

Language And Communication in Pre-Colonial Nigerian Society

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Abstract

This paper studies the diverse linguistic landscapes and communicative practices that thrived in pre-colonial Nigerian society. It examines the rich array of indigenous languages, their unique structures, and their roles in shaping social, political, economic, and spiritual life. It investigates various forms of communication- verbal and nonverbal- including oral traditions, proverbs, storytelling, music, dance, rituals, and symbolic systems. It highlights how these communicative modes facilitated knowledge transmission, conflict resolution, social cohesion, and the expression of cultural identities within and between different ethnic groups. The paper also examines the impact of inter-group interactions and trade on linguistic borrowings and the development of lingua franca in certain regions. Through this exploration, this essay will provide a better understanding of context-dependent nature of language and communication in pre-colonial Nigeria, underscoring their significance in shaping the contemporary Nigerian society.

Key Words: *Communication, Language, Pre-colonial Nigerian Society*

Introduction

The terms, 'language' and 'communication', are well-known discursive terms in every society. These terms are always at the center of all human activities. Generally, whenever the term, communication, is mentioned, the most natural reasoning is to think of language, since it is the potent means used in facilitating communication and other sociocultural activities within a speech community. Language evokes the concept of communication. It serves as a system or a code used for communication between individuals. This is because language is made up of symbols such as sounds, words, verbal sets, or gestures that have specific meanings. This position agrees with Gimson's (1980) assertion on language that it is "a system of conventional signals used for communication by a whole community. This pattern of convention covers a system of significant sound units, the inflection and arrangement of words, and the association of the meaning with words." (pp. 4-5). This system of conventional signals can be thought of as a code because they represent concepts, ideas, or emotions in a structured way within a speech community. Indeed, without language, there will not be a meaningful or resourceful socio-economic or political advancement within linguistic communities. In every sense of association and socialization, language helps people to act and react functionally and responsibly in their various linguistic communities. Language, therefore, is a determiner of social group relations, a major carrier of culture, an indispensable vehicle that drives unity and cohesion in any social group, and a system that plays a vital role in "regionally definable human group" (Crystal, 1992) identified by a shared linguistic system.

Language and communication in pre-colonial Nigerian society were rich and diverse, reflecting the multitude of ethnic groups, each with its own language, oral traditions, and modes of communication. This made each of the linguistic communities unique. This linguistic diversity played an important role in social organization, cultural identity, and in the transmission of knowledge.

This study sets out to analyze language and communication in pre-colonial Nigerian society. Available studies on pre-colonial Nigerian societies have been in relation to history and anthropology. Observably, the results have been quite rewarding as many of such studies have been in the areas of press, politics, and traditional systems of communication (Omu, 1978; Wilson, 1987; Aziken and Emeni, 2010). Interestingly, Offiong (2019), carried out a detailed study on language and discourse in Nigerian education with emphasis on implications to gender issues. Many aspects of gender-related issues and culture were examined in that study. However, nothing has been done exhaustively in the aspect of language in relation to the numerous Nigerian ethnic groups. This study, therefore, will contribute to the limited number of existing works on language studies in pre-colonial Nigerian society.

Linguistic Diversity

The Federal Republic of Nigeria is one of the nations in West Africa. It has a population of "223,805,000 and 520 living indigenous languages" (Eberhard *et al*, 2005; Blench, 2014), each with its own distinct language. Nigeria, as a nation, is "composed of different indigenous cultures and languages. It is divided into geo-political zones, states, and ethnic groups" (Inegbe, 2011, p. 177 and Inegbe, 2014). Pre-colonial Nigeria was a mosaic of numerous ethnic groups with different languages and cultures. The largest ethnic groups are the three major ones: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, as recognised in the Nigerian constitution to be used till "when adequate arrangements have been made therefore" (cf *Nigerian Constitution* of 1979 amended in 1989, 5b (53)). These indigenous languages spoken across the region belong to various language families such as "Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic" (Blench, 1998; Crozier & Blench, 1992). Niger-Congo, according to Blench, (1998) is the largest language family that predominates in the Central, Eastern and Southern regions of Nigeria. The main branches represented in Nigeria are "Mande, Atlantic, Gur, Kwa, Benue-Congo, and Adamawa-Ubangi" (Blench, 1998). Nilo-Saharan is spoken mainly in the northern regions. In Nigeria, this language family is represented by Saharan, Songhai, and Central Sudanic languages. Saharan languages are spoken by Kanuri and Kanembu in the Northeastern region of Nigeria in the states of Borno, Yobe, parts of Jigawa, Bauchi and Teda. Songhai languages are spoken by Zarma (Zabarma) and Dendi in Kebbi, Zamfara, Sokoto, Niger, Kaduna and in Lagos trading communities, while Central Sudanic languages are spoken in Taraba state. Afro-Asiatic languages of Nigeria are divided into Chadic, Semitic and Berber (Campbell and King, 2020). In Nigeria, Chadic language is spoken primarily among Northern Nigerians. This

language is often associated with Islamic culture in Nigeria, and according to Blench (1998) and Crozier and Blench (1992) Hausa is classified as a West Chadic language of the Chadic grouping, a major sub-family of Afro-Asiatic, which has historically been one of Nigeria's major lingua franca, especially in trade. This linguistic landscape fostered a rich tapestry of cultures and traditions, with each language serving as a repository of unique worldviews, histories, and social structures. Major languages such as Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were already prominent in their respective regions, facilitating trade, political organization, and cultural expression among large populations. However, other numerous smaller languages also thrived, each integral to the identity and daily lives of their speakers. Multilingualism was likely common in areas where different ethnic groups interacted (Inegbe, 2013), especially in trade centres and border regions. The diversity in languages contributed to a vibrant cultural landscape and influenced social interactions among different groups through trade, intermarriage, and other forms of contact.

Oral Tradition

In the pre-colonial Nigerian society, communication depended entirely upon oracy. This is to say that communication depended totally and wholly on spoken words. Age was revered and viewed as an important factor in each of the diverse Nigerian linguistic communities. This is because it was believed that the aged had facility in speech. As such, they were seen as repositories of knowledge and traditions. Knowledge and traditions about various linguistic communities were passed on by words of mouth through these well-endowed aged ones. Thus, oral tradition served as the primary means of communication, knowledge transmission, and cultural preservation. Information, histories, laws, customs, and entertainment were all conveyed through spoken words such as folktales, proverbs, songs and poetry, genealogies and oral histories. Folktales were used to impart moral lessons, cultural values, and historical events. Folktales include animal fables, legends, stories, mimes, pantomimes, dance, and myths that reflect the worldview of communities. Proverbs are wise sayings that are rich in metaphor and meaning. These concise expressions served as a means of communication, conveying wisdom, philosophical insights, social and cultural norms. Songs and poetry were performed at various ceremonies. These forms of social expressions facilitated communication about important life events such as births, marriages, funerals, religious rituals, social commentary, and entertainment, often linking community members through shared experiences.

Under genealogies and oral histories, lineages and historical events were meticulously memorized and recited. This was to ensure the continuity of social structures and collective memory. However, concerning myths, oral cultures do not make clear distinctions between myth and history. What is known of the past comes as stories told by gifted, aged storytellers by moonlight. Much of the morals, values, and norms of pre-colonial societies were determined by the relative emphasis meaning-makers placed on the experiences they transmitted. They sometimes fabricated stories and wove them around important and sensitive communal developments so as to draw important lessons from them. These stories, most times, were presented as events that took place. These later formed parts of the history of that society. Much of such stories about the supernatural, gods and other inexplicable developments were constructed as myths of the people. Valued histories were transmitted through stories, and collective wisdom were passed on to the next generation by means of proverbs, parables, and metaphors as explained earlier. In pre-colonial Nigerian societies, people valued the art of conversation and storytelling.

Social Communication and Roles of Language

Language served various functions in the pre-colonial Nigerian societies. Certain professions and social groups developed their specialized communication systems. Language was not merely a tool for conversation but was integral to social organization. As a versatile social tool of communication, Language played the following roles in the pre-colonial Nigerian societies:

- i. *identification and ethnicity*: Language was deeply tied to ethnic identity and social groups. Speaking a particular language often signifies allegiance to a particular group, and reinforces cultural ties (Inegbe, 2024);
- ii. *status and power*: Different dialects or styles of speaking indicated social status. Elders and those in positions of authority often spoke in a formal register, while more of casual language would be employed

among peers. The speeches of elders and traditional leaders were always laden with proverbial sayings and references to ancestry. Hence, they were seen as repositories of wisdom and knowledge;

- iii. *Conflict resolution*: Traditional leaders often mediated in disputes using rhetoric, proverbs, and their oratory skills to maintain peace, and harmony as well as settle differences;
- iv. *market communication*: Market places were not only centres of trade but also important squares for information dissemination. Market criers announced prices, new arrivals, sanitation days and other important information related to that social group;
- v. *masquerade cult and seers*: Masqueraders and seers used coded languages, signs, and symbols known only to their members;
- vi. *age grades*: This social group had their own forms of communication that reinforced group identity and hierarchy;
- vii. *town criers*: Town criers were vital figures in pre-colonial Nigerian communities. They were typically men with strong voices. They served as official messengers, disseminating important news, announcements from the rulers and councils, and calls to gatherings. They often used gongs or other instruments to draw attention before delivering their messages publicly.

Sign Language and Systems

Communication in the pre-colonial era was not limited to spoken language. Various non-verbal systems such as gestures, arts, and symbols enhanced communication.

- i. *Gestures and Body Language*: While specific meanings varied across cultures, body posture, gestures, and facial expressions played a role in conveying emotions, status, and intentions, particularly in contexts where verbal communication could be misunderstood.
- ii. *Arts and Symbols as Language*: Visual forms of communication such as carvings, sculptures, and textile patterns often carried social and cultural significance, conveying messages that complemented spoken language. Items such as cowrie shells, kola nuts, palm fronds, and specific clothing also carried symbolic meanings and conveyed messages within certain contexts. Some traditional shrubs and trees were planted as symbols and signals at borders of different linguistic communities to demarcate their borders and to set land marks. Some communities still have totems that serve as communal symbols. For instance, in Efik Eburutu community, *Ekpe* is believed to be a spirit that resides in the forest and is translated as “leopard” (Aye, 1967, p. 70).
- iii. *Talking Drums*: In many Nigerian societies, particularly among the Yoruba, the ‘talking drum’ known traditionally as *dundun* (Omu, 1978) was used in conveying complex messages across distances. These drums re-echo to imitate the tones and rhythms of speech across distances. Among the Efik, Ibibio and Anaang communities of South-South region of Nigeria, these talking drums are traditionally called *obodom* and *ntakrok*. These drums were used for announcements, ceremonies, and even political communication.
- iv. *Gongs and Horns*: These instruments served as signaling devices for announcements, warnings, and social gatherings. According to Wilson (1981) these loud-sounding gongs are common among the people of Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. In Igbo land, the wooden-gong is known traditionally as *ekwe* (Wilson, 1981).

Impact Of Trade and Migration on Languages and Cultures

Languages and communication in pre-colonial Nigerian societies were significantly shaped by both internal and external forces. Trade and migration served as major vehicles for socio-linguistic and cultural exchange as well as transformation. Language play a key role in the successful integration into labour markets and society. According to Chiswick (1991) and Chiswick and Miller (1995), language proficiency among migrants can be determined by the “exposure” to the host language, “efficiency” in the language acquisition and “economic incentives” to learn a new language. These processes, often intertwined, fostered both convergence and divergence across the various ethnic groups that inhabited the region. This, in a way, indicates that pre-colonial Nigerian societies were dynamic entities.

Trade, both local and long-distance, played a dynamic role in shaping linguistic and cultural terrains of pre-colonial Nigeria through the following ways:

- i. *Language Contact and Borrowing*: Trade routes served as conduits for language contact. As people from different linguistic backgrounds interacted for economic exchange, they inevitably borrowed words and phrases from each other. For instance, the extensive trade networks involving the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba likely led to the adoption of certain terms related to trade goods, market practices, and even social customs across these languages. The trans-Saharan trade, connecting northern Nigeria with North Africa, introduced Arabic loanwords into Hausa and other northern languages, particularly in the areas of religion, law, scholarship, and commerce. Hausa traders, who established trade routes across the region also contributed to the spread of Hausa language as a lingua franca. This facilitated communication across many communities and enhanced socio-economic interaction.
- ii. *Development of Trade Languages /Lingua Franca*: In some instances, the need for an efficient communication in trade leads to the development or adoption of lingua franca. While there is no extensive documentation of fully developed trade languages across all of pre-colonial Nigeria, it is plausible that simplified forms of dominant languages or pidgin-like varieties emerged in key trading centers to facilitate interaction between diverse groups.
- iii. *Cultural Exchange and Diffusion*: Markets and trade routes were not just places for exchanging goods; they were also vibrant spaces for cultural exchange. Interactions between traders and buyers from different ethnic groups led to the sharing of customs, traditions, artistic styles, religious beliefs, and social practices. For example, the spread of certain fashion items, food preparation techniques, or musical instruments could be attributed to trade-related interactions. The trans-Saharan trade also facilitated the introduction and spread of Islam and Islamic culture in northern Nigeria, influencing legal systems, education, architecture, and social norms.
- iv. *Economic Specialisation and Cultural Differentiation*: Trade also foster economic specialisation among different communities based on their resource endowments or skills. This specialisation, in turn, led to development of distinct cultural practices and identities associated with particular trades or crafts. For example, communities known for metal-works, weaving, or salt production, developed unique rituals, social organizations, and artistic expressions related to their primary economic activities.
- v. *Spread of Innovations and Technologies*: Trade facilitated the diffusion of new technologies and innovations across different parts of Nigeria. The introduction of new crops, tools, or manufacturing techniques through trade had significant impacts on agricultural practices, craft production, and overall way of life. This led to cultural adaptations and dialectal droppings and changes.

Migration, driven by factors such as population pressure, conflict, environmental changes, and the search for better opportunities, also profoundly influenced the linguistic and cultural map of pre-colonial Nigeria. These impacts are visible in the following ways:

- i. *Language Shift and Language Contact*: When groups migrated to new areas, they often come in contact with existing linguistic communities. This contact often leads to language shift, as the migrant group gradually adopts the language of the host community, especially if the migrants were a smaller group, they get integrated into the host society over time. Conversely, if a large or dominant group migrated, their language could spread and influence the languages of the indigenous populations of the host society.
- ii. *Language Islands and Linguistic Diversity*: Migration contributed to the complex linguistic diversity of Nigeria. Movements of people resulted in the establishment of language “islands” where speakers of a particular language were surrounded by speakers of different languages. This close proximity often leads to linguistic borrowings and mutual influence, contributing to the evolution and diversification of languages.
- iii. *Cultural Assimilation and Integration*: Migration often involved cultural exchange and adaptation. Migrant groups had to learn and adopt aspects of the host community’s culture to integrate successfully. This could include adopting new social norms, customs, religious practices, and even kinship systems. Over time, this

process could lead to cultural assimilation (Chiswick, 1991), where the distinct cultural traits of migrant group might become less pronounced.

- iv. *Cultural Hybridity and Innovation*: Migration could also lead to cultural hybridity, where the interaction between migrant and host cultures result in the emergence of new cultural forms and practices (Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011) that blend elements from both linguistic communities. This could manifest in new artistic expressions, religious syncretism, or development of unique social institutions.
- v. *Conflict and Cultural Boundaries*: In some cases, migration could lead to conflict over resources or territory which could, in turn, reinforce cultural boundaries and differences between groups. The need to maintain distinct identities in the face of potential conflict could lead to a greater emphasis on cultural markers such as language, customs, and traditions.
- vi. *Spread of Governance and Social Structures*: Migrations associated with the rise and expansion of pre-colonial states and empires often lead to the spread of particular forms of governance, social hierarchies, and legal systems. The migration of ruling elites and their entourages could introduce new administrative technologies and cultural practices associated with the dominant political entity.

It is important to note that the impacts of trade and migration on languages and cultures are interconnected processes. Trade routes frequently facilitated migration, and migrant communities could become important nodes in the trade networks. For instance, trading diaspora often emerged as migrant groups establish themselves in new areas and leverage their connections to facilitate trade between their homelands and their new settlements. This interconnectedness amplified the linguistic and cultural impacts of both processes.

Ritual Language and Ceremonial Communication

Language and communication played significant roles in religious and ceremonial settings. Ritual language was a medium of spiritual communication that conveyed traditional values into a society. These traditions and customs have a significant role in strengthening the cultural identity of a society (Nuraedah and Saefudin (2024). Tradition uses ceremonial languages like songs and prayers to convey social values and strengthen social cohesion within the community as maintain Noortyani *et al* (2023) and Suma *et al* (2024). Rituals were accompanied by songs, prayers and incantatory chants, often in the community's native language. Ritual communication connects individuals with their spiritual beliefs and the collective memory of the community. The languages used for ritual and ceremonial communication holds immense significance, often imbued with sacredness and power. They are not just tools for conveying information but are believed to have direct links to the spiritual realm, ancestors, and the very fabric of the cosmos. The specific languages and their characteristics varied greatly across the diverse ethnic groups, reflecting their unique cosmologies and social structures. According to Budasi *et al* (2023) ceremonial language was a symbol of local pride and values, as well as means of communication. The key characteristics and distinctive roles of these ritual and ceremonial languages are:

- i. *Elevated and Specialized Vocabulary*: Ritual languages often employed a distinct vocabulary, filled with archaic words, metaphors, and esoteric terms not commonly used in everyday speech (Inegbe, 2023). This creates a sense of otherness and reinforced the sacred nature of the communication. For example, names of deities, spirits, and sacred objects would have specific, often revered, terms.
- ii. *Formal and Poetic Structures*: Ceremonial language frequently adhered to strict grammatical structures, rhythmic patterns, and poetic devices like repetition, parallelism, and incantations (Inegbe, 2018). These formal structures enhanced the solemnity and memorability of the communication, making it more impactful and easier to transmit across generations, especially, the carefully structured chants during ancestral veneration or the rhythmic invocations during religious festivals.
- iii. *Restricted Access and Transmission*: Knowledge of ritual languages was often restricted to specific individuals or groups, such as priests, diviners, elders, or members of masquerade cults. This controlled access reinforced their authority and the sanctity of the rituals. Transmission of this knowledge typically occurred through rigorous oral tradition, often involving apprenticeships and initiations.

- iv. *Symbolic and Metaphorical Language*: Ritual communication often relied heavily on symbolism and metaphor to convey complex spiritual concepts and cosmological understandings. Objects, animals, colours, and natural phenomena could all carry profound symbolic meaning (Inegbe, 2020) within a ritual context, and the language used would often allude to these meanings rather than stating them directly.
- v. *Performative and Action-Oriented*: Ritual language was not just about conveying information; it was performative. The very act of speaking certain words or phrases was believed to have power (Inegbe, 2024) to invoke spirits, influence events, heal ailments, or ensure prosperity. The efficacy of the ritual was often tied to the correct pronunciation and delivery of these sacred utterances.
- vi. *Connection to Ancestors and Deities*: A primary function of ritual language was to communicate with the spirit world. Prayers, invocations, sacrifices, and offerings were often accompanied by specific linguistic formulas believed to be understood by ancestors and deities. The language served as a bridge between the human and the supernatural realms.
- vii. *Maintaining Social Order and Values*: Ceremonial language played a sensitive role in reinforcing social norms, values, and hierarchies. Rites of passage, coronations, and other significant social events involved specific linguistic performances that legitimized authority, transmitted cultural knowledge, and strengthened social cohesion.
- viii. *Preservation of Cultural Heritage*: Ritual and ceremonial languages served as important vehicles for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across generations. Myths, legends, historical accounts, and traditional wisdom were often embedded within ritualistic chants, songs, and narratives.

Illustrative Examples of Ritual Language and Ceremonial Communication Across Nigerian Ethnic Groups

While specific documented examples from every single pre-colonial society are scarce due to the reliance on oral tradition, this study will infer certain practices based on anthropological and historical studies. However, Nigeria's rituals and ceremonial languages are rich and diverse.

Yoruba: The Yoruba language is rich in proverbs and metaphorical expressions, prominent in ritual incantations and invocations to the *Orisha* (deity). The use of praise names, *oriki* (Bascom, 1952) for deities and ancestors, with their poetic and evocative language, was central to ceremonial communication. Ritual language is also in *Isomo Ioruko* (naming ceremony). Yoruba naming ceremony is a sacred event where names are carefully chosen for a newborn using symbolic items such as honey, sugarcane, kola nut, salts, dry fish for destiny significance.

Igbo: In Igbo society, ritual language often involved the use of symbolic objects and gestures alongside specific incantations, such as, kola nut, *ọfọ* (Chukuma and Odoja, 2017). Kola nut is used for a ritual of welcome and peace with blessings offered for prosperity. The concept of *ọfọ* itself embodies both ritual authority and the power of spoken word in connecting with the spiritual realm. Oaths and covenants also involved carefully worded pronouncements with significant spiritual implications.

Hausa: The Hausa language, while influenced by Arabic in certain religious contexts, pre-colonial Hausa rituals likely involved specific forms of address to spirits and the use of traditional proverbs and metaphors in ceremonial contexts like naming ceremonies, marriages, and traditional festivals. The recitation of lineage histories and praise songs for important figures would also have employed a formal and often poetic style. The Fulani have a harsh rite of passage into manhood known as *Sharo /Shadi* festival, where young men endure whipping to show bravery and maturity for marriage (Ibrahim, 1966; Yaakugh, 2019). This is a vibrant cultural event reinforcing Fulani identity, and values, celebrating endurance, honour and community. This cultural ceremony often take place during Eid festivals, particularly after Ramadan. Success in *Sharo* ceremony brings prestige, making participants more desirable as husbands.

Benin Kingdom: The rich oral traditions of the Benin Kingdom involved specific forms of address to the *Oba* (king), who held both political and spiritual authority. Rituals which honour ancestors and deities employed a formal and dignified language, emphasizing the power and lineage of the kingdom. In Benin kingdom, there is also a harsh traditional widowhood practices, such as traditional custom of drinking water used in bathing the husband's corpse. This ritual practice is also seen among the Imo State people of Nigeria as noted Uzoma (2025). This practice was used to prove a widow's innocence in her husband's death. This practice, however, is declining.

In Efik and Ibibio lands, there is a traditional prenuptial initiation rite known as *mbopo*. A coming-of-age ceremony for young girls. A traditional rite of passage for young maidens into womanhood (Adekunle and Edem, 2023). This practice involves seclusion, fattening, body painting, teaching domestic management, moral values and public display showcasing the maidens' readiness for marriage. This tradition due to modern influences and criticisms is declining.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that there are challenges in exhaustively studying various linguistic practices of various communities. The primary mode of transmission in traditional societies was oral, meaning that much of the specific linguistic detail was not written down. And many of the gifted aged orators and storytellers passed on without bequeathing their special skills or talents to posterity. The esoteric nature of many ritual languages meant that knowledge was often guarded, kept secret, and not shared with outsiders. As such, meaning in language was specific. This is to say, an outsider required a kind of acculturation and integration to decode information. Colonialism also led to the suppression of many traditional religious practices and the dominance of European languages, resulting in the loss or alteration of some ritual languages and practices. Despite these challenges, the understanding that pre-colonial Nigerian societies possessed distinct and powerful languages for ritual and ceremonial communication highlights the deep connection between language, culture, and spirituality in these communities. These languages were not merely tools for communication but were integral to maintaining social order, connecting with the divine, and preserving cultural heritage.

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