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A Sociolinguistic Analysis of an Igbo Festival: The Iko Ehugbo (Afikpo) Example

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the imperativeness of language in archiving culture noting that if language which is part of culture is not preserved, the language dies, likewise the culture and people's essence are lost. The work is anchored on Wardaugh (2002) overview of Sapir Whorf's Hypothesis. The paper supports the mutual influential view on the relationship between language and culture. Though the world is gradually evolving into a global village that efficient and effective communication in foreign languages is prerequisite for effective participation in the era, there are diversities of culture enshrined in indigenous languages which much be archive for prosperity via intergenerational linguistic transfer. These cultures, if not preserved, will be exposed to the risk of being engulfed by predatory languages. Culture includes our customs, beliefs, tradition, indigenous values and knowledge our individuality, distinct style of living and our language, in fact, it is the totality of a people's essence. Language as man's right and identity, is a veritable channel for cultural transmission and transfer. Iko festival of Art and Culture celebrated in Ehugbo (Afikpo) is an embodiment of artistic -linguistic display, which brings to limelight the interplay of language use in culture via songs during the festival. Though the language used in the song, culture of the people is brought to bare and passed from one generation to another thereby combating language endangerment.

Keywords: language, communication, Culture, Tradition, Beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a social group cooperate and interact. Language is a vehicle means through which culture is passed from one generation to another. It is a medium of intra and inter communication with others in the same culture area. Of all aspects of culture like art, habit, craft religion, drama and language, [1] observes that the least mentioned is the only one that is born on the same day with those who own it, who make it and who in turn it makes. Language tells the hidden story of a person or a people. It expresses the thought, artistry, values, indigenous knowledge and the essence of a people. It is man's crown glory by his creator. Thus the specie-specific criterion of language, which sees language as sole property of men. [2] views language as being very important to man, because every human activities revolve around language. She further states that there is no conceivable human activity where language is not used. This she illustrated that drama for instance is the ability to use language to create images, while in poetry language is equally used to conceptualize one's thought. Language is a tool for human and material development of any nation. The ability of people to acknowledge and appreciate their cultural festival lies in their sociolinguistic conception. [3].

The concepts of language and culture are two sides of the same coin, they cannot be separated. The relationship between language and culture, and how both function in the life of a people, is far deeper than the former being an aspect of the latter. Although culture embodies language, the survival of culture is inextricable tied to the language. This is so,

given that language is a carrier of culture and is passed from one end to another through socialization and also it is by means of language that we narrate events that are happening now, have happened in the past and will happen in the future. Language is a vehicular means of preserving our culture. It oils the wheel to propel the transmission of culture from one generation to another. It is a means used by man to assemble his dream, wisdom and experience for onward transmission.

This paper is pursued due to the near extinction of our language. [4] laments that at least one language dies somewhere in the world every 24 hours and the worst of it is that two-third of these deaths happen in African continent. This is caused by the total neglect and disloyalty towards our language. Most of our African languages are suffering from 'disuse' by the owners of the language. A phenomenon if it persists will lead to total extinction of the variety. The worst hit in the trend of language enlargement is the oral form of our language like festival chants, folklore, etc. this is because, oral forms are seen as archaic, moribund, old-fashioned and obscure, to most of Igbo language speaker especially the elite class.

It is a common phenomenon to see people who have abandoned their language and still claim to be part of the society. A cultureless people is a lifeless people. This is because they are like people without cultural identity, who are culturally dislocated for the fact that their authentic mark of cultural identity "language" is lacking. It is no surprise to see people who have abandoned their language, reason in very alien and obscured way. Their thought pattern and deeds are often at variance with the values and beliefs of the society they claim to belong. This leaves them at a cross road, where they are neither here nor there, that is to say that most of them lack communicative competence in neither their mother tongue their "acquired" or second language. This tantamount to their being the proverbial bat "usu" which is neither a land animal (mamma) nor a bird.

It is on this premise that it behooves us to harp on the importance of our culture and language as a medium of transmission. One of such outstanding cultural festival is Iko Ehugbo. As it is in every Igbo cultural area, cultural festivals are prominent aspects of Ehugbo life. Iko cultural festival is an annual festival widely celebrated by all the communities that make up Ehugbo, according to the communities chronological ages. The festival usually depicts the height of appreciation of friendship especially between maidens who visit their girlfriends and stay with them for four days. This festival could be likened to the western valentine's day of February, 14, the climax of this festival is exhibited in a special language display via songs, cultural relativism and satiric displays by the masquerades.

The beauty of this festival is not just in its being celebrated with pomp and circumstance, pageantry and fun fair, but in its linguistic import, content and display. Iko Ehugbo cultural festival is an embodiment of chants, masquerade displays, poems, folklores, incantations and a lot of oral forms.

THE CHANTS

Quite a number of chants are delivered during the Iko Ehugbo cultural festival but for the purpose of this work, we shall critically analyze two of the chants.

ANALYSIS OF CHANT

This chant is designed to cajole the ills in our society. It is a means of exposing promiscuous young girls and discouraging them from such acts. The males are equally taunted as the maniacs are called ‘Oragbari umuagboghō’ that is people who take their turn in defiling the young girls.” The dry season usually is a period of rest from farm work. Most young men always capitalize on this to put the young girls in a family way. That is why this festival comes up at this period of the year when promiscuity is usually at its peak.

ANALYSIS OF CHANT II

Mother who give away their girls for mere materials things are satirized using this song. The end result of such mother’s greed is usually pregnancy. To distinguish between the girls who are still “intact” and those who are “heavy” hopping and squatting exercise id embarked on to accompany the song.

The girls who are no longer “intact” are mocked and abused using such ridiculous names like “mkpikwe” “eregere” “okpamgbisi”, etc.

The Iko cultural festival is a means of sanitizing the society. It is an avenue of instilling law and order in Ehugbo society. Promiscuity is highly frowned at and is treated with every bit of seriousness. For the fact that these cultural practices are disappearing with westernization and globalization. Our society is a well losing their essence norm and value.

THE ROLE OF IKO CHANT IN EHUGBO TRADITION

In an age when the force of globalization and industrialization. Seem to diminish the importance of kinship and communalities, the Iko festival act as a stable means of uniting people of Ehugbo together as one indivisible family.

The Iko Festival is needful in achieving the following purpose: There is that trust and brotherliness among the people. This is fostered by the Iko festival.

- **Recreational Purpose:** Iko festival is usually celebrated during the dry season. This is usually after planting when people wait in anticipation for the maturing of their plants. This season is usually a season of rest. The festival celebration usually takes off on an orie day, which is a non-market day in Afikpo. This makes for a better participant by everybody. The song is usually sang during this period which last for four days are usually rhythmic and young maidens dance to the rhythms while the older women who sing the songs usually keep themselves busy while peeling their melon “egusi” seed. This adds to the recreational value of the people.
- **Moral Value:** Iko cultural festival is designed to satirize the promiscuous ones in the society and also to discourage young girls from illicit sex and unhealthy relationship. Mothers who give out their daughters for mere “morsel of meat” are exposed to the public and taunted Boys who mess up the girls are equally dealt with. The girls who on their own allow themselves to be explored are publicly satirized. These practices are to instill order and morality in the minds of the youth and young adults.
- **Educational Value:** The older women use the opportunity to trait the younger girls on how to sit down, behave and comport themselves in the midst of the opposite sex. The culture and language of the people are equally passed down via this medium, from the older to the younger ones.

For the fact that this cultural festival is fast phasing away, some of the languages or terms associated or used during this period are equally at the verge of extinctions. Some of these words are almost alien to the younger ones and that is why we advocate for the salvage of this dialect of Igbo language. Some of those terms associated with Iko Ehugbo are outlined below:

SPECIAL LEXICON USED

- IKOM (noun) - My friend
Ngwee o o - An exclamation to show disgust
Anamana (adj) - mischief
Eregere - sex maniac
Nnina (adj) - Promiscuous / fat and heavy object
Ojombigijio - A fat and ugly girl.
Mkpikwe - A short and ugly girl
Oragbari umuagbohoh - A man who tends to take his turn in sleeping with girls (sex rounder)
Kpari eekwu - pilferer of fruit, usually used to refer to a girl having an illicit sex before Marriage.
Mgbijisi - Literally means a sick used in cleaning the anus after defecation symbolically to depict the male genital organ (penis).
Ikpa mgbijisi - It means that the penis is inserted into a female's organ. This is used to ridicule and discourage premarital sex among the maidens.
Ojombigijiji (adj) - Heavy
Ogwe m eka --- the trunk of the hand (symbolically used to discourage young girls from allowing themselves to be penetrated by such hefty object)

RECOMMENDATION

The cultural content of most Igbo culture is fast declining likewise the enshrined values and significant role(s) it plays to the people. The influence of westernization, urbanization and the overt demonization of African culture and values by the colonialist, has been major factors responsible for the decline of interest by the youth and even the older members of the societies. With the erasure of the culture, the language of the people is not left out. There is linguistics shift and preference of foreign and western culture, language and values in order to feel belonged or identified with the popular culture. The trend if not control already spell doom to the fate of indigenous languages and culture, of which, iko festival of art is one. Iko cultural festival is not reinvigorated will lead to the death of the culture likewise the rich linguistic reservoir and artistry associated with the culture. The paper however makes recommendations on ways to reinvigorate / sustain the festival to avert the starring loss.

- There is need for change of attitude toward indigenous languages and culture , especially by the owners of the language. There is need for self assertion that there is nothing primitive or obnoxious of African cultures and value system. The rich and noble content of the people's culture should be boldly showcased by the owners of the language and culture.
- Older men and women who still carry the untainted cultural content should make out time to interact with the younger ones and give them the residue of our culture [5]
- Educational agencies should equally brace up to the challenges , because it is through this agency that the missionary alienated the indigenous people from their rich culture and language . The school curriculum should be indigenized with a view to making the r children realize that they are not English people but African , in fact Igbo people . This orientation should start with the teachers who will in turn inculcate the interest and pride using their mother tongue.
- Learners should be energized or encouraged to speak their mother tongue in order to appreciate and analyze the linguistic characteristics and beauty of their indigenous language and culture.
- The ritualistic and diabolic aspect of the festival should be removed out. This is to make for a greater participation of all in the society.
- Our media and the academia equally have formidable role to play in projecting the oral forms of indigenous culture. Some of the masquerade characters practices could be converted to cartoon character which still carry the same traditional

character and philosophy. This will showcase the festival to more people outside the immediate linguistic environment.

- Our local varieties should be allowed to thrive alongside the standard variety. This will help them to complement one another for better linguistic growth. Just as the Argungun festival has been made a national and international event our government should intervene in elevating the status of the Iko Ehugbo considering its indefectible role in the preservation of our language and cultural essence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, language and culture are two knots knitted together that one could not be separated from the other. Language and culture as seen in this work play a symbiotic relationship, since man express and transmit their culture by the use of language. Language stands out being the beauty of Iko festival because it is the only way through which the messages are conveyed. If this language dies, the Iko festival loses its cultural solemnity and essences entirely. This paper is a clarion case to stand out and ensure that this ugly situation that is staring at our faces is reversed. It is noteworthy that the fate of any language and culture lies in the hands of native speakers and owner of the culture.

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