

ASPECTS OF IGBO CULTURAL OBSERVANCES IN DEATH THROES: THE QUESTION OF THESE PRACTICES, LANGUAGE AND NATURAL IDENTITY OF A PEOPLE.

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Abstract

Igbo socio-cultural practices delineate the region from other socio-cultural regions. The observances that clearly distinguish the Igbo race are grouped as internal and external: the former are family practices; the latter inter family or inter-communal observances. "Omugwo" (nursing mothering period), "Igba oso ochu" (manslaughter retribution), are internal; "Ozioku" (invitation to a feast), "Emume Arusi" (Oracular fiesta), folktales telling, bridal procession and songs, "Igba nju di/nwunye" (inquiry before marriage), "Igba mgba" (wrestling match), prohibition against abortion, etc are external. These culturally recognizable practices are facilitated by language. Their features and the characters are demonstrably conveyed in the Igbo language which acts as a vehicle for fostering 'natural' identity of the Igbo people. This paper examines some aspects of Igbo cultural observances made possible by the Igbo language which in itself, together with these observances, is in danger of extinction, thus threatening the consequent disappearance of a people, its culture, and its identity.

Introduction

It has been observed that cultural practices of a geographical locale are identifiable patterns of gregarious show of identity, ownership and common descent. These recognizable social acts peculiar to natives enable them to engage any group of kins that organizes them without any prior preparation. Any member of this cultural milieu is largely knowledgeable in these practices, and has no hindrances in displaying this knowledge by either talking about them or counseling those who transgress against the norms. The commonality evidenced on these observances convinces linguists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists of the common source of origin of the people of this culture. The Igbo practices evident in Awgu, a town in Enugu State, are approached in two ways: internal social observances involving observances limited to every family or kindred; external social observances embracing observances connecting communities and kindred. These practices however are snubbed on, discouraged and left reeling backward by the blows of foreign culture. The languages of these cultural observances are no longer relevant to contemporary culture. The natives gravitate towards the ravaging dictates of other languages, and so, the language of these indigenous practices is almost moribund, the practices themselves mundane, and the identity of the people of these cultural surroundings radically eroding.

Some aspects of these practices are neglected while the inherent languages of these practices are becoming anathema. Consequently, the identity of the people are gradually eclipsing because of negligence. This is examined as a warning and suggests that the peoples' genealogy, their culture and their identity risk near obliteration.

Internal social observances

“Omugwo” assigns a nursing mother a period of exclusive “convalescence” to regain lost flesh transferred to her baby; to resuscitate agility lost during gestation period, and to receive special attention from her husband and kith and kin. This restriction to observe this period and to receive both bodily and visitor’s attention is not a mute fanfare. Happy ululations announcing the arrival a baby, hauntingly ethereal melodies about new births, dramatic joyous jumping high in the air by women and poetic encomiums to God, the giver of children herald the birth of a newcomer. These expressive displays suggest neighbourly concern, communal oneness and happy acceptance of the new child for the perpetuation of family pedigree. In recent times, *Omugwo* is becoming primitive and is being assigned to the dustbin of historical irrelevances: a mother puts to bed today, tomorrow she attends to domestic chores or even office duties; a mother puts to bed today, tomorrow she recruits a nanny to take care of her baby. The neglect experienced by *Omugwo* as well as the outdoor ceremony of inviting little children to accompany the mother to a stream to bathe and collect some water to also bathe her baby as marking the end of her restriction makes it no more practicable.

The camaraderie evinced by families in seasonal invitations to observe notable fiestas natively called OZI OKU, is dead. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* describes the fun of such invitation to eat together. A heap of pounded foofoo is mounted and guests invited to the occasion fall on the food at either sides of the metres high food, and only exchange greetings with the others at the opposite sides of the depleted foofoo. It is necessary to ponder and pause over what Achebe dramatizes: generosity of the host, satisfaction of the guests, reciprocation of the guests to their host by next season, sobriquets accorded to the host by the guests – “Omelu ora” (one that does something good for the community), “osielu ora” (one that cooks food for the community), and the like. A new reaction unprintable and nonexistent in our culture is now being exemplified: suspicions of poisoning, fear of bewitching, afraid of siphoning one’s destiny, and of course, the idea of death to halt one’s progress. OZI OKU signaling gregariousness, brotherly keeping, trust and protection is dying to be replaced by drinking and eating sprees in eateries where one considers oneself free from diabolical attacks. Individualism of the West is fast taking hold of Igbo culture and a consequent death of Onye aghara nwanne ya (be your brothers keeper), nwanne di na mba (relatives reside in foreign land), nwanne amaka (relatives are beautiful), nwanne di uto (relatives are sweet), nwanne bu ike (relatives are backbones/livewire), etc.

Folktales (Ifo/Iho) are aspect of literary lore of Igbo land. They relate the philosophy, the wisdom, the counseling, the understanding, the patriotism, the worldviews and the relative communal relations of neighbours and other tribes. The significance of moonlit night and the cheerfulness introduced by dry season point to the liveliness children adopted in carrying out household chores in order to avoid being prevented from participating in night tales of heroism in wrestling and wars, wiles of tortoise, myths of death, preference of male babies, discovering deception, punishing villains, and what have you. Informal education on

reasoning, avoiding acts that make one disreputable, unpatriotic and irresponsible is cultivated by listening to tales. Parents, especially grandparents, are the raconteurs in families, while, in arenas where children gather, elderly children who had picked stories from parents, grandparents or any other persons, reeled off tales to the children who listened spellbound to their words. The knowledge and wisdom gained, the maxim of honesty and the prize of good work learned dissuaded children from bad company, irresponsible acts, laziness and slovenly attitude. Folktales are today jettisoned overboard. Undergraduates taking a course on *Introduction to the Study of (English) Literature* at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka display crass ignorance of their communities, folktales and always depict confusion about recollecting any folktales and giving their suggestive moral lessons.

Parents are preoccupied with raising money for their children's upkeep, but neglect any thought about the accepted mores of their villages, in most cases, exemplified in folktales. The result is the death of these sublime tales and the encouragement of readings, scenes, and learning that spearhead moral decadence, social malignancy and degeneration of ethical values.

"Igba oso ochu" or willful homicide or manslaughter is anathema in Igbo land. This observance accords dignity to human life, recognition to the essence of existence, consideration for living together of man in contrast with loneness of classes of animals. Achebe's work, *Things Fall Apart*, dignifies man as being to be discreetly related with, and whose life is unquantifiable in material possession. Okonkwo inadvertently commits murder. Shrapnel of his exploded dane gun pierced the heart of a lad culminating in his death. Okonkwo's status is not commensurate with the sanctity of human life lost, and so, he has to leave for exile and his hard earned property razed by cleansing human agent of tradition. Similarly, but in different retribution, Okonkwo has to commit suicide in payment for decapitating the whiteman's court messenger.

Kidnapping for ransom and/or ritual sacrifice after dismembering vital parts have desecrated the accepted saying: life is sacrosanct. Unemployed youths engage in it as a trade. Some police officers collude with some miscreants to kidnap or abduct infants, school pupils and prominent members of society for fees, and business rivals kidnap one another or their rivals' workers to cripple their business enterprise. These gangs operating with apparent impunity are obvious slap on the culture highlighting the nobility of man.

The commonplaceness of "ite ime" or abortion is a flagrant infraction on the sacredness of man and his offshoot, babies. Igbo culture celebrates exultation of families blessed with children in songs.

O bu nwa bu ihe a n'ile – O nwa oo unu anugo!

Onye chi ya si ya riwe eri – ya riwe ooo!

Translation:

It is child that provided all these – it is child, have you heard!

He whose God asks him to be eating – let him eat!

This is a song of joy for "an achieving child" who has provided his mother with some things. The child making provisions for his family is tantamount to God asking such a family to be enjoying the goodies of the world. The esteem given to children by Igbo communities caused the various nomenclatures imbued with divine praise, social thanksgiving, admirable possession. Names as nwaamaka (child is beautiful or child is endearing), nwabunwanne

(child is kin), nwadialu (child endures), nwadinakachukwu (child is in the hand of God), nwamgbechi (child is God's gift), nwabuike (child is strength), nwadiugu (child gives respect), etc run through Igbo world views in recognition of the inestimable values attached to children.

In Igbo land pregnancy is extolled. Man and woman involved in securing conception receive praise from neighbours about God's blessing. This tacit admiration, as well as, readiness to accommodate a would-be born baby turns sour whenever it leaks out to the public that a pregnant girl terminates her pregnancy. This scandalizing information infuriates the youths who collectively accost the said girl: they hoot derisively, jeer angrily, heckle abusively at the offensive girl who ignominiously leave for voluntary exile.

This is a memory of a bygone age! Abortion is legalized in Europe, the United States, China, India. Abortion, though not legalized in Africa, is rampant among girls and many mothers, and even many fathers who do not want certain sex. Patrick Oke in his weekly Enugu State Television (ETV) program shocks concerned viewers by his revelation that 12 billion babies were aborted in 2003; 43 million babies are aborted annually all over the world. So, the culture of abortion violating the culture of human sanctity puts humankind on trial as regards the sacrilege meted out to the dignity of humans. This negates the beauty of conception, the ultimate values of conception, and the divine intention of conception.

External social observances

Religion points to man's relationship with his environment with regard to understanding and explaining natural phenomena – the sun, the moon, the seasons for planting and harvesting, and life birth/death. The ascription of meaning to the operations of these facts is placed upon superhuman beings who determine their unending cycles. This gives rise to oracular christening and worship – “Emume Arusi”. These gods as the Earth goddess (Ani or Ali), the bigger than-the-earth sky (Igwe ka Ali), the gigantic one (Agbara), the god of yam (Njoku), the stream goddess, the river goddess, etc came to be worshipped. Their ceremonial periods are characterized by assorted dances, masquerades, and sundry activities. Activities take off at the “Igwe” or chief priest's compound before converging at an open square, in most case a market square. Speeches of thanksgiving to the Supreme Being addressed to the people by the leaders led by the Igwe and other sacrifices of appeasement and atonement bring the fiestas to their climax and, finally, people disperse in groups of comradeship to entertain, dance, court or wander with enticing dancing steps along with masquerades

These festivals unite rather than disunite; they enliven rather than create disarray; they infuse happiness rather than confusion; they introduce the beginning of new season and readiness for work rather than laziness and loafing about; they introduce a period of marriage consummation to be remembered by the fiesta's name rather than a period of perpetual cohabitation; they above all, introduce a period of relaxation/resting and “oiling one's mouth” rather than every-time-on-the-field engagement giving the nickname of “Okpaku erieri” (one who continuously selfishly acquires supplies of comestibles without settling down to eat any of them).

Oracular fiestas introduce a period of marital consummation. This final rite of marriage contract has procedural steps. Under this is discussed “Igbo nju di/nwunye” (inquiry about prospective marriage), and bridal procession with songs. Marital rite is not hurried through as done in articles of trading. Announcing choice of a husband or wife

constrains parents to set about finding out qualities worthy of emulation possessed by either of the two. Satisfactory information for proceeding or discontinuing with the marriage will be collated and examined. Predominance of favourable or disfavourable information will make or mar the marriage contract. Inquiries embrace eligibly self-relied young man, early/premature death, history of criminality, productive fertility of parents, well behaved mother-in-laws, issue of mental illness, issue of waywardness, etc. These behavioural dispositions tend to contain widespread moral inclinations which society frowns upon as contrary to acceptable norms.

On the contrary, favourable behavioural dispositions further the course of the marriage contract, which, when perfected, leads to bridal procession together with its songs. I offer no discussion on marriage contract approach, but on the heart rending songs of the procession and disturbing cries by the bride who is troubled by parental severance. After much bargaining for a fee to pay off the bride's peers who constitute the procession, and as the peers arrange themselves in single file behind the maiden bride, it then dawns on the bride that she is severed from her paternal compound, traded off and abandoned to her whims and caprices. She bursts into pitiful wail, which receive weakly, tearful comfort of a sobbing mother, as her friends cajole her to keep moving. As soon as the procession advances, one renders a counseling song reminding the bride of subservience to another authority. The song rendition encapsulates the bride's name and repeatedly beckons on her to be obedient to her husband.

Procession Song

O duru ooo
O duru ya la
O duru ooo
O duru ya la
Mgbeke – bride's name
Ihe di gi gwara gi
K'iga eme ee
Ihe di gi gwara gi

Egwu eji Eduna Nwunye

Have you taken
Yes he is taking her home
Have you taken
Yes, he is taking her home
Mgbeke – (name of bride)
Whatever your husband tells you to do.
That you shall be doing
Whatever he tells you to do!

I recall this as if it were yesterday, but it has been abandoned to the footsteps of bygone years!

Wrestling (Mgba) is another inter-village or communal entertainment ceremony that has died, except for the ad-hoc securing of two young men who agree to capitulate to one of the two in television shows of culture. Wrestling as a sport brings honor to oneself and to one's community. Achebe in his opening of *Things Fall Apart* presents to the outside world that Igbo land possesses honour, strives for honour and wants honour. Wrestling prowess gives love to the young man as Ekwefi to Okonkwo, it makes one respectable, as Okonkwo becoming an elder by washing his hands clean and eating with elders (nwata kwocho aka osoro okenye rie ihe), it opens floodgates to wealth, decision-making and limitless other involvements. Wrestling in Igbo land does not end in death or maiming as experienced in the foreign-introduced wrestling called fight. Fans gather to cheer and lift victorious wrestler onto their shoulders, and the lost one walks home to prepare for another time. *Mgba* in Awgu is accompanied by musical instruments fashioned after xylophones but the wood tools are

larger than xylophones. A flutist is ever present to praise-sing the valours, adventures and exploits of the strong men or their ancestors. These praise-names inspire the men into action, and in some cases wrestling heroes not in the mood will taunt a flutist thus:

“Opu lafuo” dike – The flute that deceives the hero. And eruption of laughter welcomes the demer of this hero. In some instances a hero might not be around at a bout, and musical instrument will be yelling his whereabouts. On perceiving the calls, he rushes to the scene to wipe shame off his village whose champions of tyros at the arena have been silenced by a better experienced and tested village.

The question of language of these observances

The cultural observances or practices selected, traditionally conceptualized to entrench them in observer’s perspective, are facilitated by language. The Igbo language supplies these linguistic codes – Omugwo, Ifo/Iho, Ozi oku, Igbu ochu/Igba oso ochu, ite ime, emume arusi, Igba nju di/nwunye, Igba mgba, and others – to encapsulate these ideas embodying Igbo people and culture: a culture disdainful to villainy but upholding virtues. The language is a tool for grooming children who grow to take over the task of continual grooming.

Translation and interpretation strip a language of the features inherent in delineating it from the nuances of any other languages. The feeble attempts ever since being made to describe Igbo culture in foreign languages is an adventure in futility as these attempts are extrinsically imaginative and not intrinsically realistic. The characteristic of convention attributed to language explains that speakers “agree on... the relationship between form (sign) and meaning (object) of the words” (Fromkin et al 599). The language of one speech community is therefore disfavoured as channel for accounting for histories, philosophies, socio-cultural ideas, politico –economic practices of a community whose language has no cognate relationship with that language. The efforts made to arrive at any result will be approximation, assumption and speculation. This is because the linguistic elements of a language are imbued with meaning different from the other language. If “there is no natural” connection between a linguistic form and its meaning (Yule 21) in a language of a community, then, how can a language unrelated to this community be used to explain ideas in this community? It is therefore the Igbo Language spoken by the Igbo people, understood by the Igbo people and written by the Igbo people that can convincingly be employed in linguistic exercises of any type. It is therefore bizarre and an invitation to death of this language that the majority of the Igbo do not speak Igbo, discourage their children from speaking Igbo and feel uneasy at occasions Igbo is the language of transmission. Fromkin et al warn that “through its grammar, each language provides new evidence on the nature of human cognition. In its literature, poetry, ritual speech, and word structure, each language store the collective intellectual achievements of a culture, offering unique perspectives on the human condition. The disappearance of a language is tragic; not only are these insights lost, but the major medium through which a culture maintains and renews itself is gone as well” (526).

The question of lost identity of a people

The Igbo language enables the encoding, explanation and transmission of Igbo cultural norms which mark out the Igbo as separate from its neighbours. This cultural identity

infuses itself into Igbo names, whose forms are determined by language elements of sounds, letters and syllables, and whose meanings are given by the semantics of the Igbo language. Many names reflect oracular linkage, market connection, titular attainment, divine connection etc.

Oracular linkage

Nwa Ovia	-	A deity of a village in Awgu
Nwa Oviangwu	-	A deity of a village stream in Awgu
Alibuisi	-	Earth goddess (The earth is foremost)
Anichebe	-	Earth goddess (The earth protects, defends)
Nwaagbara	-	Gigantic Being (The child of this god)
Nwaali	-	Earth goddess (The child of the god)

Market day connection

Nworie, Mgborie, Okorie
Nwafor, Mgbafor, Okafor
Nwankwo, Mgbankwo, Okonkwo
Nweke, Mgbeke, Okeke

Titular attainment

Udeji, Uduji
Diji, Orijeji
Ogbuagu

Divine connection

Chukwundu, Chukwubike etc

These names interweaving with religious observances, economic observances, political observances as wealthy farmers and notable priests are leaders, and supreme – being reverencing to whom all other observances are subservient, are reflective of the cultural practices in Awgu and some other Igbo communities. *Omugwo* with its outdoor ceremony of completion and oracular fiestas have links with oracular thanksgiving, *Igbu ochu* and *ite ime* have connection with the sacredness of life as ordered by the supreme being controlling everything; *Iho/Ifo* and *igba nju di/nwunye* have prohibition of avoiding infesting community with undesirable elements; *Mgba* celebrates cravings for entertainment and honour which every village and worthy young men and women aspire for.

These practices in name – bearing, oracular worship and celebration, market days observation and economic attainment are identities exclusive to recognizing a tribe. Oracular worship is termed heathenism and paganism; names commemorating market days give bearers uncultured consideration; title-taking based on wealth from yam presents takers as spendthrifts, undeveloped about foreign needs and cultures. Consequent upon this, the Igbo nation is becoming culture empty, the Igbo tribe becoming a people without identity, and one can argue that a race is literally sustained by its language and when this language dies, a race literally dies. Giving credence to this, *Chukwu* in Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of philosophy vol. 3 2011 asserts:

The present distaste for speaking local languages, as experienced in many homes, at schools and in public social functions, is sounding the death knells of this indispensable initiator of cultural identity. “What happened to the black people of Kemet”, the traveler asked the old man”. “For legend had it that the people of Kemet were black. What happened” “Ah!” wailed the old man, they lost their history and they died”, (Emeagwalu 2003). History is about the political culture, the economic culture and the social culture of people projected through the linguistic and mnemonic devices as written records, oral traditions of the griots and artificial remains. Rejecting and/or discouraging these cultural identities makes one a ghost of a cultural livinr-dead, for one’s thinking and action will be controlled by foreign languages and mannerisms not adequately lost in one (29).

Conclusion

The Igbo culture, language and identity are endangered. Language is culture, as the form of a language given as meaning of an object in a cultural milieu is determined by tacit agreement of speakers of the language. Now that speakers of this language are adopting a different language for the opportunities not existing their first language, the consequence is death of the language and the culture. Hausa and Yoruba are media- transmission languages nationally and internationally. Yoruba and Hausa guard their languages expeditiously and so interviews are conducted in VOA and BBC services on these languages. Many Igbo people rival the West in the diction of English because the Igbo language does not inspire interest nor describe ideas to be successfully conveyed. The result is that predictions for its death in “2025, 2035 and 2050 form captions in newspapers. Fides newspaper, November 24 – 30, 2012 in bold headline writes, “Igbo Language, Culture: Going ... Going” on this dismal condition of this language” (Chukwu in eds Nnolim, Ezeigbo and Chuma – Udeh, 2012). Nostalgia governs few Igbo scholars who now clamour for possible resuscitation of this weakened language with its culture. These scholars recall the funs accompanying *Omugwo*, *Igba Mgba*, *Ozioku*, *igba nju di/nwunye*, *ihon/Ifo*, etc. It is believed that a cultural practice capable of surpassing the above named practices of the Igbo is yet to exist. The worst homesickness about this abandonment is that the few who still recall the operations of these observances will soon die out and genealogy will have dissevered from the Igbo. The death of the Igbo language and culture is the death of neighbourliness often encoded in *onye aghana nwanne ya*, *nwanne bu ike*, *nwanne di na mba*, *onuru ude nwanne agbana oso* and often names and events interwoven with market days to serve as dates for recollections of births and achievement. Musical instruments and flutes for dancing and wrestling have their languages only deciphered by members of the community: litanies of praises are reeled off. SOS is communicated and understood by those it is meant for; scathing lampoons successfully taunt whoever has brought disgrace upon a community. These languages of talking drums and instruments are no longer given attention as the instruments and instrumentalists have become historical artifacts for an epoch, and so exercising on this mundane task will earn one a flat character of a fiction who refuses to grow as the novel grows to a climax.

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