

# Speaking HIV/AIDS Out in Nigeria: The Role of Indigenous Languages

**Abiodun J. Oluwabamide**

*Department of Sociology  
Ahmadu Bello University  
Zaria, Nigeria*

**Samuel A. Jegede**

*Department of Sociology  
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria*

## Abstract

*If there is any disease that is giving man serious restlessness and/or sleeplessness, it is HIV/AIDS. Many lives have been lost to this killer disease. Because it spreads fast and there is no cure for it, nations of the world have continued to give it a pride of place in their daily scale of activities. The only available remedy for the disease is basically cultural. Cultural in the sense that it focuses mainly on curtailing and/or controlling people's sexual habits, at least to prevent the disease from spreading further. Thus, the international community, especially the UNO and national governments have intensified enlightenment campaigns aimed at discouraging indiscriminate and casual sexual habits. The success or otherwise of this approach is dependent on a number of cultural factors one of which is the language of information dissemination. The paper therefore, examines the role of Nigeria's indigenous languages in this respect.*

**Keywords:** *Language, Campaign, Scourge, Indigenous*

## Introduction

One of the primary preoccupations of every human society is how to ensure a state of good health for its members. Therefore, any disease that takes lives at a very high rate is always excessively worrisome to the managers (government) of such society. There exists a number of killer diseases which defy medical interventions (e.g. Tuberculosis, cancer etc) yet there is still another one that does not have any medical solution (treatment) talk less of defying it. This is no other disease than HIV/AIDS.

Right from when it was first identified by medical scientists, HIV/AIDS has taken several millions of lives and is still taking more on daily basis. It has no age limit. That is it kills children, middle aged persons, older adults and elderly persons.

The only available remedy for the disease is to prevent it from spreading further. Since it spreads mostly through sex, indiscriminate and/or casual sex is being discouraged through massive public enlightenment campaigns. The present approach to the disease is targeted at people's sexual habits, hence it is purely a cultural approach. Consequently, a number of factors which are derived from cultural traits are being juxtaposed in order to succeed in the campaign against the deadly disease. One of such cultural factors is the language of information dissemination.

The paper therefore, examines the role of indigenous languages in the campaign against HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. This is particularly necessary considering the fact that Nigeria's indigenous languages are under serious threat of extinction as new breed Nigerians prefer the English language to their mother tongue.

## Theoretical Orientation: The Culture and Health Relationship

Studies have shown that culture has a great impact on the individual, the family and the entire society (Alland, 1980; Adebajo, 1992; Usman, 1999). In fact, culture and environment interact a great deal and this in-turn determines the health status of human beings.

The central focus of sociological and anthropological studies of health and diseases is the network of relationships between health and disease on the one hand and culture on the other. Owumi (1996) observes that the approach and methods of dealing with ill health or discomfort and the maintenance of health is rooted in culture. On his part, Oke. (1993) notes that some organic diseases have at least indirect cultural origin. According to him, human behaviour is a manifestation of his culture. In the words of Owumi (1996:198) therefore, human health behaviour is "culturally determined".

Oke (1993) views contemporary medicine as part of human Cultural Revolution. He also states that all communicable and infectious diseases occasioned by faulty diet, clothing or housing are dependent upon socio-cultural factors; even some organic diseases have at least indirect cultural origin. He therefore, postulates that man's physiological state is largely conditioned by socio-cultural phenomena.

Jegede (1998) notes that traditional concept of disease influences health behaviour in any socio-cultural environment. According to him, the decision to use a health care service depends, to a large extent, on how the target disease is perceived. He therefore, concludes that knowledge of disease and cultural factors affect health care utilization.

Disease problems vary among cultures. Kottak (1991) observes that the incidence of particular disease varies between cultures and different cultures interpret and treat illnesses differently. According to him, Medical Anthropology that is based on biological, social and cross-cultural research has the theoretical and applied dimensions to the relationship between culture and health. What is recognized as disease or illness is a matter of cultural prescription (Saunders, 1972). Thus, a given biological condition may or may not be considered an "illness" depending on the particular cultural group in which it occurs.

From the discussion so far it is obvious that culture affects not only the incidence of disease but also its perception by the people as well as their utilization of health facilities. It is therefore, being argued that language, which is one of the traits of culture, plays an important role in the present campaign against HIV/AIDS in Nigeria. Language in this regard refers to indigenous languages of Nigeria. The people's acceptance of the HIV/AIDS message is dependent upon their understanding of its contents. A proper understanding of the message can therefore, be enhanced only when Nigeria's indigenous languages, which tend to give deeper meanings of issues to the people, are used.

## Nigeria's Indigenous Languages: Their Status

Nigerian indigenous languages are the languages, which are native to the people. They are traditional in the sense that they are not foreign to Nigerians. Basically they include both the majority and minority languages. What then are majority and minority languages?

Usually in Nigeria, three groups of people-Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba-are referred to as the majority groups. By implication therefore, their languages are referred to as majority languages (Oluwabamide, 2003ii). On the other hand, other groups of people numbering more than three hundred whose population and influence are not as those three are altogether regarded as minority peoples and/or cultures and their languages as minority languages.

Perhaps Bleambo's definition may enhance a better understanding of minority and majority languages in Nigeria. Bleambo (1999:1) conceives of minority languages as "those Nigeria languages that are not major". According to him, the major languages are in two groups; the foremost being Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba, closely followed by the second, which comprises of Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Igala, Izon, Kanuri, Nupe and Tiv. Those notwithstanding, in the Nigerian parlance, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba are considered as the major languages.

What is the number of Nigerian indigenous languages? This is a difficult question to answer because there is no generally accepted figure especially among scholars of Nigerian languages. Emenanjo (1990) identified 399 Nigerian languages. According to him, there are 390 "odd Nigerian minority languages" and 9 "odd major Nigerian languages." Bleambo (1999:2) on his part states: "By current knowledge, there are about 390 members..." Thus, his figure corresponds with that of Emenanjo. But according to Dawulung (1999) there are as many as 395 Nigerian languages. Crozier and Blench (1992) listed over 400 languages in Nigeria. Similarly Ethnologue (cited in Urua, 2003) listed 500 languages for Nigeria.

In this paper therefore, both the majority and minority languages are regarded as Nigeria's indigenous languages at least, because they are all native languages of Nigeria. Each of these languages gives its speakers a sense of belonging within their cultural setting. The language of each group is a mirror of their worldview. That is, the members appreciate the culture of their group when they speak their native language.

But it is very unfortunate that Nigeria's indigenous languages are under threat as they are being neglected for the English language. Due to the impact of modernization and the accompanying Western influence and even globalization, recent breed of Nigerians prefer Western culture and language to their own. Most public and private transactions and events are conducted with the use of the English language. Worse still most public enlightenment campaigns of the government are conducted in English language. This has often hindered their successes. Expected success can only be achieved when indigenous languages are adequately used in addition to English.

## The HIV/AIDS Scourge in Nigeria

According to the World Health Organization, HIV stands for Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus", the virus that slowly destroys parts of the body disease-fighting immune system. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome". It is the final life threatening stage of HIV infection. It is more or less a sexually transmitted Disease (STD). This is because the easiest and most common means of contacting it is through sexual intercourse with an infected person. The disease also spreads through blood transfusion. It can also be contacted through other forms of blood contact such as during haircut.

In Nigeria the HIV/AIDS scourge dates back to 1984 (Ajuwon and Shokunbi, 1996). The first AIDS case involved a sexually active thirteen years old girl. The case was officially reported in the same year (Federal Ministry of Health and Social Services, 1992). Since then the numbers of persons infected with HIV and those who have developed AIDS have been increasing rapidly. In 1992, for example 367 new cases were reported in Nigeria (Ajuwon and Shokunbi, 1996). This number rose to 917 by September 1993 (WHO, 1993) and at the end of 1994 it had risen to 1,490 (Federal Ministry of Health and Social Services, 1993). The figure has continued to rise greatly year in year out. But it seems AIDS is under reported in the country. This is because of inadequate screening centres and refusal by people, to go for HIV screening (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994).

The disease has been reported among a broad spectrum of the Nigerian population with reference to various reports and research findings. Ajuwon and Shokunbi (1996:86) have identified the following as the categories of people among whom HIV has been reported: blood donors, clients at STD clinics, tuberculosis (TB) patients, long distance truck drivers, pregnant women attending antenatal clinics, commercial sex workers and their clients. Ajuwon and Shokunbi have also observed that because commercial sex workers engaged in many risk behaviours they have the highest reported rates of HIV in Nigeria. They also observed that commercial sex workers are responsible for the transmission of other STDs that facilitate HIV transmission.

## The Approach

Government's concern on the problem of HIV/AIDS can be traced back to the setting up of the National Expert Advisory Committee on AIDS (NEACA) in 1986. This body was reconstituted in 1992 and renamed National AIDS and STDs Control Program (NACP). The primary responsibility of NACP is to co-ordinate AIDS prevention and control activities throughout the country. This governmental body together with Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have vigorously pursued the campaign against

the deadly disease. For example, through their activities more HIV/AIDS screening centers have been established. This was sometimes done with some assistance from various international organizations. They have also used the mass media to educate people on how to avoid being infected with the HIV virus.

Since an effective cure has not been discovered, primary prevention through education is the main approach being adopted by the government. The electronic and print media have been used a great deal in educating the masses on AIDS prevention. Public rallies have been organized to educate the people. Seminars and conferences have also been organized to discuss the AIDS problem. The core of the public education is that sexually active people who cannot do without sex should always use condom. Abstinence is suggested as the best preventive measure.

Despite a high level of awareness on HIV/AIDS, condom acceptability and use levels remain quite low across the different levels of the social strata (Oyekanmi, 1999, Oluwabamide and Akpan, 2006). According to Oyekanmi, it is well below 10% and 5% respectively for men and women. The call for abstinence is hardly heeded by most Nigerians. In fact, many Nigerians still find it hard to stick to a single partner. To complicate the issue, the number of commercial sex workers increases on daily basis. All these imply that the HIV/AIDS will continue to devastate the country if care is not taken.

## The Inherent Problems

A recent observation shows that the intensity of the campaign against HIV/AIDS is waning. Consequently, Nigerians tend to be forgetting that HIV/AIDS is still in existence and taking lives in large number. Many people are either overtly or covertly returning to their old habits of engaging in indiscriminate and/or casual sex. It is very unfortunate that the intensity of the campaign against HIV/AIDS, which is supposed to be continually high, since there is still no cure for the disease, is dwindling at a very fast rate. Consequently, many people are still contracting the disease.

Apart from the dwindling intensity of the campaign, there is also the problem of not really reaching the rural majority. Though a lot of money is being released for the campaign, it is not actually spent on activities, which will involve the rural majority. Worse still, the language of disseminating the information on HIV/AIDS is, in most cases, the English language only. Where an indigenous language is used at all, it is one of the three major languages - Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba.

It should be noted that a larger percentage of Nigerians live in the rural areas. Similarly, larger percentages of Nigerians are illiterates. Therefore, for the large rural illiterate population to understand the message on HIV/AIDS, it should be relayed to them in their own indigenous languages. This is because the people appreciate their own languages and understand them better than other languages.

Since the present approach on HIV/AIDS scourge is mainly focused on changing the sexual habits of the people, they need to be educated in context of their cultures, which basically entails using that important element of culture - language. It is only when the people's language is actually used that they would assimilate the message and consequently change their habits appropriately. It is no gainsaying that a person's language and culture make much meaning to him than other people's language and culture. Therefore, for the HIV/AIDS message to be absorbed in the minds of Nigerians, (the majority of which are rural illiterates) their indigenous languages should be used in transmitting the information to them. By so doing, many lives would be protected from the scourge of the disease.

## The Way Forward

The government should take stock of all the indigenous languages in Nigeria including the endangered ones. Though some linguists have done a number of works in this respect, there is still the need for proper updating. The government should therefore, consult linguistic research findings on the identity of Nigeria's indigenous languages. Thereafter, the HIV/AIDS message should really be taken to all the remote villages in the country and be presented to the people using their native languages.

The approach should be more of face-to-face presentation of the message. In that case, reliable indigenes of all the villages in the country, who have a good command of the native languages should be selected and trained on how to enlighten or educate the people about the menace of HIV/AIDS. The-

reafter, they should be provided with the necessary resources to organize rallies within their localities and educate the people on how to prevent the disease.

Furthermore, radio discussion programmes should be intensified. The native languages should be used in such discussions. In states where there are many languages, time should sincerely be given for each of the languages to be used in educating the people on the menace.

Government should also print leaflets containing information on HIV/AIDS. The information which should be printed using various native languages should not be too long. They should be made available to the people.

## Conclusion

The attitude of Nigerians toward the HIV/AIDS menace is no longer as alarming as in the last decade when the disease scared the people so much that majority of those who got adequate information on it adhered to the precautionary measures advocated by the government and other health organizations. This was as a result of the high intensity of the campaign at that time. That notwithstanding the campaign did not achieve the desired results. A number of factors contributed to this. One of such was the use of mainly English language and, second, where indigenous languages were used at all, they were just the three major indigenous languages. Thus, majority of the rural people, (mostly illiterates) were not properly educated on the HIV/AIDS problem due to either the fact that the message did not reach them or the language of educating them was not the one they understood very well.

It is a known fact that up to date the disease has no cure. Therefore, the existing preventive measures are still being advocated. Efforts should therefore, be made to maintain a constant high intensity campaign against the menace. The campaign should be taken to all the remote communities and villages in the country. But it should be conducted not only with the use of English but also with the use of Nigerian indigenous languages. In fact, the message should be presented with as many indigenous languages as exist in the country. If this is done, there is the tendency for the rural majority to understand the message of AIDS properly and yield to it appropriately. It should be noted however, that a message can only be meaningful to somebody if it is presented in a language he understands well. Apart from enhancing the campaign against the disease, the use of indigenous languages will also help in propagating these languages, some of which are already facing the threat of extinction.

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