

SOCIO-LINGUISTIC INQUIRY ON OKOROSHI LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Organizations, institutions, groups, and individuals often use specific languages that are peculiar to their group or sect. People outside these groups may find it difficult to understand such specialized language. Language, in turn, is an important aspect of a group's culture. This study set out to analyze the Okoroshi language of the Agwa clan in Imo State, Nigeria, and its impact on members of the Okoroshi cult. The objectives of the study include identifying the unique language used by the Okoroshi of the Agwa clan and examining the reasons for its use by the Okoroshi masquerade. The researchers also explored the challenges associated with the restricted nature of the language, which makes it inaccessible to the general public. Historical and case study research designs were employed, and existing reports on the Okoroshi language were randomly examined. Findings revealed that, despite a decline in its use in recent times, there remains a strong need to preserve this vital aspect of the people's cultural heritage, particularly in the face of cultural extinction. It was also observed that efforts should be made to revive and modernize this aspect of Agwa culture in the 21st century. Therefore, it is recommended that the Okoroshi language be promoted and made more accessible, not only to members of the cult but also to the wider community, as part of the people's linguistic and cultural identity.

Keywords: Agwa; culture; language; Okoroshi; sociolinguistics.

Introduction

The relationship between language and an organization or community lies in its ability to promote and preserve culture. As such, communities and societies often develop and use a specific language understood only by their members. The Okoroshi language is part of the cultural heritage of the Agwa people. No society exists or survives without a distinct culture (Asuoha, 2017, p. 25). Language is also an integral part of culture. As Adekunle (1990) stated, "There is no doubt, however, that there is a correlation between the form and content of language and the beliefs, values, and needs present in the culture of its speakers. The vocabulary of a language provides us with a catalogue of things important to the society." This assertion suggests that language offers deep insights into a particular society's cultural beliefs, philosophies, and values.

Language is used by different groups and societies for communication. Sapir (1921) defined language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols," implying that there are also non-verbal forms of communication which may be regarded as types of language. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1986) defined language as "the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words, words combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts." This definition presents language as a medium for expressing thought. Similarly, Bloch and Trager (1942) noted that "language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social

group cooperates,” suggesting that language plays a vital social function. Otagburuagu (2003) described language as a verbal means of communication, and Hall defined it as “the institution where humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols,” implying that only humans can use language. Noam Chomsky (1957) added that “language is a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a limited set of elements.”

Language and human existence could not be separated. None could exist without each other. Hence, Udemmadu (2013) agrees that language is part and parcel of the social man and his many varied interests, aspirations and activities. Language has therefore adopted to the social-cultural context in order to serve the society. This demonstrates the fact that the cultural background of a people or group of is so intertwined with the basics of the existence. Language practice in any cultural content is to mark among other things the system of usage. Hence, the use of language cuts across all facts of human life.

Language influences people and affects their behavior and feelings. Okonkwo (1989) agreed that language is a powerful influence over people's minds, feelings, and reasoning, and a potent factor in the development of group solidarity. He argued that the most commonly shared property among all members of a society, regardless of status, class, or religion, is language. It is a taken-for-granted instrument of communication in society. Each culture, therefore, develops a particular language that is commonly shared by its members and may differ from the language of even its closest neighbors.

Statement of the Problem

Okoroshi is spoken only by the initiated members of the Okoroshi language. At present, only the initiated men could speak Okoroshi group when they put Okoroshi mask and come out to the people. When Okoroshi masquerade speaks, only the elderly and those initiated could understand the language and respond.

Unagha (2004) note that only men are usually initiated into the Good, Okoroshi is a cult with its own coded expressions. These restricted expressions are instances of language use. This does not make Okoroshi communication a distinct language (Owu cult). This initiation is called “*I du mmiri in Agwu language*.” The men wear the mask of the Okoroshi before they are allowed to practice. Before that they must have performed what is called “*Mmi Ama*.” This is between the ages of 20-25 years.

Therefore, this study intends to address the following questions: Why is Okoroshi festival practiced by the men alone? Why is it that women are forbidden in the night during the period of Okoroshi? Why is it important for the men to be initiated before they practice Okoroshi? Why do the practitioners cover all their parts of body? Why is the language of Okoroshi not spoken and understood by only the initiated and not everybody? This The language of Okoroshi is spoken and understood only by the initiated because it serves as a sacred or secret code that preserves the cultural, religious, and mystical integrity of the masquerade tradition.

This specialized language, often symbolic or coded, is deliberately restricted to the initiated members to maintain the secrecy, authority, and spiritual power of the Okoroshi cult. It creates a

boundary between the sacred and the ordinary, ensuring that only those who have undergone the proper rites, training, and acceptance into the group can fully comprehend and participate in its rituals. This exclusivity also reinforces respect, fear, and reverence among non-initiates, helping to sustain the cultural significance and mystery of the Okoroshi performance within the community.

Objectives of the Study

This study is aimed at analysing Okoroshi language use in Agwa Clan and its importance in the promotion of indigenous language of Agwa Clan. Hence, the objectives of the study are to:

1. What are the various languages spoken by Okoroshi masquerade in Agwa?
2. What are the reasons Okoroshi language in Agwa differs from that of the entire community?
3. What is the purpose for harmonizing or merging Okoroshi language with the community language?
4. What are the challenges hindering the merge of Okoroshi language with Agwu language?

Brief History of Agwa Community

Agwa community is one of the communities in the present Oguta Local Government of Imo State. According to Unagha (2004), Agwa descended from an ancestor named Agwa. Agwa is believed to have migrated from Ihi-Agwa in the present day Owerri West Local Government Area of Imo State. Agwa was the first son of his parents with Ihi and Neke as his younger siblings. They lived peaceful with their parents until a sharp disagreement arose among the sons of Agwa over allocation of their fathers' farmland. When the dispute was not amicably settled the two sons of Agwa (Akuma and Ahii) left their homeland to settle at the present Agwa land. Akuma was the first to migrate and settled at Agwa. Later, Ahil followed suit and also settled in the same Agwa land, although with a little distance from where his brother Akuma settled earlier.

Apart from this two migrants, there were also other settlers from Ihiagwa too according to Unagha (2004). The third son of Agwa later joined them to settle at another place called Umuekpu. His name was Ezekpu. Later a man was discovered by Akuma whom he discovered settled at Mgbala. His name was Mkpokirikpo, who was believed to have migrated from Egbeme in the present Ohaji/Egbeme Local Government of Imo State. Later Ofeke was discovered by a crowd of Ahii people which is the present Obudi community in Agwa. His descendant is the present Umuofeke community in Agwa. The sixth community was Obeama, Akuma discovered him while he was sweeping his compound. He was said to have migrated from Mgbolo in the present Owerri west community. Later Mkpo, was discovered by Akum, a descendant while him Mkpo was collecting sticks for his yam. He was said to have migrated from Amafor. His descendants are the present Umukpo community. The next community was Umuonu. Some Umuekpu people were collecting leaves of "etere" for their wives and the discovered a man licking the fruits of 'etere'. They called him 'onu-fruit' meaning 'one who licks fruits his descendants are the present umonu community also in Agwa'. He was said to have migrated from Awara Ohaji in the present Ohaji/Egbema community of Imo State.

The last community to settle to Agwa was Uba community, they were said to have migrated from Uba-Chima in Awo-omamma in the present Oru West local government of Imo state. The Aro Agwa community makes up the tenth community in Agwa. Their settlement at Agwa was a result of the Aro expectation when the British colonists destroyed the long juju of Arochukwu in 1902.

Agwa therefore is made up of nine communities while Aro community made tenth community. Hence, we have the following communities in Agwa in order of settlement, Obeakuma, Obudi, Umuekpu, Mgbala, Umuofeke, Obeama, Umukpo, Umuomi, Uba and Aro.

Methodology

The study combined historical and descriptive research designs. The historical aspect focused on exploring the origins and development of Agwa and Okoroshi using both oral traditions and published books, while the descriptive aspect aimed to capture and present findings in a clear, narrative form. The population of the study consisted of individuals with knowledge of Agwa and Okoroshi traditions, as well as relevant published literature. A purposive sampling technique was used to select knowledgeable informants and relevant texts. Data were collected through oral interviews and library research, and were analyzed qualitatively and presented in a straightforward narrative format.

Data Presentation

RQI: What are the various languages spoken by Okoroshi masquerade in Agwa?

Language and sociolinguistics have established the language use to identify with the cultural way of different societies and communities Adegbija (2014). Agreed that sociolinguistics help to understand the importance of inter-cultural and cross linguistic communication. Ohamaere, Onwusonye and Egwim (2019) also agreed that the concept of sociolinguistic is the ability of individuals and groups to acquire the knowledge of his/their environment or the society through a peculiar language) in the society.

Okoroshi language is spoken by the initiated Okoroshi cults during the celebration of Owu festival. In Agwu some of those specific languages include the following:

Table 1: Languages Spoken by Okoroshi Masquerade

Mba Oru	The general public
Akwara Kunyi	Money
Gubute akwara kunyi	Okoroshi is asking somebody to bring money or give him money
Mba oru, unu-ana ekele	Okoroshi is complaining here to the people when somebody is attempting to undermine or infringe on his right.
Ala grootu	This is what Okoroshi call women it means women.
Nna mirikom	This is Okoroshi language for friend or my friend
Ala grootu obiela oo	This is spoken by Okoroshi the night that would end the one month of their celebration.
Nna e nnae	This is the Okoroshi language for elderly men or titleholders. it also refers to the various Owu serves in different kindred's. It means 'father'.
I gu burule	Okoroshi is telling somebody that the person has desecrated Okoroshi or he has violated Okoroshi laws. Okoroshi says it when one unmasks him or tear his shirt, trouser or beat him.

Ala grootie Aguburule	Okoroshi is saying that a woman has desecrated or violated the owu law.
Aya ala	Do not say anything. Okoroshi is telling somebody not to say anything but to comply by giving him money or anything else.
Nwataaka or Umutaaka	This means child or children are to many. Okoroshi says this when he sees too many children surrounding an elderly man for safety of not beaten by Okoroshi
I shi oberime ole?	Okoroshi is asking somebody or a visitor where he is coming from
Daba kwa na udurukuku	Literarily, Okoroshi is telling somebody to fall into a river. it is the language Okoroshi was to curse people.
Okomoko	Meaning Thank you in Okoroshi language.
Odekiri	Teacher
Odekirikirikem	My teacher
Nna miri iko	My friend
Ozem ezele oghom oghola	No evil will be fall upon you
Nwune oma	My good brother

RQ2: What are the reasons Okoroshi language in Agwa differs from that of the entire community?

The earlier attempts establish the fact that there are 10 (ten) community language spoken by everybody in the community as first language. Inside the community, there are artificial unions which members entered into at their freewill (Ohamaeme, et al., 2019). The gift of language is the single human trait that marks us all, genetically setting us apart from the rest of life. Language is like language according to him is like nest building or hive making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We cannot be humans without it. This is time with Agwa community. As an Igbo community, the people speak Igbo language, though with slight dialectical differences. It is the mother tongue of all Agwa indigenes. Okoroshi masquerade or cult is an artificial union or society in Agwa community. Only the initiated are introduced with the Okoroshi language. Non-members or non-initiated owned not speak or understand their language. One learns the language at initiation, hence, the difference between the Agwa community language and Okoroshi language.

RQ3: What is the purpose for harmonizing or merging Okoroshi language with the community language?

In a larger community, there is a language of LI (ie the mother-tongue). This language is spoken by everybody in the large community. Okoroshi, being a cult and artificial union which exists amongst other in Agwa speaks their language too. Other artificial unions too such as age-grades, women unions etc. speak their language too.

However, to harmonize the community language with Okoroshi language would require a consensus between the “onye ishi owu” (the Chief Priest of Okoroshi) and the traditional milers of Agwa Clan. The two languages could be blended if agreement is reached while still preserving the owu cult.

RQ4: What are the challenges hindering the merge of Okoroshi language with Agwu language?

Agwu community is socio-political community recognized in Imo state and Nigeria. As an Igbo community, the language spoken is Igbo language. It is an open community and exists openly and freely, using their language. Okoroshi is not a free society. Its membership is not open. Christians who are genuinely born again could not be members of the cult. It is practiced in utmost secretly. One could not teach his children the language of Okoroshi that would mean initiation. Non-imitated members or the society are fined when they violate Okoroshi values system or practice. Genuine Christians cannot carry fowl, yam tubers, kolanuts, palm wine to be members of Okoroshi and speak their language.

Discussion of Findings

Okoroshi is a cult union in Agwa community. It has a particular language which is not open to the general public. Research question one has some languages spoken by the practitioners which could only be understood by members. On whether the Okoroshi language differs from the community's language, research question two answered it. Every society, group, organization has a reserved language which could only be understood by the members. Whether the Okoroshi language could be integrated with the community's language, research question three proved its case. It could be merged when appropriate procedures are followed and dialogue and compromise reached. However, there are challenges to this as Christians would reject Okoroshi language because it is fetish. This answered question number four.

Conclusion and Recommendations

We conclude by stating that the study discovered Okoroshi language. Also the authors agreed that Okoroshi language differs from the community language. The differences could be harmonized with the community general language or mother-tongue. However, the challenge faced by this is that while Okoroshi and its language is fetish in practice, Christians could not speak such language as they would term it satanic.

Therefore, we recommend as follows:

1. That Okoroshi cult should be period of fetish practices to allow everybody to speak the language.
2. That there should be a summit or conference of Agwa indigenes to dialogue and come out with guidelines on merging the Okoroshi language with Agwa language.
3. That Okoroshi language should be intergrated into Agwa language and be spoken by everybody.
4. That Agwa language should develop its orthography which would bring it with the general Igbo orthography. This will make the community's language generally accepted by everybody in Agwa and beyond.

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