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When 'the Centre Cannot Hold': Achebe and Anglophone African Literary Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Extending Derek Bickerton's pioneering study on the Creole Continuum; this essay argues that English, a former colonial language, serves as an arbiter in the re-imagining of diverse African communities. The essay revisits Chinua Achebe's fiction to examine the relationship between literary English and the indigenous languages, and cultures it imaginatively and concretely embodies in traditionally non-native universes of discourse. The essay considers how Achebe's literary English embodies the local cultural-specific literary elements to illustrate that anglophonism can thrive in the national discourse of a non-native English environment if it has both a functional and utilitarian value, an integral part of Achebe's theory on the language of African literature. Achebe's works show that English serves as a linguistic bridge in the complex multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Nigeria. Finally, the essay establishes that the local aspects introduced into literary English do not necessarily represent a break from the main Anglophone literary-linguistic tradition, but rather a manifestation of an anglophone African literary-linguistic continuum with peculiar characteristics and divergences imposed by a localised context.

INTRODUCTION

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, the concluding scene involving the child-naming ceremony, which serves as a symbol of national renewal, curiously also helps to define Achebe's theory on the role of English in national discourse. During a traditional ritual to name a child in the novel, an old man—in an apparent recognition of his status as a guardian of African traditional norms and values—leads a child-naming ceremony, a child ironically already named by the young, and to be exact a female character, Beatrice. This passage in the post-civil war novel based on a fictitious nation of Kangan reads in part:

> "May these young people here when they make the plans for their world not forget her. And all other children."
>
> "*Isé!*"
>
> "May they also remember useless old people like myself and Elewa's mother when they are making plans."
>
> "*Isé!*"
>
> "We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families."
>
> Abdul was nodding energetically, his head bent gently towards his simultaneously translator, Emmanuel.
>
> […]
>
> Abdul, a relative stranger to the kolanut ritual, was carried away beyond the accustomed limits of choral support right into exuberant hand-clapping.
>
> "I have never entered a house like this before. May this not be my last time."
>
> "*Isé!*"
>
> "You are welcome any time," added Beatrice following Abdul's breaking of ritual bounds. (*Anthills of the Savannah* 211-12)

In this excerpt, traditional discourse has entered the main English discourse of the novel in an attempt to resolve the divisive national issues. Although "*Isé!*" comes from one of the linguistic communities in this fictitious nation of Kangan, which to a large extent represents Nigeria,[1] the expression has been presented here as a word to which a representative sample of *all* the members of the nation are accenting. For Achebe, the solution, at least on the basis of the suggestion in *Anthills of the Savannah*, appears to lie in the co-existence of formal and traditional sub-discourses for a nation to become a representation of all.

The child-naming ceremony combines modernity and traditional elements just like Achebe fuses traditional forms of story-telling with the appropriated European narrative techniques, or put in another way, standard and non-standard literary English. The coming together of the old couple and the young generation represents this convergence of traditionalists and modern Nigerians, Moslems and Christians. As Achebe notes, "One of such gains being [the] awareness [of this group] of the totality of the community as opposed to an elite setting sitting up there and not even knowing the names of the people they were dealing with or where they lived" (Wilkinson 146). It is English—a former colonial language—that helps those from a different linguistic community not only to communicate but also to understand and participate in the ritual. Indeed, this passage brings together many facets of Achebe's theory on the question of African literature, and also helps to underline his contribution to the anglophone African literary-linguistic

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[1] Achebe does explicitly state so, explaining that he wanted Kangan to be more representative of African nation-states rather than just Nigeria.

tradition. Communication among the various parties participating in this ritual demonstrates the value of English as a tool for inter-ethnic communication. Achebe appears to suggest this method as one way through which the linguistic gap between literate and non-literate anglophones can communicate. Abdul—during the ceremony—is able to follow the proceedings and nod "energetically" because his simultaneous translator, Emmanuel, translates into English from an ethnic language what Abdul does not understand (212). Similarly, as Achebe's *A Man of the People* also seems to suggest, English as a literary or "vehicular language"[2] does not completely alienate non-English speakers, let alone illiterate segments of the populations. From Achebe, we can conclude that national discourse presupposes the existence not only of pluralistic voices uttered through ethnic varieties but also of a common linguistic choice through which esoteric and exoteric discourse becomes possible.

On the basis of Achebe's writings on Nigeria, anglophonism can thrive in the national discourse of a traditionally non-native English environment if it has both a functional and utilitarian value. In Achebe's representation, English serves as a linguistic bridge in the complex multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Nigeria. Even when he focuses on one ethnic group of the nation—the Igbo—the message presented in English targets a larger group belonging to the national communion and beyond. In a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, national culture remains a conglomeration of cultures and beliefs as no one culture can exclusively claim national space. Through his fictional representation, Achebe makes the otherwise *alien* culture of one ethnic group discernible to the rest of non-Igbo readers through representation. The former colonial language, English, he uses to address a national rather than ethnic audience thus becomes a vehicular language that helps to bridge linguistic gaps of disparate ethnic and social groups. Since English does not generate Igbo values, the language in this case serves primarily as a communication tool that facilitates cross-cultural exchange and discourse. Thus, English's capacity to accommodate various cultural and ethnic beliefs and indigenous idiomatic expressions helps anglophonism to thrive in Nigeria's national discourse mostly amongst the educated African elite.

This essay, therefore, examines Achebe's contribution to the anglophone African literary-linguistic tradition by focusing on three elements inherent in his fiction: traditional Igbo literary values introduced into English, the social linguistic context, and Nigeria's national socio-economic and political realities. These factors, it argues, shapes the orientation of Achebe's fiction and his contribution to the anglophone African literary-linguistic tradition. The local cultural-specific literary elements Achebe introduces into his mode of anglophone literary discourse include Igbo proverbs, songs, myths, legends, non-English words, and Nigerian idiomatic expressions. These affect the nature of Achebe's contribution to anglophone African literary discourse.

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[2] For Deleuze and Guattari (24), who relied on Henri Gobard's tetralinguistic model to explain that we can classify languages into vernacular, maternal or territorial language used in or rural in origin, the "vehicular" is the "everywhere" language with specific social functions.

Traditional Literary-Elements and Achebe's Aesthetics

The traditional literary-elements also help to orientate Achebe's fiction towards African rather than English aesthetics even when he uses English as the medium for his literary expression. On the basis of this distinction, Bamiro[3] would classify Achebe's fiction as Afrolect as opposed to Eurolect. Bamiro defines Afrolect literary influences in African literary discourse as a "linguistic experimentation in variants of an imperial language" to mirror "characteristics of African oral traditions," and Eurolect as "literary productions that exhibit considerable influences from European literature in content, language, and style" (72). And yet, variations within the Anglophone African novel—basically a hybrid of a European invention, the novel, and African oral traditions, orature—demonstrates that such reductive taxonomy are inadequate. For example, the literary works of Nadine Gordimer have a heavy dose of Eurolect influences, and yet she writes primarily from an African-centred consciousness even as she writes within white-settler codes, and her works also contain some Afrolect features. Furthermore, many post-colonial African texts still have Afrolect influences despite lacking a significant presence of African oral traditions, mainly because of social heteroglossia—or the range of social dialects—in nation-specific contexts.

Social heteroglossia, Mikhail Bakhtin explains in the *Dialogic Imagination*, constitutes the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. The novel "orchestrates all its themes" through "the social diversity of speech types and by differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions" which include "[a]uthorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters" (Bakhtin 263). This ability makes the novel form a good literary device that facilitates the interaction of English and indigenous African languages, cultures and beliefs in literary discourse. These distinctive features when nation-specific become useful indicators of a national literature. When applied to art coupled with the consciousness of the author, we get literary works identifiable with certain locales. The introduction of English in many of the African linguistic communities has also helped to develop literary-linguistic features mostly amongst the educated elite specific to particular national contexts. Hence in Achebe's novels, we get Nigerian Pidgin English, a product of the inter-mingling of English and indigenous African languages. As Bakhtin explains, languages "do not *exclude* each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways" (291), and Nigerian Pidgin English emerges out of such an intersection. Against this backdrop, the term Afrolect thus needs a broad-based scope to reflect the heteroglossic linguistic picture of African Anglophone literatures.

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[3] Edmund Bamiro in *The English Language and the Construction of Cultural and Social Identity in Zimbabwean and Tribagonian Literatures* published in 2000 is one of the few scholars who have examined the relationship between English and the constructions of cultural and identity in non-traditional English contexts.

The thematic orientation of Achebe's fiction, the third aspect, constitutes an integral part of his linguistic and literary agenda. Achebe's preoccupation with the questions of leadership and political instability stems largely from events in his restive native country of Nigeria, a nation that has seen at least six coups in its first thirty years of post-independence existence, and a devastating 1966 civil war that pitted his native region of Biafra (seeking secession or autonomy) with Federal Forces (seeking to keep Nigeria united as a unitary nation). The close affinity between the nature of discourse embodied in the novels of a particular nation and the state of nation-hood justifies the attention we pay to the socio-economic and political context of novels. Achebe's literary language and narration attempt in various ways to represent and critique such a post-colony, a process the writer compares to a masquerade he talks about in *Arrow of God*, which allows one to "keep on circling the arena" to "catch glimpses" and have a "complete image" of the event (Wilkinson 145). The novel's context helps us grasp some of the literary devices in Achebe's novels.

Nigeria, as did so many so-called Anglophone African countries, retained English at independence from Britain in 1960 as the official and national language in the absence of a pan-Nigerian indigenous language. Such political linguistic support has helped to entrench anglophonism in Nigeria's national literary discourse, and comparatively few African nations can rival its literary output in English. Consequently, the continued use of English in Nigeria's national discourse allows the language to serve as a base for transcribing and assimilating beliefs and values of disparate groups for this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, an environment conducive for the emergence and sustenance of an Anglophone literary-linguistic continuum. Achebe's contribution to this Anglophone African literary-linguistic tradition, therefore, can be seen in terms of how he engages with the English language and its tradition to portray the Igbo society—as a representative group of the pre- and post-nation Nigerian societies—for a mostly non-Igbo audiences.

Abiola confirms the place of English in Achebe's literary contribution when— in his "Homage to Chinua Achebe" to mark Achebe's seventieth birthday—he lauds Achebe's 1958 *Things Fall Apart* because of the way this archetypal Anglophone African novel engages with the colonial encounter and the way it reformulates English, "the inherited imperial language," to give "a special expressiveness to the novel's enactment of a decisive moment of the African experience" (2). This reformulation of the English language, then, becomes an integral part of Achebe's aesthetics and helps to define his contribution to the Anglophone literary-linguistic tradition. Indeed, the way Achebe localises English to enable his anglophone literary project to reflect the local literary-linguistic context orients his works towards African (not necessarily European) aesthetics. In other words, the English medium used does not necessarily compromise his attempt to produce a work of art identifiable with Africa primarily because the values, among other things, expressed are typically African.

One of Achebe's accomplishments stems from his ability to produce *Things Fall Apart* in largely uncharted territory. Achebe embarked on his literary career at a time when *modern* African literatures—in this case in the English language in which Achebe opted to write—lacked an established written literary tradition despite many African writers having already published before him in English. His fellow Nigerian Amos Tutuola, a messenger-turned-author, had published *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952 and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* in 1954 before him.[4] However, many African literary critics had for many years ignored his fitting place amongst pioneering modern African writers regardless of his obvious genius. In fact, Tutuola's books had received favourable criticism abroad and a denunciation at home. As Bernth Lindfors notes, "Nigerians disliked Tutuola for the same reasons that Europeans and Americans treasured him: his subject matter was exotic and his grammar atrocious" (xiii). Not surprisingly, Tutuola's works did not feature in the discussions during the landmark 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression in Kampala, Uganda. Later his Western supporters also became critical of his works because they grew "tired of his fantasies and fractured English" and his "inability to develop new themes and techniques" (Lindfors xiii). What comes of this cold shoulder is the suspicion that only the English of a certain standard was acceptable; forgetting that in a continuum there would be varieties, some closer to Standard English than others.

If Tutuola operated on one extreme of the so-called sub-standard English, then Achebe was on the other side of the spectrum of Standard English. With *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe exposed another side of the anglophone African literatures that many critics could not ignore. Whereas they could belittle Tutuola's literary contribution, they could not do so with Achebe's. With a university education (as opposed to Tutuola's six years of elementary education), Achebe had more options at his disposal regarding how to approach his anglophone literary project than Tutuola had. This essay will not go into the merits of Tutuola's contribution since few can question his place in the African canon. After all, Achebe's literary contribution augments Tutuola's in the anglophone African literary tradition. Perhaps, Achebe's made such a big difference due to what Abiola calls his "enactment of a decisive moment of the African experience" (2). Achebe helped to refocus our attention on an alternative African discourse to the denigrating colonial imperial adventure fiction.

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[4] By then Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton had already published novels; however, being white, their writings were at this stage seen as part of mainstream English discourse, not African.

Duality of Purpose in Achebe's Literary-Linguistic Project

Apart from helping to raise the profile of modern African literatures, Achebe's inaugural *Things Fall Apart* and his subsequent novels constitute an engagement with an already established anglophone mainstream tradition. In his presentation, Achebe directly and indirectly engages with colonial and postcolonial texts. This is evident such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, novels that dramatise the penetration and entrenchment of British colonial hegemony over convoluted ethnicities. The allusion to colonial discourse in these novels situates Achebe's literary contribution as a counter-discourse. Indeed, Achebe alludes to the nature of colonial discourse at the end and beginning of both novels, respectively. Towards the end of *Things Fall Apart*, a District Commissioner (DC) muses that in the book on Africa "he planned to write" he would stress the "story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself" since it would "make interesting reading":

> One could almost write an entire chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* (*Things Fall Apart* 179)

This reductive process of the DC typifies the treatment of Africans in some of the Eurocentric colonial literature. The DC would in this case reduce into a paragraph material Achebe has used for an entire novel. By including this passage in *Things Fall Apart*, James Snead observes, Achebe "pre-empts an attempted white usurpation of his story and his culture, trapping the 'official' version within a more sympathetic history" (242). Since Achebe's novel responds to a discourse already in place, he appears to undermine an established colonial tradition that perpetuated a negative representation of Africans. In fact, Achebe attempts to de-marginalise Nigerian characters by creating an authentic voice, which could otherwise have remained muted or distorted in typical Eurocentric texts.

The difference lies in the treatment and presentation of details, particularly what to emphasise and subordinate in a literary discourse. This same title, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* reappears as published work of one George Allen in Achebe's *Arrow of God*[5]; the book is resented as a colonial relic left behind after the "pacification in these parts of the world was done" (*Arrow of God* 32). As colonial discourse tended to marginalise and distort the image of the colonised peoples, their culture and their history, Achebe attempted to provide an alternative voice sympathetic to the cause of Africans. Launched as part of a discourse seeking to provide an alternative voice to what appeared to be a monologue[6] on representing both Nigerians and Africans, Achebe's early novels also engage with the West in a dialogue on Africa. In other words, Achebe's choice of literary language has a lot to with the exoteric rather than esoteric discourse he engaged in.

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[5] *Arrow of God*, Achebe's third novel but second to *Things Fall Apart* in terms of the chronology of events the novel, is also set in Igboland.

Achebe's desire to produce a counter-discourse results from this exposure to colonial writings. While at the University College of Ibadan, Achebe found Joyce Cary's depiction of Africans in *Mister Johnson* of 1939—set in 1923 colonial Nigeria—offensive to the sensibilities of Nigerians. Though Molly Maureen Mahood notes in *Joyce Cary's Africa* that the novel "like almost every masterpiece has been misunderstood from the day of publication" mainly because of its "African setting" (170), Cary's characterisation of the novel's romantic hero, whom the author describes as a derivation from "some intuition of a person" and not "from life" ("Author's note" 257) leaves a lot of room for discontent, among Nigerians in particular and Africans in general. Mister Johnson, a Nigerian character, is a child-like, mission-educated, comical character, whose incomplete Western education makes him a misfit among his fellow Nigerians and British colonial expatriates. Mister Johnson's mimicry of Western values ultimately leads him to his death after a series of mishaps. Mister Johnson lacks an African sensibility necessary to reflect a Nigerian character despite being "black as a stove, almost a pure Negro, with short nose and full, soft lips" (Cary 1). Observers such as Young note that Cary created a European romantic hero who passes for an African.

Of the many texts on Africa that Achebe disapproved of, he has continually singled out this one. Achebe accuses Joyce Cary, who once worked and lived in Northern Nigeria as a colonial administrator, of failing to see the Hausa "like a proper Nigerian" would and for producing what is "more of a caricature than a true description" (*Afrique* 7). Achebe—as he has reiterated in a series of interviews—found this novel to have painted "a most superficial picture" of both Nigeria and "the Nigerian character," prompting him to consider writing and "look[ing] at this from the inside" (Nkosi 3,4). Looking at the Nigerian character "from the inside" suggests a different approach to thematic treatment of the Nigerian subject matter in terms of representation as well as English usage. As an insider, Achebe attempts to show the disparities in the representation and knowledge of the coloniser and the colonised.

It is thus evident that Achebe chose to write in English both as a linguistic strategy to respond to colonial discourse, and as an aesthetic effort

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[6] I use monologue to refer to the domination of Eurocentric colonial discourse even when it comes to representing colonial subjects.

aimed at carving out a space for authentically African Anglophone literary expression. This resolve has implications for his anglophonism as well. Such literary attempts in Achebe's preferred medium, English, makes his anglophonism specific enough to address Nigeria's literary needs, but broad enough to be acceptable to a broader audience beyond the scope of national boundaries. In fact, two scenarios regarding the function of English in Achebe's novels emerge: as an alternative voice in international discourse, it allows others to read about Nigeria and learn about the views "from the inside"; as a voice of Nigerians within Nigeria, it allows Nigerians to look at the mirror of themselves—or a segment of themselves. In either case, English serves as a communication bridge in a world with so much cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity.

Nigeria that emerged from this British intervention had at independence over four hundred languages (Cozier and Blench). Of these languages, only English and Nigerian English Pidgin are not associated with specific indigenous peoples and, thus, the only ones that are Pan-Nigerian "in the sense that no ethnic group can claim rights to them to the exclusion of other ethnic groups" (Onwuemene 1055). The major languages in Nigeria with at least ten million speakers are Hausa (also a cross border language), Igbo and Yoruba. In this linguistic context, English as a *national* and *neutral* language enjoys a special privilege as the official language of administration as well as the medium of instruction. As the *lingua franca* of Nigeria, English allows indigenous political and linguistic groups to engage in national communication, one of the positive outcomes of the colonial heritage. Though in some parts of Africa, colonialism divided up a single ethnic group among two or even three powers, it also brought together many peoples that had hitherto been separate entities.

For Achebe who has "been given a language and [he] intend[s] to use it" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day*102), the question has not been whether to abandon using English, but how to apply the language so that it reflects the local context and fulfils his literary rhetorical agenda. The outcome is Nigerian characteristics that Achebe introduces into the English language without desecrating the base language. An African writer, Achebe insists, should aim "to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 100). Implicit in Achebe's argument is the fact that writing in English for Africans also imposes certain restrictions on how far one can manipulate the language without making the language incomprehensible and inaccessible to traditional Anglophone readers. Often overlooked in this observation is the fact that a language has a way of regulating a literary tradition that uses that language to retain its functional value. On the other hand, language is elastic enough to absorb non-traditional materials such as languages and cultures it comes into contact with, or in this case it seeks to embody. In fact, Achebe draws a line between using a kind of English that reflects the local linguistic context and cultural experience, and distorting the language to the point where English—as a trans-national and international language—forfeits its function as the base (acrolet) of the anglophone African literary-linguistic tradition.

This partly explains why despite the seemingly over-use—and some would say extreme use—of Igbo words in *Arrow of God*, Achebe still manages to retain comprehensibility. Consider the following passage from *Arrow of God*:

Ezeulu rose from his goatskin and moved to the household shrine on a flat board behind the central dwarf wall at the entrance. His *ikenga*, about as tall as a man's forearm, its animal horn as long as the rest of his body, jostled with faceless *okposi* of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and his short personal staff of *ofo.* Nwafo's eyes picked out the special *okposi* which belonged to him. It had been carved for him because of the convulsions he used to have at night. They told him to call it Namesake, and he did. Gradually, the convulsions left him. (6)

Disturbing as the Igbo words may appear to a non-Igbo reader, Achebe provides enough textual context for a traditional anglophone reader to have a gist of the intended meaning. These Igbo words also remind us of the indigenous language that feed Achebe's anglophonism to identify his writing with the particular.

These anthropological details that Achebe introduces in his novels have attracted criticism, especially from anglophone readers in the West. Snead, for example, observes that the European reader who is not familiar with Igbo traditions may find "the presence of 'anthropological' detail in Achebe" a "veritable declaration of war on the practice of dividing cultures and cultures into strictly national groupings" (241). Snead wonders whether Achebe and Tutuola were aware of the implications of the "most casual manner in which they present African norms" in their narratives depicting the first encounters between Africans and European colonialists "to primarily non-African readers," mainly due to the "interpretative confusions resulting from their disregard of earlier segregations" (241). Snead further observes that Achebe's novels do not "merely insinuate the unaware reader into a foreign and positively inferior consciousness" but also "suggest a natural and indeed actual place for African cultures alongside or even admixed with European ones" (241). Though Snead refers to *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God,* all of Achebe's novels—to a certain extent—use traditional norms as part of the rhetorical strategy. The plurality of voices in these novels provides complementary explanations that make up for whatever is lost in some of the traditional forms that Achebe uses in his writings. What Snead also appears to overlook is that the West is only a segment of Achebe's audience. Secondly, Achebe has also provided enough contexts to allow the plot and the major themes of the novels to be communicated without necessarily losing his diverse readers.

Ironically, Snead's observation can also be true for the bulk of Achebe's primary readership—non-Igbo Nigerians and other Africans. They, too, may varyingly not be as familiar with Igbo traditions—or the anthropological details Snead refers to—as the Igbo. As Achebe aims at "presenting a total world and a total life as it is lived in that [Igbo] world," he "cannot do that in a vacuum" and as such he creates "for [his characters] the world in which they live and move and have their being" (Ogbaa 64). These *anthropological* details turn out to be part of Achebe's "total world," and reinforce the values of the Igbo in an anglophone discourse. This also brings us to another point. Writing in a local context does not necessarily mean being a slave to clarifying everything about that context. This has been relatively true in non-traditional English contexts where English has been used as a vehicular language. The least an artist can do is provide enough social and textual contexts to jog the imagination and let the reader follow what is being said. After all, as the passage above demonstrates, the Igbo words intercalated in the text do not make us fail to follow the story.

Another dimension of this cross-cultural and inter-lingual contact is that the host language has terms that cannot be translated verbatim. Some of the Igbo words such as *ogbanje* (a child who repeatedly dies and returns to its mother to be born over and over again) we encounter in Achebe's novels are culturally-loaded and specific terms without equivalents in English. Retaining such words in an anglophone text allows English to borrow without altering the word and meaning from the host language.

There are also cases whereby Achebe uses words that can be substituted by English equivalents. Words such as *ilo* (the village green, where assemblies for sports, discussions take place), *nno* (welcome) and *osu* (the outcast, who having been dedicated to a god, becomes taboo and is not allowed to mix with the freeborn in any way), are translatable, but only *just* since outright translation of these culturally-loaded words could make them lose the subtleties of the local belief system. Then there is also the age-old problem of translation, whereby different translators might translate a particular word or term differently. For a word such as *chi*, the text provides "personal god" as its English equivalent within the text, but the meaning lacks the philosophical depth of the Igbo word that reflects the local belief system. In fact, the use of *chi* exposes some of the shortcomings of translation.[7] Donatus Nwogam an Igbo, in "The *Chi* Offended" supports Achebe's translation of *Chi* as "personal god" whereas Austin J. Shelton in "The Offended *chi* in Achebe's Novels" prefers to translate the tem as "God within" and Victor Uchendu, an Igbo anthropologist in *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*_explains it as "the Igbo form of guardian spirit." These varied translations of the same word justify Achebe's use of the actual word in English discourse. These personal gods serve as guardian angels that can also bring bad luck, and also occupy one of the lowest ranks in the cosmos of Igbo deities. Some words may also get a general translation that lacks the specific reference: *ekwe* (*Things Fall Apart* 51) translates into drum, but the Igbo have many kinds of drums, including *udu* a drum made from pottery. All these Igbo words become an integral part of Achebe's rhetorical strategy since they attempt to persuade the reader to accept them as part of the literary-linguistic situation that feeds his anglophone African novels.

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[7] These insights all come from Bernth Lindfors footnote number 3 in "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's Words are Eaten." *African Literature Today* (London: Heinemann, 1972) 1-4: 2-18

Achebe also appropriates traditional modes of storytelling and oral literary expressions in form of Igbo proverbs (in translation), local idiom, or Nigerian pidgin in his novels to both reinforce the presence of Nigerian characteristics in his discourse, but also because Achebe has long recognised their persuasive potential. In fact, the influence of the host culture and language go beyond issues of language usage; it extends to representing the host culture's mannerisms and ways of life. Early in *Things Fall Apart*, we thus read:

> Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye [a musician whom Okonkwo's father owes debt] said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting around the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before. (4)

This passage introduces the context in which the Igbo use proverbs and establishes their role in discourse. Okonkwo says: "I am not afraid to work. The lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one did" (*Things Fall Apart* 18). The proverb carries more weight and meaning than all the words that he uses to explain his need for borrowing yams for planting. As Egar notes, Achebe "sees, in proverbs, a means to persuade the Western European reader of the authenticity of the traditional African language—a language that is clear, transparent, and quintessentially innocent" and uses them to demonstrate "the drastic difference between African rhetoric and the Western European" (229). Whereas proverbs constitute an art of persuasion, it is erroneous to assume (as Egar does) that Western Europeans are the primary audience since the context of these proverbs is representative of the situations in which they were used. Moreover, all kinds of readers can appreciate such a portrayal, whether Africans or non-Africans. The assumption that we have been conditioned to accept is that because Achebe is writing in English, then his audience must be Western European, something that is far from the truth.

Beyond Stereotyping: Implication of Achebe's Aesthetics

There is also this mistaken belief that proverbs are typically African or are the prerogative of African literary discourse. This again is far from the truth. Everywhere—Asia, Europe, the Americas—people have used proverbs since time immemorial. Even in traditional English literature the use of proverbs is not a novelty. In performance genres, for example, the use of proverbs has been "maintained in popular cultural forms as diverse as mystery novels, American country songs and parlour games" because proverbs are "a witty unit of discourse" (Abrahams and Babcock 413, 415). What makes a difference in this case is the particularised way in Achebe uses Igbo proverbs generated in a specific social context but reproduced in an anglophone text in a manner that makes the discernible to non-Igbo readers. The proverbs have been removed from the oral context in which they were produced and immortalised in the text, in written discourse. In written discourse, "these generic devices" of proverbs become severed "from the interactional situation they have come to 'name.'" hence leading to "*de-situation*" and "*de-contextualization*" since the proverb "now exists in a different medium" (Abrahams and Babcock 418) devoid of the actual social situation and context. Outside the Igbo and oral literary context, Achebe grafts these proverbs into his text not only to reflect the role they play in a traditional Igbo social context but also appropriates them and turns these adages into rhetorical tools for his fiction. Such usage denotes a convergence of the oral literary culture of the Igbo and the anglophone mode of expression. As proverbs are an integral part of the discourse of his linguistic community, Achebe appropriates and makes them the part of his literary project because of the way they help develop the themes of his novels. Indeed, these proverbs perform both a stylistic and rhetorical function in Achebe's narratives. This latter part of using proverbs as a rhetorical strategy in national discourse confirms how adaptive artists and languages can be in pan-, trans-, and inter-national discourse. On the whole, an initially esoteric literary and communication tool for the Igbo metamorphoses into a communication tool in anglophone African literary discourse aimed at an exoteric audience.

At one level, proverbs reflect the local literary-linguistic and cultural expression; at another, the proverbs in Achebe's writing serve as a rhetorical and literary device. While we acknowledge Achebe's creativity, we also note that these proverbs are ready-made literary and rhetorical tools appropriated from local lore. This demonstrates that indigenous languages and cultures are not inert in anglophone African literary discourse. Achebe must be credited for being inventive and for exploiting the potential these proverbs have in his fiction. The rhetorical value of the proverbs in Achebe's writings has been highly documented. Here a brief attempt is being made to consider how Achebe deploys these proverbs both as literary tools and as a rhetorical strategy for addressing issues pertaining to his country, Nigeria, and Africa as a whole by extension. In particular, these proverbs are used to summarise or carry the novel's major themes.

Another dimension to Achebe's writing that makes Achebe's unique in anglophone African literary discourse lies in the way he manages to reflect linguistic nuances of one language (ethnic) in another (transnational), in this case English. Partly, he succeeds in doing so through a process known as localisation by successfully transferring the local idiomatic expressions of his characters into English speech without diluting the original nuances. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, for example, an illiterate elder at the head of the delegation from Abazon—who "does not know ABC" (113)—explains:

> *The people who were running in and out* and telling us to say yes [to Life Presidency] came one day and told us *the Big Chief* himself did not want to rule for ever but that he was being forced. Who is forcing him? I asked. The people, they replied. That means us? I asked, *and their eyes shifted from side to side*. And I knew finally that cunning had entered the matter. […] I called my people and said to them: The Big Chief doesn't want to rule forever because he is sensible. Even when a man marries a woman he does not marry her forever. […] So my people and I said No." (*AS* 115-6; emphasis added)

This speech represented in vernacular idiom bridges the linguistic gap between the perceived original, presumably in Igbo, and the transliterated version in English. On the whole, Achebe succeeds in transmitting the common man's indigenous speech in English without losing the ethnic wisdom and nuances of the elders in his society.

Those who reproduce speech from one language in another tend to do so in a modified manner. Since the writer transcribes local idiomatic expressions in another language, he or she has to ensure that the reported speech remains discernible to the reader while reflecting the local oral forms of expression. Similarly, Achebe maintains the distinctive manner of speech of Igbo elders in his fictional universe, hence a new form of idiomatic expression in English, which Bernth Lindfors calls "vernacular style"[8] or a simulation of Igbo idiom in English. Achebe maintains such vernacular style even in his later novels. On this Achebe admits:

> There is a way in which the vigour of one language, its imagery and metaphors, can be transferred across. And there is a certain irreducibility in human language anyway, which is what makes translation possible […] you make this extra effort to get as close as possible to what you have in your mind. (Searle 163)

Though writing in Igbo can solve this problem, doing so would not help a writer such as Achebe who envisages an audience beyond the scope of one's ethnicity, an esoteric linguistic audience. In many ways, it is the ability of English to accommodate nuances from other languages and cultures and still be able to communicate the intended message which makes the language effective as a vehicular language of many ethnic groups in their attempts to reach out to others beyond the scope of their own ethnic groups.

In many literary studies, this process has come to be known—for lack of a better expression—as transliteration. Transliteration constitutes "the rendering of the letters or characters of one alphabet in those of another" (OED), which Onwuemene interprets as "literal translation" (1057). The word "transliteration" first appeared in "African critical discourse as part of practical advice to African literary artists writing in English" to "condition" them to "imprint the 'signatures' of their natal tongues or cultures on their English language literary expression" (Onwuemene 1057). In his press report on the 1962 Conference in Kampala, Uganda, Ezekiel Mphahlele, renowned South African writer and scholar wrote: "It was generally agreed that it was better for an African writer to think and feel in his own language and then look for an English transliteration approximating the original" (qtd. in Wali 14), hence a deliberately induced process. Whereas this could be true to a certain extent, there is also evidence that some of the literary features that appear in Achebe's novels are also readily available in the cultural context of the Igbo transcribed for a non-Igbo audience.

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[8] Lindfors "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's Words are Eaten." *African Literature Today* (London: Heinemann, 1972) 1-4: 2-18. See also Lindfors "African Vernacular Styles in Nigerian Fiction," *CLA Journal*, IX, 3 1966, 265-73, Gerald Moore, "English Words, African Lives," *Presènce Africaine*, 26, 54 (2nd Quarterly1964): 90-101 and Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Language of African Literature," *Harvard Educational Review* 34: 2 (Spring 1964), 298-305 and Eldred Jones 'Language and Theme *in Things Fall Apart*," *Review of English Literature*. Vol. 4 (Oct 1964) 37-43

It should also be noted here that these characteristics in *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are also a realistic portrayal of a changing Nigerian socio-cultural linguistic context rather than constituting merely a manipulation of English. Mphahlele's explanation appears to ignore the fact that the very nature of African national audiences in many African nation-states demands such transliteration. Any intercourse between languages begets new linguistic characteristics. Onwuemene lists three outcomes of such transliteration: (a) the target-language expressions cast in the formal mould of source language counterparts; (b) source-language loanwords introduced into the target-language texts by means of transliteration; and (c) source-language idioms and tropes introduced into the target-language text by means of transliteration (1059).

The "source-language idioms and tropes" Onwuemene refers can translate into one of the ways through which Achebe embodies the social heteroglossia of the Nigerian context in his fiction. Hence we get utterances such as:

'Let them eat,' was the people's opinion, 'after all when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?' (*A Man of the People* 145)

'…Their intentions are good, their mind on the right road. Only the hand fails to throw as straight as the eye sees…' (*Anthills of the Savannah* 211)

'But fighting will not begin unless there is first a thrusting of fingers into eyes. Anybody who wants to outlaw fights must first outlaw the provocation of fingers thrust into eyes.' (*Anthill of the Savannah* 212)

Here Achebe tries to represent the speech from the local language into English. These sentences demonstrate that local contexts influence anglophone literary situations. Either in translation or in "Nigerian" English, the use of local idiomatic expressions also helps to introduce nation-specific elements into English. Though the language structure may be the same, the meaning differs from one that may be assigned to the same utterances in, for example, England. Thus literary semantics cannot overlook the local contexts of the linguistic expressions that the new cultural and linguistic communities bring to English. The words may be the same, and sometimes even the syntax, but the meaning different because the resultant literary semantics is influenced by the cultural experience of a given speech community, in this case Nigerian. In itself, such English usage does not represent a departure from Standard English as spoken and understood generally, but it does demonstrate how local contexts influence meaning. After all, such local contacts reflect the emergence of idiomatic expressions that may appear strange to native English speakers.

In Achebe's later novels, we also find diaglossic—and sometimes polyglossic—situations because the representations go beyond those of one ethnic group, the Igbo for example. Such representations lead to a complex linguistic environment that cuts across traditional conversational modes. These linguistic situations include the use of Standard English among educated Nigerians, Nigerian Pidgin English, and a combination of traditional and modern speech. As a matter of fact, narratives in English also reflect the linguistic influences pertaining to the local context. On this point Achebe notes:

> [T]his English, then, which I am using, has witnessed peculiar events in my land that it has never experienced anywhere else. The English language has never been close to Igbo, Hausa, or Yoruba anywhere else in the world. So it has to be different, because these other languages and their environment are not inert. They are active, and they are acting on this language which has invaded their territory. And the result of all this complex series of actions and reactions is the [English] language we use. (Rowell 176-7)

Achebe refers to nativisation of the English language as it comes into contact with Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba—all Nigerian languages. This "nativisation" of English is an inevitable consequence of the contact between English and indigenous African languages. Kachru defines nativisation as "the linguistic readjustment a language undergoes when it is used by another speech community in distinctive socio-cultural contexts and language contact situations" (235). The outcome of this confluence is twofold. The first is transliteration, we have already discussed and the second, Nigerian Pidgin English.

Nigerian Pidgin English remains one of the manifestations of social heteroglossia in Achebe's novels, with the exception of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* which represent an earlier period before the development of such a language variation. This form of language is also a manifestation that a language used in a particular locale cannot escape the linguistic influences of the host languages. For Achebe, this in itself does not constitute a medium through which he could express his writing, but rather one of the dialects to be included in his writing to reflect social heteroglossia without necessarily alienating the reader in the overall discourse. In *A Man of the People*, we find a conversation involving Chief Nanga, a corrupt Nigerian cabinet minister, Odili, the narrator, and Elsie his girlfriend:

> 'If somebody wan make you minister,' said Chief Nanga, coming to my support, 'make you no gree. No be good life.'
>
> 'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,' said Elsie.

> ‘Na true sister,’ said the Chief.
>
> ‘I think I tell you say Chief Nanga de go open book exhibition for six today,’ I said.
>
> ‘Book exhibition?’ asked Elsie. ‘How they de make that one again?’
>
> ‘My sister, make you de ask them for me-o. I be think say na me one never hear that kind of thing before. But they say me na Minister of Culture and as such I suppose to be there. I no say no. Wetin be minister? No be public football? So instead for me to sidon rest for house like other people I de go knack grammar for this hot afternoon. You don see this kind trouble before? (62)

In Achebe’s novels, this Nigerian Pidgin English, on the one hand, brings Nigerian characters to a common linguistic level, and, on the other, it introduces non-Nigerian English readers to distinctive Nigerian modes of speech. In fact, such pidgin serves as a sub-discourse within the main narrative frame of Standard English.

Attempts at realistic portrayals in this regard can be defended by the fact that the absence of pidgin in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*—Achebe’s earlier novels—also reflects the linguistic reality of the period represented, and thus does not constitute a stylistic deviation—or lack. Those who raise a question of whether Nigeria has a national character (Sullivan 74) have to examine some of these literary-linguistic features. Each nation, each ethnic group has some peculiar characteristics that tend to be introduced into localised versions of English. The absence of Pidgin English in *Things Fall Apart* is compensated by the transliteration evident in the way Achebe tries to transcribe Igbo speech in English for his Anglophone readers. Doing so results in some form of particularism that anchors these local in a specific social context. Indeed, speeches of characters in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* are English translations from Igbo because at this stage the speakers have yet to become assimilated to the new linguistic community of new Nigeria. The variations in their speech acts occur in terms of how many proverbs and anecdotes they use to demonstrate rank and rhetorical prowess within this Igbo society. These conversations appear in Standard English with occasional words of wisdom in translation. The same translation technique is deployed in Achebe’s later novels—*No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*—particularly when the characters are communicating with each other in local tongues, or they happen to be outside the Anglophone linguistic community. The use of pidgin also marks a shift from solely focusing on the Igbo—as the focal point of national discourse—to a multi-ethnic and more broad-based national outlook.

Achebe’s subsequent novels— *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*—represent modern Nigeria, in which there is a shift in the language usage. On the ground the linguistic situation evolved whereby the Nigerians did not only use English for communication but also transformed it to suit their own social and communication needs. Achebe was aware of this dynamism of language and included in his narrative to represent how Nigerian speak in addition to introducing elements of heteroglossia in his novels, much in line with the much complex national linguistic situation. Nigerian Pidgin English is an integral part of his narrative in *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* because the novels project an era when Nigerians use standard English if they are well-educated and Pidgin English if they are not or when they are educated but want to converse with those with less education. For argument's sake this *brand* of English could be used to produce a distinctively Nigerian literary discourse, but this would only be a *low* variety of the language (in the context of Bickerton' conception of a language continuum) that would only be accessible to an esoteric audience, something Achebe opted against by choosing to write using *Standard* English. His restriction of this variety only to certain parts of the novel's discourse where characters actually use it in their dialogue demonstrates that Achebe wants Standard English to be the primary conduit of his narrative. Functionally, this Pidgin also brings together the uneducated, the semi-illiterate, and the university educated to the same linguistic level in Achebe's novels.

Another significant dimension of Achebe's writing, which demonstrates the way traditional elements can enrich the literary output produced in another language is the appropriation of rhetorical techniques from a specific context to convey national themes in English. In *A Man of the People*, for example, Odili who is almost of the first generation Nigerians—as Achebe was—employs the same narrative technique otherwise deployed in Igbo conversational acts to explain complex problems:

> A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation […] was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say 'To hell with it.' We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us—the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best—had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. And from within they sought to persuade the rest through numerous loudspeakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that the next phase—the extension of our house—was even more important and called for new and original tactics; it required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house. (*A Man of the People* 37)

In this passage, Odili follows the traditional way of developing an argument. He starts with an anecdote, or saying, in a traditional mode of speech before progressing to tell a story in order to explain what is happening in his post-independence Nigeria. The fusion of the oral and the written literary modes—appears to constitute an attempt on the part of Achebe to deploy traditional and modern literary means at his disposal to reach the general readership. He borrows from the informal traditional mode of teaching and makes it a part of a broader literary discourse. Achebe, it appears, wants to exploit the same rhetorical devices employed in his native Igbo society to address the complex problem besetting his nation. It is towards such ends that he also uses proverbs. Anglophone African literary discourse did not sprout in a literary-linguistic vacuum; it benefits from many cultural and literary aspects of the host languages, that as Achebe would rather put it serve as "tributaries" feeding the main river.

CONCLUSION

As Achebe has demonstrated in anglicised African discourse, we cannot anglicise without integrating local traditions, lore and cultural values available in the universe of particular local contexts, hence the different variants of literary and linguistic elements introduced into the Anglophone text. Since Standard English remains the foil against which literary expressions are measured and the main conduit for the narrative frame for the creative effort, whatever aspects are introduced into the language do not necessarily represent a complete break—or departure—from the main Anglophone literary-linguistic tradition, but rather represents a literary-linguistic continuum with peculiar characteristics and divergences imposed by a localised context. Achebe's example also shows that English usage continuum makes a mockery of earlier attempts to describe the application of English in colonial Africa as merely an abrogation and appropriation. Perhaps, one of the counter-arguments in Anglophone national discourse is that it is generally elitist, and exclusionary. But this ought to be explained in terms of demographic statistics, not in spatial terms.

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