

The Urhobo Language Today

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Preface

This is a pioneering work in Urhobo Studies and meant to generate interest in the new discipline, which has recently been introduced to the curriculum of Delta State University. While Urhobo had been earlier studied at elementary and secondary school levels, the Urhobo Studies programme is the first of its kind in any university. The establishment of the programme has elevated the Urhobo language from the status of a language of only speech and daily conversation to that of an academic language being used for intellectual discourse. This, we believe, will make the language to further develop and more written than at any time before now. A language gains permanence through writing and studying, and writing Urhobo in the university will reduce the chances of its demise and not suffer the fate of many small languages that UNESCO forecasts will die off in a short time.

It is true, as stated in the first essay, that many individuals and associations have made efforts to have Urhobo written and studied in the past. However, the academy has its special way of conferring authority on a language taught by instructors to students with all the pedagogical and instructional facilities that a language laboratory and formal classroom gadgets and courses promote. Urhobo has rather belatedly entered the Nigerian academy, which up till recently, has been dominated by the majority languages of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Edo (that is, Bini) has for over a decade too been studied at the University of Benin.

It is significant that the Urhobo Studies programme at Delta State University has from the beginning been conceived to encompass more than the Urhobo language to include Urhobo civilization, culture, geography, history, and others. Urhobo Studies involve the totality of the people's experience. This work is the first and focuses on the language.

As will be seen from the essays, the language is studied from different perspectives. Working from the premise that language is the most significant cultural symbol of a people's identity, the writers show concern about the state of the language "today"; hence more than two essays discussing the challenges of the language in a post-modern, post-colonial, and global setting. Since culture is dynamic and language evolves with the people's changing experience, the book aptly starts with the evolution of the Urhobo language. Several writers see

the threat and challenges posed by modernity and urbanisation to the culture with the language.

There are technical aspects of the language addressed by linguists, as the essays on tone, sound, lexis and structure, and code-mixing indicate. In a few cases, diagrams are provided to explain aspects of the language. Since language is not the restricted domain of only scholars of linguistics, other aspects of the language or issues that impinge on language use are also discussed. Since literature is a vehicle of language, the proverbs and axioms of the language as well as the oratorical and performance traditions in Urhobo are also discussed. Other cultural aspects, especially music, are also seen as enhancers of the language. To underscore the significance of religion and language, several writers examine the relationship between the Urhobo language and Christian evangelisation and between the language and the people's belief systems. A writer also explores the place of language in what has come to be known as Urhobo "disco" music.

The essays in the book reinforce each other; hence some points appear repeated. The closeness of several topics is meant to exhaustively open up the Urhobo language debate. Despite the closeness of a few topics, especially of the challenges of the language and culture and on evangelisation in Urhobo as well as Gospel music in Urhobo, each essay adds immensely to the overall issue of Urhobo language "today."

We hope that this pioneering group effort will be followed by individual and other group projects that will make the Urhobo language take its place in the register of modern African languages.

Tanure Ojaide
Rose Aziza

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