

# Language and Identity in the Onwa-Oru Uratta Festival

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**ABSTRACT:** This study explored the aesthetic and functional roles of English and Igbo languages during the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival in Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo State, Nigeria. Historically, a celebration honoring the Earth goddess (Ala) for bountiful harvests, the festival now serves as a period of peace, thanksgiving, and communal renewal. Grounded in Saussure's diachronic linguistic theory and Austin's speech act theory, this qualitative ethnographic study uses participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and archival materials. Findings indicate that the Uratta dialect (Asụsụ Uratta) is a vital marker of cultural identity, cohesion, and continuity, while English functions as a medium for inclusivity, intercultural communication, and cultural tourism. Code-switching between English and Igbo emerged as a dominant communicative strategy, enhancing cultural expression while also reflecting English's gradual dominance among younger generations. The study concludes that while English increases the festival's visibility, it also poses significant risks of cultural erosion and language endangerment. It recommends a balanced, strategic approach to language use that promotes cultural sustainability, preserves indigenous knowledge, and develops Uratta as a cultural tourism destination.

**Keywords:** Language and Culture, Igbo Language, English Language, Onwa-Oru Uratta, Cultural Identity, Code-switching, Language Endangerment.

## INTRODUCTION

The interplay between indigenous languages and global lingua francas in cultural contexts is a critical area of sociolinguistic inquiry, particularly in post-colonial nations like Nigeria. In Igbo land, cultural festivals, which are traditional repositories of language, values, and identity, are increasingly sites of linguistic negotiation between local dialects and English. This study examines this dynamic through the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival in Owerri North, Imo State. English plays a pervasive role in Nigeria, serving as the official language, the language of the judiciary, education, and commerce. Njoku & Izuagba (2004: 1) explain that "The British and Portuguese merchants invaded the West African Coast to trade with Nigeria businessmen since business transaction cannot thrive in the absence of a common language, a language of communication gradually emerged as a medium of transaction". Its domestication has made it inextricably linked to Nigerian culture, creating a complex bilingual reality. Conversely, the Igbo language is the bedrock of cultural identity, oral literature, and

traditional practices. However, the dominance of English, accelerated by globalization and its status as the language of education, often sidelines indigenous languages, raising concerns about language shift and endangerment, especially among urban youth (Osuafor, 2002, p.1).

This tension is vividly enacted during cultural festivals like Onwa-Oru Uratta. These types of events are not merely performances but are fundamental to expressing identity, preserving heritage, and transmitting knowledge (Sapir, 1949). Cultural practices, even in celebration, expose the shared values and ideologies that anchor a society. Igbo culture, rich in traditions, language, and oral literature, has been shaped by colonialism and globalization, leading to a unique relationship with the English language. In many Igbo communities, people are bilingual, speaking both Igbo and English. Code-switching and code-mixing between these two languages are common in everyday communication, especially among educated people. It reflects the dynamic relationship between cultural identity and the need for global interaction in English. English, being the language of instruction in Nigerian schools, including Igbo-speaking regions, promotes proficiency in English; it sometimes leads to the neglect of the Igbo language. Many Igbo writers, such as Chinua Achebe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have used English to convey Igbo cultural themes, values, and stories. Achebe is known for blending Igbo proverbs and idiomatic expressions into English, creating a distinct style that reflects the Igbo worldview. To support this fact, Mishan and Kiss (2024) explain that "In our real world and virtual lives, we are inevitably drawn into membership in small cultures that develop and dissolve spontaneously. Those groups can have influences sustaining or temporary on our values and behaviors [...] Cultural norms and behaviors are not static ...." (p. 24).

Unfortunately, the widespread use of English in Igbo land has affected the Igbo language in various ways. Younger generations may struggle to speak Igbo fluently, especially in urban areas where English is more commonly spoken. This has raised concerns about language preservation. The use of English by the Igbo people has led to cultural blending, in which traditional Igbo practices are communicated and adapted through English. This hybridity is evident in modern Igbo literature, music, and media, where English and Igbo cultural elements coexist. In many churches and social gatherings within Igbo communities, English is used alongside Igbo. English often serves as a lingua franca across diverse settings, even in predominantly Igbo-speaking regions, fostering a multicultural, multilingual dynamic. According to Saussure (1959), "Language is a system of signs that express ideas" (p. 16).

Linking English and Igbo cultures can deepen understanding of how language evolves in a sociocultural context and how this affects learning outcomes, particularly in Nigeria. Both languages, English and Igbo, coexist in Nigeria, but they carry different cultural and historical weights. The arrival of British colonizers in Nigeria in the 19th century marked the beginning of English as a dominant language in the region. Saussure explains that external factors like "cultural or social influences play a role in language transformation" (p. 89). In Nigeria, the imposition of English for

administration, education, and trade introduced a new linguistic framework. Over time, English became a tool of colonial power, while local languages like Igbo were often relegated to informal settings. In this context, English serves both as an instrument of opportunity (education, global communication) and as a vestige of colonialism. Igbo, by contrast, is deeply connected to the cultural heritage, oral traditions, and identity of the Igbo people.

In contemporary Nigerian society, particularly in Southeastern Nigeria, where Igbo is predominantly spoken, most people are bilingual, fluent in both Igbo and English. This dual-language environment has led to standard practices of code-switching, the ability to switch between languages within a conversation depending on context. "The fundamental aim of diachronic linguistics is to identify and analyze these shifts in language forms over time" (Saussure, 1959, p. 89). This fluid use of language demonstrates how Igbo culture influences English language proficiency. As linguist Joshua Fishman argued, bilingual societies often see one language become "the high language" (used in formal, academic, or professional situations). In contrast, the other is used in "low" (informal or personal) settings. In Nigeria, English often holds the former position, while Igbo operates in the latter. The historical contact between Igbo and English has led to linguistic borrowing and the creation of localized forms of English, such as Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin. These forms of English incorporate Igbo idiomatic expressions, vocabulary, and sentence structures, reflecting the influence of both languages. For instance, certain Igbo proverbs have been adapted into Nigerian English, altering how English is spoken and understood in Nigeria.

This aligns with Saussure's observation that language is "a system of signs," influenced by its cultural context (Saussure, 1959, p. 16). Igbo culture is rich in proverbs, stories, and communal values, many of which are embedded in the language. Some Igbo concepts, such as "ụ́nụ" (community spirit or solidarity), may lack direct English translations, posing challenges for language learners. For example, Igbo storytelling traditions (such as folktales and proverbs) could be used in literature to draw parallels with English literary texts. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* masterfully blends Igbo culture with English, using both languages to convey the complexities of colonialism and cultural change. This study therefore explores how English and Igbo are deployed aesthetically and functionally during the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival and what this reveals about the changing sociolinguistic landscape of the Uratta community.

This study is focused specifically on the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival in Owerri North L.G.A. It examines the aesthetic and functional roles of the English and Igbo languages within this event. While it acknowledges broader issues of English Igbo bilingualism in Nigeria, the analysis is limited to language use, identity formation, and cultural preservation within the Uratta community. Other cultural elements, such as cuisine and music, are referenced tangentially but are not the focus of this linguistic analysis.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Language is a primary carrier of cultural identity, values, and traditions. In Igbo land, festivals like Onwa-Oru Uratta are crucial cultural spaces for transmitting indigenous knowledge across generations. However, English's dominance in Nigerian public life creates a dilemma. While it facilitates national unity and global engagement, it often overshadows indigenous languages and contributes to their gradual decline. The Uratta community exemplifies this tension. The Onwa-Oru festival, once held exclusively in *Asụsụ Uratta*, now uses English for publicity, inclusivity, and broader engagement. This shift, though pragmatically beneficial, risks cultural erosion and language endangerment. Younger generations are more likely to code-switch or use English primarily, which can weaken their proficiency in and connection to their heritage dialect. This study addresses how to balance the communicative advantages of English with the imperative to preserve the Igbo language and culture in the context of the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival.

**OBJECTIVES**

This study examines the role of the Igbo language, particularly *Asụsụ Uratta*, in preserving cultural identity during the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival and how English enhances intercultural communication and inclusivity among participants. It further analyzes the dynamics and implications of code-switching between Igbo and English as observed during festival activities. It highlights how such linguistic alternation shapes social interaction and meaning making. In addition, the study aims to identify the challenges associated with language dominance, endangerment, and cultural erosion within the community. Ultimately, it proposes practical strategies for cultural sustainability through balanced, context-appropriate language use.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study, therefore, seeks to understand how *Asụsụ Uratta* functions as a marker of cultural identity during the festival and to determine the role English plays in facilitating intercultural communication and broader participation. It also explores how and why participants code-switch between English and Igbo in various social contexts of the festival. It also investigates the key challenges that threaten the preservation of the Uratta dialect and its cultural heritage. Finally, the study asks what strategies can be adopted to ensure balanced language use that supports cultural continuity and strengthens the long-term sustainability of Uratta linguistic and cultural practices.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study contributes to sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and cultural studies by documenting the nuanced functions of language in a living cultural festival. It highlights the urgent need to deliberately preserve the Igbo language and its dialects. The findings are valuable for linguists, educators, cultural stakeholders, and policymakers in formulating strategies that safeguard indigenous languages while navigating the

necessities of global communication. Furthermore, it underscores the potential of the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival as a cultural tourism destination, highlighting the need for careful documentation and promotion.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is anchored on two complementary theoretical pillars. The first is Diachronic Linguistics (Saussure, 1959). This theory provides the lens for understanding the historical evolution of language contact in Uratta. Saussure's concept of language as "a system of signs that express ideas" (p. 16), which changes over time due to both internal and external factors (e.g., social and cultural), is crucial. It helps trace the historical imposition of English and its ongoing impact on Asụsụ Uratta, framing current language dynamics as part of a continuous process of change. Diachronic linguistics as a theory was fundamentally shaped by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure is credited with the crucial conceptual distinction between synchrony and diachrony in linguistics, which he articulated in his posthumous work, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).

His theoretical contribution lies in emphasizing that synchronic linguistics examines language as a system at a specific point in time. In contrast, diachronic linguistics studies the evolution and historical development of languages across time. Saussure challenged earlier historical linguists' claims that change follows absolute or universal laws akin to biological evolution. He argued that language change (diachrony) is not systematic, but that languages at a synchronic stage present systemic equilibria in which the forms and meanings are interconnected. Saussure used the analogy of language change to a series of still frames in a film: although the illusion of movement (change) persists, each frame is static and independent. Therefore, diachronic facts (changes through time) should be studied separately from synchronic states (language systems at a specific time), as mixing these approaches can obscure the understanding of linguistic phenomena. Saussure's theory has been both influential and controversial, with defenders praising his clear methodological distinction and critics arguing that the relationship between synchronic and diachronic aspects is inseparable and complex. His work laid the foundation for modern historical linguistics by highlighting the need to distinguish between studying language structure at a single moment and studying language change over time. In sum, the theoretical contribution of diachronic linguistics centers on understanding language evolution over time without assuming rigid laws of change, while maintaining a sharp analytical division from synchronic linguistic analysis as proposed by Saussure.

The second is Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which analyzes how language is used to do things during the festival. Austin's concept of the performative utterance, in which saying something is doing something (e.g., declaring peace, pronouncing a blessing), is particularly relevant to analyzing rituals performed by the Ezes and the Oha council. The illocutionary force (the intention) and perlocutionary effect (the consequence) of speech acts are examined to understand the power and

cultural significance of utterances made in the indigenous language versus English. According to Fromkin et al (2011), "The theory of speech acts tells us that people use language to do things such as lay bets, issue warnings, or nominate candidates" (p. 178). Mey (2006) adds that, "Speech acts are verbal actions happening in the world" (p. 95). Speech act theory is a significant concept in linguistics and the philosophy of language that explores how language functions not only to convey information but to perform actions. The philosopher John L. Austin initially formulated the theory in the mid-20th century, and John Searle later expanded it.

Austin introduced three main components of speech acts: (i) Locutionary act, which is the act of producing an utterance with phonetic and grammatical structure, essentially saying something. (ii) Illocutionary act, which is the intended function or purpose behind the utterance, e.g., requesting, commanding, or warning. (iii) Perlocutionary act, which is the actual effect the utterance has on the listener, e.g., persuading, scaring, or inspiring a response.

Searle explains that "The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has been supposed, the symbol, word, or sentence, but rather the production of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act" (Searle, 1969, p. 16). He further elaborated the theory by categorizing speech acts based on their communicative functions into five types: (i) Assertives (or Representatives): Statements that convey information or express beliefs, e.g., It is raining. (ii) Directives: Attempts by the speaker to get the listener to do something, e.g., Please, open the window. (iii) Commissives: Commitments by the speaker to future actions, e.g., I promise to call you tomorrow. (iv) Expressives: Expressions of the speaker's feelings or attitudes, e.g., I'm sorry for your loss. (v) Declarations: Utterances that bring about changes in the external situation simply by being said, often by someone with institutional authority. e.g., I now pronounce you husband and wife.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Design:** This study used a qualitative ethnographic approach. This approach is optimal for investigating cultural practices, language use, and identity formation in their authentic context, allowing for a rich, nuanced understanding of these phenomena (Wardhaugh, 2010).

**Population and Sampling:** The study population comprised the people of Uratta. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 25 participants who are key knowledge-holders and participants, including:

5 members of the Oha Supreme Council.

4 Traditional rulers (Ezes) from selected villages.

6 Community elders and oral tradition custodians.

5 Youth participants actively involved in the festival.

5 Visitors and cultural stakeholders. This ensured a representation of diverse perspectives across age, role, and expertise.

**Data Collection Methods:** Data was collected through:

Participant Observation: Researchers attended the festival and documented language use, rituals, performances, and interactions in detailed field notes.

Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with the sampled participants to gather in-depth narratives on the historical and contemporary significance of language in the festival.

Archival Materials: Secondary data were gathered from community records, festival programs, and relevant scholarly publications.

**Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis was employed. Field notes and interview transcripts were systematically coded and categorized into key themes like language as an identity marker, code-switching practices, aesthetic functions, and challenges of preservation. The principles of the stated theoretical frameworks guided the analysis.

### **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA: A SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC VIEW OF ONWA ORU-URATTA**

The festival, which originated in a historical peace pact between villages, has evolved from honoring the deity Ala to celebrating the Christian God, reflecting a diachronic shift in cultural influence (Uwaleke, 2022). This evolution frames the context for the current linguistic analysis. The festival's structure, governed by the Oha Supreme Council, involves sacred pronouncements and rituals that are quintessential speech acts, establishing peace and governing communal conduct. A summary of the history of the Uratta people from the current king, His Royal Majesty (p. 18-19), states that Uraa, the son of Atta, a Jew by nation, is the progenitor of the town called Uratta. While the Jewish nation was going from Egypt to the Promised Land, Uraa and a good number of his kinsmen by the Red Sea saw the fierce-looking Egyptian soldiers in their numbers who were coming after them and made it fast inside the bush for their lives. They journeyed through the tick forest and the hilly, rocky areas of the world, searching for a place to settle. As the leader of his group, Uraa fought to secure his people a permanent base. Uraa married one of them and continued his journey until he finally settled at a place presently called Umuoba. He established himself at Nkwo Umuoba and built his place of worship called Ala-Uratta. Uraa, the son of Atta, now called Uratta, begot two sons: Obibi and Oha. He also had three daughters. One of his daughters was Nneorie. Obibi, the first son of Uratta begot four sons, who, in their order of seniority, are Alum, Orji, Oboche and Okwu while his second son Oha begot only a son called Ihitta (Ihittaoha). Ihitta begot four sons namely: Owala, Owaelu, Nahu and Orji (who are called Ihittaoha Uratta). The four sons of Ihittaoha Uratta in their order of seniority: Alum, Orji, Obaoche, Okwu, Owala, Owaelu, Nahu, and Orji are what is presently called Uratta-ofor-asato. The man Uraa, the son of Atta (Uratta) died and was buried at Umuoba. After his death, his children relocated to the present-day Orié Uratta. Later on, kindred in Owaelu called Amakohia and another kindred called Umunahu called Akwakuma relocated and have grown to full-fledged popular

communities known as Amakohia and Akwakuma Urattta. Hence, Uratta is known as Uratta-Ofor-Asato-Mba-iri.

### THE PRIMACY OF ASUSU URATTA

Identity, Ritual, and Cohesion Findings confirm that Asusu Uratta is the primary vehicle for cultural authenticity. It is the mandatory language for rituals, prayers, proverbs, and traditional performances. The authority of the Ezes and the Oha council is evidenced by their use of the deep dialect, often featuring archaic vocabulary and specific tonal patterns. As one elder stated, "The words of the Oha, spoken in our pure tongue, carry the force of our ancestors. English cannot hold that power". This aligns with Sapir's (1949) view of language as a guide to social reality; the festival's worldview is constructed and sustained through Asusu Uratta.

Notably, there is a popular saying in Owerri: "Owerre-wu-Owerre-wu-Uratta." This means that core communities that make up Owerri will always trace their root to Uratta. Checking the following instances: Ekwem (Ekwem-Ahugo) the father of Owerre-Nchi-Ise is from Umuorii Uratta. His mother's name is Ahugo, not Arugo. Ekwem left Umuorii Uratta to Owerri on the company of his first son Ikenegbu who was twelve years then. Ihita-Ogada, Awaka, Egbu, Naze, Agbala, Emii Nneorie, Emekuku Nneorie, and others are either grand or great-grandchildren of Uratta.

### THE FUNCTIONAL ROLE OF ENGLISH

Inclusivity and globalization of English serve pragmatic functions: facilitating tourism, mediating communication with non-Igbo visitors, and enhancing publicity through modern media. Festival announcements and promotional materials are often bilingual. English acts as a lingua franca, expanding the festival's reach and economic potential. However, its use is primarily confined to these utilitarian, supportive roles rather than the core ritualistic aspects. This is a festival of peace and thanksgiving that heralds the commencement and the end of one planting season to another. According to (Mishan and Kiss, 2024), they highlight that:

How we perform such everyday practices varies from culture to culture and reveals patterns of behavior that are inevitably rooted in our culturally based values and beliefs about how things should be done. Trivial though they may seem, then, the minutiae of daily life are effectively cultural practices which expose the shared sets of values and ideologies that anchor a society. Some of these culturally directed rituals and routines are what Holliday terms 'universal cultural processes' (Holliday, 2019) – eating, family interaction, and celebrating, for example (p. 12).

In those days, the festival was celebrated in honor of the deity of Ala (goddess of the Earth) for a bountiful harvest. Today, because of Western civilization, it is celebrated in honor of God Almighty, thanking Him for plenty and asking for more in the new planting

season. It is celebrated for about 24 days with various cultural activities including theatre, religious activities, royal visits, and more. The main celebration takes place at the centre of Orié Uratta.

According to Eze (king) Uwaleke, the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival started centuries ago. It was the celebration made by the whole Uratta to mark the peace made between Alum Uratta and Owala Uratta after a prolonged problem. Owala, the first son of Ihitaoha Uratta, married one of the daughters of Alum Uratta. At the time, Alum gave his daughter a parcel of land as a wedding gift. The marriage was childless for ten years. Owala, who was no longer happy with the marriage, sent his wife back to her father, Alum. He made it clear that he would no longer continue with the marriage. Alum accepted his daughter but demanded that she receive the marriage gift (a parcel of land) he had given her during their marriage. Owala refused to give the land back to Alum. The matter went to Oha Uratta Supreme Council for settlement. Oha Uratta immediately asked both to stay clear of the land by placing a palm leaf (Omu) on the land. (That is Omu Abana-na-mmiri). The people of Uratta resolved not to farm until peace returns between Alum and Owala. After considering the matter, Oha Uratta found Owala guilty and ordered that Owala either take his wife or return the land to Alum. When he opted to go for his wife, Oha asked to take gifts including a goat. He did as Oha Uratta directed. Alum killed the goat and gave his daughter one of the legs of the goat to use and prepare soup for her husband. After Owala did all he was asked to do, Oha Uratta planted an OBU TREE, blessed it, and named it OBU-OMUMU. Oha Uratta took Owala and his wife to the OBU TREE (Sacred Tree). They prayed and blessed them. The wife of Owala was asked to march the sacred Obu Tree which she did. That was how peace was restored between Alum and Owala. The whole Uratta people celebrated the peace or settlement. Oha Uratta, after being certified that peace had returned, removed the Omu (palm leaf) from the land, and the people of Uratta went farming. When peace returned, Owala begot four sons by the same woman. This is how Onwa-Oru Uratta festival started.

Coincidentally, Onwa-Oru Uratta is the final festival that celebrates all the villages that make up the Uratta Clan. Though the various villages seemingly autonomous today, they all come together to celebrate the festival. It commences with the sighting of the moon by members of Oha Uratta traditional supreme council, who are a selected group of very elderly men whose families belong to the Oha group. These men are chosen from their villages in a very sacred procedure. It is believed that if your family or lineage is not the Oha select group and you are selected, you will die. When these Oha people sight the moon that heralds the festival, they normally make the announcement through messengers and town cries to all the villages, warning everyone that the whole clan is in a festive mood and that there should be no fighting or quarrelling. In the same vein, no one should invite the police; even tenants and visitors are expected to respect this sacred period. The Oha group will now dip the selected palm frond into water and visit all the villages mentioned above that make up the Uratta clan. The villages will often provide gift items, money, drinks, and kolanut, and

attend to their guests' requests as much as possible. This visit is also to remind them of the period; if anyone breaks them, they will pay a fine as the Oha group would prescribe. After this visitation comes the bringing down of the *offor* which is the symbol of the clan and the believed oracle that binds all the villages representing the sons of Uratta.

Interestingly, on the said day, the lead traditional ruler, who must be the first son of the first village of Uratta, canvases with the traditional rulers of all the other villages, and a committee is set up to plan the festival properly. On the festival day, as tradition demands, gun show sounds are heard from all the villages. All the various villages are expected to send their titled men, dance groups, and traditional rulers to the Uratta Market Square (Orie Uratta). There at the market square, the Oha group is expected to enter what is known as 'the consultation hall' while all the traditional rulers pay homage with gifts as a sign of reverence. The eldest daughter of Uratta (*onye isi Mgboto Uratta*) is expected to carry the traditional earthen pot and sit while others pay homage to her after about four hours of dancing, singing, and a performance of various cultural arts. This usually ends with gunshots.

### **CODE- SWITCHING AND NEGOTING TWO WORLDS**

Most Igbo people are bilingual. The inclusion of English is courtesy of visitors from other tribes and climes who grace the occasion. The Ezes (kings) and the Oha (titled persons) Supreme Council must use the Uratta dialect to transmit rituals, prayers, worship, traditions, and community practices. In this festival, code-switching functions as a strategic communicative tool to include non-speakers. It is used to explain complex cultural concepts or to engage in modern banter, especially among educated adults and young people. However, it also symbolized a growing language shift. Sadly, interviews with youths revealed a decline in proficiency in the deep dialect, with many admitting to greater comfort in English. This finding resonates with Saussure's (1959) diachronic view, illustrating an ongoing external social influence catalyzing linguistic change.

The festival is a microcosm of the Uratta community's negotiation between cultural preservation and global integration. The steadfast use of Igbo in rituals (a powerful speech act) preserves cultural authority and authenticity. The adoption of English for logistics and tourism is a pragmatic adaptation to a globalized world. The pervasive code-switching reflects the lived reality of this bilingual community and highlights the pressure on the indigenous language. The core challenge, as identified, is that the functional domains of *Asụsụ Uratta* are shrinking, confined increasingly to the ceremonial, while English dominates practical and commercial domains.

### **LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Culture consists of the arts, customs, beliefs, values, lifestyles, and habits that constitute a people's way of life. It is what people are known for, or what we call '*ejiri mara*' in the Owerre dialect and in Igbo. The term culture is fascinating when it's bound with language. It connects to whatever we know or believe operates acceptably with its

members. Culture is “the know-how that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living; only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much, music, literature, and the arts.... Thus, culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them and making sense of the world, in broadly similar ways” (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 229). On the other hand, some scholars argue that culture has different aspects. One of them is Ugwu (2016), according to him, “...If, viewed from the coinage of the two concepts, politics and culture, it means the gamut of people’s beliefs, values, norms, and emotional attitudes concerning the running of a particular system of government” (p. 110).

Eventually, scholars such as Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir argue that language and culture have a unique relationship: a people’s culture usually determines the structure of its language and the way speakers view the world. According to Sapir (1949), language is “a guide to social reality” (p. 162), suggesting that the linguistic structures we use shape our perception of the world and our role within it. Language serves as a fundamental medium through which cultures express their values, beliefs, and practices. It is not only a tool for communication but also a vehicle for fostering understanding among diverse cultures.

Moreover, other scholars insist that structure has nothing to do with how speakers view the world. There are also scholars who hold neutral views on structure and on how speakers view the world. (Carroll, 2004) notes that “The Whorf hypothesis states that the way we think about our world is shaped by our language. This hypothesis consists of two parts. Linguistic determinism states that languages determine nonlinguistic cognitive processes and linguistic relativity states that the resulting thought processes vary from language to language” (p. 381). Language is a veritable tool for communication in culture. It is like a mirror for viewing customs, beliefs, values, and traditions. People can express, preserve, worship, tell stories, pass on knowledge, and interact with one another only through language. Language makes people unique in their own way. Language and man are intertwined, just as language is with culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that both English and Igbo play vital, albeit different, aesthetic and functional roles in the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival. Asụsụ Uratta is irreplaceable as the language of cultural identity, ritual, and cohesion, performing speech acts that bind the community to its history and values. English is instrumental for inclusivity, communication, and cultural tourism. However, the increasing dominance of English, as evidenced by widespread code-switching and declining dialect proficiency among the youth, poses a clear threat to cultural and linguistic erosion. The sustainability of Uratta's cultural heritage, therefore, depends on intentional, strategic efforts to balance these languages, ensuring that functional pragmatism does not come at the cost of cultural authenticity.

This study recommends sustained efforts to safeguard the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Uratta community. This can be done by partnering with academic institutions to develop digital archives that document oral histories, rituals, and vocabulary in *Asusu Uratta*. Festival organizers are encouraged to adopt a clear language policy that maintains Igbo as the primary language for rituals and core cultural activities. On the other hand, English should be used to support communication, publicity, and inclusivity. To strengthen intergenerational transmission, *Asusu Uratta* and the lore of the Onwa-Oru Uratta festival should be integrated into local schools' curricula and into community youth development programs. Additionally, the Imo State Ministry of Arts and Culture is urged to officially promote the festival by producing materials that showcase its distinctive linguistic and cultural identity. Scholars should also conduct similar studies in other Igbo communities to provide comparative insights and develop broader frameworks for preserving indigenous languages. Finally, the findings should be presented to policymakers to advocate for stronger support and inclusion of indigenous languages in cultural, educational, and developmental policies to ensure long-term sustainability.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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