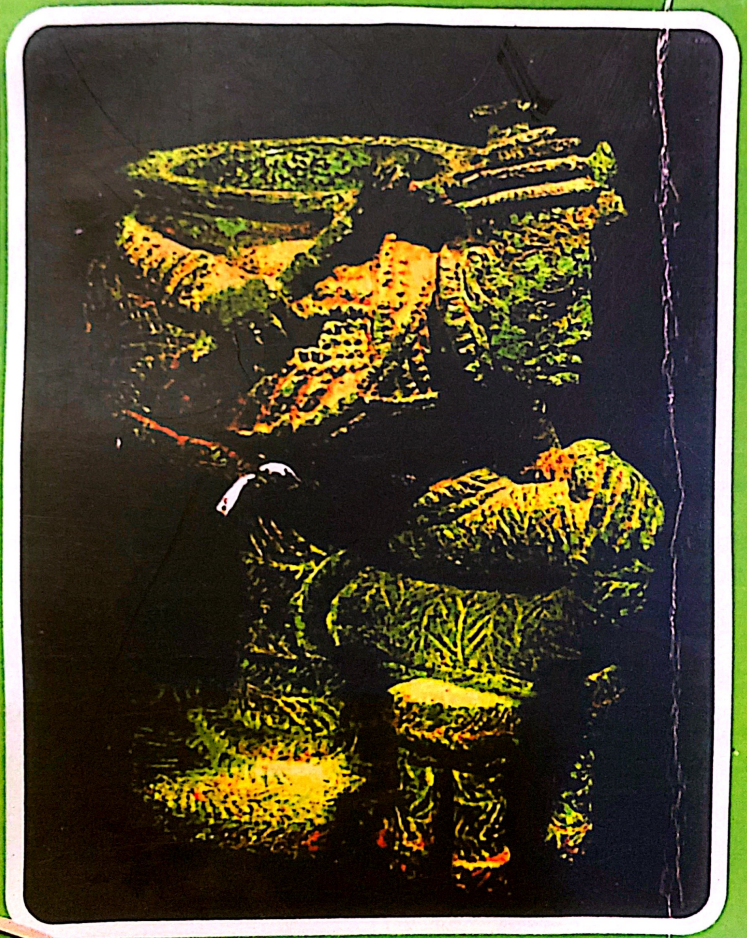
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- Authors should adopt the MLA referencing style and endnotes should be used instead of footnotes.
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Indigenous Language Newspapers in Nigeria from 1914-2013: A Review

Aisha Imam Omoloso
Aishat Abdulrauf-Salau

Abstract

The emergence of newspapers as a medium of Mass Communication in what is now known as Nigeria can be traced to as far back as 1859 with the publication of the first newspaper; *Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba'* (A Newspaper for the Egbas and Yoruba People), by Reverend Henry Townsend, an Anglical missionary. This newspaper and a number of other indigenous language publications of its kind actually predates the official existence of the country, Nigeria; a British colony which came into being through the amalgamation of its northern and southern protectorates in 1914.With this pioneering arrival of such indigenous language publications, it would logically be expected that over the years, such newspapers would have grown to become well established institutions in the Nigerian newspaper industry. Yet, today, after over a decade from the establishment of the first newspaper; incidentally an indigenous language publication, many indigenous language publications in Nigeria are still faced with problems of irregularity while some are not even known. Many others have also gone extinct. In fact, today's Nigerian newspaper industry has the publications in English language as the mainstream newspapers while the few published in local languages are more or less supplements. This paper examines the trends and challenges of indigenous language press in Nigeria from 1914 to date. The paper recognizes the importance of indigenous language in effective communication and highlights the prospects of indigenous language press in today's Nigeria.

Introduction

Since Nigeria's creation in 1914 and its independence 1960, this country like most African nations has had her share of turbulences and victories in all sectors of the economy. One institution that has played a critical and indispensable role in national development and in fact, virtually all day to day activities in the Nigerian

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society since its creation is the mass media. In fact, Nigeria's history cannot be said to be complete without mentioning the mass media. The media, world over are generally respected and described as powerful and influential due to their uniqueness of being capable of relaying messages to several people at the same time within a very short time. The focus of this paper however is the indigenous language press in Nigeria. This category of the Nigerian media has some remarkable attributes which makes it deserve scholarly attention.

The emergence of newspapers as a medium of mass communication in Nigeria was pioneered by the use of indigenous languages. This was when Reverend Henry Townsend, an Anglical missionary established *'Iwe Irohin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba'* (A Newspaper for the Egbas and Yoruba People) in 1859; a period which actually predates the official existence of the country itself. Incidentally however, the Nigerian newspaper industry today is dominated by English language newspapers. While the reason may be attributed perhaps partly to the fact that English is the official language of this country, it is still worrisome that the indigenous language press even with their pioneering status can be considered to be lagging behind in the Nigerian print media industry. For instance, several existing newspapers, according to Salau (2006) are obscure, irregular and unknown. Even though there has been slight improvement in the productions/ circulation of papers such as *Alaroye*, a publication in Yoruba language, *Ogene*, in Igbo language and *Aminiya*, in Hausa language (Ifeduba, 2012), it is still very glaring that their circulation, content and readership have not been very impressive. Given the various benefits inherent in the use of indigenous language for communication and the strategic position occupied by the mass media in every society, there is no gainsaying that newspapers published in indigenous languages ought to occupy similar positions with their counterparts; the English/ mainstream newspapers.

This paper examines the trends in the publication and content of indigenous language press in Nigeria since the creation of the country in 1914. The rest of the paper is organised under the following sub headings: Conceptual Framework; Brief Historical Development and Philosophy of Nigerian Indigenous Language Press; Emergence and Implications of Mainstream Press; Trends of indigenous Language Newspaper Contents; Challenges of Indigenous Languages; Importance of Indigenous Languages; and Conclusion and Recommendations.

Conceptual Framework

Indigenous Language: This refers to the local Nigerian dialects i.e. the various native languages spoken in Nigeria. These are languages that are native to the people.

Indigenous Language Press/Newspapers: Indigenous language press or indigenous language newspapers, as used interchangeably in this paper refer to

media publications, specifically newspapers or magazine in any of the local Nigerian dialects; whether major or minor.

Mainstream Press/Newspapers: mainstream press or mainstream newspapers as used in this paper are those print media publications i.e. newspapers or magazines published in English language, irrespective of their publication status (i.e. whether they are dailies, weekly, bi- weekly, monthly, quarterly etc.).

Brief Historical Development and Philosophy of Nigerian Indigenous Language Press

The mass media are important developmental tools any viable society needs to propel itself to a desirable height. There is a mutual relationship between the media and the society. As the society impacts on the media, so do the media reflect the society and impact on the society. It is no wonder therefore that the establishment of indigenous language press stemmed from the need to mobilize the public and orientate them towards developmental goals. The recourse to indigenous language publications was also to keep with the 1980 Yaounde Declaration, which urged African governments to start publishing indigenous language newspapers to mobilize the people particularly the majority who are not literate in the English language or the official language of the different countries, which are mostly foreign languages. (Alabi, 2003)

Contemporary press in Nigeria originated from the publication of indigenous language newspapers. The first known newspaper to be published in Nigeria was a Yoruba newspaper, "Iwe Iroyin fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba" (meaning newspaper for the Egba and Yoruba citizens). The newspaper was first published on December 3, 1859 by Reverend Henry Townsend, an Anglican Missionary in Abeokuta. (Alabi, 2003). This paper was at first published fortnightly in Yoruba language before later metamorphosing into a weekly publication in both Yoruba and English. Then, it had eight pages; four in Yoruba while the other four was the English translation of the Yoruba version. In 1866, the Yoruba and the English editions of the paper were published separately (Salawu, 2004).

Townsend's motive of establishing a local language newspaper was in keeping with some of the main functions of the press, which are to inform and educate. At the launching of the maiden issue of the paper, Townsend remarked that his objective was to "beget the habit of seeking information by reading" (Alabi, 2003). It can therefore be concluded that Townsend saw the publication of the newspaper as a social service. Profit making was not his primary motive particularly at a time when the then colonial government had not established any mass medium through which it could reach the public.

Iwe Irohin existed for eight years before it ceased publication on October 13, 1867 during a popular uprising called 'IFOLE' where several libraries and printing press which published was destroyed (Duyile, 1987: 21).

The paper however opened the door for the publication of other Yoruba and indeed indigenous newspapers in those early days. The first of such papers to emerge was *Iwe Iroyin Eko* which started in 1888. It was published monthly by Andrew Thomas.

After this came *Iwe Eko*, another Yoruba paper publication established by the Anglican Mission as a replacement for the London – based monthly *Gleaner*. The paper, however, did not last long.

Nigbati Owo Ba Dile was established by two female missionaries at the CMS bookshop in 1910. It was the Yoruba edition of the bilingual monthly initially printed in England. It was later printed locally by the Egba government Press till June 1913 when the CMS Mission established its own printing press. According to Folarin and Mohammed (1996: 104) cited in Alabi (2003: 21), *Nigbati Owo Ba Dile* was full of lively news and humor, thus, fulfilling its promise of providing relaxation in leisure hours. This therefore made the paper a compendium of news, information and entertainment. It can be inferred that it had something for everybody.

Ogunsina (1999: 12) cited in Alabi (2003: 21) stated that the 1920s were significant for the publication of many indigenous Yoruba newspapers to satisfy socio- political needs. The first to be launched among the Yoruba papers of this decade was the *Eko Akete*. It was founded by Adeoye Deniga in 1922. The paper was one of the longest lasting among the Yoruba language newspapers of the time. They added that while it lasted, it succeeded to a great extent in fulfilling its mission of fostering the newly awakened nationalism among Nigerians.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that indigenous language newspapers were used as a means of promoting nationalism and fighting the colonial rulers. *Eko Akete* was the foremost then. The reasons for this are not far – fetched. First, it was published in the Yoruba language, which was the main language of the Yorubas who were the predominant residents of Lagos. Secondly, there were more people who could read Yoruba language than English. Thirdly (and very important), there was the nationalistic consciousness in the people. The indigenes were being dominated then. Hence, the medium that could make them express their feelings and promote their interest was welcome. This was what *Eko Akete* came to do.

According to Alabi (2003), the establishment of *Eko Akete* opened the floodgate of other Yoruba newspapers. The papers came in quick succession. The first of such papers was *Eleti Ofe* (The Eavesdropper). It was founded by E. A. Akintan in 1923. It carried gossips related to the social and political life of Lagos. In 1925, Thomas Horatio Jackson of the *Weekly Record* fame established *Iwe Iroyin Osose* (weekly newspaper). He did not make success of the paper as he did with the Record because he was more interested in sustaining the leadership position of the foremost nationalistic *Weekly Record*. *Eko Igbein* was another Yoruba vernacular newspaper that came up in 1925. It was founded by Awoliyi while in

1927, *Akede Eko* (The Lagos Town- Crier) was founded by I. B. Thomas. He was a popular columnist with *Eleti Ofe* and brought his experience to bear on the operations of *Akede Eko.* (Alabi, 2003).

It is, however, interesting to note that apart from *Iwe Iroyin* and other Yoruba language newspapers which blazed the trail in Nigerian journalism then, there were other non- Yoruba language newspapers. Such papers included the *Unwana Efik* and *Obukpon Efik* published by the presbytarian church in Calabar (Alabi, 2003). There was also the *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* which was established in 1939 became a prominent Hausa language newspaper for many years. The paper was a product of the Northern Literature Bureau (NLB). The paper was established with the motive of promoting literacy, providing news and other relevant information. It was also hoped that the paper would generate funds no matter how little. According to Alabi (2003), this paper not only lived up to its expectation as stated in its mission statement but also served as a training ground for other technical staff that spearheaded the formation of 12 provincial indigenous language newspapers in later years.

These papers include; *Albashir* published in Kanuri (1951), *Iakadiya* published in Hausa (1948), *Mwanger U Tiv* published in Tiv (1984), and *Zaruma* published in Sakkawatanu (1951). Other papers identified by Hayat (1983: 195- 201) cited in Alabi (2003:26) included *Ardo*, for Adamawa, *Gamzaki*, in Hausa for Bauchi, *Okaki Idoma* in Idoma for Benue, *Durosi Oto* in Yoruba for Ilorin, Igbirra Bow and Oka – Ane in Igbirra and Igala respectively for Kabba. The remaining ones were Nne Nyetsu in Nupe for Niger while Himma, Zaruma, Haske, Baza Zzxaga and Iakadiya, all in Hausa, were for Katsina, Sokoto, Plateau, Zaria and Kano provinces respectively. Some other publications in Igbo language include *Onuora, Ogene* and *Akuko Uwa* (Ikwubozo and Nnabuihe, 2006). Anyawu and Udoka publications in Igbo language (Ifeduba, 2012).

Later developments as noted by Salawu (2004) include *gbohungbohun* another publication which began on October 29, 1970 by the Western State Government of Nigeria.

One major breakthrough in the publication of indigenous newspapers was achieved by the publisher of the Concord Group – the late Bashòrun M. K. O. Abiola. He established indigenous newspapers in the three major Nigerian languages: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. The papers published weekly by the Concord Group were *Isokan* for the Yoruba speaking Western Nigeria, *Amana* for the Hausa speaking Northern Nigeria and *Udoka* for the Igbo speaking Eastern Nigeria. (Alabi, 2003).The vernacular papers published by the Concord Group had to be rested consequent upon the dwindling fortunes for the Concord Group in the early and mid 1990s after the Publisher's death in 1993.

However, the progress recorded in the publication of Yoruba newspapers particularly with *Akede Eko* in the 1920s could not be sustained from the 1930s. The English newspapers came and stole the show. This was particularly true with

the coming of the *West African Pilot* which brought a new order into Nigerian journalism. (Alabi, 2003). Indeed most of indigenous language press are now defunct with very few in circulation.

Among the more recent publications currently in circulation is *Alaroye*, a publication in Yoruba which came into existence in 1996 (Salawu, 2004). Others are *Aminya* in Hausa and *Ogene* in Igbo language (Ifeduba, 2012).

Trends of Indigenous Language Newspaper Contents

Early indigenous language newspaper contents were characterized by religious and social news. *Iwe Irohin* for instance published mainly religious and social news at the on set. Such news items included the movement of church officials to and from district or parish, news of ordinations, baptisms, confirmations, deaths and births. The news items were aimed at informing church workers in the various outposts about the position of things at the head quarters and in the organization as a whole. The paper however later expanded its coverage by publishing non- religious items in addition to the church stories. News about Abeokuta district was given prominence on its pages while news stories about other places in Yoruba land as well as the Lagos Colony were also featured. Also featured were commercial events about producer prices of palm- oil, announcements from local chiefs and from the government of the Lagos Colony; news of the movement of government and commercial representatives; including the arrival and departure of Governors or their deputies from Lagos; agricultural and craft exhibition, as well as progress made by mission schools (Alabi : 2003).

It can hence be inferred from the contents of *Iwe Irohin* that it was more or less a general interest newspaper, which had something for virtually everyone. It was not surprising therefore that the paper became popular. However, the paper did not publish stories on crime, nudity, immoral news abstract, alcoholic promotion and the like. The reason was due mainly to the religious bias of the publisher (Alabi : 2003).

Folarin and Mohammed (1996) also observed that the style of writing of early Nigerian indigenous newspapers even in vernacular was mainly literary and in most cases pedantic. This, they reasoned was because the proprietors and editors were at best printers and at worse lawyers, doctors and failed businessmen with no formal journalistic training.

According to Salawu (2004), Yoruba newspapers in general thrive on casting screaming and sensational headlines. Imaginativeness, in this regard, should, however, be recognised. The newspapers do not pretend their allegiance to the grassroots. This is reflected in the kinds of stories they publish (stories that deal with common folks), the presentation of their stories (as an effort to explain current affairs in the manner the common folks would understand them), and in the way they cast their headlines. The headlines are usually dramatic in tone.

It has also been noted by Akinfeleye (1967) cited in Salawu (2004) thatYoruba newspapers are mostly weeklies. They are very generous in the choice of point size for their story headlines, most especially, when they come either on the front or back pages. The newspapers are packaged like tabloid newspaper magazine, that is, they blend the characteristics of newspaper with those of magazine. Like typical Nigerian newspapers, their front pages are adorned with a number of news stories, ranging from three to five. And like magazines, they carry lead headlines in bold types, the size of which ranges between 72 and 120 points. The lead headline dominates the front page of the newspaper and is always an attention-arrester, mostly in Roman and, sometimes, in Gothic typeface.

It was further observed by Salawu that some of the newspapers, in their write-ups, try to be as warm and as personal as possible. A number of the news stories begin with proverbs, which seems as a way of luring the readers with rhetorics. Yet, a good number of the stories seem not to be interested in any colourfulness; they directly go into the gist of the news.Some of the features stories also reveal this interest in exchanging greetings and pleasantries with readers before the writers go into the kernel of the write-ups. This, it is observed, may have emanated from the Yoruba oral culture which *places* large premium on courtesy. Yet, there are other features and opinion write-ups that are just formal in tone and approach.

Emergence and Implications of Mainstream Press

Mainstream press, as it has been described earlier are print media publications published in English language. Mainstream press first emerged as a subsidiary of the first Nigerian indigenous newspaper, *Iwe Iroyin.* The paper was first published in Yoruba, making it the very first vernacular newspaper in Africa. By 1860, the Anglican Communication Priest added an English edition to *Iwe Irohin.* Initially, the paper was published fortnightly, but it later became a bi- lingual weekly newspaper. As outlined by Babalola (2002), *Iwe Irohin* was followed by the *Anglo African newspaper*, edited by Robert Campbell in 1863. The *Anglo African* carried both local and international news. As a result of increased political and social activities in the country, The Lagos Times, a bi- monthly newspaper used to aggregate public opinion on topical issues, emerged on November 10, 1880. This was followed by The *Lagos Observer* fifteen months later and the Eagle on March 31, 1887. Adolphus March also started the *Mirror* at this time. According to Babalola (2002), other newspapers that emerged afterwards were the *Nigerian Chronicle* in 1908, and the *Nigerian Pioneer*, founded by Kukoyi Ajasa while in 1926, the Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company started the *Nigerian Daily Times*. Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe established The *West African Pilot* in 1936 while Chief Obafemi Awolowo started the *Nigerian Tribune* in 1946. Bablola identifies the newspapers currently in circulation to include; The *Vanguard Newspaper*, The *National Concord*, The *Punch*, The *Guardian*, This *Day*, *Comet Newspaper*, *Daily Sketch*,

The *Monitor*, The *Post Express*, The *Nigerian Herald* and The *Nigerian Compass*. Today there are more newspapers such as *The Sun, Tribune, Royal Times, Peoples' Daily* amongst several others. There are also various Magazines such as *The Tell Magazine, Newswatch, Abuja Mirror, Abuja Inquirer and African Business Information* among others, all published in English.

With the arrival of the mainstream press and of course with more Nigerians getting more educated, the mainstream press seemed to take over from the indigenous press. And over the years, sales and consequently production and circulation of the indigenous press started to dwindle.

The indigenous papers equally became less important after Nigeria gained independence. This was due to the fact that most of these papers were used as instruments of fighting colonialism by making the people informed. Upon gaining independence however, people seemed to have other issues in mind which perhaps were addressed in the mainstream press.

More so, while so much has been said and written about the contributions of the Nigerian newspapers to the political character and struggle for independence and democracy in Nigeria, not much attention has been devoted to the implications of mainstream press to indigenous publications. The indigenous newspapers have made enough impact like their English counterparts. For example, Omu (1978: 258) reported that *Iwe Irohin,* in 1889, had an annual circulation of 6,650 while its *Lagos Observer* counterpart had 7, 200. The subsequent Yoruba newspapers that came up particularly *Akede Eko* competed favourably with their English counterparts particularly in the 1920s. Factors identified as responsible for the state of lack of interest in indigenous publications include:

- The indigenous newspapers were not as many as the English papers; hence, they are not readily available everywhere like the English newspapers.
- Unlike the English newspapers that were mostly published on a daily basis, indigenous newspapers were mostly published on weekly basis. As the indigenous newspapers tend to be of less importance journalistically than their English counterparts.
- The heterogeneous linguistic and ethnic nature of Nigeria is the third factor that has limited scholarly interest in the indigenous newspapers. This has made the indigenous newspapers to be of local interest or at best regional interest. This fact is further buttressed by the pay- off of *Alaroye* in its present advertising campaign which states that the paper represents the interest of the Yorubas everywhere (*Iwe Irohin ti nsoju omo Yoruba nibi gbogbo*). On the contrary, the English papers employ the official language of Nigeria and consequently have a wider appeal.
- Many academic scholars (both foreign and local) cannot read the indigenous language newspapers. Hence, they do not consider them

worthy of study. This is against the fact that there is a great deal of their audiences, which see them as their major source of information.

The fact that scholars lack interest or cannot read indigenous newspapers was further confirmed by Coleman (1958: 496) when he referred to the English summaries of the *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo.* He also did not refer to *Iwe Irohin,* which doubled the circulation of the *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* and also existed in a more social and politically sophisticated environment.

Challenges of the Indigenous Language Press

Maduako (n.d.) notes that while Publication of Nigerian newspapers in indigenous languages has many prospects, the indigenous languages themselves are actually very many. This possess a challenge because not all the Nigerian languages can actually have newspaper or magazine publications.

According to Salawu (2004) identifies colonization as one of the challenges of indigenous languages in Nigeria.In most developing countries, communication in indigenous languages has been adversely affected due to colonization of such countries. For instance, English is Nigeria's official language and the major medium of communication; therefore, indigenous languages are not highly esteemed. This attitude is a major problem confronting indigenous language newspapers. The few indigenous language newspapers that exist critically suffer from low awareness and patronage.

Indigenous language newspapers therefore also suffer financially. The neglect Nigerian indigenous newspapers suffer is not only from the public. Most people who work in the establishments where the newspapers are published do not give them any consideration either. For instance advertisement executives in the establishments are not always enthusiastic about canvassing for advertisement for these media. Their lack of enthusiasm may, however, have been a result of the unwillingness of advertisers to place their adverts in these newspapers.

Given this situation, managements of the newspaper establishments do not consider as very important the indigenous language section, especially when it comes to allocation of resources such as newsprint, among others. All attention is focused on other titles of the establishments published in English language. Dare (1990: 8), similarly, notes that because it is presumed that there is only a small audience for the indigenous language newspapers, they are produced for the most part on a weekly basis and as a consequence, they are not self-sustaining. And because they are not self-sustaining, because they are held to constitute a drain on resources, Dare observes that little effort is made to develop them and broaden their appeal. And because such effort is lacking the indigenous language newspapers continue to stagnate.

Importance of Indigenous Languages

Currently, there are over 400 indigenous languages spoken in the country. We can categorize the indigenous languages found in the country into three. The first consist of those three languages, which are national in outlook. These are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. These major languages perform recognised linguistic functions in the country. The second are those that are regional in outlook. They are about twelve. Some of these are Ijaw, Nupe, Edo, Efik, Fulani, and Itsekiri among others. The regions in which they are located allocate each of these languages specific linguistic roles to play. The third constitute those that are limited to the locality in which they are spoken, with very little or no role given to them by the society. They are consequently recognized, if at all, only by members to which they are first languages (Harrison and Bello, 2006).

According to Hanafi (n.d.), "If indigenous languages were accorded more prominence, if people were given the right to speak, and use, their languages at greater levels of organisation and influence, such as in political and educational domains as well as in mass media, would not their languages grow and develop?"

Indigenous languages through the use of the Nigerian mass media can be used to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria. There is no gainsaying in the fact that the language (and culture) of development is the mother tongue or a language(s) rooted in the people's culture and tradition. With the use of indigenous languages in the media, information is brought closer to more people, the non-literate inclusive. This consequently makes development more broad based.

Consistent with this view is Salawu (2006:8)'s assertion that the indigenous language of a community is best suited for conveying messages to such communities. In his words, "Specifically, the mass media that use indigenous languages are important for the purpose of information, mobilization and continuity".

The importance of indigenous languages is equally recognized by Alabi (2003) when he argued in his article that indigenous language publications can be used to mobilize the populace and orientate them towards departmental goals. He goes further to state that the recourse to indigenous language publications may be in keeping with the 1980 Yaounde Declaration, which urged African governments to start publishing indigenous language newspapers to mobilize the people particularly the majority who are not literate in the English language or the official language of the different countries, which are mostly foreign.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has provided a review of indigenous language newspapers in *Nigeria from 1914 to 2013. It was able to achieve this feat by providing a history* of the development of indigenous language press in Nigeria, an examination of the emergence and implications of mainstream press in Nigeria and a cursory look

at the trends of indigenous language newspaper contents. The paper further x-rayed the functions of indigenous languages and challenges indigenous languages are faced with in Nigeria.

Indigenous language newspapers have a lot of potentials if only we can appreciate our language and recognize the fact that no language is superior to another. Hymes (1961) cited in Salawu (2004) posits that "all known languages roughly manifest the same kind of symbolic behaviour system, in spite of their great variety".

Banjo (1995: 187) cited in Salawu (2004) is however of the view that the dominance of English language at this stage of modernization is inevitable, and the situation is rather evolving than static. He, therefore, states that in the process of evolution, all the languages have a part to play, and if Nigeria is to make a distinctive contribution to human civilization, it will have to be as a result of the symbiotic relationship between English and the indigenous languages, a pooling of the resources of all the languages without foreclosing the contributions that any of them can make.

The paper concludes that the indigenous language of a community is too important to be ignored as it goes a long way in ensuring effective communication especially at the grassroots. If all Nigerians are to get access to adequate information needed for the required national development, the mass media must be used optimally to achieve this aim by making use of the languages that various categories of citizens would understand effectively. Hence there is an urgent need to ensure that the indigenous language publications are revived and published alongside their English counterparts. This undoubtedly would make information closer to the non-literates in the society regardless of their status or tribe.

The paper recommends that the publishers of indigenous language newspapers strive to compete favourably with their English counterparts by improving upon their quality of their papers. This covers their style of writing, newsprint, and coverage of issues in general. In other words, when people get contents similar to those in the mainstream press, this is likely to give the indigenous language press greater appeal as well.

It is equally recommended that the Management of indigenous language press ensure that their staff possess the requisite training for the profession. This means that they should employ well trained journalists so that the publications would be professionally produced.

The paper also recommends that indigenous languages be accomodated in journalism education curricula so that students of journalism who would eventually become professionals in the field have what it takes to practice journalism in Languages other than English. Finally, the paper recommends that the society both the government and the people in general also encourage readership/circulation and sales of the indigenous language publications. People

should strive to be patronising such publications by reading them and placing advertisement in them as well.

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