

## **IGBO LANGUAGE AS THE CULTURE THAT UNITES THE IGBO PEOPLE: PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*Culture pictures peoples' way of life. Language is one of the major aspects of culture. In fact it houses other aspects of culture, because other aspects of culture are expressed and transmitted through language. Igbo is one of the major tribes in Nigeria. In Igbo land, there are different cultural communities with different cultural practices. All these are expressed through the Igbo language. It means differences in cultural life of Igbo people has its unity in Igbo language. This paper centers on how Igbo language unites different cultures in Igbo land and the prospects for the development of Igbo language. With this in mind, the writer shows how important Igbo language is in the life and unity of Igbo people. As such, if Igbo language dies, the unity of Igbo people dies. The research adopted ethnolinguistic identity theory as the theoretical framework. The paper shows the nature of cultural practices among the Igbo people, the role of Igbo language in Igbo culture, the place of Igbo language among the Igbo people, efforts that have been put in place by some prominent Igbo people and some societies in order to promote and develop Igbo language, Way forward to the development of Igbo language.*

**Keywords:** Igbo, Language, People, Culture, Development

### **Introduction**

Culture is the mode of life of a people. It houses and shows the way groups of people view and understand the world. It is expressed through different channels; the most prominent of which is language.

In Igbo land, there many communities differentiated by different ways of living. These communities speak Igbo language as their native language; and their ways of living are expressed through the Igbo language. It all means that different communities in Igbo land which are differentiated by different cultural practices are united by Igbo language as their common language.

Language is an aspect of culture. As such, Igbo language as an aspect of Igbo culture is as old as Igbo land. Record has it that before the advent of colonial

Masters, Igbo language was the only language spoken by Igbo people. So, they cherished Igbo language to their hearts. This led to rapid development of Igbo language in every aspect of language development. However, towards the tail end of twentieth century and the beginning of twenty-first century, attention of some Igbo people started shifting from Igbo language towards embracing English language which is a foreign language, even within the Igbo geographical areas. This ugly development wounded the progress and development of Igbo language.

The decline in the use of Igbo language by some people of Igbo origin drew the attention of some people who love the progress of the language. These people helped in the public out-cry on the need to protect and fan into flame the dimming Igbo language and save it from drowning. This led to the formation of different societies and organizations for promotion of Igbo language.

By and large, there had been no recorded evidence of research on how Igbo language, as an aspect of Igbo culture unites Igbo people and their culture, and the prospects for its development. Besides, the situation of Igbo language at this age requires attention. As such, the researcher deemed it fit to embark on this research in order to bridge the gap and provide a better atmosphere for Igbo language to thrive. The research reflects on how different communities in Igbo land differ in some cultural practices; whereas they are one in some aspects; how the Igbo language serves as the culture that unites the Igbo people and their culture; the nature of Igbo language before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria till the end of twentieth century; how the people embraced the language in the past; the present situation of neglect of the language by some Igbo people especially the young ones, in this twenty-first century; the fate of Igbo land and Igbo people if the Igbo language happen to go into extinction. Then on the possible remedy on how to rescue Igbo language from extinction, in order for it to continue in its unifying function.

### **Conceptual Studies**

In order to treat this topic well, there is need to look at some basic concepts that formed the key words in the research. The basic concepts include, Language, Culture, Igbo People and Igbo Language.

### **Language**

Tasky (2007) defines language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of signs to communicate meaning. In this definition, Tasky makes it clear that human language has some ingredients that come together in order to make an utterance meaningful. The signs must be generally accepted by the group that owns and speaks that language. As such, language is a generally accepted mode of communication.

Furthermore, Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings.

Here, the researcher defines language as the recognized and unified means of communication by the people of common ancestral origin despite division in their cultural practices.

## **Culture**

James, Magee, Scerri and Steger (2015) define culture as a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses and material expressions, which over time, expresses the continuities and discontinuities of social meaning of a life held in common. This definition gives the picture of culture as a people's way of life. It covers the nature of relationship that exists among people in different societies.

Besides, Geertz (1973) defines culture as the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions. It is an ordered system of meaning and of symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place. From the definition above, Geertz presents culture as the eyes through which people see and interpret the happenings in the world. It means different cultures see the world from different perspectives. This accounts for differences in human behaviour.

Furthermore, Hofstede (1984) defines culture as the mind's collective programming that differentiates between one category of people and members of one group from another. The term category might imply nations, religion, and ethnicities, regions across or within nations, gender, organizations or occupations. Hofstede's definition views culture as it touches every aspect of human life.

The above definitions are welcomed, but as it touches this paper, the researcher sees culture as the concrete articulation of different organs that form human behavior in different communities of the world.

### **Igbo People and Igbo Language**

Onwuejeogu (1981) says that Igbo land covers from Agbo and Kwele in Delta State extending to Ahoada, Diobu and Umuabanyi in Port Harcourt. It passed Arochukwu in Abia State reaching Afikpo and Isiagu in Abakaliki extending to Enugwu-Ezike in Nsukka district and passed Ebu near River Niger. His definition points out that Igbo land covers the following states: Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and some part of Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Revers.

Ugochukwu (2019) defines Igbo people as those from Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and some part of Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Revers whose fatherland is Igbo. From every indication, Ugochukwu draws her definition from that of Onwuejeogu (1981). The definition summarizes the land boundaries of Igbo nation.

Furthermore, Nwadike (2002) defines together Igbo people and Igbo language. According to him, Igbo stands for the people of Igbo origin; second, it shows the boundaries of Igbo nation; third, it stands for the language spoken by the Igbo people. From his definition, Igbo people are those born of Igbo blood, no matter their place of domicile; Igbo land stands for the land occupied by the Igbo people, and Igbo language is the language spoken by the Igbo people as their mother tongue.

In addition, Umezi (2021) defines Igbo people as those whose parents are of Igbo origin, not minding their place of domicile. He went along to define Igbo language as 'Kwa' language spoken by Igbo people as their mother tongue.

However, as it concerns this research, the researcher is defining Igbo people as the people whose place of origin covers Anambra, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Ebonyi, and some part of Delta, Akwa Ibom, and Revers; who have common ancestral origin, practicing different cultures, but united by one language called Igbo language. Then, Igbo language is one of the 'Kwa' languages spoken by the Igbo people, and stands as their common unifying language.

### **Empirical Studies**

In order to delve properly into this research, there is need to examine some related works in order to strike a balance and know where to put footsteps so as to achieve the goal of the research.

Chukwu (2005), in his research on the relationship between language and culture noted that, language is not only an aspect of culture but the vital means expressing people's culture and values. He further stated that languages generally are the most effective means of human's communication, interaction, co-operation and development. Chukwu's research shows that language is a very important aspect of culture. In fact, it is language that gives meaning to every other aspect of culture. This is because language is the vanguard of other aspects of culture. They are expressed and preserved through language.

Umezi and Ibeh (2020) in their research on how Igbo language and Igbo culture are intermingled, says that the rites of breaking kola nut is the clear picture of the marriage between Igbo language and Igbo culture. Igbo language is an aspect of Igbo culture. In fact, it unites all Igbo people despite differences in culture. Umezi and Ibeh try to give the picture of how Igbo language unites Igbo people. This is pictured in the ceremony of kola nut, which according to Igbo culture, must be performed in Igbo language; no matter the geographical location of the place where the ceremony takes place.

Besides, Basden (1921) conducted a research on the life of the Igbo people. He observed that Igbo language is tied to Igbo culture. The Igbo people love their language and prefer it to any other language. Basden's research shows the true picture of the Igbo people before and during the period of colonialism. How they embraced the Igbo language and made it part of their life. It is a good foothold to this work, because it helps in knowing the state of Igbo language and culture in the past. It differs from this work because it dwelt on the entire life of Igbo people; whereas this research centers on how Igbo language unites the Igbo people and prospects for its development.

Furthermore, Isichei (1976) in tracing the history of Igbo people narrated how the colonial Europeans introduced English language to co-exist with Igbo language. That is the origin of the struggle for survival being faced by Igbo language today. The work is useful in the sense that it helps to expose the history and the past lives of Igbo people. It will help the young generation Igbo people to know where the struggle for liberation and improvement of Igbo language began, in order to know the strategies to deploy for its development.

Ogunyemi (2000), in his research on the negative influence of English language on the development of Yoruba language, observed that co-existence of English language with other Nigerian languages has negative influence on the speed development and advancement of the local languages. According to him, English language is being accorded more attention both in curriculum planning and development, scheduling and teaching approaches. All these hamper the development of Nigerian languages and negatively affects peoples' attitude towards them. Ogunyemi's observation is very clear. Attention which should be given to Nigerian indigenous languages are being offered to English language which is a foreign language. This hinders the rate at which the local languages develop. If such attention is given to local languages, they would not be where they are today. His work is related to this work as both are speaking of the prospects for the development of Nigerian local languages. However, they differ from each other in the sense that Ogunyemi's work hinges on the negative influence of English language on Yoruba and other Nigerian languages; whereas this work centers on prospects for the development of Igbo language. His throws more light on this research.

Emenanjo (1999:83), speaking on the need for owners of different languages to protect their languages says, "language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people. A lost language is a lost tribe, a lost tribe is a lost culture, a lost culture is invaluable knowledge lost... the whole vast of archives of knowledge and expertise... will be consigned to oblivion." Emenanjo's statement summarizes everything about the need to promote and protect indigenous languages. The people's language is their culture, and their culture pictures their system of living. As such if one loses one's language, everything about one's life is lost. It stands as a reference point on the struggle to promote Igbo language.

Furthermore, Ugochukwu (2020), in her research on Igbo language amidst globalization: the way forward, remarks that globalization has come to stay. It is promoting some languages and culture and at the same time terminating some languages and culture. She therefore advises that it is the duty of Igbo people to promote the Igbo language in order to survive the blowing wind of globalization. She further noted that some individuals of Igbo origin had helped in their various capacities in building the Igbo language to the present stage. The present generation is being called upon to continue from where they stopped. Ugochukwu's research is very good. It is of great help to lovers of Igbo language to work round the clock to pursue the course for the development and

promotion of Igbo language to fit with the key languages of the world. Her research resemble this research because both of them are working out the way to develop Igbo language. However, they differ from each other because Ugochukwu's research centers on the way forward for survival of Igbo language in the era of globalization; whereas this research focuses on how to develop Igbo language as the aspect of culture that unites Igbo people.

Umezi (2021), in his research on the state of Igbo language in Nigeria, observed that, considering the high place of Igbo people in the economy of Nigeria especially in commerce and industry, Igbo language is supposed to be the most wide-spread language in Nigeria. The research pictures the lamentable nature of Igbo language among other major ethnic languages in Nigeria. The research came at the proper time, when there is a desperate call for attention on Igbo language. The research helps to draw the attention of Igbo people on their position in Nigerian economy and the need to beef up their language to be a major language in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper will be guided by ethnolinguistic identity theory. This theory was propounded by Howard Giles and Patricia Johnson in 1981 in their work, "The role of language in ethnic group relations." The theory holds that language is the major sign of group attachment and identity. It posits that people use communication accommodation strategies including verbal and nonverbal convergence to or divergence from their communication partner in order to emphasize affiliation or disaffiliation respectively.

The choice of this theory lies on the unifying role of Igbo language among the Igbo people. The differences in the cultural practices experienced in different communities in Igbo land find their unity in Igbo language as the language of the Igbo people.

### **Findings**

Findings in this research are presented in the following subheadings: cultural practices which are universally practiced throughout the Igbo land, cultural practices restricted to some communities in Igbo land which are not practiced in other parts of the Igbo land, the role of Igbo language in Igbo culture, and the place of Igbo language among the Igbo people, efforts made to develop Igbo language

### **Cultural practices which are common to every Igbo community**

Findings in this research show that there are cultural practices which are common to every community in Igbo land. Such cultures as, Ceremony of kola nut,  $\text{o z\textcircled{a}}$  title taking, marriage ceremony, funeral rites etc. are generally seen in all Igbo communities.

The ceremony of kola nut is one of the cultural practices that are generally practiced in the entire Igbo communities. It is an official sign of unity among the people involved. It is used in different ceremonies involving the Igbo people. However, the rites differ according to communities.

Besides,  $\text{o z\textcircled{a}}$  title taking is another popular cultural practice noticed in every community in Igbo land. It is a popular position which puts one ahead of his age mates because of responsibilities attached to it. It is presumed that whoever takes  $\text{o z\textcircled{a}}$  title is an upright man devoid of deceit and other human vices.

Marriage ceremony is one of the cultural rites of passages being practiced in the entire Igbo land. It is official formation and opening of a family by male and female adults. In the whole of Igbo land, palm wine plays a very important role in that ceremony. However, the rites performed for its effect differ according to communities.

Furthermore, funeral ceremony is one of the dignified cultural rites which is universally practiced throughout Igbo land. It is the rite of passage in which the living bid farewell to their dead ones to the land of the ancestors. The Igbo believe in the existence of two worlds, namely the human (physical) world and the spiritual world. The belief in the existence of two worlds surfaces during the funeral rites. However, despite the general Igbo belief in the relationship between the living and the dead, the mode of funeral rites differ greatly from one Igbo community to another.

In addition, masquerading is another cultural practice in operation in the entire Igbo land. Masquerade is an embodied human spirit that appears in the human environment to indicate the relationship between the living and the dead in Igbo belief system. However, the practice differ from one Igbo community to another.

In sum, despite the fact that these named cultural practices exist in every community in Igbo land, the mode of practice for each and every one of them differ among the communities in Igbo land.



### **Cultural Practices Particular to Some Communities in Igbo Land**

The findings in this research show that there are some cultural practices which are particular to some communities in Igbo land. Some of these practices have connection with the origin of the cultural communities involved or what happened in history, which touched the life of the community or individuals in it. As such, some are totems and festivals.

Totems are sacred animals believed to belong to the ancestral spirit. As such, people of the communities involved do not harm them. In Igbo land, different animals are sacred in different cultural communities depending on the belief system and history of that community. Example of such animals are monkey, snake, bush rat, ostrich, tortoise, vulture etc. Some communities like Awka in Anambra state has monkey as their only sacred animal. The sacredness of monkey is in connection with ancestral origin of Awka town. Their history has it that it was the noise of monkeys on tree top that saved their ancestors from their warring enemies. So they believed that God appears to them in from of monkeys. Likewise Aguata and some other communities in Igbo land do not kill a particular type of snake; Nnokwa do not kill ostrich. It serves as their totem. The same with other communities in Igbo land and their totems. By and large, it differs from one community to another.

Furthermore, some cultural festivals are particular to some communities in Igbo land. It may be the festival of one deity or the other or any other anniversary. Example of such festivals is Ikeji festival. It is an annual cultural festival by arọ people, like Ndizuogu, Ndiokpaleze, Ndiokolo etc. Awka people also cerebrate Imo Awka festival. It is an annual festival in honour of Imo, Awka central deity. These cultural festivals are restricted to the communities involved. As such, they do not involve the entire Igbo land.

In addition, naming ceremony and child outing ceremony is a culture being practice in some communities in Igbo land, but they are not practiced in other communities. Likewise new yam festival, although it looks like a universal practice but some communities in Igbo land do not have the ceremony in their culture.

In sum, some cultural practices are universally practiced in the entire Igbo land; while some are restricted to some Igbo communities. As such, there is no water tight uniformity in cultural practices among the Igbo people.

### **The Role of Igbo language in Igbo Culture**

The findings in this research show that Igbo language is the language of communication throughout Igbo land. It implies that these cultures are expressed in Igbo language. As such Igbo language forms the bridge which unites different communities in Igbo land amidst the differences in their cultural practices.

Furthermore, for some of the cultural practices to have the required effect, the rites and rituals must be performed in Igbo language. Example, the rites and rituals of kola nut must be performed by the proper authority in Igbo language; otherwise the rite would be null and void without any effect. Thus the Igbo people say, "*o ji anaghi anu oyibo*" (kola nut does not understand foreign language). This shows that Igbo language is very symbolic in Igbo culture. It is an aspect of Igbo culture and the vanguard of the rest aspects of the culture.

Since Igbo language is the central language used by the different communities in Igbo land to express and preserve their culture, Igbo language is very symbolic. It is the culture that unites the Igbo people in their different cultural areas. So, Igbo language plays a unifying role among the Igbo people and their culture.

### **The Place of Igbo Language among Igbo People**

The findings in this research proved that the place of Igbo language among the Igbo people is shaking. It is not static rather it is shifting according to time and nature of things. Before the commencement of colonialism in Nigeria, Igbo language was the only language spoken by the Igbo people in Igbo geographical location. This is because the Igbo people had not come in contact with other nations with other languages.

However, the advent of colonialism introduced a foreign language (English language) in Igbo land. The foreign language co-existed with Igbo language. Despite every effort made by the colonial masters to impose the English language on the Igbo people as a domineering language, the Igbo people still cherished their local language and used it more in daily communications. This led the colonial masters to making effort to make Igbo language, language of letter by developing and formalizing Igbo orthography, and other developmental strategies mapped out.

However, towards the tail end of twentieth century and early twenty-first century, attention of some Igbo people started shifting from Igbo language to

embracing English language and other foreign languages. This ugly development gradually erodes the unifying force of Igbo language among the Igbo communities. Some people of Igbo origin do not understand Igbo language let alone being able to speak the language. The worst part of it is that some of such people are living within Igbo geographical location. This attitude brought a set back to the development of Igbo language.

### **Efforts Put in Place for Development of Igbo Language**

Findings show that efforts are being made by some individuals and groups of Igbo origin to nip the problem of lack of interest in Igbo language in the bud. The findings show that some societies and organizations were formed, by some prominent Igbo people, to fight Igbo language apathy among the Igbo people. Some of such societies are Society for Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture (SPILC) which was founded in 1949 by Frederick Chidozie Ogbalu. Their duty is to promote the Igbo language and Culture. They had since created a standard Igbo. *Otu Sụwakwa Igbo* is another society founded by Pita Ejiofor for the sole purpose of promoting Igbo language and encouraging the Igbo people to embrace and speak their language. The society was founded in 2006. Furthermore, outside these two outstanding societies founded for the promotion of Igbo language, some non-prominent societies and organizations are in existence to give boost to Igbo language. Some individuals of Igbo origin are equally making effort from different quarters to give boost to Igbo language. All these are efforts to revive the zeal to love and speak Igbo language among the Igbo people and beyond.

### **Analysis of the Findings**

The findings above made it clear that Igbo people have different cultural practices. Some of them are universally practiced in all the communities in Igbo land; whereas some others are restricted to some communities and are not practiced in other communities of the same Igbo land. This is an indication that Igbo people are partly culturally united and partly culturally separated. Even the universally practiced cultures have different modes of operation in different communities. The rites and ritual involved in performance of the cultural practices involved differ from one community to another. This implies that the unity of Igbo people does not hang on the cultural practices in Igbo land.

Furthermore, another finding shows that the original language of expression and transmission of every culture in Igbo land is Igbo language. Following from this,

since every culture in Igbo land, both the ones universally practiced in the entire Igbo land and the ones restricted to some communities in Igbo land, use Igbo language as their vanguard, it means Igbo language is the unifying factor as far as culture in Igbo land is concerned. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that these Igbo communities where these cultures are practiced use Igbo language as their language of expression, transmission and preservation of these cultural values. To some extent, for the rites and rituals of some of these cultural practices to be efficacious, it must be done in Igbo language, otherwise it will be null and void and of no effect. Example of such cultural practices is the ceremony of kola nut, which must be done in Igbo language for it to be efficacious. All these considered, since Igbo language is an aspect of culture, it means Igbo language is the only culture uniting the Igbo people.

In addition, the research shows that Igbo language holds high place among the Igbo people from the period before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria; even till the tail end of twentieth century. During this time, Igbo people were proud of their native language and they preferred it to any other language. This led to fast development of the language at all levels. They saw Igbo language as their proper identity and the major unifying factor of the Igbo people everywhere they found themselves. However, this enthusiastic spirit started dwindling from the tail end of twentieth century, even in the twenty-first century. Some Igbo people especially those in diaspora, even those living within Igbo geographical area started developing cold feet in the usage of Igbo language. Such people would prefer to use English language or any other foreign language to Igbo language. This led to a serious reduction in the number of those that speak Igbo language in twenty-first century. Following from the above, it means that the unifying strength of Igbo language is gradually being eroded. If some people from Igbo geographical area cannot speak Igbo language fluently, it follows that the unifying force of the language has been weakened. This is because some of the people that practice the cultures in Igbo land cannot speak the umbrella language. Since there is a negative shift in the attitude of Igbo people towards Igbo language, it is a red indication that Igbo language is gradually moving into extinction. As such, if care is not taking, Igbo language will struggle for survival in the sea of globalization which is associated with language war. If Igbo language dies, the unity of Igbo people will end.

Furthermore, since some individuals and societies have started calling attention to the imminent doom approaching the Igbo language, it is a sign that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Igbo language has potentiality of growing and

developing to international standard like other international languages. It only needs effort and commitment.

### **Way Forward**

From the findings and the analysis above, it has become obvious that different Igbo communities has different cultural practices. Despite the differences in culture, the Igbo language is common in all the communities. It all means that Igbo language which is an aspect of Igbo culture is the unifying element of the Igbo people. However, it was discovered that Igbo language started losing momentum in twenty-first century. Some people prefer speaking foreign languages to Igbo language. It is really a challenge to the development of Igbo language and a sword to Igbo unity. Since Igbo language which is the unifying factor among Igbo people is losing momentum, there is need for all heads to be put together to know the things necessary for the promotion of Igbo language.

Negligence on the use of any language brings about the death of that language. Example, the classical languages like Hebrew, Greek and Latin were reigning sometimes in the past but today where are they? The Igbo people should wake up from sleep and put heads together, value and speak Igbo language. Life of a language hangs on the increase in the vocabularies of that language. This is made possible by constant use of a language. With the awareness of the need to promote Igbo language created, the Igbo language will grow if the Igbo people take it to heart and speak the language on daily basis.

In promotion and development of Igbo language, no stone should be left unturned. There is need to start from the foundation. In the first place, Igbo parents should take Igbo language as their native language and understand it as the only and major factor uniting all the Igbo people. As such, they should speak it to their children in their homes and other places so that they can develop proper eloquence in Igbo language as their mother tongue. This will help to sustain the language from any possible extinction.

In the second place, Government should encourage the growth and development of Igbo language by making it a compulsory subject in basic schools and even tertiary institutions. This will help in making the youths of Igbo origin to love and speak Igbo language.

Besides, individuals and non-governmental organizations and societies showing love for Igbo language should add more zeal to their effort by organizing regular

seminars and conferences to discuss Igbo language affairs. This will help in creating rooms for more research in the areas of Igbo language, especially those neglected by the language speakers.

In addition, Igbo scientists and internet gurus should work night and day to create more facilities to enable Igbo language become an internet language. This will make it easy for people to post articles written in Igbo language in the internet without further modifications. By and large, all these will make the ground fertile for Igbo language to grow and develop at jet speed in this era of globalization.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this research, "Igbo language as the culture that unites the Igbo people: Prospects for development", the researcher was able to accomplish his task. The findings and analysis show that Igbo people have different cultural practices, some of which are universally practiced; while some are restricted to some communities in Igbo land. It was equally observed that Igbo language as an aspect of Igbo culture stands as a unifying factor in Igbo cultural life. However, towards the tail end of twentieth century, some Igbo people started shifting attention to English language to the negligence of Igbo language. Because of this, some individuals of Igbo origin formed some societies to call the attention of the Igbo people on the importance of embracing their language. As such, attention has been drawn on the need to hold fast to Igbo language as the only unifying culture in Igbo land. This leads to finding different strategies to develop and promote the Igbo language. By and large, Igbo language has high rate prospects for development if more effort is put in by the owners, speakers and promoters of the language.

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