
Yoruba Language and Continuity in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Language is the vehicle upon which culture is transmitted. It ensures continuity and preservation of a culture. Hence when language is threatened the whole existence of such culture and society. Even the bible highlights the importance of language at the tower of babel. The Yoruba language is part of a group of language called the 'yoruboid' group, which emanated from central Africa and the people that speak this language reside largely in the south western part of Nigeria. Legends like Hubert Ogunde, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Oladoke Akintola, Kola Ogunmola, and many others were proud Yoruba orators, musicians and politicians who were not ashamed to convey their messages of hope and reformation in their mother-tongue, most of which shaped the Yoruba peoples existence. However, more recently, the society has witnessed a deliberate starvation of Yoruba literacy among the younger generations, which is gradually and consciously producing a 'shallow-minded generation' as value, morals, wisdom, knowledge and socio-cultural continuity of the Yoruba race and cultural literacy is fading into oblivion. This paper, therefore, concludes by emphasizing the essence, challenges of the Yoruba language and its role in preserving cultural continuity in our society.

Keywords: Language, culture, society, continuity

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1. AN OVERVIEW OF YORUBA LANGUAGE

Yoruba language is a language spoken in West Africa. The Yoruba language is mainly spoken in Benin and Nigeria with other pockets of Yoruba speaking communities around the world in places like the Americas and the Caribbean. The Yoruba language belongs to the *yoruboid* group of languages located in Upper Volta and the Niger Congo belt. The Yoruba language is spoken by over 40 million primary and secondary speakers of the language and many more millions in other parts of the world. This makes it the most widely spoken African language outside Africa.

The Yoruba language itself is classified into 5 distinct variations and distinctions.

They are;

- The North West Yoruba
Egba, Ibadan, Egbado/Yewa, Oyo, western Ogun, Lagos/Eko

- The North East Yoruba
Yagba, Owe, Ijumu, Oworo, Gbede, Abudu
- Central Yoruba
Igbomina, Ijesha, Ife, Ekiti, Akure, Efon
- South East Yoruba
Ikale, Ilaje, Ondo city, Owo, Idanre, Akoko, Remo, Ijebu
- South West Yoruba
Ketu, Awori, Sakete, Ife(Togo), Idashe, Ipokia/Anago

2. DEVELOPMENT OF YORUBA LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

The Yoruba people and language development in Nigeria can be traced categorically to three distinct periods in history. They are; the period of missionary control, the period of government participation and the period of government control (Ologunde, 1982). The period of missionary control highlights the moment in history when Christian missionaries targeted the Yoruba race for evangelism. These missionaries had to employ the services of indigenes to interpret and convey sermons and instructions in the Yoruba dialect. To further assist the propagation of their message, the missionaries seriously worked upon and studied the Yoruba language.

They introduced the writing and intonation of Yoruba language. This was done by a concert of International scholars from Britain, Germany, Denmark, America, Italy, as well as Africa. (Ade Ajayi, 1960) Some of these remarkable Africans that took part in the project include Bishop Ajayi Crowther, Rev. Thomas King, T.B Macaulay, amongst others (Adeniran, 2015). The missionaries believed that communication through their indigenous language was the surest way to convert the Yoruba. Thus, essentially educational policies and religious messages and other activities were transmitted and recorded using the Yoruba language. This shows that the local dialect played a pivotal role in the educational sector of Nigeria. This was one of the major high points of Yoruba language in Nigerian education. (Ologunde, 1982).

The second stage, the period of government participation. During this period, Nigerian Yoruba elites had travelled out of Nigeria to Britain and other parts of Europe to further their education and brush up their fluency in English. On their return, they occupied clerical and court interpreters positions in which, in most cases, necessitated them to speak English. This period exalted English language, providing it with a front of privilege within the colonial administration while grossly undermining the Yoruba language. Till date, the Yoruba language is yet to recover from the outright alienation and denial it experienced during this period.

The last period between the 1950's and the 1980's was a period of indigenous government control. First, was the creation of the mid-western region, which tried to reintroduce the use of Yoruba language in polity, education and governance, Forming political affiliations along such lines as the egbe omo oduduwa and the action group government. They embarked on vigorous educational policies aimed at reintegrating the Yoruba language in education.

The second phase of the period was the 1980's when scholars emerged and began to script Yoruba literature while other patriotic Nigerians also integrated it in other social strata's, all in a bid to recover what we may refer to as 'a lost glory' of the Yoruba language and culture. Till date, the Yoruba language has continued to suffer a downward trend towards a total degeneration of the language. Presently, concern is not only emphasized on the pedagogical aspect of the language, but rather, the spirit associated with the very essence of the language. The values, norms and morals associated with the transmission of the language are equally eroded. Earlier generations to this time would recall, with fond memories and nostalgia, the periods set aside in elementary school to read comprehensive passages and sing folklore songs and lyrical poems, proverbs and idioms that define the value system of the Yoruba race.

Fondly remembered are
Ise l'ogun ise
Hardwork is the antidote of poverty

Owuro l'ojo eni maa ri ire
One must begin early to end well

Bi ina o ba tan l'aso, eje ko lee tan l'ee kan'a
Until the cloth is rid of lice, the fingernail will ever remain bloodstained

Also captured is this lovely poem that goes thus;
Kini no f'ole se la ye ti mo wa?
Laye ti mo wa, k aka ki n'jale
Ka ka ki n'jale, ma kuku d'eru

Interpretation
What shall I do with stealing in this life?
In this life, instead of stealing
Instead of stealing, I'd rather become a slave. (adego, 2008)

All the first excerpts above centre on the Yoruba perception or hard work. While the second poem condemns stealing as a social vice, even exalting slavery over stealing. Also, different greeting styles for virtually every situation one finds him/herself in, is another major uniqueness of the Yoruba language. Such dynamics and exposures enlighten one to be aware that no one is an island. Our survival and happiness is of mutual importance to all as we are all closely knitted, directly or indirectly. These are just some of the elements that language and cultural imperialism has eroded in the 21st century children and youth.

3. ATTITUDE OF THE NATIVE YORUBA LANGUAGE SPEAKERS IN THE 21ST CENTURY.

In recent years, through the 20th and 21st centuries, it has been observed that the attitude of the Yoruba people to the language has been largely negative. This negativity spans from the reluctance to speak or identify with the language, to the outright dilution of the language with other foreign languages (Adeniran, 2015). The ratio of youths that can neither speak nor write the language in the 21st century far outweigh those who can. Awobuluyi (2014) has carefully observed the situation as one that is fearful when one sees the sophistication and prestige the western educated Yoruba feels when he/she speaks eloquent English, while only speaking the Yoruba language in the corners of their homes and they even insist their wards be taught in English language from the elementary school to the tertiary level.

Some western educated people claim that recent scientific and technical concepts are quite difficult to express in the local Yoruba language, forgetting the fact that all languages go through phases to reach the heights they have achieved. English and French languages are no exceptions to this. While there are claims that there is nothing that was done to the English and French languages that has made them proficient that has not been done to the Yoruba language, it still lacks a major ingredient, which is the sense of pride the former have in their respective languages. This is lacking in the Yoruba language and that is what makes it an endangered language.

3.1 Efforts Made Towards Promoting the Use of Yoruba Language.

Since the late 1940's and early 1950's when it was discovered that an erosion of the Yoruba language was beginning, there were certain conscious and calculated efforts, made by some Yoruba elites, especially those in control of the then south western region to revitalize the use of Yoruba in all strata of life of the society.

For instance, in 1959, a conference of authors in Nigerian languages was held in Ibadan and recommendations reached at the gathering include;

1. Teaching of Yoruba language even to the tertiary level of education
2. Yoruba language should also be included in primary school curriculum
3. Try to adapt some foreign words seen as infiltrating the Yoruba language to further enhance the language.

Furthermore, the state minister of education in 1965, chief N.A. Ajibola, expressed his concern on the way the psychic of the people had been reformatted to think they could not carry out their economic and other businesses in their vernacular languages, a notion he intended to correct. In essence, Yoruba elites in the 1960's up till the 1980's made conscious efforts at the development of the language. The military intervention in government also contributed to the slow pace of the development of Yoruba language but did not halt the process. Efforts were made institutionally and individually towards its growth. One of such was the Ife six-year primary project at the university of ife headed by prof. Babs Fafunwa. Another effort was also made by the egbe ijinle Yoruba. (Adeniran, 2015)

4. PROBLEMS FACING YORUBA LANGUAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The problems facing Yoruba language and its continuity are multifaceted and when a problem persists, it is because its solution is not yet in sight. The campaign on the reintegration of Yoruba language and culture over the years has been incessant, yet the posterity of the language is still being threatened. Could it be that we have been treating a headache with medication for stomach upset. So much emphasis has been laid on Yoruba education and literacy without much attention to the larger local communities and the people of a fact, it is important to develop orthographic and lexical gymnastics for the language, however what of the larger masses who are not privileged to belong to the 'academia' or the literate world. There is an obvious divide between the classes of people within the society and this has crept into the survival of the language. Other means through which the Yoruba language can be easily propagated are not given much attention. Religion, according to Marx, is a sign of the oppressed and an opium of the people. This is an avenue where class division hardly manifests, which would present a viable front for the promotion of the Yoruba language, especially in Yoruba speaking regions of the country. However, it is commonly seen, that most churches would rather communicate their message in English language, even when 90% of the audience are Yoruba speaking people and in exceptional cases, they may interpret what is being preached into Yoruba. Although it may be argued that some of the audience may not be Yoruba, but it would be more patriotic if the message was presented in Yoruba, and then translated to English. (Adego, 2008)

Furthermore, the media is not helping matters. The media may promote societal decay, human trafficking, child abuse, and even made in Nigeria goods, but little or no emphasis is laid on taking pride in learning and speaking the indigenous language. Even when the news is cast, it is only interpreted to Yoruba language after it has been first presented in English and even then, a lot of contextual alterations would have been made because they believe the rural dwellers do not need the details and technicalities in the English version. (Adego, 2008)

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Although it cannot be over ruled that there is a consciousness permeating the entertainment industry about the importance and value of culture and by extension, language by artistes, which is reflective in the use of Yoruba language, adages and idioms to sing by musicians such as Nice, Davido and other spheres of entertainment, its promotion is still far-fetched. The respect and recognition given to other indigenous languages all over the world should be emulated and all and sundry. Policy makers, educators, parents, religious leaders, media avenues, community leaders and members - must understand that for Yoruba language to survive, there must be deliberate concerted effort by all, at home, school, church, social gatherings, communities channeled in our various affiliations to ensure sensitization, in theory and practice, of the imminent danger facing the Yoruba language and the need to champion its survival to ensure its continuity in the 21st century and beyond...

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