

THE IMPERATIVE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES, LEADERSHIP AND TRANSFORMATION AGENDA IN AFRICA: NIGERIA IN FOCUS

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Abstract

This paper examines the imperatives of indigenous languages in the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic socio-linguistic milieu of Nigeria against the backdrop of the threats of their imminent extinction. It presupposes that laudable government programmes such as the anit-graft, anti-corruption campaign, the re-branding Nigeria project, deregulation, security, peaceful co-existence, etc, can only succeed if the grassroots are sensitized and carried along speaking their own languages. It interrogates the role of indigenous languages vis-a-vis the sustenance of democratic values, conflict prevention and resolution, peace building, national re-orientation and electioneering campaign leadership. It concluded with a number of recommendations that if taken beyond merely as academic exercises, can catalyze an indigino-lingual renaissance of sorts in Nigeria.

Keywords: Indigenous Languages, Multilingualism, Leadership, Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Human language occupies a central place as the primary means of interpreting reality, negotiating and creating meaning, and articulating our perception of experience. According to Blanco (1987, pp1-10), language is basic to cultures, evolution and change and therefore becomes a code for the unique experiences of different cultural groups. For Tauli (1974), language is a social code as well as a social institution and functions as a means of identification,

categorization, perceptual, thinking, creative activity, and technology, transmission of knowledge across space and time, and the basic instrument of social behaviour.

More importantly, language is a source of group and cultural identity. In other words, the diversity and differences between human groups is marked by the distinctiveness of language. The situation in Nigeria is worrisome because of the diversity of languages spoken in the country. Emenanjo (2003) opines that it may never be possible to say with any degree of certainty, how many Nigerian languages there are in a complex, multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-culture polity such as Nigeria. This is because different authorities have different figures ranging from 200 to 450.

What are Indigenous Languages?

It is pertinent to give a working definition of the key components of the title. This is to limit our focus to what our understanding of the topic is. By indigenous languages, we are referring to those languages which are traceable to linguistic groups within the bounds of Nigeria. As a nation, Nigeria is said to have about 400 indigenous languages. The exact number of languages cannot be given due to the fact that some minority languages might still not have been located and reported and partly due to the controversy as to what should be a language and what should be a dialect.

Unofficially, or at least non-technically, Nigerian languages are divided into two main groups viz: the major languages and the minority languages. The major languages are those whose speaker population is at least one million. In the group are languages like Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik/Ibibio, Dzulfulde, Tiv, Kanuri, Lupe. In the minority group are all the other languages not listed as major languages. They include “the ones spoken in the south-south, North Central and other parts of Nigeria. The major languages have relative advantage over minority languages due to their state of development.

Although English is spoken across the length and breadth of Nigeria, it is not seen as an indigenous language, its functions in Nigeria notwithstanding. This is because no ethnic nationality in Nigeria can say English is our mother tongue. Thus for a language to pass as an indigenous language, it must have native speakers in Nigeria who speak it as their first language.

Transformation as a concept can be used differently to mean different things in different situations. However, transformation is generally conceptualized as a radical change for the better, innovation and or reform socially, politically, economically, educationally, technologically, etc. according to Etim and Jeribe (2012:3), the concept of Transformation implies a complete turn around

or change from one situation to another, a total departure from an old order to a new one.

Soyele, R.A. (2012), Stretches the concept further to subsume the need to reform, refocus, redesign, regenerate, reposition, institutions, attitudes, structures, processes and programme in the large and long term interest of the majority in society”(22).

What then are democratic values and what role(s) can indigenous languages play in evolving, enduring or sustaining democratic values, national identity and allegiance?

Democratic values according to Ikeazor (2005: p.27) include:

- A credible electoral system.
- A fearless, consistent and independent judiciary.
- Freedom of information.
- Internal democracy in the political parties, and an educated and determined populace and in addition, universal suffrage.

Fundamentally, the term “democratic values” captures the notions of openness, adherence to due process, freedom of choice on the part of those who are qualified to elect/select their leaders or in the reverse be selected/elected as leaders. Opata (2011 P.2) reports that the core democratic values of American Constitutional Democracy for example, are said to consist of the following features: right to life, liberty without causing harm to others, the right to the pursuit of the common good, justice, equality, diversity, truth, popular sovereignty, patriotism etc.

Obviously, values constitute an integral part of a people’s culture heritage. As observed by Okoye (2009), values are the greatest factors that mould character, conduct, culture and worldview central in the life of a people. However, core values vary from institution to institution, and from culture to culture.

According to Rayner, St Claire and Yazzie (1999, P. 19), African indigenous cultures teach children to imbibe a myriad of core values including:

Avoidance of adultery, Knowledge of language, Belief in God/spirituality, Respect for God’s creations, Respect for nature, Respect for elders, Respect for others, Love for children, Hard work, Spirit of sharing, Spirit of co-operation, Avoidance of crime, Avoidance of conflict , Love of humour, Responsibility to the large community, Defence of fatherland.

From the foregoing, the role of indigenous languages in the democratic process cannot be overemphasized. Abdullahi (1996) contends that the degree of progress a political process makes depends to a large extent on the:

Indigenous Languages as Instrument For Mass Mobilization

It can be asserted here that the best medium for use in eliciting a people's receptiveness, responsiveness, loyalty and development is their local languages. This is corroborated by Onuoha (1996) who posits that arrangements should be made for subsequent translations of party constitutions and manifestoes into the dominant languages spoken in each local government area. Indeed, the expressive medium through which the democratization process would reach the grassroots is their indigenous languages. For the illiterate masses, a political message on a poster is meaningless since they cannot read. Therefore, an indigenous translation into local languages is inevitable.

Okwudishu (2011, p.9) shares a more encouraging story narrated about electioneering in the northern Nigeria where Hausa is the lingua franca. Quoting Shuaibu (2007), she asserts that "money does not influence electoral Victory. In Kano State for example, once one speaks the Hausa language, respects their culture and convinces them with sincerity of purpose, he/she is sure of being accepted". Campaign kits and publicity materials can be packaged in the local language too. Shuaibu further cites the example of a young Igbo politician who in didactic prose chanted some local proverbs in very fluent Hausa to the admiration of the local people. Thus, with a demonstration of a strong passion for the local language, politicking and electioneering could be made more grassroots-oriented.

Indigenous Languages as Agents for Social Mobilization

In the light of the myriad **socio-economic/political** challenges confronting the nation made worse by violence, kidnappings, militancy and the Boko Haram insurgency, security advocacy and mobilization can be effectively done through the indigenous languages media. Many citizens do not understand the motive(s) behind the Boko Haram agitation nor the militancy in the Niger Delta region. More so, the voter apathy reported at the end of the staggered elections in four(4) states in Nigeria – Rivers, Kano, Sokoto, Kwara and Lagos in 2019 can be addressed through voter education and effective electioneering messages geared towards the grassroots. These underscore the need to promote democratic values and identity in the various Nigerian communities through the use of the local languages and through bilingual and multilingual advocacy and enlightenment. Cross River State in the 2019 carried out advocacy and enlightenment in more than one language. In fact,

the grassroots were mobilized using Efik, Ejagham, Bekwarra, Bette, Yakurr, Bahumono, Legbo, etc.

Okwudishu (2011) also reports that some states in the last elections, cognizant of their multilingual profile, carried out advocacy and enlightenment drives in many local languages. She cites the examples of Benue where the masses were addressed in Tiv, Idoma and Igede; Nassarawa, where the campaigns were carried out in Hausa, Mada and Eggon. Delat where campaigns were carried out in Urhobo, Ika, Ndokwa languages etc.

Indigenous Languages and Conflict Resolution

Conflicts and confrontations are normal social phenomena. Otite and Ogiomo (1979, p. 67) maintained correctly that there is a conflict theory of society in sociology which considers conflicts to be natural and indeed necessary for social change and they insist that:

Social interdependence does not exclude conflict in society.

Such conflict can be at three levels. First, interpersonal conflicts or disputes such as between father and son, wife and husband, or employer and employee for a variety of reasons. Interpersonal conflicts could lead to the second level, that of intergroup conflicts such as between ethnic and racial groups. The third level is the international level, that is conflict between Nations because of their different self interests, for example, the border conflicts between two countries or states.

The bottom line of all these is that one cannot escape conflict in life. In fact, wherever there are human relations, there are bound to be conflicts. The situation in Nigeria's democratic practice is worrying not with the Boko Haram insurgency in the North, the militancy in the Niger Delta, the kidnappings, violence and armed robbery in the East, the inter-ethnic and inter-religious crises in the Middle belt etc. to quote Thomas Jefferson, "Enlighten the people and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day". It is obvious that the use of language can either obviate or ignite conflicts.

In the light of the tension and heat in the polity, conflict management and resolution messages can be packaged in indigenous languages to educate the citizenry and mobilize them for national emancipation and social participation. Thus in line with Adeiyongo's 2011 observation that for a society to be a true democracy, its leaders and citizens must be alive to the

pivotal role of language in resolving conflict as well as in performing numerous other functions.

Indigenous Media and Democratic Values

Fafunwa (1989) submits that we can help our people to improve their social, economic and political activities through the mother tongue. Oyedokun (2011) contends that the indigenous media is a latent source of information and powerful medium of communication. The indigenous media gives ample attention by disseminating tales that have a local touch particularly those that concern their daily lives in their community. By so doing, problems brought into limelight are solved locally. The indigenous media have been in existence since 1859 with the publication of a Yoruba language newspaper “Iwe Irohin”. Other effort include two Efik papers “Unwana Efik” and “Obukpon Efik” (1845-92), “Eko Akete” in 1922, and Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo”.

Indeed the media and governance are inseparable. Olutokun (2006, p. 126) laments that “Political scientists have paid scant attention to the linkage between the media and how they connect democratic struggles.”

Bamgbose (2005) submits that as long as the language of governance is accessible only to the educated elite, majority of the citizens will be excluded, thereby making nonsense of participatory democracy.

A functioning indigenous media should therefore focus on the needs of the people at the community level and should concentrate on a community media where the modern media does not reach the people. Oyedokun (2011) contends that Nigeria’s quest for democratic values will not yield results until her languages are given the attention they deserve. The indigenous media become therefore, a powerful tool to achieve a credible electoral system, freedom of information and an instrument social, economic and political transformation.

Indigenous Languages as Medium of Instruction

Canham and Oziji (1979:207), Bholá (1981:87), Afolayan (1988:8), affirm that learning and reading in one’s vernacular would boost functional literacy as the vernacular creates interest. This position is strengthened by the National Policy on Education (1981) which states thus in Section 1:8.

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people’s culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue.

The policy further states (Section 2:11(3) that government will ensure that the medium of instruction will principally be the mother tongue (MT), or the language of Immediate Community (LIC) and to this end will (a) develop the orthography for many more Nigerian languages and (b) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.

Obviously, grand as the policy appears, its implementation has been hampered by the lack of political will, lack of personnel, equipment, materials (book and non-book) and orthographic for most of the indigenous languages.

Banjo et al. (2002) have explained the dangers inherent in using a foreign language as medium of instruction at the primary school level. According to them, a child who is learning a foreign language as to learn the transferred meaning by heart just as the names of objects of sense impressions have to be. The child thus loses the intermediate stage closely connecting the idea with minds become split into the two water-tight compartments one for ordinary things and actions expressed in their mother tongue, and the other, for things connected with schools subjects and the world of ideas expressed in a foreign language. As a result, they are unable to speak of their home affairs in the school subject and about their learned subjects in their dialects.

In a nut shell, learning in the mother tongue at the early stages of primary education has been found to be easy and natural for children.

Indigenous Languages and Electioneering Campaigns

It is obvious that one potent weapon in electioneering is voter education. Through voter education, people's consciousness of the power of their voices and the significance of the political choices they make can be heightened. With the 2005 electoral reforms, the one man, one vote advocacy has gained currency. Voters are further empowered to protect their vote by staying around the polling zone the votes cast are counted and the results announced.

The important question that remains is how we can carry the voters along granted that about 75% of the critical mass of the country is illiterate. According to National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2009), a campaign message is not the candidate's programme of what he/she would do if elected; it is not a list of the issues the candidate will address if elected into office, and it is not a simple catch phrase or slogan. All of these things can be part of a campaign, depending on whether or not they will persuade voters, but they should not be confused with the message. A campaign message is a simple statement that will be repeated over and over throughout the campaign to persuade the target voters.

Okwudishu (2011) therefore correctly recommends that the campaign message should have the following characteristics: “short, credible, persuasive, important, and able to show contrast, targeted, repeated again and again, clear and able to speak to the heart”.

How can a campaign message be clear and able to speak to the heart if it is not delivered in the language the people use and understand easily? As stated earlier, a message on a poster is meaningless for the illiterate masses since they cannot read. Therefore, translation into indigenous languages would create a casual image in their minds and thus enable them to understand the challenges of the everyday living.

Indigenous Languages and National Reorientation

There comes a time in the life of a people, race or nation that it becomes expedient to bring about a reorientation of the citizenry in the face of attrition of core national values. Such values include respect for elders, success through hard work, unity in diversity, freedom of worship and association, spirit of co-operation, etc.

The mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Reform (MAMSER) campaign was initiated in the mid-eighties to drum up support for national re-armament. However, the expressive medium through which the national rebirth project would reach the grassroots was not adequately addressed. MAMSER’s translation of the messages into the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) did not achieve much, since only a few could read in their mother tongues. Onuoha (1996) posited that with the number of indigenous languages in the Nigerian sociolinguistic profile, translating into only three main languages is not enough as speakers of the minority languages are bound to feel marginalized for not being given the opportunity to use their local languages- the best medium for use in eliciting a people’s political receptiveness, loyalty, and development.

It is the valued opinion of the researchers that these rebranding messages and campaign would not achieve much unless the grassroots are carried along. Indeed, the discord over the marginalization of minority language groups has been particularly serious (Emenanjo, 1990; Essien, 2003).

If the country must move forward and be numbered among the top twenty countries by the year 2020, then the indigenous language media must be adequately harnessed to sensitize and mobilize the citizenry especially the grassroots.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at what indigenous languages are, what democratic values are, and what roles indigenous languages can play in evolving enduring and sustainable democratic values and national transformation. It sees the need for the development of the so-called minority languages to make for wider coverage of the populace. No matter from which perspective look at it, language is at the core of all human communication. The English language is a second language, it is learned in school, and only the elite can effectively get meaning from slogans and other messages coined in it. The indigenous language is learnt in the home and opens to acquisition by everyone in the community.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made by the researchers:

1. Even though the Nigerian Policy on Education advocates the use of indigenous languages (NPE, 2004), the policy has not been effectively practiced; it is advocated that the policy be implemented as it is supposed to be.
2. Democratic values should be taught in all schools and at all levels.
3. Language teachers should be encouraged to carry out more language based researches which will foster democratic values.
4. Orthographies for more indigenous languages should be developed to enhance the reading and writing of the indigenous languages.
5. More texts should be written in indigenous languages in order to foster reading in indigenous languages.

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