

The Issue of Language in African Literature

(Part I)

Introduction:

The phrase "Russian literature" customarily implies the Russian language; the phrase "Russian literature in Russian" is therefore tautological. Put differently, if a literature is Russian it is so by virtue of its creation out of the Russian culture and is necessarily in the Russian language. The same logic applies to English literature, French literature, Chinese literature, and so forth, and by extension to European literatures and Asian literatures, for example. In other words, one cannot separate a literature from the culture and the language that define it; mainly for that reason, works translated from one language to another lose some essential qualities that cannot cross linguistic and cultural barriers.

Houston Baker poses the crucial question in his "English as a World Language for Literature: A Session for the 1979 English Institute." Given that language is inseparable from thought, he asks, "How then, does Tewa or *Yoruba* or Sotho thought achieve literary form in English? How, given the inseparability of thought and language, and the diversity of the world's language communities, should one approach the notion that English has global status as a literary language?"

African Languages through History:

The story effectively begins in the Victorian era, when European attitudes toward Africans were dominated by a strong belief in their inferiority to Europeans and some suspicion about their humanity. Africans were supposed to suffer from a mental "deficit," as Victorian natural scientists put it, that rendered them incapable of the sort of enterprises, intellectual or cultural, that other humans could accomplish. Their languages were held to reflect that deficit. Referring specifically to the Africans transplanted as slaves to the Caribbean, Edward Braithwaite notes that their native languages had to be "submerged" because the European slavers regarded them as those of beings who were "inferiors—nonhuman, in fact".

In that prevailing atmosphere, when the question of African education arose it inevitably generated some controversy. Those who believed in the deficit argued that forcing too much education into the deficient African brains might have pathologically debilitating consequences. Others were not so much interested in Africans' mental health as in the possibility that education might adversely affect their perception of their proper place in relation to Europeans in the order of things. T. J. Jones, of the Phelps-Stokes studies, and, unfortunately, Booker T. Washington exemplify the conviction that Africans (and African Americans) should be offered only the sort of education that would ensure their

usefulness to the dominant white society and would not give them any ridiculous idea of equality to whites. The proper education would teach only enough English to make them functionally useful; otherwise instruction would concentrate on menial and industrial subjects. Humanitarians and Christian missionaries unimpressed by the notion of an African "deficit," and wishing to disprove the racists' contention that the African could not be civilized, set out to establish schools on the continent that would be isolated "islands of civilization," hermetically sealed off from surrounding Africa. They would be laboratories from which would issue finished, educated specimens, proof of African educability.

Whatever the missionaries' plans, practical considerations intervened to modify them, at least initially, and especially in "Anglophone" areas. They had to discharge their primary duty of spreading the gospel to people who had no knowledge of European languages and must therefore be reached, at least initially, in their indigenous languages. Moreover, the size of the task necessitated the employment of African helpers, who had to be literate in their own languages. The missionaries also faced the necessity of producing literature, preferably in applicable local languages, suitable for proselytization and, later, instruction. This was true even for Catholic missionaries, who did not bear the obligation the Reformation imposed on Protestants to make the Bible accessible to every believer.

The missionaries still retained control of education during the infancy of the colonial era, with Yoruba as the medium of instruction. But the needs of the colonial administration soon assumed precedence over those of the missions. Rather than propagators of the gospel, the colonists needed messengers, clerks, civil servants, and court interpreters. The educational system responded to the development. The missionaries, always strapped for money for their projects, were induced with the grant of governmental subventions to embrace the change in orientation. But contrary to the popular notion that contemporary Africans surrendered to Europeans without a fight, in this instance nationalists protested the supplanting of their language by the European imposition.

A major difference in colonial ideology existed between Britain and France, the two most important colonial powers as far as the present discussion is concerned: while Britain favored "indirect rule," a system that was based on administration through the agency of indigenous rulers and that sought to preserve traditional institutions, France opted for assimilation, a system designed to transform her African subjects into Black French men and women. Christine Souriau has described the practical application of this policy of cultural domination, with regard to language, in the Maghreb, where Arabic was already established as a written, scholarly medium.

The French policy discouraged instruction in Arabic, stopped financing local education, replaced Arabic speaking personnel with French speakers practicing French ways (thus relegating the former to inferior status), and forbade French personnel to learn Arabic. The task of linguistic assimilation was easier in sub-Saharan Africa, where no challenge existed to French like that which Arabic posed in the Maghreb. Indeed, even now the controversy about

the choice between African and European languages is virtually confined to the Anglophone parts of the continent, because with regard to Francophone areas, Arabization has made it irrelevant in the Maghreb while sub-Saharan Africa has shown little evidence of discomfort with the primacy of French.

Regardless of the colonial power involved, colonial education throughout the African continent uniformly privileged European cultures and languages over African ones. Peter Lloyd writes of the schools:

Some were government managed, others run by missionary bodies. In either case the schools were usually located in the capitals or principal towns; most were boarding schools. Those of the French colonial territories were overtly assimilationist—many indeed had the children both of African and settler European populations. In the British territories of East and Central Africa with settler populations segregated educational facilities existed. But although the principles of indirect rule and *association* (in contrast to *assimilation*) guided the colonial governments in their policies of developing indigenous political institutions, in the educational sphere their schools were run on the lines of the English boarding school. The content of the curricula was almost entirely European—the staff knowing little about Africa. These schools divorced the youth from his local community during the most formative years of his life. They thus produced men who were elitist in outlook.

Why do African writers use European Languages ?

Dennis Brutus, the South African poet, testifies from his own experience that the African writer educated under the colonial system was exposed to the mainstream of the English literary tradition, which left a lasting impression on him or her. It is little wonder, then, that, as he also observes, "some African writers have been criticized for a too-slavish imitation of their English models". Edward Braithwaite's Caribbean experience parallels and corroborates Brutus's, for, as he remarks, the effect of English education was to make the Caribbean more familiar with Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood than with "Nanny of the Maroons, a name some of us didn't even know until a few years ago".

A not so direct but equally eloquent testimony to the effects of colonial education comes from Africa's first winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, Wole Soyinka. *Aké*, his memories of a colonial childhood, pictures an idyll centered in the sequestered mission parsonage, in the care of "Wild Christian," his mother, and Essay, his schoolteacher father, whose passions were for scholarly disputations and cultivating roses; Sunday afternoons at the parsonage featured high tea ceremonies. The laureate recalls an occasion when a colorful police band parade lured him to wander far beyond Aké until he found himself at the end of the parade in the police compound. There an English officer gamely but unsuccessfully attempted to communicate with him in Yoruba. The befuddled

young Soyinka asked another (Yoruba) officer standing by, in English, what the Englishman was saying. The Englishman was amazed at Soyinka's English, and a rapport immediately developed between them. Soyinka also recalls that contemplating the figures on the stained-glass windows of their church, who looked very much like *egúngún* (masqueraders), he wished that they would some day materialize, but only on condition that they spoke English, for only then could he converse with them.

Postcolonial condition and the use of the European language:

There are, however, other reasons. As I noted earlier, modern African literature is a product of the assimilated elite. When they tried their hands at creative writing they had no other choice of language than that of their education. Also, given the stigma of inferiority that attached to the use of African languages in the colonial era, the educated African felt hardly any misgiving about preferring European substitutes.

The enduring colonial imprint on the African intellectual is evident in J.-L. Miège's observation that the universities remain even after Independence "the best examples of the colonial past". The differences among postcolonial Africans, he suggests, are not ethnic (they may be from the same ethnic group) but derive from their different colonial pasts, and are discernible in the different ways that they write, think, and live. Those differences between the Anglophone Yoruba of Nigeria and their Francophone relatives across the border in the Benin republic prove his point.

The consequence for African literatures is that they have come to mean writings in English, French, and Portuguese. Only as a conscious effort does one include, grudgingly, "African-language literatures," and then only because the customary assumption about what constitutes African literatures, and in particular what part language plays in the determination, has lately lost its early confidence. Proponents of the status quo have offered other reasons for retaining non African languages for literary purposes.

One such reason appears in Sartre's "*Orphée noir*," the preface to Senghor's 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (*Anthology of the new negro and Malagasy poetry in the French language*). Sartre pointed out that colonized peoples lacked a common language as a consequence of the manner in which the colonial powers constituted their colonies. In general, distinct peoples who had never had much to do with one another were consolidated willy nilly into administrative units for colonial convenience. As a result, people who found themselves as subjects in the same colony, and eventually as citizens in the same postcolonial nation, often could communicate among themselves only in the language of their colonizer.

Ezekiel Mphahlele therefore had a point when he said that ironically, "colonialism had not only delivered 'the writers' to themselves, but had delivered them to one another, had provided them, so to speak, with a common language and an African consciousness; for

out of rejection had come affirmation". For, he added, even where colonialism had receded on the continent, European languages still served as a unifying force.

Writers obviously have certain readers in mind when they settle on the language to employ, if indeed they have a choice. (The question does not arise for some writers, of course, who conceive their activity as part of an intra cultural dialogue.) For Chinua Achebe, for example, the chosen audience is one involved in "international exchange". Writing for that audience distinguished between "serious" and "nondescript" writers. The former are those like him who have something to say to the world, and who are consequently better off expressing themselves in European languages. The latter are those of a much more modest calling, who must accordingly be content with African languages.

Lewis Nkosi's description of the delegates to the 1962 Kampala conference of Anglophone writers captures the affectation of self-importance that attends the consciousness of election to international responsibility evident in Achebe's statement: they were mostly young, sardonic writers, he wrote, whose mien suggested amazement "that fate had entrusted them with the task of interpreting a continent to the world" (Nkosi I). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has also testified that writers at that time understood their duty to be "to explain Africa to the world: Africa had a past and a culture of dignity and human complexity". When later on, antipathies developed between writers and rulers, be they civilian or military, the writers found their most sympathetic champions among the audiences they had cultivated abroad, and, understandably, they continued to direct their messages and complaints to those audiences. Charles Larson has in fact contended that the sometimes impenetrable English Wole Soyinka affected in his writings was a deliberate stratagem to get his works past African censors to his foreign readers.

Yet another argument for not writing in African languages rests on a practical consideration such as the writer's need to reach enough readers to make writing worth his or her while financially. Thus Gerald Moore insists that a writer should express himself "in a language that gives him a hearing (and a living)," leaving the development of "vernaculars" to those who are content with a "vernacular audience" (" *Polemics*" 9). Similarly, the Senegalese novelist and filmmaker Ousmane Sembène commented at the 1963 Dakar conference of Francophone writers that writing, "which is now my job," is a social necessity, like the jobs of the mason, the carpenter, or the ironworker" (in Moore, *African Literature* 57). He went on to assure his audience that if he had taken the trouble he could have written his novel *Le docker noir* in Wolof, his native language. "But then," he asked, "who would have read it? How many people know how to read the language? ... Even written in French, how many Africans have read *Le docker noir*? *Eighty-five per cent of the people here are illiterate; the rest can read and write but they do not read African authors. That means that our public is in Europe*".

In addition to the better living that writing in European languages affords African writers, another determinate factor is the international acclaim that comes from direct access to the international custodians of literary taste, and the rewards such access entails. Not least

among these is the frequent invitations favored writers receive to speak of their writing (and otherwise perform) before audiences around the world, but especially in Europe, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and formerly, even in the Soviet Union. As important, and perhaps more important, are the many prizes available to writers who address themselves directly to the external world.

In discussing the problem of language policy in contemporary Africa in general, one must be mindful of the implications of the reality that in African literary studies and in African studies as a whole, Africa itself is at the periphery, while the centers are located elsewhere—in Europe or America. As long as that condition persists it is logical to expect that the operative and favored languages will be those of the centers. The benefits of producing "African" literatures in non-African languages do not accrue only in the direction of the African writers, for non-African literary scholars and critics have correctly noted that were Africans to write in African languages their works would be inaccessible to all but a handful of the non-Africans to whom they are available at the moment.

Robert Plant Armstrong, for example, sees Amos Tutuola's preference for English despite his lack of facility in the language as a boon for his foreign readers. Because Tutuola's material is close to Yoruba folklore, Professor Armstrong writes, "he has doubly blessed the serious student who does not command enough of Yoruba to understand the traditional texts as they are traditionally communicated by writing in English". Similarly, O. R. Dathorne defends the same writer's idiosyncratic English, describing it as "a sensible compromise, between raw pidgin (which would be unintelligible to European readers) and standard English".

Dathorne apparently believed, as many other critics did, that Tutuola's "young English," as Dylan Thomas described it in his *Observer* review, was a deliberate put-on by the writer rather than the best English he was capable of, as was indeed the case. As late as 1987 the same misconception persisted on the part of some critics. As an example, Mark Axelrod faults Dan Kunene 's handling of his characters' language in *From the Pit of Hell to the Spring of Life*, saying, "No attempt is made to alter the prose, as Amos Tutuola does . . . to make it sound less Anglicized and more African".

**This is an extract from “The Question of Language in African Literatures”by
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