

# PROMOTION OF IGBO LANGUAGE IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: TOWARDS SAVING AFRICA FROM COLONIAL LINGUISTIC SLAVERY

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## **Abstract**

Language as vehicle of effective interaction defines human being as talking or communicating animal. African continent has over the years suffered untold stories of underdevelopment through slavery and then colonialism of a sort. Colonial linguistic slavery has moved on the line of destroying a people through the obliteration of their language leaving them without native linguistic identity that can very well be expressed in mother tongue. Using the method of critical evaluation and analysis, the researchers found out that some African languages are on the verge of extinction due to contemporary colonial linguistic slavery where some of these local languages are not spoken in favour of other most preferred foreign ones.

**Keywords:** Language, Colonial, Slavery, Mother Tongue

## **Introduction**

In his famous book, *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argues that the discovery of America and a passage to the East Indies via the Cape of Good Hope were two of the greatest and most important events recorded in human history. In fact, Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels repeated this claim later in the *Communist Manifesto*. In that work, these two philosophers argued that the overall consequences of those two events gave to *commerce, navigation, and industry* a driving force that was hitherto unknown. Put differently, the discovery of America and a passage to the East Indies gave an added impetus to the development of revolutionary elements in an

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already wobbling feudalistic society of Europe. Suffice it for  
now to observe that, later on, Adam Smith gave a subsequent  
reflection concerning the *benefits or misfortunes* that could  
follow those two events. In his 2003 *Steve Biko Memorial  
Lecture*, Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong'o(2003:424) makes the  
following crucial observation concerning those events.  
According to him:

Having lived through the  
consequences of those events, we  
know now that the benefits went  
largely to Europe and America, or  
colonizing nations, and the  
misfortunes to Africa, or colonized  
people. Where Smith wondered  
about the possible benefits and  
misfortunes, Marx and Engels were  
clear that arising from the  
dialectically linked benefits and  
misfortunes of capitalist modernity  
was the creation of the world that  
reflected the West.

Thiongo's argument above appears both clever and subtle in  
the sense that it is both precise and difficult to analyze, too.  
Nevertheless, his argument is that in making sure that all  
nations of the world choose either to participate in that  
modernity or risk being snuffed out of existence, the West  
coercively fashions a world after its own image and likeness.  
However, for the avoidance of doubt, Ngugi plainly underlines  
that the creation of the world after the image of the western  
bourgeoisie did not go unchallenged. As he rightly points out,  
this is seen in the class struggles as well as national struggles  
going on everywhere in the developing world. The Apartheid

South Africa, being a typical site of the concentration of both colonial domination and resistance, was to exemplify this ongoing ‘global struggle between capital and labour, between the colonising and the colonised’.

Thus, following the tradition of Medieval Universities whose erudite Masters used to hold “quodliberals” (public lectures) through which they freely discussed certain urgent issues of the moment, we wish to focus attention in this *write-up* on the continued struggle between the colonizing West and the colonized peoples of Africa in general, and the Igbo people of Nigeria (Ndigbo) in particular. To be more precise, we shall squarely turn the searchlight on the most pernicious form of colonial domination, namely, the linguistic domination of the African mind or mentality. This is important because, although nobody minimizes the adverse consequences of the colonial economic and political dominations of Africa, of special interest to us is the current question of the alienation of our native African languages through western cultural subjugation of the African continent. Let us then examine briefly the misfortune of colonialism with particular reference to mental slavery through cultural and linguistic subjugation of the Africans.

### **The Misfortune of Colonialism**

Now, it was the great African freedom fighter, Mr. Steve Biko, who once said, “The greatest weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed.” The late great Musician/singer, Bob Marley, put it more succinctly when he urged all Blacks, both in Africa and the Caribbean, to free themselves from the shackles of colonial mind-set in these words: “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery ....” Based on these crucial points of view which, as it were, form the terminus a quo of this public lecture, and in the light of the

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almost incurable penchant of Ndigbo to speak and converse between one and one and among themselves in foreign tongues, but especially in the English language, we totally agree with Thiongo's pungent observation in this important respect. According to him, one great misfortune of colonialism lies in its attempt to control the memory of the colonized or, that is, "to subject the colonized to its memory, to make the colonised see themselves through the hegemonic memory of the colonizing center." As Thiongo puts it the other way round, it is that during the colonial era, "the colonizing presence tried to mutilate the memory of the colonised and, where it failed, it dismembered it, and tried to re-member it to the coloniser's memory: his way of defining the world, including his take on the nature of the relation between the coloniser and the colonized." Of course, the relation was basically economic (largely effected through political power); but, in a very insidious manner, the relation was most effectively accomplished through cultural and linguistic subjugation, such as the control of the entire education system of a community, a nation, or a continent as the case may be.

Then, a crucial question imposes itself on us, namely: what was the real motive behind the colonizers' cultural subjugation of Africa? In respect to this question, I dare say also that the colonizer sought to seize the mode of thought (or the mentality) of Africans with the ultimate aim of controlling especially their linguistic mind-set. Thiongo expresses the same thought in a craftier but very moving manner. According to him, 'the ultimate goal of this cultural subjugation is to establish psychic dominance on the part of the coloniser and psychic submission on the colonised'. When put side by side, cultural subjugation through language is more menacing or dangerous than both economic and political subjugations. Thiongo (2003:52) underscores this danger also in his Steve Biko memorial lecture

- where he boldly asserts that ‘memory is also the site of dreams, desire, image, and consciousness’. This is why, according to him, a person who is said to have lost his memory has suffered a real loss, namely, the loss of “those traces that make individuals make sense of what is happening to them.” But, as he asks, if memory is the site of dreams, desire, image of oneself, and consciousness, where do we locate memory itself? Put differently, what is the site of memory? An attempt to address this passionate question brings us nearer to the heart of this discourse.

Of course, Thiongo unequivocally asserts that the site of memory is language! In fact, the salient point being put across here is that the colonialist subjugated the rest of the world to its own memory through language. In the same line of thought, it is my major contention in this lecture that the colonialist’s subjugation of Africa to ITS OWN MEMORY THROUGH LANGUAGE is the root cause of our apparent loss of identity (say, “Identity Crisis”) as Africans, in general, and Ndigbo, in particular. This cultural subjugation has since resulted in mental and linguistic slavery of African minds, which necessitates the on-going quest for the emancipation of Ndigbo from both mental and linguistic slavery (say, “mental decolonization”). For me, this is the core of the problem of *identity crisis among Ndigbo of Nigeria*, particularly with respect to the ease with which they jettison their native Igbo language in preference to the English language.

### **Quest for the Revival of African Native Languages**

Why is one so passionate about the reclamation of African native languages in general, and the Igbo language in particular? It is that, in the recent time, conscientious observers (even in the Western world) are beginning to draw attention to

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the fact that, like biological species, “languages are equally endangered”. For instance, a report that appeared recently in *The Independent* of London, N. Uweru (2004:10) points out that “the number of living languages spoken in the world is dwindling faster than the decline in the planet’s wild life.” It is of special interest to us that the authors of that report squarely traced the root cause of this frightening situation to colonialism. According to the report of that research:

Language with fewer than 50 speakers number 357, while 46 are known to have just one native speaker! Majorely, *Colonization has been fingered as the cause of the disappearance* of about 52 of the <sup>1</sup>76 languages of North American Tribes, and 31 of the 239 aboriginal languages of Australia.

This brings us much closer to the heart of my next contention in this discourse, namely: for there to be a real African renaissance after long decades of colonialism (- which retarded the overall progress in integrated development of life in Africa), we Africans must take sustained and well-coordinated measures to revivify, safeguard and develop our autochthonous African languages. Otherwise the words of M.C. Adiele (1975) that “*The most conclusive conquest of a people is the conquest through language.*” Will be very pertinent as well as that of Kassahun Checole that, “*No civilization has developed with a foreign language.*” –.

A philosopher is, by definition, “a lover of wisdom”. A wise man does not see only the surface but also “beneath the surface”. As philosophers, we invite you now to consider

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deeply that at the heart of the apparent loss of identity by Africans in general, and Ndigbo in particular, lies the near abandonment of our local languages in preference to the overpowering colonizing languages of the West, especially the English and the French languages. As Thiongo points out, the truth of this assertion can be seen more clearly in the failure of African writers, artists, musicians and intellectuals to utilize their native languages in their works.

### **The Failure of African Writers in Using African Native Languages**

Indeed, one outstanding way in which cultural subjugation of Africans is re-enforced through language is seen in the unfortunate situation whereby most African writers and artists, whom Thiongo rightly refers to as the “keepers of our memory”, still feel almost incapable of writing in their native mother tongues. Thiongo (2003:53) bemoans this situation when he asks:

What fate awaits a community when its keepers of memory – writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals, workers in ideas – *have been subjected to the West’s linguistic means of production and storage of memory* – English, French and Portuguese – so that *those who should have been keepers of the sacred word can only see themselves and the different possibilities for the community within the linguistic boundaries of memory incorporate?*

The fundamental point that Ngugi makes is that, memory plays an important role in this process of subjugation of the African mind through language. For, as he had earlier submitted, not only that ‘memory is the site of dreams, desire, self-image, and consciousness’ but, more fundamentally, the location of memory itself is in language. Thus, it goes without saying that the core of the African problem is that “we have languages” but most African writers, artists, musicians, and intellectuals still feel that they cannot store knowledge and emotions in these native languages except in foreign European languages. In fact, the efforts of a few African writers to write in their native languages had often raised eyebrows among some colonially-minded Europeans. For instance, in his book, *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiongo (2004:23) himself recounts the dismay among some Europeans when he tried to write in his native Gukuyi language. Narrating this experience he writes:

It was almost as if, I choosing to write in Gukuyi, I was doing something abnormal. The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures is questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal as abnormal ... Africa even produces intellectuals who now rationalize this upside-down way of looking at Africa.



Thabo Mbeki (2004:24) (- a champion of African renaissance), rightly views the African predicament vis-à-vis the important struggle for the decolonisation of the African mind in the same light. Thus, with particular reference to the failure of African writers, artists and intellectuals to make good use of their native African languages both in literary productions and in everyday public speeches, he pointedly observed that the tragedy of our situation today is that there are still many among us, who have the possibility to occupy the public space and the media space in particular, who claim that they are Africans, among them intellectuals, “who now rationalize this upside-down way of looking at Africa”, according to which “the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal.” Thus, for the thoroughly colonized African mind, for instance, it is abnormal to speak and write in one’s native language, and normal to speak and write in foreign languages. Or, put differently, it is normal, as it is misconstrued as a sign of “big education” to speak to one’s ‘kith and kin’ in foreign tongues, and abnormal, as it is equally misconstrued as a sign of “poor education” (if not downright illiteracy) to speak and write in one’s native language. This colonial mind-set or mentality is largely responsible for the noticeable apathy on the part of scholars in most African countries to undertake literary translation of many important works by African writers into native African languages. Consequently, most of these works are still stored in foreign languages while their authors’ native languages are thereby impoverished.

Thus, and as Onyechi Opene (2004:40) rightly observes, “during the dying days of colonialism in Nigeria, a handful of young writers deployed their literary skills towards the task of decolonising the African mind”. A leading literary giant among this group was Professor Chinua Achebe who, at the

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age of 28, published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 1958— “a socio-historical novel of the Igbo life”. Unfortunately, while Achebe and most African writers, such as Ngugi, John Munonye, Elechi Amadi, Gabriel Okara, Zuru Sofola, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, M. T. Aluko, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Onuora Nzekwe, Christopher Okigbo, Ben Okri and others, have written famous books in the English language and French, a negligible few have their works either written directly in, or translated into, their native languages. As Opene rightly observes, *Things Fall Apart* “has been translated into 30 different languages”, but one is yet to come across Igbo translation of any of the famous literary works of Achebe. On the contrary, for instance, Achebe’s *Arrow of God* (1964) was translated into German in 2002 under the title, “Der Pfeil Gottes”. That book won Achebe the German government’s 2002 Peace prize award for literature (“Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels 2002”), which carries a substantial sum of monetary award. In the same way, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was translated into German in 1983 under the title “Okonkwo oder Das Alte stürzt”; his *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) was translated also into German in 1991 under the title “Termitenhugel in der Savanne”.

The point here is that, instead of subjecting the Germans to reading these works only in its original English language, the German government made resources available for translating them into Deutch. And if the Germans were able to recognize the deeper value of promoting and encouraging their native language through the translation of famous works by foreign authors into Deutch, one would expect the same from various African national governments. They should make serious efforts to recover/repatriate the linguistic productions of Africans stored in foreign languages, by translating them into our own native African languages. Put differently, why do the

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state governments in Igboland never deem it necessary to translate some of the famous works of Achebe and other writers of Igbo background into Igbo language since their publications so many years ago? As Thiongo (2003:53) wonders aloud, how does one rationally explain, for instance, the unfortunate situation whereby over “90% of intellectual production in Africa is stored in European languages.” This is unfortunate because, in this way, alienation (drifting apart) of post-colonial Africans from their native languages and culture are unwittingly being reinforced. The profound consequences of both writing in foreign European languages and the failure to translate them into our native African languages is aptly summed up by Kole Omotoso (2004:53) in these words:

A language carries with it its own culture and *when you accept to use one language without any conscious attempt at translation into your own, you tend to also accept the culture of that language.* Until you have rendered one item of knowledge from one language into your own, you cannot creatively engage with that piece of knowledge.

Therefore, the thrust of Thiongo’s (2003:52) major contention stands unassailable, namely: at the heart of the crisis of identity in Africa in general, and in Igboland in particular, lies the apparent success of the colonialists in ‘planting their memory on our intellect through language and culture.’ This is why it is

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### **Mental Decolonization of Ndigbo**

What is important today is that Africans in general, and Ndigbo in particular, must look for ‘a way forward’ in reclaiming their native languages and cultures in which their self identities as Africans and Ndigbo, respectively, must be securely founded. In this regard, I wish here to be more particular in addressing the current growing concern in Igboland in respect to the vanishing love for Igbo language among Ndigbo today. As a matter of fact, this concern was already felt in the early 70s. For instance, in 1972, the then Commissioner of Education in the former East Central State, M. C. Adiele (1975:xii), systematically chronicled how, “within the space of only one month, the need for a re-orientation of the Igbo people to their language and culture has struck the headlines in so many pages of a single newspaper”, *The Renaissance*:

On July 5, 1972, someone write on the Dilemma of Igbo Language; On July 15, 1972, another inveighed against the use of Union Igbo; On July 22, 1972, a correspondent expatiated on the obstacles to the Development of Igbo Language; On July 28, 1972, yet another person elaborated on the significance of

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Kola-Nut in Igbo Culture; on 30<sup>th</sup>  
July, 1972, a correspondent  
quarreled with the persistence of  
what he called **Engligbo** [- a  
mixture of English and Igbo  
languages], and on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1972,  
someone still called for research  
into certain aspects of Igbo Culture  
and History.

Also, the growing concern for the bad situation of Igbo language in Nigeria has resurfaced in the most recent time. For instance, in just a single day, the following interesting concerns for Igbo language and culture came to light in the *National Light* of Wednesday September 15, 2004, namely: one Stella Obi reported that “Eze Uzu charges Ohaneze on Igbo culture” (p. 1 & 2); another reporter wrote on how “Abana calls on Igbos to promote and preserve their culture” (p. 2); yet one Emma Madu wrote on “The need for promotion of Igbo language and Culture” (p. 8). Of course, the apprehensions for the gradual but steady death of Igbo language must be appreciated in the light of the fact that cultural anthropologists are in agreement that ‘language is the vehicle of culture.’ Thus, commenting on the steady and regrettable decline of Igbo language and culture today, Emma Madu (2004:8) speaks the minds of many well-meaning Igbo people when he pointedly observes that a quick look at the sad state of Igbo language and culture in our contemporary society would elicit tears from the eyes of any true Igbo patriot or nationalist. He backs up his concern with this vital deposition, namely:

The recent UNESCO report  
on languages had it that most  
languages might become

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extinct in the next fifty  
years. The fear is that Igbo  
language was specifically  
mentioned in that UNESCO  
report as one language to be  
affected.

Therefore, the salient question is this: what must Igbo people do in the face of this ugly situation in which Igbo language is fast becoming an “endangered specie”, especially in comparison to other major native languages in contemporary Nigerian society? In other words, what is ‘the way forward’ for the Igbo people?

### **Way Forward to Reclaiming the Igbo Native Language**

In his discussion on the ‘way forward for Ndigbo’, Justice Chukwudifu Oputa (2004:46) observes that when one talks of “the way forward”, it suggests recognition that something has really gone wrong. It is a plain acknowledgment that “one is off course”; and that “one has to pick one’s way through difficulties to discover a way out.”We need to reclaim and promote our native Igbo language because, in the light of our earlier analysis of Ngugi’s reflection on the misfortunes of colonialism, one strongly agrees with M.C. Adiele’s(1975:xii) assertion that:

A race whose language cannot be used for literary and serious purposes has no real identity; the race is decadent. The most conclusive conquest of a people is the conquest through language.

We say it again that, of all the major languages in Nigeria, the Igbo language has become the most endangered specie. This is because, both ordinary people as well as intellectuals in Hausa and Yoruba take pride in speaking and writing their respective native languages. Emma Madu(2004:8) upholds this assertion when he observes that “the way our Hausa and Yoruba counterparts hold firmly their language and culture is an open challenge to us Igbos.” Like the Hausas in particular, the Igbo people must refuse to allow their native Igbo language to be completely conquered by the over-powering English language of our former British colonial overlords. Little wonder that, of all the three major Nigerian native languages, the British Broadcasting Corporation has maintained a scheduled airtime for its broadcast in the Hausa language. Both the Hausas and the Yorubas must be commended for the serious manner in which they always uphold and promote their respective native languages and culture. Ndigbo need to emulate them in this regard. Of course, it is only when one takes his native language and culture serious that others will also take them and their language serious.

In the search for the ‘way forward’ in reclaiming our native Igbo language and culture, the local Church and various State governments in Igboland have vital roles to play. In fact, the local Church has always remained at the vanguard of the promotion of native language and culture in every land. For instance, it is already a historical fact that Martin Luther’s translation of the whole Bible into German played a crucial role in making German a widely spoken language today. Also, the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in England contributed to a great extent in the promotion and global spread of the English language. Again, at the heat of the language dispute between the French-speaking and the

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Flemish-speaking people of Belgium, the priests, through the use of Flemish in the Church, helped in no small way in making Flemish a respectable language that deserved to be used in regular lectures in Universities in Belgium. This is understandable because, as Rev. Fr. Iheanyi Enwerem (2003:1) rightly puts it, “the Church is a moral community within which individuals are unified into a collective way of action or a practice which, in turn, expresses what the people hold to be dear to them in society”. Of course, one must never forget that this search for the ‘way forward’ in reclaiming the native Igbo language is fundamentally the primary project of decolonising the mind of an average educated Igboman or woman in his/her attitude towards our native language and culture.

Most importantly, and from pragmatic perspective, the ‘way forward’ in reclaiming our linguistic identity as Ndigbo must be to encourage an aggressive usage of our native tongue in both literary writings and in everyday oral speech. Put simply, Ndigbo must take pride in their mother tongue; and must speak and write in their native Igbo language. In this respect, it is unfortunate that there are some people who indulge in complaining that African native languages are bereft of scientific and technical adaptation or conversion. For instance, Ben Nwabueze (2004:27) made such a suggestion in a keynote address he delivered recently on the occasion of the 2004 Igbo Day Celebrations in Anambra State. According to him, all Ndigbo take pride in Igbo language, but that they “do frequently abandon it as a medium of communication because of its inherent deficiencies which impede its use in conveying complex ideas both verbally and even more so in writing.” Insinuations or criticisms like this one can hardly represent the whole truth of the matter. In fact, in reply to such criticisms



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against African native languages, KassahunChecole (2004:45)  
makes the following significant observations:

All languages in the 20<sup>th</sup>  
century, such as Chinese and  
Japanese, did not have  
technical vocabulary.  
***Technical vocabulary was  
created. Language is always  
expansive and flexible; it  
can be adapted and  
improved.***

One is glad to find attempts at a creative production of technical vocabularies in the Igbo newspaper, OZISA (2004:1), where one comes across such Igbo translations of foreign words or phrases, like “His Grace”, “Archbishop”, “Archdiocese”, “Metropolitan Province” as follows: “***Amarachi A. J. V. Obinna, AchibishopuKatolik nke Owere na ndi Achidayosis Katolik nke Owere***” = His Grace Archbishop A. J. V. Obinna of the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri and the Catholic Archdiocese of Owerri); “***Amarachi Achibishopu V. M. Okeke na-elekota Achidayosis nke Onicha nakwa gburugburu Provinsi Onicha***” = His Grace Archbishop V. M. Okeke of Onitsha Achdiocese and the Metropolitan of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province). One sees also attempts at creative vocabularies/coinages in Igbo like: **Ebreham** (Abraham), **Iraki** (Iraq), **Dayosis** (Diocese), **Onyemgbazi** (Chaplain), **Naijiria** (Nigeria), **Fada** Ikeobi (Rev. Father Ikeobi), **Steeti** Anambra (Anambra State), **Tuzdee** (Tuesday), **Satodee** (Saturday), **Govanọ** (Governor), **Misa di asọ** (Holy Mass), **Mahadum** nke Ibadan (University of Ibadan), **Senchuri** (Century), **Milenum** nke atọ (Third Millennium), etc. Therefore, like the editor of the *World Igbo*

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*Times* rightly observes, it is no use bemoaning the apparent penchant of Ndigbo to speak especially in English language at any slightest opportunity, and the consequent decline of the Igbo language vis-à-vis the other major Nigerian indigenous languages today. In the very words of the London-based editor: “Atona na-ekpesa n’asusu Igbo melu nkea, m’obu nke ozo. Jua onwegi ihe gi nwa megolumaka ya ....” (- Stop complaining against our native Igbo language, rather ask yourself what have you done to promote it?). The Igbo people must begin to do something more concretely about both the oral and written usages of their native Igbo language! In other words, and as Kole Omotoso (2004:53) urges us in Africa, “language activists must get down to work and mass language movements must come into being insisting on mass literacy in African languages ....” We must begin to promote the three major Nigerian native languages more consciously, and aggressively, too. In Nigeria’s educational institutions, our educational curricula must be geared toward self-awareness and mastery of pupils and students in Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba native languages. Apart from promoting mutual acceptance, social unity and peaceful co-existence among citizens of a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic Nigerian nation, one other aim is to do away with the mentality that being able to read and write in colonial languages is ‘the be-all and the end-all’. With respect to Ndigbo in particular, the overall aim is to ensure that: “Osu Igbo ga-abukwa ogu Igbo, burukwa ode Igbo” (- He who speaks Igbo language must also be able to write in Igbo language).

### **In Praise of Promoting Igbo Language and Culture**

At this juncture, one cannot but recall with great appreciation the singular effort of late Mazi F. C. Ogbalu, whose name became synonymous with the promotion of Igbo language and culture through his numerous writings in Igbo language. His

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untimely death has created a huge vacuum yet to be adequately filled by any other Igboman or woman of a known quantity in promoting Igbo language and culture. However, one is happy to note that Prof. Uzochukwu of the University of Lagos appears set to walk in the footsteps of Mazi Ogbalu in a bid to stem the tide of decay in Igbo language. His work as a professor of Igbo language in that University is sure to bring the needed forward motion in the revival of Igbo language and culture. In the words of Ben Nwabueze (2004:27):

Renaissance seems to be in the offing through the work of Professor Uzochukwu ... who, as Professor of Igbo language for many years, was able to set up on-going first degree and post-graduate degree courses in Igbo language at that University, and is presently heading a team engaged in the translation of the Nigerian Constitution .... He deserves to be acknowledged and applauded by Ndigbo. He should not stop with the translation of the Nigerian Constitution into Igbo. He should try to match Julius Nyerere's translation of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and Marchent of Venice into Swahili.

There is also a recent publication in Igbo entitled *Mkpa N'aka Maka Nsupe na Ezi Odide Asusu Igbo* (2001), which was published by Michael C. Ngoesi for the sole aim of encouraging Ndigbo to speak and write in Igbo language. Likewise, one must commend the efforts of the Bishops of the

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Igbo-speaking areas of Nigeria, who published the *Usoro Emume nke Misa* as far back as 1971. In the most recent time, they have also encouraged and sponsored the production and publication of the Igbo translation of the Bible, *Baibul Nso, Nhazi Katolik* (2000), for their faithful of Igbo extraction in Nigeria. Also, another concrete effort in this project of reclaiming our native Igbo language has been spearheaded in recent years by the Archbishop of Owerri, Most Rev. Anthony Obinna. He has initiated the annual Igbo language lecture, "ODENIGBO", and the production of the already mentioned Igbo newspaper, *OZISA*.

Thus, the efforts of Mazi Ogbalu, Prof. Uzochukwu, Mr. Michael C. Ngoesi, the Bishops of Igbo-speaking areas of Nigeria, and the Archbishop of Owerri in particular, and others not mentioned here, are very commendable vis-à-vis the overall implication of the thoughtful analysis of Prof. Ngugi, which has served as the *terminus a quo* (point of departure) of this write-up. In the words of the editor of the *World Igbo Times*, the overall implication is that: "*Onye ma asusu ndi ozo ofuma, mana o maghi nke ya, amazughi iheamazu. O bu kwuazi ohu mba ndi ahu, o ma so asusu ha.*"(- He who is fluent in speaking other people's languages but cannot speak his own, is not intelligent or wise. He is also a slave of those people whose languages he speaks well).

At this juncture, we would also like to observe that the Bishops of the Igbo-speaking areas of Nigeria can go a step further in lending their supports in promoting the use of Igbo language for the deeper evangelization (say, solidification of the Christian faith) of Ndigbo. For instance, they can also insist that, except on special occasions, all regular Sunday and Daily Holy Masses especially in rural parishes in Igboland must be really celebrated for Ndigbo in their native Igbo language. This

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is important because, as Ndigbo are exhorted in the “Mbem  
Odenigbo” Odenigbo Anthem(1997:1):

Chukwu kenyere anyi asusu Igbo, iji  
fee ya, ma kwusaa Ozioma n’ime  
Kristi, na n’aha Kristi nwa ya ... Ya  
bu k’anyi suo, guo ma dee Igbo,  
k’Igbo na Ozioma debanye n’ime  
anyi, na-edeputa ezi mkpuru na  
Kristi, Odenigbo Nzoputa anyi.

In fact, from a more critical perspective, that Ndigbo today  
manifest a bewildering penchant for looking down on their  
native mother tongue is a pointer to the apparent general loss of  
‘sovereign consciousness’ of one’s Being (self-identity) as  
“Nwaigbo”/“Nwafoigbo” (a born-Igbo). This has eaten deep  
into the general psyche / mentality of Ndigbo as a people. Seen  
from this perspective, the project of reclaiming our native Igbo  
language and, thereby, regaining our positive “self-awareness”  
(self-identity) as Ndigbo is fundamental because, as Thiongo  
(2003:52) succinctly puts it in a Heideggarian *modus loquandi*:

A person without a consciousness of  
his *Being in the World* ... is lost and  
***can easily be guided by another to  
wherever the guide wants to take  
him, even to his own extinction.***

I invite you to consider it, ‘Ndigbo ibe m’, that this is the most  
pernicious and enduring sad consequence of mental  
colonization of a people through language. You can then see  
why I said earlier that the terminus a quo of our search for ‘the  
Way Forward’ in solving the crisis of identity among Ndigbo  
today lies in re-memorizing our roots and reclaiming our native

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Igbo language. I reiterate here that religious leaders in Igboland have an essential role to play in pulling Ndigbo back from both individual and collective march down the road to linguistic extinction. As Msgr. T. Nwalor in Uwalaka (2003:ix) emphasizes this point, now that the politicians appear to have woefully failed Ndigbo, Nwaigbo is looking up to religious leaders to assist him “rediscover his human dignity and his right to freedom of thought, expression ...: to help him to rediscover his identity and culture”.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

In the final analysis, any honest “**Nwafoigbo**” would agree with T. Nwalor in Uwalaka (2003:vii) today that “the Igbo identity and culture apparently collapsed or at best hemorrhaged seriously”. But all hopes are not yet lost in reclaiming our native African languages in general, and our Igbo language in particular. We can still do something, and there is room for progress. For, as George A. Kwanashie (2004:1) of the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria rightly observes, “No society is stagnant and no society can be said to be a permanent slave to its past.” In the light of this assertion, we have tried to argue in this write-up that one foundational ‘way forward’ in reclaiming our Igbo identity and culture is to openly affirm our Being/our existence as Ndigbo. And one of the most affirmative ways to do this must be through uncompromisingly using our native Igbo language in our everyday oral speeches and in literary writings. For unless one affirms his own existence by saying, “I am”, nobody will really recognize his existential personhood by equally affirming it – that “you are”. Put differently, at the heart of my overall submission here is the point that your native tongue/language remains the most obvious and incontrovertible way to affirm one’s existential reality in the world. For, as Paul Ricoeur affirms, ‘Nobody speaks from nowhere’. We speak from the

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existential reality of our personhoods, as located in a particular natural world (say, background / environment), that is, mediated in time and space.

The *Sitz im Lebem* of Ndigbo in the Nigerian Federation imposes it upon them to validate their own Being – “who they are”, and so, to speak, to act, and to live from the background of their foundational identity as Igbo people (Ndigbo). Hence, it is important that all hands must be on deck in the project of reclaiming and promoting our native Igbo language and culture. It is from this perspective that Madu E.(2004:8) commends the positive action of the members of the Anambra State House of Assemble in its recent resolution “to set aside Wednesday of every week for government business to be conducted in Igbo language both for the legislative and executive arms of government”. This is a step in the right direction because, as Madu E. (2004:8) rightly observes:

*A situation wherewe are ashamed to say that we are Ndigbo or to express ourselves in Igbo language in any gathering is a thing of self pity.* When we think of our schools where Igbo teachers punish pupils and students for the offence of speaking Igbo language in the class, we get the whole picture of the everlasting wound we inflict on our language and culture.

Furthermore, Madu chastises Igbo parents, especially those of them who live abroad or reside in non Igbo-speaking enclaves, who perpetrate this ugly trend in their homes. This is because, these “unconscious” parents make no effort to teach their

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children the Igbo language. Instead, they take pride in conversing with them in English language or, worse still, in “broken English” (Englilgo). Therefore, one way forward in reclaiming our native language as Ndigbo is that all Ndigbo, home and abroad (or in Diaspora), parents, teachers, government officials, priests and Religious must join hands in fighting this “common course in order to regain our lost identity”, through re-discovering, promoting and sustaining the Igbo language and culture.

As influential Church institutions, I dare say that our Major Seminaries are in a unique position to do something reasonable in helping to promote and sustain our Nigerian native languages and culture. Indeed, one concrete way we can promote our native languages is to encourage their regular use in these Major Seminaries. Put the other way round, we sincerely believe that in this age and time, when there is growing international concerns over the gradual but steady death of autochthonous languages around the world, the tendency to continue to give preferential treatment to the English language to the disadvantage of Nigeria’s native languages should be reversed.

But, for the avoidance of doubt, are we really advocating the death of English language in our major seminaries and public tertiary institutions of higher learning? No. Not in the least! We are simply trying to proffer a solution to the real problem we have at hand today, for examples, in our parishes, namely, that most newly ordained priests, and even many among the old breeds, embarrass their parishioners and congregations by their inability to touch their hearts during homilies. This is largely due to poor command of Nigeria’s major native languages. In other words, we imply that in the face of this obvious problem, there is a cogent reason today in Igboland, for instance, to cede



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the place of priority to Igbo language in particular (and other  
Nigeria's major native languages in general) in the educational  
curricula of our tertiary institutions of higher learning.

In conclusion, the project of mental decolonization of Africans in general and Ndigbo in particular is of immense importance and should be an on-going one. In this regard, we strongly view the reclamation and promotion of African native languages in general, and the Igbo language in particular, as the precondition of the possibility of a real African and Ndigbo renaissance, respectively. In respect to this also, we conclude this write-up with this important advice from Msgr T. Okere especially to those Church leaders who minimize the importance of promoting our native Igbo language and culture, and our ability to use them strategically in deepening the religious faith and practice of our people as both Ndigbo and Christians. In the words of Msgr. Okere (1997:21:22):

Oge eruola mgbe a ga ejisi ike nye  
anyi na Muo Nso ohere, kwanyere  
anyi ugwu, nwee obisiike na, site  
n'ike Chukwu, na onyinye ndi  
Chukwu nyere anyi bu umu Igbo,  
anyi nwere ike jikogbuo omenala  
anyi na okwukwe anyi, n'uzo ga-  
amasi Chukwu, baakwara anyi uru  
maka nzoputa. Ihe a bu oru diiri  
anyi bu ndi Igbo bukwa ndi otu  
Kristi. O nweghi onye maobu ndi  
ozo ga-aruchitere anyi oru a, n'ih  
na o nweghi onye maobu ndi ozo ga  
anochitere anyi okwa a Chukwu  
nyere anyi, onweghi ndi ozo ga-abu

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ihe anyi bu, nke bu ndi Igbo,  
burukwa ndiotu Kristi.

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