

Which Language(s) for African Literature

A reappraisal

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Abstract:

Language and literature have both been considered as important attributes of national identity. Besides, the nationality of any literature is, at least partly, determined by the language in which it is produced.

African literature today comprises an age-old oral tradition that makes use of the continent's numerous indigenous languages and a more recent tradition of written works, many of which are produced in the languages of European and other origins, which Africans have adopted. But some voices like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and others, have come up to say that literature produced in languages other than African languages is not African literature.

A reappraisal of this language controversy leads one, in a first step, to determine the attributes of the African identity. Linguistic diversity, involving the use, on the one hand, of indigenous African languages and of adopted languages of European and other origins, on the other, is seen to stand out as one of the determining features of Africa's identity which, upon examination, reveals itself as being both complex and many-sided.

If it is true that one cannot determine Africa's identity without reference to the sometimes juxtaposed and sometimes overlapping uses to which both Africa's native and adopted languages are put on a daily basis, then it seems reasonable that a literature that is both a factor and a product of that identity should also exploit and reflect the complementary relationship that already exists between Africa's native and non-native languages.

0. Introduction:

Language has long been considered as one of the important attributes of national identity. So, too, has literature. Indeed, language and literature are so closely linked in this respect that the great Slavic poet, Constantine the philosopher, is reported by Jakobson (1968) to have said, as early as the ninth century, that people without books in their language are naked and can be compared to a body deprived of proper food.

To reaffirm and consolidate the identity of the Slavic people, then under foreign domination, Constantine went ahead to develop his own vernacular dialect into a literary and liturgical language that came to be known in philology as Old- Church Slavonic.

The people of Africa have, for centuries, handed down from one generation to the next a tradition of oral (folk) literature in their various native languages. More recently, a tradition of literature produced in adopted foreign languages has developed alongside the oral tradition. The two traditions today constitute what is generally referred to as African literature. It is partly through this literature that today's African nations are striving to build and consolidate their respective identities. But one question has arisen that divides not only writers and critics, but also linguists, other social scientists, statesmen and even the citizens of these nations: In which language(s) should Africans produce their literature?

In attempts to answer this pertinent question, writers, critics and other interested persons have expressed various competing and often conflicting opinions, giving rise to a controversy that has lasted four decades, ever since some African writers met at Makerere University in Kampala in 1962.

The present paper reexamines this same question from a sociolinguistic perspective. Indeed, it strives to show that this debate is becoming old-fashioned. After a brief review of the various viewpoints expressed for and against African or European (foreign) languages, the paper looks at the question of African identity in an attempt to bring out its salient features. By focusing on the linguistic elements of African identity, the paper concludes that all of Africa's languages are viable vehicles of African literature in particular and of the African identity as a whole.

1. The Language Controversy

The controversy over which language or languages African writers should or may use in producing their literary works has often been presented as involving two opposing camps: a camp for indigenous African languages and against foreign (European) languages, led particularly by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and a camp largely in favor of adopted European languages, led by Chinua Achebe. Yet a clear examination of the views of the various writers and critics reveals that they are not really dichotomous.

1.1 Writers for African Languages and against European Languages

Writers and critics like Obi Wali, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Abiola Irele and others argue from the premise that for African literature to be authentic and worth the name, it must be produced in an African language. Numerous valid reasons are advanced in support of this premise.

Obi Wali, for instance, is cited by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1990) as having said, twenty years earlier, that African literature could only be written in African languages because these were the languages of the peasantry and working class "most suitable for triggering the necessary and inevitable revolution against neo-colonialism". In the context of the revolutionary literature in which Obi Wali was engaged, this reason is valid. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o strongly shares Obi Wali's vision, providing additional reasons to support it. African languages are the languages of the people the writers want to address; they provide direct access to the rich traditions of African peoples and, by using them, writers participate in the struggle against domination by foreign languages and against "wider imperialist domination" (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1981).

Elsewhere, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1990:74) celebrates the merits of African national languages, saying that he would like to see them "...carry a literature reflecting not only the rhythms of a child's spoken expression, but also his struggle with nature and his social nature". Ngugi actually places African languages at the top of a hierarchy of languages for the African when he adds: " With that harmony between himself, his language and his environment as a starting point, he can learn other languages and even enjoy the positive humanistic, democratic and revolutionary elements in other people's literatures and cultures, without any complexes about his own language, his own self, his environment" (ibid.).

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is, indeed, quite categorical about all the works African writers have produced in English or in any other European language: they are not African literature. Of those works produced in European languages he writes (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, 1990:73): " What we have created is another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature; that is, literature written by Africans in European languages".

Other writers have put up a strong case for African languages not only in the realm of literary creativity, but also in other spheres of national life. Towa (1985) calls for the development and use of indigenous African languages, because the exclusive use of European languages in government and politics hampers progress since the masses who do not master the so-called official language remain divorced from their leaders. Discussing the problems faced by the African translator, Nama (1989) points to various limitations that exist when the translator uses a foreign language. He concludes: " From a nationalistic standpoint, there is a tinge of artistic and cultural

betrayal in conveying the experiences of a particular society in the oppressor's tongue...." (p. 22).

One attitude seems to run through these views expressed in favor of African languages and against European languages. The various writers continue to view the European languages, which some of them use with so much dexterity, as languages that will forever be alien to Africans. After the colonial experience, such an attitude seems justified. But it may be based on preconceptions or on an inaccurate vision of Africa, as we shall attempt to show.

1.2 Writers for European Languages

It is a simple fact of the history of the so-called new African nations that many of the literary works produced by citizens of these countries before and even after independence were written in the languages of the European colonial powers. This is not surprising as these colonial powers promoted literacy in their languages, often to the detriment of African languages. Thus, many African writers, including Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and others who today tend to reject European languages, produced their early works in a European language.

When, however, some of them thought that it would be more 'African' to write in African languages and called for a rejection of European languages, others, like Chinua Achebe, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Timothy Wangusa, did not heed the call. They thought that English, or any European language that was well mastered by the writer, could equally be used by the African writer. Achebe, for instance, feels that English can carry the weight of his African experience (Spencer, 1971). He adds, however, that this will have to be "a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding" (Ibid. p. 167). Besides, other world languages fit into this role:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many kinds of use. The African writer should not aim to use English in a way that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning a form of English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience (Achebe, 1975: 61).

Writers who support the continued use of European languages advance other reasons for their choice: many African languages are still largely spoken and cannot at this stage be used in the production of written works. Besides, most literate Africans today are literate not in African languages but in a European language. Furthermore, the use of a European language also gives the writers access to a wider world audience.

While some of these reasons have been dismissed by certain advocates of African languages (Abiola Irele, 1981; Nama 1989), one point still needs to be made about this language controversy. Apart from expressing the fear that the (exclusive) use of African languages might, on account of the considerable linguistic diversity of African nations, give rise to ethnic literatures rather than national literatures, writers who support the use of European languages have hardly condemned the use of African languages. They have simply found it more expedient to use a European language.

Omole (1985:26) aptly describes this dilemma faced by African writers who are led by circumstances to use a European language as "a clash between a desirable ideal and a compelling reality". The desirable ideal, according to Omole (1982:33), is "the expected social functions of literature: to inform, entertain and reform....", while the compelling reality resides largely in Africa's linguistic complexities and the unpreparedness of many of the numerous African languages to immediately serve the writer's purpose. The virtues of these African languages thus appear to the acknowledged by most writers and critics.

2. The Identity of Present-day Africa

Many views have equally been expressed about national identity in general and about the identity of African nations in particular. Most discussions of identity issues agree that there are objective criteria for determining identity and objective markers of identity.

2.1 Markers of identity

Marcien Towa (1985) discusses the notion of identity in terms of that which permits us to single one thing out of many. This can be done by using objective criteria such as those used in the identification of individuals. He describes such criteria as: "un ensemble d'indications caractéristiques permettant de reconnaître, de retrouver un individu parmi d'autres individus avec lesquels il pourrait être confondu" .(Towa 1985: 24).

He also cites the example of identity fact sheets which ethnologists usually establish to help them distinguish between one ethnic group and another. Such sheets usually contain facts about the location of the group, its size, its activities, its institutions and kinship system, its customs and beliefs, etc. All of these objective criteria are helpful in establishing the identity of each group.

2.2 National Identities in Africa

With particular reference to national identity, Towa (1976) wonders if we can indeed talk of a Cameroonian, a Nigerian or even a Gabonese national identity. The difficulty in clearly determining national identities in Africa stems partly from the fact that African countries lack the unity they need to clearly identify them in terms of language, social structure, the economy, religion, etc. They are nearly all marked by linguistic diversity within their borders, by underdevelopment or the absence of an integrated economy, by social differences with a bourgeoisie on the one hand and proletariat on the other. All these shared features make one country look similar to the other.

Nevertheless, if national identity does not exist in terms of organic unity, Towa goes on, it could be construed in terms of a common aspiration to build such organic unity. National identity would be a myth if we were to rely on what used to be or what is. The absence of organic unity in the past, and even in the present, consecrates the fact that what characterizes African nations today, taken individually, is their lack of identity. Therefore, concludes Towa, we must choose now what we want to become: "Impossible d'éluder la nécessité de décider de notre option actuelle, de la ligne de conduite à suivre pour nous affirmer dans le monde actuel ..." (Towa 1976: 45).

In this respect, pan-Africanism, according to Towa, appears to be the best solution:

Dans le contexte mondial actuel, avec ses super-puissances aux dents longues, une telle identité autocentrée et intégrée ne peut se former qu'à l'échelle panafricaine (Ibid.: 46).

Mveng (1985), for his part, thinks that African countries can be identified with reference to a number of factors. In answer to the question "Y a-t-il une identité culturelle camerounaise?" (Is there a Cameroonian cultural identity?). His answer is affirmative:

L'identité culturelle camerounaise est un fait. Elle repose sur des facteurs évidents comme l'histoire, la géographie, les institutions politiques, et une extraordinaire variété artistique, linguistique, ethnique et économique (p. 8).

Thus, on much the same basis as the ethnological fact sheets to which Towa refers (1985), Mveng believes that we can identify African nations with reference to their history, their geography, their political institutions, their arts, their languages, etc. If, as Towa suggests, we discover in the process that African nations have numerous features in common, that will only go to confirm that in the apparent diversity of nations, there is a certain unity on which to build the pan-African ideal.

2.3 The Linguistics Markers of the African Identity

In the course of their long history, African peoples have repeatedly come into contact with peoples from other continents. These successive contacts have in varying degrees marked the linguistic evolution of huge portions of the continent. We know, for instance, that Arabic today has become a mother tongue to many African peoples who initially spoke indigenous African languages. Mahmud (1982) reports about an ongoing process of creolization involving Arabic-pidgins in the Southern Sudan. Yet we know that Arabic is not an indigenous African language, even if few seem to frown against its use in literary production.

The various European languages that found their way into African societies during the pre-colonial and colonial periods have come to occupy a fairly important place in the linguistic map of Africa. They have modified the linguistic landscape of the continent to such an extent that there is hardly any possibility of restoring the original landscape at any time in a foreseeable future. Today, the majority of Africa's former colonies continue to make fairly extensive use of the languages of their former masters, languages that many adopted upon accession to independence as 'official' languages.

When today we talk, in objective terms, of the linguistic markers of the identity of these nations in the making, we cannot fail to take into account the fact that they are utilizing, and intend to continue utilizing, these so-called European languages, which they are in the process of making theirs. In the worst of cases they are like the scars that are left behind on the face of the warrior and that go into his or her police identity record. At best, they can be seen as war trophies, which African nations grabbed from their erstwhile oppressors and which they jealously keep as a token of their new status. These adopted languages have come to further enrich the already rich legacy of indigenous languages handed down to us by our ancestors. The challenge of how best to manage this legacy is now ours.

3. Solving the Language Puzzle

The answer to the question 'Which language(s) for African literature?' will be found not in an isolated attempt to solve the language problems of Africa's literary artists but in a comprehensive effort to address the language issue in the life of our new nations. In this respect, a number of proposals have been made that are worth examining.

3.1 Raising African languages to National Status

Some of the proposals put forward converge on one point: one or a few indigenous African languages should be chosen from among the rest, developed in order to increase their communicative capacity and then placed above the European languages which now tend to dominate in the 'official' sphere.

Ngalasso (1990), in his discussion of language and authenticity in Zaire (RDC), for instance, opts for the development of one rather than several national languages for fear that a multiplicity of languages may give rise to the development of micro-nationalisms that could compromise the unity of the state.

Speaking from a pan-African perspective, Towa (1976: 47) goes one step further and proposes one or a few languages for the entire continent:

L'adoption et le développement d'une ou de plusieurs langues nationales assureraient l'intercommunication à l'intérieur de chaque nation, mais non entre les différentes nations africaines. A ce niveau les langues européennes continueraient à s'imposer, condamnant les nôtres à la marginalité. Notre problème linguistique ne sera pas résolu au fond tant que nous n'aurons pas choisi une langue ou un petit nombre de langues africaines comme moyens d'expression et de communication à l'échelle continentale.

As attractive as both proposals may sound, they pose the problem of how to choose the one or few languages to be used for communication at the national or continental level. Linguists may, on the basis of affinities that exist between the languages, be able to come up with a small number of languages either for national or for continental use, but the politician will find it a lot more difficult to choose because of the very serious political implications that the choice of one language rather than another may have. How feasible, for instance, is Ngalasso's proposal in favor of one national language for the Democratic Republic of the Congo at present?

3.2 The Case for Linguistic Integration Based on Complementary Languages

Tadadjeu (1985) makes a strong case for a policy of linguistic Integration for Cameroon in particular and for Africa in general which requires that individuals acquire the use of at least two languages: an African language, which may be the user's mother tongue or any other language of his/her choice, and at least one European language. For Cameroonians in particular, Tadadjeu proposes the acquisition of both English and French in addition to an indigenous language.

Indeed, this Cameroonian linguist argues that both African and European languages can happily co-exist and function in a complementary manner. He assigns the functions of each group as follows:

Une fonction horizontale permettant à tout Camerounais [Africain] de communiquer avec tout autre Camerounais [Africain], quelles que soient leurs origines respectives. Cette fonction est assumée par nos deux langues officielles [européennes] et par les langues nationales [africaines] véhiculaires. Une fonction verticale permettant à tout Camerounais [Africain] de s'intégrer dans sa communauté linguistique d'origine (ou de choix) et de participer au développement culturel de cette communauté. (Tadadjeu 1985: 191).

Such an option, if given support at regional, national and local levels, will enable Africans to preserve, develop and use, not only one or a few of their numerous indigenous languages, but all of them. It also has the advantage of permitting us to keep the various other languages of European origin that give us access to the rest of the world. Besides, no language is imposed on any individual or group. Individuals and communities are simply guided to choose and learn the languages they need to take full control of their lives. In this respect, Tadadjeu's proposal provides a practical and a democratic solution to the language problem of many communities.

4. Conclusion: Implications of the Complementary Option for the Literary Artist

The question we set out to answer in the present paper remains: 'Which language(s) for African literature?'. After examining various language-planning options available to the continent at various levels, we may safely advance the following answer: 'Any or all of the various languages in use on the continent and with which the Africans themselves can identify at some or all levels'.

The writer may thus choose to use an indigenous African language to address fellow Africans who speak and identify with that language, because it is the language of their childhood, of their dreams and their ancestors. But the writer's immediate audience will be fairly limited in many cases, considering the extent of home- language diversity in many parts of the continent.

Should the writer wish to reach a wider African audience, he/she would have to choose as a vehicle a language of African origin that he/she shares with the proposed audience. In the absence of such a vehicular language, he/she would still have the possibility of choosing one of the fairly widely shared languages of European origin which many African states have adopted and are using for a fairly wide range of communicative purposes. These adopted languages in many cases have come to stay, and more and more Africans are beginning to identify with them, at least as far as certain spheres of their existence are concerned: education, employment, business, administration, interethnic communication, etc. Besides, as Towa (1985) observes,

there are whole generations of young Africans to whom these adopted languages are the only viable means of communication. We may term them 'déracinés', but they remain Africans whom the literary artist must also strive to reach. And if the African writer ever wished to share his/her African experience with a non-African audience, his/her adopted language(s) of European origin, already widely shared at the world level, would be a viable means of self-expression.

In Ngugi Wa Thiongo's (1990:73) terms, works produced in these adopted languages would be part of a hybrid tradition, "a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed as Afro-European literature, that is, literature written by Africans in European languages". Admittedly, we are in the presence of a hybrid tradition, but that is nothing to be ashamed of or surprised about. Hybridization is one of the salient features of today's African personality and identity. Almost all social strata have been touched in varying degrees by this phenomenon, which by the way does not spare any human society. Besides, the dynamism of human societies makes each period look like a transition leading to the next. And as for the suggestion that this tradition is a minority tradition, it appears quite reasonable. Considered in strictly linguistic terms, Africa is a land of minorities: Any one language, be it of African or European origin, placed side by side with the multiplicity of languages in Africa, assumes minority status. So, too, are the literatures produced in each of those languages, until such a time that the situation evolves towards greater unity. Even then, African literature is likely to remain a multilingual literature.

But what does not appear to be reasonable in Ngugi's statement is the suggestion that because Africans produce literature in a European language it is not African literature. To begin with, our knowledge of linguistic history tells us that it is often easier to determine the origin of languages than to predict their final destination. Is not the English language today the native tongue not only of the English, but also of most North Americans, Australians and New Zealanders? Did not this same English, barely some sixteen hundred years ago, exist in the form of dialects spoken by some Germanic tribes known to us as Angles, Saxons and Jutes? Must we today term American, Canadian and Australian literatures hybrid literatures? African literature as a written tradition is still very young and in the very process of self-determination. Nothing stops us from attempting, like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and others, to give direction to it. But our wishes will remain wishes unless they rhyme with the various forces at play. These forces are many and complex; they are political, social, economic, cultural, etc.

Incidentally, in spite of his insistence on the use of African languages for African literature, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1990) somewhere admits that the content of literature also determines its character: "Content with which the people could identify or which would force them to take sides. [...] Content is ultimately the arbiter of form" (p. 75).

Content such as Ngugi describes in this passage could thus constitute the unifying factor in African literature. This would somehow liberate the African literary artist who would henceforth be free to choose not only the specific African issues to address, but also the audience with whom to communicate and the language or languages in which to exercise his craft. And thus the longstanding controversy over the language of literature and Africa would be said to be laid to rest, at least for a while.

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