà bad intention  
 52. Bá}ín cíkì sadness

However, bá}í (black), in traditional Hausa society, does not always connote negativism as in the example 53 below:

53. Kabiru bá}ín Dan Izala na. Kabiru is a die heart member of Izala sect.

In this example, ‘black’ implies positivity which qualifies the level of Kabiru’s allegiance to Izala sect.

Similarly, ‘fari/hwari’ (white) is used in Hausa Idiomatic expressions to depict optimism and happiness on one hand and blemish or weakness on the other. Consider the following examples:

Hausa	glossary
54. fárín/hwárín cíkì (white stomach)	happiness
55. fárín/hwárín gà mó (white meeting)	good luck
56. fárín/hwárín bísò (white arrival)	good news
57. fárín/hwárín jíní (white blood)	popularity
58. Farar/hwarar káfá/sáu (white leg)	unlucky
59. fárín/hwárín ~érà/kúsù (white rat) traitor	scandal monger or
60. fárín/hwárín kómó (white un-matured calabash)	weak person

Items no. 56 to 57 depicts optimism and happiness while 58 to 60 expresses blemish or weakness.

Já (red) symbolizes strength and bravery and perseverance in Hausa society as presented below:

61. Ján gwárzó the brave warrior  
 62. Ján zàkì the dountles man  
 63. Ján námjì the real man  
 64. Ján hàlì great endurance  
 65. Ján zúcíyà bravery and perseverance  
 66. Ján }ó}àrì exerted effort

However, in personal epithets of ‘yan tauri’ (dauntless persons who cannot be piers or cut by sharp iron) which is one of the cultural display of Hausa society, ‘Já’ (red) and ‘Bá}í’ (black) are the dominant colours that are use to depict danger, terror, prowess, treachery, weakness and loss especially in traditional Hausa epithet. The examples 67 – 70 were recorded at a Sallah festival where ‘yan tauri’ showcased their talents in 2019.

67. Ni na **Ján gwarzo** (red warrior) na sarkin yai. Na zubda dubu sauran ko sunyi biyayya.

I am the great/brave warrior of Sarkin ya}i, I killed thousands and others remained loyal.

(gloss)

68. Sai ni **Ján zaki** (red lion) mai sa maza sumali.

Except me the dauntless that make men to ponder. (gloss)

69. Ni na **bá}i dódón }árhè** (the black, the evil of iron).

I am the black one, the terror of iron. (gloss).

70. Sai ni **dúná ~álérì dúnhù** báwàn sárà (the black, the terrible and the daunting)

Except me the black terror who is invulnerable to cut and thrust. (gloss)

#### 4.5 Mythological Implications of Colour Terms in Hausa

In Hausa mythological beliefs, colours convey themes different from what they originally described. Of course, the meaning goes beyond the literal description of objects. For example, from items 45 to 70 above, it could be seen that three basic colour terms 'ba}i' (black), 'fari' or 'hwari' (white) and 'ja' (red) provided symbolic meanings which are different from the ordinary description of objects. In fact, it is crystal clear that two colour terms 'ba}i' (black) and 'ja' (red) have negative connotations and are believed to have originated from the Hausa cultural beliefs. Hence, this confirmed Ronald's (1957) claim of colours having symbolic meanings that are deeply rooted into the people's culture and beliefs.

### 5 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, language and culture are two inseparable terms while each depends on the other. Language is needed to explain culture visa-visa culture enriches language. From the above discussion, it can be concluded that colour terms are virtually enshrined in the culture of Hausa society as culture encompasses the whole way of life of people. In fact, colour is an indispensable tool for expressing fame, deep thought and emotion in traditional Hausa society as the foregone discussion showed. Hence all languages use colour terms in one form or the other, but the division of colour space may be very much dependent upon a combination of environmental and cultural factors which are cognitively perceived and believed to have linguistic consequences on colour vocabularies and perception.

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