Africa and World Literature

University of Nigeria Journal of Literary Studies

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Language and Literature in the Era of 21st Century Post-colonies

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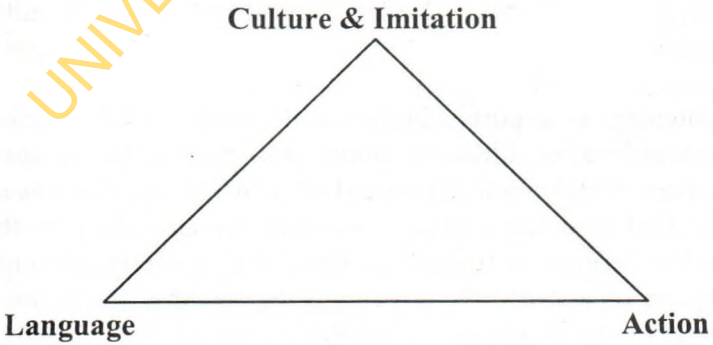
I sincerely thank the organizers of this international conference for inviting me to speak. In giving a passing thought to the phenomena of language, literature and thought in the present century, it is inevitable that we should discuss culture and communication and the illuminating fact that the sphere and universe of language is fast diminishing. This is an irony but I have the backing and the sympathy of other scholars, mightier than I, to draw from. Edwin Hubble and Stephen Hawking (1988: 9, 54) have indeed confirmed that each time you look into space, other galaxies relative to ours are moving rapidly away. In other words our universe is expanding just as our own planet, on account of communication, is becoming a global village. Hubble's landmark discovery was in 1929. Even more recently, George Steiner, in his anthology, *Language and Silence* (1969) has argued that up until the seventeenth century, the domain of language and linguistic expression encompasses nearly the whole of experience whereas in the present age its scope much narrower. He avers further:

> Large areas of meaning and praxis now belong to such non-verbal languages as mathematics, symbolic logic and formulas of chemical and electronic relation. Other areas belong to the sub-languages and anti-languages of non-objective art and *musique concrète*. The world of words has shrunk. One cannot talk of transfinite numbers except mathematically; *one should not,* suggests Wittgenstein, talk of ethics or aesthetics within the presently available categories of discourse. . ., The circle has narrowed tremendously, for was there anything under

heaven, be it science, metaphysics, art, or music, of which a Shakespeare, a Donne, and a Milton could not speak naturally, to which their words did not have natural access?...The real point lies not in the actual number of words potentially available, but in the degree to which the resources of the language are in actual current use (1969: 44 – 5).

So far, I have been very general in my approach to the predicament of language in the present century. This has to be so in that language is an acknowledged human phenomenon which we hitherto classify as an index of culture. It is also necessary for me to put forward, with critical emendations, the argument of Edward Sapir that language and culture, contrary to conventional wisdom, are separate entities. I shall subsequently argue that the corpus of language is a cultural instrument and tool for the creation of literature and thought patterns. In this regard, I believe that Sapir's conclusion needs revision and modification for the sake of an expanding postcolonial discourse and validation. But to start with, Sapir wrote on language about the time Hubble made his discovery of an ever expanding universe. The whole point of this lecture will be to try, much as it is possible, to link the phenomenon of **language** with **action,** or better still, to regard language as the medium of cultural praxis.



The reason that Sapir has separated language from culture, it seems to me, is that he sees language as mere speech bereft of the wellsprings of action, whereas in traditional thought and beliefs, language encapsulates the motive and predilection for action. Language and action therefore constitute the polar axis on which culture turns. Where language declines as Steiner has convincingly argued above, there is bound to be a decline in cultural life. From the middle of the last century to the present time, it is clear why language has constantly been the central debate in the promotion of African literature and literary representation. But let us briefly return to Sapir. He argues that however much we are disposed, on general principles, to argue that the language of primitive peoples imitate natural sounds, the fact is that those languages show no preference for imitative words. In his own exact words:

> Among the most primitive peoples of aboriginal America, the Athabaskan tribes of the Mackenzie River speak languages in which such words seem to be nearly or entirely absent, while they are used freely enough in languages as sophisticated as English and German. **Such an instance shows how little the essential nature of speech is concerned with the mere imitation of things** (Emphasis mine, 1921: 8).

This logically led him to what has become his famous definition of language:

> Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so-called "organs of speech"....There are, properly speaking, no organs of speech; there are only organs that are incidentally useful in the production of speech sounds (8–9).

Sapir dwells on the arbitrary systems of symbolism in the function and form of language and that the process of communication or the aggregation of ideas are to be associated with groups and classes of experience rather than with any single class of experience. He argues that it is this group or class experience, and its tacit acceptance that makes it an identity. (13). I have chosen this as my first thesis. **Language is an identity marker.**

My second logical derivative from Sapir is that **Language is congruous with thought**. Hence each human community since it has evolved the use of language constitutes a cultural group which is capable of evolving a distinct civilization. He argues that the flow of language is not necessarily indicative of thought but also of 'concrete particularities and specific relations', as when a man affirms that he had a good breakfast on a particular morning. This statement fulfils two of the three functions of language and the arts in society as Abiola Irele represents it: the *phatic* or purely relational aspect of language as well as the *ideological* or value-laden linguistic expression. The third or *ludic* function serves to entertain or generate pleasure. He infers, "In any society the basic functions (phatic, ludic, ideological and so on) of the expressive arts will be to enforce the sense of identity of the particular group and to promote a sense of cohesion within a particular society" (1991: 57).

Much as Irele indicates, Sapir also affirms here that all that such an expression transmits is nothing more than a pleasurable memory symbolically rendered as habitual expression. He says each element in the sentence defines a separate concept, a conceptual relation or both. But I disagree with him here that the sentence, as a whole, has no conceptual significance. I think here, he underestimates the entire framework of the psychic and the physiological as a networking system in their own context. That earlier affirmation, I believe, is contradicted by his latter statement

that only the outward form of language is constant because its inner meaning and psychic value and intensity varies with the selective interest of the mind. I believe that it is difficult to separate the cognitive from the affective components of language in their particular referents. Curiously, he arrives, in his definition of thought, at what he de-emphasized moments before. I shall like to quote him in full:

> From the point of view of language, thought may be defined as the highest latent or potential content of speech, the content that is obtained by interpreting each of the elements in the flow of language as possessed of its very fullest conceptual value.

I, therefore, uphold my objection to Sapir's further affirmation that language and thought are not coterminous and that language is a pre-rational function (1921: 15). The exact opposite, I believe, is the case. In traditional communities of Africa, and indeed with phenomenologists like Heidegger, language is the mode of thought and the vehicle of conceptual representation. I, however, agree with Sapir that **Language is the vehicle of thought;** it is a group phenomenon, and a building block for human communication and civilization. Even the creation of the world derived from the wellsprings of language as the vehicle of thought. Language calls into being.

I must admit that brilliant as Sapir's pioneering research and pronouncements are on language, they sometimes appear distant and impersonal and may not be as representative of the primordial passion Africans express over the notion of language, thought and identity. I shall, in this regard, present the fairly comparative ideas of other scholars who are familiar with the continent of Africa. Pierre Alexandre, a successor scholar to Sapir defines the same subject thus:

> Language is expression – a personal expression at the individual level, obviously, but always within the more general framework of a culture or a civilization. In this sense, the most interesting study, although the most difficult to undertake, would be of the daily familiar, informal expression – of women at the market or at their laundry, of men in a meeting hut or under the palaver tree, of children playing games. Such speech has been barely touched on until now, but with widespread use of tape recorders such studies will no doubt increase, just as the recorder has already transformed the conditions for ethnolinguistic inquiries. Meanwhile, we must limit ourselves to broad outline sketches, which are necessarily and unfortunately quite vague.
>
> To begin, we can, I suggest, set forth the principle that, throughout Black Africa, language – or rather, speaking, or speech – is taken very seriously, even at the level of trivial or daily affairs. My opinion, contrary to Durkheim's, is that so-called primitive societies do not polarize the profane and the sacred but rather the pure and the impure. (1972: 103).

I have juxtaposed Alexandre's definition with that of Sapir because the latter benefits from three obvious considerations:

i. Participant observation
ii. Diachronic or trans-historical considerations
iii. Cultural relativity

These considerations tend to engender empathy, a most sought after consideration in the field study of cultural concepts. The Athabaskan tribes of Mackenzie River were mentioned as **objects** of his research while Alexandre's African tribes were mentioned as **subjects** of his studies. He researches both his subject as well as his methodology, and these help him to culturally earth and relativise his subject. Above all, his study is not only within a time

frame but across time frames. The study of language is, undoubtedly, the study of a culture-specific, arbitrary concept but the considerations of scope and time will always help to give a clear focus. It is at this point that we shall turn to the purpose of language application as a tool directed by thought and guided by culture. The making of literature in its oral, auditory or written forms, the desire of men and women to hear and be heard, establishes communication as the ultimate goal of language. Man calls his cosmos into being by naming it; and the world, in turn, validates man and his inventions and ideals. Language is thus a meaning making tool without which learning, art, history and civilization cannot be represented or established.

Language and the Art of Literature

It is only in both the expressive and the creative media of language that it proves itself both as a medium and as a methodology. In this section I shall refer both to Sapir and to Aristotle for the elucidation of the role of language in the literary or performative arts and their existential implications. Sapir observes that language is the medium of literature just as marble, bronze or clay are the materials of sculpture (222). This would appear to be a transposition of Aristotle's earlier postulation that creativity is innate and our earliest creative lessons derive from an imitational process. In the early creative stages, the medium always appears to be the message and both are rooted in particular traditions, learning environment and culture (Aristotle 1965). Sapir equally affirms:

> The literature fashioned out of the form and substance of a language has the color and the texture of its matrix. The literary artist may never be conscious of just how he is hindered or helped or otherwise guided by the matrix, but when it is a

> question of translating his work into another language, the nature of the original matrix manifests itself at once. All his effects have been calculated, or intuitively felt, with reference to the formal "genius" of his own language; they cannot be carried over without loss or modification (1921: 222).

At first Sapir upholds the magisterial legislation of Benedetto Croce that it is impossible to translate a work of literature without loss of meaning since every artistic work is rooted in its own 'matrix'. But he quickly modifies his position by stating that there are actually two distinct kinds or levels of art:

i. A generalized non-linguistic art which can be translated or imitated without a significant loss of meaning and
ii. A specifically linguistic art that is not transferrable into a different medium.

It is significant to note here that he indicated that a scientific truth is impersonal and can be transferred to or expressed in other media without loss of meaning. This is patently true with the language of mathematics, scientific principles and Information and Communications Technology. Musical notations are of course more specialized in their original medium of production. The most important point for me here is that in the later Sapir, and especially in the theorizing of the works of literature, he has become infinitely sensitive to the fact that language in the service of literature is a cultural phenomenon. All art is culturally grounded. This is a great improvement on the rather impersonal tone of the first chapter where he conceives of language as a rootless and non-instinctive method of communication. Now he has made that surprising detour:

> Every language is itself a collective art of expression. There is concealed in it a particular set of aesthetic factors – phonetic,

> rhythmic, symbolic, morphological – which it does not completely share with any other language. These factors may either merge their potencies with those of that unknown, absolute language to which I have referred....
>
> An artist must utilize the native esthetic resources of his speech. He may be thankful if the given palette of colors is rich, if the springboard is light. But he deserves no special credit for felicities that are the language's own. We must take for granted this language with all its qualities of flexibility or rigidity and see the artist's work in relation to it (1921: 225).

It is heartening to see that Sapir's epochal study ends on the note on which we prefer to anchor the pursuit of language and literature as the media by which we advance our civilization at the instance of our culture. We agree with him that the shape of the literature is established in the substance of the language. The facility of the language gives the artist, writer or critic enough room to hang himself if he chooses to. Language is the collective art of expression, collectively owned, a summary of thousands of individual intuitions. The artist makes his or her valid mark in the collective imprint of his racial, collective endeavour. If no national literatures emerge in a particular age, it is because the culture or the national spirit has not validated the individual expression of such artists or because they have not been able to crystallize the spirit of the age. This is strikingly familiar with the assertion of W.B. Yeats in his definition of what will constitute a national literature for the Irish writer in the context of both Hellenic and other Western traditions (Yeats 1926: 337). But even nearer the threshold of the 21st century, Brian Friel has articulated the postcolonial enterprise as a function of 'translation' in an epoch-making play of the same title, *Translations* (1981). Here a young, urbane, Irish interpreter, Owen, boasts to his fellow Irish villagers from Baile Beag as British cartographers and sappers have arrived

to do a bilingual translation of Irish landmarks and place names, prior to taxation:

> Me a soldier? I am employed as a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter. My job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King's good English (29).

The chief sapper and cartographer, Captain Lancey expresses the colonialist mission thus:

> This enormous task has been embarked on so that the military authorities will be equipped with up-to-date and accurate information on every corner of this part of the Empire.
>
> And also so that the entire basis of land valuation can be reassessed for purposes of more equitable taxation.

In conclusion I wish to quote two brief extracts from the white paper which is our governing charter: (*Reads*) 'All former surveys of Ireland originated in forfeiture and violent transfer of property; the present survey has for its object the relief which can be afforded to the proprietors and occupiers of land from unequal taxation:

> 'Ireland is privileged. No such survey is being undertaken in England. So this survey cannot be received as proof of the disposition of this government to advance the interests of Ireland.' My sentiments, too. (31).

The play, interestingly, is faithful to William Butler Yeats' historical mapping of Ireland and her heritage. He conceives of an Ireland that links up with the civilizations of Ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt. The play envisions the transmutations of ideas between Ireland and these classical civilizations. He insists that

Irish civilization goes back to Plotinus (205 – 270) who is linked to Egypt, Plato and St. Augustine.

The native interpreter, the professional bilingualist; the custodian of diplomatic language, be he a *Kotma* in Umuofia, Nigeria or an Owen in Donegal, Ireland were excellent facilitators and go-betweens in the colonial enterprise. We, of course, pay due regard to the oversight observation of Edward Sapir that exact translations, being impossible, are subversive agents of linguistic fidelity. The passage above establishes the historical fact that the colonial enterprise took the land and language (or thought) as inseparable targets of domination and often reflects in the folklore and the literature of any postcolonial nation. The mind and the landscapes of any nation are always a reflection of each other. Once you change the landscapes and their impressions, you will most certainly succeed in changing the mindset and the conceptual outlook of those who inhabit and relate with the land in that geographical space or time frame.

The Challenge of Post-Colonialism

There is always the daunting task of establishing whether a post-colonial writer or artist could ever re-establish his/her allegiance with a tradition or canon since his continent, and his world, has been so terribly balkanized by the intrusion of an imposing 'other'. His language is ruthlessly mediated and his land is violently appropriated and chequered by a force from without. The question of the language for national provenance and determination has raged between African writers since the Makerere conference of 1952 where African writers gathered at a conference titled: "A conference of African writers of English Expression." The conference could not define what African literature was; neither could it delimit its language of expression. A subsequent

conference at Fourah Bay defined it as 'creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral' (Achebe 1982, 55). The language of expression seems to be at the heart of it all and Achebe ruminates aloud thus:

> What are the factors which have conspired to place English in the position of national language in many parts of Africa: Quite simply the reason is that these nations were created in the first place by the intervention of the British which, I hasten to add, is not saying that the peoples comprising these nations were invented by the British. (1982: 57).

If nation states in Africa have been reconstituted into new linguistic groups, super-imposed over their original histories and geographies; then it could be unthinkable that thinking in those languages meant first going to Whitehall to obtain a license. It just means that there has to be a new modality under which what you thought meant the same thing as what your kith and kin understood as what you spoke. Both the spoken and the written component of the new language must be broad enough to adapt to new worlds and successfully bear the concepts of the new cultures it had embraced or subjugated.

In compiling a text on post-colonial studies a little over a decade ago (Layiwola, 2001), I had compared and contrasted the situation of the African continent with those of Ireland and places like Australia. Essentially, is the context of post-coloniality the same amongst 'black' and 'white' post-colonials? In Ireland, for instance, could a poet/playwright like W.B. Yeats, or even Samuel Beckett be put on the same literary canon as Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Lewis Nkosi, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Adebayo Faleti, Akinwumi Isola, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Bode Sowande or Chimamanda Adichie?

Is the whole process of literary or dramatic production in the twentieth century territoriality as diverse as peoples, history or geography? What is the prognosis for the twenty-first century? Or could we radically say as Francis Fukuyama (2002) or Richard O'Brien (1992) have observed that globalization has truly put an end to the traditional concepts of history and geography? This is a vexed phenomenon. For instance, at the Armagh post-colonial conference of 1996, Declan Kiberd, a key delegate to the conference, believes that colonialism, and its aftermath, has created its own diversity (Layiwola 2001). In an intellectual as well as an emotive outburst, he declared:

> Apart from the mutual experience of a temperate climate, Ireland shares nothing else with Western Europe! (2001, xii)

I believe that any African writer or literary critic could replicate this passionate outburst that, in spite of the extraordinary use of the English or French language, the continent of Africa shares very little cultural or economic affinity with Europe, America or countries of the Pacific Rim. This, in spite of our conscious adoption and wide usage of English and other European languages.

In the 20th century post-colony, the Irish writers, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and Samuel Barclay Beckett (1906-1989) have broken new ice in terms of trans-territoriality and the avant-garde. Yeats tried to reproduce society in the creation of a new symbolism distilled from a panoramic understanding of his native mythologies and folklore in the context of an expansive global culture. Beckett was a maverick and an existentialist philosopher and playwright who believed that there is no prerequisite or absolute order in the universe and that the only reality is that of the absurdist; discrete, fragmentary and unpredictable (Layiwola,, 1992: 81). For Beckett, the fate of

humanity is as unpredictable as the outcome in a game of chess (Bair 1980, 191).

I have remarked that the colonial factor in language and cultural events has been a critical factor in the intellectual and artistic output of artists from Africa, Europe, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific. It is true that in Africa and Asia, the English language has always contended with indigenous languages on the school curriculum so that the question is not so much on the absence of a (mother) tongue but on the need to discover a (father's) voice. In a place like Ireland, however, there is both the need to rediscover a tongue as well as to re-invent a voice in the effort to be heard (Layiwola, 2001: xi). It is also important to note that though English studies as a university discipline was established in 1896 as an intellectual instrument of empire building, it has become the basis of cultural studies in the British Commonwealth since the period of political independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is a matter for conjecture on how long its predominance will endure, especially as Bill Ashcroft has predicted that the pre-eminence of English as a university discipline may not survive another century (2001, 1).

The first signs of Bill Ashcroft's predictions are evident because about the time of our Northern Irish conference on Post-colonial literature and culture, a book jointly edited by Ayo Bamgbose, Ayo Banjo and Andrew Thomas portentously titled: *New Englishes: A West African Perspective* (1995; 1997) appeared on the scene. It is worth quoting Braj Kachru for a sense of the text:

> ...an African canon of the English language has been established and recognized. On the whole, it is a decolonized and demythologized canon (1977: vi)

The book also largely endorsed the comments of some of the avid users of the language as a medium of immense literary creativity—Soyinka (1993), Ngugi and Achebe. The success of the text is in its ability to reference the positions of writers from the very extremes expressed by Obi Wali (1963), and Ngugi (1986), who believe that African Literatures have no voices in Foreign tongues and corroborated by a native speaker, Enoch Powell, as referenced by Obafemi Kujore thus:

> Others may speak and read English – more or less – but it is our language, not theirs. It was made in England by the English and it remains our distinctive property, however widely it is learnt or used. (1997: 368)

The point must be made that emotive outbursts of primordialists like Powell have bred the responses of writers and critics who have created canons, even from their vantage positions in the margins. This ingenuity has bred the more conciliatory models identified and nuanced by the arguments of Soyinka (1993), Achebe, and Izevbaye (1997). Izevbaye, in fact, identifies that the unipolar tradition of the English English led to the crisis that forced Christopher Okigbo to treat "the European heritage of poetry, along with other poetics, in an essentialist rather than a culture-specific manner…" (1997: 317). It is clear that the empire dies and equally resurrects in the post-colony. But the crisis of determining a definition for African literature which speaks with an indigenous voice in a foreign tongue will be a rigorous and continuing debate (compare Chinweizu and Madubuike 1980: 305-308).

Whilst the arguments at definitions are raging, it would appear to me that the broad tapestry against which we could understand the quest for identity is that of the crisis of knowledge and artistic production in contemporary Africa or in other comparative post-colonial contexts. For instance, if we are unable to invent a new

language owing to reasons that are obvious, are we able to create discourses that generate or articulate masterpieces and canons that are identifiably African? To borrow Ngugi's phrase, if we are able to 'move the centre' or relocate centres in the periphery and the margins, the post-colony may, in the light of developments in Southeast Asia, generate coherent knowledge centres and enduring canons.

One great danger that we have faced as a defeated and colonized people is the loss of an authentic voice. Even if you have the greatest masterpieces of art, but expressed in the guise or image of another, there is still the hope of an unrealized ideal. The plastic arts have fared better in that the medium, for them, have always been the message. The three dimensional arts of Africa and Oceania have always been as real as any other originals. Our literatures are no less exquisite but the media, be they Anglophone, Francophone or Lusophone, have always presented us as extensions of the canons of the metropolis. We, therefore, long for that near distant future when there would be such voices and languages that are fully authentic and African, beyond colonial outposts.

In a recent paper, Paulin Hountondji interrogates the process of knowledge appropriation in a post-colonial context and concludes that:

> Research in Africa and in all countries at the periphery of the world market, is as extroverted (i.e. externally oriented) as its economic activity (2002: 26).

I couldn't agree more with him. The analogy of knowledge appropriation with commodity production is illustrative. Our research activities are never autonomous or self-sustaining. In the process of scientific investigation, we have three distinct stages –

(a)The collection of raw data/information;

(b) The interpretation of data; and
(c)The application of theoretical findings to practical issues.

The reason that Africa has not made major scientific breakthroughs is that the middle link is missing. Africans are used to gather data which are then exported and sent back as finished products. The real interpretation or processing of raw information is done in the metropolis; yet this is the crucial phase of the production process. In the event of our inability to scientifically link up with the crucial process of cultural production, neo-colonialism will always keep the post-colonial state in perpetual dependence. In literary and critical theory, it is even worse because our experts now build and improve on the language of the empire to produce noble and newfangled results from our cultural raw materials. The originality which we so much possess and gloat over is used in the service of metropolitan cultures. These same centres appropriate our artists and put them into categories of merit such that our heroes are first made abroad before they are appreciated at home. The honour to our prophets, in a manner of speaking, comes from outside of their home base. This mode of colonial pact ensures that knowledge based industries and enterprises, including economic activities are perpetually extroverted. We look outwards rather than inwards for salvation from subjugation.

The Ascendency of Nigerian Literature of English Expression

The human community could not have organized themselves without the capacity for speech and language. Sapir says it is 'as natural to man as walking, and only less so than breathing' (1926: 3). The various oral traditions of indigenous cultures in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Americas reveal that language grew

before, the art of writing and hieroglyphics. With the invention of speech came the birth of thought, storytelling and subsequently, writing. Chinua Achebe has written of man's proclivity for the creation of fiction:

> Man's desire for fictions goes with his ability for making them, just as his need for language is inseparable from his capacity for speech. If man only had the need to speak but lacked his peculiar speech organs, he could not have invented language. For all that we know, other animals in the jungle might be in just as much need to talk to one another as man ever was and might have become just as eloquent had they been endowed with the elaborate apparatus for giving expression to that need. (1989: 141)

We recall with great amusement and pride the publication of Amos Tutuola's episodic novel, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952. This is an early Nigerian novel with an indigenous content written in a foreign tongue. The expatriate community welcomed its quaint expression and mythopoeic setting. Some Africans felt that its language was stilted and did not represent the best of Queen's English or the standard Received Pronunciation (RP). One thing that that novel did for us as a colonial people was to 're-conquer' the tool of the colonizer by appropriating it to a local flavour. Next came Achebe in 1958 with his proverbial prosody which has truly reinvigorated the English Language canon. Consider these few sentences:

> Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten (1958: 5).

Or Okonkwo's contemplative interlocution:

> Does the white man understand our custom about land?
>
> How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (1958: 124).

Note the laconic but profound intensity of the tone and language of expression and the presaging mood. There is a fairly textured, fairly restrained agglutination of structured phrases as predominant in proverbs and parables (two favoured stylistic devises of orature). These are oratorical devices of indigenous provenance in the linguistic arsenal of an unwritten language, an unscripted tongue, reminiscent of a liturgy. Now it is instructive to draw a comparative point between this rendition and the dramatic intensity of a different genre in the work of his contemporary, Wole Soyinka, exploring the same agglutinative technique for the purpose of memorability. The first is from Soyinka's play, *The Road* (1965):

> Be like even like the road itself. Flatten your bellies with the hunger of an unpropitious day, power your hands with the knowledge of death. In the heat of the afternoon when the sheen raise false forests and a watered haven, let the even first unravel before your eyes. Or in the dust when ghost lorries pass you by and your shouts, your tears fall on deaf panels and the dust swallows them. Dip in the same basin as the man that makes his last journey and stir with one finger, wobbling

> reflections of two hands, two hands but one face only. Breathe like the road. Be the road. Coil yourself in dreams, lay flat in treachery and deceit and at the moment of a trusting death, rear your head and strike the traveler in his confidence, swallow him whole or break him on the earth. Spread a broad sheet for death with the length and the time of the sun between you until the one face multiplies and the one shadow is cast by all the doomed. Breath like the road, be even like the road itself....(1973: 228 – 9).

At an even more urgent, more insistent moment in his career, after incarceration and the Nigerian civil war, a text so reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's 'Wasteland' or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame,* the mood appears like the split second before Armageddon, a definitive apocalypse. Morality and mutual, familial values have collapsed and man is afflicted by the 'dog eat dog' syndrome ideology of a modernizing elite. This is the philosophy of the Old Man in the post civil war 'postcolonial', 'postmodernist' Nigeria of Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists*:

> OLD MAN. (his voice has risen to a frenzy). Practise, Practise, Practise...on the cyst in the system...you cyst, you cyst, you splint in the arrow of arrogance, the dog in dogma, tick of a heretic, the tick in politics, the mock of democracy, the mar of Marxism, a tic of the fanatic, the boo in Buddhism, the ham in Mohammed, the dash in the criss-cross of Christ, the dot on the I of ego, an ass in the mass, the ash in ashram, a boot in kibbutz, the pee of priesthood, the peepee of perfect priesthood, oh how dare you raise your hindquarters you dog of dogma and cast the scent of your existence on the lamp-post of Destiny you HOLE IN THE ZERO OF NOTHING!

OLD MAN. Stop him! Fire! Fire! Riot! Hot line! Armageddon! (1971, 1984: 292 – 3).

In Soyinka's postcolonialist, nationalist battles, he got to the limits here and deploys brazen language, thought and outright tirade as his imaginative instrument of battle to subvert a world where, to borrow a phrase of Anthony Appiah, 'rationalization, the perversion of reason, is seen as the distinctive dynamic of contemporary history.' (1991: 344). In this text, Soyinka pushes his literature as the firebrand canon in the frontiers of the postcolonial, postmodernist critique of the Nigerian nation state. The nation has become the ambiguous space for the merchandising of all manner of signs and crass display of destructive will imposed over the other and the hegemonic space of power mongering. The interplay of this is made particularly evident in the appropriation of a western language in the context of indigenous wisdom. In that play the old order constantly jostled for fratricidal space with the pervasively modern until it was displaced by the same newfangled modernist era. On the other end of the aesthetic scale, Achebe employs sardonic humour and a moralizing ethic to portray this desperate condition in his novel *A man of the People* (1966).

There is no doubt that the African writer has turned around the fortunes of the language of conquest into a language of liberation. Before we further discuss newer aspects of Nigerian literature in English, let us, as it were, return to the future by way of the past and ruminate on how we arrived where we are. Time there was when we could not define what language our literature should 'speak' or how we should navigate the prophecy of an alien tongue. That point when Tutuola spoke an alien tongue with a Yoruba voice.

In 1964 arrived Gabriel Okara's experimental novel, *The Voice*. It caught even his elite countrymen and women unawares because, like Tutuola's novels, it was difficult to place the

language. It was a different way of inflecting the 'incorruptible' language of conquest and of empire. To the native speaker of a tonal language, it was fresh and inventive, but to those who were used to Okara's fine, lyrical poetry of very high register, it was quaint, even sometimes odd. This representative quotes from the openings of chapters four and nine bear out the courageous, experimental prose of the author:

> Okolo's leaving town was Izongo's rejoicing. His inside was sweeter than sweetness and he was with the spirit of kindness possessed (so he told his elders) and so he gathered all the people of Amatu: men, women, children, the lame, the deaf and dumb and the blind (1964:71).
>
> 'If only what?' Okolo asked his inside, but his inside said nothing. For silence had flooded it, driving away words, teaching words. So leaning on the thinking-nothing wall Okolo sat seeing only darkness, the kind of darkness you see when you close your eyes....Then he remembered his father's spoken words when he was dying: 'I could have been a big rich man be,' his father has whispered with his last voice, holding Okolo's hand, 'if the straight thing I had not spoken, if the straight thing I had not done. But I have a sweet inside and clean as the eye of the sky (1964: 105 – 6).

The diction here conflates the rhythms of pidgin or creole with those of parables and proverbs. It is an ingenious management of poetic and prosodic patterns long exhibited by poets, griots and raconteurs of ancient African empires. Okara deserves particular recognition for this feat. I believe that his bold stylistic experimentation inspired the next generation of prose stylists and soap opera practitioners like James Iroha, Chika Okpala and, of course, the playwright and novelist, Ken Saro-Wiwa.

In what amounts to a revolution in the form of the Nigerian novel, Ken Saro-Wiwa's 'novel in rotten English', *Sozaboy,* appeared in 1985. His style, and those of the fictive characters, is the English patois of the semi educated lower class speaker of the language. The beauty, and success, of the experiment is its consistency and uniformity all through the work. He claims that the seeming advantage of the dialect is that it has no syntactic rules. He, as author, in matching the content of the story to its form tells the lawless story of warfront veterans in rotten English. I quote him:

> Sozaboy's language is what I call 'rotten English', a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English. This language is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expression and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and not have his being. (1985, author's note).

The author claimed to have begun the experiment in the short story he wrote as an undergraduate twenty years before. *Sozaboy* is, therefore, the culmination of this experiment where a subsidiary medium has sought to domesticate and dominate a dominant medium. It is a triumphal effort because it was first thought that the medium might sustain a short story but not a full-length novel. This is a dialect where *number* translates as *lomber* and *story* translates as *tory; greed as long throat; local gin* as *ginkana; food* as *whakies; syringe* as *chooking needle; civil defence* as *simple defence; pretty girls* as *titis; plentiful* as *borku; frighten us* as *cut*

our heart. The 182 page novel is a stylistic trail blazer. This tradition is bourgeoning.

The farthest limits of creative patois, and in the twenty-first century is in the 60 page poetry collection published in 2011 by Edwin Erita Oribhabor called *Abuja na Kpangba An Oda Puem-Dem* and sponsored by the French Institute for research in Africa (IFRA) at the University of Ibadan. The author is based in Abuja but was born and raised in Warri. The style is steep and localized delta pidgin and might need to be translated to cosmopolitan pidgin speakers. The title means that Abuja is heaven. The first verse of the title poem goes thus:

Abuja na hevun, na kpangba
Abuja koret!
Na ples we get
Bam bam haus
Beta beta rod
We kari plan
But wons yu kom ye
Na difren difren tins
Go jos de trowe
Fo yo maind (p.1)

But the symbolic, imaginative boundary is the poem which preaches tolerance and variety, **Na baundri wi de kros**
Fo laif
Baundri boku
Na so i boku.
I mek am bam

Wen laif jam
Baundri go apie
Na so I go tanda
I go wie kap.

Yu kros won
anoda go apie
na so I go apie
apie an disapie

I go waka
i go kom
na so i waka
I go waka, I go kom.

I no de finish. (pp 40 – 41).

Conclusion: Language and the Process of Re-covering and Remembering

We have dwelt on the language and literature of the twentieth century as the basis for the cultural projection of the twenty-first century. Even though the mediums were refracted given the tone and dialects engaged, the narrative contexts and the mood of Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985, 1986) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* which appeared two decades after in 2006 were strikingly similar. The latter author was closer to history as internalized by the characters and the former portrayed his characters as observed and exteriorized by the narrator. The formality of Adichie's language gave the subjects more conviction because she made the register to carry the weight of the characters' thought. Given the register, pidgin as a form accommodated more fun and playfulness. This gave it a less formal, less assiduous medium for such a subject as the civil war. The meter and the rhythm are more amenable for comedy and melodrama than the tragic art. Even where the narrative was somber, the broken language assuaged the feelings and the depth of tragedy and

immediacy. It would therefore be less amenable to the subject of historical re-membering. But so much for stylistic differentiation! Pidgin is aftall a more recent version of the English language. In effect, it is still a dialect in transition as a hurried comparison between Saro-Wiwa and Oribhabor's texts reveal. The latter author has further watered down the syntax of the English language and is by far more iconoclastic than the former author. For universal semantic acceptability, the formal version of the language is more acceptable. This does not discourage inventors and originary thinking. It just means that the dialect of any language must standardize to have credibility. Above all, we do need to re-cover and re-member our mother tongues even if we would think in them and translate to the language of extraversion. In all of these, originality is key. This is what has set the works of Soyinka and Achebe apart as canons of African literature of English expression. Language is key to the success of our education, research and technological development in what becomes of our heritage in the twenty-first century. I believe that the point is so well captured by Mkandawire in these statements:

> The issue of language is not merely an expression of cultural chauvinism or romanticism. The interest in language is not only because it is a vehicle of regaining Africa's memory but also because the language medium is crucial for harnessing human resources and grounding scientific knowledge in African realities. It is the only way science and technology can become part of the common sense and world –view of the wider African public and underpin the scientific and technological knowledge required for the development of the continent (Mkandawire 2005: 7).

It would appear that the empire has diversified and is diversifying. The English language continues to spawn on the fertile soil of

erstwhile colonies while the language itself provides the fertile medium for spawning. As Bill Ashcroft and others have predicted, as the empire becomes self reflexive, it may appear to replicate the mobius strip, that snake which coils back to consume itself over from its tail in a cycle. At the same time it may be like the Egyptian phoenix that rises from the ashes of its own immolation. Whichever path it chooses, something is bound to give way for another to energize as we continue to re-invent our identities in the tongue we speak and how we voice it. By this very fact, our virtual and concrete identities are constantly rediscovered and reinvented.

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