

Language and Culture as Instruments for National Economic Advancement in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine how language and culture can be used as instruments for national economic advancement in Nigeria. This is based on the numerous important roles played by language and culture in human society. The paper adopted the theoretical views of Stubbs and Durkheim in discussing the functions of language in the society and the dynamics of culture; where people's relationships predominate over individualism. It examines the contemporary socio-economic challenges facing the country and how they can be tackled through the instrumentalities of language and culture. The paper submits that indigenous languages and the people's culture can serve as panacea to the numerous challenges facing the country. However, failure to romanticize our language and culture results in the neglect of the very effective tools for national advancement. To proffer a lasting solution to the nation's socio-economic and political challenges, the paper recommends a paradigm shift from the crude notion of portraying Nigerian languages and cultures as local, undeveloped, uncreative and inefficient to quintessential elements needed for the nation's advancement.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Socio-economic Challenges, National Advancement

Introduction

The multiplicity of languages and cultural beliefs in Nigeria has no doubt raised some concerns about the ideological viewpoint of oneness and national unity. It could be regarded as the bane to national development. Though viewed in the negative light, if well positioned, they can act as vital instruments for the nation's advancement. Language is a social phenomenon that cannot be divorced from culture. The dynamics of culture with language can be structured in such a way that it will accommodate the essential elements needed for national development. In this sense, this

paper examines the positive impacts language and culture can have on Nigeria's advancement despite her heterogeneous nature. It asks questions on the place of a unifying language out of the three major indigenous languages, and the neglect of cultural heritage and values that are vital for national advancement. Thus, language and culture are seen as effective panacea for the socio-economic and political challenges currently facing the country.

Conceptualising Language and Culture

It is expedient to open our discussion in this paper by shedding light on the two important concepts in the paper: language and culture. Language has been defined by various scholars according to their perception of it. According to Sapir (1963:8), "language is a purely and noninstinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols". Similarly, Odebunmi (2016:3) defines language as "a distinctively human endowment that has empowered the human race with expressivity". Language is the human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for the purposes of communication (Osisanwo, 2003). Language is used by different people for different purposes.

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that language is vital to human existence. All human beings use language as a veritable means of communication for the achievement of personal goals and societal well-being. Though some people in certain societies can neither read nor write in their native language, the inhabitants can speak it by virtue of being a member of that society.

The term "Culture" as defined by sociologists and cultural anthropologists is "a system of ideas, beliefs, values, norms, knowledge, customs, and technology shared by almost everyone in the society (Eshlem & Cosham, 1985). Tylor (1891) as cited in Tschumi (1978:238) claims that culture is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law.....customs and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. Tonja et al (2021) observes that culture comprises beliefs, values, norms, language, practices and artifacts of society. Oyekanmi (2006) explains culture from material and non-material aspects of society. The non-material aspects include language, ideas, and values; while the material aspects are houses, clothes, and tools. Both the skills needed to make a product and the product itself are part of culture. As a matter of fact, culture is the totality of the people residing in a particular community.

The Nexus Between Language and Culture

Language and culture are not two parallel paths, they are interwoven and serve as markers for the identity of a group of people. One generation passes on to the next its myths, laws, customs and beliefs largely by means of language. Lyons (1968) considers language as an integral part of culture by asserting that:

The lexical distinctions drawn by language(s) will tend to reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which language operates.

The influence of culture on language is what Ogunsiji (2001:32) calls "Cultural determinism" which he describes as an alternative to "linguistic determinism". Culture is regarded as the totality of the way people think or behave; that is, culture determines what we say and how we say it in some instances. In other words, communication succeeds if participants in the communicative

events share appreciable background knowledge. This background knowledge, according to Alo (2006), involves the knowledge of physical environment, human behaviour and activities, social relationships, cultural norms and conventions. Culture encompasses people's creative ability to understand symbols (e.g., words, numbers, flags, crosses, crescent, and kisses) and the most important symbols to humans is language (Oyekanmi (2006: 82). Sapir (1963:207) claims that language does not exist independent of culture, it is an important part of culture as well as a major vehicle for the expression of people's culture. The centrality of language to culture is universally acknowledged (Adetugbo,1992). People are easily identified by the language they speak, values exhibited and the norms they practiced. That is, language indexes people's culture as culture also determines the way language is used by people in the society .

Theoretical Issues

Language and cultural theories adopted in this paper are Stubb's (1995) classifications of the functions of language and the functionalist perspective of culture as influenced by American sociology from the 1930s to the 1960s. Stubb's (1995) proposed seven functions of language. They are (i) Expressive/emotive function, which shows language as being used to express the inner state of mind of the speaker (ii) Directive/conative or persuasive function allows the speaker to persuade, direct or plead with the hearer to carry out an action. (iii) Poetic function makes language users to use language creatively for aesthetic purposes; (iv) Contact function, also regarded as 'phatic' function allows people to use language for brief social or psychological interaction e.g., greetings or in an attempt to open a channel for conversation (v) Metalingual function is used for the purpose of clarification on any levels of language. That means language draws attention to itself (vi) Referential function ensures that the denotative meaning of a word or expression is the physical object which the language user actually refers to, and (vii) Contextual/situational function, which allows language users to relate his experience to others with regard to the immediate environment (Osisanwo 2003). All these functions performed by language are relevant in this paper as they are used to project the totality of the people which includes their culture.

As said earlier, the functionalism approach to culture is adopted in this paper. The origin of this theory lies in the work of the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim in the 19th century. This was later developed by American sociology from the 1930s to the 1960s. The Functional theory, also known as structural theory, claims that social institutions and organization of a society influence the running of the society and individuals' behaviours. The Functionalists see society as a system in which all parts function together for the benefit of the whole society. They claim that society needs culture for her functionality to meet members' social and personal needs. According to Nickerson (2022), there is a social structure that exists independently from individuals and this social structure consists of norms and values passed on through institutions that shape individuals. The Functionalists are of the opinion that people's culture serve numerous functions. The purpose of culture – traditions, folklores, values are viewed as instruments used by individuals to navigate smoothly through life and the society. They can also be used to bring about development to the nation as every individual contributes in one way or the other to the nation's development.

Language and Culture in Nigeria's Environment

Nigeria is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation. The multiplicity of language and culture emanates from the coming together of different groups of people with distinct linguistic and cultural uniqueness to form a nation. The country has her culture influenced by multiple ethnic groups of about 500 languages and over 400 dialects. It is important to note that scholars are yet to agree on the precise number of languages in Nigeria. However, reports show that Nigerian languages range between 400 to 500 belonging to different ethno-linguistic groups in the country (Bamgbose, 1995; Agbede, 2005). The uniqueness of each culture is showcased and celebrated by its people as well as other tribes in emphasizing a common tie in spite of cultural diversity.

Historically, some languages came into Nigeria as a result of trade, colonization and religion. They are regarded as exoglossic languages (e.g., English, French, Arabic). As a result, the culture of those people also come into Nigeria, thereby increasing the already large numbers of languages and cultures in Nigeria's socio-political context. The British colonial administration introduced the English language and institutionalized it. Bamgbose (1995) asserts that “of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language”.

In Nigeria today, English is a preferred language used by most Nigerians than the indigenous languages. This is as a result of the different roles English serves in Nigeria's linguistic context, ranging from being the official language to other functions such as the national language, the language of government; the language of instruction in the schools, the language of internal communication among Nigerians of differing linguistic background and, of course, the language of international communication, modern civilization and technological advancement. These, and many other reasons have eventually led to the neglect of our indigenous languages and culture to embrace the foreign ones. We hold on to European cultures in dressing, language, relationship, beliefs, either religiously or socially and in all spheres of life, thus letting our precious heritage go into extinction. Many prefer to allow their children and wards speak the English language at the expense of their indigenous languages. Unfortunately, the indigenous languages are no longer in some school's curriculum, especially the private schools. It is now regarded as vernacular when spoken in classes and students are punished for speaking it.

In 1988, the Nigerian government saw the need to revive Nigerian culture by highlighting the various dimensions of culture in a publication titled *Cultural Policy for Nigeria*. In the publication, it is stated that culture comprises material, philosophical, institutional and creative aspects. This is as a result of peoples' notion that culture only consists of the creative aspect manifesting in the visual and the performing arts such as singing, dancing, acrobatic display, masking, costuming and so on. This notion however contributes to the failure of viewing culture as the basis for cultural advancement.

Cultural neglect has been the basis for all the problems facing the country. The spirit of oneness and communality that structured the society has turned individualistic where selfishness and self-centeredness become the order of the day. For instance, political leaders or people at the helms of affairs fail in discharging their duties to the poor masses. All they think about is how to amass wealth at the detriment of the masses. They leave them to wallow in abject poverty because they have stolen the nation's resources and wealth meant for the citizenry for their unborn generations. This is as a result of lack of contentment and self-centeredness, which our culture forbids. The nation cannot advance when the citizens are self-centered and greedy.

The institutional aspect of culture where everyone is his “brothers’ keeper” has been relegated. The spirit of individualism has taken over and has brought about the various vices that negatively impact the nation for her advancement. The culture of magnanimity on the part of individuals had been the driving force for the nation’s advancement until lately when the essence of culture was abandoned and discarded. Social cohesion which symbolizes communal spirit, filial association, communal cooperation, where the problem of a person is the problem of all has been forgotten. John Mbite’s statement is a paradigmatic of African social cohesion which says, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am”. Emphasis is placed on the spirit of solidarity and not individualism.

Another dimension of culture is the creative aspect known as oral literature. This verbal form comprises myth, legends, folktales, chants and so on. Oral literature derives its existence through performance and it brings out its artistic qualities better. It unfolds people’s culture and history through poetry, praise chant, epic, story-telling, proverbs and so on to showcase the political, cultural, religious and social history of some set of people. It also serves as a kind of reminder to socially acceptable norms or behaviours basically through folktale to teach didactic lessons for national development. The storyteller is always seen as the conscience of the society. It teaches morals and ethics; good habits are encouraged while vices discouraged. It is always an art for life’s sake having social functions from womb to tomb.

Uzochukwu (2001) claimed that the impact of culture cannot be overemphasized. With oral poetry and folktale, the acts of misdemeanor are satirized and discouraged while rightful behavior is encouraged through praise, direct didactic injunctions, given through admonition to produce conducive and salient society and uphold social norms. Earlier, Uzochukwu (1997) observed that though in apparently simple language and characterization, the folktale contains some moral lessons which serve as a tool for correcting anti-social behaviour. As is often the case, wickedness does not go unpunished in the moral world of the folktale. The implication is always a warning to people to adhere to the norms of the society or else they meet the fate of the guilty.

The moral lessons deduced from folktales normally act as guides to individuals which direct or instruct individuals on the practices acceptable for individual’s development and societal growth. Values like integrity, humanity, honesty, handwork, love, contentment, patience, selflessness and so on are impacted for a better society.

It is, however, unfortunate that the nation has lost sight of the importance of culture to her advancement. Different vices have taken over the peace of the country such as kidnapping, banditry, money ritual, theft, killings, yahoo, violence and so on. There is no conducive atmosphere for economic, social and political growth due to corruption and acts of indiscipline. For instance, in the economic sector, investors that would have loved to reside and establish their businesses in the country are afraid of what will happen to them and the ones already established have located to more serene environment while others are preparing to leave the country because of the various vices that have resulted in the nation’s insecurity. The neglect of our cultural values act as threat to the stability of the nation for proper functioning.

The Concept of National Economic Advancement

In this paper, national economic advancement has to do with economic empowerment and well-being of the people in a particular society. In Nigeria, measuring economic advancement has

always been through economic dimensions such as growth in per capita income, but recent findings revealed that the human angle has to be put into consideration. It implies advancement in all aspects of human life which include politics, health, information and communication, education, transportation, aviation, trade and justice. Corroborating this view, Asiyanbola (2016) claimed that national development is the progress in the well-being of the society as regards its policy, economy, science and technology and the relative welfare of the people. It is in this respect that this paper looks at how language and culture can be relevant in national economic advancement.

Language as Basis for Development

Language is an essential instrument for communication, which is the life-wire of humanity. It will be impossible for human society to develop and make progress without effective communication. Language use is an activity that takes place everyday and man's means for survival are intricately connected to it. Human activities are diverse and complex which require meaning making through the use of language. This means, through the use of language, man is able to work together, pursue their personal and societal goals, resolve conflicts, make political and socio-economic plans for the present and future generations, which will in turn have positive effects on the nation's stride for socio-economic advancement. Language is therefore employed to get work done and to achieve set goals in the society. However, over the years, economic planners and policy makers have jettisoned the roles language in a bid to find a lasting solution to the country's socio-economic and political challenges.

In the nation's quest for economic advancement, it becomes imperative to position the indigenous languages for national use and international intelligibility. For instance, Yoruba, as a language, is being studied in Universities in Brazil, Cuba and some other countries in relation to Yoruba culture. If our three major Nigerian languages are given more attention without fear of subjugation and marginalization by the minority tribes, they will act as instruments for boosting national economic development for the nation.

Their awareness and use will cut across ethnic boundaries, thereby encouraging unity and ties that will positively affect the nation's economy. This is because we inherit language that shapes our perceptions and patterned behaviour, including those of family, friends, faith and politics (Tonja et al, 2021). The use of indigenous languages to mostly pilot the affairs of the country will not only boost the national identity but also help cement national unity. This is premised on Tengan's (1994) view that multilingualism or language diversity is the cause of many social divisions and strife in Africa which in turn retard economic, political and cultural developments of the continent.

Culture as Basis for Development

Conventionally, culture is the way of life of a given people in a given society. It is the way of life of a given society or the universe of values and artifacts in which a given people live or standardise an expected behavior within the framework of a given system of social organisation (Thompson, 1991). The Cultural Policy for Nigeria (1988) defines culture as:

the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment which gives meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and

modes of organization thus, distinguishing them from their neighbours.

Culture is the bedrock of human civilization without which no nation can make economic, social and political advancement (Awodiya, 2016). Nature and cultural values can be commercialized in positive ways for it to serve as the basis for a nation's advancement. However, and unfortunately too, it is not adequately appreciated and forgone for Westernization.

It is not that everything European should be totally condemned but we should imbibe the good aspects of their culture in conjunction with our culture for the betterment of the nation and not at the expense of it. According to Conteh. J. (2010), "people's culture and their attitude towards it are related in subtle and complex ways to their development".

Traditional values are superb and didactic in nature. These values help to structure a society for advancement. Problems arise when we lose sight of ourselves and accept false doctrines and mistaken notions of what is truly ours as in the case of language denial and cultural neglect. Nigerians find it difficult to make their heritage the center by romanticizing and showcasing the cultural values to the world due to baseless notions that African cultures are crude, evil and demonic.

The Roles of Language and Culture in National Advancement

As earlier stated, language and culture are inseparable, hence, any development project that fails to recognize the language, as well as the culture of the people may not be successful. Every society has integrated culture which prescribed required modes and conventions of living according to its norms, rules and standards. The existing structure of a given society determines whether or not the society accepts or rejects social advancement. Culture serves as a benchmark for which the growth rate of societal development is assessed, that is whether the society is developing slowly or rapidly (Livinus et al, 2012).

There is an urgent need therefore to embrace our language and culture which mark our identity in order to "rehabilitate the prestige of the black man battered by centuries of foreign domination, subjugation and exploitation" (Ejiofor, 1984). Language and culture are the driving force behind the unity of a nation because they facilitate development and growth of any institution. They are strong instruments of affiliation that can be used to drive the economic efficiency and output of a nation to an enviable height and position through a build of trust.

Language as a medium of communication plays a major role in tandem with culture towards economic enrichment of the available resources. This is because culture helps to develop skills, resourcefulness and abilities of the human being that can be geared towards increased economic output. What this means is that innovative and inventive capabilities of individuals are invariably inspired to surpass previous achievements.

Moreover, Africa's development stems from the agrarian economy that is practiced in the continent and in terms of the rural economy, the reality in Africa is that the indigenous languages hold sway (Djite, 2008). This means that for meaningful economic advancement in this part of the world, our indigenous languages must be empowered for greater economic roles.

Conclusion

The problem with Nigeria is the resentment and neglect of indigenous languages and cultures as useful instruments for economic advancement. The focus on everything European at the expense

of our own has been the major force pulling down nation's advancement no matter how hard we tried. When a people lose sight of their identity and values of their culture, then, retrogression or stagnancy sets in.

Indeed, the use of English language and foreign culture has been of great help to the nation, it should not be at the expense of indigenous language and culture. There are some nations that believe so much in their language and culture like Germany, China to mention but few and are doing really. However, this paper does not advocate a neglect of English language or foreign culture but suggests that the good aspects of the foreign culture be incorporated in the indigenous for the nation's advancement. Our indigenous languages and culture have the potency to facilitate our development, we should not see them as inferior instruments for development. There would be no society if people do not share language and heritage, and civilization would cease to function if people do not agree on similar values and systems for society control (Tonja et al, 2021). Anything indigenous should not be disregarded or discarded but embraced and modified as potent instruments for national advancement.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for national advancement:

- Government should ensure that policies that will enhance the thriving of indigenous languages and cultures are made and implemented.
- An advocacy for oneness should be prioritized by the government in order to come up with a unifying language that will serve as the official language and language for government administrations without fear of intimidation and subjugation by other ethnic groups due to the heterogeneous nature of the nation.
- There is a need to design a school curriculum that embraces the use of our languages and cultures for optimum results.
- Parents and culture custodians should rise up to their responsibilities in ensuring that our values do not go into extinction. Children and wards should be taught the demonstration of expected behaviours required of them in order to be useful for themselves and the nation at large. Charity, they say, begins at home.
- Individuals should also ensure that they positively contribute their quota to the advancement of the nation by being conscious of their identity and portrayal of the core values imparted in them.

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