

Barter In Ogbia And Nembe: An Indigenous Language Preservation And Promotion System

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Abstract

This study takes into cognizance the place of language in communication which can occur in any setting. The communication space in this study is the barter trading system of the Ogbia and Nembe people, where two distinct languages are used interchangeably in the bargaining of exchange of commodities. Data was collected through recordings of conversations of commodity exchange in the Ogbia Township Market. The data reveal that the language of bargaining is the Ogbia and Nembe languages. The involvement of these indigenous languages come as a language promotion strategy. The study concludes that the languages used make room for traders to become bilingual and also promoting their languages which results to language preservation for future use.

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I. Introduction

The barter system of goods and services has existed for centuries throughout history beginning from the hunter gatherer period to the post socialist period and even up until now. It is no longer a common practice in most parts of the world as some people claim that emergence of physical money as a means of exchange disrupted the system. It is interesting to note too that some barter practices involved as a commodity for exchange. Barter still exists in some parts of the world as the time of writing this article. In some parts of Nigeria, it is the medium of exchange of commodities mostly edibles and this takes place in a structured physical market place. A case in point is the barter system of Ogbia and Nembe communities in Nigeria. These communities have two distinct indigenous economic occupations such that they need to feed each other for survival. The Ogbia people are farmers while the Nembe people are fishermen and women. As neighbours, this system has existed as far as history can remember and it has proven to be so cordial. However, the most fascinating thing is that, these communities speak two distinct languages and they use both languages to communicate in the process and that is the focus of this study.

II. Literature Review

The review here examines the barter concept as expressed by various scholars as well as conceptual views on indigenous languages.

What is Barter?

The simplest response to what barter is would be that it is the provision of goods or services that is done by two persons or group of people which does not involve the use physical money as the medium of payment. This definition can be considered too basic because the barter literature has shown that it is just more than a physical exchange of goods and services. Garcia (2018) defines barter as the direct exchange of goods or services for each other without an intervening medium of exchange, where money can occasionally become the object of exchange. This definition goes to dispel the fact that the emergence of money disrupted the barter system. Anne (1980) also claims that barter is the origin of all exchange which is also considered as the primitive form of commerce.

The barter system over the period has caught the interest of scholars in fields other than economics and commerce. Anthropologists and sociologists have also shown interest in the barter system and they have made suggestions and claims concerning it. According to Valenzuela-Gracia (2018), the anthropological interest in the barter system started in the 1980s where they propose that barter should be considered a third category exchange. They reveal that barter includes gift items, commodity, formalized trade or truck system. This view is supported by Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) with a slight difference that states that barter should be considered a third category of exchange that is different from gift or commodity exchange. But for Heady (2005), barter is simply a technical term which anthropologists have applied to a range of transactions that share

certain characteristics. Barter is much more than basic transactions because it has proven to create social relationships with some successes and others going awry.

The Barter Process

As stated earlier, barter transcends just the exchange of gifts or commodities to establishing economic and social ties between communities and nations. It is however practiced differently in different climates. The barter system can be seen as a bilateral transaction which may be simultaneous or delayed and can have a clear-cut distinction on whether the exchange involves gift or commodity (Valenzuela-Garcia 2018). In what can be referred to as a simple barter setting, the worth of the commodity can be agreed between two individuals but on a higher scale, barter exists in market economies in an informal manner while applying formal mechanisms like coupon currencies and internet links. At this point barter goes beyond the mere exchange of commodities to a transition economy and becomes more complex.

Direct barter is considered an expression of autonomy and every level of the barter process involves engagements or bargaining which can be associated with some form of haggling, bickering, chicanery and sometimes theft. Although it can also be an indicator of mutual relationship, sense of trust, equity and fairness.

Some notable economies that had practiced the barter system are countries in Eastern Europe. Infact the origin of the barter system can be easily traced to Old Soviet Union (Seabright 2000). There are claims that the barter system still partially exist in Eastern Europe. Some other systems that recognized the barter system are Guisu in Uganda, Hawaii and Tiv in Nigeria.

The existing barter literature has focused the social and economic subjects of the barter system creating room for data to be gathered for collaborative researches in related disciplines like anthropology and sociology but it is scarce on disciplines like ethnography where language can be grouped as a part. Barter trading may not involve people who speak the same language alone but there are chances that the formation of bilateral relationships that arise from the barter system will also include the language(s) of participants. This form of relationship creates language contact which can in turn create language promotion, preservation, documentation and bilingualism. The present study is interested in a barter system which involves speakers of two different languages that are used in the exchange process.

Indigenous Language Promotion and Preservation

Indigenous languages are facing serious challenges of survival as indigenous people use more of languages that are termed global. The loss of any indigenous language will invariably result to the loss of a people's identity. This concern for the dwindling status of indigenous languages prompted the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to declared the year 2019 as the year for indigenous languages and subsequently went ahead to declare the years 2022-2032 as the decade for indigenous languages after the reports of 2019 indicated the actual statuses of many indigenous languages in the world. Language scholars who are interested in the survival of indigenous languages as well language advocates and community members are complementing the efforts of the UNESCO by researching, publishing, documenting and advocating for the preservation of indigenous languages.

There are various but related definitions of an indigenous language as given by scholars like (Adediji 2014, Jibir-Daura 2014, Lawson-Ikuru 2024). These definitions are of the view that indigenous languages are languages that are spoken in indigenous communities. The sustainability of these languages must be done indigenous people for very vital reason and that is why Emeka-Nwobia (2015) stresses that preserving an indigenous language by indigenous people should not only be for sustaining their heritage but also for nationalism. According to her, indigenous languages play a vital role in nationalism, technological advancement and national integration and Kirkness (2002) gives ten critical tasks to indigenous people who are interested in promoting and preserving their languages. According to her, the people must; (1) bank their language (documentation), (2) raise the consciousness level of their languages, (3) mobilize resources, (4) provide training and certification, (5) develop a comprehensive and appropriate curriculum (6) engage in meaningful research, (7) inform public opinion (8) eliminate artificial boundaries, (9) press for Aboriginal legislation, (10) work together. As a matter of fact, following these steps can raise the status of an indigenous language but they involve a strong synergy among community members and policy makers and they are also not easy to achieve.

Data Collection Method

Data for the study was collected through phone recordings of barter traders in the Ogbia Township Market which holds every Wednesday of the week. Data include the recording of four different conversations of bargaining and acceptance. These conversations were in the two languages alternatively. Consents were gotten from participants before the recordings were done

The Ogbia and Nembe People

The Ogbia and Nembe people are located in the present Bayelsa State in Nigeria and they share geographical boundaries. These two distinct ethnic groups also share cultural ties mostly because they intermarry and trade together. The Ogbia people are disputably (Lawson-Ikuru, 2024) numbered to be about 350,000 by the 2006 national census count and a similar number with the Nembe population. Politically, the Ogbia people are in the Ogbia Local Government Area while the Nembe people occupy two Local Government Areas; Nembe and Brass. It is important to state that the yard stick for this classification is language. People from both Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas speak Nembe as their indigenous language while the people from the Ogbia Local Government Area speak the Ogbia language as their indigenous language.

A Brief History, Ethnography and Language of the Ogbia People

The history of Ogbia is more of an oral account than a written one. There is really not much documentation on the origin of Ogbia (Lawson-Ikuru, 2021). Some oral accounts have it that Ogbia was founded by someone named Ogbeyan who originated from Benin. He had two sons, Okoroma and Olei, who later settled into various clans that make up the present day Ogbia. From a linguistic point of view, some people have claimed that Ogbia may have originated from the Bantu language speaking areas considering reconstructions found in the literature. A written account of the history of Ogbia is the one by Alagoa (2005). According to Alagoa, Ogbia traditions of origin indicate migrations from the south to north-east of the Delta. The southern part is the one now occupied by the Nembe Kingdom of the Eastern Delta. The two sets of migration are now occupied by two groups who are Olei and Okoroma who are said to be two sons of Ogbia. Alagoa said informants gave different accounts of Ogbia. Some said Ogbia migrated with his father from Benin through Iselema (Warri).

Religion

Presently a large population of the Ogbia people are Christians. The dominant sect being the Anglican Church. Catholic churches are sparingly found in Ogbia communities and more of new generation churches (Pentecostals) are springing up rapidly. Prior to the advent of Christianity, the Ogbia people worshipped deities. A spectacular deity worship system was that each town or village had its own deity. There was no national deity for the whole of Ogbia kingdom. This is not the regular practice in neighbouring kingdoms. However, there is always a single paramount traditional ruler for the kingdom who oversees the activities of village heads. The title of the traditional ruler is called 'Obanobhan'. The traditional system is based on selection and not monarchical.

Occupation

Traditionally, the people are predominantly farmers. Although the occupational roles are defined in the sense that both men and women have particular crops they plant. Women grow crops such as cocoyams, cassava and vegetables and plantains. The men on the other hand grow plantains and cash crops like palm trees.

A Linguistic Classification of the Ogbia

From a linguistic point of view, the Ogbia language is closely classified under a small group of languages known as the Central Delta. It is a decent of the Delta Cross. This group is under a language phylum called the Benue-Congo (Williamson 1989). Other Central Delta languages are, Abuan, Odual, Degema, Abureni, Ogbogolo, Ogbrounagum, Kugbo and Ochichi. The Ogbia language has dialects which are mutually intelligible to some degree. Lawson-Ikuru, (2014) identifies six varieties of the language. They are Agholo, Amorokeni, Anyama, Otakeme, Otuelei and Otuokpoti. Figure 1.2 is the Benue-Congo language family tree. Williamson (1989) in Faraclas (1989).

The Nembe History, Culture and Language

A major source of the history of the Nembe people is Alagoa (2005, 1972) which claims that there is really no generally acceptable history of the origin of Nembe but that there are pointers that they are Ijos who would have migrated from another historic Ijo group called Aregbo. Teilanyo (2014) on the other hand focused on the development of the two main communities of Nembe that have developed to become Ogbolomabiri and Basambiri and also mentioned that they obvious Ijo communities. The Nembe people are geographically bordered to the east by the Kalabari and Okrika and to the north by Ogbia and Abua-Odual.

Culture

Culturally, the Nembe kingdom is abound with a rich flamboyant lifestyle. They are known for their masquerade festivals, chieftaincy coronations, and several other cultural festivities which are colourfully displayed at different seasons. These festivals are claimed to be associated with divinity or with the traditional

beliefs of the people (Eferebo 2023). The traditional religion of the Nembes is similar to that of Ogbia but slightly different in their rulership system. The Nembes run a monarchical system where members of the royal family can inherit the throne.

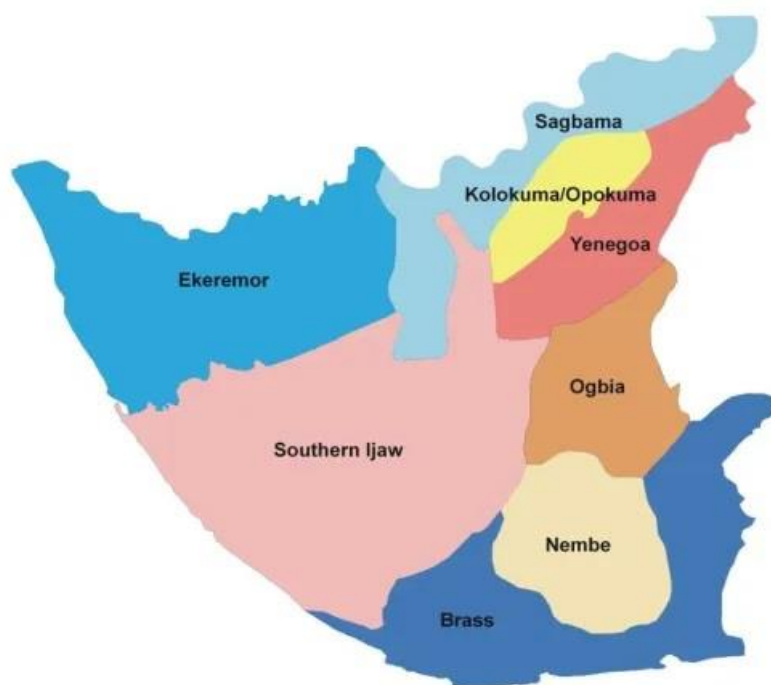
Occupation

The occupation of the Nembe people is predominantly fishing. The method of fishing is quite different from the Ogbia because they engage in high sea fishing and fishing in nearby creeks and rivers. Because fishing is their main occupation, it is common to find men and women who are into fish trading. They sell locally also do small scale exportation of processed fish, while those who engage in subsistent fishing involve in barter for the exchange of food with the Ogbia people.

Language

The Nembe language is classified as an Ijoid language alongside Izon, Kalabari, Okrika, Nkoro Defaka and Ibani under the Niger-Congo language phylum (Williamson and Blench 2000). The linguistic literature on the Nembe language is poor so there is very minimal or no linguistic description on the language. However, there is a published Bible that was used sparingly in the Anglican church and it is no longer in use.

Below is a map of Bayelsa State showing the locations of Ogbia and Nembe



The Barter System of Ogbia and Nembe

The Ogbia and Nembe people have had socio-economic and socio-political ties for several years especially when they had to share a common local government area until the year 1991. There is no documented history as to when the Ogbia and Nembe started the non-monetary exchange of goods but this has been on for a very long time but we know is that the barter practice is still ongoing. The barter involves the exchange of different categories of fish and crayfish to different category of food produce. Food produce from Ogbia include plantain, banana, cassava, cocoyam, palm oil, sugarcane and processed cassava flour. These food produce are graded according to the most valuable beginning with plantain ranking the highest. The list below shows the grading of food produce in the exchange.

1. Plantain
2. Cocoyam
3. Banana (different species)
4. Palm oil
5. Cassava flour(garri)
6. Fermented cassava (fufu)
7. Sugar cane

The Nembe people on the other hand present different sea foods like different types and sizes of fish, prawns, crayfish, lobsters, periwinkles, oysters etc. The quality, quantity and size of fish or crayfish will determine the food produce to be exchanged. So, for instance, a large bunch of plantain can be exchanged for a large size of Barracuda and a small sized sugarcane can be exchanged for a 500g worth of crayfish or prawns. This practice is done on weekly basis depending on which day is considered the market day for the markets in Ogbia and Nembe.

The Barter Language

Barter trading in Ogbia and Nembe is usually done by not very educated people and most of them do not live in the towns so their language of communication is either Nembe or Ogbia. In Nembe, most local fisher men and women live in fishing ports or settlements while the Ogbia farmers live in rural communities as well. The possibility of communicating in English is quite slim and not many of them are competent too. The language(s) of communication in the barter here is quite interesting such that if a Nembe person approaches an Ogbia with her goods, the conversation begins with Ogbia. Where the Nembe person speaks a few common words and vice versa. Below is a recorded conversation between an Ogbia and Nembe participants.

Conversation 1

Nembe Participant: webali 'good morning'
Ogbia Participant: webal oo 'good morning'
Nembe participant: ofoi a ke? Nwu na ogwan ena? 'how about the plantain? Will you exchange it for fish?''
Ogbia Participant: inyo. Mi na ogwan. 'yes I will exchange it '

Conversation 2

Ogbia Participant: iyoroba nua oo 'woman welcome'
Nembe Participant: nua oo 'welcome'
Ogbia Participant: indi donya oo 'will you exchange the fish'
Nembe Participant: donyu ooo. Okpungoro lagha ooo 'I will but the fufu is not enough'

These are regular conversations in the Ogbia market between speakers of two distinct languages during the barter process. Speakers tend to be slightly bilingual because it becomes a necessity that they communicate. This a result of language contact which is necessitated by social factors that encourage speakers of different languages to communicate with each other (Auer 2021). Language contact and bilingualism sometimes overlap but they both have a role in this case.

Indigenous Language Promotion

The language situation in the barter system of Ogbia and Nembe can be referred to as a language promotion method, because both parties can choose to speak Pidgin English which is the common language for less educated people. But whatever reasons, either consciously or unconsciously, these speakers have decided to promote their languages. This is quite phenomenal and aligns with Kirkness(2002) view about language promotion. According to him, indigenous people must make conscious efforts to promote and preserve languages through various vitalization processes. One of such process is encouraging or teaching children to speak the languages. This is observed in the Ogbia-Nembe situation as young people who engage in the barter system learn the language from their parent however basic it is.

III. Conclusion

This study is a demonstration of the place of language in every sphere of communication. The role of language in human communication can not be over emphasized and more specifically is indigenous languages. A great percentage of the world's languages are either endangered or dying and that amounts to the loss of culture, identity and even a people's existence. Barter is an indigenous commerce and can be classified under indigenous knowledge system and should involve the use of indigenous languages where necessary. The Ogbia-Nembe barter system has thrived over the years and seems to be sustained. It is our hope that the barter system of the Ogbia and Nembe people is nurtured for the promotion and preservation of both languages for future generations.

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