

DOCUMENTATION AND REVIVAL AS LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION TOOLS: THE CASE OF IRU MGBEDE IN IGBO CULTURE

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Abstract

Norms and values of any society serve as behavioral principles set to mold humans in such communities. The secret to a successful human /individual molding lies in the effectiveness of speech used in transmitting information. Speech patterns in use as norms and values during the Iru mgbede cultural grooming of some Igbo communities are reviewed in this paper as one sustainable approach to eliminating marital lapses caused by a lack of basic acquisitions of cultural values among women and a means of reviving Igbo speech patterns for posterity. In view of this, this paper examines the consistent indigenous speech patterns used in the transmission of these cultural norms. Data for the work were mostly collated from an oral interview randomly conducted among females between 50-108 years of age from different Abia, Anambara, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Written texts were also consulted. The Social Norm Theory (SNT) approach being a multidisciplinary framework was adopted for analysis of the generated data. Findings reveal that the high rate of socio-cultural aberrations like marriage failure results from a lack of cultural norms and values instilled through constant related speech patterns. The paper recommends a one on one self-actualization dialogue of innate potentials attainable only through the peaceful co-existence of spouse and children achieved through early interactions as best practices for stabilizing marriages and revitalizing Igbo language.

Key words: cultural norm and values, indigenous speech patterns and Iru Mgbede

Introduction

Language can be likened to an olive tree whose branches break off when its environment detests it. Suffice it to mean that the term language envelopes all forms of human activity including culture. Culture; be it material or non-material provides a major platform on which individuals of a given community pattern their social behaviors. In Africa, social behaviours of individuals seems to be patterned from a traditionally acquired personal understanding (Okunammiri, 2008) derived from existing norms and values. His view suggests the fact that every individual's psyche is patterned by the individual's consistent practice of speech patterns, taboos, abominations, moral conducts and traditional worship system which shapes the individual's activities in his society. In a multi-tribal nation like Nigeria, each tribe patterns their social behaviours in tandem with their cultural beliefs, norms and values. The Igbo cultural society located in the Eastern part of Nigeria is one of its many tribes. Norms and values being those cultural heritages emulated through speech and actions of older people within a social community are viewed as those ideologies and moral conducts endorsed in a social environment and conveyable through speech.

In the Igbo cultural society, their values and norms serve as a guide to their social etiquette; these values are therefore revered with a high sense of decorum and integrity (Iwunze and Adindu, 2008) relished through consistent usage in speech.

A family being the substratum of the society, mothers are assumed to have 75% influences if not more over their children's social conduct (personal interview) and as such can perpetuate the values of their cultural societies faster. If these norms are transmitted through mothers to the family members and upcoming generations by using and instilling the specific vocabularies appropriately in regular conversations, narrations or legendary, the speech patterns of these cultural norms will be better preserved.

Igbo mothers are specifically patterned to transmit these cultural responsibilities regularly through an informal system of education known as Iru mgbede. As such, social etiquette like cheerful greetings, I'm sorry when you are wrong, thank you, receiving things from elderly ones with two hands or at least the right hand, resisting fighting in public places, good sitting postures, respect for marital guidelines, not desecrating one's virginity, guarding their temperaments diplomatically even in the midst of chaos among others are

commendable values that should be preserved in documentation. However, the conquest of the Igbo cultural values by modernization has influenced some of this cultural etiquette and codes of conducts enshrined in their speech patterns as they seem not to be revered any longer within the Igbo cultural society hence a reinstatement of such symbols that bear them.

One of such highly revered social etiquette in the Igbo society is the marital conducts, responsibilities and vocal expressions of mothers to their immediate family members. For instance, decades ago, it was seen as a bad moral conduct for males and females to expose their contours in and outside the home let alone on streets because the elders will frown at such appearances sternly through speech expressions as *akwuna na- agukwanu nwa a!* (this child desires to be a prostitute) and this immediately sends a demoralizing feeling to the girl who responds with ‘*mama, biko a bughị m’* (mama, please I am not) and rushes in to change into something better to regain her reputation but today such uncompromising statements are rarely heard between a mother and a child. This modern transition seems to rape with impunity the marital sanity, morality and language used in patterning individuals of the Igbo cultural community. The paper blames the transitional aberrations on the abandonment and casualness of the socio-cultural responsibilities of some Igbo mothers. The implication of these deviations is that the language of identity, some marital norms and values of the Igbo race leans en route loss; hence an imperative call to reconstruct and reestablish some sustainable Igbo socio-cultural philosophies as Iru Mgbede to pattern children of this generation to an enthusiastic identity. The paper will therefore examine the social functions of Iru Mgbede as a propagator of some of the socio-cultural speech patterns related with marital norms and values of the Igbo society while preparing women for marriages in their various indigenous dialects as a strategy for improving the future of Igbo language.

In view of this, the paper through some conceptual constructs, a social norm theoretical framework will gather, present and analyse generated data from where this work will draw its conclusion

Conceptual Constructs

Language: Any means through which information is disseminated is generally perceived as language. It could be through signs, symbols or speech. In human social settings, emitted interactions revolve around the agreed norms and values, thereby transmitting them through language. Hence Halliday’s, (1978:25) definition of “language as an activity”. Halliday’s view suggest that language has the ability to impact on the speakers from a deposited repertoire of vocabularies that can peruse the speaker’s thoughts to perform a task in the affairs of any society. According to Fromkin and Rodman, (1978), language is a conventional system characteristic of vocal behavior through which members of one community interact. As such, language becomes a genealogical vocal transmitter, mediator or link to invaluable socio- cultural values and ancestral knowledge and ideas to enable individuals trace their roots. Finegan(2012) suggests that language is a vehicle of expression which aids transfer of ideologies from one individual to another. (Okeke,2003) in Njemanze,(2008) is of the view that language is an architect opening a number of creative potentials achievable through thoughts. Fromkin and Rodman’s (1978) use of vocal behavior and Finegan(2012)’s inclusion of the word expression affirms that some specific communal structures within a speech community can only be conveyed through speech (language). These assertions seem to suggest that the speech pattern of any language is therefore an indispensable cultural asset to perpetuate identity.

In summary, a language is the functional speech patterns of cultural norms and values in constant use within a society.

Norms and Values: Norms and values are standard principles acceptable as patterns of living in a particular society (Wikipedia). They are imbibed through emulation of inherent cultural heritages of the society. As such the speech patterns, customs, beliefs, taboos, abominations and moral conducts characterize the norms and values of a cultural group. Although there are no formal acquisition methods for such norms and values, individuals can overtly or covertly absorb them gradually in their interactive daily enterprises.

Culture: Goertz(1975)upholds culture as a social network of ideas and codes expressed to perpetuate values. Invariably, Goertz alludes that language is inevitable in any socio- cultural activities to enable one bond with one’s ancestral link. In the views of Bello, (1999), it is only in the culture of a community that their language, beliefs, arts values and customs are enshrined. Her opinion suggests that some cultural ethics prevail in social attitudes.

Omenukor’s, (2008:149), view holds that

“Culture patterns human activities and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance”.

He buttresses the intricate features of cultural impact and status of realistic formations. Omenukor's view implies that all the revered values and norms can only give credence to the Igbo society through vocal expressions.

For Okeke(2008), culture is summarised as the combination of all the human practices exhibited as morals and habits of members of a particular society. In other words, the way people speak, act and reacts are all evidences of the cultural orientation they have received.

From the constructs above, a reciprocal relationship exists between language and culture.

Relationship between language and Culture

According to George, (1976), language is a transmitter of cultural values through history. Here, George opines that cultural values, revered as they may be can only be handed down to other generations effectively through indigenous languages. His view affirms that consistent speeches perpetuate cultural notions. Ward, (1981) and Njemanze, (2007) submits that language is simply a cultural system for molding man and his social needs; impliedly an intrinsic value of language for the attainment of social and social cultural knowledge of any society lies within its language power. Suffice it to say that social empowerment, stability and advancements lie within the vivacity of language. Opara, (2008) summarises the relationship between language and culture as cultural values minus language equals loss of social identity. The analysis of Opara's mathematical proposition reveals that language is indeed a regulator of cultural identities, values and norms for a better formation of man. From Opara's postulation also, humans can achieve stable relationships only when fundamental historical patterns are instilled through continuous conversations from an older to a younger generations. I recap the relationship between language and culture as to be that of a siamese relationship where language enlivens culture.

With the influx of cultural aberration into the Igbo cultural society, one begins to wonder if the values expected of women in the Igbo society are appropriately preserved to survive another generation. Dreaded by this thought, the researcher suggests acceding to documenting speech patterns associated with Igbo marital cultural values like Iru Mgbede by handing down to offspring especially daughters those core cultural concepts using the indigenous terminologies to forestall the danger of extinction.

Iru Mgbede: Iru Mgbede (Iko Okochi/Ino Okpoko as some Igbo dialects refer to it) , is one Igbo socio-cultural institution that is set up with the view to prepare girls for responsible adulthood and possible marriage (Okafu Uzochukwu &Ewelukwa, 2012)This is done by inculcating through attitudes the beliefs and language use, that mold individual life styles. During the mgbede period, young girls deemed to have attained the age of marriage are secluded and exempted from strenuous activities like farming and other house chores for at least three years. This seclusion affords the younger ladies the opportunity to receive from the elderly women the codes of cultural conducts and their roles as wives and mothers in various communities. Its tool of transmission is literally speech. Divulging those cultural norms and values consistently through speech and actions to this young girl accelerates the rate at which she understands the future task thereby preparing her better for the marital challenges and the social ethics that yield a secured generation. When she is confirmed to have attained a certain level of perfection, marriage may follow immediately. The advantages of Iru Mgbede are numerous. It molds the girl into a responsible, self-confident and hardworking woman. Her mode of addressing issues becomes diplomatic and less conflict prone. The girl who has undergone the cultural grooming through mgbede faces challenges better equipped etc. These attitudes are worthy of emulations and craves to be documented and passed on to other generations through daily interactions.

Language Documentation: Language documentation is a subfield of linguistics interested in preserving various cultural activities through collecting data using modern technologies (Ashmore, 2008). It is a multi-disciplinary approach to safeguarding a people's life and identity. It incorporates such fields as history and ethnographic studies, medicine, anthropology, sociology etc. in other to authenticate information for better preservation. Its relevance includes preserving cultural heritages, retaining memories of extinct communities and what they are known for. Real- life observations of language use which help to demonstrate linguistic theories are captured and it also facilitates language contact study. Language documentation is a viable field/ tool for transferring social awareness which can restore to the socio-cultural ethics of any society.

Theoretical frame work

As the reckless abandon of some socio-cultural practices have adversely contributed to the high rate of marriage failures and other social demeanours in the societies, humans become direct or indirect cultural Robots by trying to fit into whatever they feel is obtainable not minding the consequences. Social Norm theory (SNT hereafter) propounded by Berkowitz and Perkins (1986) will be anchored on to illuminate the Igbo society on the implications and consequences of exterminating some traditional institutions. SNT suggests an intervention strategy of such mistaken belief by illuminating traditional norms that will have a constructive effect on such

individuals. Social Norm theory(SNT) which is a multi-disciplinary intervention approach aims at reawakening self -confidence by addressing individual perceptions decided as different or substandard from what is practiced by others when actually it is not.

Data collection Procedure

The Igbo socio-cultural society being the focus of this paper, the researcher randomly engaged some literate, semi-literate and illiterate women between the ages of 50-108 from the five Eastern states of Nigeria (Abia, Imo, Anambara, Ebonyi and Enugu) in a discourse to establish if some cultural aberrations contribute to the high rate of marriage failures using the Igbo society. This study adopted the unstructured observation methodology which involves watching and listening to people overtime and recording findings in ways that permit some degree of analytical interpretation (Ezeah, 2004). Two major instrument of data collection were used in this work: attentive listening and intermittent discussions and oral interview. The primary data for this work were elicited from the oral interviews conducted with the selected women. The secondary source of data was drawn from written texts.

Data Presentation

Two groups of informants emerged from the interview. The first group of five women between the ages 98 and 108 claimed to have participated in the Iru Mgbede practice ((henceforth group A). The other group claims to have learnt from their past generations (grand and great grandparents) and is categorized here as group B). Forty five persons within the ages of 45 and 75 make up this group. Group A gave their responses under such headings as taboos, abominations and moral conducts while those in group B made general submissions on some of those speech patterns. The mgbede speech patterns as collated from group A align with what is generally acceptable in the Igbo cultural setting as the ethics of conduct (norms and values) (Eyisi, 2006).The researcher presents these data thus

A: Taboos

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Ed.) defines taboo as an extremely embarrassing activity not socially acceptable as correct. Each cultural community has a set of taboos which guide the social behaviours of their individuals.

Such taboos (Nsọ Ala)in Igbo cultural society include:

- i imetọ ma ọ bụ ịbuso onye etere mmanụ agha (To manhandle a priest or the spokesman of an oracle).
- ii. nwanyị ịgba n'ezị(Women having extra-marital affair).
- iii. nwa nwanyị ịgba akwuna (A female going into prostitution)
- iv Igbu nwanyị n'afọ ime ma ọ bụ nyo iyi(To kill a pregnant woman or make her take an oath).
- V I merụ mmiri ọñuñu obodo(To desecrate the community's source of drinking water).
- Vi ị kwa onye kwuru ụdọ (Celebrating funeral rites for one who commits suicide)
- vii nwata ịkpachara anya hu ọtọ nne ma ọ bụ nna(A child consciously watch the nakedness of the parents).
- viii. ikom ma ọ bụ inyom ilurita onwe ha(To practice homo-sexualism/lesbianism)
- ix. inyo m iri elu osisi nkwu(A woman to climb palm tree).
- x. I ji asusu ozo echi echichi n'ala Igbo (To perform cultural rites like traditional coronation in foreign language).

B:Abominations (Arụ na Mpu)

The Advanced learners' dictionary (6th.ed.) describes abomination as that feeling which stirs repulsion. For the Igbo society, such attitudes are despicable and desecrate nature. Abominations are atoned for by defaulters. In some situations, abominations attract repercussions from nature or God if not atoned for.

- I I dina nwanne (To commit incest)
- ii igbu ọchụ(Murder)
- iii ite ime(Abortion)
- iv ị tọ mmadu(Kidnapping)
- v ịkpachara anya gbaa ihe ubi mmadu ọkụ(To intentionally set ablaze an individual's economic farmland)
- vi ị bọ ike na ama (Opening the anus for someone in a market square)
- vii nwata igbu nne ma ọ bụ nna ya ilu(A child beating up or insulting the parents)

- viii ute/ edina isere di na nwunye na ama(Man and wife fighting in public over sex)
- ix imuma kpuchie eziokwu (To intentionally conceal truth even in the face of danger).
- X ibibi oke ala(To encroach into another person's plot of land).

C: Moral Conducts

These are those acts or behaviours that are expected of individuals. The morals could be bad or good. The good ones bring good reputation to the individual and society while the bad morals have negative effects. Some of them include:

- i imegide nwa mgbei(Maltreating the less privileged).
- ii. ikpofidi ndu obodo(To spite an incumbent government)
- iii. ihigbu anu (Strangling a domestic animal)
- iv. ikpupu okpu onye echiri echi(To remove the cap or fight a traditional title person in public).
- v. iyi ikike azo ochichi(To play politics using thugs, calumny/slander).
- vi. ibukoro ego oha(Usurping public fund)
- vii. igba ahu oto(Wearing indecent attires;very tight clothing that exposes the contours)
- viii. ikugbu anu n'erute ime ma o bu ekpu akwa(Kill an incubating animal).
- ix. iwu di oke(A woman failing to feed her family as at when due)
- x. nwata I gbu okenye asu(A child to spit on elderly person)
- xi. inyom ibikwu ikom (Living with a or woman or man without being legally married).

This researcher selected just a few of these speech patterns and norms designed to mold women as better wives and mothers and grouped them as Igbo socio-cultural etiquette. They include:

- i. nwanyi no na di adighi agba n'ezi (Women having extra-marital affair).
- ii. Ikwu akwuna adighi mma mkpakwu(females should avoid going into prostitution)
- iii. nwanyi adighi ari nkwa(A woman should not climb palm tree)
- iv. soqo nwunye nwanna (avoid sleeping with your husband's relative (kinsman)
- v. nwanyi anaghi ajasa ukwu ma o noro odu(A woman should maintain a good sitting posture.)
- vi. abokwala ike na-ahia (avoid opening the anus for someone in a public place)
- vii. iwu di oke bu mmalite ekpe di (A woman failing to take care of her family as at when due for any reason)
- viii. mgbakwu ikom n'ebute nleli (living with a woman or man without being legally married breeds contempt)
- ix. agboghoo adighi akpa uria nzuzu(A girl or lady walking with a man or boy clinging on to her waist is a mark of waywardness).
- x. ute agbakwala unu ama na agbatobi (Man and wife fighting in public over sex are cajoled)
- xi. uguwu nwanyi bu di na-alu ya' (a woman's pride is the husband she's married to)

These speech patterns act as cultural etiquette to curtail marital resentment between couples in a typical Igbo social environment. The socio-cultural norms and values of the Igbo society have repercussions on deviants even when they are secretly done.

Method of Analysis

Having examined some of these speech patterns, the researcher selected the speech patterns that portrayed the socio-cultural ethics that pattern females for adulthood and possible marriage.

The paper interpreted the social implications of these norms and values as an intervention strategy to expedite a healthier cultural value and language use in the Igbo cultural society using women as the flag bearers.

The Igbo socio-cultural etiquette are analyzed thus

- i nwanyi no na di adighi agba n'ezi (Women having extra-marital affair).
- ii. Ikwu akwuna adighi mma mkpakwu(females should not associate with families known for promiscuity).
- iii soqo nwunye nwanna (avoid sleeping with your husband's relative (kinsman)
- viii. mgbakwu ikom n'ebute nleli (living with a woman or man without being legally married breeds contempt)
- ix. agboghoo adighi akpa uria nzuzu(A girl or lady walking with a man or boy clinging on to her waist).

ANALYSES

The above speech patterns are used to curtail the promiscuous nature of a woman. In cases like i & iii an emphasis is laid on respecting and holding on with your husband notwithstanding his shortcomings. When such speech patterns are constantly in use in the environment where young girls are being groomed, the young girl unconsciously sets a guard and principles for herself. She will not wish to return to her parents unaccomplished in marriage. This implies appreciating God's handwork and the strengths of your husband while working out a diplomatic way of harnessing his weaknesses. Naturally her husband reciprocates the understanding and showers the woman with care.

Analysing data ii, vii & ix

ii Ikwu akwuna adighi mma mkpakwu((females should not associate with families known for promiscuity).

viii. agbakwukwala ikom (living with a woman or man without being legally married)

ix. agboghọ adighi akpa urja nzuzu(A girl or lady walking with a man or boy clinging on to her waist).

The above lays much emphasis on building good reputations and integrity on their personalities. The individuals will understand such speech as 'ugwu nwanyi bu di na-alu ya' (a woman's pride is the husband she's married to suffice. When such ill remarks are traced to you, no man with high sense of integrity will wish to associate with such a girl. She begins to avoid such remarks by exempting herself from ill norms bearing in mind her good reputation and integrity which gives credence to her achievements.

The speech Nwanyi adighi ari nkwu(A woman doesn't climb palm tree) is one expression that moderates the actions of a woman. A woman should be soft and tender and should always present herself to the husband as such. Once she is conscious of this fact, she begins to make use of her head better by speaking lovingly and respectably to her man taking into cognizance of his mood and temperament. This singular quality disarms even the strongest and most violent of men. The woman through this manner can attain any height she ever seeks knowing that her husband will support her sincere efforts.

Inculcating them into the young ones in a cultural mode using the indigenous languages will propagate the Igbo language in use while boosting the confidence of members of such a cultural society to achieve stable marital, technological, economic and political developments.

Observations

From the data elicited, group B supplied these speech patterns associated with the Igbo norms as moral conducts. The implication of their information is that the older relations they had were able to instill cultural consciousness but due to casualness and neglect of indigenous practices, these informants could not practice these conducts properly as to evoke cultural consciousness of moral conducts or taboos or abominations among themselves. Group A supplied their information strongly believing that the lack of these indigenous ethics seem to be the root of the social problems affecting the nation today.

Submissions

Psychologically, Taylor (1985) and Chumbow, (2004) perceives that language is a means of conceptualization and thought anchored on the psychological development of man and his indigenous language use. This is largely due to the linguistic impact of a stimulus based conceptualized information operational through dissemination of the traditional terminologies. Should such heritages like beliefs, norms and values are enshrined in the indigenous languages be instilled in the child, a formidable cultural identity and orientations would have been established to pattern his social conduct. From the Igbo cultural perspective, where there is no formal setting for learning these values, the females through the SNT intervention strategy will at any opportunity expose these females to innate potentials they are likely to effectively perfect having acquired basic Igbo social etiquette. In turn, these women in their consistent indigenous verbal interactions between their husbands and children will repeat those acquired norms confidently to induct their own children into the same cultural belief system to develop more confident individuals to stabilize their social environment. Psychologically, a self-confident ideology of 'do to your husband and children what you will have them do to you' begins to grow; resisting any external influence of comparison of class while evolving a generation whose cultural knowledge will propel to excel through any technological, legal, business and security challenges of their time.

CONCLUSION

The paper has identified the lack of proper integration of some individuals into the socio-cultural love that emanates from imbibing the cultural norms of the Igbo society as one of the major causes of high marital failures within the Igbo society. This is alleged to contribute to the loss of the indigenous speech patterns and some undeveloped potentials in the females. The paper suggests an inculcation of these indigenous speech patterns early through an appropriate forum to guard against marriage failures. I conclude here that a woman, who is culturally equipped psychologically, is more confident in every sphere of her endeavor and can jettison any external influence geared towards ruining her happy home. The paper is of the opinion that Iru Mgbede cultural system be re-established.

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