

SUSTAINING CULTURAL VALUES THROUGH THE PROMOTION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA: THE ROLES OF LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

Ogwu, M. F.

*The College Library, Kogi State College of Education
Ankpa, Kogi State, Nigeria*

Agbanu, N. A.

Ofordile, J. O.

*The University Library, Anambra State University
Uli, Anambra State, Nigeria*

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the need for the sustenance of our cultural values through the promotion of indigenous languages in Nigeria relying on the Librarians and information professionals. It specifically discussed the languages and challenges of national identities, foreign languages and confused identities, implication for development, publishing indigenous languages, expected roles of the Librarians and information professionals, and conclusions.

Keywords: *Cultural values, indigenous languages, librarians, information professionals*

INTRODUCTION

The New Encyclopedia Britannica (2004) sees language as the expression of ideas by means of speech- sounds combined into words. It further maintains that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates. Language is the principal and richest means of communication used by human beings. It functions primarily as spoken means of communication. It can, however, also be transferred to other media, most clearly as in the case of writing. Languages of the kind used by human beings are specific. No other species, including non-human primates, has succeeded in mastering the complexities of any human language. All human communities possess language, language is thus perhaps, the single most significant property that distinguishes humans from other animals.

According to Ehusani (2005) Language is not the invention of yesterday, it is one of the most precious heirlooms bestowed by divinity at the moment of creation. In principio erat verbum meaning "in the beginning was the word". In view of the above, language is a sacred gift, developed in the course of human evolution. It is the sophisticated instrument of socialization and communication that distinguishes one group of people from the other and sets homo-sapiens apart from all other living organisms. Language is committed to the care of creation. Language is a formidable instrument for the cultivation and communication of meaning. It is the embodiment of the collective memory and the purveyor of the corporate wisdom of a people.

Language is the chief medium for the communication of civilizations, customs, traditions, habits, wisdom, values and lifestyles of a people.

Language as indicated above is the most powerful, most evident and most sophisticated medium of human communication. It is at the principal element of cultural identity, the most evident factor in distinguishing one culture from the other. In language can be found a good amount of the people's historical experience, their thought pattern and their worldview. Language as the embodiment of culture leads to the depth of a people's reflection - beyond the practical necessities of life such as the search for food and shelter to the mysteries of life and death, and love and hate, as well as the various rites of passage, from birth to death. The language of the elders on these mysteries of life and death often carries a depth, richness and profundity of expression that is beyond the ordinary, because their experiences of these mysteries are often richer. It is through language as it were that we live, and move, and have our being.

In line with the above fact, it is pertinent to highlight the relationship between culture and language. Culture depends for its vitality and its very existence on language and language itself loses its very essence unless it has a dynamic link with culture. To know a people is to know, understand, and appreciate their language, for therein lies the gateway to their being. Language therefore, captures the bonum, the collective good, the worthy essence, and the positive centrality of a people, including their metaphysics, their anthropology, their cosmology and their spirituality. All these elements, whether they are captured through language in its verbal or written form, or they are formulated into economic, judicial, social, or political institutions constitute what we call culture.

A people are less than full reality, less than their optimal identity, potentials, and in fact, not truly a people if such an essential ingredient of identity, an expressed and affirmed holistic sense of language is non-existent or lacking in cohesiveness among them. One cannot overemphasize the importance of language in the development of a people's collective identity and the realization of their corporate aspiration. This has been one of Nigeria's most obvious enduring problems, how to wield so many people of so many language into one, united, nationalistic, and patriotic people of one Nigeria -how to reverse the Babel of many tongues and create out of them a strong nation fully harnessing all the abundant human, material, natural, cultural, historical and linguistics resources; how Nigeria would all come to speak with one voice on the central issues of our corporate existence, without being kept in perpetual divisiveness by our ethnic allegiances, highlighted most graphically by the diverse language they speak have posed fundamental challenges to the evolution of a national language in Nigeria in view of our multilingual posturing.

LANGUAGES AND THE CHALLENGES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Delving into this issue, Ehusani (2005) points out that language has always been the perfect instrument of a nation. In an age of widespread crisis of identity and crisis of values; an age when we seem to be witnessing a general loss of cultural orientation,

and particularly for a people who have gone through over a hundred years of economic, political and cultural domination by foreign powers whose strategy for the people's subjection was the divide and rule system. The development and adaptation of an indigenous language as the nation's lingua franca, as an instrument for the attainment of genuine independence towards the forging of national unity and identity towards the much desired decolonization of the Nigerian psyche, as well as an instrument for the preservation and transmission of the collective memory and corporate wisdom of the numerous ethnic and cultural groups who have nevertheless become one people after decades of political, social, economic and cultural intercourse: the measure of a country's sovereignty is reflected or embodied in its national language.

The story of the developmental ascendancy of the countries in Asia confirms our conviction that language is a formidable tool for human development. It is widely acknowledged that the Asian countries such as Japan, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and now India and China have attained a high level of development partly because they held on to their languages. The Japanese speak Japanese, the Chinese speak Chinese, Malaysians speak Malay, and thus, their children study Mathematics and the Sciences in their mother tongues. From the very cradle of their lives, concepts and values were communicated and explained in the language of their ancestors. As children, they do not have to struggle with the complex process of thinking in one language and expressing the product of their thought in the other. The signs and symbols as well as the mysteries and riddles and folk tales of life are presented to them in their mother tongues.

However, the above scenario is contradistinctive to our situation where, from a very early age, children are confronted with the mental confusion of thinking in English language, whose semantic base, conceptual form and pattern is different, as well as translating these ideas into their mother tongues. Does it surprise anyone therefore that we are not doing very well as a people? Does this not explain in part our underdevelopment as a people? Does this not explain why our students often perform so poorly, especially in English Language, Mathematics and the Sciences? The way we have wobbled and fumbled along in the management of our national affairs can be blamed in part, on a sense of who we are, where we are coming from and where we are heading to.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND CONFUSED IDENTITIES

A people who can relate with each other only through the medium of communication foisted on them by a former colonialist are victims of a peculiar kind of schizophrenia. We can see how we are often a people of confused cultural identities; neither fully Nigerians nor can we consider ourselves English, no matter how well we can speak the colonialists' language. Mahatma Gandhi of India lamented about this kind of dilemma in the following words:

"Is it not a painful thing that if I want to go to court of Justice, I must employ the English Language as a medium, that when I become a barrister I may not speak

my mother tongue and that someone else should have to translate to me in my own language? Am I to blame the English for it or myself? It is we the English knowing Indians that have enslaved India. The curse of the nation will not rest upon the English but upon us"

Gandhi is remembered the world over for his advocacy for returning to the roots of culture. We respect him as a distinguished champion of human dignity and human liberties. But we would say of Nigeria and Nigerians what Gandhi said of India and Indians with equal, rather than diminished passion. Around the time of Independence, and since then many Nigerians have had English Language as a second language. Before going to School they received sound formation in the vernacular that carried the wisdom and values of their people. On beginning school, these tongues became the second-bests to English language. Every pupil had to use English language to go to and return from school and around the home. Today we have Nigerian Scientists, technologists, economists, Librarians, politicians and Psychologists, trained entirely in a different culture along an alien conceptual framework. The more advanced in knowledge these professionals are, the more alienated they are from their heritage with pride.

Faced by the forces of nature unlocked by the civilization that did not help create, Africans have become objects and things of another interest or value. The problem is that of the dilemma of language and culture. Today in Nigeria, indeed, in all of Africa, except for Tanzania and one or two other Eastern Africa Countries, business is being conducted in French, Portuguese, Arabic or English language while the indigenous language are left undeveloped. What is the hope of our ever reaching back to the rich humanistic heritage locked up in our indigenous languages? To what extent can we continue to blame our erstwhile colonial master? Are we to blame for this embarrassment to another language, thought pattern, culture and worldview? Are the educated Nigerians and Nigerians in policy -making positions not the ones who "must begin today the process of cultural emancipation through the restoration of our vernaculars and the adoption of an indigenous language as a national language?

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

These problems have terrible implications for the safeguarding of African cultures, because language and literature are the heart of a culture. When a language is endangered, the culture is threatened. One of the most important powers of literature in a society is its ability to revitalize culture through a double core feedback system. Literature not only reflects exactly what goes on in a society, it also sends back compelling signals demanding reform in areas where so many? Have started setting in. But it is literature in the language of the culture that can effectively socialize the younger generation into the acceptable standards of right and wrong through which they can imbibe humane qualities of honesty, accountability, transparency and others that will make development sustainable.

Unfortunately, today's enemies of African culture are many and mighty. Globalization has changed the world. English language remains the dominant language of the Internet. African languages are currently in no position to compete. Smeets (2004), states that languages disappear at the rate of two per month. The Internet therefore, seems to be a slaughter slab for African languages. The viability of language is determined by the general attitude of its speakers with respect to their traditional culture of which their language endangering arises in situations of contact between groups. A difference in technological know-how may lead to a sense of inferiority to relinquish its culture, including its language in favour of that of the more highly developed group. That is what is precisely happening to African languages in the world today. It is becoming increasingly difficult to avert the undesirable side effects of the forces of globalization. So, the challenge in this respect, in order to preserve our languages, is to take urgent measures that will make it possible for Nigerian languages to compete effectively for attention and space in the on-going information technology revolution. We must find potent ways of inserting African issues into the agenda of the knowledge age.

PUBLISHING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

National development encompasses many factors, including human and material. And until these factors of development are harnessed and properly integrated, genuine development will continue to elude any society. Many have, however, continued to view development only from economic dimension and others from the political perspective. And yet others see it in terms of physical infrastructures and monuments. The fourth, however, is that the most fundamental factor of development lies in the socio-cultural aspect of a given people. This is because any development which is not anchored on the foundation of a people's core values and identity is nothing but superficial development that cannot stand the test of time.

By virtue of their enormous significance, books represent a critical aspect of this socio-cultural requirement of development. It has been observed that through books written in our indigenous languages we will counter the indoctrination that whites are superior to us. We need to tell our children our stories from our own perspective or world view. Through our own books in our languages, we need to decolonize our thinking and examine the underlying truths in more than just foreign movies and books. We must utilize our books and publications to highlight our history, project our heritage as well as acknowledge the immense contributions and legacies of our African ancestors.

At a personal level of development, vocabulary is, for instance, developed only through voracious reading. Reading itself is an adventure into the mind of the writer. Through books, the reader delves into the personal experience of the author and that of the people he has come in contact with, the writer and the publisher. It is one of the most invaluable collaborative enterprises in human progress. These heights can only be attained through effective publishing of our indigenous knowledge into books that will remain the major avenues for the transmission of people's cultural

values from one generation to another. Representing the sum total of people's ways of life passed down from generation to generation, mostly in written forms. Herein lays the role of publishing in human socialization in terms of conformity, civilization and cultural promotion and preservation. Therefore, the kind of books and journals that are published in terms of their topics and themes should be such that are aimed at highlighting and projecting those positive aspects of our cultural heritage. Publishing also exercises great influence in the area of ethnic integration and national unity. By a deliberate policy to write more on those themes that bind us instead of the negative things that tend to separate us, publishing in indigenous languages thus, contributes a great deal towards ethnic integration and peaceful coexistence. The role of publishing in this regard would include sensitization, conscientization and mobilization towards our common national aspirations.

ROLES OF LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS

To enhance the promotion of indigenous languages in Nigeria, librarians and information professionals are expected to:

- Develop a more dependable approach towards the acquisition of indigenous language resources. The approach should consider soliciting relevant indigenous language resources from organizations or groups established for that purpose.
- Champion the documentation and publication of indigenous knowledge in the vernacular as an ideal project, because it makes for authenticity and provides the knowledge in the natural language.
- Provide translations and even transcription of the indigenous knowledge resources into the major native languages in Nigeria. This will encourage wide dissemination of the indigenous knowledge system.
- Help to source for local researchers and authors and support them to collect information and publish.
- Care for and provide access to other people's native language works; assure the library users of uninhibited access to available collection in aid of research.
- Regularly evaluate, weed and replace obsolete indigenous language resources with current ones.
- Train up coming librarians and information professionals to acquire basic skills in indigenous languages.
- Encourage wide dissemination of the indigenous language system.
- Advertise competitions among prospective authors, select the viable projects, and provide funds for the writing of the manuscripts.
- Facilitate appreciation of the achievement of humanity in knowledge and culture.
- Be the principal means whereby the record of man's thoughts and ideas, and the expression of his creative imaginations are made freely available to all.

- Promote awareness of cultural heritage, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievement and innovations.
- Foster inter-cultural dialogue and favour cultural diversity.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Writing in Nigeria indigenous languages is a declared commitment to cultural preservation for sustainable development. But it goes beyond the literary exercise because our adversaries are acting on political and economic motives. Therefore, writers, publishers, Librarians and information professionals must intensify lobbying for political decisions that will emphasise the importance of the teaching of African languages, culture and history in our schools up to University level. Finally, to attract the youth back to our culture, the stakeholders in library and information profession must learn to diversify beyond their traditional functions.

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