

## **The Development of Written Literature in Urhobo (1910 – 2010)**

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### **Abstract**

Languages are classified as major or minority ones not just because of the population of its speaker but also based on other parameters such as the level of development, availability of accepted orthography and literature in the languages. The National Policy of Education (NPE) strongly emphasized that for a language to function as first language (mother tongue) in schools it must have orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught orally as second language (L2). We can thus affirm that the quantity and quality of literature that exist in any language becomes a pre requisite for accepting it as school subject to be taught at all levels of education as well as a language of instruction in schools. This paper provides an overview on the developmental trends in Urhobo written literature; it provides an appraisal of various efforts by both writers and other stakeholders from its inception-- 1910-1911 when literary work in the language began to the present era using the ethno-linguistics vitality, a multi – dimensional approach. The result shows that Urhobo language has made significant progress both in quantity and quality of literature and as a subject of study up to University level. However, there is a great dearth in the area of creative literature. Secondly, the essay reveals that some of the authors deviated from the accepted writing system and the agreed standard dialect. A total of sixty – seven texts written in Urhobo were collected and categorized as part of our data for the study.

### **Introduction**

Urhobo language has passed through many developmental stages. In their history of existence, the Urhobo people have developed some thoughts, beliefs, religious concepts, rich folklores and works on culture as an attempt to explain their environment and survive in it. (Onobrakpeya, 2003). The Urhobo people are known to have a rich corpus of folktales most of which are expressed in poetic songs, moonlight plays, proverbs and idioms. Others are expressed in traditional artistic works. These works, stories, moral and figurative expressions of the Urhobo people are significantly found in the media or avenue

through which the people express their views and beliefs about different aspects of life, cultural and traditional beliefs as well as the totality of their world views.

Oral poetry, folktales, proverbs, idioms, songs composition and dramatic performances during festivals that are known to have both aesthetics, moral and entertainment values have been part and parcel of the Urhobo life style. They are transmitted orally from one generation to another until around 1910 and 1911 when literary works on Urhobo language started through the efforts of the Christian Missionary Society and their early Urhobo converts notably Thomas Emedo of Orogun. They evolved the first orthography with which writing, teaching and learning was done, especially for use in Sunday school, for promoting Christian education, in writing and reading the word of God- the bible in Urhobo (Oghenekaro 2004; Emama 2017). With the landmark victory of having orthography for writing the Urhobo language by 1911, the stage was set for literary work in Urhobo language. This pioneering efforts of the Christian Missionaries in literary activities, especially in the production of written literature in Urhobo is in tandem with the views of Obiechina (1990: 9) on the development of literature in West Africa.

Apart from the positive contribution of the European Missionaries to the growth of vernacular literature, the growth of written literature in English has also been stimulated by them. Of particular significance is the fact that by teaching, reading and writing to West Africans they equipped them with the necessary tools for creating written literature.

In recent times, there have been many critics of Urhobo studies. Some people held and read the views in publications and many other avenues that Urhobo language is visibly neglected and will soon go into extinction. These opinions are doing a lot of damage to the image of the Urhobo language and the people. The most painful aspect of the damage is the discredit it constituted to many teachers, authors and researchers who have done and are still doing a lot of work and production of literature for the development of the Urhobo language. It is against this background that this study has been necessitated to take a scholarly step using the ethno-linguistics vitality framework and the literary historical approaches to carry out a descriptive survey of the various trends in the development of the literatures written in Urhobo.

## Review of Related Literature

### Conceptual Framework

“Literature is generally identified by the language in which it is written or by the people who wrote it” Ojaruega (2014:87). Thus Ojaruega (2014) titled her work “Urhobo Literature in English: A Survey” Written literature in Urhobo in this study is defined from the rationalist perspective as those literature written in Urhobo language and bears the mark of Urhobo traditionalist. Language and nationality alone cannot make a novel, poetry or drama Urhobo when other elements like settings, characters and worldview are foreign to Urhobo. This study sees the concept of literature from a generic and specific perspective. Quoting Nwadike, (1996) Ivworin (2012:7) explained that:

The generic meaning of literature is referred to as “literature of knowledge. It includes anything in written form such as text books of various subjects, or even leaflets enclosed in a pack of medicine describing the composition of the drug..., while the specific meaning of literature refers to works of art through which life experiences are interpreted; a product of imagination to create a world of make belief and to produce entertainment and education.

The scope of this work covers the development of both the literature of power and literature of knowledge also referred to as ‘creative and non – creative literature’ in Urhobo.

### Empirical Studies

Different researchers and writers have written and researched into various areas of Urhobo studies but works on the development of Urhobo literature is an area that have not been given much attention. Kelly (1960) was the first writer to discuss the Development of Urhobo written literature. According to Kelly (1969:53)

There are few publications in Urhobo. The British and foreign in Bible Society has issued a translation of the gospel of St. John and a book of exercise for bible study. There is also Urhobo Baptismal hymn by the

Rev. J. E. Aganbi; a modern Urhobo reader in two parts by B. E. Onokpasa and a volume of Urhobo poems by the same author. Apart from these, there are few small pamphlets of religious stories and an English–Urhobo word list by J. E. Edjeren.

Since 1969 when Kelly made public his findings, there has not been any significant review update or survey of the present state of development of written literature in Urhobo except the report of Kay Williamson in the late 80s that pegs the number of publications in Urhobo at 15, Itsekiri 9, Isoko 19, and Izon 23, the most recent survey carried out by Ivworin (2012) sixty – seven books published in Urhobo were collected from the field and bibliographed. His work reveals that Urhobo language and literature is on its path of development steadily with over 67 literary texts to its credit.

### **Urhobo Written Literature: Early Missionaries Efforts 1910 – 1930**

The coming of James Johnson as assistant Bishop to Warri, Sapele and Benin in July 1901 does not favour the Urhobo people who were already anticipating an opportunity to get education in the whiteman's language and in their own language as they admire the Yoruba and other strangers dwelling in Urhobo land. Contrary to their expectation, Bishop Johnson subjected the Urhobo converts to learn or betaught Yoruba instead of English (Eriwo 2006).

Bishop Herbert Tugwell was the first European missionary who actually has a burden and strong desire to evangelize, bring western education and develop the Urhobo language for literary purpose. The letter he wrote to St. Luke's church and St. Andrew church Warri dated 27<sup>th</sup> December testify to this claim. Extract from the letter in Otite 2002: states:

..... I think I have already stated that I am anxious to secure the help of the CMS in connection with the needs of Sobo country especially in connection with work of the translation of scripture and training of agents, but I am not to render such help .... On this occaion, one form of the Lord's prayer has been adoped which we trust will meet the needs of the whole of the Sobo country.

Rev. Canon, later Bishop S. C. Philips was another missionary who participated in the work on translation of Christian materials into Urhobo. In an interview conducted by S.U. Eriwo on March 20<sup>th</sup> 1971 at Osogbo, Bishop S. C. Philips was reported to have said that in about 1921 he and Ofodidun translated an Urhobo primer and a prayer book with some hymns which Bishop James helped to print in Lagos. Ofodidun and Okpe were actively organizing some Urhobo congregations in Ondo area under the supervision of Bishop Philips at the time. Their translations were heavily influenced by the Okpe dialect and Yoruba language (Eriwo 1979).

### **Efforts of Foreign Missionaries and their Converts at the Translation of Books into Urhobo (1910-1970)**

The lack of meaningful explanation of the message of the gospel to the people in the language that they understand, and the absence of the scripture in the language that has any meaning to the people, is a major reason why the early missionaries geared their efforts towards the development of the native language and translation of liturgical books and the Bible into Urhobo. Eriwo (1979:28) reveals that “preliminary translation work has been on in the era of Rev. Cole, as Tugwell's letter indicates”. Nabofa (2005:226) deduced some striking facts from Bishop Tugwell's letter written from the Rest House at Kokori to the parochial committees of St Luke's Church Sapele and St. Andrew's Church in Warri on Dec 16, 1914:

The churches were in an unsatisfactory condition because both the people and their teachers were ignorant. The teachers were incapable of giving instruction to the people because the scriptures had not been translated into the language that they (the teachers) understood. There was an on-going conference on translation work and Tugwell was anxious to secure the help of the C.M.S to assist in this work. It appears that there were various versions of the Lord's Prayer in these churches due largely to a lack of a standard translation. Tugwell translated a small reading sheet for use in the churches, content of which is not stated in his letter.

The notes that followed the Tugwel letter revealed that two thousand copies of the small sheet should be sold at a penny each. There was also an order that the Lord's Prayer and the first four of the Ten Commandments should also be translated quickly. From the evidence that has so far come to light, Bishop Herbert Tugwell pioneered the translation of the scripture into Urhobo by giving the directive that guided the translators without personally engaging himself in the actual translation. Sequel to this, it was agreed in a meeting held at Ephron (Effurun) in the year 1914, that Agbarho dialect, which was almost widely understood should be used in all translations. (Nabofa 2005). This implies that it was a joint decision of the foreign missionaries represented by Bishop Tugwell and Rev Cole and the early indigenous Christians represented by Mr. T. Emedo of Orogun and others that brought about the choice of Agbarho as a central dialect for translation and production of written literature in Urhobo language.

The first foreign Christian group that responded to the plight of the Urhobo Christian in their efforts to translate and publish liturgical books in Urhobo language was the Society for Promoting Christian knowledge, a Christian group in Holy Trinity Church based in London. They assisted in the translation and publication of liturgical books and preliminary Bible translations which were published in the era of AgoriIwe and his team before the British and Foreign Bible Society took over the work. It was the Society for Promoting Christian knowledge that sponsored and published the second edition of the Rev. AgoriIwe's Urhobo Book of Common Prayers.

After his ordination as Deacon in 1938, AgoriIwe served his curacy in Eastern Nigeria where much translation and indigenous literary work was going on, and the Holy Bible already existed in Igbo language, he commissioned three Catechists Messrs J A Emoefe, Isaac Efedjama and Enajero Arawore to translate the New Testament into Urhobo, using the Agbarho dialect as union dialect. While he was at Aiden's College he made contact with the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) which showed great interest in the work of AgoriIwe and his team and thus sponsored the publication of the New Testament into Urhobo. There were series of correspondence between AgoriIwe and the BFBS representatives in the course of the translation efforts till its final

publication. Erivwo (1998), the success of this effort and subsequent publication of the New Testament in Urhobo prompted the British and Foreign Bible Society to take up the project of the complete Bible in Urhobo in partnership with the United Bible Societies. They committed both their human and financial resources toward the successful completion of the Urhobo Bible project which they achieved by 1970.

### **Efforts of Urhobo Progress Union**

When the Urhobo Brotherly Society which was later renamed 'Urhobo Progress Union (UPU)' was founded in 1931, one of its major objective was the eradication of illiteracy through the training and award of scholarships to University level, the implementation of an education scheme aimed at offering more Secondary School education to Urhobo youngsters and the development of the Urhobo language to compete favourably with other Nigerian Languages

After its inauguration in the early thirties, the Urhobo Progress Union (U P U) constituted a literary committee. In 1948, the Literary committee with the approval of the UPU evolved a new orthography over the one prepared by the early missionaries. The effort of this committee was short lived due to lack of sufficient support and backing. The committee was resuscitated with a change in nomenclature to Urhobo Language Committee, a name that clearly redefined the task of the committee in 1952. It was this newly renamed Urhobo language committee that worked with Dr. Hans Wolf, a linguistics expert to evolve a new Urhobo orthography in 1954 under the initiative of the Government of the then Western Region of Nigeria. This orthography was ratified by the Joint Education Committee of the then Eastern and Western Urhobo Divisions after it had been ratified and approved by the UPU.

According to Oghenekaro (2004:6-7), the aims and objectives of the Urhobo Language Committee include the following:

To uphold the dignity of Urhobo language and guard against its extinction.

To appeal to parents to teach and encourage their children to speak Urhobo language at any appropriate time.

To ensure up-to-date speaking, fluent reading, correct spelling and writing of Urhobo language by the youths and the adults.

To encourage and promote the teaching of Urhobo language in all institutions of learning from the primary school to the university in our land and elsewhere.

To encourage those who write books in Urhobo language

To raise funds for the promotion of Urhobo language

This Urhobo Language Committee would have produced tremendous breakthrough but for some prevailing problems and challenges, some of which are outlined by Oghenekaro (2004:10-11):

The committee's greatest constraint was finance - money to carry out researches and to sustain the vetting committee. Membership of the committee was largely made up of retired teachers.

Lack of interest shown by the generality of the Urhobo people in speaking, reading and writing in Urhobo language. In the urban areas and almost everywhere parents preferred their wards speaking the Pidgin English to speaking Urhobo, their mother tongue.

There was no secretariat where books written in Urhobo language could be stored and displayed for the general public, students as well as researchers into the Urhobo language.

There is a general lack of encouragement to writers and publishers of books written in Urhobo language.

5. Lack of sponsorship from well-to-do Urhobo sons and daughters and organizations for the printing of the written Urhobo books for sale and use

### **The Development of Urhobo Texts-Primers and Non Primers**

A close observation of the development of written literature in Urhobo shows that apart from Christian liturgical books and the Holy Bible that were translated into Urhobo language, another area where much work was done is in the area of the production of Urhobo primers. Pioneering effort in the production of primers in Urhobo language started between 1918 and 1920 when Thomas Emedo whom Erivwo (1979) referred to as the pioneer of Urhobo



literature wrote the first Urhobo primer called *Obeke*. He was appointed Instructor in Urhobo Adult Bible class at that time. Following closely to the Emedo's *Obeke* primer was the translated primer written in Urhobo by Bishop S C Philips and Mr. Ofodidun in faraway Ondo in 1921. According to Eriwo (1979:29), "Emedo's and Ofodidun's translations formed the basis for further work...". These primers seem to be the only available ones until the arrival of AgoriIwe, the first Urhobo Anglican Priest and Patron of the Urhobo Bible Translation Committee.

In 1954, the government of the Western Region of Nigeria mandates the Joint Education Committee of the then eastern and western Urhobo division to partner with the newly renamed Urhobo Language Committee (formerly Urhobo Literary Committee) to work with Dr. Hans Wolf, a Linguist to review and ratify the Urhobo orthography. This intervention re-open the door for the production of literary works in Urhobo again, although at a very slow rate. The first of such works was the B.E. Onokpasa's *Modern Urhobo Readers*, book one published in 1959 by the Augustinian Publishers of Nigeria. At the back cover page of this primer was an advert "TO BE PUBLISHED SHORTLY "Urhobo language and Grammar". This book written by the same author would be for the teaching of Urhobo in Teachers Training Colleges, Secondary Grammar School and Modern Schools.

Two notable Urhobo teachers and members of the Urhobo Language Committee who wrote primers before the Nigerian civil war were D.O. Ohwovoriole and David J. Egbebruke. These authors adopted the 1954 Urhobo orthography. D.O. Ohwovoriole's 'ObeResosuo Re Urhobo' was produced side by side with a teacher's edition written in both English and Urhobo, It was published by the Ministry of Education, Western Region Ibadan. The second author, David Egbebruke, named his primer after his own name *Egbebruke Urhobo Primer*. Obe Urhobo Kpokpo and was printed by Hope Waddel Press Calabar..

Literary work in Urhobo was interrupted by the Nigerian civil war but later commenced, when T.A Abido published his primer, *ObeKpokpo Re UyonoR' Urhobo* (books one and two), published by GKS Press, Warri. The Abido's primer became very popular in Urhobo schools until 1977 when S.S. Ugheteni's primers started appearing in the market. S.S. Ugheteni wrote his *Yono Urhobo* primer books one and two

while he co-authored the book three with the Urhobo distinguished Professor of African Studies and Poetry, Tanure Ojaide in 1981. These works were published by Macmillan Nigeria. It was at this juncture that some Urhobo distinguished scholars in the University system started showing interest in the development of the language. Literary works of all kinds including dictionaries started coming in.

Recent development shows that Urhobo scholars have started making efforts toward the production of Urhobo Literature texts in the three main genres of prose, Poetry and Drama. Atiboroko Uyovbukerhi's *Selected Poems* (1976), included some poems written in Urhobo and translated into English. The first poetry text in Urhobo was however written by Omamode Erhiawarien in 1991 titled *Urhobo Poetry for School and Colleges (Etairoro R' Urhobo)* with an overview written in English, providing a brief highlight on all the poems in the order they appear in the main work' Apart from this, Mrs. Deborah Onoyovwi wrote Urhobo short stories titled *IkunEkrekerevme Urhobo* "Short stories from Urhobo land" in 2005. It is an edited work compiled from some undergraduate students' projects in Urhobo from the Department of Nigeria Languages, College of Education, Warri. No drama text has been produced; there is no real prose work or any poetic Anthology in Urhobo. Unlike the case of the Igbo where prose works preceded poetry and drama the case of the Urhobo starts with poetry. The reason for this development might be due to the fact that Urhobo are more endowed in the area of song poetry and dance as can be seen in the works of J.P Clark, G.G. Darah and Tanure Ojaide who wrote extensively on the *Udje Song-Poetry Tradition* of the Urhobo people. The Urhobo are naturally gifted in song composition to an extent that songs are used as means of documenting historical events and in showcasing the Urhobo culture, philosophy and worldview. (Darah2010).

### **Setbacks in Urhobo Written Literature**

Urhobo written literature is a 20th century-born literature, unlike the Igbo literature whose major setback was the awful orthography controversy in its literary history which lasted from 1929-1961 and then the Biafran War that made Igbo writers go on holiday, the Urhobo problem was more or less a domestic one. The problem of an acceptable standard dialect and orthography was settled without much argument by

all stake holders when the Christians in a meeting held at the instance of Bishop Tugwell at Ephron (Effurun) in 1914, agreed that Agbarho dialect which was widely understood by all the Urhobo clans be used in all translations and writings as the standard dialect (Nabofa 2005).

The World War that lasted from 1939 to 1945 was a major setback for the missionary activities, growth of schools and churches as well as all form of literary activities in the Urhobo region although it does not last as the Urhobo language committee at its inauguration in the early 1940, evolved a new orthography in 1948, over the one prepared by the early missionaries. In 1954, the government of Western Region of Nigeria invited one Dr. Hans Wolf, a Linguistics expert who worked with the Urhobo language committee to evolve the present Urhobo orthography which was ratified by the Joint Education Committee of the then Eastern and Western Urhobo Divisions and also approved by the Urhobo Progress Union (UPU). The above information shows that Urhobo was able to overcome the problem of a standard orthography and an acceptable dialect long before the Igbo, yet Igbo and Yoruba are far ahead of Urhobo in terms of indigenous literature. Urhobo slogan as Ege (n.d) put it is that “when it comes to the question of reading and writing the language, almost everyone excuse is the lack of text books or some sort of reading and writing aids.” Contrary to Ege’s assertion, our survey shows that quite a number of literatures written in Urhobo exists, some are adequate in quality but not in quantity.

Setbacks to Urhobo written literature as revealed in this research agrees partly with Oghenekaro (2004) problems encounter by the Urhobo Language Committee in their assignment. Some of our findings are presented below:

1. Financial Constraints: Money to carry out research and to sustain the translation work started by the early Urhobo Christian elites and clergies, organizing writing workshops and actual production of quality texts was not available This shortcoming seems to be a re-occurring decimal in every efforts of stake holders to organize seminars, workshop, write books and to provide the Urhobo with a curriculum in line with the Universal Basic Education program.
2. Absence of Interest and Indigenous Patronage: The Urhobo people generally manifest a very poor attitude and lack of interest

towards the speaking, reading and writing in Urhobo language. It is quite obvious that the Urhobo parent prefer their wards speaking either the English or pidgin to speaking Urhobo.

3. Lack of Encouragement and Sponsorship: There is a general lack of encouragement to writers, translator and publishers of books in Urhobo language. The general notion was ‘of what use is books written in Urhobo language, who will buy or need them?’ Because of this phenomenon, nobody wants to invest into writing, translating and publishing in Urhobo.
4. Non Full Implementation of the Urhobo Language Curriculum Produced by the Urhobo Studies Association: Another major problem is the refusal of the Delta State Government to use the available machineries to fully enforce and monitor the use of the Federal Government approved Urhobo Curriculum in the schools in the Delta Central Senatorial District through its Inspectorate division despite its adoption by the state government since November 2017.

## **Conclusion**

The study revealed a significant progress in the quality and quantity of literary texts available in the Urhobo language except in creative literature which is yet to receive the needed attention. A total of sixty seven literary texts in Urhobo were collected and categorized: Primers 15, Dictionaries 6, Religion/ Liturgical books-13, Graded Readers 15, History 1, Short Story 1, Folktale 1, Poetry 2, Proverb/Riddle 2, Supplementary reader 4, and Grammar, Language and Literature Methodology 5. This research contradicts the public notion that “there are no books written in Urhobo”. It reveals the fact that Urhobo literature is developing gradually with over sixty six literary texts written in the language as at 2010. There is deficiency in creative literature. It is the view of this research that Urhobo literature has just moved from the derivative epoch to the formative stage. The development is progressive compared to the previous research carried out by Kelly (1969) and Onose (1993) which show a very slow level of development.

The collection of literary texts written by authors from different locations and time frame, some of which have gone out of the market, should be

regarded as one of the most tedious tasks in this type of research. Some texts that may have been omitted by previous researchers were found and included in this work. The texts collected for this study covers a period of ninety-two years (1918-2010). Thirty of the texts collected were published in the last decade i.e. between 2001 and 2010, which indicates a high level of literary revival in Urhobo language. There is an urgent need for the production of creative Literature if the language must grow as an academic discipline.

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