

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

Olagbaju Oladotun Opeoluwa<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Received: 9 December 2013 Accepted: 4 January 2014 Published: 15 January 2014

## Abstract

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

**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

43 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 21st century.

53 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.

62 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.

72 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 21st 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.

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

81 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/>).

88 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.

96 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.

103 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1 INTRODUCTION

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

---

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

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

---

---

254 [Campbell ()] 'the state of African languages and the global language politics: empowering African languages  
255 in the era of globalization'. Roy Campbell , ZM . *Selected proceedings of the 36 th Annual Conference on*  
256 *African Linguistics*, F A Olaoba, F A Renberton (ed.) 2006.

257 [Akindele et al. (2002)] *Globalization: its implications and consequences for Africa*. *Globalization 2.1*. Retrieved  
258 online 19 th, S T Akindele , T O Gidado , O R Olaopo . fromwww.postcolonialweb.org/africa/  
259 akindeleld.html 2002. June. 2009.

260 [Osokoya ()] *History and policy of Nigerian Education in World Perspective*: Ibadan, Laurel Educational  
261 publishers, I O Osokoya . 2009.

262 [Muslimi ()] *Implementing the Mother Tongue medium policy in the lower primary classes: A case study of*  
263 *selected primary schools in Saki West Local Government Area of Oyo State*, Y Y Muslimi . <http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/unilorin/journals/education/ije/june1999> 1999. 2008. Nigeria. (Retrieved  
264 online 11 th December)

265 [Rahaman] 'Indigenous Education in Nigeria'. O Rahaman . / [searchwarp.com/swa576242-Indigenous-Education-In-Nigeria.htm](http://searchwarp.com/swa576242-Indigenous-Education-In-Nigeria.htm),

266 [Emenanjo ()] *Languages and the national policy on education: implications and prospects*. *Fafunwa Foundation*  
267 *Internet Journal of Education*, E N Emenanjo . <http://www.fafunwafoundation.tripod.com> 1996.  
270 (Retrieved online December)

271 [Press Release HR/4674 on the Proceedings of the UNESCO Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Second Session, 15 th 16 th  
272 <http://www.un.org/news/Press/docs/2003/hr4674.doc.htm> Press Release HR/4674 on the  
273 *Proceedings of the UNESCO Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Second Session, 15 th & 16 th*  
274 *Meetings*. Retrieved online 11 th February, 2014.

275 [Olagbaju ()] 'Students' perception of globalization and the use of Nigerian languages in formal education'. O  
276 O Olagbaju . *Ijagun Journal of Languages and Literary Studies* 2010. 1 (1) p. . Tai Solarin University of  
277 Education

278 [The importance of language learning on the overall development of the child in primary school: solutions to the Nigerian problem  
279 *The importance of language learning on the overall development of the child in primary school: solutions to*  
280 *the Nigerian problem*, 1975. The National Language Centre

281 [Obanya ()] *Theory and practice of education: Lagos*, P A I Obanya . 2000. Basic Books publishers.

282 [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. United Nations ()] *United Nations Declaration*  
283 *on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. *United Nations*, fromwww.unesco.org 2012. (Retrieved online  
284 September 13 th)