



# MAPPING HERITAGE LANGUAGE USE IN THE OXFORD ROAD COMMUNITY

Eva Karanja, Holly Joseph, Naomi Flynn and Alice Mpofu-Coles

University of Reading, June 2024







## 2. Community Engagement:

- Meeting places: Apart from the ORC Hub, Arabic speakers meet at places like the Refugee Support Group, the Atrium café, and the Abbey church in other locations of Reading. These locations provide opportunities for social interaction and support
- Informal translation: In many cases, translation services are not professional, and individuals rely on friends or community members for help.

## 3. Cultural Events and Celebrations:

- Need for more events: Participants express a desire for more cultural events to bring the community together. They note that in larger cities like Birmingham or London, it's easier to find Arabic speakers and cultural activities, whereas, in their current location, these opportunities are limited
- Current celebrations: The hub hosts some celebrations, such as for Eid, but participants feel these could be expanded and improved to better serve the community. There are additional celebrations back in their home countries; participants celebrate various events such as Independence Day, the Islamic New Year, and the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. They suggest incorporating similar celebrations to enhance community bonding.

## 4. Challenges:

- Limited professional support: While there are some translation services, the lack of professional translators can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in communication.
- Cultural integration: The participants note the challenge of integrating into a new culture while maintaining their own. They highlight the need for more structured support and cultural events to aid in this transition.

## 5. Common Phrases and Language Similarities:

- Language learning: Participants mention that learning basic English phrases like "thank you" and "please" is essential for daily interactions. They also note some similarities between Arabic and other languages, such as Swahili, which helps in understanding and communication.

## Summary

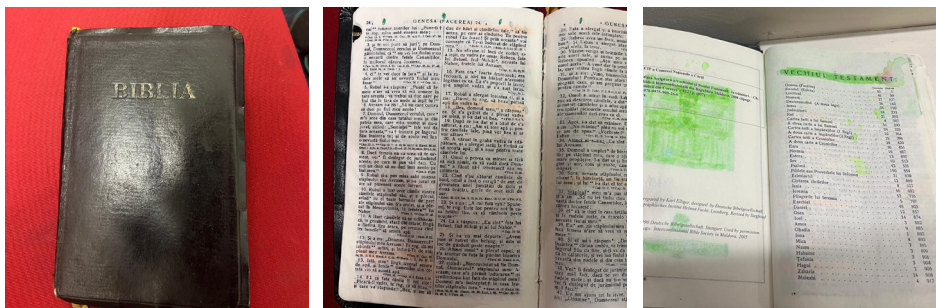
The Arabic-speaking community in the ORC Hub benefits greatly from translation services, which are essential for accessing information and services in the UK. However, there is a clear need for more cultural events and professional support to better integrate and support the community. Participants value their cultural heritage and express a desire to celebrate more of their traditional events, which would help to strengthen community bonds and provide a sense of belonging.



## Romanian Church interview

### Observations

The Romanian church is set up so that the chairs face the pulpit, and large speakers are set up as they await the congregants. The children are enthusiastic and listen to the interview. The participant explains how the service is organised. At certain times, the children translate my questions to him in Romanian. As we finish the interview, the church service is just starting, and the congregation is arriving. The children are happy to see their friends and take their seats as they begin to sing songs in Romanian. Bibles are printed in Romanian and one of the girls is very happy to show me them.



Pictures of Bible used

The interview with participants from the Romanian church reveals key themes related to language use, community engagement, and cultural preservation:

### 1. Language Use

- Primary Language: The church services are primarily conducted in Romanian to cater to the predominantly Romanian-speaking congregation.
- Bilingual Interaction: English is also used, especially with children and when interacting with non-Romanian speakers. Translation services are provided when necessary to ensure inclusivity.

### 2. Cultural Identity and Preservation:

- Connection to Home: Using the Romanian language in church helps the community maintain a strong connection to their cultural and religious roots. This is particularly important for older generations and new immigrants.
- Religious Texts: The church uses Bibles written in Romanian, reinforcing cultural and religious ties.

### 3. Community Engagement:

- The church has a small congregation of about 20-25 regular attendees. Despite the small size, the church plays a significant role in the community by providing a space for spiritual and social interaction.
- Outreach methods: The church uses Facebook and word-of-mouth to inform the community about its activities, helping to bring together Romanians living in Reading.



#### 4. Challenges:

- Low attendance: Despite a significant Romanian population in the area, the church faces challenges with low attendance. This could be due to various personal or logistical factors.
- Heritage language retention in children: Maintaining the Romanian language among children is challenging as they are more exposed to English through school and social interactions. The church encourages the use of Romanian at home and during church services to address this issue.

#### 5. Religious Practices and Beliefs:

- Religion: The community has a deep connection to their faith, which is a central part of their cultural identity.
- Spiritual guidance: The church provides not only a place for worship but also spiritual guidance and support, highlighted by the involvement of church leaders in praying for and with their congregation.

### Summary

The Romanian church in Reading serves as a vital institution for preserving the Romanian language and culture. It offers a space for community members to engage in religious practices, maintain their cultural identity, and support each other in a foreign environment. Despite challenges such as low attendance and language retention among children, the church remains a cornerstone of the Romanian community, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural continuity.





### 3. Cultural Preservation:

- Faith and education: As a Muslim community, they incorporate Quran classes into their programs. These classes are conducted in Swahili, making the religious teachings more accessible to children while also helping them learn the language.
- Identity and roots: The group places a strong emphasis on helping children understand their cultural roots. They believe it is essential for children to know where they come from and to be able to communicate with people from their heritage.

### 4. Challenges:

- Parental attitudes: Some parents believe that speaking only English is a sign of intelligence, leading them to discourage the use of Swahili at home. This presents a challenge in maintaining the language within the community.
- Sibling communication: When siblings interact, they often use English instead of Swahili, further contributing to the decline of the language among younger generations.
- Language loss among children: A significant challenge is the loss of Swahili among children who are more exposed to English through school and social interactions. The community group aims to counteract this by encouraging the use of Swahili in their programs and at home.

### 5. Educational Practices:

- Quran classes in Swahili: The choice to conduct Quran classes in Swahili, despite the Quran being originally in Arabic, is based on the desire to preserve and teach Swahili language to the young like it is done in East Africa.
- Madrasa: The community group explains the concept of madrasa, which in Arabic means school, and it encompasses both religious and secular education. This holistic approach ensures that children receive a well-rounded education.

### 6. Integration and Support:

- Funeral services: The community provides support for members during funerals, demonstrating the communal care and support that exists within the group.
- Future collaborations: The community expresses openness to future collaborations with institutions like Reading University, which could provide additional resources and support for their linguistic and cultural programs.

## Summary

The East African Community group is dedicated to preserving its cultural and linguistic heritage while supporting its members in a foreign environment. They face challenges in maintaining the use of Swahili among children but are proactive in their efforts through educational programs and community activities. The group values the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism and is committed to helping children understand and appreciate their cultural roots. The community's holistic approach to education, which includes both religious and secular teachings, is integral to its mission of cultural preservation and community support.





- The East African community group runs children’s classes and women’s groups, incorporating religious education and social activities.

**Word of Mouth and Social Media:**

- Word of mouth and social media are crucial for spreading information about community activities and encouraging participation.

4. Challenges Faced by the Communities:

**Low Attendance and Engagement:**

- The Romanian church struggles with low attendance despite a significant Romanian population in the area.
- The Arabic ORC Hub participants express a need for more cultural events and professional support.
- The East African community faces challenges in encouraging parents to maintain Swahili at home and ensuring children use it.

**Parental Attitudes**

- There is a common issue with some parents believing that speaking only English is beneficial for their children, which impacts the preservation of native languages.

5. Educational Practices:

**Religious education:**

- The Romanian church uses Romanian Bibles to teach religious concepts.
- The Arabic ORC Hub conducts Quran classes in Arabic, with translation into other dialects as needed.
- The East African community group holds Quran classes in Swahili to make religious teachings accessible and reinforce language skills.

**Holistic approach to education:**

- The concept of madrasa in the East African community encompasses both religious and secular education, emphasising the importance of a well-rounded educational experience.

6. Support and Integration:

**Community support services:**

- The Romanian church provides spiritual guidance and a sense of belonging.
- The Arabic ORC Hub offers translation services and organises cultural events, though participants desire more frequent and varied activities.
- The East African community provides support for funerals and aims to facilitate better understanding of cultural roots through potential exchange programs and collaborations with educational institutions.



## Business Owners Interviews

Oxford Road has a large number of shops, restaurants, and services that cater to a diverse population. Formal and informal conversations with owners highlighted the use of the different languages in different contexts and for different purposes.

### 1. Language Use and Preservation:

#### **Ghanaian communities (Akwaaba Barbershop, Ghanaian Restaurant, Ghanaian Shop):**

**Languages: Twi, Ga, Fante, Akan, Buno, Ewe, Nakani, and Frafra**



We observe the intersections in the Twi language between the men in the barbershop. The word Akwaaba which means welcome is very prominent in the shop and is used to show hospitality.

The language predominantly used is Twi because it is understood by many at home and in community settings. English is used primarily for business and with non-Ghanaian customers. There are Ghanaian churches in Reading that run their services in Ghanaian language.

It is a challenge to maintain the use of heritage languages among younger generations who are more exposed to English through school and social interactions. Most parents do speak to their children in a Ghanaian language at home. Although children understand their heritage language, they mostly choose not to speak it.



Pictures: Wooden cooking spoons. Dried smoked fish, and freshly made Ghanaian-style bread.



Kenkey (left) is a popular Ghanaian food made by cooking fermented corn or cassava dough wrapped in a maize husk or plantain leaves, and served with a vegetable stew or soup. It is another authentic African food. The picture shown is of Fanti kenkey, also called dokon, which means "mouth watering".

### Polish (Agnes Coffee Shop):

#### Language: Polish

The menu is both in Polish and translated to English on a big board behind the cashier's desk. The most common dish is the Zapiekaknka (toasted open baguette) with different fillings. Polish is used primarily within the shop, especially among Polish customers. English is used with non-Polish customers.



### Latvian Community (Latvian Speaker in Romanian Shops):

#### Languages: Latvian, Russian and English

The shop is stocked with items labelled in different Romanian and Russian languages. A customer comes in and converses in the Romanian language. The products in the shop are what would be found in their native countries. English is the common language for business interactions due to a diverse customer base.

### Nepali Community (Momo2Go restaurant):

#### Languages: Nepali, Hindi, English

Nepali is used predominantly within the restaurant among Nepali customers. English and Hindi are also used depending on the customer base. The menu has pictures to depict how the food looks: this allows for people to choose if they're not familiar with the food options.





### Convenience Store

**Languages: Telugu, Hindi, English. Telugu and Hindi**

Telugu, Hindi, English. Telugu and Hindi are used within the community and during social activities like playing cricket. English is the primary language for business interactions. The items in this shop are mostly labelled in English and similar to items in local English stores.

### Noon sweets

**Languages: Urdu, English**



The language identified is Urdu, but English is used most frequently in the business setting. They sell traditional Asian, Indian, and Pakistani food and sweets freshly prepared daily.

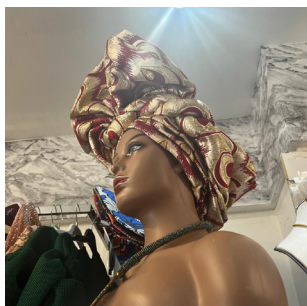
## 2. Cultural Identity and Preservation:

### Importance of cultural roots

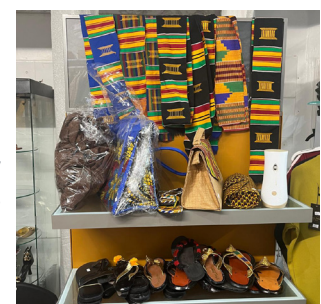
Many communities emphasise the importance of preserving their native languages as a means of maintaining cultural identity and heritage. This is particularly evident in the Ghanaian, Polish, Nepali, and Indian communities.

### Cultural celebrations and traditions

Communities use cultural events and traditional foods to maintain and celebrate their heritage. For instance, Ghanaian shops often sell traditional foods like Kenkey and Kente cloth, while the Polish coffee shop offers Polish street food.



The picture shows traditional Gele (pronounced "gay-lay") is a Yoruba term for a woman's head wrap. Nigerian women wear gele as an essential part of their traditional attire. It symbolises beauty, elegance and pride, commonly worn on special occasions.



The picture to the right shows Kente, a brightly coloured cloth consisting of separate strips sewn together, made in Ghana. This has been made into scarfs and is really in demand on special occasions as well as graduations.



### 3. Community Engagement:

#### **Meeting places and social activities**

Community engagement occurs through various programs and social activities. For instance, the East African community has children’s classes and women’s groups, the Telugu-speaking Indian community plays cricket, and the Romanian church organises religious services and social gatherings.

#### **Word of mouth and Social Media**

Information about community activities is often spread through word of mouth and social media, helping to maintain a close-knit community feel and encouraging participation.

### 4. Challenges Faced by Communities:

#### **Language retention among younger generations**

A common challenge across various communities is the retention of native languages among younger generations, who are more exposed to English through schooling and social interactions.

#### **Low attendance and engagement**

Some communities, such as the Romanian church, struggle with low attendance despite having a significant population in the area. This could be due to various personal or logistical factors.

#### **Cultural integration**

Balancing the preservation of cultural identity with the need to integrate into a broader English-speaking society is a challenge. This includes ensuring children learn their native languages while also becoming proficient in English

### 5. Educational Practices:

#### **Religious and secular education**

Religious education is an integral part of cultural preservation for many communities. For example, the East African community incorporates Quran classes in Swahili, and the Romanian church uses Romanian Bibles for religious teachings.

#### **Holistic educational approach**

Some communities adopt a holistic approach to education, combining religious and secular teachings to provide a well-rounded educational experience for children.



# International Mother Language Day celebration

**My Mother Tongue:**  
A celebration of community languages

**Join us!**  
Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 11am to 1pm  
Register here or just turn up on the day

**Lifespring Church**  
143 Oxford Road  
RG1 7UY

Celebration of all languages spoken in Reading

Music, stories and more from all over the world

In collaboration with University of Reading, to celebrate International Mother Language Day, we are hosting an event for all the family where we will showcase and celebrate some of the languages spoken in Reading. Free to attend. Light refreshments served.

During the project, we hosted **My Mother Tongue: A Celebration of Community Languages.**

The event was to celebrate International Mother Language Day which falls on 21st February each year. The Pavilion on Oxford Road hosted the event. We invited guests (all from the local area) to share their country of origin, heritage language(s) and to say something in their own language that held meaning for them.

You can see a short video of the event here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9OREtm29xE&t=3s>





The languages identified during our project are listed below alphabetically alongside a common greeting in each language.

1. **Afghanistan (Dari and Pashto):** سلام (Salām) / سلام (Səlam)
2. **Arabic:** مرحبا (Marhaba)
3. **Bangladeshi (Bengali):** হ্যালো (Hyālō)
4. **Berber:** Azul
5. **Chinese (Mandarin):** 你好 (Nǐ hǎo)
6. **Colombian (Spanish):** Hola
7. **Danish:** Hej
8. **Egyptian Arabic:** أهلا (Ahlan)
9. **El Salvador (Spanish):** Hola
10. **English:** Hello
11. **French:** Bonjour
12. **Hong Kong (Chinese - Cantonese):** 你好 (Néih hóu)
13. **Indian:** (Multiple languages, common greeting) Namaste
14. **Iraq (Arabic):** مرحبا (Marhaba)
15. **Irish (Gaelic and Georgij):** Dia dhuit / Go mbeannaí Dia duit (*May God be with you*)
16. **Italian:** Ciao
17. **Kazakhstan (Kazakh):** Сәлем (Sälem)
18. **Kisii (Kenya):** Bwakire buya (*Good morning*)
19. **Latvian (Latvia):** Sveiki
20. **Malayalam:** ഹലോ (Halō)
21. **Mursi (Ethiopia):** ሰላም (Selam)
22. **Nepalese (Nepali):** नमस्ते (Namaste)
23. **Polish (Poland):** Cześć?
24. **Punjabi:** ਸਤ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਅਕਾਲ (Sat Sri Akal)
25. **Romanian:** Bună



**26. Saudi Arabia (Arabic):** مرحبا (Marhaba)

**27. Spanish:** Hola

**28. Swahili:** Jambo

**29. Tamil (India):** வணக்கம் (Vaṇakkam)

**30. Telugu (India):** హలో (Halō)

**31. Turkish:** Merhaba

**32. Twi (Ghana):** Maakyé (*Good morning*)

**33. Ukrainian:** Привіт (Pryvit)

**34. Urdu:** سلام (Salam)

**35. Venezuelan (Spanish):** Hola

**36. Yemen (Arabic):** مرحبا (Marhaba)

**37. Zulu (South Africa):** Sawubona

**38. Shona (Zimbabwe):** Mhoro

---

## Conclusion

In conclusion, these different communities show how important the use and preservation of language is for the preservation of cultural identity and heritage. Each community uses language as a key tool for maintaining cultural identity and ensuring that younger generations remain connected to their roots. Community engagement, educational practices, and support services are tailored to meet the unique needs of their members, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity amid diverse cultural landscapes.

Community engagement through social activities and cultural events plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. Despite the challenges of language retention among younger generations, and the balancing act between cultural preservation and integration, these communities demonstrate resilience and adaptability when it comes to preserving their unique cultural identities while integrating into wider society.

There is a shared commitment to preserving cultural and linguistic heritage while addressing the challenges of integration into a predominantly English-speaking environment.

---

**For further information email [ioe@reading.ac.uk](mailto:ioe@reading.ac.uk)**