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Nigerian English Writing and Translation: The Fate of the Vernacular Literature and Culture

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Abstract— *This article examines a central paradox in postcolonial Nigerian literary and linguistic history, with a specific focus on Igbo. It argues that while early Christian missionaries used translation into vernacular languages as a tool for evangelism—thereby actively developing the language's lexical and conceptual capacity—the subsequent project of anti-colonial cultural assertion by Western-educated African writers and intellectuals has been conducted predominantly in English. This literary strategy, though successful in challenging imperial myths of cultural inferiority, has had the unintended consequence of further institutionalizing English as Nigeria's "power language." Meanwhile, vernaculars like Igbo have been relegated to a protected but stunted domain of "in-group" communication, denied the "rough and tumble of acculturation and translation" necessary for full modern development. Through analysis of language policy, translation history, and literary texts (by Achebe, Tutuola, Adichie, Soyinka, and others), the article demonstrates how the predominance of English in Nigerian writing has created a state of dependency for African languages, leaving them vulnerable to attrition and hybrid encroachment (e.g., "Engli-Igbo"), while secular translation work that could fuel their growth remains neglected.*

Keywords— Colonial metropolis, Christian missionaries, cultural software, Igbo, official language, translation, vernacular, Nigerian literature, power language.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF VERNACULAR NEGLECT IN A POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXT

Cultural and language studies in Nigeria do not appear to accord great importance to translation of documents available in foreign languages. Sometimes scholars rail against the dominance of English in national public discourse. But it is normal to do this in English because of the assumed institutionality of English in national public discourse as the official language of Nigeria. Thus in terms of the needs to translate, English is not considered by the local intellectual community to be a foreign language.

For many decades following independence, however, there was open resentment of the notion of English as the official language of Nigeria, but that is not to say that there was a clear sense of what else may be called official, if not English. Although the citizens recognize themselves as belonging to one ethnic group or another, which was bound together by one local vernacular that could have served as the source of 'beliefs, attitudes, and values, [that would then be] part of their cultural software' (Balkin 43), the bonds to the vernacular may in reality be weakening. A main reason for this is the existence of English as the official language of Nigeria. As a result, the creative role that cultural leaders normally play unwittingly and their contributions to language development in the field of discourse are little felt, or registered. Cultural leaders in many African communities, and this is true also of Igbo in Nigeria, which is my main focus in this paper, often use language purely for communication, without leaving an impact on the language itself, whether the official one or their native ethnic vernacular: they make no impact on the received foreign one, because they have not gained trust among a worldwide language community whose culture centres are physically and attitudinally far off as authentic phrase makers and reliable language innovators; the local language, because there is no level at which attention is paid to the vernacular language itself so as to notice innovations

that may be learned, cited, and used again – for according to functionalism, 'language is shaped by the language community in the context of use' (Semantics and Discourse 82).

Intended or not, the national language policy of the Nigerian state is one of the ways in which the legacy of colonization is systematically reinforced and rendered permanent. The local book industry suffers from this policy, because the good quality books are ready-made abroad and consumed locally, and there is little incentive to invest in local publishing. This is compounded by the internet which is dominantly in English. But it is dismaying that documents that are available in English are taken to be sufficiently domiciled in the local space not to call for any effort of translation.

However, if these texts have originated in other languages than English, in their translation, the English language exercises itself, grows, and strengthens and extends its capabilities. But the local languages in Nigeria rarely have the chance to exercise themselves in this manner. The exercise is of course enabled by the translator; therefore, a very important language worker. He or she does not just 'operate[] in a mediatory middle-ground' (Douglas Robinson 62), as a 'faithful servant of the source text' (Bassnet and Trivedi 5), or merely a negotiator of the movement of information from one language to another; in the case of ethnic vernaculars with their typically limited vocabularies and concept-base, much creativity and innovativeness is needed. The low linguistic impact of the scholars of this community is one thing, and the absence of the impulse to translate and give an important foreign language text a place in the holdings of the vernacular culture another. But this is only a secondary cause of retardation for the local language, a primary one being the local use of English for all official purposes, and its encroachment and increasing spread into in-group activities within the given ethnic group.

II. THE MISSIONARY LEGACY: TRANSLATION AS VERNACULAR DEVELOPMENT

It must be noted, however, that although the Christian religion was often the subject of attack especially in the days of struggle for independence and denounced by African intellectuals as part of the software of imperialism, the use of translation to benefit and help grow the Igbo language and other African languages was by the Christian missionaries who translated Christian religious books and prayers and composed Christian hymns in the local vernacular. These were not by any means professional translators, but they were driven by need. Indeed their first major achievement in this regard was to develop the written form of these vernaculars based on the Latin alphabet. The work of translation involved creating coinages like *mụọma* (angel), *mụọ nsọ* (Holy Spirit), *mirichukwu* (baptism); direct borrowing as in *baịbụl, chaplet, sakramenti, vejin, yukaristia*; loan-translations like *Chukwu nwa* (God the Son), *oriri nsọ* (holy communion), *nmesoọma* (loving-kindness), *ngarube nke obe* (stations of the cross), *ndụ ebebe* (eternal life); phraseological units like *ịtọ nime ofu dị ngozị* or *atọ nime otu dị ngọzị* (the Blessed Trinity), *itụ ime n'ejighị njọ* (immaculate conception), *ndi otu Kristi* (Christians), *njọ ekelu-ụwa* (original sin), *ọ dị be ndị* (tradition), and so forth entered the Igbo language. The coinages and loan translations show that the target language was not a passive recipient of concepts, but that it caused the translators to reach into the inner recesses of the language, enabling the language to bring up answers not previously known to exist. At the same time it brings out the individual translator's 'dynamic and varying internalizations of the norms and structures of the source and target fields, and of their mutual contacts and intersections' ('Translators and (their) Norms' 95). It is even possible by analysis of favourite Igbo translations to make out the specific Christian culture in question. *Jesu Kristi* appears to have been commonly used by Christians of all denominations until recently when *Jisọs Kraist* was introduced under the influence of Pentecostalism translating from English instead of through the intermediary of Latin as in Catholic usage.

Thus, a Christian religious service of any complexity may be conducted fully in Igbo, but no one would be able to write a theological paper in Igbo or literary criticism. The reason is that much of the theological and literary critical registers has remained un-naturalized in Igbo. Translation is the agency for introducing and naturalizing foreign concepts in the vernacular and agitating the language to bring out some of its hidden capabilities. Leaving the vernaculars unchallenged in this way is also the reason that medical and other scientific research cannot be attempted in Igbo and many African languages. The situation has remained basically the same since the introduction of the vernacular in the colonial junior primary educational curriculum.

III. THE LITERARY TURN: ASSERTION IN THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

English began to be used in literary activity in Nigeria from the very beginnings of what is called 'modern' literature in Nigeria of which the earliest flowering is Onitsha Market Literature during the 1930s and 1940s. There was of course one important work in Igbo, *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana (1935). Obiajunwa Wali was to drop a bombshell, as it were, in 1961 with a conference paper presented in Makerere before African literary practitioners entitled 'The Dead End of African Literature'. He had argued that 'An African writer who thinks and feels in his own language must write in that language' and that African writing in a

non-African language, whether creative or critical is entirely 'misdirected' and 'has no chance of advancing African literature and culture' (qtd in Emmanuel Ngara 5). This put many of the Nigerian writers on the defensive, and the discussion has been long lasting. There were some like Ngugi wa Thiong'o who took the criticism to heart and started writing in the vernacular, and others like Wole Soyinka who took the view that poetic art should not be constrained to local vernaculars with their limited readerships. According to Phanuel Egejuru, however, most of the writers were aiming their productions at a white audience, and so it made sense to write in the language that audience could understand. This is presumably in the service of so-called 'writing back to the empire'. But it has also put in place 'a one-way process', utterly failing to activate 'a reciprocal process of exchange' (Bassnet and Trivedi 5). The failure of the cultural leaders and intellectuals to open a dialogue between the vernacular languages and the world power languages redounded negatively at the epistemological level on the local people themselves: they came to know the modern world only in the language of the former colonist, and describing modern life was a lot more convenient in that language, or in hybrid Engli-Igbo. The role of language in knowledge transmission, knowledge creation, and the accumulation and preserving of available knowledge has not always been emphasized.

On the question of the language of African literature, however, there was a middle ground, which was sought especially by the literary critics, namely that the writing was to be considered as African – no matter the language in which it took form – if it captured something authentically African, an 'African psychological reality', African 'social reality', an 'African vision', 'an African experience', and so forth.

Strictly, Obiajunwa Wali and the intellectuals referenced were talking about different things. Wali was concerned with the development of African literature in African languages, while the other scholars were concerned with something to be found in a work whereby it might be given recognition as African literature. For Wali, it was a question of what can be done in African languages in the way of literature. So the language is of decisive importance and African literature was a contradiction in terms if it was in a non-native African language.

But the contradiction was not apparent to Obiajunwa Wali's immediate and younger contemporaries who understood literature as having an object of representation, which was the thing of importance, which would be the same whatever the language; and their sense was that that object had better be African. This is a version of what Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* calls 'the dualism of consciousness and body' (138). This thinking of literature as having a body (language), and a soul (content) persists to the present in African criticism and literary studies. The African literary scholars also tended to recognize the artistic in terms of Plato's 'ethics of representation'; thus in addition to elucidating 'what is [represented]', attention went to 'how correctly (orthōs) it has been represented, and thirdly how well (eu)] each image has been rendered' (Halliwell 85). This approach has no rule system for assigning worth in literature, nor does it really envisage that one literary work may be of higher literary worth than another, nor yet how to differentiate literature from a historical or a philosophical text.

Revisiting Wali's charge in a 2021 article, AfricaSon writes that:

> As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression (Web).

This echoes Solomon Iyasere's idea that in their literary works, African writers 'use language to translate and transform their vision of social reality into perceivable form' (20). But more than this, AfricaSon is suggesting in his postulations that each individual form in a literary work with a determinable content may have its own individual aim and messaging destination.

As has been noted, it seems odd that instead of employing translation to render a foreign language content accessible ('into perceivable form') in the vernacular, it is the other way around: local vernacular content is being rendered accessible in a non-African language. There is complicity here between the writer and the colonist whereby the power language is granted locus standi and normalized as the language not only for expression, but also for processing information, even if the information was originally in a native African language. Thus Lewis Nkosi complained of the 'bitterest irony of all,

that even when an assault had to be made on those opposing values which the masters used to control their colonial subjects, values which constituted the very underpinning of the colonial system, that war had to be waged by Africans in the same languages that were used to enslave them … if not in mental attitude, at least in the tool of its production, the best of African literature reflects a former colonial dependency (6).

Our concern here is not with the writer, what he should be busy with or how to approach his or her task. This is the direction that the Wali language debate has taken. Our concern is with the African languages which have remained underdeveloped, while the scholars seem to have left them to their own devices. But language evolution 'by natural selection', so to say, will leave it trailing by a long shot behind galloping modernization. This would leave us effectively with a dead language, for to be a living language is to be abreast with technological change and with whatever is driving modernization and human progress.

IV. VERNACULAR CITATION IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: TECHNIQUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Nevertheless, modern literature in Nigeria both by Igbo writers and others have been exercised by issues related to the existence of the vernacular in the space of particularly novelistic action. They often recognize the space of novelistic action as a theatre where languages clash and where the clash leaves traces which then force themselves on reading attention. Hence contrary to what normally happens in translation, where the foreign and unfamiliar is carried over into the local and familiar to render it readable and appropriable, it is the local that is taken into the folds of what should be the foreign language. But this is for a variety of purposes: to enable it participate in the discourse as an equal partner; to bring into view a habit of thought in opposition not to another individual discourse, but to that of narration itself; or even for what Jonathan Culler calls 'the conventions of literary vraisemblance' (*Structuralist Poetics* 173).

In Nigerian literature, the power language, English, dominates the textual surface, and if other languages are cited, they are, so far as the world of the text is concerned, minority languages. In Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, the protagonist muses lyrically about his own mother tongue in tones of a lament for exclusion or at least having a limited role in the public space:

> [In England,] when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. He wished they were here to-day to see. Let them come to Umuofia now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live (pp. 49-50).

Obi Okonkwo is showing his resentment over the subjugation of his native language and other Nigerian languages under colonialism. In England where this memory ranges, the languages are totally in the margins, and no one expects (perhaps even wishes) to hear them spoken. But the Nigeria to which he has returned as a foreign-trained senior service official has its own metropolis – that is, a local copy of the colonial metropolis where the language spoken by the minority of residents, the colonial expatriates, is the official language and commands the public space; and that spoken in the vast hinterland has but minority status. It is noted in Bassnet and Trivedi that the metropolitan copy is in fact a 'translation' (4). This is part of what Obi resents in the above. Nevertheless, his story, which is the matter of *No Longer at Ease* is being told in English, including the ruminations in his own interior life. And the vernacular culture, even when he has physically re-entered the world of that culture, is given perceptible form in English. Thereby the novel, the African novel, gives English the capacity to render the vernacular culture perceptible – in addition to its own natural capacity to render itself patent. It puts the vernacular language in a state of dependency. Whereas Obi Wali had been complaining about the failure of the African writers to assist the development of African literature, the deeper problem, which the scholars of African 'content' are apparently willing to live with, is the novel dependency status of the African languages which the African literature of their conception puts in place and guards.

The minority vernacular language undoubtedly lives even in London, through the agency of Obi Okonkwo who has carried it there, ready to render it expressive if, for instance, he finds a Nigerian from the same 'tribe'. In the same way, the vernacular lives within the folds of the official English of the Nigerian novel, and occasionally breaks out through citations, which according to Kristeva, 'establish a similitude, a resemblance, an equalization of two different discourses. The ideologeme of the sign once again crops up here, at the level of the novelistic enunciation's inferential mode: it admits the existence of an other (discourse) only to the extent that it makes it its own' (*Desire in Language* 45).

In Obi Okonkwo's rumination above, there is a sense of being rooted in Nigeria and in Umuofia. Nigerian is not a language, but an appendage derived from the name of a specific geographical area called Nigeria, and includes Obi Okonkwo's Umuofia, as well as others whose founding memories are rooted elsewhere than Umuofia and do not share its language and art of conversation: for Obi and all these, there is a dual identity. Obi has a clear sense of a linguistic identity where his founding memories are earthed, different from a national or a political identity, which from London he can reference as his native land.

This is a native land where the people are divided by primordial linguistic affiliative networks. One other of these vernacular languages is cited at the scene where Obi Okonkwo narrowly escapes an auto crash:

> 'Make you take am jeje. Too much devil de for dis road. If you see one accident way we see for Abeokuta side – Olorun!' (*No Longer at Ease* 141)

Since Obi is presumed by these witnesses not to share their linguistic identity, they speak to him in the hybrid language in which the words are mostly English, but elements of structure come from elsewhere. It is called in *No Longer at Ease* 'Broken English', but it came to be called Pidgin and has been defended as autonomous. For now, it does not supply Nigeria with a linguistic identity. The Nigerian identity is geographical, historical, and political, and the State expresses its political and national identity in English. It must be good politics that its literature is in English, even if this hampers the vernacular languages and retards the development of African literature. As Saïd Akl puts it, this language has become 'the nimbus of the nation's cultural narrative and the vector of continuity between its past, its present, and its future' (cited in Salameh 47). We have mentioned that some of the Nigerian scholars rail against English, but others affect the attitude that English is something we have to live with temporarily, and then it would go away. A power language will not go away as long as the institutions of which it supplies the software are in place, institutions like education, institutions of governance and control, institutions of trade and commerce, institutions of social communications, and so forth.

The double citation of Pidgin and Yoruba preserves a habit of thought, for 'Make you take am jeje', reflects unlimited goodwill and even sympathy towards Obi, whereas use of the English 'equivalent' ('[please] drive with care') would appear to lay some of the blame for the near miss on Obi. In the full account, the caution is clearly more appropriate to the other driver who was at fault with his dangerous overtaking, and the avoidance of a crash was only thanks to Obi's timely action in swerving from the other's path.

In some of Achebe's work, there is carrying over not only from the space of speech to the space of writing, but also 'a transcription of oral speech' in the vernacular (*Desire in Language* 54) into a writing that seeks to keep intact the habits of thought of the original:

> 'Is it true that Okonkwo nearly killed you with his gun?'
>
> 'It is true indeed, my dear friend. I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story.'
>
> 'Your chi is very much awake, my friend. And how is my daughter, Ezinma?'
>
> 'She has been very well for some time now. Perhaps she has come to stay.'
>
> 'I think she has. How old is she now?'
>
> 'She is about ten years old.'
>
> 'I think she will stay. They usually stay if they do not die before the age of six.'
>
> 'I pray she stays,' said Ekwefi with a heavy sigh (*Things Fall Apart* 15).

The dialogue here is a moment of realism, in which the characters' Igbo speech is represented in English words. The 'transcription of oral speech' is obvious enough in 'I cannot yet find a mouth…' and 'Your chi is very much awake', but it is beliefs about *ogbanje* (children dying and coming back to be born again) that supplies the substantive of 'They usually stay', which should otherwise be unanchored since the identified third person of the discourse is singular, 'my daughter Ezinma'.

Vernacular habits of thought run directly in the voice of narration in Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*; and this is rendered achievable from the technical point of view by the fact that it is first-person narration.

> But in those days, there were many wild animals and every place was covered by thick bushes and forests; again, towns and villages were not near each other as nowadays, and as I was travelling from bushes to bushes and from forests to forests and sleeping inside it for many days and months, I was sleeping on the branches of trees, because spirits etc. were just like partners, and to save my life from them; and again I could spend two or three months before reaching a town or a village. Whenever I reached a town or a village, I would spend almost four months there, to find out my palm-wine tapster from the inhabitants of that town or village and if he did not reach there, then I would leave there and continue my journey to another town or village. After the seventh month that I had left my home town, I

> reached a town and went to an old man, this old man was not a really man, he was a god and he was eating with his wife when I reached there. When I entered the house I saluted both of them, they answered me well, although nobody should enter his house like that as he was a god, but I myself was a god and juju-man. Then I told the old man (god) that I am looking for my palm-wine tapster who had died in my town some time ago, he did not answer to my question but asked me first what was my name? I replied that my name was 'Father of gods' who could do everything in this world…

The narration here does not always respect the rules of English sentence structure, with some of the 'sentences' going without the required predicates, as in 'I was sleeping on the branches of trees, because spirits etc. were just like partners, and to save my life from them; and again I could spend two or three months before reaching a town or a village'. There may be a case of the Wordsworthian 'overflow of powerful feeling recollected in tranquility' where the narrator totally loses control but it may be equally a case of traditional storytelling where the ruling logic is total representation focusing 'the conceptual content of the sentences' (Ngoni Chipere 2), and not on grammatically delineated sentences.

Some writers seem to use citation to achieve specific effects so that in these cases it may be called a technique, and following them one can 'discover' (Mark Schorer) the writer's overall intention. This is seen very often in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie where it may give a sense of verisimilitude. We read for instance in *Americanah*:

> Okwudiba followed him out. 'I'm going home,' Obinze said. 'Let me find Kosi and Buchi.'
>
> 'The Zed, o gini? What is it? Is it just tiredness?' ….
>
> 'The Zed! You are really quiet today,' Okwudiba said, now on his fifth glass of champagne.
>
> 'Aru adikwa?'
>
> Obinze shrugged. 'I'm fine. Just tired' (Chapter 54)
>
> 'What is it?' directly repeats 'o gini?' And both are citations. It is a form found elsewhere in Adichie, as in *Half of a Yellow Sun*:
>
> Ugwu was about to pour the cold Coke into her glass when she touched his hand and said, 'Rapuba, don't worry about that' (chapter 1).

So one must take it that this manner of repetition is a realistic portrayal of the speech habits of the characters in question. Nevertheless, the vernacular utterances *o gini* and *rapuba* have been rendered intelligible to a potential non-Igbo reader.

Verisimilitude is still preserved in citations of set phrases where there is no real equivalent in English available, with approximate meanings recoverable in the surrounding text:

> 'The Yoruba man is there helping his brother, but you Igbo people? I ga-asikwa. Look at you now quoting me this price' (*Americanah*, chapter 54).

Perhaps *I ga-asikwa* in the specific context can be translated *Impossible* or *Unthinkable!* – which may be made out in the discourse itself about the Yoruba man helping his brother, 'but you Igbo people?' In like manner, *Aru adikwa?* In Okwudiba's speech to The Zed is probably explained in the latter's response, 'I'm fine. Just tired.'

These 'discourses' (Benveniste) including citation of Igbo phrases mark the shared world of the vernacular culture with its specific 'care structure' (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 241). The Zed's quietness amidst his friends on the particular occasion has set off a call for care which first draws from Okwudiba 'Aru adikwa?', then 'o gini?' Because of this shared care structure, Obinze takes no offence at Okwudiba asking persistently about his inner state of affairs. But it does turn out that there is in fact a worry, unleashing the following dialogue – and it is not tiredness in the literal sense:

> 'You know Ifemelu is back,' Obinze said, and just saying her name warmed him.
>
> 'I know.' Okwudiba meant that he knew more.
>
> 'It's serious. I want to marry her.'

In some of Soyinka, the interplay of English and Yoruba can become challenging, especially for non-native speakers, although in most cases the translation is recoverable nearby:

The usual cries went up ' A -ah ọmọ Soyinka, wa nube wa gbowo' and they stretched out their hands.

Kabiyesi put me down, I went and shook hands round the assembly. The tall, self-consciously regal man was standing by a cupboard, lazily waving a fan across his face. When I came to him, he looked down on me from his great height and boomed out in so loud a voice that I was rocked backwards on my feet.

'What is this? Ọmọ tani?'

A chorus of voices replied, 'Ọmọ Soyinka' pointing to my father who was already in close conversation with Ọdẹmọ. The stranger's lip turned up in a sneer; in the same disorientating boom as before he ordered,

'Dọbalẹ!'

The response from the parlour was good-humoured, bantering … of course you don't know, they are these 'ara Egba', the children of Teacher, they don't even know how to prostrate (*Aké* 137).

We probably know the meaning of *wa nube wa gbowo* from the accompanying actions. But it is not clear whether *Dọbalẹ* simply means 'Prostrate yourself' as stated in the footnote. It may be a gesture more complicated than prostration. In addition to verisimilitude, a dramatic effect is also brought out in 'Dọbalẹ!', with a build up to it. But this citation 'Dọbalẹ!' also brings into play not just the vernacular, but also the culture it is associated with. Indeed the whole effect, with 'these "ara Egba", the children of Teacher, they don't even know how to prostrate' emphasizes the village as a place steeped in the traditional culture, and in sharp opposition to the one from which the 'ara Egba' have come. 'These "ara Egba"' may also involve a condescending attitude. Many of the local people, however, are willing to let the town dwellers be, but not the 'tall, self-consciously regal man'. The Teacher will take on the task of teaching prostration and *dọbalẹ* as soon as the visiting family are by themselves.

The piece is also interesting for other reasons than the interplay of English narration and Yoruba discourse. There is also the interplay of consciousnesses. What is narrated is the remembrances of the child who is effortlessly hoisted on the knee of the Ọdẹmọ. He is the persona and the substantive figure designated by the first-person 'the autobiographical form par excellence' (Benveniste 210), that should properly belong to discourse. But that person is in a state of capture by the narrator within whose linguistic operations he is reduced to a character, and 'the third person of the Novel' (Banfield). Henceforth, what we see of his consciousness is 'represented thought' (14). But this is where narration comes unstuck. The represented thought belongs to an adult consciousness:

When I came to him, he looked down on me from his great height and boomed out in so loud a voice that I was rocked backwards on my feet.

'He looked down on me from his great height' may be what the child sees, but it is not likely that this is how the child would state what he has seen or represents it to himself. So there is a split between what is seen and what is told – because the consciousness that perceives is that of a child, the one that narrates the perception that of an adult. Such a split is also observed in he 'boomed out in so loud a voice that I was rocked backwards on my feet'.

V. CONTEMPORARY SHIFTS: HYBRIDITY, FORGETFULNESS, AND THE SOCIAL NOVEL

A great example is Igbo where many members, even those with very low educational attainments have added large numbers of English words to their active repertoire. What is added may be words with no Igbo equivalent like camera, photo, video, weights and measures, heights and distances, values in money, clock time, modern information communication gadgets, household items and fittings like beer, bottle, bulb, coffee, (electric) fan, flask, fork, fridge, mattress, pan, pail, pillow, (light) switch, table, tea, teaspoon, tent; official documents like card, form, licence, passport; school materials like ink, pen, pencil, ruler, uniform; time pieces like clock, watch; shopkeeping paraphernalia like carton, dozen, packet, counter; workshop equipment like bolt, hammer, jack, nut, spanner. Other English words first enter the language as available alternatives to native Igbo words. These Igbo speakers mix the native Igbo and English codes in a form that has been jocously called Engli-Igbo, and it appears that most of the people who speak exclusively in Igbo in a conversation or even formal or semi-formal speaking events like sermons and homilies do so by conscious effort. Significant linguistic innovations such as give a sense of a living language responsive to the realities of time and place and circumstance may indeed occur in these formal and semi-formal speaking events. A living language like English seeks to capture important linguistic innovations appearing especially in print, and new editions of the authoritative dictionaries of the language register them. Whether from the dictionary or from the

original site of the innovation, other language users learn these new forms; and so they enter into circulation. A language like Igbo, heavily overshadowed by the power language, English, can only do this in a very limited degree. On the other hand, the habitual use of English replacives for available Igbo words like greetings, titles, and numerals can lead to those words gradually dropping out of everyday Igbo usage, giving the replacives a permanent place in a hybrid Engli-Igbo vocabulary.

Some of the contemporary writers are writing with no acknowledgment of the existence of a vernacular language or culture. Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* only makes an occasional acknowledgment of Pidgin, regarded by some to belong to the lower middle class, but shared by others, even the upper middle class, and used informally. Hence:

> Hello, Rufus. Na your sister be dis?
> How now, Grace. Na my sister.

Boma lowered her face instinctively (*Oil on Water*, chapter 9).

> Use of the Pidgin in the following from Chris Abani's *GraceLand* reflects a divide between the upper and lower middle classes:
>
> Okon grabbed Elvis by the hand.
>
> 'I dey serious my friend, nobody knows tomorrow. Remember— Okon.'
>
> Elvis looked from the intense eyes to the grip on his arm.
>
> 'Sure, Okon.'
>
> 'Dat's me' (Chapter 5).

The fate of the vernacular is obviously not an issue of equal importance to all the writers. With some all attention is given to the 'representing' of the issue that has given the impulse to writing, issues of global importance like climate change and mindless exploitation of earth's resources and pursuit of profit by multinationals with dire impact on human life and the ecosystem; some others are solely exercised by some particular socio-political problem apparently needing to be addressed, or any of the many problems of democracy and development that are the stuff of social discourse. A common assumption in these novels is that the received educational system, socio-political system, the rule of law, sanctity of elections, etc. are normative and not to be contested.

What we may call the social novels are therefore defenders of the values of democracy, the rule of law, individual rights, equity, social equality, responsible exercise of power, etc. in all their ramifications, and use language in such a way as to drive their point home – which language is not particularly important. But the default language for all this is the language bequeathed by the colonist. The social issues – just like the issues recommended by AfricaSon and the advocates of content – are in all these novels the objects of representation. But it is clear that they are not themselves literature or art. Literature or art can only be the work itself, and the social, political, cultural, religious issues the materials out of which literature has been constructed. This is speaking from the point of view of the Aristotelian tradition which continues in poststructuralism, where 'conventions of unity' are assumed (Culler 218), and guide reading 'in making various codes [functioning in the text] come together and cohere' (262). This contrasts with the Platonic system mentioned above. In Aristotle, the critical question is whether the incidents have been arranged in such a way that the incidents follow one another according to the order of probability or necessity (*Poetics*, chapter 9), and create 'a single, whole, and complete action, with beginning, middle, and end' (chapter 13). It is this single action that is the poem, whereas in the Platonic tradition, the represented 'message', the material object, the author's intention, or whatever is said to be 'the meaning' – which can depend on the interest behind the reading – can be given exclusive attention as what the particular work is all about.

In the conscious making of poetic art, such as in Ijeoma Umebinyuo, a contemporary poet and Christopher Okigbo in the 1960s, the concern may be not with the genesis of the language being turned into art in the same movement that the material of the construction is being turned into art. The problem that these kinds of literary works face may be simply how to order the language in hand to attain a construction with 'organic life' (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 343) or the character of 'self-contained independence' (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 31). But while the vernacular culture is embodied and a source of strength in Okigbo's English poetry, it is not at all noticeable in Umebinyuo. It would appear that at least some of Nigerian literature in the twenty-first century has decoupled from the vernacular culture and is taking form purely as English.

VI. COUNTER-CURRENTS: APPROPRIATION, VITALITY, AND THE LIMITS OF THE ARGUMENT

The ethnic languages are of course in use in their respective core areas where they serve as L1, with English as the Second Language, but English is Nigeria's official language and some like the Igbo have been complaining of increasing loss of ground to English, while still smaller language communities also complain of pressure from some of the more influential vernaculars. The language serving mainly in literary production is the official language of the country, that is the language of the former colonist, and it appears to be taken as read that serious literature is in English. But the persistence of the vernacular in the social space is frequently acknowledged through what Kristeva calls citation.

The debate over language probably fed from what was called Black aesthetics in America, itself an output of the civil rights movement. There was hardly any demand for substitution of any other components of the received social system. Capitalism was the other item of the colonial heritage, in addition to the Christian religion, that some of the intellectuals attacked, suggesting substitution by socialism, despite that socialism was equally of foreign origin. But these attacks seem not to have made any real difference. Capitalism was even more deeply entrenched than the power language, as its specific software had quickly embedded in the native language itself. Ultimately, the language movement was to collapse too. Today, writers work dominantly in the received colonial language, which in the case of Nigeria is English.

It is important to acknowledge counter-perspectives that see vitality in this landscape. The creative appropriation of English, theorized under models like Braj Kachru's "World Englishes," posits that Nigerian English is a legitimate, agential variety, not merely a tool of dependency. Furthermore, hybrid codes like Pidgin and "Engli-Igbo" are not solely signs of attrition; they can also be dynamic, creative spaces of linguistic innovation and identity formation. However, while these forms exhibit resilience and creativity, they do not fundamentally alter the structural power dynamic outlined in this article. They operate within a hierarchy still crowned by a standardized, institutional English. The primary argument here is not about the absence of creativity, but about the systematic absence of the institutional, secular translation work that would challenge vernaculars to develop *as standalone, fully-equipped languages* for modern discourse, in the way the missionaries initiated within the religious domain.

VII. CONCLUSION: THE PATH NOT TAKEN AND A FUTURE FOR AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Obiajunwa Wali's conception of African literature is tied to 'ideas of cultural authenticity' (Newell 8). For him this literature is inauthentic unless it simultaneously inscribes its cultural software in its surface as well as in its depth. An African cultural content in a non-African language is repugnant to him; and that is the anomaly that has provoked his paper. The scenario he envisages for African literature would have inevitably benefited the African languages in the same way as European languages, for instance, rose to higher levels of development in line with the evolving of the literary history. This is by reason of the constitutive role of language in the being of literature, according to Aristotle, the medium that enables the emergence of the poem itself (*Poetics*, chapter 1), that is, the only way in which this singular poem may 'accomplish existence' (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 135).

Another mechanism to assist the development of African languages is translation. Its power is seen in Christian religious activity in Africa. Besides religion, and outside the Swahili areas of Eastern Africa, the servicing of all the major out-group functions of the ethnic communities in contemporary Africa is by the official language; and this covers everything from education from senior primary onwards to commerce and exchange, from participation in socio-political discourse to the print media and information networks in a modern plural society, and as we have seen increasingly literature as well. The network powered by the official language has become so encompassing by the early twenty-first century that the preoccupations of the language scholars have all but shifted away from the debate why use the language of the colonists as the official language of an independent African nation. And concern for the subjugated African languages is a distant and dying memory. Instead language research in Nigeria is nowadays heavily focused on the question of the existence and features of Nigerian English. But as the study of native African languages is still provided for at all the educational levels, translation has a big role to play in opening of access to the world's literary archive in the vernacular languages. There is probably need also for government intervention to advance the study of the native languages with the help of well-funded translation studies to have a role in teaching things like science and technology.

The tragic irony this analysis exposes is that the fight for cultural self-representation, waged brilliantly through the colonizer's language, may have come at the cost of long-term linguistic sovereignty. The vernaculars survive, but in a state of dependency, their potential for autonomous growth curtailed not by explicit policy but by the very success of their literary defenders. The

path not taken—the path of sustained, secular translation into the vernacular, modelled by the missionaries for a different purpose—remains the clearest, if daunting, route to redeeming that sovereignty and ensuring African languages are not merely preserved as cultural artifacts, but developed as living tools for confronting a modern, globalized world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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