

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, APPROACHES TO PEACE BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: INSIGHT FROM EHUGBO-IGBO

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Abstract

The study laments the spate and incessant eruption of conflict around Nigeria with the wanton loss of lives and destruction of properties. Therefore, the questions this study evokes are: How do we account for the apparent culture of violence which now prevails in Nigeria? Is violence now part of the Nigerian Culture? What is the role of language and culture in peace building and conflicts resolution? Are there traditionally non – violent approaches to conflict resolution? Our method is to examine some idioms, proverbs or wise sayings in Ehugbo dialect which reveals the attitude of the people to conflicts. Using data carefully gathered during some events that centered on peaceful resolution of conflict among native speakers of the dialect under study, the paper using Johan Galtung (1964) theory of peace framework examines some strategic approaches to peace building and conflict resolution in Ehugbo culture. Findings reveal that there are approaches in Ehugbo dialects by which conflicts are resolved without resort to violence and which the paper recommends as applicable globally so as to foster a culture of peace rather than a culture of conflict.

Keywords: Language, Culture, Peace Building, Conflict Resolution, Ehugbo.

Introduction

The spate of conflict on the Nigerian nation in recent times is alarming. Available statistics on conflicts across the nook and cranny of Nigeria suggest it (conflict) to have become a norm in the society. There seems to be increase in the crave for violence among Nigerians, as a way of resolving conflicts instead of adopting dialogue – a peaceful approach. The pervasiveness of violence across the landscape of Nigeria becomes more evident considering the frequency of news of violent clashes among Nigerian groups and communities in the media. Cases in mind are some recent incidents of violent crises, including Ezza – Ezilo crisis, Jos Crises, Izhi – Cross River Crises, Nko – Odukpani Crises (in Cross River state) Boko Haram and Herdsmen menace, to mention but a few.

From available records and current happenings in Nigeria today, it is safe to say that the country has been engulfed by conflicts of different kinds, ranging from communal and ethnic, socio-political, security, religious and economic clashes. As

the disputants shun amicable peace building approaches to the resolution of conflict, these conflicts turn violent. This situation compels critical reflection on conflicts and how conflicts and crises can be properly managed. Peace building as a panacea for healthy co-existence among inter and intra-ethnic societies is hinged on appropriate choice of language. Language is power, and has equal validity to create or destroy, make or unmake, its appropriate use is vital for the sustenance of peace in any given society. Power, peace and even conflict are all embedded in language. To this end, it is pertinent to note that language can be vitriolic, inciting, offensive, insolent, provocative, and destructive, thus be the cause of avoidable conflict. When inappropriately released, they can be as incendiary as volcanoes or bombs and as penetratingly destructive as ballistic missiles. Many conflicts resulting from inappropriate language have been known to degenerate into unimaginable violence, broken marriages and friendships, family disarray, war-torn nations, churches and mosque in flames, business aground, and so on.

The Ehugbo people are known to always recognize the virtue of diplomacy in language and thus, there is no magnitude of violence-inciting act or peace-threatening incidence of any nature that there is not one or two subtle idioms or proverbs handy for bringing the situation to normal. That is to say that, in Ehugbo Culture, when a conflict seems to be getting out of hand for the members of the society, the wise folks look for certain cultural approaches to stem the tide and bring a sure resolution of what may look like a thorny issue. For instance, when a misunderstanding is tearing a community, a village, families or even neighbors apart, the elders or wise folks employ the use of proverbs to express their confusion and to underscore their hope for a definite resolution of the issues; thus, the paradox in Ehugbo: *Ihe a maghi nke e je mie, nke e je mie dinwa* which transliterates to "That which has no way of doing it does have a way of doing". This means that there must be a solution to every problem, no matter how difficult.

Conceptual Clarifications

Language

That language has enormous or stupendous power and has a huge role in crises management is a given fact; but what then is language?

Language, as understood and used in this study, is the repository of a people's world - view, the expression of a people's cultural heritage, - a unique vehicle for the conveyance of meaning and cultural value. It is an important means of communication, linking people and transmitting knowledge without the loss of identity. Language is an indispensable tool for the sustenance of peace, for without it, achieving peace during conflict will be impossible. This is why Amaku (2005:103) in Thomas Aquinas considers possession of language as nobly distinguishing humans from brute animals.

Nwankwegu and Nwode (2012:3) assert that humans are not unique in the capacity to communicate with one another. According to them, other animals communicate with one another, however, there are certain features that distinguish human language from other communication system. They outlined the following features that characterize human language; Arbitrariness, Duality of patterning, Grammaticality, Displacement, Productivity, Dynamicity, Versatility and Genetic Transmission. They therefore see language as a system of vocal, written, or gestural symbols that can be combined in various ways following a set of rule, to communicate thought, express feelings, or issue instructions. This is in line with Agbedo's (2015:14) opinion that language is generally seen as a human system of communication that uses arbitrary signals such voice sounds, gestures or written symbols. He also sees language as a culturally – established rules which govern all forms of linguistic knowledge, which de Saussure referred to as "Langue". As a passively accumulated, culturally – inherited and institutionalized instrument created through time by any given speech community to enable its members use their faculty of speech to achieve their communicative needs.

Similarly, The New Encyclopedia Britannica (1986) in Emeka-Nwobia (2007) sees language as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by which human beings as members of a social group and participants in culture communicate. By this definition Emeka-Nwobia posits that language is a possession unique and peculiar to human being. In other words language is specific to a species of mammals (the Homo Sapien) other animals interact by means of body movements and sounds, others even learn to understand human language to a certain extent. Yet, no animal language has conventionalized its cries and utterances to form a systematic symbol as human language has.

In the present study, we see language as a type of non-material culture conventionalized by a group of people to vividly communicate thought and share information from one person to another. Hence, our conceptualization of language aligns with Usman's (2014) assertion that language is the greatest embodiment of any culture. For through language, other aspect of a people culture is communicated to the outside world.

Culture

According to Ogbalu and Emenanjo (1982), culture consists of everything that cut across human, social, religious and economic organization. For Mesembe (2005) culture as used today, include all the ways, means and conditions of living invested by human societies such that man everywhere has a culture and is a culture builder. Culture to him is what makes a society what it is, marking it out from any other society, it is the total way of life of a people. To Boldley (1994) culture is a social

heritage or tradition that is passed on to future generation which is equally a shared and learned human behavior. It is also ideals, values or rules of living.

The culture of any society is like a mirror through which that society is viewed. The culture of any given society is unique and peculiar to the people practicing it, and that is why despite the levels of globalization, education and development several many societies still strive to retain and maintain their culture. This leads us to the question, what then is culture?

Culture is a universal concept, this is because there are certain elements of culture that are found in all human societies. For instance, in all cultures of the world we find family, language, marriage, religion etc. Though, the exact form differs from society to society. In Ehugbo culture, there have been from time immemorial some cultural approaches which are used to engender peace during conflict and crises instead of resorting to arms carrying and other practices that encourage war, this could be seen as their own culture. Onyia (1999) notes that, whatever a group of people that inhabit a defined geographical area do to live their lives their lives is their culture, the language they speak, the type of food they eat, the type of house the build, how they greet one another, how they govern themselves, how they worship, etc. in short all people of the world have their philosophy of life, which guides them and how they put that philosophy into practice is their culture.

Linking language to culture or vice versa, Mbah (2018) says that culture refers to the values, norms, and belief of a society, our culture can be thought of as a lens through which we experience the world and develop shared meaning. Each culture, the major strand of which includes language within a speech community, decrees the norm of appropriate speech in terms of grammaticality and acceptability. The normative code is one but may be realized differently in different members of the society. In line with Boldley (1994), Igbo and Anugwom (2001) say that culture is a generally learned and shared ways of doing things that are peculiar to a given society. Culture can be seen as the most peculiar and unifying property of a society especially when it is reached that when people come and go (die) in a society, the culture remains, in other words, culture is super organic. Culture is transmitted from generation to another and the transmission goes on endlessly with the culture undergoing some changes to suit the demands of society at each period.

Peace and Peace-Building

Peace accordingly to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary is a situation or a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. To appropriately put in context what could be regarded as 'Peace' Biblically can be said to exist when one has the right or being in right relationship with God. And when this is achieved then the peace that passeth all understand prevails. Be that as it may, peace accordingly to International Alert report (2002) is a condition that can be

experienced at the personal, community or national levels. Drawing from the above, Ezirim (2008) says that peace denote the absence of armed conflict, direct violence, civil disorder and upheaval which by extension guarantees from one tranquility, freedom from want, quietness, harmony and the absence of fear. At the level of community, peace denotes more than the absence of welfare or hostilities. This presupposes the notion of equity, social justice, law and order, good governance and respect for the dignity and well-being of all citizens. One can add equally that peace here should be the one that guarantee for Nigerians citizens equal opportunity, social justice and active participation in its building. Peace building involves a direct or indirect efforts which involves the restoration of law and order by creating an atmosphere suitable for the conduct of normal social, political and economic activities within a given society.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

The spate of conflict in the country today has put the term conflict in the everyday lexicon of both the media in Nigeria and the ordinary Nigerians. From far and near, no day passes by without one hearing of, experiencing or observing one form of conflict or the other. This could lead one to conclude in a haste that Nigeria is a country with culture of conflict. People erroneously tends to see conflict to be synonymous with violence and as something negative, which is to be avoided or ignored even fought about. Mesemba (2005) notes that an average Nigerian sees conflict as bad and that the feelings is that nothing good could come out of conflict. However, one must note that conflict is not at all times negative. This is in line with Mbah's (2018) assertion that conflict may not be directly culture hardening, strengthening, effacement and or shift. He goes on to contend that conflict as cited in Igboanusi (2017) is the competition by groups or individuals over incompatible goals, scarce resources or in the sources of power needed to acquire them. He is also of the view that the competition may be enhanced by the people's perception which varies from individuals to individuals and from society to society. For Odo (2006), sometimes violence is interchanged with the issue of conflict, which is not the same, while conflict is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence, violence is not. Conflict can further be seen as the pursuit of an incompatible group or individual interest goals, violence is only an outcome of conflict or use of force.

In Ehugbo language and culture, the word conflict does not necessarily connote evil. It indicates a relationship between two opposing forces. In essence, conflict is neither positive nor negative but only indicates a relationship between opposing forces and thus offers opportunity for better understanding or resolution. This is evidence in the saying *I be aha adighi mma onwo nde o bu uru diri*, which is translated to mean "conflict in a society benefits some folks". And *ibi mgbada bu*

uru di nta which also means that the tumor on the scrotum of a deer is to the gain of the hunter”.

Conflict resolution on the other hand according to Okoro (2005:162) is not an easy exercise. He portends that the nature of the economic and social environment and the mode of political governance have a lot to do with the cause and dynamic of conflict in Nigeria. It is a test of human maturity and civilization. Ede (2001:3) says that resolution is synonymous with the term peace, amicable solution, arrived at after trouble – shooting exercise in which two or more parties in discord agree to mend their co-existential fences, a temporary or permanent truce or cessation of mutual hostilities can be arrived at through...negotiations, mediation, arbitration or mere surrender. For Wallenstein (2002:8) Conflict resolution is a situation where the conflicting parties enter into an agreement that solves their central incompatibilities, accept each other's contained existence as parties cease all violent action against each other. He pointed the following as the basic element in conflict resolution.

- Reaching an agreement, a formal understanding among parties in conflict where a signed document is produced;
- Recognition of the continued existence of the opposing parties, not a situation of defeat and win or capitulation but fighting parties must accept each other as parties in future dealings with one another and;
- Termination of violent action against each other wherewith war ends fear and insecurity of persons, including former belligerents.

From the foregoing, whatever effort that are made to achieve peace during any form of conflict are sacrifice made for the survival and perpetuation of the human race. Hence for a peaceful co-existence and orderliness, language and cultural approaches to peace building and conflict resolution are the most congenial ingredient required guided by mutual trust.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Active peace as propounded by Johan Galtung (1964) provides the theoretical bases on which the study is hinged. Galtung's theory conceptualizes peace-building by calling for systems that would create sustainable peace, and peace-building approaches needed to address the root causes of conflicts and support local capacities for peace management and conflict resolutions.

This study explores such intricate relationship among the Ehugbo people, their dialect and their culture, as reflected in some approaches used to enhance peaceful co-existence and in resolving conflict among the people.

Approaches to Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in Ehugbo

Conflict resolution and peace building approaches involve conflict prevention, facilitative mediation, resolution and the process of peace building. The Ehugbo people understand these steps of conflict resolution, they are aware that peace is a core value in human existence, hence the general warning that *emeteri adighi mma*, that is “conflict is not good” there are several strategies or conflicting handling styles discernable in Ehugbo dialect and culture which may be employed in conflict management and resolution. They are:

Matrilineal Relationship:

In Ehgbo Culture people of the same matrilineal relation (*Ikwu*) are always seen as maternal relations and as such is forbidden by custom to marry one another. Therefore, conflict involving such individuals on finding out that they are of the same matrilineal system are easily resolved with saying as *unu emetesiri n’unu bu Ikwu ani*. That is “stop the conflict for both of you are the same lineage system. *Ikwu bu anu ogazi, O di na akpa la akpa* which means that Blood relations are incompatible. *Ihe meri imi meri enya*. What affects the nose affects the eye. *Didide bu ugwueze* that is to say that the dignity in royalty is mass followership and that *Ihe meri imi meri enya* which means that whatever effects the nose automatically affect the eye.

Avoidance: this is a strategy of ignoring the existence of a problem or at least refusing to respond. The Ehugbo people say *ngugu abughu nri* which means that trouble is not food. *Kpa jii laa jii akaghi ibe ohi*, that is peaceful approach engender no strife. *Ere efukwe n’oba adighi*. “May troubles and temptation never come to one as there may be no place to store them”. The message portrayed by these proverbs is that one should be careful and sensitive to situations, read and analyze situations properly and always withdraw or avoid conflict. *N’ ubi na diri nwere nwere eweri okwuru gbaa ya ogige*. That is keeping the records straight irrespective of relationship. Avoidance is not a particularly effective method of conflict resolution but it is useful in some cases such as rumor mongering, when a matter is trivial or of little importance and when there are other more pressing matters.

Accommodating: The strategy of accommodating requires that the individual or societies in conflict neglect his or their own interest to satisfy the concerns or interest of the other parties. The major factor here is self – sacrifice and forgiveness. *The Ehugbo people say ihe egbe riri lari ugo n’eho* that is your brother’s progress is yours as well. The virtue of self-sacrifice and forgiveness is captured in the following sayings: *Na ihe tari n’abali buru enwu*, meaning let the bye gone be bye gone. And *o dighi onye n’eme biko biko egbubee mma n’eka*. Which means that a

repentant offender deserve forgiveness and to be accommodated. *O bu adigi uuto bu n'ugbo abagi aba*, which is “strife militate against peaceful co-existence”

Compromising: Another approach to peace building and conflict resolution in Ehugbo is that of compromise. Following this style, one compromise so as to find an expedient mutually acceptable solutions which will partially or wholly satisfy the parties in a conflict. The Ehugbo people say *okuku eboo evugu ochicha aani*, which is compromise is the soul of peaceful co-existence. Again, *odighi ihe enya huru gbaa mee*, meaning that whatever happens can be over looked. Similarly, *kama mia j'eseri enyi ya enyi, n'itie wahi n'uzo*, which is interpreted as “may whatever will cause conflicts between friends never happen. The morale here is to make concessions. One must at sometimes forgo his or her right, so as to gain other things or engender peace. *Ekemeke na adari ochi n'ali*, which mean that “one must willingly yield in certain circumstances to allow for peace to reign.

ProblemSolving: following the problem solving approach, the parties in a conflict listen with the intent to understand the underlying elements in the conflict and attack the issues for amicable resolution. Parties in a conflict must as a matter of necessity accept mediation. The Ehugbo people say *Avua echara avuko laga laa*. Meaning “to achieve a lasting settlement of conflict, ensure that the root cause is well addressed. *Obu okweri nke madu sia chu ijiji n'egba*, that is good counsel comes from well-wishers. *Egwue ye egwu waa ya awa, n'ihe no na nnu futa i.e.* by whatever means possible let a problem be solved. *Akpatauka akpalagaria aga uka*, which means that in the days of trouble, one must run to his superiors for help. In adopting this strategy, parties must show respect for their differences and look for ways to resolve the problem.

Inter – Marriage: Inter – marriage is another strategy for addressing conflict situation among the Ehugbo people and this is encouraged by the present study. The Ehugbo people as well as most African societies believe that marriage is between not just the married couple but between the extended families of the bride and groom and even both their communities. There is a saying that *Aguiyi erighi uba n'okpe ono*, “that is protect the ones within your environment. And *ihe gbasiri di la nye bu ura nkita, ghi darim na mu adarighi*, meaning that “there should be mutual co-existence among couples and other members of the couples families. *Obu nnunu kweri ihe gi n'akpari gi ekwini n'ubi* i.e. one who loves you associates with you. In the course of the history of the Ehugbo people several inter-communal conflicts have been resolved as a result of inter – marriage. *Onye emer na nwadie ekwekwe* which means be your brother's keeper.

Socio-linguistically the importance of matrilineal relationship in Ehugbo culture and society cannot be over emphasized, in no small measures they have helped to engender peace, unity and progress among people of same matrilineal lineage. This is no doubt one of the many reasons why there is absence of communal clashes in Ehugbo communities. Similarly, avoidance, accommodating, compromising, problem solving and inter marriages are fundamental approaches through which conflicts which could result into crisis have been nipped in the bud. The people of Ehugbo are so closed to one another as even their traditional religious practices abhors them being in enmity with one another. This is noticeable in the love that is always visibly shown to any Ehugbo person especially at first contact, words like *Nwere m* i.e my brother or sister is always used to portray the love they have for one another.

These are some of the traditional non-violence approaches to peace building and conflict resolution which were and are still being employed by the Ehugbo people in the management and resolution of conflict situations. The people have been adjudged as one of the most peaceful and sociable people and like all right thinking and rational people the world over cherish the value of peace.

Summary and Conclusions

The importance of preserving the people's culture cannot be over stressed. We have therefore, reflected on the phenomenon of language, culture, peace and conflict resolution. The points made are that conflicts are facts of life, a normal part of living and cannot be wished away. The challenge is how we manage this conflict as individual, a society or a nation, since we tend to allow conflict to form, escalate and reach crises stage when some of the crisis could have been nipped in the bud, perhaps at the formation or escalation stages. We do not need all the violence that goes with these poorly managed conflict as violence does not solve any problem.

Conflict necessarily begets greater conflict, and never achieves lasting peace. Conflict has a habit of generating an inflationary spiral with every apparent successful act of violence; hence, the community involved comes to accept it as part of their culture. Such societies' tolerance decrease and violence increase, and over time an increasingly large amount of it becomes necessary to achieve the same objectives and a culture of violence emerges. Nigeria has metamorphosed to that stage, even though Nigerians are not culturally a violent people as all Nigerian ethnic groups and communities cherish the value of peace as a core value of human existence. What we desire is a culture of peace. Violence is morally undesirable and politically imprudent. Rather than violence, what we need is for Nigeria to adopt more restraint, love for one another, tolerance and the wisdom of managing conflict through the non-violent approaches inherent in the culture of the Ehugbo people.

In this study, we have tried to highlight the importance of matrilineal relationship, avoidance, accommodating, problem solving and inter marriages as approaches to conflict resolution and peace building in the Ehugbo culture and society. It is the believe of this study that if these practical steps are embraced in all cultures, the world will be a better place where justice, peace, and unity will reign supreme.

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NOTE

The Ehugbo dialect also known as Afikpo is a dialect of Igbo language spoken in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, South-East Nigeria.