

**LAGOS AS LAND OF THE SPIRITS:
EXPLORING LANGUAGE SHIFT AND
LOSS AMONG OGU AND ESAN
MIGRANTS IN THE 70s**

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Introduction

- **The emergence of Lagos as a prominent mega city, which embraces people from all parts of Nigeria, cannot be over emphasized.**
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- **Migrants from different parts of the country with diverse interests converge in Lagos in their numbers, on a daily basis, in search of greener pastures.**
- **The accommodating nature of Lagos in this regard has been captured in a Yoruba saying ‘Eko gb’ole o gbole’ – meaning that, ‘Lagos accommodates the good, bad (criminal) and indolent persons’ (Uyieh 2018:1).**

Tripartite Narratives about the Founding of Lagos

- **Narratives about the founding of Lagos surround three key players, the Yoruba (Awori stock), the Binis and the Whydah (Ogu stock) (Aderibigbe 1975, Asiwaju 1979, Bigon 2011).**
- **The present indigenous name, Eko is attributed to the Binis (Bigon 2011).**
- **Bini and Ogu people have lost their linguistic power to Yoruba despite the key roles they played in founding Lagos.**

Research Methodology

- **The study area for this research included Uromi in Edo State, Obakobe in Ogun State and Lagos.**
- **The research population constituted Esan and Ogu migrants in their 60s and above in Lagos.**
- **Part of the research population was made up of Esan and Ogu speakers in the ancestral communities also in their sixties and above.**
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with respondents in Obakobe, Uromi and Lagos.**

Ogu People, Lagos and Language Shift

- **Ogu people are a minority linguistic group found in Southwestern Nigeria precisely Lagos and Ogun States.**
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- **Ogu language and culture have been influenced by contact with Yoruba language and culture resulting in language loss and shift presently occurring in Ogu-speaking communities (Capo, 1990; Avognon, 1994; Johnson, 1994; Akere, 2002; Adeniyi and Bello, 2008; Tadopede, 2010, Senayon, 2016).**

Research Findings: The Role of Lagos in Facilitating Ogu Language Shift

- **Discussants from FGD traced the shift from Ogu to Yoruba to their Kinsmen who had travelled to Lagos in the 70s.**
- **The cosmopolitans initiated and facilitated the shift on their return visits to Ogu ancestral homelands.**
- **Their cosmopolitan status influenced the folks at home into imitating them.**
- **Speaking of Yoruba became a show of social modernity.**

The Role of Lagos in Facilitating Ogu Language Shift

- **“In those days, we in the villages perceived that some of our widely travelled kinsmen from Lagos didn’t find it fashionable to speak Ogu and didn’t encourage being spoken to in the language. That was why we were not that proud of the language and not eager to speak it. We felt that because it was the people who “had seen it all” that were not so moved about patronizing the language. Did people get imprisoned for speaking the language or did they get killed for it? We didn’t know. Because of that we were quick to hide the language and the related names” (FGD, Obakobe).**

Responses from FGD and KII

- **“Our people who returned from Lagos made us feel stupid for speaking Ogu. Some had taken on Yoruba names which many of us at home began to emulate” (FGD, Obakobe).**
- **“When I was an apprentice in Lagos, whenever my co-apprentices and I were seated, they would say, ‘*You are an Egun*’. Then they would also say, ‘An Egun person who doesn’t steal is only struggling against temptation to steal’. It was all these insults that made us resolve to hide our Ogu identity” (KII, Lagos).**

Esan People, Eko and Language Loss

- **Esan, popularly known as Ishan, is an Edoid language spoken in the Central and Northern parts of Edo State in Southern Nigeria (Elugbe 1973).**
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- **The early 70s also saw Esan people in their numbers establish their presence in Lagos in quest for economic empowerment.**
- **Many Esan people refuse to return home giving rise to the saying by elders that Lagos is a land of the spirits where people never return.**

Esan Migrants, Community Expectations and Lagos as Escape Route

- **Esan people embrace Yoruba and English at the detriment of their language. However they do not deny their identity.**
- **Lagos provides an escape route from extended family and community expectations.**
- **A major reason why Esan migrants in Lagos refuse to return home is the fear of bewitchment popularly believed to be common among rural Esan people.**

Responses from FGD and KII

- **“Are you going to allow your son to go to Lagos? The land of the spirits? You had better think twice. Learn from our experience” (FGD, Uromi).**
- **“A lot of Esan people in Lagos believe that they will be vulnerable to attack by witches and wizards and so they hide in Lagos where they feel secure. Their children too end up having this mindset about home. They speak Yoruba or English” (KII, Lagos).**



Conclusion

- **Although Ogu and Esan people played prominent roles in the founding of Lagos, they have both lost their linguistic power to Yoruba and English.**
- **For both languages to regain their linguistic vitality, their speakers need to return to the patronage of the languages and ensure intergenerational transfer.**
- **Since languages and their cultures are unique, they should not be allowed to die.**

**Thank you for
listening**