CROSS-CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS AND THE SEMIOTICS OF ETHNOCULTURAL DOMINATION IN NIGERIA

By

OBODODIMA OHA (Ph.D.)
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
Department of English

INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable and desirable that different cultures hold 'conversations'. 'Conversation, in this case, figuratively refers to interaction, which transgresses a given cultural space. In this case, cultures attempt to overcome the barrier of difference, suggesting the boundary, (Martin Heidegger) would say, as "that from which something begins its presencing" (1971: 153); or as a symbolic challenge for openness. Just as in normal conversational interaction requiring the Gricean Co-operative Principle,[1] cultures in conversation ideally have to target the arrival at some understanding of each other. In this case, we assume that cultures are not prisons, as the Whorfian hypothesis proposes, and that one culture can enter another (and also be entered), a situation the semiotician, Yuri Lotman, refers to as "the culture within the culture" (1994). The entry of the one culture into another is, as Lotman argues, transformative: it transforms the semiotic space of the host culture; in other words, it produces some hybridity.

Cross-cultural conversation appears friendly and useful to the idea of globalisation, especially as it offers what seems to be a solution to the primordial hostile imagination of cultural difference as a matter of "Us versus Them, Insiders versus Outsiders, the tribe versus the enemy" which, as Sam Keen (1986:17) states, underlies identity perceptions of "most peoples". Thus the hope of globalisation (in one sense) is the emergence of a culture of understanding, a Pentecost that signifies the triumph over babelization of the world. Marshal MacLuhan presents globalisation as a force of economy and information technology remaking the world (into a global village) -the metaphor of 'village' suggesting closeness, intimacy, being at 'home' with self, the pleasures of ease. Of course, we do recognize that the term, just like all signs, is subject to

difference, with multiple and postponed meanings; with meanings that are unstable- and may change significance from one context to another. Thus, a pan-African reading of globalisation is just one of the many possible readings.

The problem, however, is with the manner of this cross-cultural conversation according to some Afro-centric readings. Some Afro-centric cultural critics have argued that the creation of a global culture has not been devoid of cultural politics of domination, that what often masquerades as global culture is centering of European and American value systems, while African and other Third World cultures have been placed at the margins. In this regard, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in *Moving the Centre* (1993) argues that it is desirable for cultures to interact, provided this is not an excuse for one to dominate the other, or for Western culture to become the norm and goal:

> .... cultures that stay in total isolation from others can shrivel, dry up or wither away. Cultures under total domination from others can be crippled, deformed, or else die. Cultures that change to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of internal relations are the ones that are healthy... While there is a need for cultures to reach out to one another and borrow from one another, this has to be on the basis of equality and mutual respect (P. XVI).

He further contends that "the call for the Western-based new world order should be countered by a continued call for a new, more equitable international economic, political and cultural order within and between nations, a world order that reflects the diversity of world peoples and cultures" (P. XVI). A healthy cross-cultural conversation, therefore, is free from domination (just as a normal conversation cannot be described as healthy, if one party consciously dominates or tries to dominate the other).

This problem of the possibility of domination in cross-cultural conversation is also very much present in inter-ethnic relationship in multiethnic contexts like Nigeria. Often the challenge is how to build a united nation (i.e. a national culture) out of the diverse ethnocultural voices available. Thus we find the nation vacillating between a programme of homogenization and multiculturalism. As in the slogan, 'unity in diversity', which Nigeria's politicians have unconsciously used to describe the inherent *difference* of one-nationness, Nigerian multiculturalism is ambivalent: it is encouraged in policy and discouraged in practice, especially when it appears to resemble self-determination (of ethnic 'nations').

The focus of this paper is to discuss the problem of domination in the idealized and imagined conversation between ethno-cultures in Nigeria, especially in terms of the tropes used by the aggrieved ethno-cultural identities in configuring their relationship with the perceived dominant groups. These tropes which we will discuss include those of captivity, coloniality and slavery, which, interestingly, occur in themacro-discourses of racial relations. We will, in the section that follows, provide a brief contextual background on the politics of ethnocultural identity in Nigeria. We will then turn specifically to discourse on ethno-cultural domination in Nigeria and the logic underlying the representations of ethnic victimhood. We will then conclude by noting the implications of these representations for the plural society. The assumption underlying the semiotic approach adopted in the paper is that through the study of the frames used in representing ethno-cultural relationships, we will arrive at a clearer understanding of the nature of those relationships, as well as the attitudes of aggrieved ethnic identities to self and the other.

The Politics of Ethno-cultural Identity in Nigeria

Nigeria has about 259 ethnic groups, each of which is often identified with a particular language and culture. However, only three of these ethnic groups - Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo - have large populations in the Northern, Western and Eastern parts of the country, respectively. Their languages are also recognized by the government as the major languages that could be used in the 1979 constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria as languages that could be used in conducting business at the National Assembly. The apparent promotion of the three languages by the government has been criticized and rejected, especially by speakers of the so-called minority languages. The strongest criticism has been that the promotion of the three languages is an indication of (cultural) assimilation, especially as language expresses and transmits culture, or is perceived as a signifier of cultural identity. In other words, the selection of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as major indigenous languages of the country appears to suggest ethno-cultural domination, a suspicion that seems to be reinforced by the fact that these three ethnic groups have been producing the rulers and contenders to rulership of the nation. Above all, as Efurosibina Adegbija (1997:10) has argued, the speakers of (these) 'small-population languages', along with their languages, "tend to be discriminated against in a multi-lingual context". This ethno-domination in Nigeria is not perceived to occur at the linguistic level alone. Indeed, the

domination at the linguistic level is seen to connect to, as well as signify, other sphere's of domination like the political and the economic.

It is then noteworthy that individuals in the context become more and more conscious of their ethno-cultural difference when they perceive elements of ethnic discrimination and domination at these various levels. With reference to the control of power in Nigeria specifically, rulers who have emerged over the years (whether civilian or military) have mainly been identified as representatives of their ethno-cultures, and not as individuals. Thus, we find, in the recent riots over the death of Chief M.K.O. Abiola in detention, that the Hausa-Fulani persons who live in Lagos and Ibadan have reported that they (easily) became victims selected for attack by the protesters, who were Yoruba ascendancy to rulership of Nigeria (which was dashed by the annulment of the election by General Abacha and subsequent detention of Abiola). This attack on the Hausa-Fulani is indeed a play-back of the attack on the Igbos by Hausa-Fulani and the Yorubas in 1966, on the same basis that Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu and General Aguiyi-Ironsi were representatives of the Igbo ethnic group.

In the main, the conflict over the control of power in Nigeria appears to be not only between North and South, but also between Islam and Christianity, between the majority ethnic groups and the minority, between the rich and the poor, etc. Thus, it is a very complex conflictual situation, which has the perception of difference as a major underlying factor. This slows down even socio-cultural processes like inter-ethnic marriage and adoptions of names from other Nigerian cultures, despite the fact that Christianity, formal (Western) education and urban exposures as global forces have had far-reaching impacts on interethnic relationship in Nigeria (Oha, 1997: 137). Eward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, argued that:

> No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or Woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But it worst and most parodoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only mainly, exclusively, White, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. (1994:336).

This perspective, of course, takes care of the condition of many Nigerians who, born within inter-ethnic marriages, cannot define their identities strictly in terms parentage. As would be expected, cultural hybrids become significant victims in the context of rigid cultural differentiation.

Another point made by Said, which has also been made in the Nigerian case, is that (Western) imperialism consolidated perceptions of ethnic difference among the colonized. Okwudiba Nuoli in Ethnic Politics in Nigeria (1978) maintains this position, arguing that this encouragement of perception of difference was a strategy used by the colonialists in preventing the colonized peoples from uniting into an effective subversive force. But its effect has survived into the post-colonial period, this time subverting inter-ethnic communication and understanding. As we find in the Nigerian context, the basic character of ethnic prejudice is that it generates mutual suspicion between one ethnic group and the other. It is, therefore, not surprising to find, in Nigerian ethno-cultural discourses, configurations of domination and victimhood that appear to suggest the impossibility of pursuing a neutral cross-cultural conversation.

THE SEMIOTICS OF DOMINATION AND VICTIMHOOD

The discourse generated by the ethno-cultural conflict situation in Nigeria reveals appropriations of the tropes of coloniality, slavery and captivity which have strong historical meanings (for instance, reminders of the colonization of Africa by European nations, the transatlantic and trans-saharan slave trades, and the Babylonian captivity of the Jews). Implicitly, we are presented with a parallel case of argumentation in which we compare the condition of the ethnic group to the historical narratives. The implied argument, thus, is that the rational judgement applicable to the situation in the historical narrative ought to be applied to the (imagined) prevailing condition of the ethno-culture. Also, we are presented with a binary logic of Agent versus Victim, which requires that we have an attitude of dislike for the Agent, a logic that seems to confirm Keen's claim that "The mythic mind, which still governs modern politics, is obsessively dualistic. It splits everything into polar opposites" (P. 18), and within the dualistic framework, the Homo hostilis (enemy-making human) would choose to become a "passive-aggressive victim" while projecting aggressiveness and vice to the (imagined enemy (P.23).

The trope of coloniality, which recalls the colonization of Africa by Europe,

is used mainly in minority ethnic discourse in Nigeria in interrogating the control of power by the majority ethnic groups. In other words, it is a trope that analogizes the colonial condition with the postcolonial[3] , suggesting that the "post" in "Post-colonial" is not an actual movement away from temporal situation. It is suggestive of the "presence of the past". The presencing of the past, which is appealing to post-modern culture and post-modernist criticism of culture, apparently resonates an inherent paradox. But this paradox is indeed what the minority interrogation of the majority ruler's claim of having moved away from the politics of domination to that of protection is all about. A significant exploitation of this trope of (internal) colonization is found in some of the writings of the late Ogoni activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, especially in his life writings, *A Month and a Day* (1995), *Second Letter to Ogoni Youth* (1992a) and *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992b). Saro-Wiwa presents the Ogoni as a nation that has been "colonized" by the Nigerian nation, specifically by the majority ethnic groups that have been producing Nigeria's rulers. The Ogoni "colonial" subject, in this thinking, is an endangered being, made deliberately so by the "colonizers".

Related to this political deprivation of autonomy is economic exploitation, which, as we know, is fundamental to all practices of colonization. The colonizer's major pursuit is economic gain. Thus, Saro-Wiwa configures Nigeria as an exploiter of Ogoni wealth and natural resources. He is particular about the collaboration of Nigeria (the internal colonizer) with multinational oil companies (representing the external colonizer) in exploiting Ogoni and destroying its environment - implicitly saying that birds of a feather flock together.

The trope of slavery, on the other hand, is used, not only in minority agitations against majority domination, but also in some discourses of the ethnic majority. Indeed, before its use in Saro-Wiwa's Second Letter to Ogoni Youth, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu had used it mainly in some of his war speeches to stimulate hatred against the "Nigerian" (Federal) side of the war. Again in his life-writing, *Because I am Involved* (1989:18) he extends this image of slavery to what seems to be an antecedent, "captivity". A slave is first of all a captive who loses his or her rights. The captivity image used by Ojukwu is that of Jonah in the belly of the whale - which in later revisions in Nigerian political discourses has been alternatively expressed as "being in the belly of the tiger" or "being in

the belly of the beast" (especially in referring to those who worked for Babangida and Abacha during their tenure as President). The beast image is mythical and calls to mind apocalyptic portraitures of the anti-Christ and W.B. Yeats' spiritus mundi. It is an image that suggests a demonization of the (ethnic) other.

Ojukwu suggests matrimonial relationship as a preferable image in Nigerian interethnic relationships, on the presupposition that matrimonial relationship is based on love, give-and-take, and is devoid of domination. Of course, this cannot be valid in a typical patriarchal context. Ojukwu, perhaps, has ideal marriage in mind, which could best describe a condition of mutual pursuit of understanding and helping the other which is typical of dyadic matrimonial communication.

Saro-Wiwa's use of the master-slave image to describe the Ogoni condition is particularly allusive to traditional enslavement, in which the slave's labour is exploited.[3] It is for him a condition of "Monkey de work, baboon dey chop" (The monkey works, the baboon eats) as it is put in Nigerian popular discourse.
But apart from exploitation of the "slave", his or her cultural "death" is important to Saro-Wiwa. One of the harmful impacts of slave trade was the amnesiac blow, which came as a result of the uprooting of the slave from his/her cultural milieu and being subjected to the process of deshumanization and violence that entailed forgetting (of most of the acquired values), what Homi K. Bhabha (1995:160) refers to as the "syntax of forgetting or being obliged to forget".[4] Saro-Wiwa thus puts the Ogoni in the context of the historical slave, saying that Nigerian major ethno-cultures consciously remove Ogoni from their roots, turning them to promoters of other Nigerian cultures, and of course pursue the assimilation of the Ogoni.

It is possible that Saro-Wiwa's claims here are exaggerated, his logic simplistic. His rhetoric as a minority rights activist was, understandably reliant on the strategy of appealing to *pathos* (pity). The Ogonis are not comparable to (culturally) dislocated slaves. Their learning of other Nigerian languages and movement to the city (the centre) are results of global pressures - of movement from isolation to association - which the Ogonis, just like some other Nigerians, seem to find necessary for their individual progress.

Obviously, these representations of the victim as the colonized, the captive, the slave, are subtle appeals to pathos, as well as means of stimulating hatred for the "enemy" dominant ethno-culture. They problematize the idea of cross-cultural conversation in Nigeria, but then they remind us more that "conversations" ought to operate on the basis of respect of the right of each participant, each voice, each culture, to speak and to be listened to.

Conversation is a rule-governed behaviour in which the following conditions apply:

a) each of the participants is desirable (i.e. is welcome to speak),
b) each can make a valuable contribution to the interaction, and
c) each is autonomous.

These conditions agree with the model of facework suggested by Lim and Bowers (1991). According to Lim and Bowers, there are three types of faceworks namely: "fellowship face", "competence face", and autonomy face", which are addressed by facework strategies - solidarity, approbation and tact, respectively. Fellowship face refers to the desire to be included, to be seen as a desirable member, while competence face refers to the desire that one's abilities be recognized and respected. Autonomy face, on the other hand, refers to the desire to be left undisturbed or unimposed upon (Lim and Bowers 1991: 420). 'Facework' refers to 'the ways in which people mitigate or address... face threats' (1991:421). Although the doing of facework applies to conversational interactions (at the micro-level), they could also be seen as applicable to macro-relations and macro-discourses, as studies by Paul Chilton (1990) and Scollon and Scollon (1983) have proved. Scollon and Scollon interestingly show that the idea of face is very useful and applicable to interethnic communication.

We find therefore that cross-cultural conversation ought to cater for ethno-cultural face wants, and that it is understandable that cultures should feel uncomfortable with processes of homegenization, which could involve assimilation and domination.

On the other hand too, representations of the dominant ethno-cultures, as in the Nigerian case, are tremendously face-threatening, and therefore deconstructive of the idea of conversation as a means of arriving at mutual understanding. As we have seen, these representations are attack-oriented, and very common in the rhethorics of aggrieved identities generally.

CONCLUSION

The semiosis of ethno-cultural domination we have examined tends to suggest clearly the difficulties of the conduct of cross-cultural conversations in a plural Nigerian society under the agenda of homogeneity typically reflected in the slogan of "one nation, one destiny". Nigeria, as a text, is multi-voiced and resistant to monologism. Homogenizations in the plurial nation, tend to assist the so-called "major" ethno-cultural groups in securing control of, and in maintaining, a monologic and non-neutral centre, while pretending to protect multi-cultural rights. This deceptive ironical strategy is also present in the way that globalization (in the way that pan-Africanism reads it) tends to favour the dominance and control of periphery nations by centre nations, even when it pretends to neutralize the negative uses of difference at such a macro-level.

NOTES

1. This Co-operative Principle (CP) which Grice presented in his essay, "Logic and Conversation" (rpt 1996), requires thus: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 124). Grice gives the categories of this CP as "Maxim of Quantity" ("Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)"), "Maxim of Quality" ("Try to make your contribution one that is true"), "Maxim of Relation" ("Be relevant) and "Maxim of Manner" ("avoid ambiguity/obscurity").

2. It needs to be noted here that some minority ethnic group, in their search for security, have sometimes sought alliance with one majority ethnic group or the other -i.e. as a way of countering a perceived regional majority domination - only to submit to another ethnic domination. This exchange of one domination for another has made things worse for the minorities, especially in terms their having to promote an image which they later turn to deconstruct.

3. This image of the minority as a "colonial" subject could be analysed in Toulmin's model of argument as shown in Appendix One (A and B).

4. See Appendix Two for an analysis of this image in Chilton's model of Metamorphism.

5. The process of deliberately making the slaves forget their cultural roots and identity was very interestingly signified in making them walk round a tree (called "the tree-of-no-return") several times before continuing on their journey into

slavery. This semiotic of enforced forgetting, which we find on the slave trail at Quidah, Benin republic, shows us how close to literalization and shallow the slaver's understanding of memory appears to be, for memories of identity are not easily erased like chalk marks on a blackboard.

REFERENCES

Adegbija, Efurosibina, 1997,
"The Identity, Survival, and Promotion of Minority Languages in Nigeria". *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 125 (Socio-linguistic Issues in Sub-Saharan Africa), pp. 5-27.

Bhabha, Homi, K. (1995, rpt),
The Location of Culture. London: Routledge.

Chilton, Paul, 1990,
"Politeness, Politics and Diplomacy". discourse and Society, Vol. 1(2): 201-224.

Grice, H.P. (1996, rpt)
"Logic and Conversation". In Geirsson, Heimir and Michael Losonsky (eds) (1996) Readings in Language and Mind. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 121-133.

Heidegger, Martin, 1971,
"Building, Dwelling, Thinking". In Poetry, Language, Thought. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 152-3.

Keen, Sam, 1986
Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Lim, Tae - Seop & John Waite Bowers, 1991
"Facework: Solidarity, Approbation and Tact". Human Communication research, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 415-450.

Loman, Yury, 1994
"The text within the text". PMLA Vol. 109, No. 3, pp. 377-384.

Ngugi wa Thiong'O, 1993
Moving the Centre: the struggle for Cultural Freedoms. London/Nairobi/Portsmouth, N.H.: James Currey/EAEP/Heinemann.

Nnoli, Okwudiba, 1980
Ethnic Politics in Nigeria. Enugu: Fourth Dimension.

Odumegwu-Ojukwu, Emeka, 1989,
Because I Am Involved. Ibadan: Spectrum.

Oha, Obododimma, 1997,
"What God Has Put Asunder: The Politics of Ethnic Barriers in Chukwuemeka Ike's Toads for Supper and Isidore Okpewho's The Last Duty". In Meyer, Michael J. (ed.) (1997) *Literature and Ethnic Discrimination*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 135-149.

Said, Edward W., 1994
Culture and Imperialism, New York: Vintage Books.

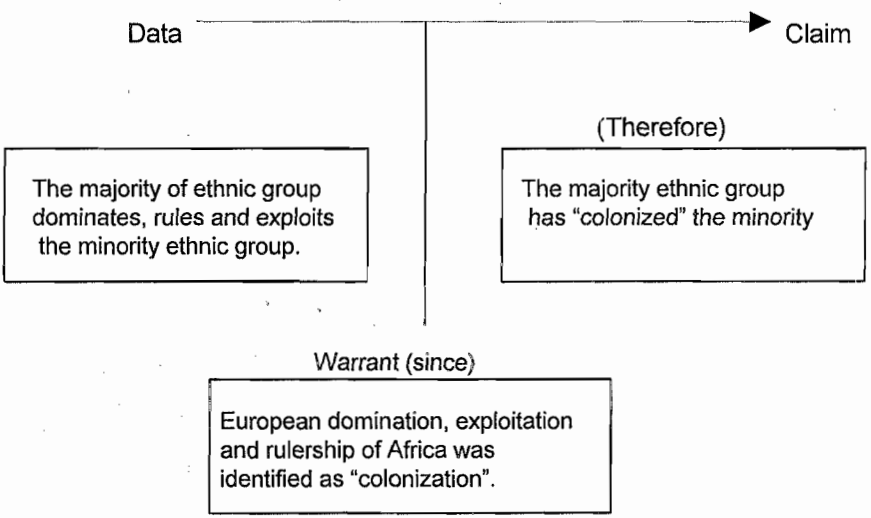
Saro-Wiwa, Ken., 1992a.
Second Letter to Ogoni Youth. Port Harcourt: Saros International.

---------- (1992b) *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*. Port Harcourt: Saros

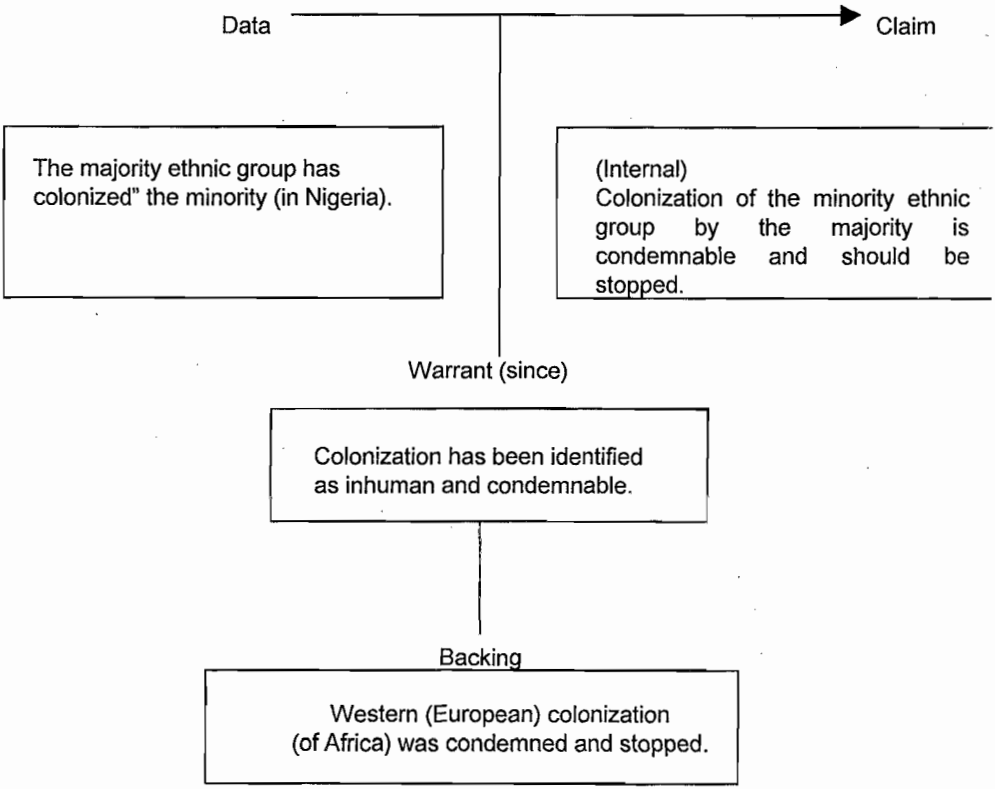
International.
---------- (1995). *A Month and a Day: Detention Diary*. London: Penguin.
Scollon, R. & Scollon, S.B.K., 1983
"Face in Inter-ethnic Communication" In Richards, J.C. & R.W. Schmidt (eds.) *Language and Communication*. London: Longman, pp. 156-188.

Appendix One

a) Analysis of Implied Logic of Majority ethnic Rulership/Exploitation (of the Minority) as "colonization", in Toulmin's Model of Argument.



b) Analysis of Implied Logic of Condemnation in the Trope of Minority as a "colonial" subject (of the majority) in Toulmin's Model of Argument.



Appendix Two

Analysis of the Paralogic of Master-Slave Image of the Majority-Minority Relationship in Chilton's Model of Metamorphism.