
The Sociolinguistic Setting of A lé gē

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Abstract

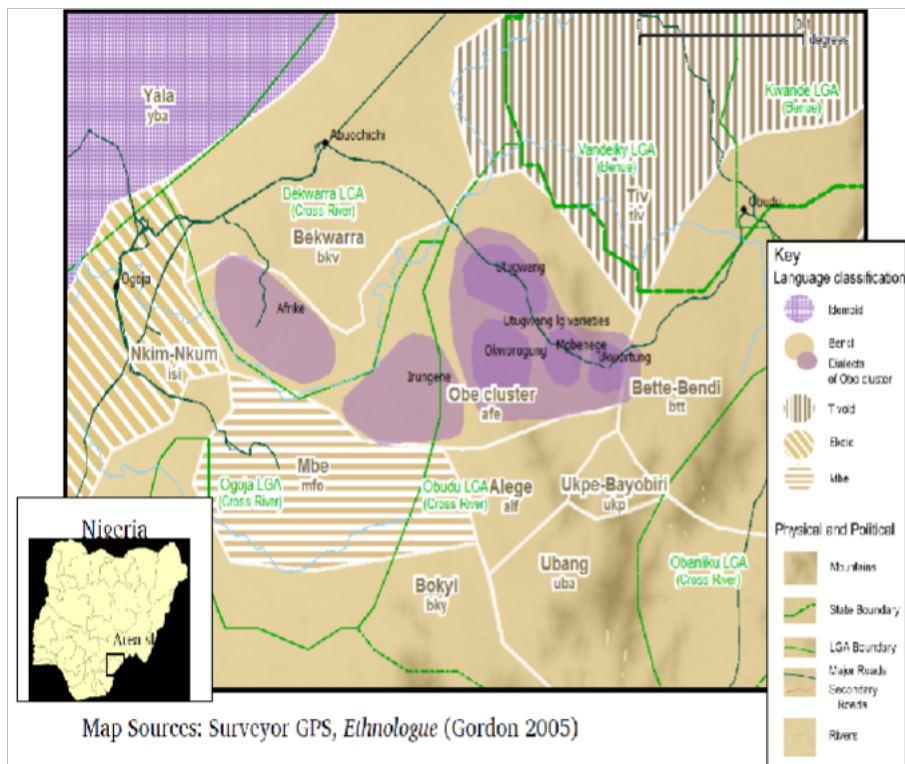
Alege is a small group Bendi language spoken in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria, West Africa. In the light of the community's efforts towards developing the language, this survey was conducted to access the different domains of language use and the factors that affect the continued sustenance of the Alege language in these domains. The aim of this study is to help the Alege community make informed decisions on the type of language development project(s) to initiate and what problems to address. For this study, three different survey methods were employed: individual and group interviews, participant observation and the use of three structured questionnaires – village profile, household and school-based questionnaires. Findings from the study show that Alege is a multilingual community where Alege is predominantly spoken with English, Nigerian pidgin and Bette language (mostly spoken by adults) being used in certain domains. Regardless of the high level of multilingualism, the Alege people have a strong positive attitude towards their language, which they proudly speak in their homes, markets, church and other domains of use within the community. Taking into account the various socio-economic and demographic factors such as migration and youth unemployment currently affecting the community, it is imperative that development strategies that would enhance the vitality of the language be established before an intergenerational gulf erupts.

Keywords: Alege, sociolinguistic setting, language domains, language

use

1. Introduction

Alege is a small group Bendi language belonging to the Benue-Congo sub-phylum. The Alege community is located in the southern part of Obudu Local Government Area (LGA) in Cross River State, Nigeria, West Africa. This area is known for its hilly terrain with the highest elevation in the region being the notable Obudu cattle ranch that serves as a tourist site. The area is made up of five ethnic communities namely; Bette, Alege, Ukpe, Ubang and Utugwang. The local government headquarters is located at Obudu within the Bette clan. The distance between the Alege community and the Obudu cattle ranch is over 35km. Alege shares boundaries with Utugwang to the north, Mbube (in Ogoja Local Government Area) to the west, Ubang to the south east, Ukpe-Bayobiri to the east, Bette to the north east and Bokyi to the south. The map below shows the geographical location of the Alege people and their neighbours.



The history of the Alege people (as narrated by Reverend Akpoji through personal communication) begins with their progenitor Alege, son of Agba. Agba and his family lived somewhere in the eastern part of Obudu. When his father Agba died, Alege migrated from the eastern part of Obudu (due to socio-economic reasons) and settled on the mountain called *Irun*. Presently in Alege, there is a visible tableland with a cave where Alege supposedly lived. In this new land, Alege farmed and had seven sons. The sons of Alege include; Amukwong, Eraru, Okikwo, Ngokpu, Ebuasu, Okpe and Okodun. After the death of Alege, these seven sons settled in scattered

settlements around the Irun mountain. The descendants of these seven sons today form what is today known as the Alege community. The Alege community is thus made up of seven villages named after these sons. The name Alege refers to both the people and the language they speak. Alternate names for Alege as used by the people include *Elige* and *Elege*. The terms Alegi, Ugbe, and Uge as cited in Ethnologue as alternate names for Alege are neither known nor used by the people.

2. Previous research

In terms of research, very little work has been carried out on Alege. In fact, previous studies that make mention of Alege are basically attempts towards the genetic classification of the Bendi family within the Cross River group. In carrying out a comparative study of the Bendi languages, Blench (2004) laments that very little research has been conducted. The research works that exist on Bendi languages are mostly on Bekwara and Bokyi, and they remain unpublished and inaccessible. Blench (2004) includes examples from Alege. Although fairly comprehensive (compared to previous studies), the data provided were however limited to few words gathered from multiple secondary sources.

Otronyi, Ajaegbu, Muniru, and Nweke (2015) conducted a sociolinguistics survey on Alege, Ukpe and Ubang. The main goal of the survey was to find out the possibility of widespread bilingualism in Alege, Ukpe, Ubang and Bette among speakers of Alege, Ukpe and Ubang and to determine the most suitable language(s) each language group understands and accepts as the best for a standard written form that would serve all groups. Furthermore, the survey sought to find out if comprehension of Alege, Ukpe and Ubang is acquired or inherent. The survey team interviewed individuals and

groups, gathered words for calculating lexical similarity and asked them about their potential support of a language project. Their report showed that Alege is closely related to Ukpe with which it shares 60% lexical similarity and Ubang with which it shares 53% lexical similarity. As a result of this relationship, there is some form of mutual intelligibility (to a varying degree) among adult speakers but seldom children. This is likely due to the fact that these communities have had a long history of social contact through intermarriages, trading and schooling.

This present study builds on some of the findings of Otronyi et al. (2015) with the view of accessing the different domains of language use in the Alege community to ascertain the type(s) of community language project(s) that would have sustained impact in the absence of institutional and government support.

3. Research questions

Although Alege is rated on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGDS) as level 6a, that is, having sustainable orality, the growing concern of the vulnerability of endangerment of small undescribed and undocumented languages has prompted the speakers of Alege to seek necessary collaboration and assistance in documenting the language. This study was therefore conducted to address the following questions:

- a. What are the domains of language use?
- b. What are the factors that affect the continued sustenance of the Alege language in these domains?

Based on the findings with reference to these stated questions, we would be able to make an informed recommendation on the types of language development project(s) to initiate.

To answer these research questions, the survey method was employed.

4. Methodology

In order to gather data for this study, three different survey instruments were employed: interview, questionnaire and participant observation. Group and individual interviews were conducted in different sections of the community. Participant observation of various communicative events was employed. Three different structured questionnaires were administered – village profile, household and school based questionnaires¹. The questionnaires were the most productive in providing the information needed. The information gathered from the study are analysed and presented in a descriptive method for easy access and understanding (especially for the speech community) in the following sections.

5.1 The sociolinguistic setting

This section explores five domains of language use within the community. Although our focus is on the use of Alege language, the study will also highlight the roles of other language codes where they apply.

5.1.1 Educational setting

Early missionaries brought education to the Alege-speaking community in the early fifties. Through their efforts, the first community primary school – St Anthony's Primary School Alege, was established in 1957 (see figures 1 and 2 below). This school, which is located in Amukwong-Alege, served children from other Alege

¹ These questionnaires were derived from Obikudo et al (2015) and prepared by Bruce Connell.

clans for many years. Presently, there are seven primary schools and three secondary schools in the community – all owned by the Cross River state government. In addition, there are three privately owned nursery schools in the community. There are no tertiary institutions. The tertiary institution closest to the community is the College of Education located at Obudu (within the Bette clan).

From the survey, it was discovered that the English language is the medium of instruction at all levels of education. However, in the first two years of primary education, Alege (where the teacher speaks Alege) and Nigerian Pidgin English (where the teacher does not speak Alege) are used to reinforce what has been taught in English. Beyond this level, students are prohibited from speaking ‘vernacular’ in school; vernacular here refers to both Alege and Pidgin English. Although there is a national policy on education that supports the use of the mother tongue in primary and secondary school education, the lack of teachers and the unavailability of literacy materials in the language have made the policy difficult to implement. The lack of proper funding of education by the government adversely affects the quality of education in this community.

For a rural community, the general literacy level in the Alege community can be rated as average. According to data gathered during the survey, over 90% of the indigenes of the community have completed primary education and over 55% have attained secondary education. A far lesser number, mostly made up of individuals below 45years, have acquired tertiary education outside the community. Regardless of these estimates, the rate of girl-child education remains very low as most families give priority to educating their male children.



Fig. 1. First educational institution in Alege

Fig. 2. St. Anthony's primary school, Alege (with first author in the picture)

5.1.2 Vocational setting

The Alege community is located within the rich tropical rain forest of Nigeria. With rainfall from March to November and the availability of extensive and fertile soil, Alege is typically an agrarian society. Over 90% of the people living in this community are occupational farmers.

The vocation is dominated by men; just a handful of women participate in farming. Although farming in this community is far from being mechanized, farmers still make good money from cash crops such as cocoa, yam, cassava, maize, oil palm, banana, and kola nut. The villagers also engage in fish farming and poultry. Cocoa is mostly sold to independent collectors who export them while all other agricultural commodities are sold at the local market. Participant observation reveals that Alege language is predominantly used on the farm. However, in cases where non-Alege speakers have

dealings with the farmers, Pidgin English or English is used. If the person is from Obudu, then Bette is used as the code for communication.

Some members of the Alege speech community are traders who ply their trade within the community or in the neighbouring Obudu local government headquarters. The traders in the community are predominantly women who are mostly involved in the processing and sales of farm produce. The major markets in this area are the Alege market and the Obudu main market. These markets attract people from Mbube, Ogoja, Bokyi, and Bekwarra communities in Cross River state, Tiv communities in Benue state and even Igbo traders from Ebonyi state.

Survey reports show that within the Alege market, business is mostly conducted in Alege language and few instances of other neighbouring languages like Bette, Utugwang and Ubang. In some cases, we found that Pidgin English is also used when one of the parties involved is not from within neighbouring communities. In Obudu however, these market women predominantly speak Bette and Pidgin English. Rev Akporji (personal communication) notes that while the community has the potential of being one of the food producers for the nation, lack of support from the government as well as poor social amenities that support farming such as motorable roads, access to clean water and electric power has limited the agricultural capacity of the community.

Apart from farming and trading, some Alege people are civil servants working in government agencies and as teachers in government owned schools. It is worthy of note that even traders and civil servants own their own farms.

5.1.3 Home setting

The Alege people have a strong loyalty towards their language. Basically, Alege language is the sole medium of communication in most homes in the community. Alege has an interesting de facto family language policy. The Alege people intermarry either from within the community or from neighbouring communities like Ubang, Bette, Utugwang and Ukpe. People from these related linguistic backgrounds easily learn the Alege language. Thus almost all activities in the home are carried out using Alege as the code of communication. Children in the home who are yet to come of school age are mostly monolinguals in Alege.

There are also cases of homes where one parent is from an unrelated linguistic background. In all such instances that we found, the woman was from a different linguistic background and the Pidgin English language was predominantly used within the home. Less frequent than Pidgin, Alege was also spoken. The frequency of the use of Alege in such homes depends on the number of years the woman has spent in the marriage and her ability to learn the language. Children from these homes are mostly bilingual in Alege and Pidgin English. In some cases, some children were reported to be able to speak Alege, Pidgin English and their mother's language.

5.1.4 Communal setting

The sole medium of communication within the community is Alege. During our study, we learnt that speaking any other language within the community shows that one or both speakers involved in the conversation are strangers. In several community gatherings like the village meetings, all the deliberations are done in Alege, except in cases where they have a guest in their midst. Should such an occasion arise, part of the deliberations may be held in English or an interpreter will communicate the proceedings of the meeting to the

guest. This was well observed during several meetings with the community leaders and elders.

Culturally, Alege has a lot of social activities that take place at night. For instance, every night, children gather in small groups to either play games or listen to stories. These games and stories are all presented in Alege. Festivals are also an important aspect of the people's cultural practice. In the past, there were different types of festivals, however, with the advent of Christianity, only the New Yam festival known as *irui ifife* in Alege is celebrated till date in the community. The new yam festival, which is celebrated at the beginning of the harvest season, is a period of thanksgiving to God for a successful farming season. It is a time of celebration and feasting in the community. Yams are prepared and eaten in different ways - roasted yam with palm oil, boiled yam with palm oil, pounded yam with different soups. Also, different kinds of cultural entertainment such as dances and masquerade displays are provided during this festival. Every aspect of the new yam festival is conducted in Alege.

Most people in the community marry from within the community and during such marriage ceremonies, the language of communication is Alege. Many others also marry from neighbouring communities like Utugwang, Ukpe, Ubang and Bette. Such occasions usually feature a mix of both Alege – which to some extent is intelligible to Utugwang, Ukpe and Ubang speakers – and Pidgin English. In the instance where the marriage is between someone from a completely different linguistic background, the ceremony is conducted in Alege and English and in some cases, a spokesperson who acts as a translator is provided for the guests.

For other community ceremonies and rituals such as burials, naming ceremonies, etc., the language used in such events is Alege.

5.1.5 Religious setting

Religion occupies a central position and as well plays a very integral role in the life of the Alege people. The Bible project, which is the very first language development project in the community, is an affirmation of the place of religion in the life of the people. Like most African communities, in the past the Alege people were adherents of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) who worshipped the deity *erim*. However, evangelical works by early missionaries saw majority of the people convert to Christianity. Otronyi et al (2015) reveal that most of the Christian denominations in the Alege, Ukpe and Ubang area today started working in the early 1950s.

There are six Christian denominations in the community, the Assemblies of God Church, Catholic Church, Church of Christ of Nigeria, Presbyterian Church, Deeper Life Bible Church, and the Lord's Chosen Church. Presently, there are twenty churches in Alege. Majority of the Alege people profess the Christian faith while very few members of the society remain adherents of traditional worship. Although majority of people in this community are Christians, traditional beliefs and cultural practices such as birth, death and marriage rites are still in practice even among Christians.

Most Alege Christians attend church services at least once in a week (on Sunday). The medium of communication is Alege and English. During church activities, the pastor/priest (or the leader of the congregation) preaches in English, while the church interpreter translates to Alege. Literate members of this community also own and make use of the Bette Bible for their personal study. In the case of traditional worship, the Alege language is exclusively employed.

5.2 Factors affecting sustainability

While currently, one can rightly argue that the Alege language is

healthy, the factors explored in this section capture some indicators that point to the fact that such language vitality might not be sustained in the future.

5.2.1 Socioeconomic factors

One major socioeconomic challenge in this community is unemployment. In Alege is a rural community and apart from the schools and a primary healthcare centre, there are no commercial centres. As a result, agriculture accounts for more than 90% of jobs within the community. The lack of mechanised support for farming and the poor productivity associated with such small scale farming are some of the factors that promote a negative attitude among the youths towards agriculture. With the consequent rise in unemployment (especially youth unemployment) sixty five to seventy percent of the youth population migrate to other cities seeking employment and a 'better' means of livelihood.

These migrants settle into their new communities and almost never return to Alege. This trend has resulted in the gradual but steady decline in the youth population in the community. Agricultural investments in this area would go a long way in shaping the socio-economic destiny of the region while creating job opportunities for the teeming youths. The quality of education in Alege is quite reflective of the poor standard of education in rural Nigeria. Given that quality education key to gaining good employment, many parents send their children to other towns even at the primary level. The mass migration of young people in search for better education in other urban areas is further worsened by the fact that there are no tertiary institutions in the area. As most individuals leave the community as children enrolled into primary schools in urban centres where the Alege language is not spoken, they progress to secondary school, and then to tertiary institution. After their education, they gain jobs in these cities and seldom return to the

village. This trend has been a serious threat to the intergenerational transmission of the language. Most individuals in such situations lose their language, since they did not actually attain full competence before leaving the community to other communities where a different language is spoken. The loss of contact with one's speech community at an early age is a major source of endangerment for this language.

5.2.2 Demographic Factors

The unavailability of a reliable official census data makes it difficult to provide accurate information about the population of the community. Several visits to the Population Census office both at the Obudu Local Government Office and the State Population office in Calabar reveal that the 2006 population census figure for Alege was based on a 2.8% growth rate estimation of the 1991 population census figure.

This estimation however did not factor in several population dynamics such as death rate and migration. During the course of our interview, two different consultants were asked about the population of the community. While one pegged the number at over seven thousand, the other suggested that they are over ten thousand. These results are however not reliable as they are at best speculative. According to Ethnologue, Alege language has over 16,300 speakers. Findings from personal observation show that this figure does not really represent the reality on ground as the population is far less than the estimated population of 16,300. Speaking on the critical factor that impact the demography of the community, Ochui Joseph notes that over 60-70% of young people constantly migrate from the community to other urban centres due to socioeconomic reasons – mainly education and job. When these individuals leave, they scarcely return to the community.

Several scholars (Bickel and Nichols 2003, Jan Wohlgemuth 2010) have argued that the small size of a speech community does not necessarily mean the language is endangered, especially where such a speech community demonstrates strong language loyalty. However, there is a general agreement that the size of a speech community can sometimes be a disadvantage especially in an environment where there is an existence of a more dominant, economically viable language. In such an environment, we see speakers of the less dominant language becoming bilinguals and at some point down the line, switching totally to the more dominant language while giving up their aboriginal language. The dominance of Hausa especially in north-eastern Nigeria is a typical example (Usman, 2014). Little wonder one of the nine criteria used to judge the vitality or otherwise of a language includes *absolute number of speakers* (UNESCO, 2003).

In the case of Alege, as children begin to grow and have interaction with people outside their speech community, they begin to learn Bette - a more dominant language of the Obudu people. Though at this point, there are indicators that show that the Alege people still possess strong loyalty to their language that has sustained a healthy intergenerational transfer. However, as the Bette language continues to gain more socioeconomic prominence and more and more Alege speakers continue to speak it even as the general population of the community continues to shrink, there is the tendency that at some point, a total shift may take place. While not so much can be done on the part of the community to discourage the trend of migration, developing resources in the language is a viable option towards promoting the reading and writing of the language even beyond the community.

5.2.3 Lack of Institutional Support

In 1977, the National Policy on Education was promulgated which was later revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004. The policy, which is the only language policy document, assigned different functions to Nigerian languages in the nation's education at various levels. It states that every child shall learn and be taught in the language of the immediate environment in the first three years of primary education while English language shall be taught as a school subject. Also, in the interest of national unity in Nigeria, every child shall be required to learn one of the three major languages - Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba. Specifically the provision of the NPE (2004), Section 4, Paragraph 19 (e) and (f) states that;

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.

For the policy to be implemented, the government must first provide the necessary incentives (such as trained language teachers and literacy materials in the language) that will encourage the development of Alege, to a level where it is suitable to be used as a medium of instruction in education. For a language like Alege to be taught as a subject, a lot of efforts, resources and manpower are required to develop different language resources that are needed to teach the language. In addition to developing teaching materials in the language, the government would need to employ language teachers. In the absence of these prerequisite governmental efforts, it becomes quite impossible for a community like Alege to initiate and sustain any language development initiative that will help promote the language. Although some community groups in the country (for example Ogoja language committee and Centre for

Urhobo language studies) have been known to initiate and fund such efforts, at this time, the people of Alege community consider such too financially demanding to bear and would rather seek for a more affordable alternative like a Bible translation project which in most cases is done in partnership with external bodies that provide the necessary institutional support.

5. Conclusion

Findings from this study highlight how Alege is sustained orally through five different domains of use within the community. In the educational domain, Alege performs very limited function only as a means of reinforcing what has been taught in English within the first two years of primary education. In other levels of education, it is outrightly prohibited as a vernacular. For economic activities within the community, findings show that Alege language is predominantly used.

However, in cases where non-Alege speakers have dealings with the farmers, Pidgin English or English is used. One very interesting feature of the Alege community is the strong role that the language plays in the home front. Basically, Alege has an interesting *de facto* family language policy, where the sole medium of communication in most homes is Alege. This practice has been the main sustenance for the intergenerational transfer of the language through the years. It is perceived that for one to fit into the community where most communal activities - moonlight plays, festivals, birth, death and marriage ceremonies – are conducted in Alege, he must be able to use the language to communicate effectively.

This study also shows how some socioeconomic, demographic and institutional factors are negatively impacting the language. The continued migration of young people in search of

quality education, better jobs and higher standards of living is presently affecting the overall sustenance of the language. For a language that is only transmitted orally, a continued reduction of the absolute number of speakers coupled with the increasing influence from a dominant language like Bette would likely disrupt its intergenerational transfer, thus endangering the language.

7. Recommendations

Having accessed the domains of language use and the various factors affecting the continued sustenance of the Alege language in these domains, it is imperative to suggest ways to proactively uplift the language from its current status of sustainable orality to sustainable literacy. To achieve this, we propose the following activities.

i. Development of a standard orthography

One of the first steps in codifying an unwritten language is devising a writing system. Such orthography when accepted and standardised will aid other language development efforts. So far, through the efforts of the Alege language community and other partnering stakeholders, a pilot orthography has been developed for the language and several efforts are being made to improve it for optimal use. In line with these significant developments, it is also important to officially register the accepted orthography with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and thereafter publish it. This will give credence to the orthography as the acceptable, standard way of writing the language and also create the needed awareness of the availability of an existing orthography for the language.

ii. Developing language resources

Materials that will aid teaching and reading in the language is very

essential in the development of the Alege language. Currently, the community in partnership with the Luke Initiative for Scripture Translation are translating the Bible into Alege. While this is very commendable, it is important for the community to seek further partnership to develop fundamental literacy materials like primers, basic readers, collections of stories and other specialised language resources like use grammars and dictionaries. These materials will aid the use of the language both in the educational setting and other informal domains like the home. In addition to developing these resources, the language committee can also organise training workshops to train people on how to read and write in the language.

iii. Documentation

International organizations like UNESCO and the European Union actively working to save languages agree that one of the steps that can be taken in order to stabilize a language is language documentation. Therefore it is advisable that the Alege people begin now to seek means of preserving their language by recording (audio and video) and archiving aspects of their oral traditions such as stories, songs, festivals, unique cultural practices, etc. Through these archives, the stored resources of the language can be accessed by future generation of speakers or those interested in the language.

iv. Advocacy

The Alege language committee should become proactive in advocating for the implementation of government policies that will encourage the use of the language. For instance, the educational language policy already makes provision for the use of Alege language as a medium of instruction at certain stages of primary education and as a subject at the later stage of primary and post primary levels. The community can therefore advocate for the implementation of this policy by advocating for the training and

employment of Alege language teacher and the development of a government approved curriculum for the teaching of the language.

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