

EXPLORING IGBO IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN MULTILINGUAL NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual nation comprising diverse ethnic nationalities, each with its distinct identity and cultural markers. This diversity has made it a multicultural society. This paper explores Igbo people identity and culture in multilingual Nigeria. With respect to language identity, the study investigates how Igbo language, the language of the Igbo ethnic group, interacts with over 500 other languages in Nigeria and the challenges arising from this interaction. Concerning cultural identity, the paper examines selected traditions and unique cultural practices that define Igbo identity and distinguish it from other Nigerian cultures. The data, collected mainly through elicitation and observation, were analyzed descriptively. One of the study's findings is that the Igbo language remains the primary marker of Igbo identity. However, it is burdened by the negative attitudes of many of its first-language (L1) speakers. Although the language is one of the three major Nigerian languages and is spoken by about 40 million people, some native speakers no longer transmit it to their children due to a preference for English, which has been accorded high prestige status in Nigeria. Another finding is that, apart from language, there are distinctive cultural elements and practices that set the Igbo ethnic group apart. These include traditional foods such as bitterleaf soup, pounded cassava, dried cocoyam, local beans, breadfruit, ogili ugba/egwusi, mbugu ede, and ogbara oti; traditional dressing—particularly red and woven caps, isiagu attire worn by men, and wrapper-and-blouse attire worn by women; masquerade performances; and the New Yam Festival. The paper concludes that, despite the multiplicity of cultures and languages in Nigeria, Igbo identity remains distinct through its language and rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Igbo, identity, culture, multilingualism, Nigeria,*

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual nation which comprises diverse ethnic nationalities. Each of these nationalities has its unique and peculiar identity as well as cultural markers, thereby making Nigeria a multicultural nation. According to Akindele (2019), Nigeria is a multilingual nation with an estimated number of about 500 languages with each one playing a very significant role in the community where it is used. Some of these languages include but are not limited to Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Igala, Idoma, Tiv, Ibibio, Nupe, Epira, Jaba, Bassa, Isoko, Urhobo, Kanuri among so many others. Each of these languages serves as a first language (one's native or mother tongue) for the speakers. A variety of English is acquired in most cases as a second language. This is due to the official status that the English language has attained. The term multilingualism has varying definitions according different scholars. However, this study would adopt the definition by Oluchi, Udushirinwa, and Nnani (2024). To these authors, multilingualism can be seen as the ability of an individual to use or speak more than two languages in a state or country. They give a typical example of a multilingual: a middle-aged woman who is of Yoruba origin was born and bred in Eastern Nigeria (Owerri) and had her early education there. This woman may settle in Kano (Northern Nigeria) to build her career life. Following her association and interaction with the major language groups, she can fluently or effectively speak the three major languages as well as English. This however, should be distinguished from an illiterate who is merely enlightened in several languages but is not proficient in them. Similarly, Childs (2003), notes that "multilingualism is a common pattern if not the norm in many parts of Africa. For example, it is not unlikely that a typical citizen of Nigeria will speak at least three different languages in addition to Nigerian Pidgin English. What this means is that many people speak more than one language and will use different languages for different purposes (e.g., Myers-Scotton 1993). Thus, they will adapt to the situation in which the (language) survey question is being asked."As studies have shown, multilingual individuals can be observed to switch indifferent situations such as a switch from one language at school or at work (official), to another while taking lunch with friends or even communicating while doing some shopping, etc.(Oluchi et al, 2024).

Each of these languages spoken in Nigeria is characterized by different cultural heritage that distinguish them from one another. This forms part of their identity. This cultural heritage can be seen in the spoken language, in dressing, in the manner of greeting, in the local delicacies, in marriage and so on. When you see a female individual arrayed with Iro, Buba and Gele, you can tell that she is of Yoruba origin. Likewise, when you see a female individual adorned with blouse and two wrappers along with head gear, you can tell that she is of Igbo origin. The same thing applies to other indigenous groups. This goes to show how important the cultural heritage of a people

reveals their identity. This study seeks to focus on the identity of the Igbo people amidst their interaction with other indigenous groups in multilingual Nigeria.

2. A Brief Overview of Culture, Identity and Language.

2.1 Culture

Adefuye (1992) defines culture in simple terms as “the sum total of a people’s way of life”. He also acknowledges that “culture is a complex phenomenon subject to several definitions and capable of being viewed from many angles.” According to Schaefer (2010:53), culture is “the totality of learned socially transmitted customs, knowledge, material objects and behavior. It includes values and artifacts of groups of people”. Based on this definition, culture is encompassing of all that an individual learns of his community’s customs, values, behaviours as well as symbols. To Abonyi (2024:1), “Culture is a dynamic and complex whole that includes language, knowledge, belief, art, morality, law, custom and all other abilities and habits acquired by any member of a given society.” She goes further to say that “cultural identity brings all that is common to the members of a group, such as rules, norms and values that one shares with one's community.” This author views culture as a phenomenon that is capable of changing depending on emerging trends. The central theme is that this complex whole constitutes all that is acquired by members of the societies where these cultures are practiced. Ekwuazi (1992) citing the Kenyan writer, Ngugu Wa Thiong’o, gives the following definition:

“Culture in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their art, their science and all their social institutions including their systems of beliefs and rituals. In the course of this creative struggle and progress through history there evolves a body of material and spiritual history and ethos. Such values are often expressed through a people’s songs, dances, folklore, drawings, sculptures, rites and ceremonies. Over the years, these varieties of artistic activity have come to symbolize the meaning of the word culture. Any discussion of culture invariably centres around these activities, but we must bear in mind that they are derived from a people’s way of life and will change as that way of life is altered, modified or developed through the ages (p.80).”

The above definition captures the totality of a people’s way and manner of living in their society.

From an architectural perspective, culture is described as the many ways in which human beings express themselves for the purposes of uniting with others, forming a group, defining an identity, and even for distinguishing themselves as unique. Often times, culture is used as a starting point when expressing our identity to others. Yet culture like identity is complex and it includes characteristics beyond ethnicity and religion. This is manifested in both the living and dynamic aspects of a people’s everyday life as well as in built heritage such as monuments and sites (Osaka, 2008). In the same vein, Arnold (2007) submits that “through architecture, it is possible to gauge many things about a culture, such as lifestyle, artistic sensibilities and social structure. To this author, cultural identity is at risk everywhere with the depredations of globalization, but the developing world is particularly at risk. A country or state is not only identified by its people and government, but by its architecture.”

2.2 Identity

According to the Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus & Wordpower Guide (2001p.634), identity is viewed as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.” This means that identity comprises all the attributes, features or characteristics through which a person or thing is known. Anyanwu & Adeseye (2017) uphold that “to identify a person means that such person can be situated within a given ethnic or national milieu. The implication is that such a person has a base, an origin. But when a people are unmindful of where they come from, they can be considered to be rootless and can therefore attach themselves to whichever people, proximity or circumstance foists itself upon them.” What this means is that identity is a very important aspect of a person’s life. One must belong to a community, must have an origin. The Igbo people are known to possess a rich cultural identity ranging from their language to their attires to their food to their religion to their system of governance, to the values they uphold, to their lifestyle. However, Okpara & Olekaibe (2013) observe that “there is a conscious deprivation of the Igbo cultural identity, through a number factors including; the influence of foreign cauterization, urbanization, Nigerian national political arrangement and pressure from Nigeria’s internal colonizers. This deprivation has persistently eroded the Igbo indigenous values, character and heritage.” Amadi & Agena (2015) argue that the Igbo culture has been mutated in diverse ways giving rise to the resurgence of new identities. The Igbo culture mutation is observed in the following areas: Mutation of Igbo cultural festivals, Language mutation, Mutation of Igbo traditional institutions, and Mutation and rural /urban migration. Consequent upon the mutation of Igbo culture due to globalization, the following new identity has emerged: The new internet identity, The New Media and Mobile Apps, Online alliances, networking and new lifestyles, The GSM revolution, Global Satellite System, Monetization of Igbo Traditional Titles, Igbo Culture De-alignment, Attitudinal Change, Land Alienation, Emergence of New Names and E-learning/Educational Inequality.

2.3 Language

Saussure (1916) defines language as a human method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through a system of symbols. For Saussure, a system of symbols represents language. For Bakhtin (1986) "language use varies according to context, and language is closely tied to power dynamics and social relationships. According to Crystal (1997), language is a concept that pervades social life. "It is a primary means by which we gain access to the contents of others' minds and establish shared understanding of the reality. Meanwhile, there is an enormous amount of linguistic diversity among human populations. Depending on what counts as a language, there are 3,000 to 10,000 living languages in the world, although a quarter of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers and half have fewer than 10,000." In his address during the 1993 African National Congress's (ANC) language policy proposal in South Africa, Nelson Mandela made a profound statement, "If you speak (to men) in a language they understand, you speak to their head. If you speak in their own language, you speak to their heart." Agbedo (2019) considers language as "not simply an assortment of words but an entity that connects an individual to his family, identity, culture, music, beliefs and wisdom. It is the conveyor belt that transmits history, traditions, customs and folklore from one generation to another. Without language, no culture can sustain its existence, hence the indissoluble natural link between language and identity." From the positions of these scholars, it is evident that there is a strong link between the language of a people, their culture and identity. All of these concepts are interwoven and have to be considered in relation to one another.

3. Studies on the Exploration of Igbo Identity (Language and Culture)

Several authors have investigated into the identity of the Igbo people. Their research cut across different aspects of the Igbo culture. Some of these studies and their significance shall be considered.

Okoye and Ukanwa (2019) carried out a research on an aspect of the Igbo material culture; architecture. The study focused on Igbo traditional architecture as a symbol of Igbo cultural identity. It was observed that architecture in Igbo land has lost its uniqueness, local identity and cultural significance largely due to globalization and western colonialism. In the bid to promote the Igbo culture, the study aimed at stimulating the revival of Igbo traditional architecture as this reflects the belief, values and religion of the Igbo people. The study evaluated and examined Igbo traditional building materials and forms, settlement patterns of residential estates as well as arts and paintings. In addition to these, archival search and oral interviews were conducted. Findings from the study revealed that Igbo traditional architecture is a sustainable architecture because it is eco-friendly, its building materials are easily accessible and the pattern of settlement is one that fosters unity among the Igbo people. The study concludes that traditional architecture depicts the culture and identity of the Igbo people and therefore recommends that the principle of traditional architecture be reviewed and adopted in modern times.

In their research on culture, language and identity, Anyanwu and Adeseye (2019) delve into the world of Igbo Video Films. The study set out to examine how the Igbo movie has been utilized or not utilized to rebrand the Igbo culture (particularly focusing on costume and dressing), as well as various ways through which the Igbo movie industry can be employed to project the Igbo culture while ensuring that it is preserved and remains relevant. The research posits that film as a medium of mass communication can be used to achieve anything. It further posit that "the Igbo video film, more than any other medium of cultural, economic or political projection and emancipation, has the power to reposition both the Igbo people and their culture in the minds of the people and other peoples of the world" (pg 96). Films are so powerful that they can be used to prescribe correct norms of behaviour in the society. It was discovered however, that the ways of life of the Igbo people is fast diminishing as they do not fully appreciate their cultural heritage in reality as well as through the films that are produced. Igbo movies are written with English titles, the Igbo language is partly or not spoken in Igbo movies, the costumes used do not fully represent the Igbo people. In addition, ceremonies, festivals and dances are fast fading away. "What seems to be left for the Igbo now and in the not so holistic shape are the ritual of the kola nut and the chieftaincy way of greeting, three back-hands and the normal frontal hand-shake." Despite this decline, the researchers do not give up hope. They strongly believe that something can be done to remedy the situation. The study concludes that video film can help bring the much needed synthesis and synergy in our culture and traditional ways of doing things and strongly recommends that Igbo movie makers employ its potentials for such ends.

Focusing on the dynamics of language and culture as a paradigm for interrogating Igbo identity, Agbedo (2019) sought to explore the resources of language and culture as a paradigm for forging Igbo identity and leverage on its potentials for deepening advocacy for Igbo unity and development. Leveraging on the concept of 'Onye aghana nwanne ya' (Be your brother's keeper) which is the motto of Qhaneze Ndigbo, the study attempted to show that "a dialogic exchange between advocates of Igbo unity and academics" may give rise to a positive dialectic synergy that could promote the advocacy for the unity and development of the Igbo nation. The study identified language and culture as veritable tools that could be leveraged on to construct and entrench Igbo identity even in the face of underlying factors such as colonialism which introduced linguistic and cultural imperialism as well as politics. In order to reawaken the Igbo language and culture and fully embrace one's identity, the author charges Ndi Igbo

to take up their responsibility of keeping alive their language and culture; to develop a new mindset in favour of Igbo language and culture and dismantle the enslaving colonial mentality.

Enyi explored Igbo music as an aspect of the Igbo culture during Igbo Reconnection Ceremony in the United States of America and the role it plays in identity formation. Geographical proximity is a challenge for Igbos who live in America, however, efforts are made to maintain cultural and ethnic identity. Religious and social gatherings are organized to this effect. One of such social gatherings is the meeting of American Igbo Societies. These societies have included a ceremony known as the Igbo Reconnection Ceremony as part of their activities. The Igbo Reconnection Ceremony is an official welcome-back Igbo ceremony held yearly in Staunton, Virginia and a few other parts of the United States for Americans who found their ancestry to Igbo land through DNA testing. To welcome these Americans, "a naming ceremony (*iba-ahà*) is held where these people are given Igbo names and told the meaning; after which the head of the ceremony (usually an older Igbo male) pats them three times on the back—hunched down—with a piece of "horsetail". Music at the Reconnection Ceremony was in audio CD and DVD files played from a set of stereos by a contracted DJ. These include Igbo versions new genre of popular music (a hybridization of traditional music elements, old Nigerian genres such as Highlife, Juju and Apala with Western elements such as Rap) called *Naija Hip-hop*." The study acknowledges that Igbo music contributes to the formation process of ethnic and cultural identity by these Americans. However, the study questions to what extent it achieves bridging the gap.

4. Exploring Igbo Language and Cultural Identity

Igbo is one of the 1650 African languages belonging to the Niger-Congo family with over 17 million speakers (Childs, 2003). Igbo as a language is one of the over 500 languages spoken particularly in southeastern Nigeria. Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo are the states that make up southeast Nigeria where Igbo is chiefly spoken. A plethora of studies on the origin of the Igbo people and their migration from one geographic location to another exists. Some of the theories propounded that have been applied to the Igbo people and how they came to be include: The Hellenistic theory, the Semitic theory, the Northern Common Centre theory and the Autochthonous theory (Chinagorom & Onuoha, 2018). The focus of this study is not to align with any of the theories, rather, it is to acknowledge researches carried out in relation to the origin of the Igbo people. The Igbo people are blessed with rich cultural heritage that sets them apart from other ethnic groups. This forms part of their identity. This makes Ndubuisi (2019) to assert that "Igbo Cultural Identity is the sum total of customs, practices, traditions and values of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. The uniqueness of the Igbo is enshrined in their way of life. This uniqueness cuts across their archaic and pristine practices as well as new concepts added into the Igbo culture either by continuous cultural evolution or by outside influence". He further states that the Igbo people show how they perceive and explain their world, or the ways things are or change in their environment through their cultural identity. His study captures various ways through which the Igbo people manifested their cultural identity. They include: attire, performing art/Igbo music, Igbo language, *kolanut* and religion. We shall consider a few of them briefly.

4.1 Attire

The original purpose of clothing for the Igbo man was to cover private parts; hence, the Igbo attire generally consisted of little clothing. *Uli* body art was used to form pattern and shapes on the body. Men wear contemporary *Isiagu* with the ceremonial Igbo men's hat *okpu agu*. Maidens usually wore a short wrapper with beads around their neck and waist. Both men and women wore wrappers. Men would wear loin cloths that wrapped round their waist and between their legs to be fastened at their back. The Igbo people also wore perfumes gotten from a particular type of wood. With the advent of colonialism, the Igbo people copied foreign dress customs. Clothing worn before colonialism became "traditional" and is worn only on cultural occasions.

4.2 Performing art/Igbo music

The Igbo people have various musical instruments such as *udu*, *ekwe*, *ogene*, *opi*, *igba* and *ichaka*. A popular music genre associated with the Igbo people is highlife. Some highlife musicians include Chief Osita Osadebe, Oliver de Coque, and a host of others who were prominent in the 20th century. In dance, a popular dance style peculiar to the Igbos is *atilogwu*. Different Igbo speaking areas are known for different dance styles.

4.3 Igbo language

Igbo language is a core cultural identity of the Igbo people. Igbo is a tonal language. It has Igbo *Izugbe* as the standard variant and a host of different Igbo dialects such as *Onicha*, *Owerre*, *Oka*, *Achi*, *Izzi*, *Nsuka* and so on. The Igbo language is richness in form and structure and vocabulary. It is highly expressive. The government of Nigeria through its language policy has made Igbo a compulsory subject at the secondary level of education. This move is to help promote and sustain our indigenous languages.

4.4 Food

Food is another means through which a people can manifest their cultural identity. The Igbo people have an array of delicacies which they are known for. Some of them include akpu (pounded cassava), ofe onugbu (bitterleaf soup), achicha (dried cocoyam), akidi (local beans), ukwa (breadfruit), ogili ugba/egwusi, mbugu ede, ogbara oti, okpa, abacha, ofe oha and so on. These foods set the Igbos apart from other tribes.

Owing to globalization, colonialism and other factors such as migration, there have been some negative impacts on Igbo cultural identity. They include: Language mutation; Lack of people to hand over; Mutation of Igbo cultural festivals; Igo na Iwa Oji (Blessing and Breaking of Kola Nut); Influence on Igbo attire; Music and dancing style and Religion.

Language as we know is a strong indicator of a person's identity; a major identity marker. It is unfortunate to note however that people who speak core Igbo in this present dispensation, are considered uncivilized. Among the young people, you would hardly find someone who can speak Igbo fluently without mixing it with the English language. Even in the secondary schools where Igbo language is supposedly taught, students are punished for speaking their mother tongue because it is regarded as "pidgin". Igbo parents prefer to speak English to their children. There is a strong preference for the English language over the Igbo language because it is seen as a "prestigious language". This negative attitude is gravely affecting the growth of the Igbo language and if something is not done about it, the speculations that the Igbo language is going into extinction would become a reality. All hope is not lost as everyone has a role to play to ensure that the Igbo language is revitalized.

On another hand, a lot of young people are migrating to the cities. These are people who are supposed to be the custodians of the Igbo culture. The older generations of Igbo speakers are gradually dying. If majority of young Igbo speakers all leave for the cities, who would the Igbo cultural values be handed over to?

It is no doubt that some Igbo cultural festivals such as the *Ofala* and the New Yam festival are being celebrated. However, majority of the festivals are phasing off because they are no longer being celebrated. Moonlight Tales and Folk Tales have gradually become a concept we learn about in modern literature. Most young Igbo speakers do not have such experience. Traditional wrestling is also another activity that is gradually phasing out. What most young Igbo speakers are introduced to is foreign wrestling. They have passion for foreign sports such as football. The Igbo attire has become a ceremonial wear. More preference is given to Western dressing and in situations where African materials would be used; Western styles are sewn with African fabrics, thereby causing a conflict of identity. Unfortunately, this is considered fashionable.

5. Summary and Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the identity of a people is fundamental in communicating who they are to the world. The Igbo people are endowed with a rich cultural heritage that distinguishes them from over 500 ethnic groups in Nigeria. This heritage is expressed through their language, attire, cuisine, music, religion, architecture, among other cultural elements.

However, due to factors such as globalization, colonialism, migration, and cultural contact, there appears to be a gradual erosion of this identity, as key cultural markers of the Igbo people are no longer strongly upheld. This is evident in the declining use of the Igbo language, reduced adherence to traditional dress, and a diminishing preference for indigenous Igbo cuisine.

Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. Stakeholders across all sectors are called upon to collaborate in the revitalization and preservation of Igbo cultural identity, as a people without a well-defined identity risk cultural dislocation.

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