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The Influence of English on the Igbo Language and Identity

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Igbo and English. Dmitri van den Bersselaar (1997) “Creating ‘Union Ibo’: Missionaries and the Igbo Language”

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The Igbo language, despite being one of the major languages of Nigeria, has faced significant challenges in establishing a strong literary tradition. Unlike Hausa and Yoruba, which have developed into widely used written and literary languages, Igbo has remained secondary to English in many aspects of communication, education, and literature. This situation can be traced to historical factors, particularly the role of missionaries, colonial policies, and the social dynamics of Igbo society. Dmitri van den Bersselaar's *Creating 'Union Ibo': Missionaries and the Igbo Language* (1997) offers a detailed exploration of these influences, shedding light on why English became so dominant among the Igbo.

01

Missionary Influence and the Creation of 'Union Ibo'

One of the earliest attempts to develop a standardized written Igbo was undertaken by Christian missionaries. Given the linguistic diversity of Igbo, with numerous dialects spoken across different regions, missionaries sought to create a unifying form of the language for religious and educational purposes. This effort led to the development of Union Ibo, a constructed version of Igbo that was meant to serve as a common literary standard. However, Union Ibo was not widely accepted by native speakers, and as a result, no significant body of written literature developed in it or in any other standardized Igbo dialect at the time (van den Bersselaar, 1997).



02

The Prestige and Dominance of English

During the colonial era, English quickly became the dominant language among the Igbo, particularly in education and administration. Mission schools, which controlled most formal education in the region, conducted lessons primarily in English. The language was also used in church services, further entrenching its importance in Igbo society. By the late 19th century, English had already established itself as the language of power and opportunity, and many Igbo saw little reason to resist its dominance.

Unlike Hausa and Yoruba, which were already widely used in written form before colonial rule, Igbo lacked a strong literary tradition. The absence of a widely accepted pre-colonial script or standard dialect meant that English filled the gap as the primary language of education and governance. Over time, Igbo-speaking individuals realized that learning English provided access to political and economic advantages under British rule.

03

The Impact of Igbo Socio-Political Structure

One of the major reasons why English became more deeply entrenched among the Igbo than among the Hausa or Yoruba was the nature of Igbo pre-colonial society. Unlike the centralized Hausa states under the Sokoto Caliphate or the Yoruba kingdoms, the Igbo operated in a decentralized, village-based political system. This lack of a unifying political entity made it difficult to develop a standardized



literary language that could be widely adopted.

Furthermore, as van den Bersselaar (1997) notes, there was no strong ‘counter-culture’ movement among the Igbo to resist English as a colonial language. Unlike other groups that had centralized leadership structures capable of organizing resistance, the Igbo adapted to the colonial system by integrating into it. Many Igbo individuals saw learning English and working with the British as a pathway to success rather than a loss of cultural identity.

04

The Consequences for Igbo Literature

The preference for English over Igbo in formal education and communication had long-term consequences for Igbo literature. While there have been successful Igbo writers, most of them have written in English rather than in their native language. This trend continues today, with English remaining the dominant language of publication for Igbo authors.

The historical dominance of English among the Igbo is the result of a combination of missionary influence, colonial education policies, and the decentralized nature of Igbo society. Unlike Hausa and Yoruba, which developed strong literary traditions in their native languages, Igbo struggled to compete with English due to the absence of a widely accepted written standard. As a result, English remains the primary language of education, literature, and formal communication among the Igbo today. While there have been efforts to promote Igbo language and literature, the legacy of colonial language policies continues to shape linguistic identity in Igboland.

van den Bersselaar, D. (1997). Creating ‘Union Ibo’: Missionaries and the Igbo Language.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Chuka Odi**

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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