

# KANURI

## BASICS FOR HUMANITARIANS

This factsheet is designed for humanitarian responders in northeast Nigeria and other humanitarian and development staff who require information about the Kanuri language. It aims to provide a brief overview of the dialects, speakers, and geographical distribution of Kanuri and of the ways to effectively communicate with Kanuri speakers.

### Overcoming the language barrier

**There are several ways humanitarians and others can reduce misunderstandings and establish trust with Kanuri speakers:**

- Know if your audience speaks Kanuri as a first language and their literacy levels.
- Use pictures, graphics, and audio messages to help comprehension, particularly for less literate individuals and second-language Kanuri speakers.
- Check that field staff and interpreters speak the dialect used in the relevant area. If that is not possible, use the Yerwa dialect avoiding slang, idiomatic expressions and Hausa loan words.
- Support field staff to use consistent, accurate, and easily understood Kanuri words.
- Allow Kanuri speakers to communicate their needs and concerns in their preferred language and format.

### Facts you need to know about Kanuri

- 1 Kanuri is a Chadic language spoken across northeast Nigeria (mostly in Borno and Yobe States), southeastern Niger, western Chad, northern Cameroon, parts of Libya, and the Darfur region of Sudan. An estimated 7.8 million people speak Kanuri as a first language; the majority of them live in Nigeria.
- 2 Kanuri is also known Bornu, Kanouri, Kanoury, Yerwa Kanuri, and Beriberi (but the latter is considered insulting). There are **four major dialects, not all of them mutually intelligible:**

**Yerwa.** Also known as Wuje, this is the formal form of the language spoken across many local government areas (LGAs) in Borno and Yobe States as well as in parts of Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Sudan. This dialect is the most widely understood by native Kanuri speakers provided that local idioms, slang, and borrowed words from Hausa are avoided.

**Mobar.** This is spoken in Mobbar, Abadam and Kukawa LGAs of Borno State and in Niger. Mobar is related to Yerwa and the two are considered mutually comprehensible.

**Kanembu.** This is spoken in Chad and Niger. Some scholars consider it a different language because it is not mutually intelligible with the other three dialects.

**Manga.** This is similar to Yerwa and is used in the Gaidam and Nguru LGAs of Yobe State and in Niger. Substantial Manga-speaking communities are also present in Jigawa, Bauchi and Gombe States in Nigeria.

- 3 Kanuri is still a lingua franca in northeast Nigeria, although Hausa became more prominent during the colonial era. It is taught in some schools and up to university level in Borno State. **If mother tongue Kanuri speakers have a second language it is most likely to be Hausa or Shuwa Arabic.**
- 4 Many people in northeast Nigeria are not literate. According to a survey conducted by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics, in 2010 the literacy rates were 40.5 percent in Adamawa, 14.5 percent in Borno and 26.6 percent in Yobe, with female literacy levels much lower. However, **no specific data is available on literacy rates among first-language Kanuri speakers so responders should aim to provide Kanuri information in a range of formats to cater for low-literacy groups.**
- 5 For non-literate Kanuri speakers, the main sources of information are radio and television programs in Kanuri. To our knowledge, no Kanuri language newspaper exists.
- 6 Kanuri is a tonal language; this means that saying a word with different tones changes its meaning even if pronunciation is otherwise the same. For example, the word *liwula* can mean 'silver' (when all the vowels are pronounced with high tone) or 'blue' (when all the vowels are pronounced with low tone).
- 7 Before the colonial era, Kanuri people used a modified Arabic-based script known as *ajami*. Now Kanuri is most commonly written in a modified Latin script, although *ajami* is still used by some Islamic scholars.

## How TWB can help

- Kanuri translations of written, audio and video materials by trained translators
- Comprehension-testing research to determine the best combination of language, format, and channel for communicating with crisis-affected people
- Training on the basics of interpreting for humanitarian field staff
- Practical tools, online glossaries and good practice guides for humanitarian field staff, interpreters and translators are available at [translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-response-nigeria](http://translatorswithoutborders.org/twb-response-nigeria)

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