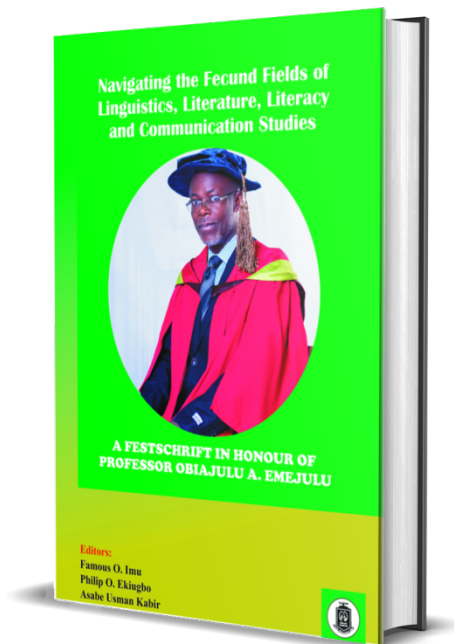


Navigating the Fecund Fields of Linguistics, Literature, Literacy and Communication Studies: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Obiajulu A. Emejulu



Editors:

Famous O. Imu, Philip O. Ekiugbo and Asabe Usman Kabir

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Chapter Thirty-One
Advocacy for the Survival of Nigerian Languages: An Examination of
Obiajulu A. Emejulu's Scholarly Input

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Introduction

The essay examines Obiajulu A. Emejulu's scholarly contributions to the cultural project of revitalising the waning major Nigerian language, the Igbo language, using two of his academic articles, both published in 2014. The two articles are “Living in Bondage: A Dream Deferred or a Promise Betrayed for Igbo Linguistic and Cultural Renaissance?” and “OnyeWetara Oji WetaraNdu! Harnessing Igbo Cultural Practices to Preserve and Enliven the Igbo Language. The Case for the Revival and Sanctity of Igbo Kola Nuts Rituals,” respectively co-authored with ChimaAmadi and Benedict Igbokwe. The selection of both is largely regulated by their individual attention to the less-than-desirable status of the Igbo as one of the three major Nigerian languages, with its profound cultural, ethnic and national impacts and implications. In addition, the articles by making their arguments mainly from the prisms of the seminal Nigerian movie *Living in Bondage* and, to a lesser degree, the novel *Things Fall Apart*, and the popular Igbo cultural ritual of kola nut, inject significant innovativeness and creativity into the robust Igbo language endangerment discourse. Moreover, Emejulu's co-writing of the articles with other scholars underscores the inevitable collaboration demanded by the all-important cultural project, of all stakeholders, within and outside the domain of scholarship, but especially Nigerian scholars and institutions like the National Institute for Nigerian Languages Aba (NINLAN).

The disturbing classification of the Igbo language as an endangered language, by the UNESCO *Red Book on Endangered Languages (1995)* has become common knowledge also acknowledged by Emejulu and Igbokwe. UNESCO (2012) states that a “language is endangered when its speakers, use it in fewer and fewer domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles and/or stop passing it on to the next generation.” Years later, The National Universities Commission (1999-2000) corroborated UNESCO's report by categorising Igbo as “the weakest” of the three

major Nigerian indigenous languages, in usage within and outside the classroom and from the standpoint of higher institutions of learning. The revelation by UNESCO, among other things, motivates profound consciousness and a large body of research activities, across various academic disciplines. However, considering the critical national and cultural implications of the reports, especially for the Igbo as individuals and groups, and the UN's classification of language maintenance as a human right, it is important to revisit generated arguments towards reemphasizing the essence of a conscious, consistent and comprehensive commitment to the revitalization of the Igbo language. This essay does so by engaging the offerings of a seasoned Igbo scholar and administrator Obiajulu Augustine Emejulu, a professor of Communication and Language Arts and the Executive Director of NINLAN between 2019 and 2024.

Emejulu's Contributions

Emejulu dedicates a significant percentage of his scholarship to advocacy for the survival of Nigerian languages, largely from the perspective of his indigenous Igbo language. In the first article examined by this paper, “Living in Bondage: A Dream Deferred or a Promise Betrayed for Igbo Linguistic and Cultural Renaissance?,” Emejulu, with Amadi, recruits the first official Nigerian Igbo movie, *Living in Bondage* as his ticket into the discourse hall. The essay expresses interest in the role of the movie in reintroducing the declining Igbo language into national, and indeed global consciousness, but bemoans the inability of the Nigerian movie industry, mostly populated by the Igbo, to sustain the linguistic revolution the movie started. The study constructs a solid background for its argument on the need for language revitalization as it pays a fitting tribute to the artistic genre it exploits, by tracing the development of the film industry in Nigeria back to 1903 Lagos (276). It also identifies the 1970s and early 1980s, as the “golden era” of the indigenous feature film industry in Nigerian, *Amadi*, by Ola Balogun was the first Nigerian movie in the Igbo language, and *Living in Bondage* was the first film in Indigenous language, with English subtitle (277). Further justifying the choice of the film in a discussion on the survival of the Igbo language, the scholars classify it as an epic and “most widely watched” Igbo and Nigerian movie ever, despite its “late entry” into the Nigerian movie industry (278). In these are observed the interest of Emejulu and Amadi in indigenous Nigerian languages, especially Igbo, as a language of artistic expression, as well as film as a cultural production with wide appeal.

No vigilant reader of the article can overlook the highlighted unmistakable

relationship of similitude between Chika Onu and Kenneth Nnebue's movie *Living in Bondage* and Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, in terms of their respective seminal impact on African literature and the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood (276 and 278). Furthermore, the essay draws attention to the cultural value of literature and film, as fictional but effectual categories and so validates the view of humans as “fiction-making” beings, and fiction as a “familiar component” of every human society (Achebe, 1978, p. 108). Again, by tracing the source of Nollywood's stories to the “bowel” of the Nigerian society, Emejulu and Amadi, note the indigenous character of the film, which qualifies it for its role within the essay's linguistic and cultural argument. Thus, like literature, the film is a “medium for recreating” societal life and reveals the “concrete experience” of human societies, even though it is a “mythical space” (Emezue, 2012, p. 44 and Mudumbe, 1985, p. 60). The scholars observe that the home video industry “interprets, propagates and disseminates indigenous cultures,” and creates jobs, by exploiting the quantum advancement in ICT (278). That is why Emejulu and Amadi tacitly identify the film as, perhaps, the most effective medium of Igbo language revitalization and attribute this to its contemporary indispensability and innate capacity to “create everlasting impression” (276). No wonder the scholars believe that “if half of the efforts and resources committed to conferences on Igbo language, culture and civilization had been ploughed into Igbo language movies, a better result would have been achieved” (276). This also explains the scholars' choice of *Living in Bondage* as a primary tool of mediation and implicitly points out where energies ought to be channelled in the efforts at prominentising the Igbo language to ensure its survival. Notably, even when the essay is primarily interested in the language aspect of the film, it also pays attention to its technological features and economic impact. This co-facilitates the work's comprehensive character.

In a bid to make a water-tight case for the revitalization of the Igbo language, Emejulu and Amadi beams the light on the film's city setting and characters. The scholars emphasise the film's preoccupation with the corrupting influence of the urban centre, embodied in occultism, and from this perspective, detect a correspondence between the movie and novels like Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* and Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. This intensifies the identified closeness between film and literature. Additionally, the urbanity slant enables the authors to depict the contribution of the Igbo to the multiculturalism and multilingualism visages of postcolonial Nigerian cities and the impact of this on the Igbo language and culture. The essay, from this angle, validates the classification of the Igbo as the

“most dispersed” and enterprising ethnic group, within and outside Nigeria (Onyemelukwe, 2019, p. 214 and Meniru, 202, p. 320). It also displays the importance of encouraging Nigerian city dwellers, typified by the Igbo, to buy into the cultural project of preserving Nigerian indigenous languages by using them. To Emejulu and Amadi's credit, they observe that *Living in Bondage* is, in some ways, a “morality tale ... story of Ndigbo” but the protagonist, Andy's lifestyle is “not a reflection of all Igbo” young men and women, (279 and 278) and this represents an explicit rebuttal of the general impression that Nollywood is bound to occultism while the Nigerian society personifies that aberration. Consequently, through the essay, Emejulu and Amadi engage in a theoretical renovation of the image of the Igbo, and so fulfil a major part of their cultural and scholarly responsibility, as 21st century Igbo scholars.

Furthermore, Emejulu and Amadi's advocacy acknowledges the profound contribution of *Living in Bondage* towards enlivening the Igbo language and engendering its renaissance by submitting that:

It is in its choice of language that *Living in Bondage* made its boldest statement. By using [the] Igbo language – not the rustic, localized but pure dialect of any of the numerous large Igbo clans with [a] substantial sprinkling of the famous Igbo proverbs, but an easy-going almost deodorized modern-day Igbo of the urban settlements – it generated an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm amongst Igbo speakers the world over. It showed that Igbo could be a modern language used in modern, contemporary movies. To make matters even more profound, the film caught on tremendously amongst non-Igbo speakers in Nigeria and Nigerians overseas. (279)

The excerpt lucidly illustrates a deep understanding of how *Living in Bondage*'s appropriation of accessible urban Igbo language revitalized the language and caused a cultural resurgence even beyond the confines of its southeastern original home and attracted crowds of “enthusiastic non-Igbo” learners and speakers. Again, the observation implies that like English, the Igbo language, in its spoken form, has evolved from what could be termed Old Igbo to Modern/Contemporary Igbo. Furthermore, identifying the Igbo language as one of the movies' “agents of success” (281), as manifest in “catch phrases” like “Andy

(sic) a kowasikwaalu m yaofuma” (Andy (sic) did not explain the implications to me”), the scholars express the untapped capacity of the film to play a leading role in the attempt at engendering the desired linguistic and cultural renaissance.

The statement also displays the possibility of the Igbo language, developing beyond its mother tongue status to other tongue and further tongue, for non-Igbo Nigerians and non-Nigerians, and invites the Igbo, as individuals and group, to make practical efforts towards resuscitating the language and invigorating it for such functions. Again, the scholars note the unifying function of *Living in Bondage*, and by extension the film, within a multicultural environment like Nigeria, in their view that with the film, Nigerians of “all linguistic backgrounds ... perhaps for the first time” since the end Nigerian Civil War, celebrated a “Nigerian project of Igbo language colouration” (281). They consider it a revolutionary development that indicates a “possible renaissance” of the Igbo language and culture (279). The testimony of the general reception of the film across languages and cultural divides is encapsulated by the exceptional achievement of the film in making the Igbo language attractive to Igbo and non-Igbo speakers. This validates the scholars' earlier position that movies can revitalize the Igbo language. Emejulu and Amadi, therefore, identify the film, cast in indigenous languages here exemplified by Igbo, as a cultural antidote to the easily observable polarization of Nigeria, along ethnic and religious lines.

One of the strengths of Emejulu and Amadi's argument, in the essay under examination, is its ability to lucidly articulate the critical gaps that necessitate the desired linguistic and cultural renaissance. This is, perhaps, best displayed in the observation that the immense linguistic revolution of *Living in Bondage* provided but a “momentary euphoria (and) was aborted,” because as the industry grew in leaps and bounds, Igbo as “the linguistic medium of high profile films” was largely discarded (280). Ironically, Nollywood is chiefly operationalized by the Igbo, as the authors note. Thus, Nigerian movie production patronized the English language to the detriment of Igbo, and other Nigerian languages and the trend is also observed in the preference for books written in the English language (Ugochukwu 2022, p.151). Explaining the neglect of the Igbo language by the film industry, Emejulu and Amadi note that the initial efforts, though linguistically and culturally successful, were “not built on a long-term strategic vision of the Igbo” and their global position, but on a limited vision (280), mainly regulated by economic and commercial dynamics. In this the essay insists that for the Igbo language to survive into the future, experience meaningful revitalisation, and attract global attention and respect, there is a need to articulate clear vision and mission statements governed by an unwavering

commitment to the Igbo language and be capable of eliciting a positive attitude towards the language, considering its status as a major Nigerian language and function as a primary marker of personal and group identities.

It seems that the abbreviated success of *Living in Bondage* compelled Emejulu to take his advocacy for the survival of the Igbo language, especially against the vicious onslaught of the English language, outside the imaginative and mundane realms. Thus, Emejulu, with another scholar, Benedict Igbokwe, looks towards one of the most enduring cultural observances of the Igbo, the kola nut and its rituals in the article “OnyeWetara Oji WetaraNdu! Harnessing Igbo Cultural Practices to Preserve and Enliven the Igbo Language: The Case for the Revival and Sanctity of Igbo Kola Nuts Rituals.” Notably, the authors' commitment to the Igbo language is illustrated in the hybridized title, which illustrates an obvious attempt at making room for the language even within a scholarship driven by the English language. It is also a strong marker of the authors' bilingual identity.

The need for Igbo language revitalisation is established in Emejulu and Igbokwe's report that in Nigeria the language plays “fourth fiddle,” after English, Hausa and Yoruba languages (57). In other words, Igbo is a “marginalized majority language” because, among major Nigerian languages, it attracts the “least prestige,” mostly arising from negligence (Onyemelukwe 2019, p. 219 and Aruah 2021, p. 3). Justifying the value of Igbo kola nut and its ritual in language conversation, Emejulu and Igbokwe, describe the kola nut as a “purveyor” of the Igbo language and the associated ritual as having “some of the highest utility values of all Igbo cultural indices in promoting the use of Igbo language” but belongs to the cultural category that is “not carried along” in the quest to preserve and promote the language (51 and 48). Following the footsteps of the previously examined essay, this second study draws from the novel *Things Fall Apart* to buttress its point on the centrality of the kola nut within the Igbo culture. And that again establishes the enduring influence of the literary text, as an art form and the role of Achebe's rural novels in reflecting the Igbo culture to the world.

Still on Igbo language preservation, the scholars recognise that the popular maxim that kola nut does not understand the English language (ojianaghi and bekee) was developed as a “determined bulwark” to protect the suppressed Igbo language and prevent the possible sacrilegious invasion of the sacred ritual and coup de grace against the Igbo language and culture, by the hegemonic “rapacious adversary, English,” and confers “a lot of pride” on Igbo (57). Thus their advocacy points out one of the most overt collective attempts at ensuring the survival of the Igbo

language and also identifies the kola nut ritual as one of the very few cultural practices which must be protected from the overwhelming onslaught of the English language. The authors' attention to the hegemony of the English language gives an account of our colonial history. Remarkably, the narrative of religion and attendant sacredness, introduced into the essay with the kola nut, is extended in Emejulu and Igbokwe's view of the Igbo language as capable of bearing the burden of the vertical communication between the living Igbo and divinities/God. Consequently, the scholars shift their argument to the unobservable spiritual realm, in a manner that suggests an attempt at pushing the Igbo language, with its kola nut rituals, beyond human interrogation and presenting it as a gift from divinities. That divinity tends to appear again in the Igbo language in "a voice" that asked the cleric and founder of Odenigbo Lecture, Archbishop Anthony Obinna, "what about Igbo language,?" as he studied Greek in Rome and as revealed in his interview with Alaribe (2017, np).

To show the gravity of the harm done to the Igbo language to further establish the need for its revival, the authors observe that the sanctity of the language within the cultural context of kola nut rituals is beginning to be violated by Igbo city dwellers who lack adequate competence in the Igbo language and are "not proud" of the language (57). Thus, Igbo people could be found using foreign languages in "domains and functions" where the Igbo language should be used (Prezi 2022, p.75). Emejulu and Igbokwe's anxiety that the Igbo language is threatened is embodied in their observation that the norms, gestures and tempo of the kola nut are being progressively neglected by the present generation of Ndigbo and are likely to deteriorate further with the oncoming "digital age" Igbo, and increasing "usurpation" of its prayers by Christian ministers (59). This again deepens the previous study's identification of negative attitudes towards the Igbo language, especially by Igbo city dwellers, as a major facilitating factor of the decline of the Igbo language. Emejulu and Igbokwe's cultural intervention also displays a cute consciousness of the special language of the kola nut, which is heightened with "idioms and proverbs" (56). This represents one of the important cultural issues raised by the writers. It highlights the orality which constitutes parts of the Igbo indigenous epistemology and forms the "empirical observations" of traditional Igbo societies (Emejulu, Nnamani and Amadi 2014, p. 21-2). In these are found the threatened invaluable non-material cultural capital and the urgent need for the revitalization of the Igbo language. Consequently, if these negative trends are not checked the language may become "critically endangered" (Prezi 2022, p.76) and that is why the advocacy of scholars like Emejulu is crucial in our 21st century Igbo universe.

Emejulu and Igbokwe's scholarship, within the context of the article under examination, is not without recommendations towards facilitating the necessary renaissance of the Igbo language. The recommendations include setting up a campaign towards encouraging men to "learn the art" of kola nut prayer, within and outside the family, especially at public functions (63). The next is an introduction of the kola nut ritual system in the syllabus of theological institutions in Igbo land, in order to train "skilful ministers of the kola nut" (64), and this way ensure the survival of the ritual and its attendant Igbo language. These are actionable suggestions towards pushing and uplifting the language to engender its survival. Lastly, Emejulu and Igbokwe's advocacy for the renaissance of the Igbo language and culture holds that kola nut and its ritual prayers are "imperative for the good health of Igbo language and culture" (64).

Conclusion

The need for the Igbo language to experience a renaissance has been clearly established as a cultural necessity by Emejulu and Amadi and Emejulu and Igbokwe, respectively, through the prism of the Nigerian film in Igbo language *Living in Bondage* and Igbo kola nut rituals. The criticality of the linguistic project undertaken by Emejulu's scholarship is clearly stated in the understanding that "language is the greatest source of identity for every people ... Once you lose the language you have lost the primary identifying factor of the people" (Pita Ejiofo, in a 12th July 2017 interview with Orient Daily News). In summary, a diminishing language implies a diminishing people. That is why the easily observable progressive neglect of the Igbo language in private and public domains, and especially in cultural productions and traditional ceremonies and among the Nigerian Gen Zs, in the light of UNESCO's 2012 definition of endangered language, is very worrisome. It is therefore the cultural duty of every Igbo, including scholars, to take calculated and constant steps towards protecting and preserving the Igbo language, especially against the assault of other seemingly more prestigious languages, like English. Thus, one cannot but find wisdom in the Igbo postproverbial text that promotes the survival and prominence of all languages, including the Igbo language thus: "asusundiozodewe, Igbo dewe, nkesiibeyaedenaluguoya" (Emejulu and Igbokwe 2014, p.66).

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