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### Editors' Note

The effort to institutionalize social studies education in Nigeria, via the dissemination of relevant knowledge, ideas and findings, is not only a desideratum, it is also a continuous process. In this vein, a team of select scholars have voiced their minds, suggestions and opinions on some aspects of social studies all geared towards its firm establishment in the school curricula.

Scholars who have brilliant and innovative ideas on social studies should make them known through this journal - *Social Studies Quarterly*.

We are not relenting in publishing this journal.

Dr. F.A. Akinlaye  
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## ENHANCING NATIONAL UNITY THROUGH NIGERIAN LANGUAGES

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### Introduction

Language according to Mackey (1992:11) is initially a system of representation before it can become a system of communication. He sees it as the way a people has conceived its universe of perception and experiences and organized it into a system of culture concepts. Language is the mind or soul of a culture and it is also the most effective vehicle for cultural acquisition. Language is equally 'the most important in the learning process' (Bangbose 1992: 23).

In the National Policy on Education (1981:9), recognition is given to the importance of language in the educational process as it is seen as a means of preserving the peoples' culture. Not only that,

The Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue (P. 9 (8)).

From the above, attestation is given to the fact that indigenous languages play vital roles in the educational system of a given society. For any meaningful and solid educational foundation to be laid in any society, it has to be rooted in the culture of the people and be fully integrated into the society that originates it.

However, it should be noted that multilingual and multicultural societies are usually faced with language conflicts and where such situations remain unchecked, such societies have suffered unrests, instability and national disintegration. According to Pattanayak (1992:49), the entire South Asia region is an example of language conflict. Nigeria is a multilingual nation having about 410 languages (Mackey 1992: 12) or 430 languages (Crozier and Blench 1992).

In spite of the moves by the present transitional government toward national reconciliation, Nigeria is still faced with political instability, tribalism, communal clashes literary to mention just a few. There is no doubt that the integration of Nigerian nation has been seriously threatened in recent years. The political logjams in our nation cannot be unconnected with misunderstandings amongst the geo-political groups (Makinde and Ogunbiyi 1998 : 1).

Ikara (1987) and Banjo (1995) in Fideiye (1996:123) have argued for the choice of a national language for the promotion of the national psyche and facilitation of national mobilization for effective development. Ikara (1987) actually called for a rejection of English as a national language in Nigeria. Therefore, this writer will endeavour to examine the various language (situation) options that could lead to the promotion of national integration in Nigeria.

### Multilingual and Multicultural Nature of Nigeria

From the birth of Nigeria as a nation, it has had a population of multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural heritage. As earlier indicated, about 430 indigenous languages exist in Nigeria. Multilingualism is not a feature that is peculiar to Nigeria. Even in countries like Burundi, Lesathio, Somalia, Seychelles, Swaziland, which could be said to be monolingual other languages still exist amongst them however little the number (Bangbose 1991: 16 & 17). It is the believe of some people that a single common language is the most suitable model for national integration because of the benefits derivable from such an arrangement which include:

- Strengthening of national unity
- making planning easier
- absence of unnecessary duplication of effort



- absence of communication gap between the elites and the masses
- ensuring maximum participation by all citizens in the system.

However, in spite of the enumerated advantages, it should be noted that a deliberate attempt to employ language as a weapon or instrument for promoting national cohesion in a multicultural and multilingual nation without giving consideration for 'unity-inducing' factors could plunge the nation into chaos, conflict disunity and eventual irreversible disintegration. (Isayer 1977:192) cited by Bangbose 1991:16). Such attempts had failed in India and Sri Lanka where Hindi and Sinhalese respectively could not unify the nations but led to chaos.

There is no doubt that multilingualism is a barrier to national integration (Schwarz 1965:39) in Bangbose (1997:14) but Bangbose (1991:15) opines that it is not the language that disintegrates but the attitude of the speakers and the sentiments and symbolism attached to such language. According to him, the real causes of disintegration in African countries are unconnected with language but the following:

- exploitation of ethnicity by the elites in order to gain political or economic advantage
- the problem of sharing scarce resources with the inevitable competition (e.g. for jobs, positions facilities, etc.)
- uneven development, and
- external instigation based on nationalistic, ideological or religious motives (P 15.16).

Cultural pluralism is observed to be a permanent fact in Nigeria society and must be dealt with in a positive way. Each linguistic group would like to defend its identity within the society. Admission and employment opportunities should not be denied to anyone on the basis of his state of origin. The Government cannot prefer one group to another (Dopamu 1984:52). Indeed Nigerians have certain common needs in spite of the different ethnic origins and cultures.

#### The Language Policy in Nigeria

In the National Policy on Education (1981) paragraph 8 section 1, the philosophy of Nigerian education states that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the education process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages, other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

It is commendable on the part of the Government that it recognises the role of Nigerian languages in enhancing national unity. As a result of which every Nigerian child would have to learn one of the three major languages, apart from his own mother tongue. In other words, a Yoruba mother tongue speaker could learn any of Hausa or Igbo language of either the Igbo or Hausa people, he also learns the culture of the linguistic community. This enhances mutual understanding, friendliness and strengthens nationalism.

The various constitutions in Nigeria (Richard's of 1947, Macpherson's of 1951, Lyttelton's of 1954, 1960 and 1963) gave official recognition to English Language.

In 1954, the constitution has recommended English in the South and English and Hausa in the North. The 1960 and 1963 constitution also maintained the status quo. The 1979 and 1989 constitutions specified that the business of the National Assembly should be conducted in English and the three major Nigerian language (Awonusi 1993: 5-8). It could be seen that English had been imposed on Nigerians by the British Colonial masters and up till this day, there has not been an alternative to English language. While the Nigerian languages is expected to be the medium of instruction at the pre-primary level and the first three years of Primary Education, English is the medium of instruction for primary four to six and at the post-primary and post-secondary schools.



### **Evolving a Lingua-Franca: Problems**

There is no doubt that evolving a national language for effective communication in Nigeria - a multilingual and multicultural state is a herculean task. Obasanjo and Mabogunje (ed) (1991:200) had remarked that efforts being made toward the search for a national lingua franca is fruitless and time wasting because the English Language provides an easy means of communication among the various ethnic groups in the Nigerian Society. Banghose (1971) remarks that the choice of a Nigerian language as a national language might be seen as an imposition of a favoured ethnic group over the others. This view was strongly supported by Banjo (1995) who regards the imposition of any language as the lingua franca as "a political keg of gun powder". Others who contended against such imposition include Awoniyi (1995) and Ahmed (1989). Ahmed added that suspicious attitudes of the speakers of the minority languages and problems of linguistics as regards the implementation including lack of adequate infrastructure account for the failure of evolving a lingua franca for Nigeria.

The political situation in Nigeria as of now would not favour the selection of a Nigerian Language as the lingua franca. It could lead to disintegration instead of integration. This view is also shared by Iwara (1997:4) who observes that the development of local languages in Nigeria will eliminate the danger that is posed to national unity by the enforcement of one national language on the various ethnic entities in the country. To him, language choice is 'highly emotive issue' and 'language imposition is counter-productive' in a world of democratic revivals where equality of opportunities is preached in a culturally pluralistic setting. Therefore, in the next segment, the writer will present strategies aimed at enhancing national unity through Nigerian languages.

### **Strategies for Enhancing National Unity Through Nigerian Languages**

The following are strategies which could be employed in promoting national unity using Nigerian Languages as veritable weapons:

#### **De-Emphasizing The Issue of Lingua Franca**

Due to the fact that language choice is an emotive issue (Iwara 1997:4), it is expedient to de-emphasize it. It is better to discard an issue that would be seen as an imposition by a more favoured group over the others. This is a time when national reconciliation and mass participation in government by all the ethnic groupings should be promoted and encouraged through mass mobilization using the major and the minor Nigerian languages.

#### **Emphasizing the Language of Wider Communication (LWC)**

In the Nigerian setting the LWC is the language that is most popular amongst the regions. Hence, the adoption of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo is a reflection of the three language poles in Nigeria (Banghose 1991:23). That is to say, Hausa is the Language of Wider Communication in the Northern region, Yoruba is the Language of Wider Communication in the South West while Igbo is the Language of Wider Communication in the South East. At the State and Local Government levels, the Language of Wider Communication can also be identified and recognised for teaching as a subject in the schools and also used as the medium of instruction in the schools. Such a language should be used along with English and the major Nigerian language in that region at both the state and local Government Assemblies.

#### **Promoting Inter-Regional Language Learning**

In consonance with the provision of the National Policy on Education that a Nigerian child should learn a Nigerian language other than his own mother tongue MT, this idea should not be confined to the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. It should be extended to the Public and Private workers. In this regard, the Federal Government through the National Institute for Nigerian Languages should establish Nigerian Language Teaching Centres (NLTC) in every Local Government throughout the Federation to organise part time induction courses for the public and private workers across board for the learning of at least one of the major Nigerian languages apart from the individual's MT.



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