

Challenges and Possibilities of Reviving Endangered Nigerian Minority Languages: The Kiong Perspective

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Abstract

Kiong, a Delta Cross minority language, is 'critically endangered' by UNESCO's standard as it is 'only spoken by the oldest few'. The factors responsible for Kiong's moribund status are numerous. The present study suggests measures that can revive Kiong, such as: speakers' attitudinal reorientation, immersion with Durop, pragmatic domestication of the national language policy, documentation, among others. The study examines how the 2022 National Language Policy and emerging technologies can assist in fleshing these measures. Data for the study came through field elicitation via digital and manual recording and the library. This study affirms that Kiong is critically endangered and imminently coasting towards extinction if the less than one score septuagenarian speakers pass away without intergenerational transmission. We solicit urgent pragmatic language shift measures from all stakeholders to upgrade Kiong sociolinguistic status, especially by dialect immersion in the adjoining Korup community in Akamkpa LGA where Durop is in active use.

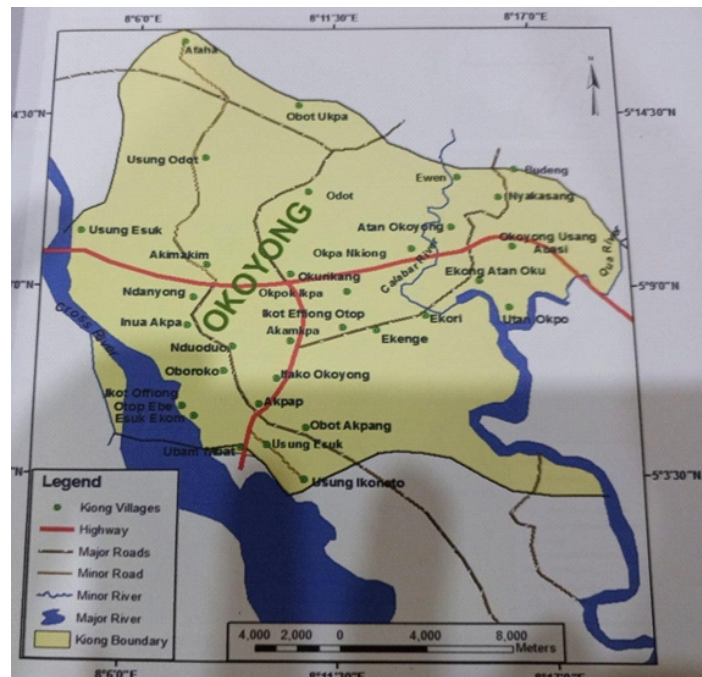
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Background to the Study

Kiong (kkm) is an Upper Cross language of the Delta Cross sub-group (Connell 1998) spoken in Odukpani Local Government Area (LGA) in such villages as Okut Ikang, Okoyong Usang, Obot Ukpa, Ekenge, Ubambat, Akpap, Ikoneto and Inua Akpa. These and other Kiong-speaking communities are delineated in the Map titled Fig. 1 below culled from Akiba (2017:4). By UNESCO's (2021) criterion, Kiong is 'critically endangered' because currently no child, youth speak the language. The youngest speakers are grandparents and older people. It is used (often) partially and infrequently in phatic communion and libation (for this last function see: Mensah, Silva & Inyabri 2020). Other critically endangered Nigerian minority languages include Defaka, Ilue and Luri. At present, Kiong is spoken by less than a score octogenarians with no intergenerational transmission. The alternative names for Kiong, together with the Durop (Krp) dialect are Korop, Korup, Ododop, Okoyong and Abayom. Durop is the language name and Korup the name of the people (*Personal Communication*: Elder Silvanus Okon Orok, June 24, 2024 in Calabar).

Map 1, Figure 1: A Section of Odukpani Local Government Area Showing Map of Okoyong and the Various Villages.

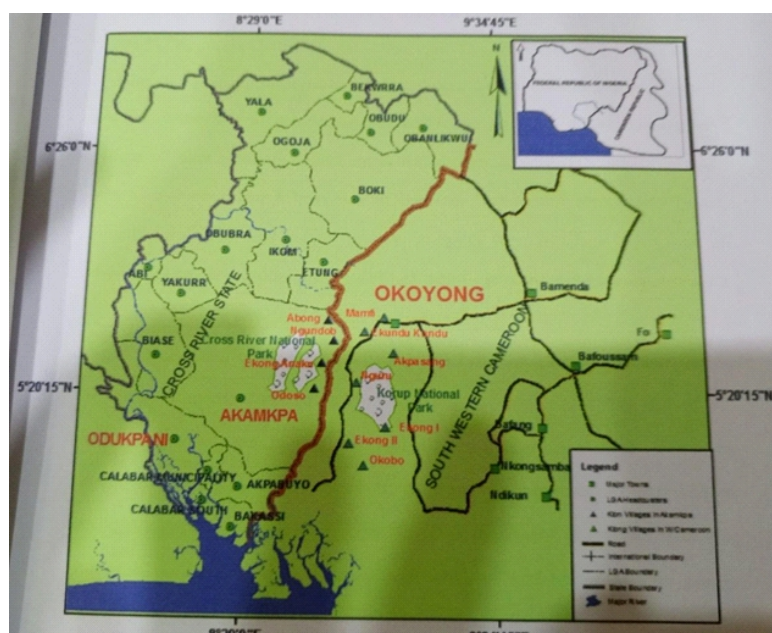


Source: Culled from Akiba 2017:4.

But unlike Kiong, the Durop variety spoken by the Korup community in parts of Akamkpa and South West Cameroun is stable and used in most language domains (Muniru, Eju, Andrews & David 2022; Connell 2021; Kastelein 1994) by about 18,000 indigenous speakers (2007 estimate by Ethnologue 2015). However, there is no evidence of its being taught in schools (Inyang 2011; Fennig et al 2022). Some of the Durop-speaking

communities in Akamkpa and Cameroun (South Western Province) are shown in the Map titled Fig 2 (culled from Akiba 2017:5). They include Abang, Ododo, Ekong Anaka, Ngundob, Kundu Kundu, Mamfi, Ekong I, Ekong II, and Okobo. As safe and stable as Durop in Akamkpa may appear, being sandwiched with other socially more prestigious, dominant languages like Efik, Ibibio, English, Ejagham and Nigerian Pidgin may be cause for concern in decades to come for its continual stability.

Map 2, Figure 2: A Section of Nigeria/Cameroon Border Showing Okoyong & the Various Villages in South Western Province of Cameroon and Akamkpa in Cross River State, Nigeria.



Source: Culled from Akiba 2017: 5

Language endangerment hinges on two major issues as also summarised by Okon and Noah (2021):

Language endangerment can be essayed from the point of view of users, uses or functions, at least. While some languages are shrinking in Nigeria in numerical strength and functional loads (like Ejagham in Cross River, Izza in Bayelsa, Chibok in Borno), others are expanding (like English, Arabic, Nigerian Pidgin, Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa), (p. 142). What may be emphasised is that it is not the actual number of speakers per se but the number of young language users who can ensure intergenerational continuity that matters the most. That is why the Kiong case is a serious case for concern. The more the number of aged users without young speakers, the more the endangered language is prone to extinction.

In fact, quite a number of Nigerian languages have been certified extinct. Blench & McGuill (2012) enumerates the following 12 Nigerian languages as extinct: Ashaganna, Fali, Shirawa, Auyokawa, Kpati, Tanra, Bassa-Kontagora, Lufu, Ajanci, Akpor, Akpondu, Butu-Ningi and Holma. Babalobi (2020) posits 29 as extinct (and another 29 minority languages as severely endangered). Similarly, the Nigerian Council for Arts and Culture as well as Nairaland have given a number of extinct Nigerian languages which largely corresponds to Blench's (2019) inventory. The sad thing is that language loss is not only the loss, death, dearth of speech but also of archives, civilization, secrets, myths, technology, science, aspirations and triumphs. This is aptly expressed by Edwards & Sienkewich (1990): "We are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old ... we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word, we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for the younger generations" (p.15).

In much of the real-world language situation, a social Darwinistic scenario seems to be at work, especially with minority languages like Kiong in Cross River State, Nigeria being nearly whaled by the rough waves in the ocean of Nigerian multilingualism, ethnoculturalism. It is one of the most complex pluralistic countries in the world. Nigeria is home to about 520 of the world's 7,164 languages. 12 of these 520 languages are extinct and 163 endangered (cf. Eberhard et al 2024; Fennig et al 2022). Only few Nigerian states are squarely monolingual in indigenous languages such as Anambra and Imo (Igbo) in the South East, Ekiti, Oyo and Osun (Yoruba) in the South West and Kano (Hausa) in the North. Observe that this case is in favour of the three major indigenous languages. Most Nigerian minority languages such as Kiong usually have to compete for survival with the majority ones including English, Arabic and Nigerian Pidgin in the murky waters of contemporary globalism and in some cases downright marginalisation (Essien 1990, 2007).

The much-taunted advantages of globalisation could have made sense if the benefits were equitable to Nigeria, the third world. It is unambivalent to the mentally liberated individual that the profits of globalisation are but a plague, scourge to the authentic potentials of the third world in the long run. This new world order appears to be a glamorous 'Greek gift' and wholesale adoption of Esau's trading off of his pristine birthright with a pot of luscious red stew. To be sure, bilingualism or multilingualism in an international or major Nigerian language has awesome advantages to the users. However, in Nigeria at least, it is not usually the case. This is because the English language systematically withers and supplants the indigenous tongues together with their knowledge, culture and worldview. This has tragic hemorrhagic consequences to national development

Ordinarily, there seems to be nothing inherently evil in multilingualism and or globalisation. A multilingual brain, individual is more advantageous than a monolingual one: linguistically, culturally and conceptually, (Jessner 2006; Baker 2006). However, the trend of global, multilingual hegemony harbours a potent threat to coast most Nigerian minority languages to early extinction (Babalobi 2020; Ndimele 2003; Noah 2003;

Igboanusi 2004). This adds to the general nature of civilisations and languages in terms of rise, fall and death (Dixon 1997; Simmons & Fennig 2017). Apart from globalisation and multilingualism breathing down on the neck of Nigerian minority languages generally, the case of Kiong is further aggravated by native speakers' poor attitude towards the language (as they, except a handful of octogenarians communicate in English, Efik, Ibibio and Nigerian Pidgin, hence no intergenerational transmission), oral culture (- as it has no systematic official writing system), limited usage domain, unfavourable, unpragmatic language policy. According to Mrs. Babara Etim née Slessor (*personal communication*), the well-known Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Mary Mitchel Slessor who lived and worked in Okoyong from 1888, used the Efik language throughout her stay there, which could suggest that Kiong was either going extinct or that Efik was the lingua franca.

Given the above challenging trajectory, bringing new perspectives to re-orientating the language attitude of Kiong speakers will be invaluable; domesticating the new *National Language Policy* (NLP 2022) at the state and local government levels will engender a pragmatic perspective to Kiong rebirth; the language needs urgent digital documentation and orthography provision; using Kiong in the early primary school level and other domains should rejig its low social status and transmission for future generation. Perhaps the most important step to revive Kiong would come through immersion with its geographically contiguous sister dialect, Durop in Akamkpa. No potentially effective revivalist measure would be overlooked in the task of helping Kiong back to active multidimensional usage.

Earlier Studies

There is no sustained history and volume of scholarship on Kiong in comparison to its nearest linguistic neighbours like Ejagham and Efik. But quite a few works exist and the tempo of work on the Kiong language has increased in about the last past three decades. Some of such works are *Buka Bunde*, a printed vocabulary and phrases in Kiong by Ekpenyong (1982), followed by Henshaw's (1990) B. A Research Project entitled 'Kiong Phonology', which investigated aspects of the Kiong general phonology. A dictionary has been compiled on the South Western Cameroonian dialect of Kiong, Durop by Inyang (2011). Noah's (1994): 'A tentative analysis of the syllable template in Kiong' shows a similarity with those of Lower Cross languages, especially with regard to null consonant clustering. Okon, M. M. (2004) highlights the precarious state of the Kiong language within the sociolinguistic realities of the 21st century in Nigeria. Okon & Noah (2009) draws attention to the moribund status of Kiong, describes the sound pattern and remarks on traces of noun class system that is typical of Bantu. A B.A Research Project by Akiba (2017) on 'Aspects of Kiong Phonology' apparently ignores the earlier Project of Henshaw (1990) of the same Linguistics Department in the same University of Calabar as it claims a pioneering status. It describes (in less detail and vigour, compared to Henshaw, 1990) 'Aspects of Kiong Phonology', especially the phonemic inventory. Okon & Noah (2018) did not only draw global attention to the Kiong endangered language situation, based on their fieldwork experience, but also took practical steps towards its resuscitation by giving an outline for a possible Kiong orthography. Mensah, Silva & Inyabri (2020)

documents the language of libation rituals in Kiong for archival purposes that would be useful to both indigenous and external communities. Muniru et al (2022) surveys 5 language varieties in Cross River, Nigeria; Durop (krp), Kiong (kkm), Ukpét, Ubetene, Evia (akd) group spoken in Akamkpa, Odukpani, Biase LGAs and some villages in Cameroon (for Durop, cf. Blench 2020: 112). Connell (2021) has done a study of the gender system of Durop, which amplifies Kastelein's (1994) earlier work on concord classes and also indicates that Durop is stable.

From available scholarship on Kiong not much seems to have been done by way of practical steps to record, document the gradually vanishing tongue of Kiong. Except perhaps for Okon & Noah's (2018) 'Preliminaries to Kiong Orthography' and Mensah, Silva & Inyabri (2020) on 'Kiong libation rituals ...', not much pragmatic scholarly efforts seem to be made in terms of Kiong language resuscitation. It is this void in pragmatic scholarship that justifies our current effort in assessing the challenges and possibilities of reviving Kiong, a minority language in South South Nigeria. We hope to gain some insights from Documentary Linguistics in this study.

Present Focus

Previous studies on Kiong tend to concentrate on the sound system (Henshaw 1990; Okon & Noah 2009; Akiba 2017; Okon & Noah 2018) and a few on the advocacy for its revival (Okon 2004; Essien 2007), as will be evident under section 1.1. The present study examines some of the above suffocating challenges facing Kiong as well as practical steps towards its resuscitation. We expect that the wind of neo-africanism blowing across the West African sub-region will impinge positivity on the psyche of Kiong people to reinvent the pride in their descent culture and language. Emerging trends from other hitherto critically endangered and dead languages that have been successfully revived could also stoke the Kiong nation to approach their language with greater determination as it is pregnant with enormous revival possibilities. The cases of Modern Sanskrit in India, Hebrew in Israel, some aboriginal American, Australian languages are very uplifting (see: UNESCO's 2021 *Atlas of world's languages in danger, priority languages support project*, etc.).

Apart from the general advocacy for Kiong revival which has been done by scholars as indicated above, in this study we are leveraging on: (a) the need to domesticate the new National Language Policy at the grassroots level for maximum pragmatic impact on Kiong language revival and culture; (b) maximising the advantages of dialect immersion so that new generations of Kiong speakers will emerge in a few decades; (c) emphasising and undertaking more audio-visual recordings of Kiong language acts for preservation, data for language use and research, as expounded in Section 2.2 below. These and other steps offer the possibilities of reviving Kiong, a 'critically endangered' Nigerian minority language in Cross River State, Nigeria.

Possibilities of reviving the Kiong language

We hope to use the following positive indicators, measures to attempt the revival process of the Kiong language.

Gains of the National Policy on Education (2022)

The National Language Policy (2022) seems to be the first ever of its kind in Nigeria. Others had been part of a larger *National Policy on Education* (NPE.1981, 2004, for example). Part of the advantages of the NLP (2022) is the involvement of the three tiers of government in the implementation of the policy (pp.13-14), 'The Policy shall be implemented in conjunction with the 36 states of the Federation and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, Local Government Areas, relevant agencies and stakeholders. Also, the policy makes lofty pronouncements on the equality of languages, the need to preserve, sustain the languages, and the resolve of the Federal Government to develop less developed and endangered languages.

3.14 (c) 'All Nigerian languages are national treasures and heritage and shall be preserved from endangerment and extinction' (p.14). 3.14 (d) 'All Nigerian languages are equal and none shall be held superior or inferior against the other' (p.14). 3.14 (e) 'All Nigerian languages shall be assigned equitable functions and roles for communication and interaction within the socio-economic domains of the country' (p.14). 3.14 h) 'The Federal Government of Nigeria shall support efforts to develop less developed and endangered Nigerian languages facing extinction' (p.14). 3.14 (k), 'The traditional rulers are considered custodians of language and culture and as such, are to play significant roles in the development, promotion and preservation of the Nigerian languages' (p.15).

For the first time, the actual custodians of indigenous culture are appropriately recognized and tasked to preserve and promote language and culture. Of similar importance is the recognition of the critical role of Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of Immediate Community (LIC) in the educational process and development as stated in 4.18 below: 4.18. 'To ensure effective delivery of instructions and attendant positive learning outcomes, Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) shall be used as the medium of instruction from Early Childhood Care and Development Education to the six years of primary education' (p.17).

However, given the Federal Government's lethargic approach to policy implementation and the tendency of the major language users to 'oppress' minor languages in Nigeria, the prospective positive learning outcomes via MT education may not accrue to Nigerian minority languages like Kiong. The Federal Government or majority language users may conveniently use the LIC alibi and rationalise the continued use of 'major' languages like Efik or English in the Kiong language community, thereby denying Kiong of its inalienable linguistic rights as encoded in the NLP (2022.16); UNESCO's (1988,1989) Declarations, among other Statutes.

Be that as it may, the Odukpani Local Government Area, where Kiong is domiciled, the several Obonn ('chiefs') and the Kembengta (Paramount Ruler) in Kiong nation who have now been saddled with the official responsibilities (NLP,2022.14,15) of developing and preserving their linguistic treasure can only blame themselves if Kiong dies on their doorstep. We expect them to devise ingenious measures to inject life into Kiong to prevent

the attendant collateral losses that accompany language loss (Edwards & Sienkewicz 1990; Okwudishu 1997; Crystal 2000). Therefore, beyond the fear and risk of losing Kiong, the Kiong people have to interface with the Cross River State Education Ministry, relevant Local Government Area officials to translate and domesticate the NLP for the overall benefit of reviving their language and eventually bequeathing a stable linguistic heritage to their progenies.

Attitudinal Re-orientation

Whatever the mind can conceive, it can achieve! The Kiong people, language enthusiasts and other stakeholders have to rewind, reset the poor language attitude that has lured Kiong language owners to prefer exogenous culture, language to their rich linguistic treasure. They must take pride in the fact that no external language repertoire can express the rich gamut of their ethnocultural wellspring.

Documentation

The primary purpose of language documentation is to generate corpus, usually in audio-visual format, for language preservation and restoration (Himmelmann 2006, 2012; Austin 2021). Kiong data that can be documented include everyday family language activities, community activities, ceremonies such as storytelling, libation rituals (see Mensah, Silva & Inyabri 2020). The present study steps up from there to video document renditions of Psalm 23, Kiong Pledge, aspects of the counting system and greetings. These will firm up the existing Kiong linguistic repertoire for scholars and archival purposes.

Orthography Development

Kiong has no official orthography though Okon & Noah (2018) has done a prolegomenon to a phonemic orthography for the language. This effort should be scaled up through further research, indigenous collaboration and communal participation towards an acceptable (definitive?) orthography for Kiong. A language with no practical orthography in the contemporary multilingual Nigerian, global community is writing its ethnocultural history on quicksand. A critically endangered minority language like Kiong must do everything possible to have an official writing system that would engender its social status and preserve its rich ethnolinguistic heritage.

Dialect Immersion with Durop

Kiong and Durop are dialects of the same language. If language immersion is beneficial in a disparate bilingual language setting (L1 and L2), then the Kiong: Durop dialect immersion stands to yield extra ethnolinguistic advantages. This stems from their geographical contiguity (Odukpani where Kiong is domiciled adjoins Akamkpa, the home of Durop in Nigeria) and close linguistic affinity. As such, we expect a seamless re-invigoration of the asphyxiated Kiong from the spirited Durop dialect. This can be promoted via exchange programme, intermarriage and sharing of linguistic resources.

Expansion of usage Domain

For Kiong to get back on its feet, it has to be deployed in various usage domains and tasked with multidimensional functions. It cannot be sustained only on the lap of oral greetings, libation ritual and rendition of its Pledge. Kiong urgently needs an orthography that will expand its usage beyond oracy to other language skills. It also has to be used beyond family circles to the classroom level, politics, entertainment, science and the social media among others.

Infrastructural Development

Economic poverty and weak social infrastructural development have indirectly weakened the Kiong language base through mass urban drift. If community and government agencies provide adequate social amenities to retain the youth in the Kiong locale, the language will be strengthened. More urban migration means greater descent language shift from Kiong to English, major or international languages.



Figure 3.

This is where Mary Mitchel Slessor lived. It is now used as a health centre for the natives. But this structure needs to be modernised and made more functional to attract the youth populace.

Scholarship, Sponsored Research and Publications

Kiong youth should have the opportunity for scholarship to study the Kiong language in tertiary institutions. This social investment would be a good seed to nurture the rebirth of the language. Wealthy Kiong indigenes and the local government authorities should invest in and sponsor research that would document and publish texts in Kiong. Individuals (Kiong and other language enthusiasts) should be supported or rewarded morally, financially or materially to up the tempo of Kiong language revitalisation.

Glimmer of Hope for Kiong Revival

A little hope seems to be rising for the Kiong language revival. The indices include the determination of the Kiong people to maintain their ethnolinguistic identity as espoused in the Pledge, the tepid zeal of some youth who now use aspects of the language like reciting the Kiong Pledge, Psalm 23, counting in Kiong, Kiong names, and greetings with native-like flair and accent, buoyed by the patriotic orientation of the Oath.

Also, our current principal informant, Akiba Ekpenyong Akiba (55), did his Bachelor's Degree Research Project on 'Aspects of Kiong Phonology' (2017). He and a few other indigenes are eager to rebirth the language through local advocacy. These ones use the rudiments of Kiong in greetings, counting and the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, a Kiong royal father and Paramount Chief: Effiong Offiong Andong (85), Kembengta Obonn Ankiong is most enthusiastic to bequeath a less 'critically endangered' Kiong to the coming generations. Apart from reorientation talks for Kiong people to embrace their indigenous culture and language, he has made contacts with their Korup brothers in Akamkpa for assistance in shoring Kiong. Chief Andong is also collaborating on how the soon-to-be published Durop primer can be utilised equally by Kiong children in Odukpani. If these measures are effectively stepped up together with those proffered in Section 2 of this work, the highly moribund sociolinguistic status of Kiong could be eventually reversed. Here lies our hope.

Summary and Conclusion

Kiong is a critically endangered Nigerian minority language with less than one score octogenarian users with no intergenerational speakers. Its sister dialect, Durop (spoken in Akamkpa, Cross River State and South Western Cameroon) is stable though. A combination of issues has collaborated to successfully asphyxiate Kiong for several decades now. Unhealthy geo-linguistic environment that pitches Kiong against the more sociocultural dominant neighbours like Efik, Ibibio, English and Ejagham constitute a grave danger to Kiong linguistic wellbeing. A policy that nominally recognises Nigerian minority languages but selectively empowers only major languages has suppressed the fortunes of Kiong for some time. The absence of documentation, standard orthography, limited usage domain, globalization and poor indigenous language attitude are other factors that have gradually withered the language.

A glimmer of hope has arisen for Kiong of late, though. Such include the new National Language Policy (2022) that recognises the relevant government (state, local government) and sociocultural (traditional rulers) authorities in language development, positive attitudinal reorientation, new dawn in Kiong documentation (including libation rituals, Kiong Pledge, Psalm 23, counting, names greetings), closer language ties with Durop - which portends positive immersion, increasing research and publications on the language including some by indigenes, a prolegomena to a Kiong Orthography has been published - which will engender primers and general literacy. Hopefully, the above trends indicate the possibilities that Kiong would soon increase its users (for example, our principal informant, 55) and function domains beyond the present fossilised usage (like libation and pledge rendition).

Given the colossal losses inherent in language loss, Kiong and other Nigerian language minorities must do everything possible to preserve their descent language. A revitalised Kiong apart from having enormous benefits of a written language will also enjoy some prestige in the educational system, increased legitimacy and social power in the national, supranational circle as well as access to and creation of social wealth and capital for its indigenous users, community.

Limitations, Areas of Future Research

This paper was unable, regrettably, to undertake two salient areas that Okon & Noah (2009) envisaged for future research: (a) “to establish the degree of relationship between Kiong and Durop” (p. 335) and (b) linguistically establish the stability and endangerment of Kiong, using GIDS.

Acknowledgements

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APPENDIX

Kiong Pledge

Ami nde wen Ankiong
Nde amama ikwọ Ankiong
Odena omem-onen ode Ankiong

Bekwo bedening betungo mmung
Onen-onen ode ikwọ
Ka nwuwut ka nkpen ikpen

Ami nna ndewen Ankiong
Kiong efen kenya
Kiong dusie dunde

Literal Translation

I am a child of Ọkọyọng
I am good wealth of Ọkọyọng
Because only person is wealth

Many riches mean what?
Only person is wealth
Whether I live or die

I am still a child of Okoyong
Ọkọyọng people are brave
Ọkọyọng people are one