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# Illiteracy of the Mother Tongue: The Bane of Urhobo Language Development

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**Abstract:** Majority of Urhobo's cannot speak and write in their local language, this could be trace to the illiteracy of the mother tongue (Urhobo). Hence, this paper tend to look at Urhobo nationhood and the role of major stakeholders both past and present in the development of the language. Urhobo language civilization deserves advancement and marketing, knowing fully well, that language is a key to people's heart and development. However, constraints to the development of the Urhobo language were identified, the study recommends among others workable language policy that appreciate the multilingual dialects of the various ethnic groups in Urhobo.

**Keywords:** Illiteracy, Urhobo , Mother tongue, Language, Bane, Development

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## Introduction

Urhobo intellectuals cannot converse and communicate deeply and meaningful nor read or write in Urhobo which is the gross product of the under- growth and underdevelopment of concepts and thought processes of Urhobo as a language. Language being a hall mark of any group of people, underscores the most available possession for dealing with changes in man's environment. Language is also a manifestation of cultures and tradition which is the most enduring artefacts of any group (Obuasi, 2007). In a survey Bleuch (2011) observed that Nigeria has some four hundred and eighty eight languages of these twenty are severely endangered and as many as two hundred are threatened. The actual state of Urhobo language is hard to analyse because of an absence of reliable data.

The pervasive state of Urhobo language subordination in the present dispensation generate a syndrome of self- relegation or self- rejection, and continues for as long as the so- deemed Urhobo elites prefer to conveniently ignore the wealth of unique language civilization originally invested, patented and bequeathed by autochthonous Urhobo sieges before external language imposition. Besides, the inheritors of this language has not historically shown any interest in its linguistics heritage. In spite of the evidence that the language is taught in primary schools, and recently introduced into two higher institutions in Delta state. Empirical evidence shows that the teaching of the language is bedevilled by many problems such as, lack of adequate and qualified teachers, inadequate literature, and inabilities of government at various levels to implement a workable language policy.

Hale in Orkar (2006) Observed that losing one's language entails losing one's culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art e.t.c. "Every language that is endangered or goes into extinction is like a library destroyed by fire". This is the researcher own rendering of the famous statement credited to Ahmadou Hampate Ba of the republic of Mali, who in his life- time engagements in the collection and translation of Folklore and oral literature in his Fula language,

Hampate Ba was apparently pained by loss of some traditions as a result of the death of custodians and the influence of Western education which undermined the indigenous knowledge of his people (Darah, 2010). Ojaide (2003) lead credence to this when he opined that Ba's metaphor of a burning library underscores both the limitations of an oral culture, such as the traditional African, and the urgent need to retrieve as much of the Folklore as possible for study and preservation before its aged custodians die with their vast knowledge.

The point to emphasize here is that there are numerous genres and traditions, stories, songs, poems, proverbs, and folk rhetoric's stored in Urhobo language awaiting the diligent effort of researchers, collectors, translators, interpreters and all stakeholders in development of Urhobo language. Ironically, these class of people who are supposed to carry out these activities are in short supply. The importance of language for any group of people cannot be overemphasized, hence Adeiyongo in Orker (2006) summarized it thus: "when a language dies the people who speak it also die". Before Urhobo language become submerged in this competing world, it is therefore paramount for Urhobo to guard their indigenous language jealously by ensuring the survival at all cost because it is their human right to maintain and secure their culture and existence through the language.

### **The Urhobo Nationhood**

The Urhobo nation, to the best of my knowledge and understanding of the Nigerian Federal State, began to acquire an identity of nationhood in recent times (Oyovbaive, 2010). It seems that there have been Urhobo people in antiquity just as we can say the same of other major ethnic groups, and hence most probably in existence before the birth of Jesus Christ and of Christendom. Hence, Oyovbaive (2010) further opined that Urhobo nationalist identity or Urhobo distinctive characterization is a manifestation of colonialism. He further asserted that Urhobo nationalist identification is most probably not older than the Mukoro Mowoe phenomenon. Here we are thinking of the late 1920s and early 1930s when few good Urhobo men, and perhaps women too, such as the late Mukoro Mowoe of blessed Memory, began to engage themselves with the historical challenges of their time. These were good Urhobo men who were critically conscious of the social forces of history thrown upon the Urhobo people by colonization and colonialism, and they decided patriotically and irrevocably to organize and confront and transcend the forces.

It is paramount to note the effort of Urhobo Language Committee (ULC), Urhobo Studies Association (USA), Urhobo Historical Society (UHS) and some other individuals who saw it as a big challenge and summon courage to start writing in Urhobo language. There is the need to promote, protect, preserve and modernize Urhobo culture and language in general, in order to empower Urhobo language to compete favourably in the emerging global world dominated by western cultural values and standards. One way of doing that is the need to create enabling environment for the speaking of Urhobo language both at home and public places. Children should be encouraged to speak their indigenous language and also educated to read and write in them.

The standard Urhobo language the Agbarho strand or version is of recent adoption, adaptation and practice. While the Orogun and Ughievwen of the language are close to significant variations from the contemporary Agborho distinct. In spite of all these variations the Urhobo language is a language that possesses most of the vital qualities of standard language. It is codified, it has a formal writing system. It also has a history of its own, revealing that, it has

come about as a result of normal development over time and not just something invented or newly established. This indicated that the Urhobo language like any other such language is ripe enough to be standardized but the questions are: why has it not be standardized? What are the offerings of Urhobo intellectuals to the development of Urhobo language? Though we can put our fingers on specific elements of growth and development in the spectrum of Urhobo language as the products of intellectuals of Urhobo descent. The Urhobo intellectuals will have to do more in the modes of learning, researches and application of research products, leadership, administration and management of intellectual institutions, which will affect positively the Urhobo language. This paper is an attempt to highlight the challenges militating against the developing of Urhobo language now and in the nearest future.

### **Reclaiming Urhobo Language Uniqueness**

The consumption mentality that currently disable Urhobo language acuity among Urhobo youths, intelligentsias and polity systems operations need to be exorcised as an alien affliction. We must articulated the primary critical disablement bewildering the Urhobo language anywhere among Urhobo sons and daughters, and which must be addressed head- on in order to re- install and re- instil meaningful and intellectually secure sense of direction for all Urhobo irrespective of modern rank or privilege . Urhobos must first discover and cherish their intellectual and human uniqueness, through their language, and from there engage with other world knowledge system without inferiority.

Urhobo indeed has vast original and contemporaneously viable language civilization that disserves advancement and marketing to the world as unostentatious but economically viable products. Unfortunately, the Urhobo have become educationally as well as politically programmed as consumers of finish often, artificial and injurious products, hence foreign languages as English and pidgin have displaced the Urhobo language in local and national development processes. This situation is most unhealthy when we consider Bamgbese's (1998) viewpoint:

The fact is that if development is to be meaningful, there is no way in which it can be carried out in a language which exclude the majority of the people in the society. This, then is one of the most important justifications for putting greater emphasis on the use and development of a country's indigenous languages.

Eva Engholm as cited in Nwadike (2008) observed that language is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key, we lose the people, if we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to untold riches, riches that cannot be guessed from the other side of the door. Can Urhobo afford to lose their language which entails losing the people, their culture, intellectual wealth, works of art e.t.c. knowing that the forces binding the Urhobo people are culture and language?

While the current attitude and perceptions seem to make majority of Urhobo people view their indigenous language as inferior or less competent while holding the colonial and probably other languages in high esteem. In the opt words of Adegbija (2004);

Attitude towards language are motivated by several factors including their perceived esteem, their perceived

functions or roles in the nation, their numerical strength, the perceived official domains, their educational value.

As a result of these challenges, the majority of Urhobo are of the opinion that the knowledge of English and French language is a passport to better jobs and , livelihood, while the Urhobo language suffer recognition, neglect and often left in the state of disuse even by the people who owns the language.

### **Constraints to the development of Urhobo language**

Though, successive governments have come out with good policies geared towards the development of indigenous languages. Government have failed to ensure that the medium of instruction should be principally the mother tongue or the language of immediate community, and to this end failed to; (i) Develop the autography for many more Nigerian language (ii) Produce text books in Nigerian languages (National Policy on Education, 1977). While many of the previsions in the National policy on education (NPE 1977, revised 1981,1998 and 2004) remain largely unimplemented, talk less of evaluation and renewal/reformation, there is, however, no comprehensive language policy formulation, except a few irresolute provisions scattered in the Constitution of the Federal Republic and National Policy on Education (Adegbite, 2011)

The mind-set of many Urhobo parents to bring up their children using English language for purposes of proficiency in the language, and many other reasons is grossly affecting the Urhobo language. If this trend is not corrected, the fearful prospects of having a generation in the near future who have no mother tongue, no identity, and no culture, will be inevitable. Ejedafiru & Ejobee (2012) presented scenarios of Urhobo language thus:

- A situation where parents do not impact on their children their spoken language.
- A situation where parents are even ashamed to speak their language to their children.
- A situation where the youth are ashamed to speak their language
- A situation when both parents and children cannot read and write in their local language.
- A situation where siblings hate their local music and language.
- Finally there is also a situation where the Urhobo language is not accorded proper recognition even though language is the backbone of the home and the hub in the wheel of the nation

In the light of the above Urhobo's have not resolve their dilemma, and will continue to wallow in self-deception as well as physically disabling false representations of self if we are not frank, no matter how painful the truth we know that the language is a candidate for extinction. Questions that would come to mind are: what are the roles of Urhobo intellectuals, what is to done in the modes of learning, research and application of research products, leadership, administration and management of intellectual institution, and how these can affect positively the Urhobo language?

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

For as long as Urhobo language usage is confined to cultural activities, the possibility for long-term survival is dim as rural Urhobo migration, education, employment and globalization possibilities continue to have their toll on the language ( Ejedafiru & Ejobee, 2012), it is pertinent to observe that language is very important to the existence of man, therefore language should not be allowed to die since it is very relevant to man's existence. If there are evidences of languages

already going into extinction, then there is the need for all stakeholders to work for a common goal to preserve and protect Urhobo language from extinction.

Despite lip service to the relevance of Urhobo linguistic heritage, government support fall short of expectations. It becomes obvious that scholar and leaders of the field of Urhobo cannot afford to let these opportunities pass by and not seize the opportunity to place Urhobo on the global map. Urhobo intellectuals should be seeking to capitalise on this enthusiasm rather than bypassing it in pursuit of somewhat ephemeral academic goals. Adegoju (2008) noted that to empower local languages, it is not enough to prescribe teaching/ learning them in schools curriculum. We need to come up with workable language policies that appreciate the multilingual dialects of the Urhobo and give due recognition to the potential of every dialect to contribute to national development.

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