
The Religious Language and the Challenges of Insecurity in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study discussed and analyzed what constitutes religious language and how it can help to reduce or heighten the insecurity challenges in Nigeria. Given to the present security challenges facing the country, this study analyzed the role which religious languages have played either as instrument of nation-building or as a tool for instigating insurrections, conflicts, and ethnic disputes which adversely affect the national development in Nigeria. Specifically, the study explored the meaning of religious sentences and utterances. Religious sentences are generally taken to have a religious subject matter; a religious utterance in speech or writing of a token religious sentence. In Nigerian Multilingual context, with emphasis on the diversities of languages amongst the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, religious subject matters could encompass a variety of agents, states of affairs or properties-such as God, deities, angels, miracles, redemption, grace, holiness, sinfulness among others. Most attention, however, has been devoted to the meaning of what people say about God. An attempt is made in this study to ascertain the authenticity of such sayings. The study also investigated the existing dividends of multi-lingualism in Nigeria in terms of intra-ethnic group relations as regards to the use of religious language. However, following the findings of this study, the researcher recommended that Nigerian religious leaders should

be mindful on their usage of religious language so as not to instigate violence. The scope of religious language and discourse should be construed in such a way that it would not be castigating, hateful, abusive or insulting to one another; being that Nigeria is comprised of multiple religions. It is hoped that this will help in reducing the incessant insecurity challenges in Nigeria.

Keywords: religion, language, insecurity, nation-building

1. Introduction

Crises in Nigeria particularly, religious crises have affected the growth and development of communities and people in particular and economy in general. Many lives have been cut short, properties worth millions of Naira destroyed while many innocent Nigerians are displaced and turned refugees in their father's land. Most of these crises and insecurity challenges are caused by some religious utterances which instigate violence and strife against the various religious groups in Nigeria (Okpanachi, 2010). Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society consisting of about 340 ethnic groups. This means that in terms of social relations, one of the sociological problems of building Nigeria as a nation is ethnic and religious crises. Religious and ethnic nationalism has led to conflicts about control of state power, unequal allocation of resources, citizenship issues, state collapse, economic decline and ethno-religious clashes. Nigeria has been pushed hither and thither by recurrent crises of regional or state illegitimacy, often impairing efforts at economic transformation, democratization, national cohesion and stability (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). With this continental background, this research work seeks to examine the relationship between religion, ethnicity and conflict in Nigeria, focusing mainly in the south-east region of the

country. The study seeks to ascertain the extent of which conflicts are emanating from religious sources.

Furthermore, with the numerous ethnic groups and well over 450 languages, Nigeria is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural country where diverse culture and religions coexist. All the ethnic cultures are greatly influenced by their respective religious systems and each religion has its distinct religious language by which the adherents communicate with their Supreme Being or deity. This religious diversity contributes to her rich heritage and at the same time mares its growth as a nation. In Nigeria, people of an ethnic group are indentified by their religion and languages spoken and practiced in their community. For instance, the three largest ethnic groups which include Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo speak the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo languages and as well practice Christian, Islam and African Traditional Religion respectively. Other large groups as Edo, Ijaw, Ibibio, Efik, Kanuri, Epira, Nupe, and Tiv are predominantly Christians and Traditionalists. The micro minority groups like Ishekiri, Urhobo, Idoma, Igala, Isoko, Fulani, the Ikwere among others are partly Christians and partly Muslims. Moreover, English and indigenous languages are used side by side amongst these ethnic nationalities in Nigeria whereas Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are predominantly spoken and used as means of communication in the regions where they are located. Though some forms of linguistic homogeneity exist in some parts of the North, West and East, there are a handful of heterogeneous linguistic groups in small, minority speech communities with a variety of dialects. This could be said to contribute to the inability of the country to design national language policy. The fear of marginalization of the minority groups by the majority groups is mainly responsible.

However, recent studies on religious identity have underscored the positive function of religion and language in

promotion of peace. On the other hand, mobilization of identity has been used to incite political groups to struggle and religious groups to legitimize wars and various modes of brutal and violent acts (Alger, 2002). Religious practice is a belief system that is practiced among individuals of different ethnic groups within a political system where language and culture are the most prominent attributes. The formations of religious language within a cultural, political and ethnic space are ways in which religion interacts with the socio-cultural orientations of the people. Thus, the distribution of these languages is directly proportional to both religious and socio-political power, and therefore the language group to which one belongs defines his/her status in society. Missionaries and local politicians created standard languages and hoped they would homogenize language and ethnicity, and create more harmonious ethnic identities. For example, during the colonial and post-colonial era, the administrators allowed the emergence of “us” versus “them” syndrome, where Muslims were pitted against Christians, Northerners against the Southerners, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo against each other, and so on (Adefemi, 2003). In this era, religious and ethnic differences have become prominent factors in instituting and executing socio-economic strategies and applications.

Apparently, Nigeria does not have a language policy. The constitution nonetheless states that the National Assembly must conduct its affairs in English. The constitution also allows the use of indigenous languages in addition to English in the state house of Assembly. Moreover, the role of English as a dominant language to a large extent could be said to be one of the causes of language regression in Nigeria. Nigerians do not only prefer English to their domestic languages, they believe that the later are limited in scope and usefulness. On this fact Oluwole (2001) argues that the extent

to which one language or type of language is favoured or preferred depends on the community's perception of the role or status of that language or language type in the context of the prevailing linguistic attitudes in the society. It could also be said that the spate of religious and ethnic crises in some parts of the country, as well as religious bigotry and ethnic cleansing which has led to disharmony and disintegration, could account for a change in communication patterns. Where people are continuously fleeing from one part of the country to another, the tendency will be to adopt and acquire new speech acts. This affects the overall development of Nigeria in following ways such as having some cases of multi-ethnic vices such as allegiance to ethnic group, intra-cultural and inter-ethnic antagonism, hostility, aggression, bitterness and hatred which have not augured well in developing an egalitarian and a virile nation. Following the above findings, it is discovered that the central causes to the under listed problems in Nigeria is the diversities of religious languages of the multifarious religious groups in the country. This has increased and exaggerated the rate of insecurity in diverse ways.

1.1 Conceptualization of Religious Language and Insecurity

A religious language can be described as religious sentences and utterances; religious language in the sense that they are generally taken to have a religious subject matter. It is also described as a religious utterance because it is the production in speech or writing of a token religious sentence. It encompasses such words as God, deities, angels, miracles, redemption, grace, holiness, and sinfulness. In a nutshell, religious language is devoted to the meaning of what we say about God. Such languages would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled unto certain conceptions and belief about God. It can also be described as a systematic means of communicating the people's understanding of

God by the use of words or conventional symbols. Religious languages are patterned based on the people's worldview and philosophical conception of God. These are languages construed according to the aboriginal perception of a certain religion practiced by a certain people. For example, what constitutes religious language for African traditional religion may not apply in Christianity and in other religions.

Once a language becomes associated with religious worship, its believers often ascribe virtues to the language of worship that they would not give to other language even their native tongues. Religious or sacred language is vested with a solemnity and dignity that ordinary languages lack. Consequently, the training of priests in the use of religious language via Greek, Hebrew and less often Latin has become an important cultural investment, and the use of such languages is perceived to give them access to a body of knowledge that untrained lay people cannot have. The sacred languages typically preserve characteristics that would have been lost in the course of language development. However, only very few of these languages have written forms. A number of languages have been used as religious languages. They include: classical Arabic for Muslims who believe it to be the only language of Qur'an. It differs from the various forms of contemporary spoken Arabic. The core of the Hebrew Bible is written in classical Hebrew referred to by some Jews as the "Holy Language". Hinduism is traditionally considered to have one liturgical language, Sanskrit. The churches which trace their origin to the apostles have continued to use the standard language of the few centuries after Christ's Ascension. These include: Latin in Roman Catholic Church, Greek in Greek Orthodox Church and Greek Catholic Church, Coptic on the Coptic Orthodox Church, English for the Western Protestant churches mainly in England and Syriac in the Syriac Churches (Buswell, 1997).

Insecurity refers to a state of being uncertain about one thing or the other, which may include job, protection, food, health, shelter, career, emotions, feelings, government or livelihood. It is a state of being doubtful which could be influenced by decisions, suspicions, opinions, actions, attitudes, responses and counter-responses. In the context of this paper, insecurity refers to the state of lawlessness, instability, anxiety, and exposure to danger caused by social vices such as terrorism, crime, kidnapping, killings and maiming, religious and extra-judicial killings. Insecurity in this context also includes, loss of lives, property, and business, terror and huge fear of sudden danger, community violence, harassment, emotional insecurity and threats as well as blatant divisions or disputes among ethnics, religious sects and groups, as many as such cases that are found in Nigeria.

2. Literature Review on the Meaning and Problems of Religious Language in Nigeria

For proper appreciation of this work, it is necessary to review some literatures on what have been written or expressed concerning the meaning and problems of religious language. Through the process of reviewing the previous studies on the subject matter, gaps uncovered would be indicated. Ugwu (1996) holds that religious language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Ndukwe (2009) views it as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which the members of a religious society interact in terms of their religious beliefs and expressions. Madu (2003) argues that it is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with the divine or spirit beings by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols. However, the roles of religious language in

the inter-connectivity of the finite and infinite beings are suggested above. The use of religious language in divine rituals and worship illustrates its relationship with beliefs and mind sect (Chomsky, 1998). Abrams and Greenhawt (2020) affirms that the wrong use of religious language during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Nigeria worsened the effect of the pandemic on the people.

However, the literary genres above maintain that proper use of religious language would integrate religion with language of a given people. The over estimation of the value of foreign tongues in religious worship is rather overwhelming and is having some negative effects amongst the various religions in Nigeria. The reason for this stemmed from the acceptance of foreign languages by Africans in attending to almost all their affairs. This is evidenced by Bangbose (1970) that Nigerians have learnt to adore, and perhaps overestimate the value of foreign tongues. Mbagwu and Obiora (2015) further pointed out that there are hardly any African countries that have indigenous languages as official languages in both religious and civil matters. Kenya and Tanzania are one evidence, Nigeria is another, in fact, in the colonial times there was heated argument especially among the C.M.S group on the translation of the Book of Common Prayer (B.C.P) in indigenous languages. It was Henry Vein, the Secretary General of the C.M.S that came up with his theory of self-supporting, self-reliance and self-governing of the African churches that settled the matter (Ezenwa, 1997). The point here is that it is the level of value attached to a given language that makes it religious or sacred, civil or official. This argument is in line with Akao (1999) as he posits that the ancient language like Hebrew and Greek were taken to be religious based on the people's acceptance. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2002) affirms that Hebrew language was the only language that united Jews diachronically and synchronically, through time and space. He observes that it was their

daily usage of it in both the religion and secular matters that earned it such a universal acceptance. Coke (2000) adds that apart from Hebrew as a religious language, other languages could earn, such a universality based on the people's appreciation of it. Boktin (1999) further insists that no particular language is termed "religious by God". He further argued that every language speaks the mind of God.

Based on the above background, one can envisage the opportunities offered for man to communicate his feelings, opinions with the transcendental beings in one's own language. In the course of interacting with divine beings in one's peculiar language, man acquaints himself/herself with divine messages which he/she in turn relates to his/her immediate environment. When people are deprived of the use of their language, they lose their self-identity enshrined in their belief and traditions. This does not restrict the knowledge and the use of other languages. In this case, religious language can be said to unite its users because people who speak the same tongue are likely to be closer and friendlier than others who do not understand a common language of communication. This is seen clearly where people of diverse dialect converge in a place. Religion has such a binding force that it sometimes supersedes that of siblings. In fact some Christian conservatives and Christian denominations address one another as brother, sister or even elder.

However, the languages of Nigeria are classified into three broad linguistic groups: Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asianic (Akao, 1999). He further states that the huge Niger-Congo group is further subdivided into nine major branches, including the Kwa subgroup, spoken in the extreme southwestern corner of the country; the Ijoid branch, spoken in Niger Delta region, the Atlantic subgroup, which most notably includes Fula; the extensive Benue-Congo subgroup, which includes Tiv, Jukun, Edo, Igbo, Igala,

Idoma, Nupe, Gwari, Yoruba, and several languages of the Cross River basin such as Awak, Waja, Waka, and Tula, spoken in the northern Nigeria. The Nilo-Saharan group is represented in Nigeria principally by Kanuri, although speakers of Bagirmi and Zerma are also present in the country. Afro-Asiatic is a much larger linguistic group and comprises of Hausa, Margi, and Barde, among others. Some peoples (such as the Fulani and the Tiv) are relatively recent immigrants, but, on the basis of modern linguistic research, it is thought that the great majority of Nigerian languages and specifically the Kwa subgroup have been spoken in roughly the same locations for some 4,000 years. Hausa is widely spoken in the northern states of Nigeria. In addition to English, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, and Fula, are also widely spoken in Nigeria. Many of these languages exist in written form. These languages can be further developed to ensure unity and security of its users.

3. Using Religious Language to Ensure Peace and Stability in Nigeria

Religion and language individually or collectively can be strong determining factors for employment, admission into schools, marriage and a whole lot of other cooperation, unions and solidarities. It is because Nigerians have not exploited the benefits of language that it is being used for negative purposes. Many have used language in the past for the destruction of lives. Some have used religion and language to hide the truth from the people; a situation whereby religion and language are employed to cause confusion, disunity and war in the country. However, to understand religious language which falls under what Crapo (2002) calls “restricted code” is not easily decoded especially if one is not an insider. What this implies is that the peace and unity of any people is guaranteed when they understand and appreciate their individual

language in all spheres of life. This is why Spolky (1999) maintains that religious adherents express and identify themselves with their faith and religious consciousness. He goes further to state that to relinquish the people's language from their religion is to literarily or symbolically relinquish a significant and powerful dimension of practical religious identity. This is collaborated in the words of Anzadua (2000), who categorizes religion and language as a "twin skin" to religious identity, and says "language is religion and religion is language". This relationship of language and religion is best examined from the historical perspective of Abrahamic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Apart from the meaning of language in religious perspective, scientific and archaeological discoveries are also expressed in language. Every kind of idea or feeling is given through the medium of language. Most natural, religious ideas are also represented as language. As a result, religion has developed its own register and consequently generated some peculiar text-variety (Bhatia, 2006). Following this development however, the researcher understands that ineffective communication is responsible for most unsatisfactory situations that dominates all the facets of the country's life. This as a matter of fact has heightened ethnic tensions and insecurity owing to status and adoption of certain languages that are not familiar to the people especially at public and religious functions. From the purview of Dukor (2003), the use of religious language must conform in a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which members of a religious community cooperate and interact. Religious language therefore, does the primary function of externalizing and objectifying thought processes and belief system. Nonetheless, the secondary functions of religious language are not less significant. These are stimulative, descriptive and argumentative functions (Popper, 1963). A people develop a

language appropriate to their needs and environment. Such language serves them as a medium of communication, the transmission of knowledge, religion, culture and values, and for the articulation of their worldview. In this regard, various languages can be said to be equal in so far as each serves adequately the fundamental language needs of its linguistic group. However, the outstanding challenges occasioned by not using language in the right sense of it include:

1. Retarded economic development: The low economic status of the country's life could be attributed to the ineffective communication owing to the multifarious languages in the country. Economic policies are formulated in English whereas the implementation of the said policies is not only for the elites but for all and sundry including those who are not lettered in English language. Incidentally, those illiterate ones constitute a greater part of the population and their illiteracy in English creates the difficulty in the implementation of the policies, especially the ones on agriculture and small scale industries, which largely concern them. Moreover, in the use of sacred languages in a religious worship, there are phrases or statements that could be labeled as religious sayings. Having a conversation about the cost of things in the market or about poverty in the society is nothing unusual. Each is a topic directly related to everyday experience and is often referred to as everyday language. If the conversation is to turn to discussion about God or Virgin Mary or Angels, then the language drifts from the everyday to religious, mysterious, sacred or metaphysical. Many doubt the truth of such statements, and if not clarified may spark off crises and religious violence.
2. Poor education: One of the challenges of education in Nigeria revolves around reading and writing in native

languages. Given the adoption of foreign language in schools amongst the local communities, it hinders promotion of vernacular literacy. It would be impossible to acquire a religion without the medium of language especially the indigenous language. Because what is said may particularly condition what can be thought, the use of such speech pattern will have subtle psychological effects on the speakers. Religion, like language, has testified to be easily learned by children. Religion is acquired by language. Religion is taught literarily early from one's mother's knees, and religious faith infused early in life. Hence, there is need for good and quality childhood education to facilitate the good and efficient use of language in both religious and civil matters. With good and quality education in the country, there will be a clearer understanding of the real meaning of religion as well as its values, beliefs and ritual practices. In this way also, some religious jargons and hate speeches that often create enmity will be reduced. A sound academic learning will discourage hate speech and promote a lovely and friendly interactions like; "we are one in Christ", "we are all the children of God"

Most of the perpetrators of crimes in the country are mostly drop outs and less informed members of the public. In fact, illiteracy alone can lead to restiveness. An adage has it that half education is a disease. Because some of them could not express themselves in English language or understand the government economic policies as well as the overall system of government and religious message which are documented in English, they tend to misinterpret the government political policies, and by that implication organize themselves to stage violent

demonstrations. It is also understood that because of the fact that majority of the members of the religious groups are illiterate in English (in the case of Christianity) and Arabic (in the case of Islam); they hardly receive appropriate religious information given to them in those languages.

3. Poor health and mortality rate: Health workers are trained in English. Again, information about health matters is disseminated in English. The illiterate masses certainly have a problem with adequately and appropriately understanding the information. Nwaozuzu (2002) laments: “The situation where a people’s health is dependent on the information passed on to them through a foreign language, is, to say the least, undesirable, taking into consideration the percentage of the populace who can comprehend and speak such languages”(p.65). Undoubtedly, this situation has brought about most of the masses patronizing native, quack and witch doctors who speak the language of their understanding. The result of this would always lead to poor health and mortality rate.

3.1 Addressing the Challenges of Insecurity using Religious Languages

The writer believes that if the following recommendations are taken and applied, would considerably reduce language barriers in the country. It will enhance effective communication which will in turn reduce the unbridled tensions and insecurity occasioned by the multifarious factors in Nigeria. Effective communication will be enhanced which will in turn reduce the unbridled tension and insecurity occasioned by the multifarious factors in the country.

- a) **Being cautious in the use of certain languages in religious worship**

Many religions have sacred languages that are mostly unintelligible to the laity. These vulgar and unintelligible languages often times instigate violence. An example is the phenomena of Glosolalia (speaking in tongues). This is the production of sound sequences that have no conventional meanings in speech which often occurs during ecstatic trance states. In Nigeria for example, glosolalia is commonly associated with Pentecostal churches where it is understood as a gift of the spirit in which the speaker is believed to be either praising God in angelic language or is into a spiritual warfare. These utterances when misinterpreted can lead to crises in families or between one another. It is important that religious leaders should adopt clear and common language in administering to their congregations.

b) **Establishing an active national language commission**

Nigeria urgently needs to establish an active National Language Commission with branches at states and local government levels throughout the country. The primary objective of this body should be to serve as a databank on all language-related matters. It will advise the federal and other governments, as well as other relevant ministries on language and religious affairs. It will also promote the preservation and enrichment of Nigeria's language resources. The present situation where all language matters are left in the hands of linguistic departments of the Nigerian universities is not satisfactory. A commission with multi-disciplinary committees with members spanning all relevant professional fields should be created.

c) **Training teachers to use the mother tongues in teaching**

There should strategies mapped out for educational development through mother tongues, and adequately training of language teachers across the nation. Compulsory use of English for instruction in schools should be minimized. Teachers should be trained in the mother tongues of the area where a school is situated.

On this note Okonkwo (2008) states: “The child thinks and dreams in the language which was used at the time he worked his way from the state of infancy to that of member of language community. This naturally is the MT/LIC. And for this reason the MT/LIC happens to be the best language of schooling for intellectual development of the child” (p.8). Education is for human development and civilized life relies on language which is the basic tool for communication. This implies that language, religion and culture are inseparable. Language is the essence of religion and culture, for it constitutes the medium for cultural and religious transmission (Okediadi, 2009). That is why every Nigerian child should be tutored in his/her mother tongue especially within the category of pre-primary, primary and post-primary schools. As each of the language is by definition a mother tongue, in theory they all qualify to be taught as school subjects. It is also expedient that the three major languages, viz: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba indigenous languages in the country should be allowed to feature in the country’s formal school system.

However, a major setback to this fact is that the native speakers of these languages look down on each other language and this presupposes why the language teachers teaching any of these languages are regarded as second hand teachers including the public schools situated in each locality where each of these languages is the mother tongue. This has hampered the growth of some of these indigenous languages thereby marrying the sole objective of the language policy of Nigeria.

d) Developing indigenous languages

Nigerian linguistics has done a good job on the indigenous languages. However, the work is not sufficient. This is because there are many of the languages that have received little or no attention at all; a situation that makes it difficult for information to be expressed in English. Worse still, the so called major and main languages do

not have enriched vocabulary to satisfy new developments in the world today. An example is Igbo where “Iba” is used to refer to malaria, hepatitis, and typhoid; an indication that users of the language have a problem with the foreign terminologies (Ezeuko and Mbagwu, 2009). The point here is that all the indigenous languages demand varied degrees of attention for communication to improve in Nigeria. However, many native speakers add salt to the injury by not speaking their language either in religious worship or person to person interaction. They see their language as inferior. Suffice it to say that if all the people would speak their languages to the young people, they would have no need for indigenous language curricula or for conferences to save their languages. If Nigerians can speak their languages, all of their languages would be healthier and very effective.

e) **Making Nigerian pidgin official**

The Nigerian pidgin is the language of the widest inter-ethnic mode of communication, especially between the members of the illiterate class (Mann, 1990). It is easy to acquire or learn because of its simple grammar, hence, its widespread use in the country. In fact, making it official would largely reduce ineffective communication, which is associated with English, the official language of the country. When developed, would lead to the emergence of a true national language, which would not be seen as foreign. If used in religious worship would help in reducing ambiguity associated with some religious expressions.

f) **Identifying communication roles English cannot play in the different speech**

Communities in the country

There are certainly some communicative roles, which English or any other foreign language cannot perform. Such roles are better performed with the use of the people’s indigenous languages. An

example is the blessing of *Oji Igbo* which is always carried out using the Igbo vernacular. This is the reason why the indigenous languages should never be relegated to the background but enhanced for optimum use when necessary.

4. Conclusion

There are many instances when language is used for quite different reasons ranging from expressive, communicative to descriptive functions. Religious languages are all about the people's channeling their energies to communal religious construction. This is because every language entails the reflection of the people's collective imagination. Any language whether indigenous or national has the same functions except for coverage. A good command of a given language is necessary for effective communication in any human society. Nigeria is one of the countries in which ineffective communication has led to some unfavourable conditions ranging from religious conflicts, restiveness, retarded economic development, and poor education among others owing to the fact that people hardly understand one another. A major factor causing this, as has been pointed out, is underdevelopment of languages in religious and civil matters; a situation that justifies the adoption of foreign language, English as the official language. Literacy in English language is low and this is the main cause of insecurity in the country. This study discussed ways of reducing the aforementioned challenges and one of them is developing the indigenous language of the people.

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