

# The Interplay between Language, Literature and Culture: Challenges for the Nigerian Indigenous Education in the 21st Century

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## Abstract

Language, verbal or non-verbal, is central to the survival of mankind because it is an important tool for communication, negotiation and the transfer or preservation of the literary as well as cultural heritage of a people from one generation to the other. The relationship between language, literature and culture is so strong to the extent that a change in one ultimately affects the other two. Every language is a directly mirrors the culture it serves -a language either enriches or impoverishes the culture it serves. Therefore, the influence of language on the culture and literature of a people has dire consequences for the sustenance or development of their indigenous education. Nigeria, like the rest of the world, has joined the terrace of globalization which has led to the import of foreign language(s), literatures and cultures into the indigenous way of life and system of education. Currently, increasing quest for the language, literature and culture of the developed countries of the world which are projected by globalization has denied the Nigerian child access to his/her indigenous system of education.

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***Index terms***— language, literature, culture, indigenous education, globalization.

The Interplay between Language, Literature and Culture: Challenges for the Nigerian Indigenous Education in the 21 st Century Olagbaju Oladotun Opeoluwa Abstract-Language, verbal or non-verbal, is central to the survival of mankind because it is an important tool for communication, negotiation and the transfer or preservation of the literary as well as cultural heritage of a people from one generation to the other. The relationship between language, literature and culture is so strong to the extent that a change in one ultimately affects the other two. Every language is a directly mirrors the culture it serves -a language either enriches or impoverishes the culture it serves. Therefore, the influence of language on the culture and literature of a people has dire consequences for the sustenance or development of their indigenous education. Nigeria, like the rest of the world, has joined the terrace of globalization which has led to the import of foreign language(s), literatures and cultures into the indigenous way of life and system of education. Currently, increasing quest for the language, literature and culture of the developed countries of the world which are projected by globalization has denied the Nigerian child access to his/her indigenous system of education. A system of education which is rich in fables, taboos, folklores, and cultural rites/rituals is gradually being crushed under the weight and demand of globalization. This trend is common in Africa and it portends danger for the continued survival of the continent's indigenous language, literature and culture. This paper therefore posits that there is a need for Africans/Nigerians to preserve and promote what is left of their indigenous language, literature and culture through the use of an indigenous system of education. The paper concludes by recommending practical ways of making use of the indigenous system of education within formal school system. This is the only way that the people's indigenous way of life will survive the onslaught of globalization beyond the 21st century.

## 1 Introduction

he 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed unprecedented growth and a remarkable change in the areas such as trade, commerce, security, communication, education etc throughout the world. With the emergence of globalization, the whole world has become condensed into a compact unit or global village and this has come with attendant challenges of language and culture contact or conflict. Every human activity or transaction in the now globalised world is conducted through the instrumentation of language (verbal or nonverbal); language in its own right is the custodian of the speakers' culture. Therefore, there is always an imminent threat that the globalised language/culture of the super powers will suffocate the languages/cultures of the developing countries of the world. The influence of globalization on the indigenous languages, literatures and cultures in Nigeria has very serious implications for the education of the Nigerian child in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Nigeria is the most populous African nation with an estimated population of over 170 million people (2012 estimate) who are distributed into more than 250 ethnic groups and nationalities -each with unique linguistic, literary and cultural identities. Experts have put the number of indigenous languages currently catalogued in Nigeria at 521. This number includes 510 living languages and 9 extinct languages excluding the two official languages. To 'effectively' cater for the linguistic and cultural plurality in the nation; the Nigerian government has assigned roles to the different languages in the country. For example, French is the second official language in Nigeria while English language remains the first official language, language of education and the lingua franca (National Policy of Education, 2004). The numerous indigenous languages play non-formal roles as mother tongue (MT) or home language, regional languages and the language of the immediate environment.

The Nigerian government in appreciation of the importance of the indigenous system of education and the benefits of using the mother tongue in education recommended that early childhood and lower primary education (Primary 1 -3) should be conducted in the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. The use of the English language as a medium of instruction was not to begin until upper primary classes (Primary 4 -6) and progress to the higher levels of learning. The benefits of making use of the home language or mother tongue in education have been established in some studies. For example, The National Language Centre (1975) states that for education to be meaningful, a child should be taught in his or her mother tongue which is the language that he or she can both read and write. Similarly, Emenanjo (1996) opines that the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around is best done and T Volume XIV Issue II Version I realized in the languages in which the learners are most familiar.

The rationale behind the use of a language that the learners are familiar with is that every Nigerian child is expected to have acquired his or her mother tongue (from home) through the indigenous system of education before he or she started schooling. However, the emergence of globalization and the reality of its powers to impose itself on minority languages, literatures and cultures have robbed the Nigerian child in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of the use of indigenous languages in education. As a result of this, Nigerians, especially the elites, no longer use the indigenous languages in their homes as they have adopted the use of English language which is one of the languages projected by globalization. Therefore, a great gap exists between the child's home language and the school language during the early years of primary education as recommended by the NPE.

a) The History, Curriculum and Modus operandi of the Nigerian indigenous system of education.

As far back as the 1990s, there were three fundamentally distinct education systems in Nigeria. These were the indigenous system, Quranic schools, and formal European-style education institutions. In the rural areas where the majority lived, children learned the skills of farming, fishing, arts and crafts, palm oil production and other work, as well as the duties or roles of adulthood, through active participation in the communal life of their immediate environment. This process was often supplemented by age group-based activities in which groups of young boys were involved as well as instructed in community responsibilities by mature men (<http://www.onlinenigeria.com/education/>).

The historical development of the indigenous system of education in Nigeria goes beyond the advent of colonialism and the missionaries who established mission-owned schools to provide western-style or formal education. This is because Nigerians had a standard system of indigenous education before the coming of the missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century and the establishment of the first mission school by the Methodists school in 1843. Similarly, Obanya et al (2000) and Osokoya (2009) submit that Nigeria had an indigenous system of education before western or school education was introduced in the country. The indigenous system of education was used to prepare the younger ones to become responsible adults and function effectively in the society.

As stated earlier, the indigenous system of education in Nigeria is as old as the existence of the people itself because it was the established system of transmitting and preserving the peoples' indigenous beliefs, cultures, languages and literatures (mostly oral literatures) from generation to generation. Similarly, Rahaman (nd.) opines that the people of indigenous societies in Nigeria had ways of inculcating the societal norms, values and attitudes on the members. To Rahaman, this process of enculturation is the primary function of the indigenous system of education. He argues that indigenous societies in Nigeria had means of initiating, instructing, drilling, orientating and indoctrinating the younger people before the introduction of western education.

With or without the western-style or school education, every indigenous society in Nigeria had a sound system of preparing their young ones to become responsible adults and to live in the society. This system of education in Nigeria specifically focuses on the teaching of indigenous knowledge, models, methods, and content within

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a formal or informal educational setting. The system of education was mostly informal in approach with a unique set of objectives, curriculum and modus operandi. The medium of instruction is strictly in the mother tongue (MT) and the products of the system were expected to demonstrate sound indigenous intelligence in language, literature and culture. One of the objectives of the indigenous system of education is the functionality of knowledge acquired through quantifiable proficiency in certain skills and societal integration.

The process of instruction in the indigenous system of education in Nigeria emphasizes the use of hands-on approach such as modeling, observation, imitation, storytelling, collaboration and cooperation. The modus operandi of indigenous education in Nigeria is all-inclusive, in that the learner is gradually integrated by immersion into his immediate community where he learns through direct contact with object to be learned and from personal experience. Also, correction and feedback is spontaneous with the use of motivation and punishment. As stated earlier, education takes place under informal circumstances anywhere -in the home, farm land and the community. The Nigerian indigenous system of education emphasizes the development and understanding of the traditional way of life -cultural values, beliefs, taboos, deities, and the reflection of an individual's action or reaction on his/her family name and entire household. Teaching is often done through active engagement of the learners in tasks, traditional games and competitions, folksongs, folklores, rituals and festivals.

Fafunwa (1974) describes the indigenous educational system in Nigeria as all embracing in that it incorporated every aspect of the society therefore it could lead an individual to acquire behavior patterns, abilities, respect for others and skills necessary for effective citizenship in the community in which the child lives. Similarly, Osokoya (2009) posits that the indigenous system of education was fully developed as a means of initiating the young men into the society, and in preparation for adulthood. The indigenous system of education stressed the importance of communal living, dignity of labor, respect for elders, discipline, personal hygiene, chastity, social responsibility, dispute resolution, spiritual and moral values. The indigenous people had a standard way of teaching numeracy, economics, medicine, history, geography (borders and land boundaries), devotion and the identity of their community.

The curriculum of the indigenous system of education includes but is not limited to vocational training, housekeeping and moral teachings. The language of education is indigenous language and credits are often given for aesthetic or literary use of the indigenous language. It is not examination-based rather the indigenous people rely on competence, performance and the total 'omoluabi' (well-behaved and complete gentleman) concept to determine a person who is well educated in the indigenous system of education. Also, Rahaman (nd) opines that the curriculum of the indigenous system of education covers several aspects such as mathematical concepts, training in the art of good and correct speech, history, literature, physical education and vocational education.

The different ethnic nationalities in Nigeria had a system of inculcating and transferring conventional societal beliefs, norms and values from generation to generation. The indigenous people had established methods of passing the indigenous knowledge base which was mainly in the oral form to the younger generations. According to Rahaman, most of the content of the indigenous knowledge used to be transferred through folk songs, storytelling, rituals, festivals, poetry and incantation chanting etc. The older generation (elders) were usually the ones to pass the indigenous knowledge across to the younger generations, this knowledge included the science of plants, herbs and roots, taboos, omens, the history of their ancestors, ancestral lineage, successes and failures at wars between villages and clans. Vocational training was another important aspect of the indigenous system of education and it was given through an apprenticeship system.

However, with the coming of globalization and its influence on indigenous fashion, languages, cultures, literatures, beliefs etc, the Nigerian indigenous system of education is on the threshold of extinction. The present realities in Nigeria show that the indigenous system of education and way of life is being gradually replaced by the formal/school system of education either in form of the European-style or the 'Almajiris' system of education with English or Arabic as the medium of instruction. Therefore, there is a need for the total revitalization of the indigenous system of education in Nigeria in order to survive the onslaught of globalization.

The 21 st century has brought about unequalled development in science and technology which has led to innovations in the areas of commerce, information sharing, mass media, crime fighting, education etc across the globe. Akindele, Gidado and Olaopo (2002) describe globalization as the process of the intensifying economic, political, social, linguistic and cultural relations across international boundaries with the primary focus of exploiting African resources, disintegrating her economies and integrating it into the international capitalist economy. With the emergence of globalization, the whole world has indeed become a global village and this poses serious threats to the survival of several indigenous cultures, languages and literatures all over the world. According to Roy Campbell (2006), as the world becomes smaller and takes the mould of a global village, only a few languages will be needed for communication thereby some languages will become less important and eventually superfluous.

Languages do not only serve as means of communication, they also function as the custodian of their users' cultures and a tool in education. Olagbaju (2010) opines that a loss of any indigenous language will ultimately lead to a loss of the indigenous/speakers' identity, culture, and literature. Anything that influences the indigenous languages and cultures of a people will affect their indigenous system of education. The Nigerian indigenous system of education is culturebased and it makes use of indigenous languages as tools for educating or inducting the younger generation into the way of life of the society. However, increasing modernity and the demands of a globalised economy which are the hallmarks of the 21st century have constituted some of the challenges

confronting the indigenous system of education in Nigeria. Indigenous knowledge, languages, cultures and literatures in Nigeria are gradually dying out or being eroded because of decreased need for them and lack of interest from Nigerian parents (elites and illiterates) who would rather communicate with their children in the English language and other foreign languages (French and Arabic) even at home thereby denying the child of a vital aspect of his cultural heritage.

With access and exposure to the influence of globalization, most Nigerian children/youths no longer appreciate their indigenous languages, literatures and cultures. This has influenced the indigenous peoples' judgment of what-is-right (values), fashion, language, and education. Nigerians have abandoned the farms for white collar jobs and they prefer to communicate in foreign languages (English, French and Arabic) often describing the indigenous languages as vernaculars. Almost all the basic elements of the indigenous system of education are fast disappearing from most Nigerian communities with indigenous learning opportunities

The negative consequences of globalization on the indigenous way of life can be seen in the way most Nigerian youths are becoming increasingly desperation to migrate from the rural areas and a career in agriculture to the menial (white collar) jobs in the cities.

Apart from the direct consequences of globalization, other factors such as the spread of Christianity and Islamic religion in Nigeria also contributed to the relegation of the indigenous system of education and its subsequent replacement by the European-style and 'Almajiri' system of education. In Nigeria, it is a common thing to see children traveling distances from their villages in order to have access to formal education whereas they are traditional learning opportunities provided by the indigenous system of education in their immediate communities, villages and homes. These children are forced to speak and learn in a foreign language (English or Arabic) in these schools in line with the provisions of the National Policy of Education (NPE, Revised 2004). The Nigerian government supports the formal system of education both financially and legally through the construction of classroom, requirement of teachers, provision of facilities and text materials etc.

The need to belong to the global economy has prompted the Nigerian government to introduce information and communication technology (ICT) into the new secondary school curriculum for the Europeanstyle and 'Almajiri' systems of education. The government is also investing massively into the nation's formal educational system in areas such as the provision of infrastructures, training of teachers and construction of classrooms in schools. However, the same cannot be said of the indigenous system of education because it is not receiving any form of support or attention from the government or policy makers. The current realities in the rural areas and villages have shown that most of the indigenous people in Nigeria have embraced formal education through adult literacy programs, in other words, these people no longer encourage the indigenous educational system. Furthermore, the indigenous languages which play an important role in the indigenous educational system are not left out of the negative effects of globalization. There has been a dearth of indigenous language teachers across the country because most of the students seeking admission into higher institutions of learning in Nigeria do not want to study any of the indigenous languages. They often prefer to study the English language and other foreign languages because they believe that these foreign languages will serve a better purpose in a globalised world. Similarly, the diction, lexicon and figurative use of language in indigenous languages are gradually been eroded amongst the younger generations because they often rely on the English language for words they do not know in the indigenous language by code mixing or code switching while communicating in the indigenous language.

Although there has been a growing consciousness and awareness across Nigeria on the need to revitalize and reclaim the indigenous languages, literatures and cultures, the lure and swaying effect of globalization on the youths has been a major stumbling block to the use and development of the indigenous knowledge. Young Nigerians now prefer the use of the English language in formal and informal situations; they read much of foreign text, watch or listen to movies, music and sports that are not indigenous. As a result of their exposure to globalization, the internet and modernization, Nigerian indigenous fashion, languages and cultural beliefs are gradually been relegated for their foreign/ globally acceptable counterparts. If the indigenous system of education in Nigeria would survive 21st century, then Nigeria must find a way to revitalize her indigenous languages to make them relevant and meet up with the demands of globalization in every aspect of our daily lives.

c) The interplay between languages, literatures and cultures and the education of the Nigerian child in the 21st century: Solutions and recommendations.

The rights of indigenous people to a form or system of education that best suits them have formed a part of the global discourse on fundamental human rights. Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples makes particular reference to the educational rights of indigenous peoples. It emphasizes the responsibility of states to adequately provide access to education for indigenous people, particularly children, and when possible, for education to take place within their own culture and to be delivered in their own language ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous\\_education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_education)). Similarly, the official press release on the proceedings of the Permanent Forum on indigenous issues, Second session of the 15th & 16th meetings states that continued denial or relegation of the indigenous system of education will mean that a sizeable number of indigenous youth would be set apart from their own cultures unless educational instructions are encouraged to take place in indigenous languages (<http://www.un.org/news/Press/docs/2003/hr4674.doc.htm>)

As earlier discussed in this paper, Nigeria may not be able to return to the pre-colonial and preglobalization era of indigenous education but the various indigenous languages in the country need to be assigned functional roles in widely acceptable European-style and 'Almajiri' systems of education. These roles could range from

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adopting the major indigenous languages as the languages of education in the geo-political zones where they are dominant to inculcating the cultural and linguistic elements of the indigenous language into the formal education curricula.

Although the challenges of combining the indigenous system of education with the formal school system are enormous, the argument of this paper is that the formal system of education and globalization remain the only way for Nigeria to preserve what is left of her indigenous languages, cultures and literatures.

Globalization has been blamed for most of the challenges confronting the indigenous system of education in Nigeria. However, the truth is that if the indigenous system of education would survive the 19th century, the various indigenous languages and cultures must be developed to actively function in formal education. New vocabularies may need to be developed and several volumes of oral indigenous knowledge will have to be documented and catalogued for use in formal education and globalization. Also, the government should provide the necessary incentive for people to study indigenous languages in the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. These incentives can be in terms of scholarship awards and automatic employment for graduates of indigenous languages.

In addition, the curriculum of the European-style and 'Almajiri' system of education should be broadened to accommodate the basic elements of indigenous education especially in the choice of language(s) of education, vocational training, cultural awareness, oral literature etc. The Nigerian indigenous system of education must find a way to work with and for globalization rather than work against it. Orthographies of most of the indigenous languages should be developed and educational materials need to be produced in these languages for use in formal education and globalization. The indigenous system of education in Nigeria needs to be better supported by the government through the enactment of relevant policies that will foster the development of the indigenous system of education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Interplay between Language, Literature and Culture: Challenges for the Nigerian Indigenous Education in the 21st Century



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