

Language, Political Parties, Electorate Enlightenment and Political Participation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Language is strategic to political enlightenment, mobilization and participation. Of much more significance in this process is the language the electorate is most competent in – their mother tongue. This paper examines the place of language especially, the indigenous languages in the emergence of an enlightened, effectively mobilized and politically active electorate in a multilingual nation like Nigeria. Our findings are that Nigerian political leaders tend to perpetuate the imposition and dominance of English language over the indigenous languages as a way of maintaining the statusquo and retaining power. Reduction of illiteracy through a vibrant education and language policy tend to be a threat to political cleavage to power and undemocratic acts. We recommend among others that government and political parties should borrow a leaf from missionaries in Nigeria, who invest heavily in the development and use of the indigenous languages for evangelistic mobilization; to invest, develop and use same for electorate enlightenment and political mobilization. The paper further recommends the democratization of the national language question.

Introduction

Language according to Essien (2006:2) is a system of structured vocal symbols by means of which human beings make meaning and communicate and interact with each other in a given community. Put more

simply, language is a system of rules and principles in which sound, structure and meaning are integrated for communication.

A vital attribute of human language that must be mentioned here is its creativity. The creative quality of human language makes it possible for it to be used to express anything we wish to express, in whatever language. This suggests that any Nigerian language can be used for electorate enlightenment and political participation in Nigeria like any Indo-European language.

The year 2006, was set aside by the African Union as the year of African languages, aimed at promoting the use of Africa's indigenous languages. Ironically, that was the same year back home in Nigeria, the institute for the study (promotion) of Nigerian languages at Aba, was scrapped in the name of "educational reforms." The present writer had stated elsewhere that Africa's nay Nigeria's educational and technological backwardness is as a result of her linguistic backwardness (Iwuchukwu 2007:8). This assertion was upheld by Chinweizu (2007) in one of his ubutungology series of lectures delivered in honour of professor Bassey Andah. A look at the list of developed nations such as United States of America, Britain, Italy, France, Germany, Russia etc and developing nations like South Korea, India, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia etc may help to make the point clearer. All the developed and developing countries make use of their indigenous languages while most of the underdeveloped countries with Africa contributing the highest number, do not make use of their indigenous languages. According to Essien (2006:12).

While developed nations involve their mother tongues in the development enterprise and succeed, black nations of Africa rather withdraw their languages from this very vital enterprise and it eludes them.

In most African countries like Nigeria, linguistic imperialism still thrives. It is considered prestigious to be educated in European, Asian languages than in African languages. This is why most university senates may willingly concede to the establishment of a department of European, Asian languages rather than a department of Nigerian languages such as Efik, Bekwara, Ejagham, Ibibio, Igbo etc. Institutes of policy studies do not consider it relevant offering courses that analyses the national language

policy. In fact, they scrap such courses in preference for the analysis of other policies of less significance.

This scenario and attitude also plays out in Nigerian politics, political enlightenment and mobilization. This paper therefore, highlights the relevance of language especially, the indigenous languages for political enlightenment and electorate participation in Nigeria. It examines the journey so far and proffer useful suggestions that could transform the landscape of political enlightenment and participation drawing from missionary activities in Nigeria.

Language, Political Parties, Electorate Enlightenment and Political Mobilization in Nigeria: The Journey so Far

Hitherto, it is only modest to say that electorate enlightenment and political participation in Nigeria has been at his lowest ebb. Although Nigeria has chequered political history occasioned by frequent military intervention, it is noted that both during the military regimes and the democratic regimes, there has been little or no political mobilization. The people have not been carried along in the political process not withstanding huge sums of money spent and various government agencies set up from time to time for that purpose. Such agencies include MAMSER or National Orientation Agency as presently constituted, the Federal Ministry of Information. Also, the political parties often come up with manifestos, and carry out political campaigns before elections (both ones annulled and the ones condoned).

All these have not amounted to political mobilization or have failed to enlighten the people due to their neglect of linguistic factors. It may be argued that government's lip service, lack luster attitude and the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian polity may be responsible for this, but the position of this paper is that such factors are less weighty compared with linguistic factors. The absence of a pragmatic language policy and the neglect of her indigenous languages is the prime cause of the low level of political participation in Nigeria.

In a nation where there is still up to 50% level of illiteracy, the use of English language which has become both a second and official language had led to the wrong assumption by many including policy makers that when political education is done extensively using English in parts of the country, everybody has been carried along. They are ignorant that even if the entire English speakers or hearers are enlightened less than half of the entire population who are illiterates are unreached. How can there be

effective political enlightenment under such circumstance? Nevertheless, this has been the trend over the years from pre-independence to date. At most what is done in recent times is the inclusion of few jingles or announcements in a few Nigerian languages which is periodically beamed on the television or in the radio. These television and radio where found however, in few city centres, have very poor network coverage. The target audience who are mainly rural dwellers, are hardly reached. In fact, even if these slots of announcements were to reach the people, most of them do not have a radio set or television to hear or see due to poverty. It should be noted that the present general satellite for mobile communication, (G.S.M) is altogether new in Nigeria and could be said to still be on a test-run with epileptic network fluctuations and high tariff which has still left it out of the use of these same vulnerable group under discourse. With the present high tariffs, how much of political mobilization can be done today with G.S.M.?

There tend to be no better way of reaching people, persuading them or educating them than through the language they understand best (their mother tongue). The people are politically alienated from the policy and programmes of the government because they have not been given access to such policies, and programmes through linguistic recklessness. There is hardly any human activity that is not carried out through language. When the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized that the mother tongue is the best language for the education of the child, it did not exclude political education, and mobilization.

The political class and policy makers should have learnt from religion (in Nigeria what role language can play in the propagation of a program, policy or in enlightenment. The church has done so much works and investments in the development of Nigerian languages than government and every other group put together.

Missionary Participation in Language Development: A Lesson for Political Enlightenment

An area of generally acknowledged confluence between traditional African education and western education; is in the area of intellectual training and promotion of cultural heritage. Intellectual growth and perpetuation of cultural heritage form cardinal objectives of both education traditions. Islamic and Christian missionary education tend to have better appreciated the above fact as they carried on language development along side their

missionary propagations. According to Fafunwa (1974:55) “indeed the history of the teaching of Arabic through the Islamic world, but particularly in the non-Arabic world, has been the history of the spread of Islam. This is one of the reasons why the elementary Arabic schools in Nigeria were called Qunranic schools, and both Arabic and Islam were taught simultaneously. When a pupil began to read the Arabic alphabet, he did so with an intention to read the Quaran. In fact, it is believed that the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio, produced a literary resurgence, of course in Arabic language.

From the 16th century when Christian missionary activities is said to have commenced in Nigeria, it had commenced with the development of English and the indigenous languages. According to Fafunwa (1974:87),” their early school curriculum consisted of bible reading in the local language, catechism, the story of Jesus, hymns and prayers sewing for girls and farming for boys”. The Christian missionaries embarked on the aggressive study and development of the indigenous languages, developing orthographies for them and translating the bible, catechism and other Christian documents into them. Fafunwa (1974:89) maintained that:

As the missionaries’ knowledge for the local language developed, they tended to use it particularly for religious institutions, in order to ensure that the bible was fully comprehended. The missionaries discovered that a child, or man for that matter, learns better, absorbs more and appreciates better in his mother tongue. No history of any developed or developing Nigerian language today appears to be complete without the effort of the missionaries. Although in some cases, they gave wrong phonetic and phonological descriptions with interference from their mother tongues, but they translated the bible, produced grammar books and dictionaries in these languages. Furthermore, they trained their church workers and missionaries on the use of the indigenous languages and ultimately made them to be part of the school curriculum. With this awareness of the role of the indigenous language and their adoption of that strategy, the success of the missionary enterprise in Nigeria is no longer news. They were able to reach and penetrate the hinterlands as well as the creeks and mountains recording tremendous breakthroughs in their evangelistic mobilization. It thus stands as a good reference point for political mobilization in Nigeria. There ought to be no less zeal and aggressive development and exploitation of indigenous languages by political parties, for electorate enlightenment and political participation in Nigeria.

Investing in Indigenous Language Development and Propagation for Political Enlightenment and Participation

From the evidences before us, it does appear that the missionaries or the church has so much work and investment in the development of Nigerian languages than the government and any other group put together. In fact, most other underdeveloped Nigerian languages are looking up to one missionary group or the other rather than the government for the development of their own languages. Many people who are helpless seeing their languages undeveloped, heave a sigh or relief hearing or seeing church or missionary organizations coming up with a translation of the bible into that language. This opens way for further development and use of that language in different media. To bring any language to this point is a very capital intensive project which many of the churches or missionaries have been bearing. This situation tends to be an aberration. The government should take the lead in the investment for the development of Nigerian languages for political enlightenment and participation. What the missionaries want to achieve through evangelistic mobilization should be comparable to what the government should achieve through political mobilization and participation. However, it is very clear that there can be no political participation by the citizenry without effective political enlightenment. Also, there cannot be effective political participation in Nigeria without proper development and utilization of the indigenous languages. Some critics of the Christian missionaries in Nigeria argued that they were politicians and business men masquerading with the bible as evangelists and preachers. Supposing this argument is taken to be true, is it not then ironical that for about three centuries ago that these “so called politicians and business men rather than missionaries coming from different parts of the world (Portuguese, Germans, Scotish, Irish, British, American, Carribeans etc); saw the need to mobilize the citizens with their own languages, thereby investing heavily on it; Nigerian politicians and political parties have not seen the need neither to develop nor invest in the development of the same languages. No wonder the Foreign ‘Politicians’ in Nigeria and their missions succeeded while the Nigerian politicians are failing not only to consolidate democracy but also to provide the dividends of democracy. For these two cardinal objectives to be achieved, the citizens must be politically enlightened in order to be carried along. Government must invest heavily in developing the Nigerian languages and evolve a policy for their appropriate utilization.

Apart from the government, there is need for political parties to also invest in the development of Nigerian languages for enlightenment and political participation. There should be a review of the constitution, pegging the number of political parties in Nigeria to a maximum of three. It should be provided for in the constitution that each party should invest and provide for the description of as many Nigerian languages as possible that are not yet described which they consider relevant to their political ambition. They should provide orthographies for such languages, hiring the services of linguistic experts. Furthermore, they should train up their party men or non party men as translators and effective users and writers of as many Nigerian languages as possible that they consider relevant to their political ambition. This should be part of the constitutional requirement for political enlightenment and participation by the citizens. This means that political parties and the government have crucial roles to play in the issue of enlightenment and political participation in Nigeria. This depends to a large extent on the level of their investment on the development and use of Nigerian languages as did the missionaries. The languages so developed and used will be an asset to the parties in their political campaigns. There is no doubt that the party or parties that have more coverage or more Nigerian languages will enlighten a greater proportion of the Nigerian electorate. Such enlightened electorate will also reflect a sizeable level of political participation of that electorate and subsequent empowerment of the party to clinch power at the polls, all other things being equal. With such proposal it is clear that any party that limits itself to the use of English language or a smaller percentage of Nigerian languages will suffer a serious political set back in the light of the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian nation.

The current political apathy as witnessed in the previous elections in Nigeria is a direct consequence of non-enlightenment of electorate by both political parties and the government. Many Nigerians vote for those they do not know. Out of the fifty registered political parties in the last locally and internationally acclaimed flawed 2007 election in Nigeria, only about four campaigned in the major cities or state capitals. The implication of this is that most Nigerians did not know the presidential candidates of the forty six other parties since they did not campaign. Even if they had campaigned, they usually restrict themselves to the city centres and state capitals while seventy percent of the Nigerian population dwell in the rural areas. When the current president of Nigeria, who was then the presidential candidate of the people's democratic party came to Cross

River State for example, he only campaigned in Calabar, the state capital. He did not even reach the zonal centres neither local government headquarters. There is no gain saying however, that Calabar, the state capital could only account for at most, forty percent of the population of Cross River State. It tends to appear that the inability to reach the rural areas is not just because of limited resources or time, but because of what may not be unconnected with linguistic factors. Many Nigerians politicians fear to campaign in the rural areas because of their inability to communicate with the inhabitants of those areas. Political leaders tend to perpetuate the imposition and dominance of English language over indigenous languages as a way of maintaining the status quo and retaining their power. Reduction of illiteracy through a vibrant education and language policy tend to be a threat to political cleavage to power and undemocratic acts.

Democratization of the National Language Question: Implications for Electorate Enlightenment and Political Participation in a Multi Lingual Polity

The proposals made so far in this paper, would not have been made, or would have appeared different, if the national language question was still a subject rotating around the possibility of adopting any of the three major languages; Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba provided for in the existing constitution. This option tends to have been over-taken by events and the practical realities in the Nigerian heterogeneity as well as time even through scanty voices from time to time from each of those three major linguistic backgrounds still echo in this direction. For example, Oguejiofor (2008:30) recently in an anniversary of an endowment in honour of a promoter of Hausa literature quoted the chairman of the occasion as saying that “Hausa language is one of the largest spoken languages in Africa and could be made into the lingua franca of Africa.”

The feasibility and practicality of the proposals in this paper is anchored on the most recent pragmatic and viable research findings towards solving the national language question. It involves the shifting of emphasizes on the development and adoption of one single language, whether major, main or minor to adoption of as many number of Nigerian languages as regional, state or local government or even community languages better referred to as languages of the environment Ogundowole (2006:10). It makes it possible for every tier of government, and political parties to be involved not only in choosing, adopting and developing the

indigenous languages but also in assigning specific roles or extra roles to any or all of the languages within its jurisdiction. According to Abubakre (2006:1) “out of the thirty-six states of Nigeria including FCT, eleven are monolingual and the remaining twenty-six are multilingual.” The democratization of the national language question option further entails the development, adoption and propagation of more indigenous Nigerian languages rather than a select few. The native language speakers will be actively involved in shaping the destiny of their languages. Languages more developed, adopted and propagated will enjoy more economic advantages over those not so done. This will propel a healthy competition for the development of almost all the languages. This may lead to language mergers and acquisitions as is obtainable in the global economic trend which has swept through the Nigerian banking sector, insurance and now security and investment houses. It will lead to the promotion and encouragement of multilingualism as a matter of deliberate policy. If there is nothing wrong in a student who wants to study at the University of Zurich, Switzerland or higher schools knowing German, while another student studying at Geneva University or her schools does not need to know German but French; in the same way, there is nothing wrong for any person studying in a university in any state or local government in Nigeria, or her schools studying in or with the language of that state or local government. States like Cross River State with many languages will plan and decide on what languages would be assigned what roles or adopting zonal or local government by local government arrangement. In some civilized countries like the Netherlands, (University of Amsterdam), their own language is the language of instruction while English is the language of research and one must have the knowledge of both to study there.

The import of the democratization of the National Language Question tend to lie on the diffusion of tension over it which according to Ogundowole (2006:10), remains a concept that creates tension, crisis in thought and confusion in world view and thus practice as a result of the deep seated contradiction in the sub-conscious⁷. It projects the adoption, development and propagation of more indigenous languages as the only way of achieving electorate enlightenment and political participation. It tends to encapsulate a hybrid of opinions of scholars such as Ogundowole (2006), Abubakre, (2006), Friday-Otun (2006), Elugbe (2006) etc towards achieving the same goals.

Recommendation

- (a) Government should emulate the missionaries on the effective use of indigenous languages for grassroots political enlightenment and participation.
- (b) Arising from the above, government at various levels and her agencies should begin to invest on the development of many indigenous languages.
- (c) Political parties and the private sector should constitutionally be mandated to invest in the development of many, Nigerian languages which they shall use for political enlightenment and mobilization for participation.
- (d) The national language question should be democratized as a way of not only deepening the democracy but also making Nigerians the owners and shapers of the democracy.

Conclusion

In this work, we have shown that the level of political participation and electorate enlightenment in Nigeria is so low as at now. We have also shown that languages, especially, the mother tongue is strategic to political participation and electorate enlightenment. A comparison was drawn on the role of the indigenous languages on the successful missionary evangelization in Nigeria, to show the level to which proper harnessing of the indigenous languages could galvanize electorate enlightenment and political participation. It is submitted that any passive toleration, deliberate ignorance, positive discouragement or outright banning, Crystal (1987:366) of such languages in a multilingual nation like Nigeria with a high rate of illiteracy, will lead to nothing but political apathy, electorate alienation and unstable democracy.

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