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Urhobo Verbal Arts (Proverbs), Globalization and Threat of Extinction

Akporherhe Friday¹ and Udi Peter Oghenerioborue²

¹Department of English, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria.

E-mail: akpoChrisoke@yahoo.com

²Department of English, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria.

E-mail: udipeter4@gmail.com

²Correspondence: udipeter4@gmail.com

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Abstract

Verbal arts particularly the proverbs are performed in traditional African societies using the indigenous language of the people. The apprehension of most people in recent time is that the new technologies like the Internet, Instagram, Twitter, MP3, WhatsApp, and Youtube, western cultures and influence would eventually push most indigenous languages with oral traditions into extinction. The aim of this research is to examine the future of Urhobo language and the verbal arts particularly the proverbs in our globalized society. The information and data for this study were gathered through in-depth interviews and focused discussions. They were drawn from a handful of communities that cut across diverse Urhobo kingdoms and qualitatively analyzed. Our findings revealed that the extinction of Urhobo language with verbal arts such as the proverbs, myths, folktales, riddles and so on, is indeed worrisome to language scholars. However, most respondents argued against the threat of extinction stating convincing reasons. They affirmed that readers should be educated about the utilitarian functions of oral products in order to preserve them for future generation despite the challenges posed by globalization. It is recommended that conferences, seminars and studies on Urhobo language and verbal arts should be organized regularly for their documentation and transfer to successive generations. The new technologies should also be employed to preserve these elements of Urhobo cultural heritage.

Keywords: Language, verbal arts, transfer, globalization

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the future of Urhobo language and verbal arts such as proverbs, myths, folktales and legends, to mention a few, in spite of the threat posed by globalization in contemporary African societies. There has been a controversy that several indigenous languages shall go into extinction in most societies because of their non-usage by the present and future generations. Since the oral products like the proverbs are also an aspect of communication arts, there is the tendency that they might likely go into extinction. It is against this background that the researchers sampled opinions of some Urhobo elders in the field and our findings show contrary viewpoints. While some respondents asserted that proverbs, songs, myths and folktales used by the Urhobo elders during peace and conflict resolution shall stand the test of time, others argued against this viewpoint, drawing our attention to the challenges emanating from globalization in our societies. The opinions shared by majority of the respondents during the research would be critically examined in this paper.

The cultural practices and beliefs systems of any ethnic nationality are often transmitted through language and without this medium, subsequent generation would be disconnected from the cultural heritage of their people. This is because language is a vehicle of culture and the understanding of a people's language puts one close to their thoughts and emotions. Language, therefore, is primarily a means of communication among a people or between peoples (Ojaide, 2006 cites in Omotor, *et al*, 2006). From Ojaide's assertion, the absence of indigenous language in a society is tantamount to termination of cultural values since it is the only communicative medium and gateway into the culture of an ethnic grouping. Language has to be spoken for it to survive the test of time. This is because language speaks a lot about a people's culture and values. Obotetukudo (2001:42) noted that language affords a window into the views and beliefs of a people, and hence their philosophies. Besides the fact that it reflects the culture and beliefs system of an ethnic nationality, scholar further posited that, "language excites, extorts, motivates, extols, entertains, praises and blames; it persuades, informs, celebrates, and memorializes" (Obotetukudo, 2001). With this, one can perceive that language performs numerous utilitarian functions in a society and as the scholar clearly stated

language gives meaning to human existence in our world apart from the use of symbols which are also means of cultural identity.

The culture of every ethnic grouping is conveyed through language of which proverbs and other verbal arts play vital role. Proverbs, therefore, are the integral part of any living language and as Ojaide (2007:113) asserts, language is the most important carrier of a people's culture. To the Urhobo people, the strength of their language lies in the proverbs, which are not only expressive and communicative tools but also agents of the perpetuation of their entire culture and its values. In Fashina's (2006) view, African proverbs, like proverbs from some other ancient and primeval societies, are moral educational modules which are used for instruction in social behavior (165). From the foregoing viewpoints, it has become obvious that proverbs play vital roles in language development and its existence depends on the continuity of language.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this research is to examine the future of the Urhobo language and the verbal arts, particularly the proverbs in globalized society. Apart from the foregoing, the specific objectives of this study include to; (i) examine the concept of globalization and its impacts in society, (ii) explore Urhobo proverbs and communication arts, and (iii) examine various methods of preserving Urhobo language and the verbal arts (proverbs) in globalized society.

Globalization and Cultural Impacts in Society

In recent time, globalization appears to be penetrating faster than imagined into several African cultures especially in the areas of language and communication. Be it globalization or modernity, many languages are being influenced greatly by the technological advancement interiorizing our traditional societies and this has to a large extent posed a great danger to the future of languages and the use of verbal arts such as the proverbs. Globalization as a concept could be defined in several ways but whichever definition given it should reflect the steady increase and influence of socio-cultural, economic and political ideologies across the entire globe. The focus here is on global influences which could be experienced in various parts of the world. According to Obioha (2010), globalization refers to "a process of bringing together the compliant nations of the world under a global village with socio-politico and economic-cultural interaction, integration, diffusion and give

and take facilitated by information flow and perhaps for the enhancement of the global world” (2). This definition conveys the idea of interiorization or influence explained above be it ‘interaction’, ‘integration’ or ‘diffusion’ which in the long run must have both negative and positive influences on the society. In the opinion of Ahmadu (2013: 85), globalization is the term used to describe the changes in societies and the world economy that result from dramatically increased international trade and cultural exchange. The societal changes described by Ahmadu above cut across all aspects of human existence especially the areas that have to do with interaction and assimilation of ideologies, values and beliefs system which can not only affect our lifestyle but also determines our economic activities. Ahmadu (2013: 85) acknowledged Tandon (1998) whose view collaborates his meaning of globalization. According to Tandon, globalization seeks to remove all national barriers to the free movement of international capital and this process is accelerated and facilitated by the supersonic transformation in information technology. The emergence of the new technologies such as the Internet, email, WhatsApp, Camcorder, Digital Video Disc, MP3, Youtube, Ipad, and others has promoted the growth of globalization and most importantly the effectiveness of the Internet in dissemination of information across cultures.

Globalization, in actual sense, is a multifaceted phenomenon conceptualized by various people based on their backgrounds. While some scholars focus on the economic aspect and emphasize the global economic outlook, others are concerned with the global cultural aspect, or how it has affected their socio-cultural patterns (Owolabi and Owoeye, 2013 cite Adedimeji, 2007). The influence of globalization is mostly felt in urban settlements compared to the rural areas though there are still traces of it in some of those places. The decision of the new generation to disrespect their indigenous languages cannot be separated from the influence of globalization which has been gradually and steadily eroding our primordial custom and traditions inherited and nurtured by our elders in our contemporary societies in Africa. Western lifestyle has adversely affected our traditional values and beliefs. While many children are shying away from articulating their Mother Tongue in public, Eurocentric-minded African men and women have discarded their language and other elements of their culture. In affirming the above argument, Darah (2007: 108) laments the adverse effects of urbanization on the Urhobo language particularly among the children raised in urban

environments. According to him, illiteracy and deafness in Urhobo language are some of the negative consequences of urbanization. The situation since the 1990s has been so bad that there are now several generations of Urhobo children who neither understand nor speak Urhobo. This is tantamount to an act of cultural suicide. The pitiable situation of the challenge at hand is aggravated by the attitude of the present generation of children who cannot only exchange greetings in their native language. Though these children communicate effectively in Pidgin, this medium of communication cannot replace their Mother Tongue, the Urhobo language. Darah (2007) in his right words, refers to such children as the *minguo* (*migu*) generation that does not have the capacity to understand and transmit the essentials of culture and civilization that can give the Urhobo identity and esteem in the global community of 6,000 languages.

Also contributing to the issue of globalization, Owolabi and Owoeye (2013: 28) observe that the global economy, through globalization, is taking its toll on our culture and psyche to the extent that only a sense of history can bring us back on the path of rectitude. The need to retrace our steps and embrace our cultural practices is of great significance. Children of this generation should not only assimilate our beliefs system and means of communication but also cherish and transfer them to next generation. In corroborating this view, Darah (2007) posted that language is the most dynamic curator and transmitter of culture. It is the software of civilization. Indeed, to speak is both human and divine. Wambi (1998) while commenting on the significance of language posits that human development is hinged upon communication that is the very heart of language. With language, a people can share experiences, transact business, hold discussions, conversation, play games to amuse and recreate themselves among many other things. As he further stated, language is society's moral code and as such, an essential part of human identity. An attack or negligence upon language is felt as an attack upon our human development and us. At this juncture, one can concurred with Sapir (1949) who posits that it is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group (Sapir, 1949 in Ojaide, 2006:4). Apart from language being a medium of communication,

several developments and policies are been carried out with the help of language and mutual understanding.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. While the former aims at creating time and freedom for respondents to explore issues that are related to the research topic, the latter is designed to ascertain the authenticity of the oral data collected throughout the fieldwork. The data which were gathered using video camera, tape recorder and notes taking were transcribed and translated from the Urhobo language to English and qualitatively analyzed.

The people interviewed during the fieldwork were men and women of about 40 years and above.

Globalization and the Future of Urhobo Proverbs

Though globalization is perceived to be eroding cultural values, beliefs system and the use of oral traditions especially the verbal arts like the proverbs in social and conflict-related discourse. Our research findings from various Urhobo communities revealed some beaming signals of hope. During the fieldwork, a large number of respondents provided positive views about the future of Urhobo proverbs in the context of peace and conflict resolution. While some respondents were of the opinion that proverbs and some other verbal arts would face extinction because of lack of usage as discussed earlier in this work, others strongly kicked against this postulation citing several reasons which would form the basis of this study. There is a general apprehension across Nigeria that several minority languages may face extinction because globalization is eroding many socio-cultural, beliefs and practices which are conveyed from one generation to another through language and communication. Without mincing words, the use of pidgin and/ or English as medium of communication in most towns and cities is posing as threat to the existence of indigenous languages especially the minorities. In market places, schools, religious gathering, social events, political meetings and rallies, and even in some homes, the dominant medium of communication is either pidgin or English. This trend is caused by the rapid spread of globalization and the struggle by Eurocentric Africans to imbibe and promote the western cultural beliefs and practices, economic ideologies and politics. Though globalization is fast interiorizing the nooks and crannies of every

society, a handful of respondents encountered during the fieldwork gave contrary views which are the main focus of this study.

Proverbs and Communication Arts in Society

Language is actually an integral part of culture that is employed to convey experiences, practices, beliefs, thoughts and feelings people in society. During the research, interviewees argued that the Urhobo language cannot face extinction because certain people at present study Urhobo proverbs and other verbal performances informally from talented elders who are famous orators in several communities across Urhoboland just as students study indigenous languages from primary to tertiary institutions. With this development, people who were not conversant with proverbs, myths, legendary stories and so on, let alone having interest in their oral traditions can now learn from others who are authorities in the use of proverbs. During dispute settlement, for instance, elders who have in-depth knowledge of the legal culture of the people and are capable of utilizing proverbs in de-escalating conflicts would be called upon. The unique thing with this class of people is that, they infuse relevant proverbs into discussions in order to reduce tension. Abraham Esegba, one of the respondents reaffirmed the significance of Urhobo proverbs and stated that: *Ohwo ro tan'ise ke'kpawaren, oyekpa. Kir'edie evur'ekiditor, etiy'ada mre ise;* (Whoever says that proverbs will be things of the past is a fool; because it is when people are seated that proverbs come to play). In essence, whenever elders are gathered to deliberate on certain issues, the use of proverbs must be explored. Inasmuch as the language of an ethnic group lives, proverbs which are introduced into utterances will never be eroded away by globalization. Not even the "minguo (*miguo*) generation" of children can put an end to their usage.

According to Akporobaro (2005:29), oral literature is a living phenomenon which is contemporaneous with the written tradition. Oral literature is a creative text delivered by the word of mouth. It refers to the heritage of imaginative verbal creations, stories, folk-beliefs and songs of preliterate societies which have evolved and passed on generation to another. One of the things that helped the transmission of culture to scholars from other parts of the world was that most documentations made on the proverbs and other verbal arts have English transmissions. The tools deployed for documentation by these scholars then were basically oral interviews and the print

media. The results of the collections done through interviews were published in texts which later became resource materials for early scholars. The Urhobo cherish proverbs like other oral narrative forms of orature because they are vital ingredients that are used to garnish their language during expressions. Besides, these proverbs have been in existence for a time immemorial and they are passed on from generation to generation. Elders hardly midwife conflicts without copious use of relevant proverbs. For instance, whenever elders (spokesmen) are delegated to other communities both within and outside Urhoboland for a peace talk, they display their wisdom lore over there. It is not uncommon among the Urhobo especially the elders to carry out a peace process without making use of proverbs. In fact, elders begin their traditional legal proceedings with proverbs, utilize them during and after their judgement.

In a strong view expressed by George Oyibocha who was interviewed in the field, the extinction of proverbs and other linguistic resources utilized during conflict diffusion sounds as a mirage because our forefathers used these proverbs in their time. Our present elders have now taken over from them and as they speak, the next generation is also eager to learn and continue from where they would stop. According to Ong (1999: 24), in an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired has to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration and the new way to store knowledge was not in mnemonic formulas but in the written text. This freed the mind for more original, more abstract thought. George Oyibocha drew our attention to the therapeutic effects of proverbs and other oral products such as storytelling and myths often introduced into peace and conflict discourse and according to him, proverbs and storytelling are what Urhobo elders employ to relief pent-up emotions and whenever they are infused into a discussion, the dispute, no matter how serious it may be would be resolved amicably. Oyibocha further reaffirmed that proverbs cannot go into extinction because *Na ware rhe oye, adjan s'ako*; (Right from the ancient days, bat has gaps between its teeth). This is also in line with Aderho's view that proverbs with other verbal resources have been in existence from a time immemorial. In fact, they are peculiar oral materials that have come to stay. In furtherance, a handful of the respondents at Kokori Inland in Agbon Clan of Ethiope East Local Government unanimously agreed to the view that language and proverbs could hardly go into extinction. Their reasons are not

farfetched. First, some of the forms of oral tradition have now been recorded in cassettes, video and even in the websites/Internet for people within and outside Urhoboland to access and download.

Proverbs and the New Technologies

The new technologies contributed immensely towards the economic growth and development of every nation in the world. The findings of this research have further revealed that a lot of people have realized the need to preserve their cultural heritage by resolving to buying cassettes of their traditional songs especially the old songs of famous artists like Omokomoko Osokpa, David Ayandju, Diamond Ichege, A. D. Djalere, Johnson Adjan, Ogute Ottan, and so on. Some parents have resolved to be sending their children to their villages to learn their mother tongue and since proverbs are embedded in the language of the people there is the possibility that they would learn some of the vital proverbs. Without language, people cannot fit into their society because they could neither speak nor understand their indigenous language, let alone their proverbial expressions. However, proverbs could only go into extinction in families where the use of English has taken over the place of mother tongue. Even though English has become the first language of some Africans in their homeland, the advent of technologies should also be considered beneficial to us because African oral tradition is 'still being produced, in various forms, updated in its themes and references'. Some of its forms are documented in records, cassettes, films and more latterly videos (Irele, 1990:53-54). The documentation of oral materials through the new technologies has helped in portraying African culture and also provokes further research among scholars. Based on the above, the proverbs would stand the test of time and as Oyibocha clearly asserted that, *Ame kpa'ware-e. Okpor kpo'kpor amr'ame*; (Water does not go into extinction. It remains new forever). In addition, there is a proverb that: *Orodeko kpe aware-e*; (Snakes never go into extinction). Another related proverb is: *Edjor r'awaren ten-n*; (Ancient gods never lose their potency). The above proverbs are used to illustrate the belief that proverbs would not go into extinction. In buttressing the above assertion, Hussein (2005) observes that Africa is a continent known for its rich oral arts and proverbs are the most widely and commonly used in the continent's long-standing tradition of oral arts. Among such oral arts, the African proverbs have been facilitating the transmission of knowledge and conventions from generation to generation.

The new technologies are always mobile hence collected proverbs and other verbal arts like myths, folktales and riddles conveying the Urhobo language, peace and development are now being recorded while researchers can upload such texts into phones, MP3, Ipod and computer. This in essence enhances memorization and aids learning of oral performance. Moreover, the new technologies create an opportunity for the teaching of proverbs as a form oral literature and culture to people in the Diaspora, with little or no stress. This is because of the fact that oral literature which encompasses proverbs, riddles, folktales, and so on, could be posted on online archives while a website could be created for the documentation of these genres. An instance of a website design for Urhobo oral literature and culture is: <http://www.urhobowadoo.com> and this was formed to promote Urhobo language and other aspects of their culture. This website was created by the Urhobo Historical Society (UHS) which was founded by Prof Peter Palmer Ekeh.

Urhobo Dictionary and Scriptures

The results of the investigation have shown that there is now Urhobo dictionary which also contains some proverbs and other forms of oral traditions of the people. This is in addition to the Holy Bible which has been translated from English to Urhobo language and there also a website designed to preserve and promote Urhobo scholarly works as stated earlier. Occasionally, Urhobo elders also appear on radio and television stations to present some aspects of their rich cultural heritage which are recorded and stored for future reference. Adejumo (2009:3) is not silence on the future and continuity of oral traditions. He observes that documentation has helped in transmitting our culture to scholars throughout the world and this is made possible through oral interviews and the print media. Interestingly, the outcome of the collections made in the field 'was the published texts', which later became resource materials for early scholars. These materials are retrieved and studied by people who could not obtain firsthand information of oral productions and verbal arts. According to Korhonen (2006:5), through reading about people's experiences and problems, we learn new coping and problem-solving skills for ourselves. The ability to contribute to our communities, make choices, reach goals, and solve problems leads to increased confidence and self-esteem. Also affirming Korhonen's stand on the documentation and preservation of oral resources and language, Adejumo (2009: 4-6) posits that through the use of home video, the language and culture of the

people could be taught in any part of the world. In the same vein, works on proverbs, myths and storytelling are documented with the new media/technologies in the form of Video Home System (VHS), Compact Disc (CD), or Digital Video Disc (DVD). However, people who cannot afford to buy copies of the (VHS), CD and DVD can still rent them at video shops or record studios.

Oratory Works and Documentation of Verbal Arts

The formation of the *Ukoko R'etota* (Urhobo Oratory Association) of which Akpomedaye Ofua was the founder and first President General shows that Urhobo oral literature especially the proverbs and riddles have actually come to stay. Other great Urhobo orators who draw on these oral products in Urhobo communities include M. Echeru, Andrew Djegebada, Eugene Adegor, Saturday Ighovo, Okpowe and Inaya, to mention a few. There are still women anchoring oratorical works at different ceremonial occasions across Urhobo land and these orators have their proverbs, myths, folktales and cultural songs recorded in cassettes, Compact Disc (CD), Digital Video Disc (DVD), Visual Compact Disc (VCD) and some reserved columns of *The Urhobo Voice*: a newspaper that contains news about the entire Urhobo kingdoms and other neighbouring ethnic nationalities across Delta State. Urhobo orators are often invited to public functions such as marriage and burial ceremonies, chieftaincy confirmation, coronation of new monarchs, and so on. Their performances are greeted with excitement as they take their audience down memory lane with their humorous but educative verbal expressions.

On the role of technologies in preserving our cultural identity, Yankah, (1999: 15) states that the print and mass media and the establishment of literate society in the modern era were considered one means of curing the primitive in the African. He further makes allusion to McLuhan (1962: 45) who is of the view that mass media indeed were going to be a source of Africa's salvation; a ray of light in the dark Africa. But the role of the media was not just to create a suitable climate for change but it would create a modern environment that was development in itself. In Chukwuma's (2002: 19-20) opinion, oral literature is of great significance in the African context, mainly because it is the traditional form of literary expression bearing in mind the oracular nature of African societies. However even with the practice of writing and the print now, oral traditions will still enjoys a rich currency existing alongside written literature sometimes fusing into written literature. The proverb

is an oral genre but has no such distinction in written literature today. Though it reflects the changing nature of taste and time of people in contemporary societies, verbal arts and proverbs in particular hardly forms a stable base for delineating it as pre-literary.

In a nutshell, Chukwuma emphasizes that literature remains literature though indeed its content and forms change through time. African oral literature is an art culture of its own and also serves as background props and sometimes formulaic tools of modern literary creations. The documentation of oral forms of literature such as proverbs, riddles, folktales, folksongs, would enhance and promote their utilitarian functions within and outside their cultural base. In essence, proverbs and other verbal arts will stand the test of time as long as there is dynamism, and development in our technology-driven society of which Urhobo nation is a part of.

CONCLUSION

In the paper, we examined the future of the Urhobo language and oral performances like the proverbs, myths, and folktales utilized in contemporary societies especially during peace and conflict discourse. From our discussion, we observed that elders in Urhoboland employ proverbs and other oral resources in mediating disputes and inasmuch as conflicts are bound to occur in society, their importance cannot be ignored. The advent of the new media/technologies, the formation of Ukoko R' Etota, (Urhobo Oratory Association), Urhobo Studies Association (USA) and the study of Urhobo Language in tertiary institutions among others, shall boost further research in this unique form of oral tradition. Above all, as long as the Urhobo language survives, proverbs, storytelling, myths and riddles shall not go into extinction because they are vital aspects of culture and through them people portray their identities to the outside world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having critically examined the future of the Urhobo language and the verbal arts particularly the proverbs in a globalized society, the following recommendations are made;

- (i) It is recommended that conferences, seminars and competitions on Urhobo language and verbal arts should be organized regularly for documentation and transfer to successive generations.
- (ii) Scholarships should be awarded to learners of indigenous languages and verbal arts in society.

(iii) The study of indigenous languages and the artistic resources of the people must be promoted at all time.

(iv) The new technologies should also be employed to preserve these elements of Urhobo cultural heritage.

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