

Review Article

PRESERVATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY THROUGH VERNACULAR RADIO BROADCASTING

Abstract

This paper focuses on the role of vernacular radio in the preservation of indigenous culture and language. It is anchored on the position of the United Nations that mother-language is not just a means of communication, but also a carrier of the core values and identity of a people. Consequently, the discourse investigated how radio could be used to revive and promote the language and cultural identity of the Ikwerre people as a distinct ethnic nationality in Nigeria. It adopted the survey research design. The population was 1,390,895 people from the Ikwerre speaking ethnic nationality and a sample size of 400 was derived using the Taro Yamane formula. The study concludes that the Igbo language hegemony in Ikwerre land and in other parts of Rivers State was as a result of political dominance of the Igbo ethnic group when Rivers State was part of the Eastern Nigeria region.

Key words: Vernacular radio, cultural preservation, indigenous identity, ethnic nationality, language

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Vernacular As A Mark of Ethnic Identity

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines vernacular as a language or dialect that is native to a region or country. It is also called the mother-tongue. The vernacular or the mother-tongue as a mark of a people's tangible heritage is highlighted by the United Nations which set aside February 21 every year for a global commemoration of the International Mother Language Day. The position of the United Nations may have informed the decision of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA), and other international broadcasters to introduce vernacular language broadcast services. The BBC, VOA, or the other broadcasters did

not just introduce programming in vernacular because they wanted more market value of the broadcasting business, but as a deliberate effort aimed at reaching out to large population of native speakers who are not served by their English service programmes. The innovation was aimed at offering a platform for in-depth reporting and for such underserved people to tell their stories in their own vernacular. The action is in line with Orao (2009) that vernacular mass medium has great influence on the local people and their participation in public domain, prompting Okpoko (2010) position that the media should focus on rural programming so as to preserve indigenous cultural heritage, identity and pride.

In the light of this, radio is often regarded as the best medium of mass communication that can help to preserve people's culture, as well as serve as a channel of information dissemination and enlightenment. Freedom House (2012) affirms that radio is the dominant and best medium for taking development education to the teeming population of Nigerians because of its impact and immediacy, while Asemah (2011) asserts that of all the mass media available to Africans, radio is the most widespread and accessible, as well as the most effective medium because of variety of programming.

As a result, studies by these and other scholars have contributed to increased advocacy for the establishment of vernacular radio stations for the purposes of enlightenment, public education, and preservation of cultural identity (Orao, 2009; Okpoko, 2010; Asemah, 2011).

1.2 The Problem

The motivation for this paper was drawn from two articles that portrayed Ikwerre people as an annex of Igbo. One of the articles was written by Nigeria's globally acclaimed writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which she titled "We Remember Differently"; in honour of one of Nigeria's foremost novelist, Chinua Achebe, when he marked his 82nd birthday anniversary. The

article was published by Sahara reporters on November 24, 2012. The two outstanding issues she raised in her article were the abandoned property issue, which she claimed has remained unresolved, and the creation of 'Rumu' from 'Umu' to change Igbo names in Port Harcourt after the civil war.

The other was written by Charles Ugwuanyi, a Lagos based lawyer, and captioned "Ojukwu: Biafra and the 'Abandoned Properties' Question (2)", published on March 8, 2012 by PMnewsnigeria.com. In the article, the author claimed that a meaningless 'r' prefix was added to some streets and areas in Port Harcourt to distort and obfuscate the Igbo in them. He further stated that the action to deprive the Igbo people of their rightful property made them to leave Port Harcourt for Lagos, and that the decision to leave the place has "adversely affected the growth of Port Harcourt as a metropolis to date." His submission reaffirmed claims by Chimamanda Adichie that 'Rumu' were created from 'Umu' to change Igbo names in Port Harcourt after the civil war. These are just few of the many written and verbal claims on the ownership of Port Harcourt by Igbo people.

Clearly, Adichie's position as highlighted in that publication, is what the erudite writer herself calls "the danger of a single story." Adichie, in a Tedglobal (2009) video, points out, and rightly too, that single stories could have malicious intent to suppress other groups of people. She further affirmed that the simplest way to dispose a people of their identity is to tell their story. From her submission, therefore, there is no doubt that the narratives of the identity of the Ikwerre people which are mostly told by notable Igbo voices was intentionally skewed to favour them. Regrettably, while the authors were concerned about 'abandoned properties' and "distortion of Igbo names in Port Harcourt", they were silent on the subjugation of Ikwerre ethnic nationality when the place was part of Eastern Nigeria administrative region.

This is important when placed side by side with claims by other minority groups in the then Eastern Nigeria that the fear of further suppression in an Igbo controlled nation contributed to the fall of Biafra. Therefore, it is also important to consider these two questions in the context of the above assertion. Firstly, could it not have been possible that the Igbo public office holders used the period when they held sway in the area that later became the Eastern Nigeria region to name the streets in Port Harcourt after themselves or their communities? Secondly, could it not have been possible that the “properties” in question were acquired from the natives through the powers of the state in a manner that did not follow due process? Recall that within this period, the colonial police was engaged in what Idowu (2013) calls brutal subjugation of communities and the suppression of resistance. These questions are pertinent in view of the fact that within this period, elite Igbo men occupied strategic positions in the area, notable among whom was Richard Nzimiro, who was the mayor of Port Harcourt in 1956.

Thus, in the light of the assertions by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Charles Ugwuanyi, one can rightly say that the recurring disruption of social and economic activities in Port Harcourt by members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as indicated in the January 20, 2017, September 15, 2017, and October 21, 2020 disturbances, could be linked to claims by the Igbo that Port Harcourt, and other upland areas in Rivers State is Igbo land. Hence, this study adopts the position of Nwuneli (1985) that the indigenous language is the most appropriate for the revival of the language and cultural identity of the native speakers. Accordingly, this study seeks to foreground the role a vernacular radio station could play in changing the one-sided and misleading narrative on the Ikwerre ethnic nationality.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study sought to achieve the following objectives;

1. To establish whether vernacular radio broadcasting can be used to restore the loss of cultural identity of the Ikwerre people.
2. To determine whether the Ikwerre ethnic group has the capacity to build and sustain a vernacular radio station.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the **Development Media Theory**. This theory was propounded by Denis McQuail in 1987. The theory holds that the media should be used for development and advancement of the lives of people in any nation they are present, the development media theory advocates for the media to be used to champion social change in every society.

In a bid to use the media to bridge the existing gap between first and third world countries, Development media theory emerged. The theory became significantly known and acknowledged for its use in the developing and under developed countries all over the world. Development media theory was intended to recognize the fact that societies undergoing a transition from underdevelopment to development and better material conditions often lack the infrastructure, the money, the professional skills and even the information needed to make the transition from underdeveloped to develop, hence the need for the media to contribute significantly to the development of such societies.

This idea promotes the use of media and communication to enhance a current political system's attempts to achieve overall national economic development. The media helps society as a whole by supporting government development efforts. This idea contends that until a country is well-established and its economic progress is well-established, media and communication must be supportive of the government rather than critical. Journalists should not criticize government

initiatives to promote growth; instead, they should support the government in putting such policies in place.

This theory is relevant to this study because with the establishment and maintenance of vernacular radio will serve as a guarantee for the preservation of a people's culture and identity.

3.1 The Igbo Language Hegemony in Ikwerre Land

There are abundant literatures on why the Igbo language is widely spoken among Ikwerre people. Ofonagoro (1979); Wahua (1992); Amadi (2003); Agumagu (2006); and Izeoma (2017) have written extensively on the influence of the Aro and their trading activities, highlighting how some of the Aro migrants even ascended to strategic political offices in Ikwerre land during the colonial administration. Prominent among whom were Nwaocha Amefula and Osondu Oyo who were appointed Warrant Chiefs in Isiokpo. There are equally verifiable migrant settlements of the Aro people in different communities in Ikwerre land.

As noted in Nwokeji (2010), the expansion of the Aro diaspora as a result of the expanding overseas slave trade affected the geo-cultural landscape of the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra. Again, the expansion of the Igbo metal industry which produced hoes, cutlasses, guns, and metal traps in the 19th century caused the Igbo smiths to travel from the South-Eastern hinterlands to other areas to reach their customers, including Ikwerre land. In most cases, these migrants were offered free accommodation in exchange for working in the farms of their hosts on a specific day of the week. The hospitable disposition of the Ikwerre people equally encouraged inter-tribal marriage, just as Ikwerre land became a safe haven for those who were fleeing the dehumanising and traumatising practices of the Osu caste system which still remains an issue of concern in Igbo communities till date. So, the ethno-linguistic similarity between Ikwerre and Igbo is traced

to these activities; the receptive and hospitable nature of the Ikwerre people; as well as close relationship of trade.

However, the most outstanding factor that gave Igbo language dominance in the upland areas of Rivers State was the role of the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) in the Niger Delta territory. Oraka (1993) notes that Isuama Igbo; a type of Igbo dialect spoken among returnee Igbo slaves from Sierra-Leone, was introduced in the Niger Delta territory by the CMS in order to ease communication difficulties between the natives and the strangers. The controversy generated by this choice instigated T.J. Dennis, a superintendent of the CMS Southern Ibo Mission, to introduce "Union Ibo", a combination of various Ibo dialects, especially Isuama and Onitsha in 1905; resulting to the Union Bible Nso, which was vehemently rejected for causing great damage to Igbo language. The resentment for that Union Bible Nso was noticeably conveyed at the 1999 Odenigbo lecture titled "Tomorrow is uncertain, today is soon enough" (Oraka, 1993). But as noted by Bishop Johnson in 1906, the native Christians did not understand, like, or enjoy the language, but simply tolerated it, as he emphasized that the rejection caused a major hindrance to the spread of the gospel. Most illuminating, was the observation by Herbert Tugwell of the Christian Missionary Society as captured in Tasie (1978), that the natives could not understand the Union Ibo Bible translation because the language was strange to them. As would be expected, those who were keen on acquiring education were compelled to accept the language since it was the only medium of communication. This situation was made worse by the enactment of the education ordinance and code of 1926 by the colonial British administration which recommended the study of vernacular in schools.

The above claim was corroborated by five respondents in this study who narrated how some parents withdrew their children from school and stopped them from participating in all church

activities because they were forced to learn “Isoma” language. They further explained that in most cases, the teachers also modified the pronunciation of the native names of the pupils to Igbo names since they could not pronounce them in the native’s tongue. Recall that “Isoma” is a term the Ikwerre address Igbo people; and was coined from the Isuama Ibo that was originally introduced by the missionaries.

Odili (2014) observes further that most of the Igbo converts who served as interpreters and teachers in the local mission schools and churches in the Niger Delta area were poorly educated in the English language, so the only option was to use the Igbo language in all the activities of the church even though most of the natives resented it. Thus, Tieze and Dick (2012) submit that when a dominant group successfully projects its language and cultural values, the dominated group internalises the norms even when it is not necessarily in their interest. This is the case in the Ikwerre/Igbo situation; the British colonial imperialists and the dominance of English in the world; the imposition of Spanish on the Catalan people; and in colonial Ireland where the indigenous Irish language was systematically suppressed and even banned in schools for most of the nineteenth century. It is the same everywhere in the world on how dominant languages assume dominance. More so, the works of Wiley (2000), Suarez (2002), and David (2003) on linguistic hegemony further explain how dominant groups or nations adopt systematic intension to coerce minority people to a state of linguistic subordination and cultural inferiority. Other scholars like Kaplan (1993) and Phillipson cited in Mustapha (2014) have also written extensively on how language is used as basis for social and political acceptance, and as a weapon of linguistic domination of multilingual or multicultural communities. This is applicable to the position of Rivers State as explained in Afiesimama cited in Kari (2019) that as a multilinguistic state, Rivers State has no single indigenous language that can be used to address the people. It

therefore means that the Igbo people took advantage of this situation to force their language on the people of Rivers State, most especially, the Ikwerre people who were more hospitable than the other ethnic nationalities in the region. Williamson (1973) concisely asserts that based on lexicostatistical analysis Ikwerre, Ekpeye, Ogba, Etche and Igbo belong to the "the lower Niger group of languages", emphasising that although the languages may be Igboid, but are certainly not dialects of one another.

More instructive is the position of Ifyede (2019) that the language spoken by the Ikwerre people of Rivers State has metamorphosed into full-fledged language distinct from Igbo and is addressed as such by the Nigerian constitution. So, with the above facts presented in this study, the Igbo language hegemony in Rivers State was as a result of political dominance of the Igbo ethnic group before and during the British colonial administration, and after the early years of Nigeria's independence. This study has also established that "Isoma", as the Ikwerre people call Igbo people, is in connection to the "Isuama" Igbo dialect, and signifies strangeness and resentment for the language.

3.2 The Scramble for Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt played a prominent economic role during the colonial administration and during the administration of the area as part of Eastern Nigeria. Braimah (2020) and Mckenna (n.d) state that until 1912, the area that later became Port Harcourt comprised of fishing settlements of the Ijaw and the farmlands of the Diobu people of the Ikwerre ethnicity. The port was constructed by Frederick Lugard to export coal from the mines of Enugu which was located 243 kilometres north of Port Harcourt through the Eastern Railway line built by the British. It was named Port Harcourt after colonial secretary Lewis Harcourt a year after the rail link to the Enugu coalfields was opened in 1916. Their reports showed that the port had facilities to handle the export of palm

oil, palm kernels, and timber from areas around the Niger Delta, coal from Enugu, tin and columbite from the Jos Plateau, and, later in 1958, petroleum from fields in the eastern Niger River delta. It is worthy to mention here that Igbo traders were the prominent merchants during that era, up until the Nigeria/Biafra civil war.

Therefore, this active engagement in most of the economic activities in Port Harcourt is also another reason why the Igbos' claim ownership of the place. Luckily, history is clear about the acquisition of the land on which the port was built. But most importantly, is the fact that as importers of large containers of goods, a political hold on Port Harcourt will create an unfettered transit route for their containers should the agitation for Biafra nation become a reality. It is worthy to mention that if the Biafran nation is achieved, Biafra will be a land locked nation surrounded by the nation it broke away from, and this will mean paying heavy international tariffs to have their goods transported to their destinations across the towns of Rivers, Bayelsa, and Delta States which will all be in another country. Hence, the persistent claim on Port Harcourt.

Moreover, Knoema.com (2016) puts the population of the five states of the South-East at over 21 million, making the region more populated than Belgium. With a population of over sixteen million; a land mass about the size of Belgium, and Ebonyi State, with the least population of about 2,880,383 far larger than the population of Cape Verde, Malta and Belize put together; well-developed industrial clusters in Aba, Newi, Onitsha, and Abakeliki; highly innovative made-in-Nigeria products; an international airport; undisputable number of human resources cutting across all sectors of the economy in different countries of the world; as well as other enviable qualities that favour development, the south east has all it takes to be an independent nation.

In addition, Ekekwe (2021) notes that the Igbo apprenticeship system has been recognized by the Harvard Business Review as the largest business incubator in the world, and this is another confirmation of the ingenuity and resilience of the Igbo. Therefore, these extraordinary qualities qualify the Igbo to become an autonomous nation without coercing Rivers State, or any other state in the south-south.

3.3 The Importance of Vernacular Radio in the Preservation of Ethnic Identity

From its inception in Nigeria in 1932, radio has become a prime medium of information dissemination and mass education. This could be why international organizations like World Health Organization; United States Agency International Development; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund; Department for International Development; Food And Organization amongst others recognize the power of radio in the world, while Myers (2008) asserts that an outstanding aspect of radio in Africa is its capacity to broadcast in Standard English, Pidgin English, and in local languages. Meyer's position is in tandem with the submissions of communication scholars and advocacy groups for the establishment of vernacular radio stations.

Furthermore, the positions of Eyoh (1986), Nwuneli (1986), Salawu (1993) all lend credence to the fact that there are plenty studies that support that people understand information better in their indigenous languages than in any foreign language. Consequently, McNamara (1965); Klein (1994); and Lockett (1994), have equally established beyond doubt that vernacular still remains the best language for social interaction. Obviously, the fundamental role of language in communication cannot be over-emphasized.

In this regard, radio gives a voice to those who cannot speak the English language, thereby enabling them to participate in the discussion of matters that concern them through vernacular

programming. This relevance was highlighted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres in his 2019 World Radio Day message, when he noted that in spite of advancement in digital communication, radio reaches more people than any other form of media. Similarly, BBC (2006), Balancing Act (2008) agree that radio serves as an agent of social mobilization, and an important tool for education, entertainment, and information dissemination. Thus, Gelsthorpe (2005) agrees that radio is a veritable medium and has provided good access to communication for both the literate and non-literate. He argues that the advantage of radio over other media lies in its relative simplicity, affordability, and ability to be operated on batteries when there is no electricity. But beyond the aforementioned roles played by radio, its strategic role in the preservation of cultural values and linguistic identity cannot be underestimated.

As Patrick (2017) observes, the use of vernacular in radio helps in the promotion of local languages because it gives the local language used in programming prestige, as it also promotes the local identity of the people. Similarly, Mwangi, Biwott, and Gichuhi (2017) in a study on the influence of content of vernacular radio stations and programmes on the Nyeri County in Kenya discovered that the use of vernacular on radio increased audience participation through call-in programmes in vernacular radio stations in Kenya. The studies above have demonstrated that there are evident gains in the use of the mother-tongue in the media.

First, it accords prestige to the language and elevates the culture and identity of the speakers. Secondly, it increases the participation of the people in policy making. Therefore, on the heels of the increasing activities of IPOB in Rivers State, this paper argues that the establishment of a vernacular radio by the Ikwerre ethnic nationality will help to promote the local culture and identity of Ikwerre people and change the distorted narrative that Ikwerre is Igbo.

4. Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design for data collection. The population of the study is 1,390,895 people from the four Local Government Councils that make up the Ikwerre speaking ethnic nationality. Using purposive sampling technique, a sample size of 400 persons in the four local government areas was collected for the study using the Taro Yamane sample determination formula.

5. Findings

Findings from the study indicated that 73% of the population responded that Ikwerre is a distinct and autonomous ethnic nationality, and not an annex of Igbo. One point that the respondents spoke against was the coercion of Ikwerre ethnic-nationality in the struggle for Biafra, which the respondents do not want to be associated with, while also condemning the activities of IPOB in some parts of the state. 92.5% of the respondents overwhelmingly agreed that vernacular radio broadcasting will help to restore the loss of cultural identity of the Ikwerre people. They recalled the role played by Radio Rivers 1 which was established in 1978 with its programming focused on Rivers indigenous languages, culture and identity.

The study further revealed that 65.5% of the respondents agreed that the four Ikwerre language speaking local council areas have the financial capacity to build and sustain a vernacular radio station. Their position was hinged on monthly allocation from the federation account and the revenues these councils generate internally. They were unanimous that the establishment of a vernacular radio station will promote the ethnic identity and language of Ikwerre people which is seriously threatened by conscious plans by the Igbo to continue to exert dominance on Ikwerre ethnic nationality even after the area is no longer part of the Eastern Nigeria region.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that the Igbo language hegemony in Ikwerre land and in other parts of Rivers State was as a result of political dominance of the Igbo ethnic group when Rivers State was part of the Eastern Nigeria region. As one of the most hospitable ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta, Ikwerre is receptive to people from any part of the world to live and do any legitimate business. Whereas the Igbo have their right for self-determination, they should equally respect the right of other ethnic nationalities to be independent entity, and as matter of peaceful existence, stop their provocative claims of the ownership of Port Harcourt.

Against this backdrop, this paper urges stakeholders in the Ikwerre ethnic nationality project that there is need for conscious and deliberate measures to counter the distorted narratives by the Igbo on their claims over the ownership of Port Harcourt, of which vernacular radio broadcasting can be very instrumental to getting this done. This is due to the fact that vernacular radio is a potent platform for the preservation of a people's identity, including their vernacular.

7. Recommendations

Having ascertained that vernacular radio is a potent tool in the preservation of language and culture, this paper recommends the following:

- That the Ikwerre ethnic nationality should as matter of necessity, setup of an Ikwerre radio committee to work out modalities for the establishment of a vernacular radio station that will clearly promote the Ikwerre language and culture to correct the many years of distorted narratives by Igbo writers claiming that Ikwerre is an annex of Igbo land.
- That Radio Rivers 2 FM should be revamped and designated to promote Rivers State as a whole by broadcasting in Rivers indigenous languages to project the rich multi-cultural diversity and identity of Rivers State. This recommendation is hinged on the fact that Rivers State has two commercial radio station; The Garden City FM and Radio Rivers 2 FM. The respondents said

that Radio Rivers 2 should return to its role of offering a broad range of programming which includes news and information on the native ethnic groups of Rivers State so as to promote Rivers people and their local vernacular languages.

- That Garden City FM should focus on catering to the professional and urbane audience by promoting the economic potentials and business opportunities in Rivers State.

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