

## **Sustainability of Oral Performance in Nigeria: A Case Study of Urhobo Culture**

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### **Abstract**

Orality precedes all other forms of communication known to humans. In addition, language and culture are symbiotic considering the fact that without language there is no culture and culture, being the totality of the way of life of the people is summed up in language. Both are used as means of identification which suggest that they cannot be separated. This paper studies the level at which orality, as a means of communication, is deteriorating in Nigeria and amongst the Urhobos, in particular, on a daily basis. This research uses three significant features of oral performances, which include speaking, singing and storytelling, to investigate how this orality is being sustained in Nigeria and amongst the Urhobo people. It was discovered that among 50 respondents of the current generation, only 5% could speak, sing and tell stories in the language in which the cultural ingredients are stored. This is greatly affecting the cultural psyche of the people. In return, this situation affects the moral decadence of the populace, which is an indication that the people and their language are going into extinction. It was suggested that the Urhobo people in particular and Nigeria at large should wake up to this clarion call to save and sustain their heritage (culture) of the people for the sake of posterity.

Key Words: Sustainability, Orality, Culture, Performance, Urhobo

### **Background to the Study**

It is obvious that orality precedes all other forms of communication known to humans. This is because language is primary to other means of communication. For one to know how to communicate using other forms of communication, the person would have to speak a language first. Okolo & Ezikeojiaku (1999) observe that language is perhaps one of the most essentials thing to human life as we know it, and most far-reaching of human capabilities in relation to the whole span of humanity's achievements. In other words, if language ceases to be, the people cease to be. This is true considering the fact that most tribes are called/named after their languages. Because of the importance of this phenomenon, different groups, Linguists, NGOS, UNECO, communities, countries etc have voted/budgeted and have done rigorous campaigns on articles newspapers, radios, televisions to promote and encourage owners of the language and beyond to keep speaking and transmitting their language to their children/wards.

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2001, p. 11) submit that language is the primary means by which transmission of culture and socialization can be achieved. This is so because it is the means through which the older ones in a society "teach" the younger ones on the "dos and the donts" of the people. Therefore, it is an instrument for socialization. Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme also argue that all known records in the history of language show that all other forms of languages are secondary and meant for capturing and preservation of the speech/spoken form and its meaning. That is, every language existed first as a spoken form before gestures/writing.

The word 'Urhobo' is used to refer to the people and the language of a certain group of people in Nigeria. They (Urhobo) belong to the Niger-Delta Region in Delta State and spread

into ten (10) L.G.A.'s in Delta Central and part of Bayelsa State. According to the 2006 census population, the Urhobo both at home and diaspora were estimated to be over five million (Ejobee, 2018). According to Aziza (2007), Urhobo is a Southwestern Edoid language spoken extensively in Delta State. The culture is expressed in the language via their religion, marriage, socialization/acclulturation, saying etc through oral performances. This paper is aimed to study and unveil the level of oral performance/usage of this vital tool called language amongst this generation as to ascertain the height of sustainability of the language in the nearest future. Research has shown that many parents don't speak their native languages to their children/wards which have its great repercussion on these native languages.

Therefore, this paper investigates the level of oral performance as means of communication and identity using fifty individuals from Urhobo families. The respondents have an age range of fifteen to thirty. Their abilities were tested through unstructured interviews which required them to speak, sing and tell stories in the Urhobo language. Out of the fifty people interacted with, 20 were male and 30 were female. Among the females, eight of them have given birth to children but none of the male had children. Their educational status ranged from secondary school students and undergraduates to a few with first degree certificates. The choice of this group of persons was made considering the fact that they are the people who will make the next generation the Urhobo nation. The choice of ratio of 20 to 30 of male and female as informants is as result of the fact that linguistically, mothers are the owners of the language (MT) being that they are closer to the children, while males are the custodians of the language. Thirteen communities in different Urhobo clans were visited, which include; Kokori in Agbon, Awirhe in Agbarha-otor, Ijomi in Oghara, Oriá in Abraka, Ofuoma in Ughelli, Ovara in Orogun, Evwreni in Evwreni, Esaba in Ughievwen, Ekreravwen in Agbarho, Adagbrassa in Ijerhe, Ughweru in Ughweru, Olomu in Olomu, and Mosogar in Mosogar.

We used the unstructured interview method as to allow the informants to be free to speak all that he or she can speak and use the language for with little guide toward the three variables meant for this research. In these selected communities, the informants were picked randomly as samples. Also, we used the statistical method of analysis to analyse our data considering the fact that this paper has to do with the number/ percentage of those who can speak/use the Urhobo language fluently. This was presented in a tabular form indicating the number of male and female with the percentage of their performances in each variable for the sake of clarity

Aziza (2015), citing Dana (2012), submits that: "if development is seen as the sustainable socio-cultural, economic and technological transformation of society, then language is important. Language is a granary, a repository of the worldview of its speakers, it is this particular language that best contains and expresses the indigenous belief systems of any society. New belief systems are immediately related to these existing systems. Development can only be achieved through the use of the mother tongue or the indigenous language of that society.

This means that the existence of the people is stored in their language. Aziza further added that the mother tongues should be treated as an asset and not a liability and that those individuals, governments, families and societies that treated it as asset have attained better and more sustainable

development, knowledge and creativity than those that have treated it as a liability.

It is generally accepted by experts in Linguistics that the spoken language is more basic and necessary for the existence/identity of the people than other forms of communication. This acceptance/assumption is supported by a number of factors, such that the numerous societies without written languages which are recognized and functioning comfortably. Some well-known languages that were written without much attention to the sustainability of its spoken form have lost speakers and stand to be considered as being endangered. In addition, spoken language is also acquired without specific formal instructions.

Considering the importance of the sustainability of orality of language, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has set aside February 21 of every year for the celebration of the mother's tongue. The aim is to foster sustainable development; wherein learners' must have access to education in their mother's tongue and for the transmission of cultures, values and traditional knowledge.

Mowarin (2005, p. 524) observes that about 2000 indigenous languages in Africa, spoken by about 480 million Africans, are threatened by the dominance of English language. To him, this is traceable to the neglect by the owners of the language as a result of political, social, economic and hegemonic domination by Britain, the United States, and other Anglophone nations. Thieberger (2002, p. 312) posits that in Australia, many of their languages have gone extinct as a result of this superstrate of the Anglophone language. Linden (1991, p.20) investigated the endangered languages in the world that are going extinct and estimated that of about 6000 languages spoken in the world, up to half are already endangered or at the verge of extinction. Linden also posit that a language disappears somewhere in the world in very two weeks. Eghokhare (2004, p.13) also submits that

There is a grim predication that in the next 50-100 years, 90 percent of the languages of Africa will be extinct. This if allowed to happen will be a tragedy given the huge information base and folk wisdom that will perish. It touches on our identity and our continued existence as a people.

This view is supported by Bradley and Bradley (2002, p.xi) when they predicted that 90 percent of the world's languages will disappear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century except something is done about it.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this work is to study and to know the percentage of people speaking fluent Urhobo language in this generation using three parameters of assessment. These parameters are: (i) speaking, (ii) singing and (iii) storytelling. In what follows, the performance of the respondents vis-à-vis the aforementioned parameters are discussed. Note that there are other variables such as riddles, religious, hunters' chants etc but we chose to use these three because these other ones maybe sum up in them. The section is divided into three sub-sections, in line with the parameters.

## **Speaking**

Fifty individuals were interviewed across eight communities in Urhobo land. The respondents were from Urhobo families. From each of the families visited, the respondents, who are within the age bracket of 15-20, were conversed with using the Urhobo language. Elementary speech components of turn-taking, including greetings, place of origin, place and name of schools attended/attending, names of common things in Urhobo such as, cups, spoons, foods, things in a parlour, if they have attended any marriage rite etc were used to interact/discuss.

In the course of the interactions, it was observed that out of the 50 people that were interacted with, only 5 persons could converse fluently in the Urhobo language. Of the other 45 persons, few could exchange common pleasantries in the language and majority of the people were code-mixing while responding to few questions correctly. Others responded by saying “I don’t understand or I don’t know”.

It was further observed that these children were not allowed/prohibited from speaking the language at homes, schools, etc. It is regarded as a vernacular or bad language. The respondents complained of their parents not speaking the language to them and it is not taught in their schools. The 5% that speaks it are called or referred to as “Ogbu r’ Urhobo”, that is, “a professor of Urhobo”, in a derogatory manner, thereby discouraging the speaking of the language.

**Table 1: Statistical Table Showing the Level/Numbers of Speaking Performances**

	Male	Female
No of those who could name some items	14	20
No of those who could form sentences with the item named	5	12
No of those who could discuss with the named items	2	5
No of those who could exchange pleasantries	16	17
No of those who could not name items	6	10
No of those who could not make sentences with the items named	15	18
No of those who could not discuss with named items	16	27
No of those who could not exchange pleasantries	4	13

On the average, the ratio of both male and female in the speaking category is 50 to 50.

## **Story Telling**

The same 50 respondents used above were equally asked to tell at least two stories in the Urhobo language. Storytelling is construed in this study as the act of informing people about some hidden facts that are sacrosanct and capable of building moral behaviour and awareness about the life of the people. This vital oral tool is one of the mediums of cultural transmission. Of the 50 respondents, only three individuals could tell two stories. Few could tell one and majority of the respondents did not understand/know any story to tell in the Urhobo language.

Many of the informants informed us that they had never been told a story in the language and hence, they do not have idea of how a story is told in the language. Many of the informants do not know the technicalities of language use in story telling that are embedded in the culture. When they were told of some of the technicalities of the language in storytelling, it sounded like fiction to them. This is so because they were trying to establish links with the normal way of storytelling using the English language. This vital aspect of the culture has already gone extinct because of the percentage of the users.

**Table 2: Statistical Table Showing the Level/Numbers of Story-Telling Performances**

	Male	Female
No of those who could tell a story	3	5
No of those who knew/understood what story-telling meant but could not tell a story	9	12
No of those who told more than two stories	2	1
No of those who could not tell/know/understand what story-telling meant	6	12

Here, the percentage of male is higher than female at the ratio of 60 to 40.

### **Singing**

Another feature of oral communication is singing. Singing is the act of using voice to produce sounds which could be musical in nature as a way of passing information and expressing one's feelings. The same numbers of informants above were equally used. Fortunately, all the people interviewed were able to sing two to five songs each in the Urhobo language. Unfortunately, 60% of the people cannot produce/pronounce the wording of the songs correctly. 50% percent of the people do not know the semantic content of what they sang and they cannot link it to the language as the case maybe.

It seems to suggest, from the data, that 40 percent of the informants can sing fluently in the language. This means that somehow, they are keen to speaking the language. They ascribed their good performances in singing using the language to their church and other social gatherings wherein different Urhobo songs were performed. The respondents all agreed that singing appears more interesting and simple in articulation and comprehension than other means of oral communication.

**Table 3: Statistical Table Showing the Level/Numbers of singing Performances**

	Male	Female
No of those who could sing in the language	20	30
No of those who do not know the wordings of what they sung	6	10
No of those who could not pronounce the wordings correctly	7	8
No of those who could not understand the semantic content of the words	8	12

Here, all the people could sing but with a lot of defects in pronunciations and in their level of understanding.

## **Findings**

- It was observed that parents are not speaking the language to their children/wards in this generation and therefore, only 5% of those in the current generation from our scope of study can speak the language.
- Singing in the language is more interesting to the children than other means of communications.
- Story telling in the language is at the verge of extinct in this generation from our data
- From data at our disposal, the Urhobo language is at the verge of death with this generation.
- The cultural norms of the people which are embedded in storytelling and speaking of the language are not known to children of this generation in these clans under investigation there by affecting the cultural psyche of the people. In return, this is affecting the moral decadence of the society that this research covers.

## **Suggestions**

It is evident from this study that the Urhobo language is going into extinction and this is very dangerous to the Urhobo people and their identity. It is therefore suggested that the Urhobo people should know and remember that the language is their identity and means of cultural transmission and therefore, they should speak and teach it to their children. They (Urhobo people) should wake up to the clarion call to save and sustain their heritage for the sake of posterity.

All custodians of the language (kings & chiefs) should make it as point of duty to see how the language can be taught across the nooks and cranny of Urhobo land. As a matter of fact, they should vote their resources to the development of the language by way of giving scholarships to students/teachers/principals/headmasters/headmistresses who are studying/teaching the Urhobo language in their schools.

Governments should see it as their responsibility to safeguard the indigenous languages in their domain because the language and its cultural artefact build the moral behaviour of the people and this will usher peace to their domains. Let indigenous languages be examined at every level, including FLSCE, BECE, SSCE and even GST in the higher institutions. All sons and daughters of Urhobo should also devote their time to the course of the Urhobo language and culture.

## **Conclusion**

This paper studies oral performance in the Urhobo language and how to sustain it in this generation. It was established that oral communication is the oldest means of communication known to humans. Also, language and culture have a symbiotic relationship. It has been submitted by different scholars that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many minority languages will go into extinction. Using the three major means of oral communication in the language of speaking, storytelling and singing as data, it was discovered that the Urhobo language is almost dead with only about 5% fluent speakers in this generation. This has greatly affected the moral psyche of the people and their oral performances in every sphere of their lives. An urgent wake-up call has been made to the sons and daughters of Urhobo to call the Urhobo people

to action to quickly save and sustain the Urhobo heritage for the sake of posterity, knowing well that when the language dies, the people and their culture also die.

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**Appendix**

**Items the informants were asked to name and pronounce**

Informants Pronunciation	Correct Pronunciation	English Gloss
Owo	Oghwo	Oil soup
Ifani	Udjuodja	Fan
Eli/eri	Eri	Fish
Agbara	Agbara	Chair
One/ole	One	Yam
Iteboro	Imejje	Table
Oze	Omoze	Plate
Ukpe	Urukpe	Light
Itelivishoni	Ekpeti-ughe	Television
Usiawe	Usiaphre	Key
Uko	Uko	Cup
Igari/eba	Eba	Garri
Uhojo	Ughojo	Clock

**Exchange of Pleasantry with Informants**

Informants responses	Correct responses	English Gloss
Mingwor	Miguo	I am on my knee
Oma gaga/omaggare	Omagare	I am fine
Uweyi do gaga	Obuwevwidori gaga	Home/family is fine
Ode isikuru me ye/na	Ode re isukuru me na	The name of my school is

**Songs Sang**

**Song 1**

Informants Version: “Jesuomanabo we ra aware wobooworu aware wa re taJeso do” repeatedly

Actual song: Jesuomanabovwerheavwareve obo worukeavware; avwaretaneJesu do” repeatedly

English Gloss: “Jesus we are very very grateful for all you have done for us ... we say thank you Jesus” repeatedly

**Song 2**

Informants Version

“Iyeeewwu; X 2  
Emohenekogooforu  
Ugoufurugbewewe  
Iyeeewwu; X 2”

Correct Version,

Eyee..... eghweghwu; X2  
Emoghenekeugo re oforo, ugooforogbi re bie,  
Eyee..... eghweghwu; X2. etc