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## **LANGUAGE AND DEMOCRACY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Language is man's most important asset, his most important tool with which he interacts. The place of language in any democratic dispensation cannot be overlooked. There is indeed a marriage between language and democracy and the Nigerian democratic scene is not an exception. The question remains how this marriage has fared in the Nigerian environment. The coming of democracy in Nigeria 13 years ago has given this language issue a new face. Due to the freedom democracy afforded everyone in Nigeria, there is abuse of language in Nigeria. Ethnic wars, tribal wars, religious wars and a lot more have been witnessed and are still on the rise in Nigeria in the past 13 years. The language question on the other hand lingers in the minds of Nigerians, who still question our use of English language as our national language. The basic message in democracy is freedom for everyone and everything but we can still ask: is language really free in democratic Nigeria? The last 13 years has shown that language in Nigeria is not really free. It is a manipulative tool which most Nigerians who breathe the air of democracy use to cause confusion, problems and disasters in Nigeria. Today, a turning point should be reached by Nigerians in their attitudes towards their fellow Nigerians and their languages, a point at which Nigerians, irrespective of tribal ethnic or religious affiliations, should accept to work together and choose a language as their national language to foster peace unity and national development in a democratic Nigeria. Our multilingual nature should be a blessing and not a curse to us. Democracy should be a crowning effort to address this language issue in Nigeria. In the end we should have a language of the people by the people and for the people.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years the term language and democracy have become synonymous. They go hand in hand such that if there is unity in language in a country, democracy will thrive but if there is disunity in language in a country, democracy will die. This language is man's most important tool. It is his most important asset. His day to day interaction is dependant on language. Above all, language is a people's identity (Ofoegbu 2005). Language in any democratic dispensation is very important. The marriage between language and democracy in the Nigerian democratic scene has not been smooth. How well has this union fared remains our truthful question. It is expected that democracy should bring unity, peace and national developments wherever it goes but our Nigerian democratic environment, has not witnessed any of these. The advent of democracy over a decade ago to Nigeria, has given this language issue a new dimension. Enshrined in any democratic constitutions are the fundamental human rights and Nigeria's 1999 constitution is not an exception. Chapter IV, section 33 to 46 of the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria provides for these fundamental human rights for every Nigerian, irrespective of ethnic, tribal or religious affiliations. The misinterpretation of parts of these fundamental human rights has become the order of the day in democratic Nigeria. The

freedom of speech granted us by our 1999 "Democratic" constitution, has given rise to the abuse of language in democratic Nigeria. Today 13 years after the advent of democracy in Nigeria what do we have? A roll call of ethnic, tribal and religious wars. To an extent we can include political wrestlings. Why kill, maim and destroy the lives and properties of fellow Nigerians in a democratic era when our 1999 democratic constitution chapter IV sections 33 to 46 forbids it? A lot of water has passed under our democratic bridge in the last 13 years. These wars and conflicts are on the rise at an alarming rate in our democratic Nigeria. The military era preceding our present democratic journey hardly witnessed any of these wars and conflicts. The fact that our democratic "Molue" is attracting wars and conflicts instead of unity, peace and national development should be the concern of every democratically minded Nigerian.

The language question is supposed to be a matter that needs urgent attention in our present democratic dispensation, but it has been relegated to the background and worse still it was not included in our late President's seven point agenda for Nigerians! I really wonder how we can make a head way with our seven point agenda without a common language in a democratic Nigeria. Our late president should have taken a cue from the story of the tower of Babel. Their success and achievements depended on their unity in language. This language question lingers in the minds of most Nigerians who express their frustrations in their daily discussions, on why Nigeria, the giant of Africa, should still use English Language as her national/ official language. The underlying message in any democratic setting is freedom for everyone and everything. Yet our question will always be: Is language really free in democratic Nigeria? The last 13 years tells us from experience, that language in democratic Nigeria is not really free. It has become a manipulative tool with most Nigerians who claim to be democrats, use to cause havoc in Nigeria. Democracy in Nigeria affords us the opportunity to look at Nigerians from the perspective of brothers and sisters and not as enemies or rivals. Our attitudes towards our fellow Nigerians should show love. We should accept to work together irrespective of our ethnic, tribal, political or religious affiliation so as to promote peace, unity and national development in a democratic Nigeria. With a democratic approach to our language problem in Nigeria, we hope to achieve a language of the people, by the people and for the people.

### **THE LANGUAGE ISSUE SINCE INDEPENDENCE (1960-2012)**

The issue of language has come a long way in Nigeria, beginning from 1960 to our present day. However I will look at the period between 1960 and 1998. The first major debate on our language issue was on 21<sup>st</sup> day of November 1961... Mallam Albatan Yerima proposed a motion for the use of our "major" languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and other indigenous languages in our institutions of learning by the Federal Government of Nigeria. He was supported by Mr. G.D.O. Eneh who agreed that a national language will promote peace, unity and national development in Nigeria (Ofoegbu 2005). The idea behind this motion was good as well as the intention. However the process was undemocratic. Democracy provides a level playing ground for everyone, every language etc. my questions are: Which languages will be selected? Which ones should not be selected? What makes a language major? What makes a language minor? Looking at the first republic, we can pick out many problems caused by language. First there were riots in some the country especially in the west such that it was nicknamed "wild wild west."

The middle belt area (the TIV speaking area) had its own fair share because according to them "the mid west was given a region when they (mid west) did not merit it, while they (the middle belt) wasn't given when they merited it. Political parties during this first republic were formed along tribal and ethnic lines. The rejection of the election results during this period was the climax of the whole thing. Ethnic, tribal and religious anthems became the order of the day. Ethnicity, sectionalism, nepotism etc took over the thoughts of our first republic "democrats" all because of our multilingual and multicultural nature - and the man died- the military took over via a coup on the 15<sup>th</sup> day January 1966.

The second republic also had its own share of language related problems. It was within this period that: "the three major languages" were thrown up to be considered as our national language and "the minorities" staged a walk out on the floor of the national assembly. Again the process was a very undemocratic. Why classify some languages as "major" and others "minor" in a democratic setting when democracy is all about justice, equity and fair play? Even the much celebrated "Wazobia" option was undemocratic. It still remains the same until we learn never to draw a distinction between languages in democratic Nigeria. Some "democratic" Nigerians who wrote on the pages of newspapers on this language issue were very biased. They suggested or proposed their own mother tongues as a solution to our language problems. Some Nigerians went as far as proposing Hausa even though they were not ethnic Hausa – Fulani (Simpon 1978) but it was discovered that those who did this were members of the "Wazobia" clique who wanted to impose the "Wazobia" languages on Nigerians. Their undemocratic motives and moves did not work as well meaning democratic Nigerians resisted their every attempt. Again political parties were formed based on tribe and ethnicity. Sectionalism, nepotism, tribalism Etc. occupied the thoughts of our second republic "democrats" because of language, tribal and political differences –and the man died – the military took over again via a coup on the 31<sup>st</sup> day of December 1983. The third republic was started but we never got to that destination because the freest and fairest election ever in Nigeria was annulled for "good" reasons. However I wish to state here that political parties then were formed on religious lines. To these religions were attached languages. Some "democratic" Nigerians applauded the annulment of the election without knowing that they have contributed to murdering our newest bride-democracy. By and large I have observed that aside the civil war of 1967 to 1970; it is only during a "democratic" era that we witness a lot of ethnic, political, tribal and religious wars. "Democratic" Nigerians capitalized on the freedom of democracy to carry out their evil plans and acts. The misinterpretation of our constitution by some "democratic" Nigerians hasn't helped our cause. We haven't been able to achieve anything on this language issue because we have not followed a democratic process.

### **THE LANGUAGE ISSUE SINCE 1999 [to present]**

Our journey into our present democratic dispensation started 13 years ago. Between then and now the events of yesteryears has still not taught us a lesson. The capitalization on the pampering of democracy to create havoc remains a hobby of some "democratic" Nigerians between 1999 and 2012 a lot of undemocratic things has happened in democratic Nigeria all in the name of language. The roll call is much. Where do I start? The Tiv/Jukun crisis of 2000 and 2001, the very many religious riots in Jos, Kano, Gombe, Kaduna, Maiduguri, Bauchi, Okigwe, Aba, Onitsha Etc. have left Nigeria devastated. Our

multilingual and multicultural nature has created a spirit of distinction and hatred in us. In 13 years we have witnessed so many ethnic, religious, tribal and political conflicts and wars. What will happen in the future is my candid thought. A closer look will reveal that 1999, 2000, 2001, 2009 2010 and 2011 were the worst as these wars were triggered off at the least provocation. A fact remains that the perpetrators of these acts are not brought to book. They are allowed to walk freely, thereby constituting a threat and a nuisance to well meaning and democratic Nigerians. Political parties are still formed based on religious, ethnic and tribal loyalties. Democratic Nigeria has suffered heavily in Nigeria in the last 13 years, tribal and ethnic differences contribute to its suffering, and above all, the lack of a common language threatens the peace and unity of this country. Choosing a common language for us is like climbing the Mount Everest with your eyes closed. The democratic tendencies we displayed in 1999, the democratic anthem we sang 13 years ago etc are no more displayed and sung. They have been replaced by undemocratic tendencies and undemocratic anthems. If we take a look at what happened in Ekiti State in 2008 I believe you will understand what I am talking about. Even among same tribe, political party, ethnic group etc they fight themselves undemocratically talk more when they are different. Nigeria's 13 years of democracy has been characterized by undemocratic democrats, undemocratic actions, undemocratic thoughts, undemocratic parties and undemocratic events. The last 13 years remains a sorry sight for democracy in Nigeria. Our greatest problem is our multilingual nature and our lack of a common language to call our own.

### **DEMOCRATIC APPROACH TO THE LANGUAGE ISSUE IN NIGERIA**

A popular definition of democracy is that it is government of the people, by the people and for the people. According to Ashiko, J.B (1999) the important elements to retain in this definition, as indeed in the whole of the democratic process of doing things and of governance, are the supremacy of the will of the people, the need to avoid arbitrary imposition of decisions on people, the need for powers that be to steer clear of unnecessary meddlesomeness especially in areas where people collectively or as individuals should really be free to make their own choice. In choosing a national language a democratic approach should be taken. It should be a language of the people, by the people and for the people. That language should fulfill these three criteria.

- (a) Cultural criteria
- (b) Political criteria
- (c) Linguistic criteria

Cultural criteria refer to the fact that the chosen language must adapt to Nigerian cultures easily by way of borrowing. Political criteria refer to the fact that the language should be politically neutral and must not be affiliated to any ethnic group, tribe or religion. Linguistic criteria refer to the fact that the chosen language must be widely spoken and must have numerical strength. For democratic Nigeria to have a democratic national language she must adopt and use democratic method. Undemocratic options, alternatives, persons, thoughts, etc. should not be welcomed. The process to achieving this common democratic language is playing according to the rules of democracy in order to avoid the mistakes of yesteryears that cost us our democratic "moi-moi in 1966, 1983 and 1993. The full measure of democracy should be meted out to undemocratic elements in order to promote unity, peace and national development in Nigeria. If the democratic due process

is followed objectively, then the story of the tower of Babel before the Lord confused their language will be a reality in Nigeria and we shall have a language of the people, by the people and for the people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The place of language in any democratic setting cannot be overlooked and Nigeria's democratic setting has been our scene. We have looked at the events (undemocratic) that happened in our democratic setting in the last 13 years and we have seen how language serves as a vehicle to maim and kill all in the name of democracy. Nigerians should employ democratic means if they will ever pick a language as their national language. If India, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea etc can do it why not Nigeria, the giant of Africa? For Nigeria to attain a real democratic status, she must by democratic means, select or choose a democratically selected or chosen language that will stand the test of time in all situations. The language must embrace Nigeria and its democratic attitudes so as to foster peace, unity and national developments. There are other democratic attitudes that can take a democratic Nigeria to the Promised Land; this paper serves as a stepping stone to others to further their knowledge on how to achieve a language of the people, by the people and for the people.

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