

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE LANGUAGE FACTOR IN NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

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Abstract

Nigeria has been bedevilled by intermittent inter-ethnic and religious crises since her independence. This has resulted in mutual distrust, social disharmony and lack of real national development. This paper critically examines the language factor in this ugly trend of events, and contrary to popular opinion situates language at the centre of (he crises. As such, the language factor in the Nigerian linguistic milieu has little to offer for national reconciliation. The paper is, therefore, of the opinion that the path to real reconciliation is good governance through democracy. Referring to Nigeria's colonial past, the paper high lights how democratic governance can weld Nigerians together, irrespective of language differences. However, the paper observes that language is, again, a crucial factor in achieving sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Introduction

The need for national reconciliation in the present-day Nigeria is undoubtedly very pressing. Since independence the country has been bedevilled by intermittent, inter-ethnic, social strife and bloody religious violence, which have torn apart the thin walls of social harmony. In this atmosphere devoid of peace and socio-political stability and the spirit of oneness, real development will continue to be a forlorn hope.

A careful and critical review of Nigerian society-past and present-will show that linguistic differences are at the root of the problem. This is because each language confers a strong mark of identity upon the ethno-linguistic group that speaks it, influences the world view of the group, and conditions the group's response to external socio-cultural and political stimuli. Nigerians, up to now, do not know the exact number of languages they speak, but it is generally believed that there are more that 250 distinct languages spoken in Nigeria. The language differences are indeed an underlying, corroding factor that has weakened the entire Nigerian socio-political structure and has continued to vitiate efforts towards national reconciliation and development.

In view of Nigeria's peculiar complex, linguistic milieu, it is advisable to handle language issues carefully, if real national reconciliation is to be achieved.

This paper first turns attention to the divisive character of language in general and the situation in Nigeria vis-a-vis the quest for social harmony and national integration. Secondly, the paper highlights the principles of democracy and the place of good governance in national reconciliation.

Divisive Character of Language

The Biblical account of the multiplication of languages in the eleventh chapter of "Genesis" is a clear indication that the gift of many tongues was purposely given so that mankind would fragment and live in distinctively autonomous groups. This account also illustrates the unity and the spirit of fellowship and oneness, which a language confers on those that speak it.

The converse of the linguistic situation, that is the amalgamation of diverse ethnohnguistic groups into one political unit, causes lack of unity of perception, lack of common socio-political vision and lack of oneness, which in turn forms and sustains the condition that stimulates conflicts and violence. So, the mystic cord that binds men together also contains in itself a bestial force that tears them apart.

Most often, it is the unifying aspect of language that receives all the attention while the other aspect is swept under the carpet. It should, therefore, be stated unequivocally that language, more than any other factor, segregates the peoples of the world and thus prepares the stage for distrust, hatred, conflict and violence. All the legislative furore about, and clamour for, the development and study of one language or another (local and foreign language) in many countries are attempts to undermine the

negative influence of languages on society, and then to inculcate a contrived sense of oneness in and among the people.

This notion of language as a divisive element has featured prominently in the writings of social linguists. For example, the anthropologists Miller and Weitz (1979:327) observe that

"Language is the most characteristic pattern of behaviour that distinguishes one group from another and is often considered the primary mark of its identity or its connection to other similar groups". Crystal (1987:34) wonders why language should be a "significant index of ethnic or nationalistic movements". He goes further to observe as follows:

There is also the tendency for language to act as a natural barrier between cultural groups, promoting conflict rather than co-operation... There is no more awesome testimonial to the power of language than the fact that there have been so many people ready to die if their demands for linguistic recognition were not met.

Crystal also notes that such linguistic conflicts "due to divided ethnic and national loyalties are often bitter and violent",

History is replete with such bitter, violent and bloody conflicts. Examples can be found in countries like Nigeria, Liberia, Somalia, Ethiopia, India, Rwanda and Yugoslavia. In these countries, it is the tongue that mainly determines who is an "enemy", not colour, or political ideology. In Nigeria, there were myriads of cases of trivial matters that turned gory just because the actors happened to be speaking opposing tongues. Whenever such incidents occur, no one deems it necessary to distinguish between Cine the Poet and Cina the conspirator, so that one's tongue identifies one either as a target for attack or otherwise.

In Nigerian political sphere, the repercussions of the divisive tendency of language has been glaring, especially in the formation of political parties. Since independence, major political parties have been ethnolinguistic in composition, and voting in elections has also toed the same line. National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) was Igbo-based; Action Group (AG) was Yoruba in origin and composition, while Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) identified with the Hausa/Fulani of the north. The same picture re-emerged in the Second Republic (1979-83), indicating that the former political alignments were never an accident. Again the Nigeria People's Party (NPP) became a rallying point for the Igbo; Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) became a Yoruba party, while National Party of Nigeria (NPN) became another name for the Hausa-Falani.

The pattern presented by the democratic dispensation, which commenced on May 29, 1999, shows no remarkable deviation from the previous ones.

Alliance for Democracy (AD) is a symbol for the Yoruba; All Nigerians People's Party (ANPP) is a party for the core north of Hausa-Fulani, while the People's Democratic Party (PDP) is dominated by the Igbos and the northern and southern minority groups.

Apart from inter-linguistic conflicts, rivalries and conflicts also exist within language groups as a result of dialectal differences. In Nigeria, the problem is more pronounced in the major ethnolinguistic groups. The Igbo, for example, are highly dichotomized along dialectal lines. There are the Igbos of Rivers State, Delta State, Qwerri, Onitsha, Enugu, Nsukka and Abakaliki. These are merely the major dialectal blocs which contain within themselves many more dialects. The dialectal blocs evoke varied attitudes and sentiments that often create dangerous social rifts and complexes.

A good reference point was the situation in the former Anambra State which was dichotomized into north and south. The north was pejoratively called the wawa-a term derived from their peculiar way of saying "no" in their own dialect of the Igbo language. The situation impeded development and made the State nearly ungovernable. The creation of Enugu State out of Anambra State did a little to solve the problem of linguistic dichotomy and cold war in Enugu State as the new State had to contend with the harmonization of three more dialectal sub-groups: Abakaliki, Enugu and Nsukka. Harmonization efforts led to the enunciation of the policy called Triangular Equilibrium, whose primary aim was the restoration of unity among the three linguistic groups.

The above analysis is an attempt to give an insight into the negative potential of language and to debunk the unqualified notion that language always promotes peace and unity. Such a notion should not be accepted hook, line, and sinker. Language in a multilingual group should rather be seen as a bulwark and fortress behind and within which "enemies" are monitored and attacked.

Enlightened societies recognize the danger in this structure and make committed efforts to batter it through careful language engineering or planning (Crystal, 1987:364).

Such language planning is not feasible in Nigeria at the present time because of the mistakes already made and their socio-linguistic and political repercussions (Nwokolo, 1999). Indeed, the language situation in Nigeria is "extremely complex" (Akinde and Omolewa, 1982) and it is likely to continue to cause social disharmony until a time when a more powerful force will completely eclipse and relegate it to the abyss of socio-political inconsequentiality. Such a force has already been identified in good democratic governance.

Democracy, Good Governance and National Reconciliation

Democracy is the concept of a system of government, whose origin is in Western Europe. Popular classical definition sees democracy as the government of the people. The emphasis is on the people. Hook and Elshtain (1994:684) defined democracy as "a form of government in which the major decisions of government - or the direction of policy behind these decisions-rests directly or indirectly on the freely given consent of the majority of the adults governed". This definition directly situates democracy in the drama of politics and specifies the manner of people whose drama it is.

Mere definition of democracy as the one above can be deceptive because it does not communicate the totality of the concept, its spirit and its application. In order to understand democracy, appreciate its values and the extent it can bring about socio-political stability and national reconciliation, one must know the principles upon which authentic democracy is built. Some of these principles include: freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press, equality before the law, rule of law, social justice, change of government through the ballot box, human rights, accountability, etc. It is the inculcation and imbibing of these principles that make democracy enduring and reconciliation possible. When these ingredients of democracy form the colour, character, spirit and action of government, rights and interests of the people will be protected and this will result in peace, social integration and reconciliation.

It needs to be stressed that good and purposeful governance is a sure path to national reconciliation and that the existence of a widely used national language can, hypothetically, facilitate national reconciliation. However, our heterogeneous linguistic milieu will continue to be a dichotomizing factor notwithstanding the effectiveness of our skills in mutual communication using the national lingua franca. Before independence, Nigeria was socially more cohesive and harmonious because the colonial government suppressed ethnolinguistic sentiments and projected only the English language. With one working language and fair treatment of all Nigerians in its employ, the colonial government created the atmosphere that made all the educated Nigerians (irrespective of tribe and tongue) see every part of the country as their home. As a result of their orientation and training, the young Nigerian officers saw themselves as the property of the state, and as such, ensured the protection of government's interests wherever they found themselves. This spirit of oneness made the struggle for independence formidable and irresistible for the colonial masters. That oneness disappeared shortly after independence as soon as selfish political office holders succumbed to the temptation of thinking in tribal-linguistic ways.

Conclusion

We have seen that the differences in language and culture presuppose that linguistic groups were fashioned and intended to be independent of one another. Since language determines the "how" of thinking to a great extent (Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), it follows that each language group will certainly slightly different emotional and psychological make-ups and also perceive issues differently from others. Thus, it is linguistic differences predispose Nigerians to distrust, disharmony and disintegration. Those who took over leadership from the colonial masters were not knowledgeable and wise enough to foresee the danger and to suppress it through proper linguistic legislation, good leadership and governance.

The only path to national reconciliation and sustainable development at present is democratic governance which can bring diverse people of Nigeria together to forge common interests in universal principles like justice, human rights, freedom, etc.

However, language is still a crucial factor in thorough understanding of the concept of democracy and in the democratization process in Nigeria. As Nwokolo (2002) has pointed out, all the

resources of language available to Nigerians should be employed, as this will facilitate comprehension of the concept and make democratization faster and more effective. It is only when Nigerian society is truly and completely democratized that genuine reconciliation and development will be attained.

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