



Using Nigerian Languages for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: The Igbo Example

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Abstract

This article highlights on using Nigerian language for conflict resolution in Nigeria: the Igbo example. Language as human means of communication is also used to resolve conflicts in various ways. In Nigeria, language plays a vital role in making peace in a community. Conflict is a misunderstanding between or among communities within a period of time. Language is an instrument engaged by the individuals or communities to resolve conflict when it occurs. The paper highlight among other things; concept of language, conflict, conflict resolution, major Nigerin languages place of Nigerian language in education system; the use of Igbo language in conflict resolution. Based on the discussion of the variables, recommendations and conclusion were drawn.

Introduction

Language is the organized system of speech used by human beings as a means of communication among themselves. It is an important gift given to man by God for communication. Language is universally accepted as the most effective instrument used by man as he attempts to interpret the phenomenon he encounters in his daily activities. "Language universally, is venom which triggers off conflicts of whatever nature. Similarly, it is also the panacea of conflict management and resolution". We can deduce from the Jija"s view that language is venom (bullet) that fight conflict and win, and also language is panacea (cured/managed/control) conflict and language is resolution (decision/determination, solution, collective opinion, process) of solving conflict. One of the greatest attributes that characterize human being is language. It is a means by which we control, create and preserve our culture. Man cannot do without language as all activities of man, be it social, economic, political, educational and regional have language as its nucleus. The paper however discusses the use of Nigerian languages as a means for conflict resolution in our nation (Ekwe, 2021).

Human beings are insatiable by nature. The pursuit of material and nonmaterial things always lead to conflict in the society. Nigeria is a multilingual nation made up of diverse ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds and cultures. Bamgbose (1991,12) opined that there are; about 400 languages in Nigeria and this creates language problem. To reduce the problem posed by multi linguistic and ethnicity, only three major indigenous languages are recommended by the federal government of Nigeria; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba language.

Definition of Language

Language is a means by which a message is conveyed from one person to another. It is a veritable tool for imparting knowledge. Without language, messages cannot be passed from one person to another.

According to Hornby (2021:664) language is use by human of a system of sounds and words to communicate. He further said, it is a way of expressing ideas and feelings using movement symbols and sounds.

Language is very important to man. It is a way of interaction and communication with one another. There can be interaction, socialization, relationship and love between one another only when we understand the language of each other. In view of the importance of language, it is necessary to teach the three Nigerian languages: Hausa Igbo and Yoruba otherwise known as (WAZOBIA) in our schools, in order to promote unity, peace and understanding in our nation. (Okereke, 2011)

Conflict

“Conflict”, according to Advanced learners Dictionary “is a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument”. It is a violent situation or period of fighting between two countries. Ede (2019) defines conflict as “A confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means of ends”. “Conflict is a given situation in which people, groups or countries disagree over ideologies, aims or objectives” (Nwoolise, 2019). Resolution of conflict is the act of solving or settling problem, dispute or conflict among people, community or country at large.

Conflict is part and parcel of every human society. Whenever two or more people are gathered in one interaction or another, conflict is bound to surface. Conflict is described in terms of what might have caused it, such as scarce resources, disagreement and competition. Conflicts will always occur due to ideological, political, social and economic differences which usually resulted in rivalry and competition. Conflict resolution aims at restoring social harmony, mending breached social ties, performance of rituals and offering apologies or compensation to ensure that the status quo before the dispute is restored. The pre-colonial Igbo society cannot be said to differ, as individuals and communities engaged in one form of interaction or the other - a situation which at times led to conflicts (Ezenwoko and Osagie, 2018:135). Igbo peace scholars are unanimous on the causes of conflicts in Igbo land, which include issues arising from marriage, inheritance, chieftaincy tussle, land, territorial boundaries, among others. Matudi (2016) captures the sources of rift or conflict in African setting in different levels. In the family level; conflict ensues through interpersonal relations, marital issues and property ownership. In economic level; conflict can take shape through land encroachment, territorial dislocation, terms of trade and

failure to pay tribute.

In the political level; conflict can arise through tussle for leadership, especially where rules guiding selection of traditional rulers are disobeyed. Conflict can also be manifested in non-compliance to religious obligations violation or objection of shrine order and finally, non-allegiance to constituted authority such as elders and traditional rulers. Charles (2016) agrees with this when he said, “Conflict in Igbo land has always been either disputes over ownership of land, chieftaincy tussle, political authority and fears of domination and marginalization”. Thus, inter-tribal conflict overboundary and trade, marital conflict, conflict over inheritance and chieftaincy title tussle all exist in Igbo land.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict is an inevitable part of life. It erupts whenever there is disagreement between two individuals, groups or communities. The major cause of conflict is “individual differences”. Everyone possesses different family background, opinion, needs, values, ideas, beliefs. These differences often lead to conflict. Rahim (1992:16) described conflict as the interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreements or dissonance within or between social entities. It shows that conflict bob up whenever there is disagreement between persons, groups or communities.

Uchendu (2010;11-12), opines that conflict occurs when there are fighting struggle or quarrel. Conflict is a natural disagreement that results from differences in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs of individual or groups. There is a conflict when disagreement between parties degenerate to fighting, quarrels and struggle for selfish interests. Nmah (2009:28) argued that conflict is a process that erupts when a group sees that another has damaged or about to destroy something that is important to them. Conflict arises usually from three factors Economic factor: This is seen when there is limited resources. The individuals, groups or communities involved come into conflict in order to obtain most of the resources either by trick or force, more especially where there is insufficient land, resources etc. an individual, group or community tries to take the lions share or all of them. Greed can also lead to conflict even when there is enough.

Value factor: which is concerned with the beliefs and ideologies of a person or social group in which they have emotional investment. This type of conflict is demonstrated in wars where separate parties have sets of beliefs they maintain. Power factor: This arises when parties involved intend to maximize the wealth and power they have in the social setting. Such situation can equally arise among individuals, groups or communities. All these boil down to say that conflict exist in situations where there is selfish desire, greed, mistrust, misunderstanding, quarrel, false practice against each other. When conflict begins to reduce productivity, giving way to more conflict, then a third party from different party will be needed to come up with a solution.

Conflict resolution is the process of trying to find a solution to a conflict. Udezo (2019) contends that resolution is a variety of approaches aimed at determining conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinction from management or transformation of conflict. Conflict resolution is the process of solving the

differences between two parties. There is no way conflict can be resolved without first getting to the root of the conflict. This means that resolution is the total means of wiping away conflict so that it will not resurface again. Ikoku in Anidobe (2014:114), maintains that conflict resolution is conceptualized as the method or processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of social conflict. Often, committed group members attempt to resolve group conflict by actively communicating information about their conflicting motives or ideologies to the rest of the group (e.g. intentions, reasons for holding certain beliefs) and by engaging in collective negotiation. Anyacho (2005:69), said that the society employs institutionalized rules such as legislatures, courts; tribunals, arbitration, committees for the resolution of conflicts. According to Ogundabe in Okoli (2012:21) conflicts can be resolved by surrendering running away, overpowering your opponent with violence and filing your case in a law suit. Other major ways of resolving a conflict are negotiations, mediation and mediator – arbitration.

The major Nigerian Languages

Nigeria, a multilingual country has about 400 languages spoken all over the country (Bamgbose 1991: 12). There are three major Nigerian languages namely (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). In recognition of the importance of language in education, the Federal government of Nigeria stipulated in educational policy introduced in 1977 and revised in 2004 that the medium of instruction in primary/preprimary school be mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. The teaching of the three major Nigerian languages in our schools will make people have the knowledge of other people's culture and respect each other's idea, values and beliefs. It will also inculcate in the people the spirit of oneness, unity and togetherness.

(1) ISOKO is an Edoid language, one of the languages in Delta State spoken by the Isoko people in Isoko South, North and part of Ndokwa East Local Government Areas of Delta State, Southern part of Nigeria in Niger Delta region. It is also spoken in some part of Bayelsa. The Isoko language has close similarities between them and Edo people with other Edoid language because it is an Edoid language, the Isoko people are “an ethnic nationality made up of people and their ancestral roots can be traced through history to the Benin (Aka) kingdom, attested to by the linguistic and cultural similarities that exist between the Isoko people and the Benin (Aka) people” although a few of the Isoko communities or clans have their origins attached to the Ibo language and Urhobo language. Some 750,000 people consider themselves Isoko. Language is a mark of identity and plays an all-important role in the life of a people. The Isoko language however, is being threatened with extinction as reported by Idudhe (2002), as a result of neglect in teaching, learning and use. The Isoko language has about 20 to 21 dialects, but the Aviara/Uzere dialect is the standard dialect of the language. ("Delta State Government- The BIG Heart". Retrieved 2022-03-06.)

(2) THE EFIK people speak the Efik language, which is a Benue–Congo language of the Cross River family. Due to the peregrinations of Efik traders across the lower Cross River region, The Efik language was regarded as the language of commerce in the Cross river region. The Efik language also borrows words from other ethnic groups such as Balondo, Oron, Efut, Okoyong, Efiat and Ekoi (Qua). The Efik language was also spoken in several communities in Western Cameroon. As of 1877, Alexander Ross reported that thirteen towns in the

Cameroon region speak Efik and had an aggregate population of about 22,000. Communities within the Calabar metropolis such as Efut, Kiong and Qua also speak and understand the Efik language. Due to the support of the missionaries, the Efik language became the language of religion. During the colonial era, The Efik language was the only language taught in schools in many parts of the present-day Cross River and Akwa Ibom state. (Joshua Project. Retrieved November 13, 2019).

(3) THE IDOMAS are people that primarily inhabit the lower western areas of Benue State, Nigeria, and some of them can be found in Taraba State, Cross Rivers State, Enugu State, Kogi State and Nasarawa State in Nigeria.[1] The Idoma language is classified in the Akweya subgroup of the Idomoid languages of the Volta–Niger family, which include Igede, Alago, Agatu, Etulo, Ete, Akweya (Akpa) and Yala languages of Benue, Nasarawa, Kogi, Enugu, and Northern Cross River states. The Akweya subgroup is closely related to the Yatye-Akpa sub-group. The bulk of the territory is inland, south of river Benue, some seventy-two kilometres east of its confluence with River Niger. The Idoma tribe are known to be ‘warriors’ and ‘hunters’ of class, but hospitable and peace-loving. The greater part of Idoma land remained largely unknown to the West until the 1920s, leaving much of the colourful traditional culture of the Idoma intact. The population of the Idomas is estimated to be about 3.5 million. The Idoma people have a traditional ruler called the Och’Idoma who is the head of the Idoma Area Traditional Council. This was introduced by the British. Each community has its own traditional chief such as the Ad’Ogbadibo of Orokam, Chief Enenche. The Palace of the Och’Idoma is located at Otukpo, Benue State. The present Och’Idoma, HRM, Elaigwu Odogbo John, the 5th Och’Idoma of the Idoma People was installed on the 30th of June, 2022 following the passing of his Predecessor HRH Agabaidu Elias Ikoyi Obekpa who ruled from 1996 to October 2021.[

(4) Past Och’Idomas also include: HRH, Agabaidu Edwin Ogbu, who reigned from 1996 to 1997, HRH, Abraham Ajene Okpabi of Igede descent who ruled from 1960 to 1995 and HRH, Agabaidu Ogiri Oko whose reign took place between 1948 and 1959 (Agah, 2019).

The place of Nigerian Languages in Educational System

The National policy on Education (NPE.) 2004, advocate for the use of mother tongue or language of the immediate environment as a medium of instruction in early formal education. It also requires that every Nigerian child should learn one of three Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in addition to his language and English which the policy insisted will be taught later. In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving people's culture, government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own mother tongue. Despite government's good intention in relation to the development of indigenous language in the country, most schools still begin their learning in English to the detriment of indigenous languages as the policy has not been strictly adhere to.

Abdullahi (2012) reports that in some states, using English as a medium of instruction begin in primary one while some start in primary two or three. Ugbozulawa and Oyene (2019) state that there is strong evidence to show that primary schools are failing in the task of teaching reading in Nigerian languages. The reading ability level of children in private schools which are superior to the public schools still fall below the demands of curriculum. They observe that “These findings show that the national objective of making primary school pupils literate in both mother tongue (MT) and English has not been achieved”(p-109).

The use of Igbo language in conflict resolution

What is conflict resolution? It is an act of solving or settling dispute, problem or disagreement among people, group, community or country. The use of language generally cannot be over emphasized. There is no aspect of life that does not require the use of language. Language is very important to human beings in politics, social economics, education, commerce etcetera. Can we imagine a society without languages?

Politically, Nigeria being a multilingual nation also operates a multi-party system. People from different ethnic groups or tribes gather in order to campaign or carry out rallies for their parties. Mostly, foreign languages such as English or the Pidgin are used for campaign thereby excluding majority of people from active participation in politics since the masses are not literate in the languages. An Indigenous language such as Igbo language should be used in the campaign and also in the legislative house to carry the masses along most especially in the western part of the country where almost 100% of the population speak and understand the Igbo language. This will go a long way to resolve the problems and crises in such area (Udezo, 2019).

Language barriers had caused setbacks for inter-ethnic marriages as a result of our belief that marriage after one's ethnic group will create a big problem to the family in terms of communication. We fail to realize that inter-ethnic marriages will foster unity among various nationalities, the National Youth Service Corps took it upon itself to sponsor marriages involving Youth Corp members from different ethnic groups to encourage inter-ethnic marriages and foster unity among different ethnic nationalities.

Igbo language plays a vital role in the medical life of people in the society. A patient visiting hospital for medical attention with a mutual understanding of the language between the patient and the doctor will surely go home happily.

Also in a gathering like seminar, workshop, wedding, naming ceremony and so on, it is only those that understand the language that will appreciate what is going on unless there is an interpreter. Thus it is necessary to learn the Igbo language from primary school level so as to feel the sense of belonging in the society where one finds him/herself. This will eliminate the fear of cheating and will allay the fear of misunderstanding that can generate chaos and crisis in the society (Ekwe, 2021).

In the contemporary Nigeria most conflict and violence are caused by religious groups. Example is Shiite Islamic sect in the north-west, Boko haram in the north east, kidnapping, banditry and Fulani herdsmen in the southern part of the country and other crises rocking the nation just to mention a few. Most of these crises resulted from misunderstanding of languages and religious beliefs. When religious people gather together and share ideas

or common values, it should be done in an indigenous language or there must be an interpreter in the local language since the entire religious group converse for peace and this will go along way in fostering peace among the people.

Roles of Igbo Language in conflict Resolution Igbo Administrative System

Administration is the art of running of day to day affairs of the people. The Igbos generally had no Kings or Chiefs (Igbos enwe-Eze). However few towns like Onitsha had what looked like a recognized chief. The Igbos operated a democratic system of Government. The highest democratic institution among the Igbos is the Ohanaeze (Town Assembly). The largest political unit was the village/village group. This was by kindred then family unit. The Igbos had a decentralized system of government. The executive, legislative and judicial power were vested in the

- Ohanaeze
- the council of elders
- the Ofor title holders
- the family
- the Ozo title holders
- the Age-Grade
- the Umuada
- the 'Ala' or the Earth's goddess represented by a Chief Priest.

The administrative system was decentralized and characterized by the principle of acephalous (absence of a centralized government). It was therefore a chiefless society which was segmentary and egalitarian in nature. There was no supreme king like Oba and Emirs in the North. Interestingly, however, each village in Igbo society is normally administered like a Republic, independent or sovereign state. Be that as it may, there existed many institutions in the pre-colonial Igbo society, charged with the responsibility of judicial, legislative and executive functions like: the family group, village council, Ozo title holder, age grades and the Ala.

The Family Group is one of the most recognized institutions in pre-colonial Igbo society as the basic unit of every political institution. It comprised people of the same family. Not only that, each family group was autonomously headed by the title holder called 'OKPARA'. The Okpara controls the family and judges any family disputes. He performed ritual and ceremonial functions on behalf of the family.

Village Council is popularly known as council of elders, it comprised of all the family heads in the village. However, the most important thing is that each village was administered as a sovereign entity and each family heads (Okpara) were reckoned or named an 'Ofo' title holders in the village. They had the responsibility of

discussing the matters that affected the life of the citizens and resolve conflict. They also helped in maintaining law and order in the society as well as settlement of dispute/conflicts between or among group of families. The chairman of the council was known as the oldest of the OKPARAS. Ozo Title Holders was seen as the highest title of honour which was given to the specific individuals in pre-colonial Igbo society. To become an Ozo titleholder, one must be prestigious, popular and wealthy. The most amazing thing is that the position wasn't hereditary. Ozos were highly influential. They settled and adjudicated on different disputes. Not only that, they rendered valuable advice to the family heads (the Okparas). Age grade was another important institution in pre-colonial Igbo society. They are group of young men on the basis of age. The Ala is another political institution in pre-colonial Igbo society. Ala was popularly known as the goddess of the land. Cases like murder, homicide, etc was judged by the Ala. To any Ala, there is a priest called Ala's priest who interpreted the pronouncement of the Ala. This explained Igbo's belief in Amadioha, Igwe-ka-ala, Ogbaegbu, etc in terms of needs.

Finally, the Igbo society is segmentary, Republican and sovereign in nature. There were no chiefs compared to Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani pre-colonial administration. This was how Igbo land had been governed before the advent of colonial masters and they made use of the structure they met on ground in the ruling of the people. Since the conflict resolution involves the stability the ability of a government that adheres to the opinion of the populace in decision making jurisdictions, the Igbo people leadership change their administration in some ways and follow the procedure which paved way for a well organized society which was delivered/shown to them through the colonial masters.

Recommendations

Based on the discussions in this paper, the following recommendations were made:

- Government should enforce the compulsory use of Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) as a medium of instruction from primary to tertiary education.
- Christian and Muslim preachers should be encouraged to use Nigerian languages or have interpreters by their side.
- The principle of one man one vote should be imbibed for. citizen to freely choose their leaders in the atmosphere devoid of violence.
- Igbo way of leadership which allow people's interest and opinion in decision making should be employed.

Conclusion

Our economy should be developed to provide jobs for our teeming youths. In light of the foregoing, using Nigerian languages for conflict resolution will contribute immensely to the development of commerce, national unity and politics in Nigeria. Lastly, efforts should be made to improve the languages of instruction (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and English in our primary, secondary and even tertiary institutions in Nigeria. If Nigerian languages are used in our various means of instructions, there would be better understanding of our environment and approaches to things.

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