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Documenting Oral Media in African Languages as a Tool for National Development¹

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Abstract In African rural societies, many aspects of life are transmitted from generation to generation via spoken language usually through some form of oral media such as town crying, folklores, songs, narratives, dances, rites of passage, etc. Many forms of African oral media are today threatened by such factors as migration, education, religion, contact with 'prestigious' languages and urbanization that lead to lack of use and eventual loss of the associated vocabulary and practices. One way of preserving and developing oral media is by documenting language as expressed in its oral culture. Language documentation aims at providing a long lasting record of the linguistic and cultural practices of a people so that it can be used for a myriad of purposes (Himmelman 2006, Austin 2010). This paper posits the documentation of oral media, which is the traditional form of communication in African societies, as a tool useful for creating traditional language resources, preserving the cultural and linguistic heritage of the people and arousing both local and international interests; towards the development of the indigenous languages that in turn can enhance national development.

Keywords: oral media, language documentation, traditional language resources, national development

1 Introduction

The African continent is a linguistic paradise. It contains more languages than any other continent. Over 2,000 of the world's estimated 6,700 languages are spoken in Africa (Grimes 1996, Bamgbose 2011) by over 400 million people. This language total is not certain as many language areas in Africa remain inaccessible or have not been accessed at all. Even though this number may well be an underestimate, it represents nearly one third of the world's languages. Very few of these languages are spoken by large populations and more than 1,800 of them are minority languages (Batibo 2009). Amongst the major languages, a few such as Hausa, Fulfulde and Kiswahili are spoken in more than one country. With Africa being the home of almost one third of the world's languages, it is not surprising to discover

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that no African nation is monolingual. Rather, what we find are languages of varying status existing side by side.

According to Emeka-Nwobia (2015:115), "language holds the power to maintain national and cultural identity". In other words, every nation is identified by its language (or languages) and culture. It only makes sense that if one has to develop a nation, its language and culture must be developed. When one speaks of development, the images that quickly come to mind are those that pertain to transformation, growth, progress, advancement, and improvement. For a society or a nation, development should be all-embracing, encompassing every facet of a people's lifestyle which includes language development, economic development, educational development, social development, technological development, political development, etc. Development is a process that involves putting in place policies, infrastructure and resources that are capable of raising living standards, improving the quality of human lives, and maintaining self-esteem and freedom (Topadro and Smith 2011). Development is thus people-oriented and the medium by which information that enhances standards of living is communicated to people is via language. Therefore language and communication are essential components for the advancement of any society. This means that development cannot be achieved without a channel of communication for it is necessary that the transfer of knowledge, skills, resources and information that propel progress must be communicated to the people via a medium. There can therefore be no meaningful development without language.

Language is a key factor in the development of African nations because it enhances the participation of citizens in national development (Bambgose 2000, Ndhlovu 2008, Kanana 2013). Since the African continent is a multilingual state hosting both indigenous and foreign languages (as a result of colonialism), the question we should ask ourselves then is, in what language should the transfer of knowledge, skills, resources and information that propel progress be passed on to the people – in their indigenous language or in a language that is foreign to them? Kanana (2013) posits that development is slow in Africa because important communication is transmitted in foreign languages (usually the language of colonialism and prestige) and this hinders effective interaction between the parties involved in the development process, (who are speakers of indigenous African languages) as participation of all citizens cannot be fully utilized. In her words, "we need to acknowledge that all the world's developed countries have developed on the basis of their national languages, as they have adapted and integrated technology within their cultural and social values thus reaching all the people in their countries" (Kanana 2013: 49). According to Mazrui (1999), "no country has ascended to a first rank technological and economic power by excessive dependence on foreign languages". Every form

of advancement, be it educational, economic, political, social, technological, etc., can only succeed within the cultural and linguistic framework of the nation or society in question. Therefore, this paper advocates that development strategies in Africa should be based on indigenous languages. One way to exploit the potentials of indigenous languages for national development is via language documentation.

1.1 Defining language documentation

Language documentation is an emerging field in linguistics. Also known as documentary linguistics, it arose out of a need to address language endangerment. Its aim is to provide a comprehensive and lasting record of the linguistic practices of a speech community in such a way that it can be used for a myriad of purposes (Himmelman 2006). According to Boerger et al. (2016:1), "Language documentation is about creating a record of the language and culture of a human community that will outlast the individual memories of those creating it". It involves "working directly with members of speech communities in their home environments to compile an audio-visual record of their linguistic and other cultural practices" (Boerger et al. 2016:2). It is linguistic field work that is done in, with, for and in some contexts, by the speech community.

Language documentation is "achieved by systematic recording, transcription, translation and analysis of a variety of spoken (and written) language samples collected within their appropriate social and cultural context" (Austin 2014:60). Language data so collected should be digitally archived and made accessible to interested persons. The collection, analysis, preservation and dissemination of documentary records has been enhanced by advancements in information, media, communication and archiving technologies of which documentary linguistics is a beneficiary. As such, multimedia products derived from various computer-based genres should form part of the documentary records created. Information technology is thus a vital component in documenting languages (Nathan 2006).

2.0 African societies: an indication of orality

Generally, African societies have a predominant oral culture and lack a tradition of literacy. In other words, many aspects of life are transmitted from one generation to the next via spoken language usually through some form of communication media such as town crying, folklores, songs, narratives, dances, rites of passage, etc. Orality forms the bedrock of the traditional system of communication in African societies which is "instrumental in the mobilization of people at the grass root level for community development ... and other communication purposes leading to group and national cohesiveness" (Wilson 1987:87). However, many forms of African oral media

are today threatened by such factors as migration, education, religion, contact with 'prestigious' languages and urbanization that lead to lack of use and eventual loss of the associated vocabulary and practices. Documenting African oral media is a vital key to preserving and developing its oral culture. Such efforts will add value to the language and the speech community. Some features or characteristics of oral media (also known as oramedia) include the fact that:

1. They are inexpensive and readily available within the speech community. Many of the objects such as drums, pieces of cloth, leaves, cowries, etc. can be found within the community and in cases where they have to be made, there are usually people in the community that can make them.
2. They are usually characterized by a face to face kind of communication.
3. They are culturally transmitted.
4. They may be verbal or non-verbal. Verbal communications involve practices that are transmitted by word of mouth while non-verbal communications include signs and symbols, objects or instruments and body gestures.
5. They are native or indigenous to the people who associate with them as part of their cultural identity.
6. They are communal practices and so involve the whole community.
7. They portray and reinforce the value system and ethical conduct of the community (Ugboajah1982, Salawu 2015).

These indigenous means of communication have been in existence for generations and reflect the cultural values and traditions of the people. They constitute part of the identity of the people and so are indispensable components of the culture useful for transmitting information, educating and shaping social behaviour. In the words of Osho (2011:1), "oramedia are highly effective in the dissemination of information among the peoples of Africa". For instance, among the Malawi Tonga, folktales were taught in junior primary schools as a strategy to communicate development and inculcate the right social values in the children. "Children were taught in their own languages, read local literature with local content in local languages" (Manda 2015:608). This was during the British colonial era. It is however evident that various forms of oral communication in many present-day African societies are endangered due to lack of use; the result of which would be an eventual loss of the vocabulary associated with these practices. For instance, among the Nkqorq, an Eastern Ijo language group in Nigeria, the female initiation rite into womanhood known as *qbokq* is hardly practised². Among the Ikwerre people (Ikwerre is an Igboid language spoken

²This was observed by the author during her field trips to Nkqorq town while working on a project documenting Defaka and Nkqorq.

in Rivers state, Nigeria), palm wine tapping is an endangered activity and so is the associated vocabulary³. Documenting African oral media is thus a vital key to preserving and developing its oral culture. Such efforts will add value to the language and the speech community.

2.1 Documenting African oral media

The need to digitize African oral media in this age of rapidly evolving technological advancements cannot be overemphasized. Documenting oral narratives provide "excellent materials not only for dictionaries and linguistic analysis but also for stimulating writing and reading in the language" (Soto 2010:87). Oral media documentation as proposed in this paper entails creating traditional language resources from the oral culture of a people. Traditional language resources in this work refer to the linguistic materials associated with the cultural practices of a people that may be derived from traditional modes of communication (i.e. oral media). 'Traditional' in this sense is different from Childs, Good and Mitchell (2014) where it refers to the norm expected of most language documentation projects that lead to the production of dictionaries and grammars. The activities that characterize oral media documentation should be carried out with the aim of creating traditional language resources. Examples of language resources that may result from oral media documentation include; *Texts*: specialized lexicons, encyclopaedias, primers, storybooks, anthologies and other literary works.

Multimedia products: interactive encyclopaedias, multimedia thematic dictionaries, annotated audio-visual recordings, digital pictures, computer games, etc.

Documenting oral media does not in any way discourage the oral cultural practices of the people. Rather, in addition to a tradition of orality, it encourages a tradition of literacy and digitization. Oral media documentation involves the following activities:

- a. Systematically collecting language data that portray the oral culture of a people in a variety of contexts.
- b. Transcribing, translating and annotating linguistic data with the aid of annotation software such as Transcriber, Toolbox, FLEx, We say, ELAN, Praat, etc.
- c. Audio and video recording of data. (Digital pictures of recorded data should also be taken).
- d. Recording metadata about the documented data.
- e. Interdisciplinary research collaboration (e.g. linguists, communication experts, musicologists, oral literature experts, film and theatre professionals, etc.)

³This information was gotten through personal communication with Dr. R. I. C. Alerechi at the University of Port Harcourt.

- f. Community participation.
- g. Creating digital resources as part of the documentation.
- h. Creating websites that will host the language resources. The purpose of the websites should be "primarily cultural and secondarily linguistic" (Columbia 2012:160).
- i. Sourcing for grants to fund the documentation project.

It is important to note that any form of language documentation does need some amount of funding to cover expenses that range from buying recording equipment, travelling expenses, remuneration for native speakers to website hosting. All well-known granting bodies that fund documentation projects are either from Europe or North America. It is sad to note that African governments and organisations have not been involved in funding language documentation. Some of the granting bodies and their websites are listed below:

1. National Science Foundation (NSF), USA

www.nsf.gov

2. Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), UK.

www.eldp.net

3. Volkswagen Foundation DoBeS Project, Germany.

<http://dobes.mpi.nl>

4. Endangered Language Fund (ELF), USA

www.endangeredlanguagefund.org

5. Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL), UK

www.ogmios.org

6. Fire Bird Foundation for Anthropological Research, USA. The Firebird Foundation provides fellowships for the documentation of oral literature and traditional ecological knowledge.

www.firebirdfoundation.org

2.1.1 Types of African oral media for documentation

Oral media include all forms of verbal and non-verbal communication practices traditionally used in African communities to transmit information to members of their speech community. It includes all activities involved in African traditional face to face communication. Some of these are:

- i. Songs – dirges, lullabies, ceremonial songs, praise singing, etc.
- ii. Poetry
- iii. Proverbs
- iv. Dances and pantomimes
- v. Initiation rites – rites of passage into manhood & womanhood, coronation rites, burial rites, etc.
- vi. Folktales
- vii. Myths

- viii. Traditional herbal medical practices
- ix. Migratory history
- x. Procedural narratives – how things are made (e.g. basket-making, blacksmithing, hunting, farming, fishing, food preparation, palm wine tapping, etc.)
- xi. Town crier practices
- xii. Talking drum
- xiii. Masquerades
- xiv. Village square/market square/town hall meetings
- xv. Signs and symbols – native chalk, palm fronds, cowries, certain colours of cloth, etc.
- xvi. Festivals – fishing festivals, new yam festivals, etc.

Some pictures of oral media documentation are shown below. The pictures were collected as part of the 'documenting Defaka and Nkqorq project' sponsored by an NSF grant (no. 0553971) which was awarded to Akinbiyi Akinlabi and Bruce Connell. Defaka and Nkqorq are two Ijoid languages spoken in the Niger delta region of Nigeria.

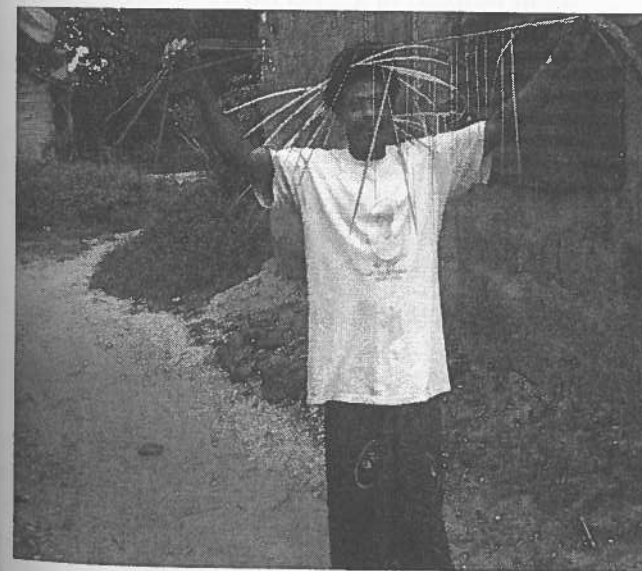


Fig. 1: Burial rites among the Defaka (Ijoid, Nigeria)

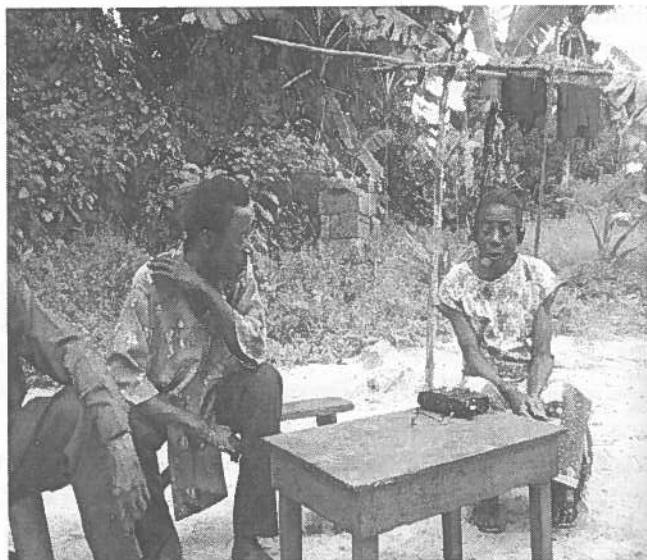


Fig. 2: Folktale narration among the Defaka

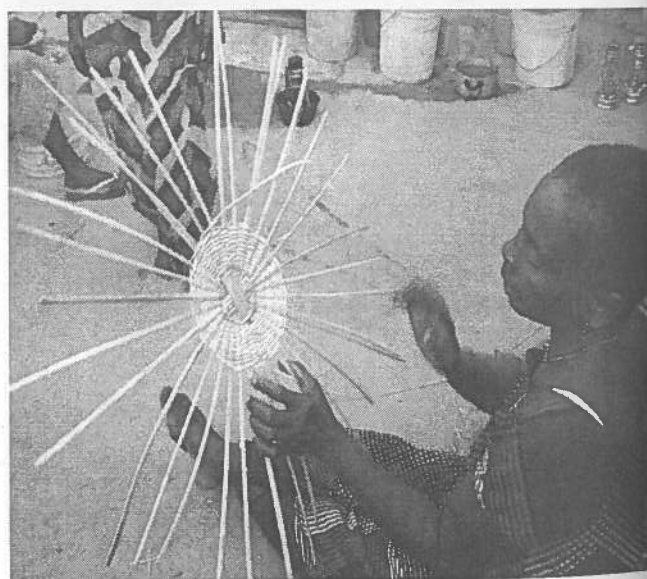


Fig. 3: Basket making among the Nkqorq (Ijoid, Nigeria)

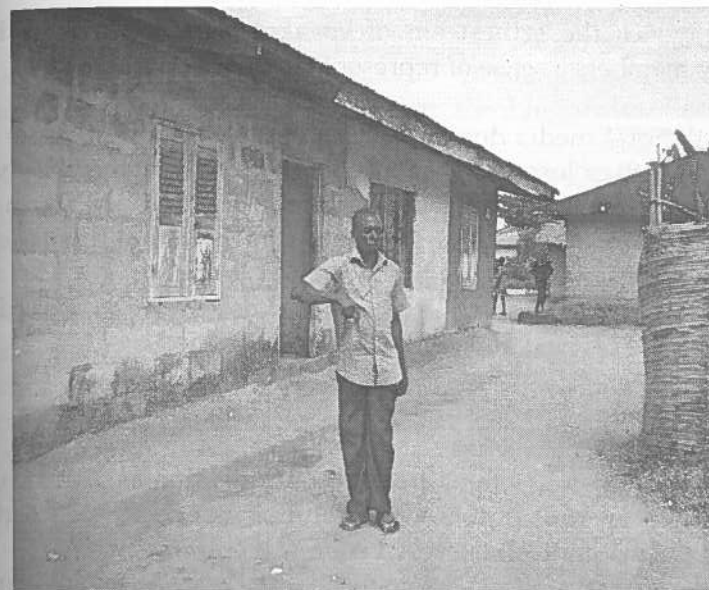


Fig. 4: Town crying at Nkqorq town

3.0 The role of oral media documentation in national development

There are many ways in which oral media documentation can aid national development. This is achieved mainly through language development activities. While collecting language data, language documenters can get involved in corpus planning through: terminology development, orthography development, graphization, etc. One of the immediate results of engaging in oral media documentation is that participation by both members and non-members of the speech community is encouraged. Such participation fosters communal and national identity and unity.

Oral media documentation also facilitates the development of literacy materials such as specialized dictionaries, user-friendly texts, story books, primers, etc. Such language resources encourage literacy in the language, increase the amount of data available in the language and provide additional domains of use. As a result, the status of the language is elevated thereby enabling language empowerment.

The creations of linguistic websites that host oral media documentation resources provide global visibility for the language. This can arouse both local and international interests. For instance, as a result of being part of the 'documenting Defaka and Nkqorq' project which is hosted on a website⁴, I have received calls and emails from people in Nigeria and outside Nigeria who were interested in the work we were doing. In addition, global

⁴<http://defaka.rutgers.edu>

visibility elevates the self-esteem of speakers of the language by giving community members a sense of representation in the digital world.

Lastly, oral media documentation can aid revitalization in the event of language death or loss and vocabulary loss. A language may be viable and still experience loss of aspects of its vocabulary that are associated with practices for which its speakers are no longer engaged. This is usually the case when a particular cultural practice is no longer in use. The associated vocabulary is lost. However, if there are documentary records of this practice, it can be revived and its vocabulary sustained.

4.0 Conclusion

It is worrisome that a vital aspect of our identity as Africans is being threatened by numerous factors. Oral culture is not peculiar to Africa. Many of the epic poems and folktales of Western literature such as *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek, *Beowulf* in Old English, *Hansel and Gretel* in German, were handed down for centuries as traditional oral literature before they were documented in writing (Boerger et al. 2016). If these aspects of European culture could survive for centuries until they were taught to Africans in schools because they were written, how much more would African oral media be preserved with the aid of digital technology if they are documented. Not only would documentation preserve this form of communication, it would also aid the development of the indigenous languages, the speech community and the nation at large.

5.0 Recommendations and suggestions

The following recommendations that will aid oral media documentation are suggested:

1. African researchers especially in such fields as linguistics, communication studies, music, theatre and film studies, etc., should form collaborations that would engage in oral media documentation with the aim of creating traditional language resources.
2. Research collaborations should involve the participation of members of the speech community.
3. African governments should dedicate funding to document indigenous languages.
4. Private and non-governmental organizations (such as banks, telecommunication companies, manufacturing companies, etc.) based in African countries should be encouraged to fund oral media documentations especially in the communities where they carry out their economic activities.
5. Academic Linguistics bodies in various African countries (such as the Linguistics Association of Nigeria, Linguistics Association of Ghana,

etc.) should drive the helm in sourcing for funds to organize training workshops and summer schools in language documentation methods. It is worthy of note that the Linguistics Association of Nigeria (LAN) in association with the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) and with support from the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) recently organized a training in language documentation for doctoral students in linguistics, early career researchers, language activists and community members.

6. Language documenters should strive to create and digitize as much language resources as possible such that these resources are accessible for the development of the languages in which they are created. Such resources as primers, story books, anthologies, dictionaries, etc., can be used for teaching indigenous languages in schools.

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