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# Tooth Dyeing Tradition among the Kanuri Speaking People of Borno, Nigeria

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## Abstract

By now, there is much research on almost every aspect of Kanuri speaking people of Borno. Unfortunately enough, no attempt has been made, so far, to document the tooth dyeing tradition among them leaving a wide gap begging for a research. This paper therefore is an attempt to fill this lacunae by discussing the ingredients, techniques and significance of tooth dyeing among Kanuri speaking people of Borno. To achieve its goals, this study adopts a multi-disciplinary approach: a historical framework and an ethnographic framework. The paper argues that the tooth dyeing tradition has been one of the long beautiful cultural aspects of not only the Kanuris but also other people around the world. But for the Kanuris, it is used in natural ways for maturity, beauty, civilization and medical purposes such as prevention of mouth odour.

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## 1.1 Introduction

Nigeria, as one of the largest countries in Africa, has a very rich culture and tradition. It has a population of about 212, 949, 088 people belonging to 250 different ethnic groups which implies a large diversity in culture and tradition. The major ethnic groups are the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Tiv, Nupe etc. Each ethnic group has its own language, culture, custom and tradition due to geographical factors. Kanuri, which is the subject of our study, had an advanced culture and tradition. One of such traditions is tooth dyeing which is only practiced by the Kanuri for centuries. The tooth dyeing, blackening, lacquering or coloring one's tooth as a symbol of either maturity, beauty, civilization or medical purposes such as prevention of mouth odour is a long tradition among the Kanuri speaking people of Borno. But obviously, the story of tooth dyeing in Borno is almost virgin land to which scholars do not appear to have directed attention, however, slightly. Even though the ancient city has attracted a good number of works from historians and anthropologists, hardly has any one of such writers considered it worthwhile to cast even a cursory glance at tooth dyeing tradition among the Kanuris in the city. For instance, Bukar et al (2004) in their medical research on tooth dyeing in Borno in which they revealed "Three hundred and one (60.8%) of the respondents stain their tooth with flowers of *Solanum incanum* or *Nicotania tabacum*," Bukar et al (2004) did not draw the attention of anthropologists and cultural historians to trace the history of tooth dyeing in Borno.

Even Brenner and Cohen, authorities on Borno anthropology, have not treated this subject, beyond mentioning tooth dyeing tradition here and there in some of their works. This observation is not however meant to put any slur on the splendid and meritorious works of Brenner and Cohen. Rather, it is aimed at drawing attention to the dearth of written records on the tooth dyeing in Borno. The only source we can count on for that history today seems to be the oral tradition collected from old Kanuri people of Borno. Consequently, this paper depends



largely on the result of our research tours conducted in October, 2021 in different parts of Borno for the purpose of studying tooth dyeing in the polity.

In the light of the above, therefore, this paper examines tooth dyeing tradition among Kanuri speaking people of Borno and its place in Nigeria's culture and tradition. In attempting this, the study focuses its attention on the ingredients and techniques of tooth dyeing and shows that this long existing tradition that had been carried out in natural ways has not been diluted by the foreign influences. Secondly, this paper is of the view that tooth dyeing tradition constitutes an important aspect of Kanuri speaking people of Borno. As would be expected, the ingredients, techniques and significance of tooth dyeing also differs from place to place.

## 1.2 Cultural Context

Historians tell us that the Kanuri refer to the principal people of Borno who are considered to be a mixture of Arab and Negro communities established in the area for many centuries and they can still be found east of the Chad Republic, an area which covers the greater part of the Kanem-Borno Empire. Now, it is widely spoken across Borno, Yobe and Jigawa States in present day Nigeria as well as in large parts of Niger, Cameroun and Chad Republic. Alkali, an authority on Kanuri history, states that Kanuri refers to a language, the people who speak the language Alkali (1987). He also affirms that the many branches such as Manga, Mobar and Bodawai are the major groups that formed the Kanuri language and the Kanuri speak any of its major dialects Alkali (1987).

The Kanuri were said to have established the famous Kanem-Borno Empire whose dynasty is reputed to be one of the longest in world history, flourished for nearly 1000 years. This old empire, founded by the *Kanuris*, originated from the north of Lake Chad between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also flourished to the East and West of Lake Chad under the Sayfawa from 11<sup>th</sup> century to late 14<sup>th</sup> century and later the El-Kanem dynasty from 19<sup>th</sup> century to the closing decade of the century,

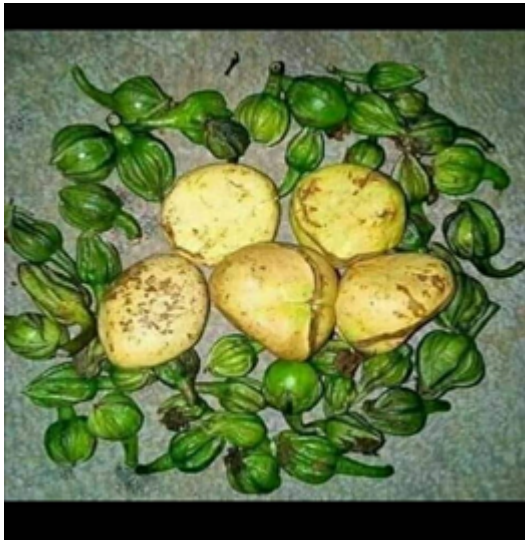


and was restored by the colonialists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hiribarren (2019).

Its history demonstrates that the empire has a very long and powerful civilization and culture that cannot be dispensed with by any other force civilization or culture (Although much of the social organization of the Kanuri's has been influenced by Islam). The survival and continuity of tooth dyeing tradition among the Kanuri up to this period attest to that. Even though the tooth dyeing tradition in Borno is not well documented, traditions relate that this tradition is as old as the Kanuri people.

### **1.3 Techniques of tooth dyeing among the Kanuri of Borno**

Tooth dyeing can be complex depending on the region and the cultural background comes from, despite the fact that the processes and the procedure differs from one traditional group to another. It is not peculiar to Kanuri alone but there are some ethnic groups that practice tooth dyeing around the globe especially Asia, South America, Middle east and other part of the world. The process of the tooth dyeing in Kanuri tradition is clear and straight done in natural scheme of things like plants that is naturally grow within the local communities which is not harmful to oral cavity base on the indigenous observation and oral tradition. Therefore, some of the ingredient used in dyeing the tooth are wet fresh fruit that belong to the family of garden egg called “gorongo” scientific name *solanum macrocarpin* or “Fele” flowers of *nicotiana tabacum*, these are the two prominent ingredients are used in dyeing tooth either to black or red in the society.



Hence, others chew “kola nut” *cola nitida* in order to accommodate and make it look attractive during the application. Indeed, based on the available literature consulted, there are some rare species of plant that have been used for dyeing tooth black in other nations which are unknown to the Kanuri traditional society. Ehringhaus (1997) expressed that there are multiple species plants in use for tooth blackening, some practitioners expressed. For example, the *Cashinahua* designated *Piper pellitum* and *nixpu kuin*, the “true tooth blackener.” As one of the rarer species in their habitat. These dyeing is done by the woman in Kanuri tradition without assistance and is not difficult, rather it is done in a very good mood.

Thomas & Brian (2013) further observed that the chewing, sometimes aided by rubbing the tooth, was the foremost method of extracting and simultaneously applying the dye from a variety of fresh plant materials, such as the leaves and their petioles, stems and young shoots as well as fruits. Furthermore, tooth dyeing was almost applied by individuals to their own teeth. Some of the ingredients that people use is potassium but mainly for men because they use dry flowers of *nicotiana tabacum* and chew it without swallowing saliva. This practice is being revived by the young and old men generations of today more especially among the Kanuri. It is a long cultural practice about to die out but it was revived in recent years.



## 1.4 Significance of tooth dyeing

Cultural historians and anthropologists cannot but agree that teeth undergo modifications from human actions for so many reasons like other essential parts of the human body, which can be used as a form of identification, beautification, prevention of mouth odor, maturity and civilizations. According to Thomas & Analyn (2009) with the view that human teeth are an alternative, though far less obvious canvas than skin, the difference can be inscribed and read as a way of defining individual identity and cultural differences. Indeed, coloration of teeth to black is a long cultural practice among the Kanuri people which is a popular tradition that is still being practiced by the women in the society. In some societies both male and female dye their teeth for so many reasons but in the case of Kanuri it is restricted to females only. However, people embrace significantly staining their teeth in the society and are excited towards those traditions and eager to sustain the next generation to benefit. The locals expressed vacuously that dyeing of teeth provided many benefits for protecting and strengthening people's teeth. According to Valenzuela (2005) opined that in some communities this was reflected in the frequent and informal chewing of the respective plants to maintain the black colour.

Based on western observation people deliberately embrace tooth staining for many reasons, one of the most prominent functional explanations and, for example, thought it was plausible that its primary benefit was to prevent bad breath Niclutsch (1781). It depends on the perception and belief of the people and some societies in a belief that tooth dyeing among the women increases sexual seduction and reproduction. For instance, people of Amazonia according to Gow (1989) asserts that the corporeal idiom derived its significance in Amazonia particularly from the predatory, consuming, and sexually reproductive. However, these days, women without dyed or modified teeth are not recognized as complete women in the Kanuri traditional society because of the outstanding value and unprecedented aesthetic presentation. Men prepare to marry who have beautified or dyed her tooth to black



or red because without it, they considered her uncivilized or not beautiful enough, it is a sign of attraction and social class which can easily be identified. There is a mythology regarding the tooth blackening in South American tribes that when a woman displays her tooth through lips opening that sends a signal to young men to date her. For instance, among *Miraña* tooth blackening apparently played the most important role for adolescent girls around the time of their first menstruation La Rotta Cuellar (1987). Looking at the male and female connections, it is possible that the female dyed tooth symbolically related to male regenerations of sexual feelings.

The tooth modification culture has been preserved for the present generation especially during festivals, events and ceremonies such practices are common among the Kanuri women with colorful attires, beautiful hairdos and dyed teeth come out to dance. Morga (1609) further states that people are very careful of their teeth, which from an early age they file and render even, with different ingredients. They dye them a black color, which is lasting and preserve them. This tradition still been in existence in Kanuri society but this time is among the older generation of women and some few young ladies due to the fact that the processes and procedure are drastically declining and the tradition are in set of threat of transformations as a result of modernity and other external forces that penetrated into the society. Smyth & Lowe (1836) with the opinion that in Amazonia both sexes stain the tooth black with a plant called "*Yanamuco*," which they say prevents them from tooth decay.

## 1.5 Conclusion

From the discussion of this study, it is concluded that Kanuri, like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria for centuries, had possessed an advanced and rich culture. Indeed, this paper has shown that tooth dyeing is a long tradition practiced among the Kanuri of Borno to enhance beauty and for aesthetic, religious or ceremonial purposes. It is accomplished in a very simple and natural way and the ingredients are available in the area, with the exception of kola nut which is imported from the





southern part of the country. Interestingly, this tradition has been preserved until today and it is still being considered the symbol of maturity, beauty and civilization.



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3	Alhaji Bukar Ibrahim Kawuri	52	Maiduguri	10th October, 2021
4	Ya Zariya Babagana Modu	73	Maiduguri	13 <sup>th</sup> October, 2021
5	Hajiya Bintu Musa	76	Maiduguri	20 <sup>th</sup> October, 2021
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Usman Al-amin, Ph.D. is a lecturer in the Department of History, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. His main fields of research include Islamic history, Sufism and manuscript cultures in the context of Nigerian social and intellectual history, in particular, the formative period up to the 20th century, and the historiography of Islamic sects in modern and contemporary Nigeria. He recently developed interest in the cultural history of Kanuri. He has published extensively in journals, and presented so many academic papers in local and international conferences. In addition, he has been invited to research, write papers, and make presentations for several government functions and civil society fora. His recent researches include:

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