



## THE NEGATIVE ASPECT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ON IGBO CULTURE

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### ABSTRACT

The decadence in Igbo culture has been decried by many concerned individuals and groups. So this paper joins voice to say “the situation has gone beyond what a mere voice can solve and therefore pleads with the Igbo society to kindly revive the Igbo culture by practice” At least, if the Igbo culture is returned to its past glory, the Igbo man will definitely retrieve his ambitious attitude, selfish and immoral behavior which have overtaken the once brotherly love, moral attitude, hard work, honesty and love for norms and tradition of the Igbo society of the old. The paper points out the norms that need crucial attention and also suggests what things to do which will help revive the dead culture. Remember they say, “A society without culture is like a person who is deformed because he is not informed”. The influx of the English language, the high society respect accorded it in our society has crippled our once highly cherished way of life.

**Keywords:** Igbo culture, Igbo language, communication, cultural transmission

### INTRODUCTION

This paper joins voices like that of Chinua Achebe through his artistic creation in the world of literature to revive the Igbo culture. He says in one of his prominent books, *Things Fall Apart*, (published in 1958) that “The proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten”. The proverb is the beauty of communication in Igbo land, it ascribes great respect to men of wisdom who can manipulate words in Igbo language effortlessly. The world is now a global village and so the once prestigious Igbo culture had been traded in for the culture of other lands thereby driving the Igbo culture into extinction. The Ogene Television Programme also decries the match towards extinction of the Igbo language due to modernity of life of the Igbo man who has thrown into oblivion the use of the Igbo language in his private family given preference to the use of the English language instead. The late Ikemba Ojukwu cried loud even at the point of death warning ndi Igbo not to allow the Igbo language to die. Ojukwu was known to speak Okpala Igbo even as it is known that in his life time, he could speak the English language more than any one else in Nigeria having studied in the Oxford University, London. In spite the level of education of late professor Afigbo, he was known to promote Igbo language and spoke it till his last day on earth. The Ahiajioku, an Igbo cultural organization organized by erudite scholars and meaningful Igbo men works to promote the culture, especially the Igbo language. To wake and revive the Igbo language from sleeping, the Igbo actors and actresses organized and acted out an Igbo movie called living in Bondage in 1992 and because of such movies cannot have enough backing by our people, hardly do we have movies acted purely in Igbo Language. The Yoruba people have Yoruba movie organizations which grow from strength to strength every day. The Hausas have joined too. They are all watched in the national television authority. They cannot mixed their languages with any other language as they act out their movies except the Igbo group. Hardly does an Igbo man tells his stories without bringing in English words or sentences. The Igbo language is romantic, beautiful, polite and appealing both to the speaker and listener. It is also rhythmic in nature and identifies the great Igbo man. Other ethnic groups in Nigeria cajole the Igbos in

order that the Igbo man redeems his identity, all to no avail. Igbos should not forget that Igbo language carries the embodiment of Igbo culture which marks the Igbos as more purposeful than men from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbo man is strongly made, beautifully shaped and endowed with wisdom, a people in God's own society with human and natural resources with beautiful climate and adorable topography. M.J.C. Echeruo in a bid to ascribe relevance to Igbo language wrote an Igbo English Dictionary to encourage the people know the meanings of certain Igbo words.

**Language:** Nwachukwu et al (2007:1) define language as a means of communication. Crystal (1982) as cited in Nwachukwu (2007) states that language is essentially a human phenomenon which is very complex and that it is the most frequently used and most highly developed form of human communication technique. Anukam (1999:12) states that language is a medium of communication which is a quality of man that distinguishes him from other animals and that it grows in use and dies in disuse.

Webster's Dictionary of International Edition states that language is defined as follows:

- (a) a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings;
- (b) an audible, articulate, meaningful sounds as produced by the action of the vocal organs;
- (c) the words, their pronunciation and the methods of combining them, used and understood by a considerable community.

Halliday (1975) is of the opinion that language is an institution whereby human communicate and interact with one another by means of habitually used oral auditory symbols. This is why language is treated as a purely human institution, the author opines. Bloch and Trager (1942) view language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which a social group co-operates. The arbitrariness in this particular definition restricts language to speech only; which means that no human speaks without using language (ie without speaking in a particular language).

Sapir (1963) defines language as a purely human and non-instructive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. The source further explains that these symbols are in the first instance auditory and are produced by the organs of speech.

### **THE IGBO LANGUAGE**

The Igbo language is one of the three major national languages in Nigeria. The other two are Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo Language is originally spoken by the indigenes of the eastern part of Nigeria as first language. The Igbo language does what other living languages do in the society. It is a recognized living language that has many books in it, on it and its culture. It is also a subject of study in schools especially within the Igbo speaking region. It is one of the subjects qualified for external examination. Students offer it for WAEC, GCE, NECO etc. it is studied in the university as a discipline. Some of the books in Igbo and about Igbo includes Echeruo, M.J.C. "The Future of Igbo Studies: A very Modest Proposal", In Igbo language and culture, (1972). Ezikeojiaku, P.A. (1989) *Fonoloji na Uteasusu Igbo*. Clark Mary M. 1990, *The Tonal System of Igbo*. Igwe, G.E. and M.M. Green 1970: *A Short Igbo Grammar in the Official Igbo Orthography*, and so on.

### **Characteristics of Language**

Language is a human phenomenon. This is because no other form of communication can compare to human language which is by far a greater potential for international communication.

Human language allows its users to talk about things and events not present in the immediate environment. With language one can discuss about things which happened many years back. Human language is said to have displacement property, a property that allows it to refer to things of the past, present and future.

Language is said to be arbitrary because the spoken or written words have no relationship to the object they represent.

New utterances or new ways of language use indicate that language is creative and dynamic. The creativity in language use can be found in songs, poems, prose, drama and the words of master of ceremony in social events.

Language has two levels which combine to make meaning and they are; the physical level at which sounds are produced and the semantic level at which meanings are ascribed to sounds. This level of operation of the language is called duality of purpose.

### **Cultural Transmission**

Language is not inherited rather a normal born human being acquires a language in a culture with other speakers of a language. The process of passing information from one generation to another is called cultural transmission.

In any speech environment, there is always a message, sender and receiver. In most cases, the speaker can in turn become a listener. This feature of a language is called **reciprocity**.

### **Functions of a language**

In addition to what we have stated above, language is used to ask questions, give orders, give directives, give notices, write letters, pass information, give instructions, buy and sell, exchange pleasantries, desire others good luck, influence people, interact locally and internationally. Human beings also laugh in language, keep record, cry, sing, perform drama and dance in language. Language is everything in the human world. The embodiment of culture is in language. Language is the agent of survival to culture. Without language there would have been no culture. Language makes the culture of a people transmissible from generation to generation of a people. Culture is a bond among a group of people.

### **What is Culture?**

Culture is the totality in the people's way of life. It is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Culture is possessed by man alone.

Culture is a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another, <http://www.tamu.edu/classes/cosc/choudhury/culture.html>.

In my lecture notes during my National Certificate in Education Programme, culture was defined as follows:

- the sum total of learned behavior of a group of people that are generally considered to be the tradition of that people and are transmitted from generation to generation,
- the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them,
- a system of differentiating between in-group and out-group people,
- culture is communication, communication is culture.
- culture is a whole pattern of life of people as expressed in their language

### **Characteristics of Culture**

1. Culture is not a new innovation rather it is as old as a given society.
2. Culture is inherent and transmitted from generation to generation of a people.
3. Culture is society specific or ethnic base.
4. Culture varies from society to society
5. It is dynamic and affected by social contacts.

### **The Importance of Culture:**

1. Culture gives identity to a people
2. It is a certificate of origin to who truly belongs to a certain society or group.
3. It is the standing mirror in which the past is seen, the rock on which a group is built and the pillar that holds a group of people together.
4. Culture also fosters moral values of the people.

5. It gives recognition to men of great deeds, like great hunters, best palm wine tapper, Heroes in wars, warriors, singers, wrestlers like Okonkwo the cat in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.
6. It makes people compliant to norms and traditions of the people.
7. Culture moulds behavior and shapes events.
8. It is a symbol of Unity.

Igbo culture is based on Igbo language which the advent of the English language has destroyed.

Some of these Igbo cultures which have suffered decay include:

*Ibi ugwu* – circumcision

*Igu aha* – naming

*Ibo uzo* – weeding of path ways

*Ilu nwanyi* – traditional marriage

*Echichi* – tittling

*Igba ngba* – wrestling

*Iri ji* – New Yam Festival

*Omugwo* – Post natal cares

*Egwu onwa* – Moon light play

*Osu* – untouchable

*Diala* – son of the soil

*Ichu nta* – hunting

*Asusu* – language

*Ikwa ozu* – Burial rites

*Ima mmanwu* – Masquerading

*Izu ahia* – trading

Some parts of Igbo are known for certain cultural events examples;

Ila oso Uzuakoli,

Ofo of Ezinihite Mbaise,

Abigbo dance of Mbaise,

Ichi Eze ji n'ala Ngwa,

Mmanwu Arondiuzuogu,

Ofola of Anambra,

Dike N'agha of Ohafia,

Ibini Ukpabi of Arochukwu

Iwa Akwa of Mbano,

Oru of Owerre and so on.

These norms above and others not mentioned above are hardly heard of again because everybody now speaks in the English language and therefore feels the English ways thereby perceiving these norms as local and for timid people.

We briefly look at the worst heat among what the English language has destroyed in our culture

1. Religious belief: The Igbo man was known to have very strong belief in his *chii* (gods) which they worshiped and trusted. Those *chii* include; *Amadioha* (god of thunder) *Ala ubi* (god of farm and harvest) *Oparaobishike* (the protector of all first sons) *Ngalama* (the Chief security of the Land) *Ibini Ukpabi* (the god of zero corruption) *Alaogbaga* of Mbaise (the god that stands on behalf of the cheated) others include; *Ogwugwu*, *iyi Eke*, *Okija* shrine etc.
2. Etiquette: The ambitious Igbo man is aggressive. Lack of consideration of another. Politeness is now deleted in their manner of approach. Respect for elders is now a thing of the past. This is as a result of mass literacy, politics in every organization including the church caused by who can speak better English than the other.
3. Occupation: The Igbo people are known to be strong farmers, traders producers of national resource materials which are; palm kernel, palm oil, raffia, bamboo walls etc. They are now seen as petty since everyone has gone to school to learn to read and write in the English language.

4. Social events: Wrestling activities, dancing, singing, iwa-akwa, igba ekpe, Okonko, Ofola have all witnessed transformation from the traditional system to attach foreign components.
5. Institutions: marriage, in-laws, age grade, kingsmen associations, town unions, communal life existed. They have been politicized in the English language pattern.
6. Hospitality: the once Igbo generosity, kindness, brother's keeper and so on have turned to selfishness, wickedness and brothers killers.
7. Mode of dressing; This changed a long time ago to foreign pattern of dressing and the rich Igbo style is ignored.
8. Naming: No more Igbo names that carry a lot of meaning and brings a lot of good luck to who has it. These days it is English names to children and even some people who had their Igbo names have made their names sound English, examples, Uchenna to urch, Ikwchukwu to Iyk, Chikayima to Kyma, Chidumebi to Dume, Chukwuemeka to Chuks etc. What a people! This is a people being ashamed of their identity.

This Igbo group is so highly endowed in wisdom that wherever an Igbo man finds himself, he speaks the people's language fluently like them, eat like them, behave completely like them that he is hardly identified as an Igbo man. There is this actress who acted in living in Bondage of 1992 by name Ngozi Nwosu, she is a native of Arochukwu in Abia state of Nigeria, people have doubted as for where she came from because she speaks Yoruba language, acts in Yoruba and gestures in Yoruba. When Pete Edochie speaks Hausa language, one can mistake him to one Alhaji like that. Igbos should be proud of themselves by not allowing the Igbo language to die off.

## **CONCLUSION**

This work is just one of those numerous voices calling to retrieve the Igbo culture back to life. Civilization is a good thing and oath to be embraced because life is dynamic. Civilization or not, identity is very important. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society and each ethnic group speaks a language different from one another, having different laws guiding each ethnic group, therefore Igbo group should be mindful of her language and culture and use other languages when necessary. Do not ignore your route completely because that is your own background not our own background as Nigerians in the foreign counties would say. If your name is Okafor or Ibu and you find yourself living in America, answer your name boldly and give your children Igbo names and even speak Igbo language to them, let them know where they came from, that is our background. This paper assumes that the English language is a popular language known by everybody who is entitled to know it. The history of it, how it found its route to Nigeria, its functions, its importance in our multilingual nation (Nigeria) and the level it operates are known. This is why it is not emphasized here.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of what we have above, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Igbo language should be made compulsory as a subject of study across the Igbo land.
2. Igbo customs and traditions should form part of civic education in schools.
3. Local Igbo products should be labeled in Igbo language
4. There should be a handbook of the Igbo language to all non Igbo origin in Igbo land to enable them value our worth/language.
5. Tell people good stories about your background Igbo land.
5. Cultural exhibitions should be encouraged in physical and health exercises in schools, such as wrestling, ifo, riddles and jokes, ilu, idioms, Igbo songs, dancing etc.
6. Do not tell them that Igbo people are timid or that they are monkeys.
7. Be very proud of who you are and do not try to hide your identity.
8. Speeches of Igbo concern should strictly be done in Igbo Language
9. Title taking should not be bought
10. Every indigene of Igbo should be compliant of Igbo norms and tradition irrespective of wealthy background and personality.

11. Review henceforth, dress code in our higher institution and women in particular.

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