

# Àbèsàbèsì Language Documentation and Maintenance

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**ABSTRACT**

*The need to develop theories and strategies of language maintenance arises from the knowledge of language endangerment. In many instances researchers on language documentation project have found themselves faced with the question of how to maintain threatened languages. This question holds no less true for Àbèsàbèsì (Akpes in the literature). This paper examines steps taken so far to maintain and revitalize the speech of Àbèsàbèsì a language (known as Akpes in the Literature with ethnographic identity ibe). Agoyi 2008 proposed the name Àbèsàbèsì, formed from the root morpheme Àbèsì ‘we’ because it is the only identity accepted by all the nine communities that speak variants of the language. Speakers of the language are currently aware of the endangered status of the language. One even decried the situation in which a family resident in one of the linguistic communities, who had spent their entire life living in the community, yet none of them from, ages 25 years and below could speak the local language. A Language Development group was initiated by me with some native speakers who felt concerned about the endangered nature of the language. The initial establishment of the language development group was seen by some as a waste of time. However with the draft of a proposed orthography and attempts to document and compile a dictionary and primers for the language, some of the elders are optimistic that the language may be saved from extinction. Gradually, the language maintenance mandate of the group is gaining momentum. This is a report of the work as far as it has progressed. The report is presented using the following outline*

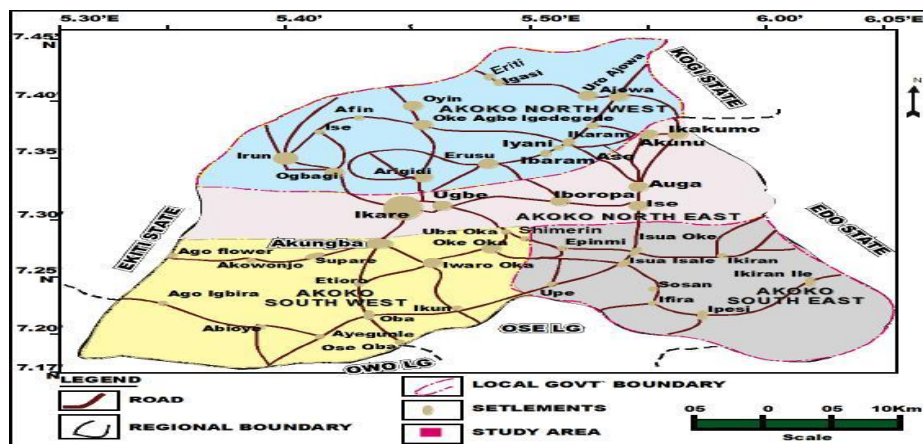
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## I. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Àbèsàbèsì (Akpes) communities are found in two local Government Areas in Ondo State, Nigeria. The Local Governments are Akoko North West and Akoko North East. The map of Akoko region in Ondo State, Nigeria, showing the four local Government Areas is shown below.



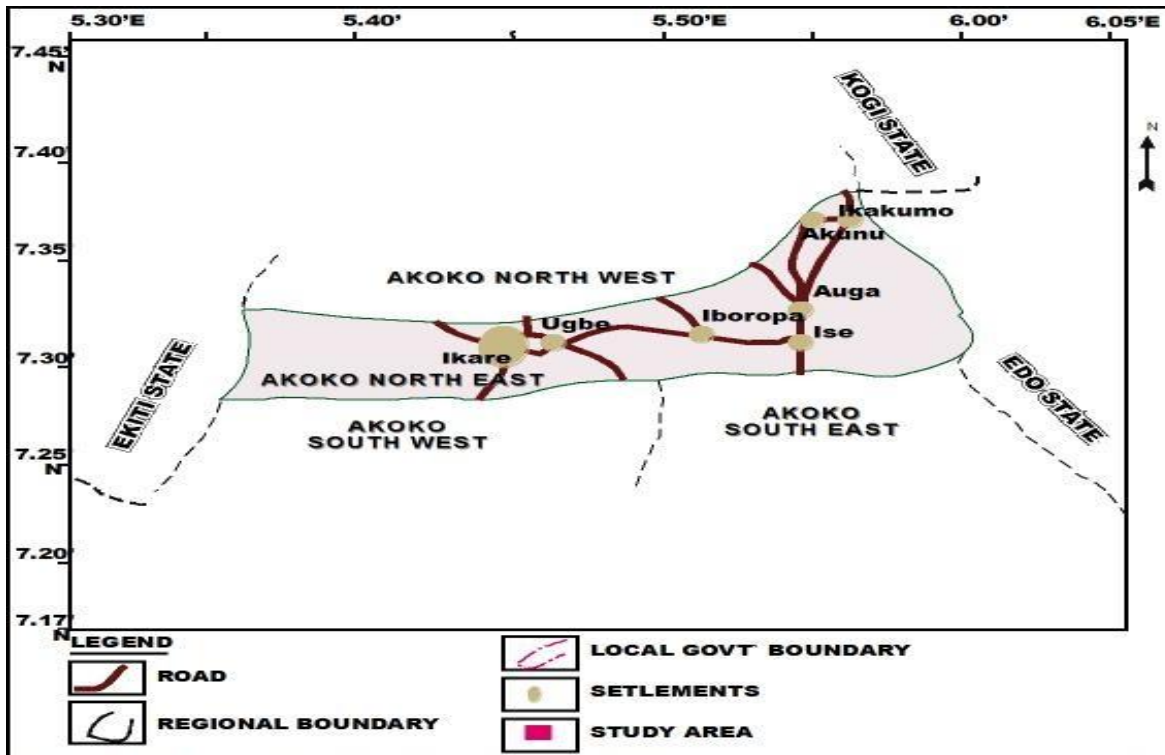
**Fig .1: Regional Map of Akoko showing the Four Akoko Local Government Areas.**

### Population

For some reasons, we are not able to state the exact number of Àbèsàbèsì speakers. Among the hindrances include; problems with 1996 nation population census that released figures on local government bases. Going by the population gazette, Akoko North West local Government’ population is 211,867; the figure includes eight of the Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities: Àsẹ̀, Ìkàràrà, Ìyàni, Ìbàràrà, Gèdègèdè, Èşùkù Dája and Ìlúđòtun Èşùkù, Dája and Ìlúđòtun are in Ajowá) and other distinct linguistics communities. Àkùnù (Akpes) is the only community in Àkoko North East Local Government. The local government ia credited with 179,092 inhabitants

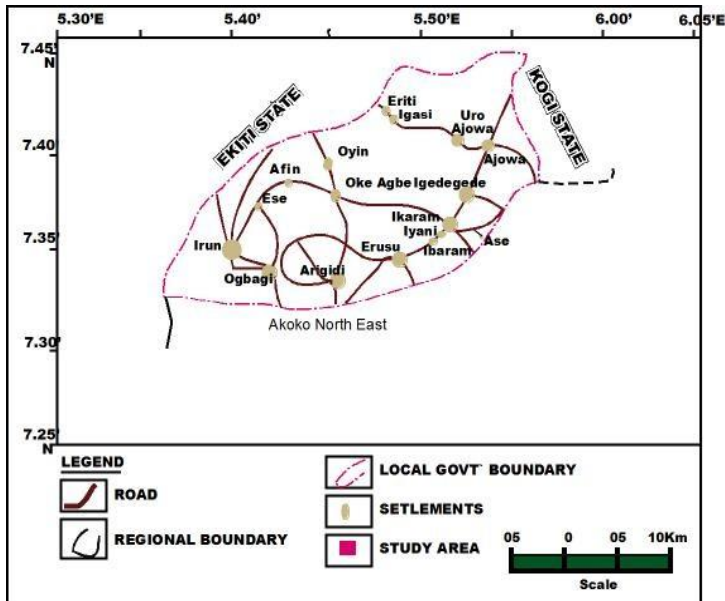
(NPC 1996). An attempt to use the 1991 census could not help because in 1955 there was a politically motivated relocation of 3 of the Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities from old settlement Àjowá. Presently there are about seven distinct languages spoken in Àjowá. Therefore, we are not able to project Àbèsàbèsì speakers' population on the bases of 1991 census.

The maps of Akoko North East and North West are shown in figures 2 and 3 below



**Fig 2. Map of Akoko North East Local Government.**

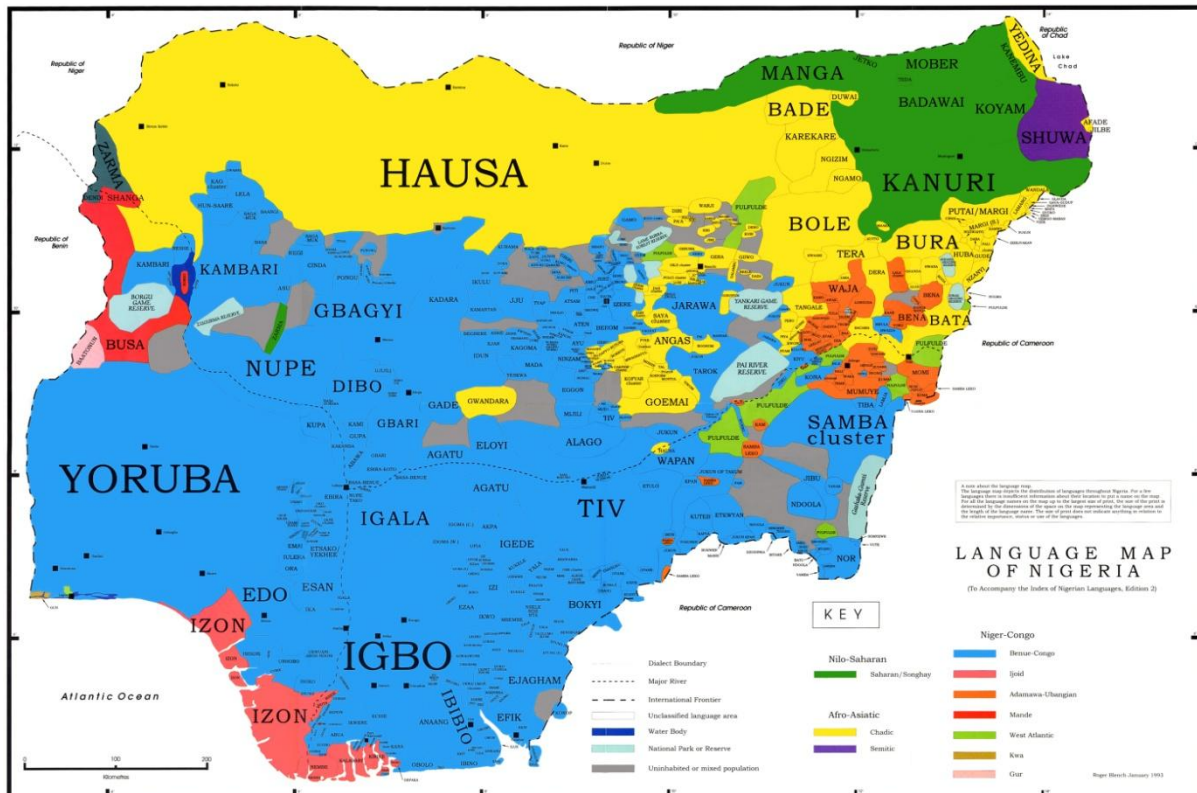
Map of Akoko North West



**Fig: 3. Map of Akoko North West Local Government showing the study area.**

SOURCE: Ministry of Works Akure (reproduce in macromedia)

## Language Map (C & B, 1992)



### Àbèsàbèsì Linguistic Situation

Each of the Àbèsàbèsì linguistic communities is multilingual. The speakers acquire Yorùba and Àbèsàbèsì simultaneously. Yorùba is the language of instruction in primary 1-3 while Yorùba and English are used interchangeably for instruction upper classes in primary school and the secondary school. In the communities, there are speakers of other Nigerian Languages such as Hausa, Epira, Nupe, Igbo, Igala, Ọwón Àfá and Yoruboid group of speakers. The literate parents speak Yorùbá and English to their children. My interaction with members the communities reveal that they are more interested in speaking Yoruba which is rated higher than the local Language. My experience in Dája in one of my many trips to the community shows that the youths are not interested in speaking the local language. Interaction with youths met on the field showed that they were amused. A dedicated member of the Àbèsàbèsì Language Development Committee, Mrs. Ayisat Sumonu was humiliated in her community. She was initially seen an unserious person in her community for being dedicated to the course of developing and revitalizing the language.

### **The People and Their Language**

Speakers of each Àbèsàbèsì Linguistic community have different names for identifying themselves and language. The people of Ìbàrà̀mù, Ìyà̀nì and Gèdègèdè are the Ìlùè̀nì; Àsẹ̀ and Ìkàrà̀mù are Èkíròmì; Àkùnnù and Ìlú̀dò̀tun Àjowá are Akpes; Èşùkù are the Ọşùgù while Dája people speak Dája. Speakers still regard to Èfifá as members of the group though the community lost the Àbèsàbèsì as war strategy. The interview I conducted with my contact persons from each community reveal that the Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities were working as a united people or as a confederation before invasion and subversion by Nupe lords and colonial rule. Burial Ceremonies, Marriage rites, New Yam Festival, Masquerade (marking the curt of the dead) and other traditional as well as cultural festival are celebrated in like manner in each of the communities. Dates for the cerebrating any festival in one community is fixed to avoid clash of interest in any of the Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities. earn

**Political Situation:** All Àbèsàbèsì speaking communities were in the domain of Akala of Ikaramu during and after the reign of Momodu Akombo 1865-1898. There was a move by Late Olusa to form Àbèsàbèsì town. But because of political interest, mismanagement and high handedness of the then Akala of Ikaramu the proposal failed, Ajowa was formed instead. Some leaders of the Àbèsàbèsì communities were still loyal and subjects to the Akala. In the 1960s, Akala denied leader of other Àbèsàbèsì communities (Ìbàrà̀mù, Ìyà̀nì and Gèdègèdè) the right to preside over the customary court in Ikaramu. These leaders revolted; in protest they joined those who relocated to Ajowa where the act of presiding over the court is by rotation among the leaders of the member communities. As a result of the high handedness of the Akala he was given the praise singing: *igi òlá jóeùn balẹ̀; Àkùkọ òlá jómíràn kọ* meaning “a big tree that prevents the race of the sun from shinning on things under it; a big cock that prevents other cocks from crowing”. There was bad blood, it was difficult to relate with member communities. All good intentions by individual to reconcile the member communities are always resisted (Presently, but for the Àbèsàbèsì language development project, the people of Ìyà̀nì and Ìbàrà̀mù are not too much in good terms).

### **The Endangered Status of Àbèsàbèsì Languages**

The result of the responses to ability to speak Àbèsàbèsì languages conducted in each community is presented below:

Table I

Community name	Age Range					
	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51+
Àkùnnù	5%	10%	20%	30%	60%	90%
Àkùnnù Ìlú̀dò̀tun	0%	0%	5%	20%	30%	65%
Àsẹ̀	1%	5%	10%	30%	50%	75%
Dája	0%	0%	10%	10%	20%	58%
Gèdègèdè	0%	5%	20%	40%	68%	93%
Èkíròmì (Ìkàrà̀mù)	0%	5%	15%	35%	70%	89%
Èşùkù	0%	0%	2%	10%	30%	57%
Ìbàrà̀mù	0%	10%	35%	40%	70%	95%
Ìyà̀nì	2%	11%	30%	32%	68%	91%

The table shows that the younger generation no longer use the language. The percentage of the computation of the population interviewed in each age range is discussed below

**Age 1-10:** Only insignificant percentages of 1% in Asẹ, 2% in Ìyàni and 5% in Akunnun and Gèdègédé respectively speak Àbèsàbèsì in all other communities 0% of the population investigated speak Àbèsàbèsì.

**Age range 11-20:** indicates that 0% speak Àbèsàbèsì in Ìlúdòtun, Dája and Èşùkù. 5% speak Àbèsàbèsì in Àkùnnù and Èkiròmì. In this study, 5% is considered an insignificant figure. The % of the population interviewed from Àkùnnù, Gèdègédé and Ìbaràmù show that 10% speak the language while Ìyàni has 11% speakers. If we compare the outcome in this age range, it shows an improvement in the use of Àbèsàbèsì within some of the communities.

**Age 21-30:** In this age range 35% and 30% of the population interviewed Ìbaràmù and Ìyàni speak Àbèsàbèsì. Àkùnnù and Gèdègédé has 20% each, Èkiròmì 15%, Asẹ and Dája 10% each, Àkùnnù Ìlúdòtun 5%, Èşùkù has 2%. Outcome of the percentage computation of population figure in this age range indicate significant improvement on the Àbèsàbèsì language use in each of the communities.

**Age 31-40:** The percentage result population interviewed in this age range is higher than the one got from age range 21-30. Ìbaràmù and Gèdègédé has 40% each, Èkiròmì 35% Ìyàni 32%, Àkùnnù and Asẹ 30% each, Ìlúdòtun 20%, Èşùkù and Dája 10% each. The implication of this result is that age plays a significant role in the native speaker performance of the Àbèsàbèsì language.

**Age 41-50:** The outcome of the computation of the population interviewed in this age range confirms our observation in the computation of age range 31-40. In this age range Èkiròmì and Ìbaràmù has 70% each, Gèdègédé and Ìyàni 68% each, Àkùnnù 60% Asẹ 50%, Èşùkù and Ìlúdòtun 30% each, Dája 20%.

**Age 51+%** : In this age range we observe that the percentage computation of the population interviewed in all the Àbèsàbèsì linguistic communities are significant; to be precise above 50%. Thus the percentage result is in this order: Ìbaràmù 95, Gèdègédé 93, Ìyàni 91, Àkùnnù 90, Èkiròmì 88, Asẹ 75, Ìlúdòtun 65, Dája 58, Èşùkù 57. The implication is that the passing of the language from generation to generation in each community is on a declining trend. The last four decades the language is speedily moving towards total extinction. If no effort is taken at documenting and revitalizing the language, in the next 50 years when the present speakers might have died, or shift to other languages, the language may be numbered among the extinct Nigerian languages. Efforts at documenting and revitalizing Àbèsàbèsì will be discussed later in this paper. Before then let us take a look at the languages that are threats to Àbèsàbèsì.

### **Languages that pose threat**

The languages that are distinct linguistic forms from Àbèsàbèsì that threaten the language are the ones grouped as inter-lingual threats. Such languages are the Nupoid, Yoruboid, English and Hausa/Arabic. Àbèsàbèsì communities are located in a geographical area that was one time in history a war zone. The Nupes oppressed the Akokos for over 50 years. Many of the warriors settled in the communities. While some of the settlers still identify themselves to be of Nupe (Tapa origin, majority of them are subsumed in the community they find themselves. They are not ready (for political reasons) to trace their migration history to the Nupe Origin. Such communities are some of the clans in Iyotus in Ikaramu who claim descent from Ile Ife. Any attempt by any member of the community to link the migration history to 'Bida' as claimed by some elders, always leads to protest and hot argument. One of the traditional songs by Iyotu women at burial ceremonies is close to the traditional music of the Nupes. I am still working on a track rendered by a group in Iyotu. The meaning of the song is still a mystery to me. The performer told me it was her clan's original traditional song. I am still working on the women to give me more of the songs but they needed incentive which I have not been able to provide. Another language that highly threatened Àbèsàbèsì is Yoruba. Before the colonial era, the Yorubas dominated Akoko Land and people. Adivè J. R. (1998:2) has this to say on the influence of Yoruba on Ebiras (Adivè's view of Yoruba influence on Ebira is similar in some respect to the influence of Yoruba on Àbèsàbèsì):

Yoruba seems to have had more influence ... on Ebira in various ways.

For example, Western Education and missionary activities spread from Yoruba people to Ebiras. The first schools among the Ebiras were established by the Church Missionary Society (MS) and Roman Catholic missionaries. Most teachers in the schools in the early days were Yoruba and Yoruba was the medium of instruction in the schools for the first three years.

Unlike Ebira, Àbèsàbèsì is still under threat from Yoruba. An Àbèsàbèsì child needs no formal instruction on the acquisition of Yoruba. The situation is that an Àbèsàbèsì child acquires Yoruba and Àbèsàbèsì

simultaneously. Presently most adults feel the community has been bi-lingual from creation. On Friday 5<sup>th</sup> of July at a meeting in the palace of Akala of Ikaramu, one of the chiefs argued that the bilingualism in the community came as a result of their origin from Ile-Ife. The community leaders claim the real language of the Àbèsàbèsì is Yoruba, he refers to the Àbèsàbèsì linguistic form as ‘Eno’ secrete language given to the people as special gift from God. The claim of the community leader informs the deliberate shift from Àbèsàbèsì to Yoruba in the communities.

English is another language that has been a threat to Àbèsàbèsì. The ruling power in Ikaramu since Nupe invasion has been compromising confederacy of his people with invaders. Ikaramu became the seat of government for the European government. A regiment of the Royal Niger Company was located in Ikaramu. The barrack was near the present location of Ìbaràmù. The people borrowed many lexical items such as:

ínting ‘something’

dínò ‘dinner’

jídínò eat dinner’

The influence of English is not much because of the shortness of the period spent in the communities.

### **Efforts at Documentation and Revitalisation of Àbèsàbèsì**

There have been various efforts on the linguistic description of Àbèsàbèsì. In mid 90s Mr Ajatta of Ayeteju Ikaramu wrote some Ikaramu lexical items in a note book. The write up was of help to my research in 1996 on Èkiròmì. Aside this effort, many linguists have worked on the Àbèsàbèsì lects. There are some undergraduate long essays in each of the languages In the Department of Linguistics and Languages in Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, Ondo State Nigeria, Ekiti State University Ado Ekiti Nigeria, and University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Ibrahim-Arirabiyi (1989) is the first rigorous academic work on the language. His work is on the Reconstruction of the Akpes. Agoyi (1997, 2008) are other researchs conducted on a lect and Àbèsàbèsì language respectively. Agoyi (2008)’s study is on the Phonology of the Vowel Harmony in Àbèsàbèsì. All these researches attempt grammatical analysis of the language. Giwa published of 500 Ìyànì lexical items in (2010). The book is restricted to only Ìyànì/ Ìluèni speakers. Many speakers complained of lack of reading materials in the language. I decided to form an Àbèsàbèsì language Development committee after consultation with people of like mind from each of the Àbèsàbèsì linguistic communities in 2009. I coordinate the committee; Chief Williams W. O. from Ìbaràmù is the chairperson; Mr Ajayi from Ìkáràmù is the secretary. Other members are at least a representative of each of the speaking community. I fund the group from my salary.

The Akoko Language research committee in the Department of Linguistics and Languages, Faculty of Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, was awarded a grant to document Akoko Languages. We had completed the field work already. We are working on the analysis of the data collected. The grant assisted me to compare my data with the structured data prepared from the University. The incentives given to the resource persons by the research committee were of much assistance to win the support and cooperation of the speakers of Àbèsàbèsì. In addition I use my bus a Mercury villager brand to transport the members of the committee to and fro from the meeting venue. In the meeting the chairperson ruled that all discussions have to be done using Àbèsàbèsì as medium of communication. To write reading materials in the language, I proposed orthography for the language. The proposed orthography was beginner class orthography. The ability of the speakers in reading and writing Yoruba in formal and informal education was taken into consideration.

I only proposed new but familiar graphemes for the phonemes that are not found in Yoruba. Such phonemes are:

/ /	/ ɔ/	ngɔ	‘drink’
	//nĩ ã/	ningi	‘reach/get to’
/ɲ/	/ɲĩ/	nyi	‘open’
/ɲõmĩ/	nyomi	‘fade’	
/ʃ/	/ʃaà/	tʃaà	‘say’
	èʃĩ	ètʃi	‘market’

A booklet titled:

### **NŃ KPAS ÀBÈSÀBÈSÌ MO GBÓ ÀBÈSÀBÈSÌ I UNDERSTAND ÀBÈSÀBÈSÌ**

was published to test the orthography in June 2012. The booklet was accepted by all speakers (though they wanted the booklet to be distributed to them without cost).

There is a collaborative work with the institute of Living tongue in America to write a digital dictionary for the language. We are working on the lexical items for now. The project has served as a challenge to each Àbèsàbèsì speaking community. Members have been gathering to work on the word list I prepared. Youths are getting challenged to speak the local language. On 29<sup>th</sup> December 2012 we held a quiz competition in Ìyànì tagged Dèdè mí n Dèdè. Although only four of the communities were represented, the program was very interesting. Ìbaràmù came first, Àkùnnù was second Ìyànì third and Ìkáràmù was forth.

Unlike before, it is fashionable to give a child an Àbèsàbèsì name now. There are names such as:

English Orthography	Proposed Orthography	Gloss
Chreno	Tṣẹ̀rẹ̀ṅo	‘mend/adore me
Osumena	Oòsùmẹ̀ná	‘God did it for me /God is good to me’
Osunkona	Oòsùńkọ̀ná	‘Thank God’
Dosubo	Doòsùbò	Hold God/Trust in God

Local songs and dancing steps are now welcome phenomenon in entertaining guests in Social gathering. Presently, in Gèdègèdè community meetings are conducted using Àbèsàbèsì as medium of expression. Any member who is not competent in the language is not allowed to contribute to discussions. To actualise my dream on revitalizing Àbèsàbèsì I contacted the president of the Living Tongue Institute in America; I signed an agreement with the institute as a Living Tongue Activist to compile a multi-dialectal digital dictionary for the language. The project is strictly owned by the community. All members of the Àbèsàbèsì language Development committee are working as a team on data collection, transcription, edition etc. Other community members have offered to join the group to enrich the production of the dictionary. We all hope that one day somebody or the government will assist to sponsor our projects.

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