

Reviving the Use of Indigenous Languages in the Contemporary Nigerian Society: The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) Initiative

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Abstract

The need to revive indigenous languages in any society is germane. The place of a native language in a society, like Nigeria, where there are multi-ethnic nationalities with many languages, cannot be overemphasised. The fact remains that Nigerian indigenous languages can be veritable media to engender unity, cultural identity, and national pride in the people. They can also impact positive values in the children and youths, in addition to facilitating and sustaining national development. Thus, non-revival of indigenous languages in the Nigerian context means their gradual extinction. There have been attempts by successive governments to make the teaching and learning of indigenous languages compulsory in the Nigerian educational system. But, sadly, government has been paying lip-service to such policies, just as parents are not encouraging their wards to speak their mother tongue at home, to the effect that there have been no visible impacts. This paper examines the poor state of Nigerian indigenous languages and documents the initiative of the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) to ameliorate the situation through the Nigerian Indigenous Language Programme (NILP) platform. The submission is that, if there is political will, on the part of government, to give vent to the implementation of the Language Policy, the situation will be ameliorated.

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Introduction

The Nigerian society has, over the years, been plagued by many challenges brought about by the domineering influence of foreign cultures on our national psyche. This phenomenon, to a large extent, has resulted to lack of appreciation for our culture and its component parts, which include our indigenous languages. The indigenous language, which is one of the most basic and veritable media of communication, is a vehicle that drives culture. A people's culture is inseparable from their indigenous language because it is vital in explaining their norms and values, thus aiding in the social, economic and technological advancement of given societies. It also binds the people together in unity, building relationships, and leading to the sustainable growth and development of the society generally.

However, this cord that reflects in national unity and identity, enhancing the moral and ethical values, as Nigerians, is almost being eclipsed by the influence of foreign cultures. As it were, the place of the indigenous language in transforming a people and the society, positively, cannot be over-emphasised, as it has the potential of encouraging peaceful co-existence, tolerance, and ensuring better dialogue and mutual respect among the people. This stems from the fact that language has been said to be an inseparable tool in man's quest for identification in any society, as it is the primary vehicle and conveyor of the culture of a people. Considering the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, resulting from the multi-linguistic situation, there is the need to revive the teaching and learning of the indigenous languages, so that people can learn to speak one or more indigenous languages, other than their mother tongue (MT). This will foster unity and bring about a spirit of togetherness among the diverse ethnic nationalities co-existing in the country. This campaign of reviving the use of indigenous languages will no doubt enhance the dignity of Nigerians.

It will also promote and preserve the indigenous languages, which are treasures of culture, without which people will lose their place of pride and identity as a peculiar people, because, a people without a language, which is one vital symbol of their identity, are lost.

The Language Policy in the National Policy on Education

According to section 1:10 of the *National Policy on Education* (2004):

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is language of the immediate environment and in the interest of national unity; every child shall learn at least one of the three major Nigerian languages (NPE, 2004: 9).

The policy stipulates more provisions for secondary education (section 1:8, 2:11(3) and 3:15(4)). At the junior secondary school level, students are required to learn English as well as Nigerian languages, composed of: (a) the language of their own area; and (b) any of the three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers. At the senior secondary school level, students would be required to learn English and one Nigerian language. Officially, this educational language policy makes provision for the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school. Indeed, the language provisions in NPE are firmly predicated on the four principles of national unity, equality of opportunities, permanence of literacy, and numeric and linguistic competence required for communication and higher education.

The provisions above, to a great extent, relate to Nigeria's political and educational objectives. These are the two major ways of looking at the issue of language in relation to political and educational policies in most African countries. A critique of the political and educational language policy provision in Nigeria exists in various forms and shapes. For instance, many scholars have written on the dominance of English as the official language in Nigeria. According to Oyetade (2002):

Consequent upon our colonial experience under the British, English has become Nigeria's official and dominant educational language. It is used in its written form as the language of administration from the federal to the local government level. It is the language of commerce and industry, its knowledge therefore is an essential prerequisite for effective participation in the day-to-day running of Nigerian government (Oyetade, 2002: 34).

To Igboanusi (2001), the dominance of English in Nigeria is overwhelming in virtually every domain, including inter-ethnic communication. English is used in all and at all levels of official business: education, commerce and industry, in the dispensation of justice, in all government departments and Parastatals at all levels of government. Official records are kept in English and official information is given principally in English. Government activities are published in gazettes and transmitted in the mass media in English. Furthermore, English is the official language of the National Assembly as well as the states Houses of Assembly.

The Nigerian Indigenous Language Question

All over the world, there have been concerted efforts by various countries to save indigenous languages from going into extinction. This does not in any way come as a surprise, because language remains the foremost medium of propagating ideas, just as it is a veritable tool in facilitating human relations across racial barriers. When talking about reviving the use of indigenous languages in any given society, three things are involved: the languages are either endangered, dead or gone extinct. While an endangered language is said to be a language that stands the risk of going out of use, a language becomes dead when it loses all its native speakers. On the other hand, when a language is extinct, it means no one speaks the language again.



Pix 1. Children in language programme



Pix 2. Children in class

Although there is no definite threshold for identifying a language as endangered, linguists have identified three major criteria that could be used as guidelines. Firstly, you consider the number of speakers currently living; secondly, you take into cognizance the mean age of native and fluent speakers; and thirdly, the percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency with the language in question. The fact remains that some Nigerian languages are going into extinction and that many of them are hardly spoken even in the family. Incidentally, our educational system has not helped matters either as there is no serious attention at giving the study of indigenous languages in our school curricular. Worst hit is the fact that many Nigerians are still indifferent to the learning and speaking of indigenous languages in homes. Children even take pride in saying, they do not understand their mother tongue.

There is a common trend in contemporary society, where most parents do not want their children to speak indigenous languages, believing that it would affect their ability to speak English language. Unfortunately, the prohibition of the use of 'vernacular' (as indigenous languages were derogatorily termed) in our educational system and the discouragement of speaking indigenous languages in homes has fast become the in-thing because it is being regarded by many as the normal way of civilization and development. Ironically, it could be said that it is the high level of illiteracy, which is still prevalent in the rural areas today that is keeping our native languages alive.

There is no gainsaying the fact that, our indigenous languages are very essential in giving children the opportunity to develop their native ability; but rather, they shy away from using them, and placing preference on foreign languages at the expense of our local languages. As it were, globalisation has made people to believe that it is when you speak English that you belong, which is not the case. This does not take cognizance of the fact that children are very impressionable at a tender age and once the love for indigenous languages is imbibed in them, they will take pride in such languages and would want to promote everything that comes with it.

Suffice to state that once a language is said to be endangered, there are two basic steps that need to be taken in order to stabilise or rescue it. First is documentation and the second is revitalisation. While documentation could be referred to the process by which the language is documented, in terms of grammar, lexicon, and oral traditions, that is, stories, songs or religious texts, language revitalisation is ensured when a community, through political, communal and educational means, attempts to increase the number of active speakers of the endangered language. This process is also sometimes referred to as revival or reversing language shift. Language revival, revitalisation or reversing language shift, therefore, could be summed up as attempts by interested parties, including individuals, cultural or community groups, governments or political authorities, to reverse the decline of a language. Although the motive for reviving a language may vary from community to community and the situation, the goal of many communities is usually to return a language that is extinct or endangered to daily use. One of the important aspects of indigenous languages lies in the existence of different local languages, because cultural values, norms and customs (cultural heritage), are transmitted from one generation to the next by means of local languages.

In Nigeria, there have been growing concerns over the decline in the use of our indigenous languages in homes, schools, and communities, over the last two decades. It has also been noted that there have been no conscious efforts to sustain the indigenous languages for the younger generation. Currently, linguists put the number of languages estimated and catalogued in Nigeria at 521. Out of this number, 510 languages are living languages, two second languages without native speakers, and nine extinct languages. Thus, what is of interest here is the need to revive the endangered indigenous languages and preserve them so that Nigerian indigenous cultures, which they preserve and transmit, will not suffer atrophy. It explains why there have been strident calls for their revitalisation in order to ameliorate their endangered status. For example, Hubert J. Charles, former UNESCO Representative to Nigeria, stated at a 2006 UNESCO conference that though Nigeria is known to have over 250 languages, it is likely that several of these are dialects of major languages, rather than languages, but that:

The vast majority of these languages are in fact at risk since they are not being systematically transmitted to the younger generation. Additionally, policy measures agreed to be the state as being central to the use of mother tongues as languages of instruction seem to be ignored in preference to one of the dominant indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik) or at worst English (Charles, 2006: 2).

It was also reported at the aforementioned UNESCO conference that nine Nigerian languages, namely, Ajawa, Basa-gumna, Holma, Auyokawa, Gamo-Ningi, Kpati, Mawa, Kubi and Teshenawa, had become extinct.

This has very serious implications, because the situation is unquantifiable and irredeemable, for language is extremely important in any given community, for it serves as the repository of a people's culture, its history. A people's culture is expressed in their agriculture, medicine, intellectual reasoning, moral values, attire, cuisine, kinship, marriages, work ethic, customs, beliefs, burials, social norms, religion, social and material traits, folktales, proverbs, myths, native wisdom, etc., and language is the vehicle used to communicate these cultural components to the present and succeeding generations. How a culture survives depends on the people's capacity to transmit it to the succeeding generations. No culture can survive without the retention of its language (Charles, 2006: 2).

Even an editorial of *Culture Digest* magazine expressed concern about the grave consequences thus: The rate at which indigenous languages are being eroded has become a thing of grave concern to all culture-conscious people. In fact, some of the languages face extinction in the not too distant future (*Culture Digest*, 2010: 1).

The indispensable role language plays in the socio-economic and technological development of any given society, in the face of the challenges of globalisation coupled with it being intrinsic to culture, makes it more compelling for more concerted efforts to revitalise the use of these indigenous languages in the Nigerian society. This appears to underpin the position of Elugbe (2006) that,

Every language has the right to be accounted for in any community and a right to exist, whether it forms a 'majority' or a 'minority' language. Language is an extremely important aspect of a community. It is an important index of identity. It is used for all communication functions that a community requires and it serves as a repository of a people's culture, history and exploits. In fact, it is language that differentiates the *homo sapiens* from other animals. It is so important to man that every community and every Government should address linguistic issues with the same vigour that infrastructures are developed (Elugbe, 2006: 15).

Many reasons have been attributed to be the cause of non-active use of our indigenous languages in homes, schools, communities and even in the general society. *Culture Digest* notes: Sometimes ignorance is the bane. Many unwise teachers place embargo on the use of the vernacular in schools in order to encourage proficiency in the use of the English language, the same reason some ignorant parents speak only the foreign tongue with their children at home (*Culture Digest*, 2010: 1).

Charles (2006) further observed that English language enjoys considerable support from parents and teachers in the belief that it is an important door to modernism and success. That the ability to speak English in our globalised world constitutes an advantage is not in doubt nor is this being challenged. What is certainly not true is that knowledge and use of one or even two indigenous languages militates against one being able to master English or French for that matter (Charles, 2006: 1).

In fact, the view expressed by UNESCO holds that mastery of these Western languages is more often than not predicated on the mastery of one's indigenous language, as against the fear held by some parents on our indigenous languages. Consequently, the need to address this troubling situation necessitated government's *National Policy on Education*, with its provisions to enhance the sustenance of our indigenous languages. The language provision, as we noted earlier, stipulates that:

- a) learning in the first three years of the elementary education should be in the mother tongue; and
- b) an alternative language of the immediate environment in lieu of the mother tongue.

This alternative is a subtle reversal of mother tongue because the language of a child's immediate environment could as well be a foreign language. But then, because of the cultural implications, and as a follow up to the declaration of 2006 as the Year of African Languages, there have been some significant developments, which could be delineated thus:

- a) UNESCO in collaboration with NCAC (National Council for Arts and Culture) held a workshop on the "Best practices to safeguard endangered Nigerian languages."
- b) Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State instituted cash prizes for three best performers in Igbo language in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASCE).
- c) The legislative business of Anambra State House of Assembly is conducted in Ibo on Wednesdays.
- d) There was a resolution by lawmakers of the Ogun State House of Assembly to use Yoruba language on the floor of the house for their deliberations on Wednesdays.
- e) By the year 2004, Yoruba was introduced for legislative sessions in Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, and Oyo States Houses of Assembly.

- f) Similarly, the legislative businesses of Kano, Kebbi, Sokoto, Katsina, Jigawa, Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger and Plateau States Houses of Assembly are currently being conducted mostly in Hausa; and
- g) The Centre for Blacks and African Arts & Civilisation (CBAAC) has facilitated the production of orthographies for four major Nigerian indigenous languages, namely, Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo and Ijaw, to enhance their written forms.

The place of indigenous languages in our national consciousness, national discourse and national reconstruction is therefore very critical, because we can use the learning of indigenous languages, other than our mother tongue, to foster our national integration, in spite of our multi-ethnic diversity in Nigeria. As Elugbe (2006) puts it,

Language is a sustained artefact of culture and people’s history can be traced or reconstructed from their language ancestry due to the fact that language changes in a patterned way over time and space, one language begets dialects in space, and then time makes them become separate languages. In this way, one original language can become hundreds (Elugbe, 2006: 15).

About National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO)

The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO), is a Parastatal of the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, which came into existence as a result of a joint initiative of the Federal Government of Nigeria and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), during the World Decade for Cultural Development (WDCD) programme, which UNESCO declared between 1988 and 1997. WDCD emphasised the cultural dimension in the development of member nations. The Institute was subsequently established by Decree No. 93 of 1993 with the primary responsibility of promoting positive cultural values and harnessing culture for national development as enunciated in the *Cultural Policy for Nigeria* (1988).

NICO has the mandate of affecting a sense of cultural direction and relationship to meet the challenges of social integration, unity, peaceful co-existence, self-reliant and national development. This is achieved through inter-agency, intersectional and inter-disciplinary programmes and projects. The main objectives of NICO include:

- a) To serve as a focus for orientation in cultural matters for Nigeria’s policy makers and other top government officials
- b) To develop the relevant curricula aimed at integrating Nigeria’s positive cultural values into the educational system at all levels
- c) To develop cultural materials for promoting the image of Nigeria, nationally and internationally, and use them for the realisation of the nation’s cultural diplomacy objectives
- d) To ensure that the cultural dimension is seen to be central rather than peripheral in Nigeria’s development programme
- e) To train cultural officers who will integrate Nigeria’s culture into the educational system at all levels and to facilitate the practical application of the Nigerian culture in everyday activities
- f) To carry out public enlightenment campaigns that would effectively mobilise Nigerians towards a better life for all; and
- g) To sponsor and undertake research into all aspects of Nigeria’s arts and culture.

For effective execution of its mandate, the Institute has offices in all the six geo-political zones in the country. Also, it runs diploma, advanced diploma and post graduate diploma programmes in Cultural Administration at its Training School in Lagos and Abuja; and the programmes are affiliated with Nasarawa State University, Keffi, which is the only university in Nigeria currently running a degree programme in Theatre and Cultural Studies. Some programmes being organised by the Institute, in fulfilment of its mandate, include:



Pix. 3. Gbagyi language students in a drama



Pix 4. NICO Media Workshop in Gombe



Pix 5. Izon language class in progress

- a) Quarterly national workshops on repositioning cultural workers for improved productivity
- b) Promoting Nigerian dress culture
- c) Quarterly national media workshop for art writers and editors
- d) Annual round table on cultural orientation (ARTCO)
- e) Annual national conference on culture, peace and security with traditional rulers
- f) NICO cultural clubs in schools
- g) Annual public lecture
- h) World culture day; and
- i) Living human treasure programme, among others



Pix 6. Traditional Rulers Conference

Pix 7. NICO Cultural Clubs

Pix 8. NILP Participants

Nigerian Indigenous Language Programme (NILP): The NICO Initiative

Being the statutory organ of government established to re-orientate Nigerian's toward a culture-related lifestyle and promoting value orientation, by way of effecting a sense of cultural direction in the citizenry, the Institute has taken the initiative of piloting and encouraging the learning of our indigenous languages as one of the major orientation programmes. To promote a sense of Nigerian identity in our homes and country, for improved interactions, national integration and development, a long vacation Nigerian indigenous language programme (NILP) was conceptualized as one of the practical ways of encouraging the learning of our mother tongues in many families, even in the Diaspora. The programme started in 2007 in the Lagos office, with the teaching of three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The programme has however expanded to twelve languages, including, Tiv, Efik, Gbagyi, Nupe, Fulfude, Izon, Isoko, Bwatiye and Batonu. Today, these languages are taught in the zonal offices across the six geo-political zones, according to their peculiar language needs. Arrangements are on to open state offices to further coordinate the teaching and learning of more indigenous languages, thus taking the programme to the grassroots.

The approach to NILP is such that participants undergo normal classroom teaching of the languages of their choice. Apart from the usual language study, key aspects of the culture of the people are embedded in the scheme of work. These include proverbs and aphorisms, recitations, folk songs, going to the market to buy items, the dress culture of that ethnic group, hair styling, cooking of the popular dishes from that tribe, and other major cultural practices. The idea is for those who go through the programme to be well grounded in the culture of the people.

However, other developments to sustain this programme include:



Pix 9. NILP Opening Ceremony, Yola

- a) Requesting and receiving formal approval from the Director-General of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) to use language graduates to drive the programme;
- b) Introducing weekend indigenous language programme, beginning in Lagos State, for interested persons, who do not have the time to attend the intensive one-month NILP;
- c) Designing Quiz Wazobia, a family entertainment television programme, to educate general viewing public on the relevance of learning and communicating with children in our mother tongue;
- d) Carrying out several public enlightenment talks and discussion programmes on radio and television networks;

- e) Organising series of workshops to enlighten and deepen understanding on the need for constant use of our indigenous languages;
- f) Introducing language in the barracks programme, where resource persons will go into military, paramilitary and police barracks, to teach Nigerian indigenous languages;
- g) Making the study of one Nigerian indigenous language compulsory for students admitted into the diploma and post graduate diploma programmes of the NICO Training School; and
- h) Designing a page on NICO's website: www.nico.gov.ng, to promote Nigerian proverbs and aphorisms, to further generate interest on indigenous knowledge, especially, for those in the Diaspora.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the point has to be stressed that unless these languages are made functional and relevant to their users by government, both at local and state level, all efforts at reviving their use in the society will amount to nothing. NICO, on its part, is not resting on its oars to ensure sustainability of all its programmes geared at making our indigenous languages functional and relevant to our linguistic need and mode of transmitting our cultural realities. Furthermore, to make significant impact in this campaign on revitalising the use of our indigenous languages in our society, unlike other initiatives that end with workshops, seminars and conferences, which are mainly for small elite audiences. NICO's indigenous language study programmes are more progressive and sustainable and more grassroots-oriented. Thus, these initiatives need to be supported and encouraged.

It is also important to note that, if families are hardly in the habit of using our local languages and educational materials; textbooks and dictionaries are not available to facilitate learning, our official attempts at reviving indigenous languages would be under threat. If we are not to ultimately lose our national identity, government needs to pay greater attention to the teaching of our indigenous languages at all levels in the educational system. If the reverse is the case, the percentage of our children that speak local dialects will continue to thin down, which will likely result to the loss of our identity, our culture, our moral values and heritage. Thus, preserving our dialects is an all-important national challenge that requires our urgent and collective responsibility. The need to revive and preserve Nigerian indigenous languages can therefore not be overemphasised as a nation's culture is largely be reflected through the thoughts of its people. For our culture to remain alive, our language(s) through which culture is transmitted should be preserved, as language again powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes, and is an instrument of human development.



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