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Taxonomy of Ogu nominal shift to Yoruba

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Abstract

Ogu has been experiencing nominal language shift among its speakers, through the agency of Yorubaization, from the turn of the 19th century. Yorubaization is the conversion of anything to more Yoruba norms, which may come in diverse forms such as names, language and other styles or character. Yorubaization of Ogu personal names to spellings and pronunciations that make them look and sound Yoruba, the dominant language in Southwestern Nigeria, has become a common trend among Ogu people, especially the adults. Studies on Yorubaization and even Anglicization, have focused mainly on reasons, effects, patterns and consequences. Such studies do not only suggest that distortion of names is a recent trend, but have also conceded its practice to young people in the main. This study, however reveals that Yorubaization has been a practice of Ogu people, a minority linguistic group in Southwestern Nigeria, since the turn of the 19th century and the trend is not only common among youths, but transference from adults, who have been involved in it, to their children. The study examines the precipitating circumstances that led to Ogu people denying their identity at a time when such practice was rare in Nigeria, with a view to assessing its impact on the affirmation of Ogu individual and group identity in a multilingual, multi ethnic setting. The research methodology, which was qualitative, employed the instruments of participant observation and key informant interviews (KII). A total of 20 family names that have been Yorubaized, across Lagos and Ogun States, were purposively collected. Data gathered were subjected to descriptive, and content analyses. Findings reveal that Yorubaization is a direct consequence of language shift fuelled by inferiority complex, shame and an attempt to deny self. The practice has further engendered language shift, which, in turn, has aggravated the minority status of Ogu people.

Keywords

Yorubaization, Ogu, acculturation, self-denial, minority linguistic group

Introduction

Yorubaization is the conversion of anything to more Yoruba norms, which may come in diverse forms such as names, language and other styles or character.

Yorubaization of Ogu personal names to spellings and pronunciations that make them look and sound Yoruba has become a common trend among Ogu people, a minority linguistic group in Southwestern Nigeria with a population of 1.5 million people (based on 2006 census result and the Nigerian growth rate projection of 2.5%). This phenomenon became rampant with those who left their ancestral communities for major cities in Southwestern Nigeria such as Lagos, Abeokuta, Akure, especially in the 1970s.¹ Previous studies on Ogu have acknowledged that the language is experiencing shift to the more prestigious Yoruba, with evidence in adoption of Yoruba names.² However, such studies gloss over Yorubaization of Ogu names, which has made them to lose their original forms thereby causing difficulty in placing their bearers' ethnic identity and nativity. Even when Thompson argues that "an investment in a personal name is an investment in a social identity,"³ many Nigerians still distort their indigenous names to conform to other languages of their choice. An instance of this is the Anglicization of Nigerian indigenous names, which is now rampant among young people.⁴ Social media is replete with youths who try to anglicise their names in order to align with the prestige that English carries in Nigeria and other countries of the world. Raheem and Akande substantiate this in their argument that the issue of identity construction is more pronounced in the digital age due to easy access to information around the globe, especially in this era of social media.⁵ Ogu people too have been involved in both

¹ E. Senayon, *The language provisions of the national policy on education and the endangerment of Ogu in Southwestern Nigeria*, "International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism" 2021, 24(7), p. 963–975, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1528205>.

² B. Soremekun, *Two approaches to Aladagbe phonology*, M.A. Project, University of Ilorin 1986; H.B.C. Capo, *Towards a viable orthography for Egungbe*, "African Languages and Cultures" 1990, 3(2), p. 109–125; F. Akere, *Linguistic assimilation in socio-historical dimension in urban and sub-urban Lagos*, [in:] A. Adefuye (et al.), *History of the people of Lagos State*, Lagos 2002; J.K. Avognon, *The degree of bilingualism of Ogu speakers of Badagry-implications*, [in:] G.O. Ogunremi, M.O. Opaleye, S. Oyeweso (ed.), *Badagry: a study of history, culture and traditions*, Ibadan 1994; S.O. Durodola, *A survey of Ogu and Yoruba bilingual usage in Badagry*, M.A. Project, University of Ibadan 2004; J. Tadopede, *Language attitude of Ogu bilingual children in Badagry*, M.A. Project, Lagos State University 2010; T.A. Onadipe-Shalom, *The sociolinguistic context of Egun language maintenance and shift in Badagry town Lagos State*, M.Phil. Thesis, University of Ibadan 2013; E. Senayon, *Language shift and cultural policing among the Ogu of Southwestern Nigeria*, Ph.D thesis submitted to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria 2017.

³ R. Thompson, *Bilingual, bicultural and binominal identities: Personal name investment, (bi)cultural identity negotiation & the imagination in the lives of first generation Korean-Americans*, "Journal of Language, Identity and Education" 2006, 5(3), p. 187.

⁴ T. Soneye, *Acculturation of English into Yoruba personal names: a socio-phonetic analysis*, "Journal of Social and Cultural Studies" 2008, 11(2), p. 1–9.

⁵ S.A. Raheem, A.T. Akande, *Naming as a marker of identity on Nairaland*, "African Identities" 2019, 17(3–4), p. 191–210.

Anglicization and Yorubaization, the former to escape from self and the latter to identify with Yoruba language and people.

Since the turn of the 20th century, when Ogu people began to migrate to cities, especially Lagos, in their numbers, coupled with the resultant shift to Yoruba that followed, Ogu people have been changing their names to conform with Yoruba pronunciation, phonological and semantic forms with a view to associating with Yoruba, a language with over 20 million speakers in Nigeria alone⁶ and about 22 million speakers outside its native domain.⁷ This study is an exploration into the reasons Ogu people, apart from outright taking on of Yoruba names, resorted to Yorubaizing their names, patterns of Yorubaization and the implications of this practice for Ogu language survival as well as individual and group identity in a multilingual Nigerian setting.

The Sanctity of African Indigenous Names

African indigenous names are reputed to bear meanings and not just some means of identity. If we consider the fact that indigenous names ‘always bear a message, a meaning, a history, a record or a prayer’,⁸ changing any name to conform to another language, does not only eventually destroy the identity of the bearer; it also tampers with the meaning of the names and the very essence for which they were given in the first place. Even in Thailand, Mahwasane and Tshifaro reveal that “The Tshivenda naming practice plays a vital role in the shaping of the identity of an individual. Ethnic and cultural identity constitute a major role in defining an individual in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural setting such as Nigeria. The politics of language and power is based on the status and privileges accorded some languages and their speakers in African countries.”⁹ Soneye posits that African “names often reflect the circumstances surrounding the birth of, as well as the parental desires, expectations and prayers for the children.”¹⁰ Personal names are often reflective of the cultural values that shape the community to which individuals bearing the

⁶ B.O. Sogunro, *A socio-phonological Analysis of Hausa English, Igbo English and Yoruba English Varieties in Nigeria*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan 2012; H. Igboanusi, L. Peter, *Oppressing the oppressed: The threats of Hausa and English to Nigeria’s minority languages*, “International Journal of the Sociology of Language” 2004, 170, p. 131–140.

⁷ B.F. Grimes, *Ethnologue: the languages of the world*, http://www.ethnologue.com/Show_Country.asp?name=Cameroon [accessed: 20.08.2006].

⁸ E.K. Idika, G.C.S. Iwuchukwu, *A phonological analysis of Igbo pet names*, “IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science” 2019, 24(10), Series 9, p. 39.

⁹ M.M. Mahwasane, T.J. Tshifaro, *New-born baby naming practices of the Vhavenda: A sociolinguistic analysis perspective*, “South African Journal of African Languages” 2019, 39(2), p. 176.

¹⁰ T. Soneye, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

names belong while also telling the story of their birth. Again Kotilainen sees personal names as “cultural symbols that contain socially shared meanings.”¹¹ Personal names also reveal the unique profession, craft, as well as heroic deeds of the bearer’s lineage.¹² It therefore follows that a Yorubaized Ogu name will neither reflect the Ogu socio-linguistic nor socio-cultural group connection.

The recent trend of Yorubaization is gradually eroding the purity, deep traditional, cultural and linguistic ties associated with Ogu personal names, thereby further entrenching the erroneous belief that anything Yoruba is superior to Ogu indigenous languages and culture. This appears to be a fashionable practice among Ogu youths, who feel that it is an opportunity for those whose parents did not give Yoruba names at birth to Yorubaize their names. The spelling and pronunciation of such names eventually turn out to be more Yoruba than Ogu, however the bearers are satisfied with the feeling of prestige which is associated with Yoruba. Nigeria is linguistically heterogeneous, with over 500 ethnic groups and indigenous names serving as a major means of identifying the ethnicity of Nigerians.¹³ It therefore follows that in the Nigerian traditional society, names do not only serve as a means of personal identity but a marker of ethnicity.

The Ogu People, Language and Religion

Ogu, erroneously referred to as Egun,¹⁴ is spoken in the Southwestern part of Nigeria, precisely Lagos and Ogun States. It is also spoken with greater recognition and privilege in the Republic of Benin. For instance, not only do Ogu people constitute 30% of Beninese population, they are also politically and economically privileged, having severally produced presidents and heads of state over time.¹⁵ Closely related to Ogu, also in the Republic of Benin, is Fon, which also enjoys the status of a major language in the country. Ogu also shares affinity with Ewe spoken in parts

¹¹ S. Kotilainen, *The genealogy of personal names: towards a more productive method in historical onomastics*, “Scandinavian Journal of History” 2011, 3(1), p. 44–64.

¹² S.A. Raheem, A.T. Akande, *op. cit.*

¹³ A. Bamgbose, *Standard Nigerian English: issues of identification*, [in:] B. Kachru (ed.), *The other tongues across cultures*, Urbana 1992.

¹⁴ B.O. Gbolahan, *Complementation in Egun*, M.A. Thesis, University of Ibadan 1991; D.K. Flynn, *Borders and boundaries: gender, ideology, and exchange along the Benin-Nigeria border*, A Ph.D dissertation submitted to the University of Evanston, Illinois 1997; A. Duru, *Ogu-a people united by tradition*, „Daily Independent” 2015, 2 August, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201508031963.html> [accessed: 25.04.2023].

¹⁵ C.I. Ofulue, *Bilingualism and language maintenance in small language communities: the case of Gungbe*, [in:] O.M. Ndimele (et al.), *Issues in contemporary African linguistics*, Port Harcourt 2013, p. 39–58.

of Togo and Ghana. Generally, Ogu, Fon and Ewe belong to languages of people in the Aja-Tado belt in West Africa. The language is a member of the Aja-Ewe language group, which in turn belongs to the KWA family.¹⁶

Asiwaju claims that the geographical location of Ogu speakers in Nigeria are the Badagry Local Government Area of Lagos State, the Ado-Igbesa and the Ipokia districts of Egbado South Local Government Area of Ogun State.¹⁷ This narrative however is flawed as recent developments prove that there are other places in Lagos where Ogu people assert their nativity in spite of the controversies that such an assertion often generates, especially with regards to the absolutist narratives of their Yoruba neighbours in such places. They are also found, although to a lesser degree as indigenous people in other parts of Yewa Region and places like Abeokuta and Ifo in Ogun State. Beyond Badagry Region in Lagos State, Ogu people are similarly scattered in small numbers in several places in Lagos Island. There are also accounts that acknowledge the place of 18th and 19th century migration of a number of Ogu people into what in the 20th century became Nigeria.¹⁸ For instance, Badagry, a 15th century indigenous town, became the settlement of the Hueda as a principal Aja group.¹⁹ Beyond the Aja-Tado origins, a recent study by Dotse, has shown that the Ogu were part of the groups that migrated from ancient Egypt towards the south of the continent in primordial times.²⁰ The group, according to the research, was led by its progenitor called Gu. The movement that resulted in the present day large concentration in the Aja-Tado belt of West Africa had evolved through several regions including Ethiopia and other places.

The Ogu, like other Africans, are worshippers of indigenous deities and divinities in the fashion of African Traditional Religions. The Ogu have not escaped the influence of the imported religions of Christianity and Islam as many have embraced these religions. However, in both Lagos and Ogun States, the Ogu are more of Christians than Muslims. Many though still cling to their traditional religion of worshipping indigenous deities and divinities. Notable among the deities are Hun, Than, Sapata, Vothun, Aylo, etc. While many erroneously tend to place Zangbeto in the category of the Ogu dieties, recent works by Hunsu and Okure indicate that Zangbeto is not a deity to be worshipped but a traditional vigilante group that

¹⁶ J.H. Greenberg, *Languages of Africa*, Minneapolis 1963.

¹⁷ A.I. Asiwaju, *The Aja-speaking peoples of Nigeria: a note on their origins, settlement and cultural adaptation up to 1945*, "Africa" 1979, 49(1), p. 15–28.

¹⁸ Y.N. Babatunde, *Vlekete slave market and the Atlantic slave trade in Badagry from 1600 to 1889*, "African Journal of International Affairs & Development" 2015, 18(1–2), p. 50–61.

¹⁹ T.O. Avoseh, *A short history of Badagry*, Lagos 1938; B. Olaide-Mesewaku, *Badagry district: 1863–1999*, Lagos 2011.

²⁰ K. Dotse, *The origins and brief history of the Ewe people*, <https://ferrusca.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/the-origins-and-brief-history-of-the-ewe-people.pdf> [accessed: 25.04.2023].

defends its people and maintains law and order in the community.²¹ The Ogu also engage in ‘Yoho’, which is ancestor worship. They believe very much in the propitiation of departed ancestors. Particular communities usually have peculiar deities that they worship. Examples are the Ajara-Hungbo worshipped by the Ajara group; the Whego and Thejoro deities among the Toli and the Anavie-Hungbo among the Seto. In addition, some family names such as Avoseh and Hungbo reveal the deities worshipped by such families. Perhaps it is in the traditional religious domain that Ogu still survives today especially in shrines and groves.

Research Methodology

The research, hinged on the Acculturation Theory, employed the qualitative approach to data collection and analysis and is based on fifteen years of ethnographic study of Language Shift and Language Maintenance (LSLM) among Ogu people of Lagos and Ogun States in Southwestern Nigeria. Twenty family names, which have been Yorubaized over time, were purposively collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII). The study also employed the research instrument of observation and library materials. Data gathered were subjected to descriptive and content analyses.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Acculturation Theory. Acculturation Theory, according to Berry, is a process of cultural and psychological change which results from intercultural contact in a multilingual and multicultural society.²² When individuals or groups of people with different languages and cultures come into continuous contact, their languages and cultures begin to influence one another in different degrees. Usually, the lesser recognised language and culture gives way for the language and culture of the more powerful and influential group. When minority groups come in contact with more powerful linguistic groups, the acculturation process often begins with embracing the more prestigious language at the detriment of their own language. This is referred to as linguistic acculturation.

²¹ F. Hunsu, *Zangbeta: Navigating between the spaces of oral art, communal security and conflict mediation in Badagry, in Nigeria*, <http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:419980&dswid=6888> [accessed: 12.05.2012]; D. Okure, *The Zangbeta masked cult as an apparatus of social control among the Ogu of Tarkwa, Lagos, Nigeria*, A Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan 2015.

²² J.W. Berry, *How shall we all live together?*, [in:] M. Luik (ed.), *Multicultural Estonia*, Tallinn 2003, p. 3–11.

Another form of acculturation is changes in cultural practices and social structures, in the level of group, and changes in behaviour, in the level of individual. Since elements of culture include food, dressing, names, ideology, etc. the individual or group who undergoes acculturation opts for another culture other than theirs. This is why acculturation outcomes and processes are said to be strongly associated with identity.²³ The lesser recognised individual takes on the identity of the more influential group. Berry explains that acculturation can happen in four different ways: assimilation (accept host and reject home culture); separation (reverse of assimilation); integration (accept and connect both host and home cultures); and marginalisation (reverse of integration).²⁴ The acculturation dimension that any individual or group takes, when in contact situation, may depend on the strength of their language and culture vis-a vis the other. Again, Fargion and Nuttman-Shwartz opine that acculturation usually refers to the processes of coming to terms with a multicultural environment mainly for the purposes of building or adapting to a new life, as a result of processes of migration. This can also happen in a multilingual and multi-ethnic setting where there is a majority-minority dichotomy and diverse peoples find themselves in daily contact.²⁵

Language Contact between Ogu and Yoruba in Southwestern Nigeria

Trudgill defines language contact as situations where two or more groups of people who do not have a common native language and culture are in social contact with one another or come into such contact.²⁶ Language contact can force a people to learn a new language often at the detriment of their mother tongue as they often shift completely to the new language.²⁷ Nigeria, being a multilingual country, experiences contact situations amongst her over 500 languages. In Southwestern Nigeria, for instance, languages in contact include, Yoruba, Ijaw and Izon with Yoruba being the dominant language used in communication at almost every domain. It also enjoys the status of national language with more recognition and prestige than the minority languages for obvious political, demographic and socio-political

²³ B.G. Adams, F.J.R. Vijver, *Identity and acculturation: The case for Africa*, "Journal of Psychology in Africa" 2017, 27(2), p. 115–121.

²⁴ J. W. Berry, *op. cit.*

²⁵ S. Fargion, O. Nuttman-Shwartz, *Acculturation theory, cultural competency and learning from differences: reflections from a European short student mobility program*, "European Journal of Social Work" 2020, 23(5), p. 849–861, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1608911>.

²⁶ P. Trudgill, *Introducing Language and Society*, New York 1992, p. 45.

²⁷ J. W. Berry, *op. cit.*

reasons.²⁸ Alongside Hausa and Igbo, Yoruba and its speakers are socio-politically more privileged than other languages in the region thus causing them to feel inferior and marginalised. The minority languages such as Ogu, Erushu and Izon are hardly recognised thereby creating room for much rivalry.²⁹ This anomaly in the equation has precipitated widespread shift from Ogu to Yoruba resulting in a reduction in the number of Ogu speakers in Nigeria. Oyetade reports the endangered state of the Akoko languages, concluding that the natives are more proficient in Yoruba than in their mother tongue, and that language use both at home and in the neighbourhood is Yoruba.³⁰ Dada also confirms that Erushu is disappearing from the mouths of its young speakers in Ondo State.³¹

Many Ogu people have gone to the extent of denying their identity and taking on Yoruba identity in order to align with the prestigious language, as well as enjoy socio-economic privileges.³² What is more, due to their minority status, Ogu people are ridiculed by the Yoruba, often called derogatory names and made to feel less than human. Their language and culture have been termed barbaric, esoteric and ‘bush’. It is common among the Yoruba to say that a person is speaking “Egun” if they don’t understand what the person says. This derogatory way of referring to Ogu has resulted in many of them being ashamed to be identified with the language and as such the rate of language shift from Ogu to Yoruba is on the increase. Several factors contribute to making a people shift from their language to a more prestigious one; some of these are socio-economic, political, cultural and ideological.³³ The shift by Ogu people to Yoruba can therefore be termed forced and not voluntary since they have had to undergo acculturation. This resonates with Adams and Vijver’s argument that acculturation is strongly associated with identity.³⁴

²⁸ H. Igboanusi, I. Ohia, *Language conflict in Nigeria: the perspective of linguistic minorities*, “Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa” 2001, p. 125–142.

²⁹ S.O. Oyetade, *Language planning in multi ethnic state: the majority-minority dichotomy in Nigeria*, “Nordic Journal of African Studies” 2003, 12(1), p. 105–117.

³⁰ S.O. Oyetade, *Language endangerment in Nigeria. Perspectives on Akoko languages of the Southwest*, “International Journal of the Sociology of Language” 2007, (184), p. 169–184.

³¹ S.A. Dada, *Erusu-Yoruba endoglossic bilingualism and language alternation in Akoko, Southwestern Nigeria*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan 2006.

³² H.B.C. Capo, *op. cit.*; S.O. Durodola, *op. cit.*; E. Senayon, *Language shift and...*, *op. cit.*

³³ L. Campbell, C. Muntzell, *The structural consequences of language death*, [in:] N. Dorian (ed.), *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*, Cambridge 1989, p. 181–196; J. Fishman, *Reversing language shift: theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*, Clevedon 1991; D. Nettle, S. Romaine, *Vanishing voices*, Oxford 2000; P. Coluzzi, *Economic phenomena and ideologies behind language shift*, “Language Problems and Language Planning” 2015, 39(1), p. 70–83.

³⁴ B.G. Adams, F.J.R. Vijver, *op. cit.*

The situation of shift has been made worse with their constant harassment by the Yoruba, who accuse them of being migrants in Nigeria since Ogu people are a majority in the Republic of Benin.³⁵ However, historical accounts reveal that Ogu people had settled in the geographical area now known as Nigeria even before the Yoruba. For instance, Badagry, a 15th century indigenous town, became the settlement of the Hueda as a principal Aja group.³⁶ It is colonial mapping that brought about people finding themselves in certain countries. Evidence of shift from Ogu to Yoruba includes speaking of Yoruba even at the home domain, denial of Ogu identity, taking on of Yoruba names and Yorubaization of Ogu names, amongst others. The scorn and mockery (from the Yoruba) that greet an Ogu, when he owns up to his identity, is often so demoralizing that Ogu people deny their identity and claim Yoruba. Some of the people who are counted as Yoruba today are actually Ogu who have abandoned their language, adopted Yoruba names or Yorubaized their Ogu names as a matter of economic survival.³⁷

Among other consequences of language contact is the fact that Ogu now has some Yoruba phonological inflections, as well as linguistic assimilation, which is a dimension of linguistic acculturation.³⁸ Evidence of this is the presence of the alveolar trill [r] in some of its dialects, which was hitherto absent. The alveolar trill only occurred in borrowed words but in recent times, its presence in some dialects of the language has brought about some slight variations in the dialects, which however are still mutually intelligible.³⁹ Again the language is also now replete with loan words from Yoruba. Ogu people use the Yoruba terminologies, “Wá, káàbò, Ó dàbò, kúusé, etc.” for Come, Welcome, Bye, Well done, etc. even when there are Ogu versions or terminologies for them but language and culture contact has brought about such transference just as Yoruba too enjoys borrowings from Ogu and other languages such as Hausa, Arabic, etc.⁴⁰ Examples of such borrowings from Ogu by Yoruba speakers are: *De de mera o*, which is a corrupt form of the Ogu expression “Thethe Medaho” (Easy, Brother!); ‘fon dagbe’, which means “to wake well” in Ogu, but has been invested with a radical semantic shift in Yoruba (to be scattered or take to one’s heels).

Another instance of the borrowing is at the lexical level, where, for instance, a word like *depe* that means ‘young man’ in Ogu is used in Yoruba to mean

³⁵ S. Olaoluwa, *Ipokia forum and the purported end of history*, <https://nigeriaworld.com/articles/2006/sep/072.html> [accessed: 12.05.2012].

³⁶ T.O. Avoseh, *op. cit.*; B. Olaide-Mesewaku, *op. cit.*

³⁷ E. Senayon, *Language shift and...*, *op. cit.*; E. Senayon, *The language provisions...*, *op. cit.*

³⁸ F. Akere, *op. cit.*

³⁹ B. Soremekun, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ A.A. Olaoye, *Languages in Contact, a Blessing or a Scourge? A Case Study of Yoruba Ethnography of Greetings*, “Theory and Practice in Language Studies” 2013, 3(4), p. 669–677.

‘a buffoon or stupid person.’ These Ogu expressions, that are employed by Yoruba people, are often used derogatorily to ridicule the language and the people.⁴¹ In fact, most of the Ogu borrowings in Yoruba are usually corrupted and used to mock the speakers. Needless to say, the psychological effect of this derogatory use of their language by Yoruba people has contributed, in no small measure, to the shift from Ogu to Yoruba by both young people and adults. Ogu is replete with more borrowings from Yoruba than Yoruba from Ogu, to the extent that the language has completely lost some of the original terms to the Yoruba lexicon and vocabulary. This obviously points to the prestigious status of Yoruba that endears it to the Ogu people. Code mixing and code switching of Ogu and Yoruba are very common among Ogu youths and even among the middle aged who find it rather difficult to hold conversations completely in Ogu without having to mix with or switch to Yoruba. Cases abound of Ogu youths who neither understand their language nor speak it.⁴² This is another aspect of acculturation which happens in contact situations.

Patterns of Yorubaization among Ogu People

An average Ogu is often bilingual in Yoruba and Ogu due to the multilingual nature of their immediate environment. Shift from Ogu to Yoruba manifests gradually as impulsive code-switching and code mixing. Eventually, the shift completely favours Yoruba as the people deny their identity, and either take Yoruba names or Yorubaize their Ogu names. Yorubaization follows different patterns as discovered in this study.

Phonological Approximation

Ogu people, in their bid to identify with Yoruba language, people and culture, often Yorubaize their names by phonological approximation. They look for Yoruba names that somewhat resemble their Ogu names in spelling and pronunciation but having different meanings. That way, it becomes simple for them to change their identity without much effort while still convincing themselves of not totally abandoning their Ogu identity. Instances of such names and their meanings are seen in the table 1.

⁴¹ E. Senayon, *Language shift and...*, *op. cit.*

⁴² B. Soremekun, *op. cit.*

Table 1. Yorubaization of Ogu Names by Phonological Approximation

Ogu	Yoruba
Setonji (destiny's appointed time)	Adétúnjí (royalty reincarnated)
Titengbe (significant)	Títílopé (eternal gratitude)
Peawhanji (victory over battles)	Béwàjí (risen with beauty)
Thasi (in Tha's hand)	Dáíísí (the spared one)
Jidenu (a thing of hope)	Jídé (the reincarnated one)
Athanmitonde (not by our power)	Adamitunde (My matchet has returned)
Maumeh (a God-sent person)	Omowùmí (I desire a child)
Athasede (not by my power)	Adansere (A bird is playing)

The table above shows Ogu names that are Yorubaized through phonological approximation. This is made possible with the fact that the Ogu names somehow resemble the Yoruba names in spelling and pronunciation. Although the spellings and pronunciations are not exactly the same, they manage to replace one another. For instance, the Ogu name, *Thasi* has the voiced dental fricative /ð/ at the initial position while the Yoruba name, *Dáíísí* begins with the voiced alveolar plosive /d/. One of the features of Ogu that makes it a distinct language from Yoruba is the presence of the voiced dental fricative. Although the sound has now been replaced with /d/ even among younger generations of Ogu speakers, this does not erase the fact that it is part of the sound inventory of Ogu, as evident in the speech of older generation. In fact, Ogu is among the very few Nigerian languages that have the dental fricative in its sound inventory.⁴³

Orthographically, the sound is often written as 'th' but in most cases, it is replaced with 'd', which gives the wrong impression of its phonetic properties. However, this is not to suggest that Ogu does not have /d/ in its sound inventory as it occurs distinctly and is not in free variation with /ð/. Both sounds are in complementary distribution, occurring in mutually exclusive environments. Ofulue explains that although the Ogu are a minority that make up less than 5% of Lagos state's population, they are a distinct group in that their language is the only one within the region that belongs to the KWA language group.⁴⁴ This may further account for the differences in its phonetic properties from other languages in the region. There is therefore need for a standard orthography for Ogu in order to address the issues of discrepancy in phonetic symbols as a result of contact between

⁴³ *Ibidem*; E. Senayon, *Language shift and...*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ C.I. Ofulue, *op. cit.*

it, English, Yoruba and French. This is the main concern of Capo, as he reiterates the fact that Ogu people are linguistically overwhelmed by Yoruba and English orthographies and for which it is often difficult to determine how best to embark on the exercise of standardization.⁴⁵

Ogu names such as Titengbe and Setonji are further reduced to Titi and Tunji, which are short forms of the Yoruba names, Titilope and Adetunji. This further distortion renders the name completely Yoruba, making it extremely difficult to tell the true identity of the bearer. Scholars, who have acknowledged that evidence of shift from Ogu to Yoruba manifests in the bearing of Yoruba names, may have arrived at their submission based on names like these. However, they may not have realised that some of these names are in real fact, Ogu names which have been made to conform to that of the target language, Yoruba.⁴⁶

Key informants from Lagos and Ogun States revealed that they had to resort to the Yorubaization of their Ogu names as a matter of social-political survival. Apart from the ridicule and mockery that they are subjected to, some of them are denied jobs and political positions just because they belong to the minority.

The reason some of us Ogu people adopt Yoruba names is because we feel ashamed of the language. For if we find ourselves in the midst of the Yoruba, who deride/belittle us by saying, "Who are the Ogu? They are worth nothing", it makes some Ogu feel ashamed to speak the language. How should people find out that such a person as I am an Ogu person? I won't get a job in Lagos. This is one of the reasons why our people kept on speaking Yoruba until some of them lost the language.

Several controversies have followed the declaration of some Nigeria languages as majority, minority and small group.⁴⁷ Rivalry and competition have also attained the political system as minority language speakers among Nigeria's indigenous languages continue to raise issues of marginalization and inferiority complex. The political system has favoured the majority language speakers more by virtue of number and official recognition. Semantically, the meanings of the Ogu names above change automatically when Yorubaized, thereby distorting the deep cultural and ethnic identity of the bearer. Yorubaization hides the real essence of the Ogu, thereby subjecting him to some form of linguistic and socio-cultural slavery, thus robbing him of his ethnic pride and dignity. The names and their bearers also lose the sanctity, history and social cultural expectations associated with them and

⁴⁵ H.B.C. Capo, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ S.O. Durodola, *op. cit.*; T.A. Onadipe-Shalom, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ A. Bamgbose, *op. cit.*

these are the essence of the names in the first place. Soneye expatiates more on this while explaining that African “names often reflect the circumstances surrounding the birth of, as well as the parental desires, expectations and prayers for the children.”⁴⁸ As Ogu names, which are Yorubaized through phonological approximation, are distorted in meaning, the very reasons for the names are lost.

Semantic Approximation

Another pattern of Yorubaization of Ogu names is by semantic approximation. This happens when the Ogu name is changed to its direct Yoruba counterpart in meaning, thus retaining the meaning but not the language. The Ogu people who do this are unwilling to completely extricate themselves from the cultural essence of their names. Though they are forced to shift to Yoruba and change their names, somehow they try to retain their oguness by taking on a Yoruba name that has the exact meaning of their original Ogu name. Examples of such names appear in the table 2.

Table 2. Yorubaization of Ogu Names by Semantic Approximation

Ogu	Yoruba
Osefrimi (God has remembered me)	Olurántími, (God has remembered me)
Owhenayon (born at the beginning of a new year)	Abíódún (born at the beginning of a new year).
Senayon (Mine will be good)	Tèmiádára; (Mine will be good)
Zinsu (the first of twin babies)	Taiwo (the first of twin babies)
Sagbo (the second of twin babies)	Kehinde (the second of twin babies)
Thosa (a baby born after a set of twins)	Idowu (a baby born after a set of twins)
Thosu (a second child born after a set of twins)	Alaba (a second child born after a set of twins)
Semako (My destiny did not give me up for ridicule)	Abayomi (I could have been mocked)

The table above shows Ogu names that have been Yorubaized by approximating them to their direct Yoruba equivalent. It has been noted earlier, that many Ogu people bear Yoruba names in a desperate bid to identify with Yoruba people. Some who are originally given Ogu names grow up to find any Yoruba name that somewhat resembles their Ogu names but not in any way having the same meaning and begin to answer such names. Perhaps the near similarity in sound and syllable

⁴⁸ T. Soneye, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

structure between Yoruba and Ogu names may account for this ease in the Yorubaization of Ogu names. The seemingly ambivalence in denying the language by changing Ogu names to Yoruba ones and yet the retention of the Ogu meaning in the Yoruba counterpart shows the ambivalent nature of the average Ogu.⁴⁹ While it is very easy for an average Ogu to deny his identity and claim Yoruba in certain environments, when it comes to matters that touch on ethnic nationality and patriotism, he reclaims his Ogu identity. This accounts for why research in language shift among the Ogu, using the questionnaire, often leads to wrong conclusions, as responses rather suggest that the Ogu are favourably disposed towards their language, whereas participant observation shows that the reverse is the case.⁵⁰ Evidence that the Ogu is forced to shift to Yoruba, as well as take on names of same is captured in the words of a key informant from Ogun State:

I answer 'Idowu' which is a Yoruba name given to the next child born after a set of twins. Ogu people also have the equivalent - 'Thosa'. Life in the Southwest is very difficult as an Ogu. So in order to save myself a lot of problems, I changed my Ogu name (Thosa) to its Yoruba equivalent (Idowu). That way, I gain in both ways.

The fact that Ogu people Yorubaize their Ogu names for socio-political benefits, in a Southwestern Nigeria that privileges Yoruba over the other minority languages in the zone, cannot be overemphasized. Some Ogu consider it a gain when they identify with Yoruba as they believe that they have nothing to lose by denying their ethnic identity. This again accounts for the ease with which they dump their ethnic identity and pride. Seeing how social mobility in Southwestern Nigeria is tied to an exhibition of a certain measure of proficiency in Yoruba, Ogu as a minority language continues to experience shift to Yoruba in the bilingual setting. To that extent, for the Ogu, proficiency in Yoruba is analogous to the attainment of a form of modernity. It also follows that the Ogu culture is again subjected to endangerment as a language cannot be separated from its culture. According to Holmes, "nothing benefits a country more than to treasure the languages and cultures of its various peoples because in doing so, it fosters intergroup understanding and realizes greater dividends in the form of originality, creativity and versatility."⁵¹ An Ogu who has denied his identity by taking on a Yoruba name is not likely to ensure

⁴⁹ T.A. Onadipe-Shalom, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ E. Senayon, *Ethnic minority linguistic ambivalence and the problem of methodological assessment of language shift among the Ogu in Ogun State*, „International Journal of the Sociology of language” 2016, 242, p. 119–137.

⁵¹ J. Holmes, *An introduction to sociolinguistics*, London 1992, p. 64.

intergenerational transmission, which is the main reason languages die.⁵² Minority language speakers need to guard against aggravating their minority status by refraining from actions that would further reduce their number.

Advanced Yorubaization

Yorubaization of Ogu names takes on an advanced form when Ogu names are completely dropped and the bearer takes on new Yoruba first names and surnames. This brings about a total severance from the language and the people. I call this advanced Yorubaization because in the other two patterns of Yorubaization discussed above, the Ogu-ness of the bearer of the Yoruba name is still underlying. Even though the surface name and meaning is Yoruba, there is still some form of Ogu-ness in it that connects the bearer to the language and which may give out his true identity to a fellow kinsman who is conversant with the practice of Yorubaization among his people.⁵³ While Ogu people who engage in Yorubaization of their names through phonological and semantic approximation may still show some level of loyalty to Ogu, the ones who engage in advanced Yorubaization are unlikely to ever identify with the language and culture. A key informant revealed that he only got to know that he was not Yoruba when his father lay dying in hospital and decided to 'confess':

My father told me, on his dying bed, that he had sworn to an affidavit sometime in the 1950s in Lagos to the effect that he was an Ogu man and not Yoruba. Years later in the 1960s, this testimony was used against him in Lagos as he was denied scholarship for high school. Experiences like that made many otherwise famous Ogu families in the Lagos of the 50s and 60s shy away from identifying themselves as Ogu. He further said that he had watched many notable Ogu families in the city of Lagos change their names from Ogu to Yoruba.

Senayon revealed that there are many of such cases of famous Ogu people in the data above who pass as Yoruba. These are the group, who will never return to their ancestral communities as they have claimed other Yoruba communities as theirs for a long stretch of time and have become known as such. At best, it is only on their dying beds that they disclose to their children, who had always believed they were Yoruba, that they are not. This group is usually given up as lost or 'dead' by their kinsmen. Their children, who answer Yoruba first and second names, have

⁵² J. Fishman, *op. cit.*

⁵³ E. Senayon, *Language shift and...*, *op. cit.*

also married Yoruba women and given their children same names. It becomes difficult to start retracing their steps, especially if they have become very influential persons in the Yoruba community. They therefore continue in the new identity. Examples of such family names include Adebiaye, Oso, Alonge, Oludaitan, Ekundayo, Oluseyi, Olaide, etc.⁵⁴ Siebenhütter emphasizes the fact that stigmatised minority language speakers often shift to other languages of wider communication in order to escape social, political and linguistic feeling of inadequacy.⁵⁵

Some Ogu people engaged in advanced Yorubaization on their own but some others, especially the illiterate ones, found themselves bearing Yoruba names by mere coincidence. In the early sixties, when some Ogu families took their children to register for elementary education, they were attended to by Yoruba teachers, who found their Ogu names difficult to spell. This again accounted for part of the ridicule that Ogu people faced as they were told that their language was a sort of esoteric one that could neither be understood nor written by anyone. Those parents were not learned and so could not spell their children's Ogu names. In order to solve the problem of unwriteability, the Yoruba teachers found any Yoruba name that sounded similar to the Ogu names. That was how names like Peawhanji became Bewaji; Maumeh-Omowumi, Setonji-Olatunji, Athanmitonde – Adanmitunde, etc. The parents had no choice but to accept their fate in order for their children to have access to formal education. These names have stuck with some of such families up to the present time.

The language provisions of the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1977 in Nigeria stipulates that every child be taught in his mother tongue in the first three years of elementary education. One would have expected that, following the policy, Ogu pupils would meet with Ogu teachers and be taught in their mother tongue. However, Yoruba, being the language of the immediate environment in Southwestern Nigeria, as well as the language of wider communication, was the medium of teaching in Ogu communities.⁵⁶ This amounts to form of language oppression of majority over minority. As Roche claims, „Language oppression' is a form of domination that is coherent with other forms of oppression along the lines of 'race', nation, colour and ethnicity."⁵⁷ Little wonder then that Ogu children met with teachers who were not familiar with their names and had to Yorubaize them. The situation today is not different, as Ogu pupils are still taught in Yoruba in elementary schools in their community. This again is a contributory factor to

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ S. Siebenhütter, *Language practices and attitudes among young minority language speakers in Thailand*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development" 2020, 42(7), p. 1–26.

⁵⁶ E. Senayon, *The language provisions...*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ G. Roche, *Articulating language oppression: colonialism, coloniality and the erasure of Tibet's minority languages*, "Patterns of Prejudice" 2019, 53(5), p. 487–514.

the widespread shift being experienced in Ogu communities for which the language is presently listed as one of the endangered languages in the country. Ogu communities are generally found around the borders between Nigeria and The Republic of Benin. It is a well-known fact that borderlands are often abandoned by governments as well as underdeveloped and impoverished.⁵⁸ This is true of Ogu communities where basic infrastructure is lacking and the people made to feel neglected. Identifying with Yoruba therefore constitutes an escape from the harsh realities of their minority status.

Nicknaming

Nicknaming has also contributed to Yorubaization of Ogu names. It is fashionable for Ogu people to take on Yoruba nicknames as another way of identifying with the prestige associated with speaking Yoruba. This way, they seek integration into Yoruba and the associated benefits enjoyed by its speakers. Some of such nicknames eventually overshadow the Ogu names to the extent that they completely replace them. This is common with those, who originally hate to be identified as Ogu as it becomes easy to carry on with the Yoruba nickname instead of their native names. A key informant revealed how his surname became *Olaoluwa*, a Yoruba name:

I grew up with my maternal grandfather. He was a wealthy man by local standards. Jokingly his Yoruba neighbours would ask him how he came by his wealth and he would reply that his wealth had been given him by God. He was later nicknamed Olaoluwa, a Yoruba name, which means God's wealth. On the day I was registered at elementary school, the teachers simply wrote 'Olaoluwa' as my surname without asking whereas my Ogu surname is Azinmagba. The name has stuck with me to date.

Cases abound of Ogu families whose grandsires gave in to Yoruba nicknames, which have stuck with them to date. Examples of such names gathered through key informant interviews include *Olaoluwa*, *Daisi*, *Oluranti*, *Ekundayo*, *Seyi*, etc. These names do not in any way reflect the true identity of their bearers. At the time the grandsires were given these nicknames, they derived pride in being identified with the Yoruba without perhaps any idea the implications for Ogu ethnic identity and cultural pride. *Mahwasane* and *Tshifaro* emphasize the fact that names play

⁵⁸ D.K. Flynn, *op. cit.*

important roles in African communities.⁵⁹ This is why Nigerians are careful about naming and also explains the reason a great deal of cultural practices is engaged in the naming of a new-born child. For the Ogu whose Yoruba nickname has overshadowed his Ogu name, the reality is that he does not belong anywhere as he has lost his ethnic identity and pride.

Conclusion

Yorubaization of Ogu names has had grave implications on the language, its speakers and their culture. For one, their ethnic identity and pride is lost as they do not only change their names, they also shift from the language. Considering that the politics of language and power in Nigeria is based on number, it becomes increasingly difficult for Ogu people to assert themselves since their number continues to reduce. In losing its speakers to Yoruba, through forced shift, coupled with Yorubaization, the minority status of the language with its speakers continues to aggravate. What more, the people lose the cultural essence of their Ogu names, which is believed to have positive influences on their lives. Living in denial takes its toll psychologically and emotionally, thus giving the average Ogu, who has engaged in Yorubaization, the feeling of being lost. Ogu people, despite their minority status, should develop pride in their language by speaking it and answering Ogu names. In order for the language not to disappear, intergenerational transmission should be embarked upon by parents to their children. Young Ogu speakers should be encouraged to take interest in their language and acknowledge the sanctity of Ogu names. One way of doing this is for the government to promote the language by including it as a subject of study in elementary and high schools; use in the media, and for the people to enjoy the incentives as well as privileges enjoyed by the dominant linguistic group. Elite Ogu speakers can also promote their language by giving out scholarships and bursaries to young speakers as well as funding the publication of learning materials in the language.

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