

IMPACTS OF IGBO INSTITUTIONAL SOCIAL CLASS ON IGBO LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

DR. NGOZI DOM-ANYANWU
COLLEGE OF LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ARTS EDUCATION
LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION
OTO/IJANIKIN, LAGOS STATE
E-Mail: ngoziidom@gmail.com Tel: 08060371930

Abstract

This paper looked at the impact of Igbo institutional social class in the Igbo language. It looked at the Igbo social institutions as social class and their duties in promoting Igbo culture which is language bound. The paper x-rays the activities of the social class in Igbo institution and their impact on promoting the Igbo language and culture. The intergenerational language transmission theory was adopted in this study to buttress the Igbo institutional values. The study concluded that Igbo institutional social class as well as other social classes in Igbo land generally has both positive and negative impacts on the Igbo language.

Keywords: Social class, impact, institution, promotion, culture.

Introduction

The Igbo language is the language of the Igbo people who live in the southeast states of Nigeria. The Igbo language is spoken in states such as Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Igbo, and parts of Delta and Rivers states. The Igbo people are unique people with their language. That is to say that the Igbo language is culture-bound. One of the characteristics of Igbo culture is that it is transferred from generation to generation. Traditionally, the Igbo have norms and values which are seen in some of their social activities.

Social class is an aggregate of people who have the same status, rank, or common characteristics. This aggregate of people is identified based on their relationship to the economy, access to power, wealth, and certain lifestyle. Social class in Igbo as designed in Igbo tradition is primarily

to keep the life of the community going. Social class makes the villages and towns lively and to provide security, honor, respect, and order among the people. In matters connected with progress and development of the community, they draw their source of strength in community effort (onye aghala nwanne ya). Some of the social class also function politically and economically in Igbo land. Though in Nigeria generally, social class is not legally or religiously defined. Social class generally is characterized by the following hierarchy status: social ranking, equal distribution of wealth and power, acts as sub-culture, a system of behaviour, a set of values and a way of life. (Ogbalu, 1987).

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to look at how Igbo Institutional social class helps in promoting Igbo language and culture. The paper wants to find out the impacts of the social class in the use of Igbo language generally.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Fishman's 1991 Model of Intergenerational transmission. Intergenerational transmission expresses the dynamic nature of Igbo institutional social class in Igbo language development. The paper looked at the crucial routine of the model to the practice and promotion of Igbo language through the social class. Fishman believes that intergenerational transmission of any language from generation to generation is the key to keeping the language (Igbo) alive. In other words, the activities of the Igbo institutional social class can promote the growth of Igbo language through intergenerational transmission which will help in keeping the Igbo language and culture.

The social class in Igbo tradition includes;

- Ozo title
- The age grade
- Umu ada/Umu okpu
- The politicians
- The elites

- **Ozo Title**

Ọzọ title takes a long time to be completed because it takes large sum of money, large entertainment, and rigorous procedure because it is the end point of taking other titles in Igbo land. Its essence is to display wealth publicly.

This is one of the Igbo titles that shows social class in Igbo land. Men and women are admitted into the order to show their stature. Ọzọ membership is highly exclusive and an individual needs to be highly respected, highly regarded and well-spoken of in the community for him or her to be qualified to be a member. One other important factor to consider is that the person must be a free born. Therefore, it's not for everybody in the society. The conferment of the Ọzọ title is often based on achievement. Ọzọ title makes the holder to be recognized in the society and could then reside over meetings about the issues affecting the community with elders (Ogbalu, 1987).

Amongst the functions of Ọzọ title members, they are custodians of culture. They make sure the Igbo traditions and culture grow and remain unshaken by keeping the norms and values of the culture which includes the language. They promote the language and keep it going by handing the culture over to the next generation who also keeps it, maintains it and hands it to the other generation (Dom-Anyanwu, 2021).

Politically, the Ọzọ title holds the highest political status in Igbo land. Economically, apart from being wealthy, the Ọzọ title holders are sure of some shares from new members seeking admission every year. Indeed, Ọzọ title is an Igbo social class that is respected by all and sundry and the Igbo culture and institutions will not be complete Without the Ọzọ title holders. This group of people tries everything possible to maintain the Igbo language and culture thereby affecting the language positively. In some cases, they have their own special dialect which separated them from others. And which is one of the factors in promoting a language. culturally, they live according to the norms and values of Igbo culture.

- **The Age Grade**

Another social class in Igbo tradition is the age grade (otu ọgbọ). This simply means the organization of all males in each town who attained manhood (iwa akwa) into age groups. Iwa akwa is the onset of belonging to a particular age group. It is a ceremony

marked with a little entertainment to indicate that a male child has attained manhood and is liable to duties and privileges. The age difference between one age grade and another is usually three years. Every male child looks forward to the day he will be initiated into the age group. Parents also look forward to the day their sons will be initiated into the age group.

The functions of the age grade include social, political, and economic. Politically, the age-grade members are represented in town councils and are consulted in matters connected with their duties by governing bodies like the Nze Na Ozo. Duties are assigned to age grades by the committee, according to their experience, number, and stamina. The age grade duties include sweeping and cleaning the market, building, and maintenance of roads, and settling petty cases such as pick-pockets, fights, and quarrels. Older age grades are not expected to perform duties involving physical strain. Therefore, they provide money and material assistance and sometimes they entertain the younger age grades. They also see to the community development, projects such as roads, water, and electricity (Dom-Anyanwu, 2006).

Socially, the age grade keeps the society lively by dancing, displaying masquerades and other forms of entertainment to keep the Igbo culture going, especially during festivals. They also help their members economically. They make the funeral of a member very warm and high. Age grade is a very strong and recognized social class in Igbo land. They also promote the Igbo culture, thereby promoting the language. They are the heart of every community in Igboland. In some cases, they also live their unique dialects, which is different from other people's dialects in the society. This in a special way promotes the use of Igbo language (Dom-Anyanwu, 2021).

- **UMU ADA/ UMU- QPU (Daughters of the husband)**

Umu-Ada, as the name implies, are women born in a particular town, married or unmarried. They may be married in the town in which they were born or in a different town.

One important function of the Umu-Ada is that they help to settle family dispute either in their father's town or where they are married. They are seen as peace makers, custodians of peace especially between families where they are born. What their brothers

cannot do to make peace reign, they can successfully do it. By so doing, they promote and maintain the culture of Igbo which language is the key and keep it growing by handing it over from generation to generation. Umu-Ada is a highly respected social class in Igbo land. The men feel happy and secure whenever the Umu-Ada are around them in any case. They are, true, the backbone of their brothers. They handle cases that their brothers cannot handle. They are fearless whenever it comes to making peace between their brothers and their wives. They are not afraid in telling the Eze (king) the truth about issues concerning the peace of the community. The Umu-Ada command respect from the brothers' wives more than their brothers. The position of the Umu-Ada in their families is first among equals. Even their brothers accord them more respect because they are there for them whenever it's tough.

Indeed, the love that exists between the Umu-Ada and their brothers is divine (Dom-Anyanwu, 2021).

- **THE ELITES**

Looking at the modern world, one can see the elites as another social class we have in Igbo land. These are the educated. They look down on the less educated people, as well as the illiterates. Most of them do not in any way encourage the growth of the Igbo language. They look down on the Igbo language and as such do not allow their children to learn or speak the Igbo language. They prefer the English language to the Igbo language. They feel ashamed speaking the language of their birth thereby throwing away their identity. They forget to know that a child who goes to school with a language of his own and is then introduced to learning in another language is bound to have problems that are worse than those of a child who is taught in his mother tongue or a child who can fluently speak his or her mother tongue. The child is taught using the mother tongue he or she knows in primary school will acquire new skills while the child taught using a foreign language would acquire little or no new skill because he or she would spend most of the learning period, learning the rudiments of the foreign language (Iwuala, 2019).

Cultural transmission is better done through the effective use of the language. the elites should try as a matter of importance and speak or communicate with their children in their languages. This will help the children know their cultures because culture and

language are inseparable. Culture and language are like right and left hands. The two help each other and they work together. Not teaching the children their language is equal to selling their identity.

They are completely westernized. Most of them do not give their children Igbo names. Even when they give them, they mispronounce the names by changing the names to suit the English language. In the support of Ohiri-Aniche (2002), some good examples of these names include;

- Chukwudi- Chuks
- Ngozi- NG
- Ifeoma- Ify
- Nkechi/ Nkiruka- NK

Notwithstanding, there are some elites who know the benefits of ethnic identity and are hell-bent on promoting the Igbo language and culture. People like these are seen in our schools evangelizing, teaching, and encouraging the teaching and learning of the Igbo language in all levels of formal schools. These people help in promoting the Igbo language and culture across the world.

- **POLITICIANS**

Politicians see themselves as people of the high class in society. They are the ruling class in society. They see to the affairs of the government and the people. They have a great influence on the Igbo language because they often use the language during elections especially in their manifestos, knowing the language of the grassroots is one of their advantages. By so doing, therefore, they promote the use of the Igbo language among the leaders and their subjects. Though some of them do not encourage the learning or speaking of the Igbo language by their children, simply because they prefer the English language and as such are ashamed of seeing their children speaking the local language before their fellow politicians from other parts of the world. They only speak the language during elections because they need the votes of people on the grass root. They rub off their children's identities in ignorance.

They do not encourage the learning of the language in schools. They prefer to give incentives to teachers of English and French languages Igbo language teachers.

Some of them promote the learning of English and French languages in secondary and tertiary institutions but will never encourage the learning of the Igbo language. This is because they see the language as being local. They forget that charity begins at home. They decided to enslave their children to belong to the western world. They ignorantly cut off their children's God-given identity.

CONCLUSION

Social class exists in our societies. The Igbo tradition has its traditional social classes which help in promoting language and culture. Westernization also came with social classes such as the elites and the politicians. Amongst the social class, it's only the elites that one can say do not fully support or promote the growth of the Igbo language. Though a few of the elites especially those teaching the Igbo language in different schools help in promoting the Igbo language as they could. Our elites are "oka mma na-ama". They are good outside but not inside their homes. They derive joy and happiness in encouraging and promoting other languages like English and French. Some of them go to the extent of giving incentives to the English and French teachers as well as giving scholarships to the students learning English and French. But will never dream of encouraging the growth of the Igbo language. On the part of our politicians, speak the Igbo language and promote Igbo culture whenever it is time for the election.

It is therefore clear that the activities of some of the Igbo institutional social class make the international transmission model which is the basis of this study very weak in promoting Igbo language and culture. One can therefore conclude that the Igbo institutional social class affects the use of Igbo language and culture adversely and positively. This is because while some of the social class promotes the Igbo language and culture, some are not interested in promoting the use of the language because of their selfish interest and ignorance.

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