# THE CONCEPT OF 'ALA BỤ ALA': A SIGNAL FOR IGBO EXTINCTION

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**ABSTRACT**
*Igbo people has been known as the ethnic group that is most travelled. They do not only travel but also prosper in foreign lands, build houses, feel at home and relax in another man's land. Some marry from other ethnic groups, bear children and imbibe the culture of other people they meet in the host community. Some do not care to reach their native land or build any house in their state or village in spite of the prosperity they have gotten. This behaviour has been popularly tagged as Alabụala meaning, land is land. Many have written on the Igbo language endangerment especially since the prediction of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization(UNESCO) that Igbo language may be heading to extinction in fifty years if nothing is done by the speakers. None has emphasized the Igbo belief in travelling live and not just travelling but relaxing in foreign land and neglecting of their heritage community. This attitude has been described as Alabụala meaning land is land. The aim of this paper is to expose the danger of this type of attitude demonstrated by some Igbo indigenes to the continuity of Igbo language and culture. It also suggests ways to prevent the extinction of the language and culture. In doing this, the researchers made use of participatory observation in data collection. Participatory in that, he lives in Diaspora. Some Igbo youths were also interviewed to investigate their familiarity with their heritage land and their ability to speak Igbo language.*

## Introduction

Igbo refers to the language of the Igbo people of the South Eastern Nigeria. Igbo is the language and Igbo also refers to the people that hail from Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi states and some parts of Delta state, Edo state, River state. One major characteristic of these people is that they speak the same language although with different dialects which are mutually intelligible to one another. We say, *Igbo na-asụn'olumanaakwaụkwara ọ bụrụotu'* (Igbo people speak in different voice but when they cough it is the same) meaning Igbo people understand themselves. Igbo people are rich in culture and are highly industrious. They distinguish themselves anywhere they are found. Igbo people travel far and near and believe that *'Onyeijekaonyeisiawoakụkọ'*

meaning a traveller is richer in knowledge than the elderly. For this believe, Igbo people believe so much in travelling.

Igbo is also good in imitation. They copy the new language and culture they meet in any land they find themselves in attempt to adapt to the new land.

All the above characteristics of the Igbo pose a serious danger to the extinction of the language and culture. According to Ogbonna (2015:32), language endangerment is real and it is a phenomenon which is continuing through space and time as many languages continue to fall out of use and are being replaced by other languages that may be more widely used for economic or socio-political reasons within the region.

Language endangerment begins gradually. When a language is being replaced in a community that language is heading into extinction. A language goes into extinction when no one speaks it. A language that no speaker is death. When the young ones do not cherish their language and culture but prefer another language rather than their mother tongue, within a space of time, their parents will die off and the mother-tongue will go into extinction.

Igbo language, literature and culture are dying as a result of the abuse of the travelling live by many Igbo people referred to as *Alabụala'.* The travelling live of the Igbo people which is presently abused by many is a serious challenge to the continuity of Igbo language and culture.

The aim of this paper is to expose the threat Igbo culture of '*Alabụala'* poses to continual existence of the Igbo language and culture and suggest solution to the problem.

## Review of Related Literature

Here, we will review the related literatures on the topic of discussion.

According to Ogbonna (2015: 32)

> *It seems illogical to assume that Igbo, a language spoken as one of the major languages in Nigeria by a population of about 17 million indigenous native speakers is an endangered language considering its status as one of the major indigenous languages and one of the major languages of literature, education and commerce.*

Language endangerment is a very dangerous it penetrates into a language gradually. Ikwubuzo (2023:5) states that when a language is no longer used, it must die; while Madubuike (2011) states that when a language dies, its culture is rendered useless. In other word, language does not exist without the speakers. A particular generation may decide to kill or promote their language and culture depending on the value they placed on the language and culture.

Ikwubuzo (2023:17) noted that Igbo children in Diaspora face challenges resulting from alienation from their Igbo cultural environment. They are easily acculturated to the language and culture of the land where they were born and brought up.

Nwadike (2008:20) referred to the Igbo people's code switching from the Igbo to English as an instance of language endangerment. He likened the practice to leprosy bacillus, which may affect part of the body, but with time it quickly makes inroads into the entire human system. This trend endangers the Igbo language. Code switching has become a popular communication pattern of the Igbo native speakers.

Ikwubuzo (2023:17) divided Diaspora residence of the Igbo people into two. They are national and transnational. The national being those residing within Nigeria but in other states outside Nigeria while transnational are those living in foreign countries. He noted that Igbo children in Diaspora face challenges resulting from alienation from their Igbo cultural environment.

Ohiri-Aniche (2010:26) stated thus:

> *Issue of language endangerment has occupied the front burner in the world of sociolinguistic and education circles in the past three decades. In general, the misgiving is that many languages are dying and that up to 90% of the world's 6000 – 6500 existing languages are not likely to survive into the next century.*

From the above statement, one can understand that language endangerment is not restricted to only Igbo language. However, with

the dispersal attitude of the Igbo native speakers, it appears they are more affected than other languages in Nigeria. Madubuike (2011:419), addressing Igbo language endangerment stated, it is a tragedy when a people fail to realise the magnitude of the danger before them and refuse to do something serious in response in order to avert the danger. He further stated that when a language dies, its culture is also rendered useless.

Toni-Durualu (2004:98) noted that it a people throws away what they can be easily identified, which brings and binds them together as one, they lose their identity and generations after generations of their peoples will float in their ignorance, swim in their lose of identity. Other languages and culture especially English has eaten deep into the fabric of the Igbo people. Nwadike (2008:20) state, 'How many of our children living in the urban areas know the names of our local birds, plants, animals, fishes, insects, etc? Do we still sit under the moonlight to tell our children the folklore of our land? This shows how not only our language is endangered but our ways of life in general.

Ogbonna (2015:33) observed that Igbo is endangered but not yet endangered to the point of extinction as predicted by UNESCO Advisory Committee on Languages. Based on the vocabulary test he conducted, he concluded that Igbo is gradually losing some of its vocabulary items used in day to day communication.

UNESCO (2012) as cited in Ogbonna (2015:36) warned that about the number of indigenous languages that is dwindling but eh day, overwhelmed by the influence of foreign languages especially English and French. Ogbonna (2015:36) citing UNESCO's latest prediction states, "most Nigerian languages including Igbo are under the dangling axe of extinction.

Since this prediction by the UNESCO, many have written on the Igbo extinction threat but none has mentioned the Igbo way of live and belief that ignites this threat especially the '*alabụala* Concept'. For this, paper looks into the concept of *alabụala,* the danger it poses to the existence of Igbo language and culture and suggests ways to control it.

In this paper, we will examine things that placed Igbo language and culture in the danger of extinction.

## Methodology

The methods adopted for this research are observation and questionnaire. Observation is based on what the researchers have seen living in Lagos. Again the questionnaire was used to ascertain how often the young Igbo Lagos dwellers visit Igbo land and their ability to speak to speak Igbo.

### Extinction Threat to Igbo Language

Here, we will mention certain things in the life of the Igbo people that poses threat to the continuity of their language and culture. The Igbo people say, *"Abụsịna-eghena-okụsịyanaashammanụ"* (A cricket is frying in the fire and boasts that it is shining). Real meaning is nothing but that one is dying yet feels that he is enjoying.

Many of the Igbo people are lost yet unaware of it. The worst that can happen to a people is when they have a live threatening problem yet unaware of the problem. Some of these problems will be discussed below.

1. **The *AlaBụAla* Concept and Igbo Endangerment:** We have earlier explained the meaning of the term '*AlabụAla*' as relaxation of the Igbo native speaker Diaspora. We list some of the observed things that enhances Igbo endangerment and a signal to extinction. The greater percentage are connected to the *'Alabụala'* syndrome. They are:

    i. The travelling culture of the Igbo

    ii. Imitation culture of the Igbo

    iii. Adaptation culture of the Igbo

    iv. Acquisition culture of the Igbo

We shall take them one by one.

### i. Travelling Culture of the Igbo

As we mentioned earlier, Igbo people have been known as travellers. There is a popular saying that any community one finds himself and could not find an Igbo man living, the person should escape for his/her life. It shows that the place is not habitable. Igbo people has been described also as developers who fail their own

land. A serious attention to major cities in Nigeria are developed by the Igbo people yet their land is nothing to talk about. Many other countries outside Nigeria are not left out. Igbo people are scattered all over the world.

As the Igbo people relax and feel at home, they believe so much in 'When you go to Rome, behave like the Romans'. This attitude bring about the concept of *'Alabụala* – home is home'.

### ii. Imitation Culture of the Igbo

Imitation is no other thing except copying other being. The Igbo people are good in learning from others through the repetition of observed behaviours and patterns. Due to this imitation way of life, they also copy other people's language and culture. Having found himself in the midst of other ethnic group, copy their language and culture. He does this to enable him succeed in whatever business he finds himself in the land.

No one is born with language. Language is learnt formally or informally. For this, anything learnt or acquired and not practiced will die gradually. This brings to the adaptation culture of the Igbo.

Igbo people get adapted easily to any environment they find themselves. It is a saying also that if you put an Igbo man in a bottle and lock it, he will not only survive but prosper there. They adapt to any environment they find themselves, improve their lives there and prosper to the surprise of their enemies. They marry the daughters of the other ethnic groups they find themselves, give their children to marriage to the same people, bear children there and teach the new language and culture they have learnt.

The Igbo people are harmless and prosper without stepping on the toes of another person. They believe in *'Egbebereugobere*' – live and let live. As nice as all these characters sound, they are at the same rekindling fire to Igbo language and culture extinction.

### iii. Acquisition Culture of the Igbo People

The Igbo people believe in acquiring property anywhere they go. We all talk of our father's land. An Igbo child born in Lagos or any other place where his parents have lands and houses believes he is in his father's land. This child may not have visited Igbo land as an adult before the death of his parents. For this, no one is to show him his father's village nor does he understand Igbo language at all. This child although may have Igbo names but may not have understood the meaning of his Igbo name. Worst still, the child may not have any Igbo name at all. Examine the following names given to some Igbo children mostly in Diaspora:

*Emmanuel Joseph*

*Michael Esther*

*John Joseph*

*Joseph Julius, and so on*

In a situation where the mother is from another ethnic group, you may hear names like:

*Joseph Bolaji*

*John Kayode*

*John KayodeToochukwu*

*Joseph, FunmilayoNgozi etc.*

As time goes on, those with Igbo names as third name will begin to put only the abbreviation of it and the above becomes:

*John, Kayode T.*

*Joseph, Funmilayo, N.*

All these behaviours of the Igbo people are now popularly tagged "Alabụala". The lineage of the father that bears these type of children mentioned is a great loss to the Igbo land. This reduces the population of the Igbo speakers. Gradually, Igbo language is endangered and moves towards extinction.

Ikwubuzo (2013:14 – 20) mentioned the challenges facing our mother tongue and literary tradition as follows:

Western contact with Igbo culture. He described this as where the rain started to beat us. He stated that the impact of western culture/modernity on the use of Igbo language is heightened among others by:

1. Igbo migration with its concomitant acculturation of the Igbo children in their host communities.

2. The lethargic attitude of the Igbo towards their language both in the homeland and diaspora.

Although Ikwubuzo (2013:24) recognised the negative impact of westernization and modernity on Igbo language, he agrees that the problem is on the Igbo family. He stated that nobody dictates to us what we do to our family. In addition to this, nobody forces any language or culture to any Igbo family or person in our families.

The motion to adopt Igbo language in the national assembly in the former Anambra state having Enugu as the capital was after much argument was rejected. According to Ikwubuzo (2023:24), this motion generated hostile reaction from members of the house.

Ejiofor (1984) as cited in Nnabuihe (2003: 210) stated that one of the house members said, "Let us throw it overboard and take something serious. This is not time for Igbo language or no Igbo language".

## Some Other Implications of '*AlaBụAla*'

'Alabụala' (land is land) concept of many Igbo people encompasses other concepts all of which discourages the identity of the Igbo as a people. The believe in the 'alabụala' results to other concepts such as the following:

## *MmadụBụMmadụ*: Human Being is Human Being

This stand makes those who abandon his or her kinsmen never have any feeling concerning them. Just as they do not care about the land of their nativity believing that *'alabụala'*, they replace their new relationship with other ethnic groups to their kinsman. Their children have no much interaction with their kinsmen. Even in diaspora, they neither attend nor introduce their children to the community meetings.

This '*mmadụbụmmadụ'* encourages cross ethnic group marriage. In the past, Igbo men in disapora travel to their villages in search of a wife. Matured ladies born in diaspora are taken home in every festival to be seen by the people from their community. This helps young men of their land to see them and desire to marry them. In recent time, the search for more wealth coupled with the insecurity problem all over the nation have made many remain for many years without visiting home.

It is unfortunate that some children born in diaspora grow to adult age without visiting their native land. Such a child in some cases bury their parents in diaspora. The child does not understand or speak Igbo language. Igbo culture is alien to him. Children in this group may bear Igbo names and claim to be Igbo which they are but have no connection in their kinsmen. Some whom their mother came from another ethnic group are being fed with negative information that their fathers' kinsmen are devilish and murderers. In this type of situation, this family becomes a great loss to Igbo language and culture extinction.

## NdụBụNdụỌnwubụỌnwu (life is life death is death)

With this belief, no matter the type of threat some Igbo people receive in diaspora, they will not consider going back to their native land as an option. This attitude is also a great danger to Igbo language and culture.

## ỤlọBụỤlọ (Home is home)

Igbo in diaspora are over relaxed to the extent that they build houses in diaspora, plant trees and do not care much about their native land. Language of the diaspora environment becomes the family means of communication. The question is how many houses in Igbo land belong to the people of other ethnic groups. In spite that the Igbo people are not harmful and show love to the people of other ethnic groups, they hardly invest in Igbo land. A story was told that on the opening ceremony of the trade fair mega market built by the Igbo traders in Lagos Nigeria, where a prominent Igbo man was invited.

On seeing what the Igbo people built in Lagos, he was not pleased. In addressing the Igbo traders, he said "*Igbo ndịnzuzukwenu!!*" meaning, Igbo the foolish people *kwenu.*

It is disheartening that it is not only our language that is endangered but also our belief.

## Endangered Belief of the Igbo

Some of the Igbo belief are also endangered just as the overall culture is dying. The following popular statements among the Igbo are no longer popular. They are:

(i) *Akụruoụlọ o nweeugwu* (wealth reach home it gets respect) meaning wealth is more valued at home.

(ii) *A na-esin'ụlọmarammapụọama* (Good behaviour begins at home)

(iii) *Ofekeamaghịamannayagafereaman naya.* (useless person does not know his village and passed it.)

(iv) *Isi nwadikeanaghịatọnamba* (A man's head does not remain in a foreign land)

The above and many other popular sayings are dying because many do not believe in them again as a result of disapora life.

## Result of the Questionnaire Conducted to Igbo Children in Lagos.

The aim of the questionnaire was to find out how often some Igbo youth in Lagos state visit their village. They are to choose agree and disagree. The ages range from 18 to 25 years. Fifty youths were asked to fill the questionnaire.

| S/N | Statement | Agree | % | Disagree | % | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I have visited my village since I was born. | 20 | 40 | 30 | 60 | 50 |
| 2. | I visit my village at least once a year. | 5 | 10 | 45 | 90 | 50 |
| 3. | I only visited when I was in primary school. | 15 | 30 | 35 | 70 | 50 |
| 4. | I can locate my village in my state. | 5 | 10 | 45 | 90 | 50 |
| 5. | I speak Igbo language fluently. | 10 | 20 | 40 | 80 | 50 |

From the above interview result, 50 Igbo youths in Lagos state of Nigeria ranging from ages 18 to 25 were interviewed, only 20 accepted that they have ever visited their native land which is Igbo land. That is to say, out of the 50 young ones ranging from 18 years to 25 years only 40% has ever visited the Igbo land. The remaining 60% have never gone to their native land. Out of the 20 people which is just 40% accepted only 5 people which is 10% accepted that they travel to their village at least once every year. The remaining 15 people which is 30% indicated that they only visited when they were in primary school. From the interview, only 5 people out of the 20 accepted that they can locate their village form their state of origin. At the same time, only 10 people which is 20% can speak Igbo language fluently. Without being told, it is a serious danger to the growth and even the sustenance of Igbo language and culture.

## Solution to the Igbo Endangerment

Whether Igbo language and culture continuous existence is endangered is confirmed already from numerous researchers carried out. The most important thing now is how to revive the language and culture. The following suggestions are ways to revive the language.

1. Parents in both diaspora and home based should not teach their children in English but Igbo.
2. Parents in diaspora should endeavour to visit their native land with their children at least once a year.
3. Igbo people in both diaspora and at home should communicate among themselves in Igbo language.
4. Let there be promotion of Igbo language and culture anywhere the Igbo people are found.
5. Schools should promote the study of Igbo language and culture.
6. Government and non-government organisations including some wealthy

individuals should sponsor scholarship for students willing to study Igbo language and culture.

7. Igbo people should try to invest in Igbo land. This will help to draw the attention of their children to Igbo land.

The above if implemented will reduce the downward movement of Igbo language and culture.

## Conclusion

We have been able to expose the concept of '*Alabụala'* – 'land is land' among the Igbo in diaspora. We have also analysed the implication of this concept. We conclude that this belief has done a lot of damage to Igbo language and culture. This live of*Alabụala* among the Igbo has done more harm than good to the existence of the Igbo language and culture. Ways to remedy the problem have been suggested. If all the suggestions put above are implemented, the situation of the Igbo language and culture will definitely improve.We also recommend that further researches should be done on this topic especially deeper investigation on the role of the family and government on the prevention of Igbo extinction threat.

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