

Original Research Article

'Tsaraka' (Good Luck Charm): An Expository Appraisal of its Usage in Sarkanci

Dr. Musa Fadama Gummi^{1*}

¹Department of Languages and Cultures, Federal University Gusau, Nigeria

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Musa Fadama Gummi
Department of Languages and Cultures, Federal University Gusau, Nigeria

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Abstract: Hausa land lies within the North-West of Nigeria and the southern part of Niger. Despite the low nature of rainfall distribution and the insistent drought which befell the zone, there exist streams, rivers, and lakes, which traverse the area. These water phenomena are filled up with water during the rainy season. This provides quite a good number of fishing grounds stocked with freshwater fish. Examples include among others, the river Rima, Hađejiya, and the river Niger which entered into Nigeria at Bahindi, having crossed several West African countries. The natural lakes that exist include the Nato, Kalmalo, and Saru, to mention but a few. There are also several man-made dams, examples of which include among others, Bakalori, Goronyo, and Kainji. Smaller earth dams also abound. The availability of fishery resources paved the way for fishing activities to thrive in Hausa land. Hausa professional fishermen 'Sarkawa' put into practice some cultural traits among which is the 'tsaraka', a good luck charm that they prepare to solicit for luck and success of getting a good catch during fishing expeditions. It is this culture of 'tsaraka' practiced by the 'Sarkawa' (professional fishermen) while executing 'sarkanci' (professional fishing) that this paper explored and analyzed. The primary information is sourced directly from *Sarkawa* through a survey. Obtained data is completely analyzed and discussed. The paper has found out that despite deep acceptance and practice of Islam as the religion of 'Sarkawa', up to the present time, various forms of good luck charms are still being prepared and put to use by the Hausa Fishermen, to invite luck and enhance good catch while fishing.

Keywords: *Tsaraka*, Good Luck Charm, Expository, Appraisal, *Sarkanci*.

1.0 BACKGROUND

Fish is a living creature that inhabits an aquatic environment. Within their habitat, some fishes are pelagic by inhabiting and feeding near or around the water's surface. The semi-pelagic fish lives at the middle water level also abound. Demersal fishes however are fish species that dwell at the bottom of the water. At whatever level of the water fish is found, the Hausa fishermen devise various strategies to catch it for sale and consumption as well as for other medicinal and fetish use. To ensure good catch, the acquisition and utilization of efficient gear by all traditional Hausa fishermen are paramount. To an average 'Basarke' use of efficient fishing gear alone, does not guarantee good catch during a fishing expedition. The reasons for this thought are not farfetched. It is widely believed by traditional fishermen that fish always resist being caught. This is depicted in a Hausa proverb that says:

'Kifi na ganin ka mai jar koma'

It literally translates as 'fish outwits fisherman with the red (colored) clap net.' From the traditional viewpoint, therefore, 'Sarkawa' hold the notion that luck plays a significant role in enhancing catch. To them, a wishful desire for a good catch alone is not enough to ensure a bumper catch. Hence, the use of 'tsaraka' or a good luck charm becomes inevitable. An old Hausa adage attests to the strong belief in the virility of 'tsaraka' in Hausa traditional fishing. The adage says:

"Su babu tsarake wanka ne"

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Literally, it translates as ‘fishing without good luck charm equates with swimming.’

The premium value attaches to the use of ‘*tsaraka*’ by the Hausa professional fishermen is the motivating factor behind its exploration, to unravel the practice. Presently, fishing as a local Hausa craft is dwindling due to the effects of climate change, brought about by global warming. It has a devastating effect on the aqua environment in most parts of Hausa land. Sand and other sediments brought into the lakes and ponds by seasonal erosion have filled up some natural lakes, such that water accumulation in some of the water reservoirs has greatly reduced in volume. It, therefore, makes the water bodies dry up within a short while. The fishery resources are presently in the decline. Some fish species are facing the danger of extinction. This has adversely affected the local fishing industry. A good number of ‘*Sarkawa*’ have opted into other ventures because fishing alone no longer provides means of sustenance for them. This scenario, the paper believes, is likely to make this cultural practice go into extinction. It is with this in mind that, the research is undertaken to attempt to preserve the culture, at least in written form.

1.1 METHODOLOGY

A survey method is adopted for the conduct of this research. The ‘*Sarkawa*’ across the fishing areas of the Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, and parts of Niger states are sampled and interviewed to obtain information on the topic under consideration. Niger state is included in the research area because it is a melting point for the gathering of fishermen from different parts of Hausa land. This is due to abundant fishing grounds, most especially Katcha local government.

It is pertinent to note that the issue of good luck charm is held in secrecy among family members. In other words, ‘*tsaraka*’ forms part of the family secrets. Even within the family, it is sometimes only disclosed to the most obedient and preferred family member. This, therefore, makes it inherently difficult for the respondents to divulge to a stranger, the ‘*tsaraka*’ they prepare and utilize while undertaking the fishing expedition. However, the bottleneck was overcome through the use of research assistants with whom the respondents were familiar. This has to a large extent helped in bridging the barrier. The information obtained is explicitly analyzed and discussed.

2.0 Origin and Definition of Concepts

An attempt at defining the concepts of ‘*Sarkanci*’ and ‘*tsaraka*’ is important as the two words form the focal point of this research. The words may likely appear strange to quite many people because they may not be familiar with them. The words are therefore defined below:

2.1 Sarkanci (Professional Fishing)

Sarkanci is not an original Hausa word. It is a derivation from the word ‘*Sorko*’, a fishing community of Songhai origin. Fadama and Rambo, in Gado and Baƙo, (Eds) (2016:25) have quoted Alkali, (1969:30) to have posited that it is the craft of professional fishermen of Songhai origin who in the course of searching for more conducive fishing grounds migrated to the area of Tilliberi, presently in the Republic of Niger, and then finally settled in Kebbi, Nigeria. Professional fishermen also hunt aquatic animals. They intermarried with the Hausa population and became assimilated. Due to their expertise in techniques of fishing and the superiority and efficiency of their fishing gears, they exerted great influence in local fishing craft, such that it came to be referred to as ‘*Sarkanci*’.

The professional fishermen came to be known as ‘*Sarkawa*’ (plural) and ‘*Basarke*’ (singular). *Sarkanci* goes beyond fishing alone. Sani, Dahiru, Hassan, & Abdullahi (2017: 71) refer to *sarkawa* as “Fisher Folk.” They quoted Merriam Dictionary and Tawari that “fisher folk are defined as people who fish especially for living and they sometimes move in search of fish as dictated by the type of fishes required, the movement of the tide, and season of the year. It involves expertise in all aspects of traditional fishing like the manipulation of water and its creatures by way of water rituals. It also involves being knowledgeable in the practice of traditional medicine in which water-borne related diseases are cured. To a large extent, *Sarkanci* refers to professional fishing. The major occupation of ‘*Sarkawa*’ (professional fishermen) is fishing throughout the seasons. However, they cultivate rice around swampy areas proximate to where they operate their local craft.

2.2 Tsaraka (Good Luck Charm)

The word *tsaraka* is an indigenous Hausa word, not borrowed from any other language. Some Hausa scholars have the understanding that it is the name of a specific plant that is traditionally used as a good luck charm to attract luck in the sales of wares as in trading or to enhance catch as in hunting and fishing. However, this concept now goes beyond a specific plant. It may include different plants and sometimes concoctions obtained and utilized to attract luck. This is amplified in Bargery, (1934:1030) [1], who in his monumental dictionary, defines *tsaraka* as “anything used as a charm by a trader to ensure successful trading.” This definition, however, seems implausible. The use of *tsaraka* as far as Hausa

¹ See Bargery, G.P. (1993), A Hausa-English Dictionary and English Hausa Vocabulary (2nd ed.), Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Ltd. Page 1030.

culture is concerned goes beyond trading alone. Hence, CNHN, (2006:453) in addition to Bargery's definition, states that *tsaraka* may also mean a "medicine that one makes to attract or achieve bumper catch in fishing."

It is pertinent to note that the usage of *tsaraka* is not limited to sales and fishing alone. To attempt a working definition of *tsaraka* therefore, it may be said to mean a traditional medicine one prepares, mostly from herbs and other substances, or the chanting of incantations to attract good sales of one's wares or success in trading and bumper catch in hunting or fishing expeditions.

This research will however focus its attention on the usage of *tsaraka* as it pertains to professional fishing called *sarkanci* in Hausa. An attempt at classification of *tsaraka* will be made and examples of how it is prepared and put into use will be made.

3.0 Classification of *Tsaraka* (Good Luck Charm)

After careful study of the data collected, what became manifest is that *tsaraka*, from the viewpoint of Hausa culture, can be classified into three distinct types. The first has to do with its constituents or the ingredients used in its preparation, which we may refer to as medicinal *tsaraka*. The second category is the *tsaraka* of incantations. The third is a combination of the two in which medicine is mixed with a recital of incantations. An explanation of each type with its example comes below:

3.1 Medicinal *Tsaraka*

This is the type of *tsaraka* in which substances are sourced and prepared into concoctions or other different forms of uses. In the preparation of medicinal *tsaraka*, the ingredients to look for may include but are limited to plants like grasses, and trees, especially the leaves, the bark, and the roots. Sometimes, poultry droppings are also included in their preparation. In other instances, parts of a specie of fish desired to be caught is made use of in the preparation of this type of good luck charm. It all depends on the individual fisherman. The fishermen's philosophical thought behind the inclusion of poultry droppings in the preparation of this category of *tsaraka* is the fact that the substance serves as fish feed, as such, it is believed that when placed in the water, its aroma has the potency to attract fish to any trap on which it is applied. Similarly, the body parts of a fish like its caudal fin or the scales may form part of the ingredients for the preparation of the good luck charm. It is included with the notion that it will attract the same species of fish into the trap or fishing gear, on which it is applied.

According to Fadama Auwal [²], an example of how this type of *tsaraka* is prepared and utilized is that if a fisherman intends to catch any specie of catfish, he needs to source and process certain ingredients to prepare a good luck charm of this type. The ingredients are:

- i. Roots of jujube tree (magarya).
- ii. Dorsal fins (the fins at the back) of the specie intended to be caught.

The roots are peeled so that the bark is separated from the stem. The peeled substance and fish dorsal fin are then sun-dried and ground into powder. The powder is then soaked in a bowl of water. After a while, the water is used to wash whatever fishing gear is intended to be used in making the catch. It could be the gill net, clap net, hook, line, cast net, etc. Alternatively, however, the powder can be burnt in a live ember. The fishing gears to be treated with *tsaraka* are placed in the direction of the emanating smoke so that it passes through the gears. The philosophical thought behind the use of jujube root in making the concoction is that the catfish is demersal in nature and the roots are down in the ground as such the fish habitat is similar to where the roots are found. The dorsal fin is used with the belief that it will entice or lure its type to the treated fishing gear so that it is caught.

The fishing gear so treated with this *tsaraka* is then taken into the water for fishing. By their belief, this attracts luck, such that whatever specie of catfish intended to be caught, success will abound. The fact that the fishermen have a strong belief in the efficacy and effectiveness of this medicinal concoction, they achieve great success through its application.

Another example of this type of *tsaraka* in which different ingredients are processed to produce a good luck charm to catch a particular species of fish includes the one prepared specifically to catch *yaumi*, *gymnarchus niloticus* popularly known as the African knife fish. The ingredients are [³]:

² This information was obtained from Fadama Auwal. He is the fadama of Kurfa, a district in Gummi. He takes charge of Saru, a natural lake blessed with abundant fish species. He was interviewed at his residence in Gayari town of Gummi local government, Zamfara state, on 13th January, 2023. He is aged 86 years.

³ This information was sourced in an interview with Mairuwa Bala Romo held in his residence at Romo, Tambawal Local Government, Sokoto state on Saturday, 28th January, 2023.

- i. Roots of a pumpkin plant.
- ii. Poultry droppings.
- iii. Thatch grass from the roof of a poultry house.

The three are allowed to dry. All are then burnt using live ember. The resulting smoke is allowed to pass through the fishing gears intended to be used in making the catch. The gear so treated is put into immediate use to be very virile and effective in catching the *gymnarchus niloticus yaumi* specie. The philosophy behind the usage of the ingredients is that both the roots of the plant with its fruit lay on the ground. The African knife fish also inhabit the water bottom; as such they share a commonplace of existence. The poultry dropping and the thatch grass from the roof of a poultry house when burnt may emit an odor that will lure the fish to the fishing gear.

3.2 *Tsaraka* of Incantations

By definition, an incantation is the use of a spell or verbal charms spoken or sung as part of a ritual of magic. It can also be said to be a written or recited formula of words designed to produce a particular effect [4]. In essence, incantations may include the use of words uttered to invoke or solicit assistance from the deity that is held with high reverence.

Before the introduction of Islam into the Hausa land and its widespread acceptance both as a religion and a way of life, the Hausa people indulged in the practice of traditional religion. This involves among others, the belief in the supernatural powers of different deities which could be in the form of objects, animals, or even spirits. Offerings of various forms are made to the deities and their help, assistance, or intervention is invoked while a worshipper or an adherent is in dear need or distress. This is usually done through the use of incantations [5]. The words uttered are sometimes meaningful Hausa words while at times, it consists often of abracadabra.

However, with the overwhelming acceptance of Islam by an overwhelming majority of Hausa people, coupled with the influence the Islamic religion and Arabic language exerted on both the culture and language of the Hausa populace, the Islamic forms of supplication gained wider acceptance, thereby taking precedence over the traditional incantations.

Thereafter, over time, penultimate to the religious crusade of the revered sheikh Usman bn Fodio, there witnessed a decadence and retrogression in the Islamic belief and practice among the Hausa population. This adversely affected the observance of the tenets of the Islamic religion among the Hausa people. They resorted to syncretism, where Islamic tenets were mixed up with the inherent heathen practices. This has affected the purity of the forms of supplications that hitherto, Islam taught its adherents. Hausa traditional incantations were reinvigorated with a mixture of words and phrases that are of Islamic origin.

Before the early 19th century struggle for Islamic revival undertaken by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo and his followers in Hausa land, most Hausa incantations consisted of code-switched phrases between the Arabic language and Hausa. Presently, there exists till today, the practice of chanting incantations that have code-switched words or even phrases of both Arabic Hausa. Fadama and Rambo, in Gado and BaKo (eds.) (2016:25), posited that Dandanci, a sub-dialect of the Zarma language has also made a great impact on the conduct of Hausa traditional fishing. It is therefore commonplace to find incantations related to fishing that are embedded in them, either meaningful words and phrases or those that rhythms with the Zarma language.

The good luck charm or *tsaraka* of this type now consists of incantations that have both Hausa Arabic connotations in them. A fisherman using the clap net (koma) as the gear of operation may recite this incantation seven times. At the end of each recitation, he makes a light spit on the gear. This invites good luck. The incantation is:

Bismillahi! Badaka sori na soda,
Dursan ga koma ta. [6]

⁴ “Incantation” Merrian-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/incantation>. Accessed 7 February, 2023.

⁵ For a detail exposition on the incantations of the practitioners of Hausa traditional religion, see the works of Ibrahim, M.S. (1982) “Danganatakar Al’ada da Addini: Tasirin Musulunci A Rayuwar Hausawa Ta Gargajiya.” M.A. Dissertation, Kano, Jami’ar Bayero. and Abdullahi, I.S.S. (2008) “JIYA BA YAU BA: Nazarin A Kan Waiwayen Matakan Ratuwar Maguzawa Na Aure, Haihuwa Da Mutuwa.” Ph D. Thesis, Sokoto: Usmanu Danfodiyo Unibersity, Sokoto.

⁶ The incantation was sourced from Homaof Kebbe, Sani Naba’u, in an interview held at Kanwurin Sarki Kabin Kebbe on Sunday, 26th January, 2023.

As can be seen, the incantation begins with a phrase from the holy Qur'an. It translates as 'In the name of Allah'. Every Muslim is enjoined to begin each activity with the recital of the phrase. The word 'sori' is also derived from the Arabic noun 'sawaratun'. Its verbal form is 'sara' which may mean catch, jump respectively. Amazingly, the preoccupation of a fisherman during fishing is to catch fish which sometimes jumps in an attempt to escape. The word 'soda' in the incantation is derived from 'swaidan' in Arabic, which may mean a 'game' for hunting. Fishing is hunting-like; the difference is, it is conducted in water. The word 'dursan' is supposedly from the Arabic word 'disaru' which connotes cover with a shroud or garment. The word is found in Suratul Mudassir, Qur'an 74:1 which says: "O you who covers himself (with a garment)," [7].

The preceding analysis of the lexical items in the incantations shows that its meaning may be 'Oh you fish that jumps, thou that I desire to catch, come into my clap net that will shroud you up.'

Another example of incantation recited to invoke a good catch is:

"Bismillah! Dunka na kabido, yi dukuku tahe cikin komata" [8].

The words 'dunka and 'kabido' are supposedly derived from the holy Qur'an. The former can be found in Surah 20, verse 124. 'Dankan' in the verse is translated as "a life of hardship." The latter word comes from Surah 90:4. It is translated to mean 'hardship' as in: "We have certainly created man into hardship."

The underlying meaning in this incantation is luring the fish that is supposedly believed to live a life of hardship by toiling to survive, to the fisherman's clap net.

3.3 *Tsaraka* of Combine Medicine and Incantation

This is the type of *tsaraka* where substances like the roots, stems, bark, or even leaves of trees and grasses are combined with incantations either at the point of picking the substances from the source or during the processing of the good luck charm. Sometimes, the incantation recited is mixed up with Islamic or Arabic words and the heathen type. However, recent practices indicate the fact that recitation of verses of the holy Qur'an takes precedence over and above the heathen incantations. This is due to the firm belief in the Islamic religion, its influence, and its impact on the lives of the majority of the Hausa population.

An example of *tsaraka* in which certain substances are combined with the recitation of verses of the Qur'an suffices here. To prepare the good luck charm, the fisherman will look for the leaves of a grass called *tsaure* in Hausa. While fetching the leaves, the fisherman recites seven-fold, Surah ash Sharh, chapter 94 of the holy Qur'an. Its translation is:

Bismillahir –Rahmanir- Raheem

1. Did we not expand for you (O Muhammad), your breast?
2. And we removed from you your burden
3. Which had weighed upon your back
4. And raised high for you your repute.
5. For indeed, with hardship (will be) ease (i.e., relief),
6. Indeed with hardship (will be) ease.
7. So when you have finished (your duties), then stand up (for worship).
8. And to your Lord directs (your) longing [9].

He thereafter makes a light spit on it, after each recitation; then cuts some of it. Cut into pieces a bulb of white onion. With the use saltpeter *jar kanwa*, soak all the ingredients in a bowl of water. After a while, the water is used to wash thoroughly, the fishing gear intended to be used. However, before the commencement of the wash, 'Bismillah' is recited along with chapter 110 of the Qur'an, Surah an-Nasr, then one spits lightly on the concoction [10]. The Surah is translated thus:

Bismillahir – Rahmanir – Rahim

1. When the victory of Allah has come and the conquest,
2. And you see people entering into the religion of Allah in multitudes,

⁷ This is a translation from *The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes. Saheeh International*. Page 866.

⁸ This incantation was obtain from Sahabi Kardaji, a fisherman from Falale district of Gummi local government area of Zamfara state. He was interviewed at his residence in Kardaji on Saturday, January 14th 2023.

⁹ This English translation is from *The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes, Saheeh International* page 921.

¹⁰ The information on how to prepare the type of *tsaraka* was obtained from Homan Kebbe, Homa Sani Naba'u. He was interviewed at Kanwuri area of Kebbe town in Sokoto state on Sunday, January 26th 2023.

3. Then exalt (Him) with praise of your Lord and ask forgiveness of Him.

Indeed, He is ever Accepting of Repentance [¹¹].

The above English rendering of the Qur'anic verses recited in the good luck charm does not directly have bearings with fishing. However, Muslims do believe that the Qur'anic verses can be used to commune with Allah and pray for his benefaction and bounties. Hence, the Hausa fisherman finds solace in seeking Allah to help him out of hardship by providing relief as there is no hardship without relief. Fishing is a herculean task, most especially having to endure long presence in the water despite its cold nature. If at the end of a fishing expedition, no tangible catch is made, the fisherman remains in hardship since it is his means of livelihood. He, therefore, solicits Allah's countenance and help to make a good catch, similar to the help Allah has rendered to the prophet of Islam by making people enter the religion in multitudes. Similarly, fishermen pray and wish that he gets Allah's help, such that their fishing gear will make the catch in multitudes which will in turn lessen their burden and hardship.

4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research has brought to the open, the cultural practice of good luck charm as it pertains to its preparation and usage in Hausa traditional fishing. It has made mentioned some examples of ingredients that are used in the preparation of the charm. It has also come up with the premium attached to the charm by the Hausa fisher folk most especially when it comes to their desire to make a big catch of a particular fish species.

Culture is dynamic as it changes over time and space. Certain cultural practices become extinct when it is not transmitted to the young or upcoming generation. If not well documented, some cultural practices are lost forever. This research has realized that the preparation and usage of tsaraka among the Hausa fisher folk is past diminishing, especially now that climate change and its devastating consequences have led to the abandonment of the occupation for a more lucrative and sustaining one. The persistent drying up of lakes and ponds that provides habitat for fish is seriously affecting this occupation. As a result, cultural practices that accompany fishing as a traditional occupation face the same risk of extinction.

5.0 CONCLUSION

What has become clear is the fact that the Hausa fisher folk faces dwindling fortune as a result of the diminishing of fishery resources in the available ponds, rivers, and lakes which were hitherto, the places in which they hustle to make a living. This is largely caused by the drying up of the ponds, a little while after the rainy season. This is due to the menace of global warming, which devastates not only surface water but underground water as well. Due to this problem, a good number of Hausa fisher folk have left fishing for other trades that are more lucrative.

This paper wishes to make a clarion call on the federal and state governments to construct earth dams across Nigeria. Dredge the existing ones that are nearly filled up with sand. Stock the surface water resources with varieties of fishery resources so that fishermen will be licensed to harness the resources to improve their economic well-being and as well, boost the food security of the country. This will to some extent help in the preservation of the cultures of the fishermen.

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¹¹ The English translation is from *The Qur'an: English Meanings and Notes*, Saheeh International page 939.

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List People Interviewed

1. Fadama Auwal, the Fadama of Kurfa in Gummi Local Government, Zamfara state. He is aged 86 years.
2. Mairuwa Bala Romo of Romo town, Tambawal local government, sokoto state. He is aged 69 years.
3. Homan Kebbe, Sani Naba'u of Kebbe town, Kebbe local government area, Sokoto state.
4. Sahabi Kardaji o village, Kardaji Falale district, Gummi local government, Zamfara state. He is aged 67.