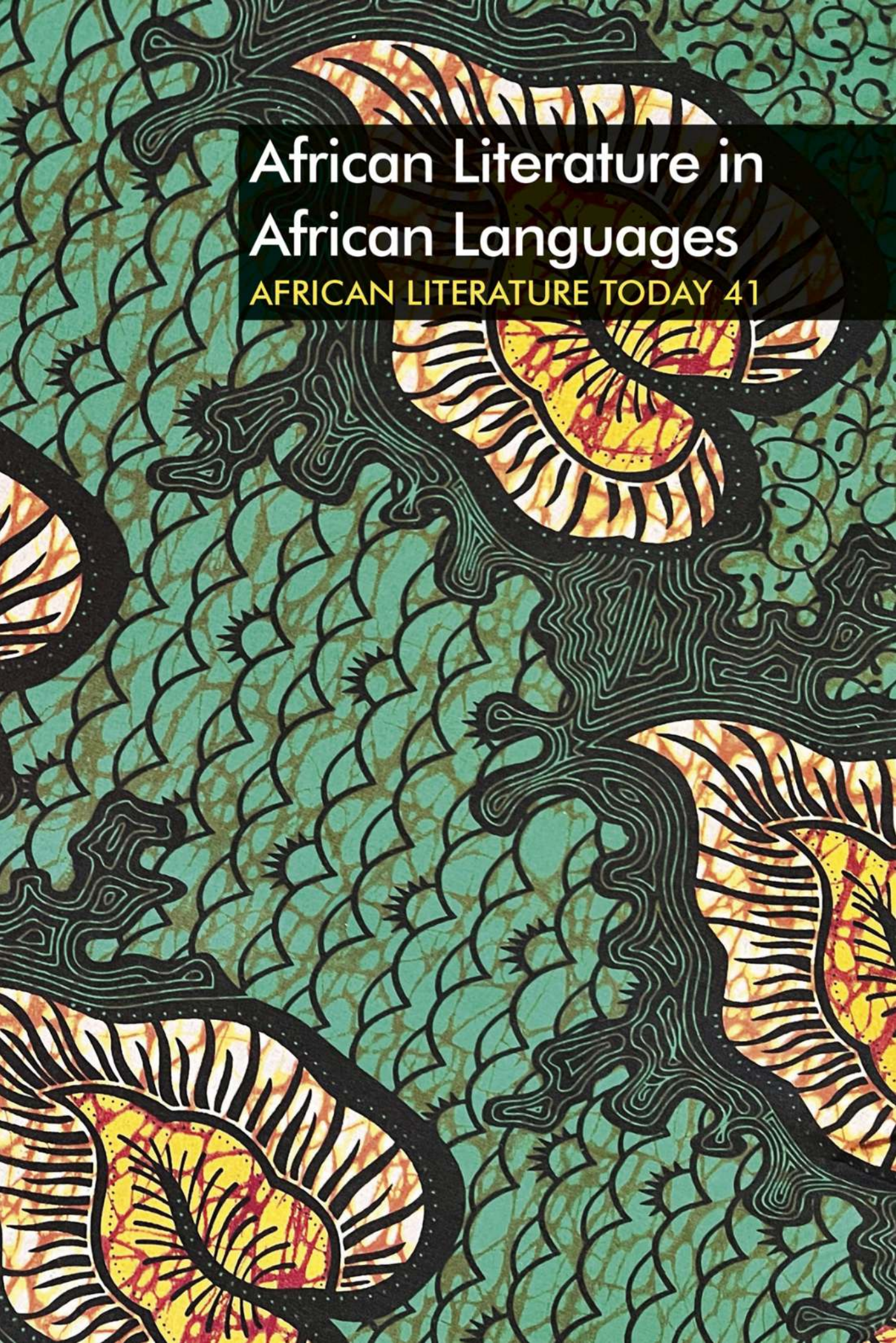
African Literature in African Languages
AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY 41

African Literature in African Languages

AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY 41

Guest Editors: Chiji Akọma
Nduka Otiono

JAMES CURREY

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As we were going to press with this volume, we got the news of the death in Ghana of Ama Ata Aidoo (23 March 1942 – 31 May 2023), a pioneer consummate feminist voice of all time! We will carry a full tribute of her life and work in the next issue, *ALT 42*.

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Alexander Opicho is a poet, essayist, literary critic, as well as a short story writer, from Kenya.

Jeff Opland is the author and editor of numerous articles, books and anthologies of Anglo-Saxon and Xhosa literature. After a career in which he taught at universities in South Africa, Canada, the United Sates, Germany and England, he retired and now lives in Wales.

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Introduction

African Literature in African Languages: Orality and the Burden of Modernity

NDUKA OTIONO & CHIJI AKỌMA

A year after the much-celebrated 'Conference of African Writers of English Expression', which took place in Uganda in 1962, Obiajunwa Wali published a scathing article, 'The Dead End of African Literature?' in the journal *Transition*, in which he criticized the privileging of African literatures written in European languages over those in indigenous African languages, as evidenced by the category of African writers invited to the conference. Much has been made of his problematic attempt to define African literature and prescribe texts that fit the form, but Wali threw an important challenge to his readers towards the end of his short essay, stating: 'What one would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility' (*Transition*, 10 September 1963: 14). Central to this debate on the politics of language in African literature are two canonical essays by two of Africa's foremost novelists, 'The African Writer and the English Language' by Chinua Achebe and 'The Language of African Literature' by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. These two texts, to which we shall return later, have come to represent, broadly, the two 'tendencies' writers and scholars of African literatures exhibit when debates about the languages of African literature are wont to erupt.

Sixty years have passed since that historic Makerere University conference in which indigenous African language literatures were conspicuously cast aside for those written in English or French. In the intervening years, discursive approaches such as postcolonialism, postmodernism, and world literature (Damrosch; Prendergast) have compounded the debate and stretched the binary/dichotomy between African (oral) literatures in indigenous languages and 'modern' African literatures in European languages or languages of the colonizers. Given the renewed interest in this abiding question of the language of African literatures in the context of decoloniality and the promotion

of prizes to recognize and encourage writing in African languages and to kindle translation from, between, and into African languages, exemplified by the Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature (see https://kiswahiliprize.cornell.edu), it is pertinent to return to Wali's submission and ask: What is the state of African literatures in African languages today?

* * *

The six articles that we have curated for this special edition of the journal address two important aspects of studies in African language literatures: the capacity of indigenous cultural production to keep past traditions alive while standing firmly in the present, and the continued power of translation projects to build cultural and linguistic bridges. These articles reflect critical engagement with that body of African literary production where oral texts and those originally written in indigenous African languages reveal their dynamism and relevance in understanding African societies today. They do not speak of a bygone age; they are not archival items to be retrieved, polished, and returned to the cellars. Instead, the articles examine literary works that ventilate contemporary issues, such as environmental preservation and global capitalism. But by representing these ideas originally through indigenous languages or via the medium of translation, these articles equally draw attention to the beauty and wholeness of indigenous African languages in fostering and defining African literary performance aesthetics.

For an appreciation of the dimensions of cultural production in indigenous languages, Jeff Opland takes a magisterial view of South Africa's Xhosa language literature. Unarguably the doyen in that field, Opland offers what could well be described as a condensed history of Xhosa written literatures, identifying writers such as Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi, Nontsizi Mgqwetho, and David Manisi, in addition to tracing the earliest Xhosa writings to as far back as the early 1800s. Opland's article is significant in highlighting the tremendous work he and others have done not only in transcribing many of the oral texts, but in translating them for appreciation and study by a much wider audience.

In Chike Okoye and Juliet Ifunanya Okeyika's article, '"A People's Firewood Cooks for Them": The Contextual Prosody of Igbo Mask Poetry and Mbem Poetics', one critical aspect of the revered Igbo mask theatre, the *mbem* (poetic chants) performed by the masks, forms the basis of inquiry. Setting aside the dynamism of the theatre, Okoye and Okeyika examine the artistic value of the Igbo chants, laden with proverbs and dense imagery. Perhaps, more importantly,

the authors advance what they call 'Mbem Poetics', a theoretical construct that aims to provide a more encompassing framework for understanding Igbo mask chants and poems, focusing on prosody as the key to unveiling the indigenous knowledge system embedded in the performances. In many ways, Okoye and Okeyika's article echoes the theoretical reflections of Emenanjo ('From Third World to First', 'The Modernisation of the Igbo Language', 'Written Literature in the Major Nigerian Languages') and of Obiechina (*Nchetaka*: *The Story, Memory and Continuity of Igbo Culture*). Particularly applicable is Obiechina's poignant observation that 'the Igbo of today are linked to the Igbo of by-gone ages … not only at the surface level of everyday communications, but at the deeper, symbolical level of myths, tales and fables, of values and patterns of meaning and signification' (25).

To be clear, the discussion of knowledge production through poetic language systems is not to suggest a simple utilitarian quality to the indigenous language presence in performance. The theoretical offering provides a lens through which the unique features, themes, and techniques employed in Igbo poetry and oral performances can be analysed and appreciated. Artistry emerging as the intermingling of individual talent and communal aesthetics still shines brightly over whatever norms and ethos of the community are gleaned from the performances. This is what makes Marame Gueye's discussion of the *bàkku*, a form of the panegyric among the Wolof of Senegal, specifically performed during traditional wrestling matches (the *làmb*) particularly fascinating. Wolof traditional wrestling lies in the domain of men, and performing the *bàkku*, the wrestler's self-praise delivered with wit and rhetorical sophistication, adds to the masculine mystique of the entire tradition. Gueye notes that, while contemporary wrestling remains popular, even as it has taken more and more Western capitalist undertones there is less of the accompanying *bàkku* performance as younger wrestlers pay perfunctory homage to that tradition.

In a culture where griots still command the highest social space in oral traditional performances, Gueye's focus on the *bàkku* tradition is important. But even more so is the analytical move she makes on that genre by arguing that part of *bàkku*'s panegyric elements are actually borrowings from two other oral genres performed by women – the *taasu* and the *xaxar*. While both genres feature women in self-praise either in the context of family celebrations or in rivalry with co-wives, Gueye's work shows the resilience of the African performance text in the face of changing economies and gender stratification.

This volume features two different articles on written Bini poetry. Among the numerous languages spoken in Nigeria, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo have received more attention than the rest, basically because they also command the greatest number of speakers in the national population. Despite the multiplicity of dialects in those three languages, they have also managed to develop standard forms for writing in them so that speakers of the various dialects can read and write in a common vernacular. Although other languages such as Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, Edo, Idoma, Fulfulde, Igala, and Kanuri have evidence of written traditions, unfortunately they have not garnered as much attention as the 'Big Three'. It was partially in recognition of that reality that we gave the spots to the two Bini articles. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro's 'Pictures of Materialism in the Benin Ecological Worldview: Eco-Critical Poems of Osemwengie Ero' draws attention to the poems of the contemporary poet, Osemwengie Ero, who writes in the Edo language. Ero's formal education in linguistics and Edo language and his social standing as a titled man in Benin certainly colour his poetry, with his rich representation of the flora and fauna of the ancient kingdom captured in the formal poetic structures possibly nurtured by his own advanced studies at the university.

In their analysis, Eke and Mukoro examine the ways that Ero's poetry draws attention to the Benin worldview concerning the sacredness of the environment and, by implication, the responsibility of the Benin people to preserve that world. There are elements of Bini spiritual values that are alluded to but, again, the authors are careful to direct our attention to one of the pressing concerns of our time – global warming and the imperatives on humans to help heal the earth. Since they are working from an Edo text, the authors further validate that worldview by seeking the interpretation of certain lines and ideas in the poems from knowledgeable members of Bini society. The point that comes through is the capacity of Ero's Bini poetic expressions to successfully capture the beauty of the Bini world using the sensibility of the culture within that linguistic milieu.

Similarly, Uyilawa Usuanlele's article on another Bini artist, Ikponmwosa Osemwegie, represents an effort to bring the Bini epic tradition as written by Osemwegie to a wider audience through translation. Osemwegie was a pioneering writer in the Edo language in the 1950s, when the British colonial administration did not have the development of Nigerian indigenous languages as one of its priorities. Indeed, even after independence, as we mentioned earlier, Edo was not in the top tier of languages receiving significant support for development

as far as its written tradition was concerned. Therefore, Osemwegie's choice to write in Edo and share his research into Benin history, culture, and tradition made him a folk hero in Edo land for those interested in seeing their culture and history represented in writing.

Usuanlele's article is an original and significant contribution to the historiography and development of Edo literature with Osemwegie's *Ọrọ* epic constituting the high point of indigenous literary craft. Granted, the history and visual arts of the Edo have enjoyed sustained scholarly attention for nearly a century. However, there has not been much research and analytical work on Bini/Edo literary traditions. The article demonstrates how Osemwegie and his contemporaries inaugurated a thriving tradition of creative writing in the Edo/Bini language. In this regard, the essay broadens and deepens our knowledge and appreciation of the literature beyond references available in studies by historians, anthropologists, and ethnographers.

The detailed historical background in the article reveals fresh insights on the various factors that impeded the development of the Edo indigenous language and its literature during the era of British colonial rule. The heroic efforts made by the Edo elite to surmount these hurdles offer valuable lessons for researchers working on other areas of Africa. The section of the article that chronicles Osemwegie's writings and creative engagement illustrates his genius. The final section of the article examines the themes and techniques in the *Ọrọ* epic. Although the text of the epic is not provided, the synoptic analysis enables us to see how the epic contributes to the debate on the genre of African epic. The analysis draws attention to the cultural and historical context that engendered the story, particularly the Benin-Idah war of the seventeenth century.

The scholarly merit of the article also rests on the discussion around the translation of the *Ọrọ* epic. The intellectual collaboration between the composer/writer (Osemwegie), the work of the distinguished American anthropologist and scholar on Benin, Professor Joseph Nevadomsky, and his wife, Rebecca Agheyisi, as well as other custodians of Edo folklore and language underscores an important aspect of the epic form. This process involves multiple creative voices, and they add to the thematic and aesthetic quality of the work. This creative enterprise alludes to the matter of oral epic narratology discussed extensively by Isidore Okpewho in his study of J.P. Clark's *The Ozidi Saga*. In Usuanlele's article, therefore, we not only learn about the pioneering work of this Bini artist and historian, we also learn about the development of written Edo, Professor Nevadomsky's

extensive work with Osemwegie, and Usuanlele's fateful role now as the executor and finisher of the collaborative translation work that Osemwegie and Nevadomsky had started, as both are now deceased.

Ida Hadjivayanis contribution to this collection titled 'The Swahili *Mtapta*: Exploring Translation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*', emerges out of her translation of the Nobel laureate's novel in English, *Paradise*, into *Kiwahili*, with emphasis on its treatment of the very act and process of translation. As Hadjivayanis writes, the novel is set in a region that, for centuries, had vast trading networks that extended from continental East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, India, Persia, China, Indonesia, and the Mediterranean. Trade was vital in creating relationships through multilingual connections and networks that were distinctively Swahili. In *Paradise*, Gurnah writes about a society where *Kiswahili*, a language that has absorbed vocabulary from across the Indian Ocean and beyond, is established as the lingua franca in the region. Various languages that are spoken rely on *Kiswahili* to cut across the area's diverse linguistic, religious, and political communities. In this article, Hadjivayanis explores how Gurnah grapples with that language conundrum by empowering the Swahili voice in colonial East Africa through the mediating force of translation. Hadjivayanis' article emphasizes the important role that translation plays in shaping the trajectories and relationships that exist among the characters in the novel, while offering a glimpse into her own translation of *Peponi*, the first translation of *Paradise* into an African language.

* * *

There's no gainsaying the fact that collaboration is at the heart of the production and circulation of African literature in African languages, as evident in the articles included in this special edition of *ALT*. Additionally, the articles exemplify how translation relays the complex interface between orality and the burden of modernity. The works of the contributors to this issue reflect the different aspects of literary production in African languages. Understandably, the focus is more on written literature. In conceptualizing this special issue, we had hoped to attract submissions on other literary forms in African languages. Of great importance are topics on literary production, orality, readership, authorship and community ethos, African modernity, translation, and digitization. We had hoped that, on the diamond jubilee anniversary of the historic 1962 Makerere Conference on African literature, reflections on the state of African literatures in African languages today would include articles that offer comparative meditations on African language literatures and African literatures in European languages,

with a view to understanding what Wali calls 'a truly African sensibility' (14). Furthermore, we had hoped that we would receive a bounteous harvest of papers that highlight language systems and aesthetic values in original literary texts in African languages, as well as articles that pay attention to the regional peculiarities of literary production.

That we have not really received the expected robust submissions indeed raises some questions about the state of African literatures in African languages today. Although one may suggest some reasons for the lean harvest, it is fair to say that, without a detailed, data-driven, quantitative analysis, such reasons may be at best speculative. Nevertheless, is it possible that the few submissions received for this special issue reflect the overall parlous state of African literature in African languages? How popular is African literature in African languages? What is the demographic of writers who subscribe to the idea of writing in indigenous languages? How many entries are received annually for the few awards for writing in indigenous African languages such as the Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature?

The answers to these questions may shed light on the state of African literatures in African languages today. Notwithstanding the answers, contemporary African writers at home and in the diasporas have increasingly demonstrated consciousness about the growing decolonial practices in intellectual and cultural production. Recognizing the three main streams of literary production – orality and oral tradition, writing in indigenous African languages, and writing in European languages – young African writers have boldly staked their claims to the 'globalectic' (wa Thiong'o 2012) or 'world-ness' of their scribal practices within world literature. This partly explains their resistance to the use of glossaries for local words or terms used in their writing, unlike the practice by the literary forebears. The integrity of the new hybrid expressive forms goes beyond the idea of 'New Englishes' to the insistence by the new generation of African writers that international readers of their works tackle unfamiliar words by searching out their meanings online. The corollary of this new cultural independence or confidence is in the creation of special dictionaries for some of the neologisms, slangs, or pidgin. A good example of the point being made here is the establishment of the Naija lingo (or the Nigerian pidgin) dictionary online. These new expressive forms are often hybrids or glocal in nature – as it were, combining local and European languages – especially in the urban centres. Indeed, as Thaddeus Menang notes,

> 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. (n.p.)

The choices made by these contemporary writers are partly shaped by Ngũgĩ's observation that 'language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century' ('The Language of African Literature'). Extending the imperial domination of the language of literary expression, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o further notes: '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' (73). As a side note, indeed, we had invited Ngũgĩ to contribute to this edition, but he could not because of health challenges. However, in his e-mail, he restated his position on the language of African literature emphatically:

> African literature is that literature written by Africans in African Languages. English, French, and Portuguese are NOT and WILL NEVER become African. Furthermore, they are colonial to us. African intellectuals have become prisoners of the mind. Without knowing it they have betrayed Africa.

For his part, Achebe rationalizes that

> [t]he 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. (61)

For all the pragmatism in Achebe's words here, we can also see how this backhanded privileging of English, however it is 'domesticated' and rendered hegemonically inevitable, has depressed advances in African language literary production and studies. One need not look further than the fate of translating Achebe's own debut novel, *Things Fall Apart*, into his native Igbo language. For a novel that has been translated into sixty-one world languages (as noted in *Brittle Paper*'s 'They Say There are Over 50 Translations of Things Fall Apart'), Achebe's opposition to the adoption of 'Standard Igbo' (*Igbo Izugbe*) for written Igbo, advocating instead for writers to write in their individual Igbo dialects, profoundly discouraged Igbo translation of that masterpiece about Igbo people. Ernest N. Emenyonu's groundbreaking *The Literary History of the Igbo Novel* devotes an entire chapter, 'Chinua Achebe and the Problematics

of Writing in Indigenous Nigerian Languages: Towards a Resolution of the Igbo Language Predicament', to this issue. That position by such an influential writer may well account for the fact that even though Izuu Nwankwọ published *Ihe Aghasaa* (2008) as his translation of *Things Fall Apart*, that work is hardly cited formally as the novel's Igbo translation, as the *Brittle Paper* compilation would seem to confirm.

It would appear then that many contemporary African writers have had to balance both Ngũgĩ's and Achebe's approaches to the language question by producing a hybrid. The idea of hybridization has culminated in the use of such terms for African cultural identities as 'Afropolitanism' and 'Afropeanism', the latter, coined by David Byrne and Marie Daulne of Zap Mama in 1991, being applied by Sabyl Ghoussoub to evoke 'a zone of fusion and blurring, plural identities, diverse visions of constantly evolving, self-questioning Afropean identity' ('Afropean: Plural Identities' n.p.). But more conceptually stated, in Hicham Gourgem's words, 'the two concepts informed by anglophone and francophone African experience respectively – "Afropolitan" and "Afropean" – construct cultural dialogue through an over-reliance on a dualized Western-African relation' ('Beyond Afropolitanism'). The indigenous-Western duality is implicated in much of the identity politics that we witness in the writings of contemporary African writers, some of whom live in the diaspora and embrace the new identities as Afropolitans or New Age citizens who depend on the new technologies of communication for literary production. Hence, as Thaddeus Menang rightly notes,

> 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. (n.p.)

The most defining aspect of the current transition is technological advancement. It is apposite then to conclude this Introduction with a contemplation of the role of AI or artificial intelligence on the state of African literatures in African languages today. Given the advances in real-time translation software and other sophisticated technologies of writing, it remains to be seen how our contemporary writers would deploy these technologies for producing African literatures in indigenous languages. The potentials of AI in the sense being cited here is articulated in Gutherz et al (2023) which explains how AI could assist scholars and interested laypeople alike to automatically translate 5,000-year-old cuneiform tablets.

Although the articles collected in this volume do not explore the implications of AI for our field of focus, they productively refocus attention on matters arising in the field. Particularly noteworthy, as we have tried to demonstrate, is the fact that concern for the sustenance of Africa's rich oral and literary heritage in indigenous and non-African languages is still strong. This is evident in the coverage of articles in this volume – ranging from the minority literature of the Bini people, through the rich oral traditions of the Igbo mask theatre, the *mbem* (poetic chants), to Nobel Laureate Gurnah's Swahili-defined novel set in a region that stretched from continental East Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, Asia and Europe, to Jeff Opland's authoritative recounting of South Africa's Xhosa language literature. It should be noted that, while we grapple with the importance of promoting African literatures in African languages, the lesson of the success with Afrikaans needs to be highlighted. As Sean Jacobs, the founder and editor of *Africa is a Country* points out in his review of Mahmood Mamdani's work, 'it is no exaggeration to say that Afrikaans represents the most successful decolonizing initiative on the African continent' and 'no postcolonial government elsewhere on the continent had elevated indigenous languages to languages of science or humanities, beyond what he [Mamdani] described as "folkloric"' ('When the war is over' n.p.).

Finally, besides the articles, this volume also features a Literary Supplement comprising poems by Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Amaka Blossom Chime, Blessing Ezinne Okah, Alexander Opicho, Stephen Oladele Solanke, Aisha Umar, and a short story by Felicia Moh. The Literary Supplement is followed by Featured Articles by Ukachi Wachuku and Chijioke Onah, and Reviews by Kufre Usanga and Iniobong I. Uko.

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Articles

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Pictures of Materialism in the Benin Ecological Worldview

Eco-Critical Poems of Osemwengie Ero

KOLA EKE & EDAFE MUKORO

African eco-criticism is an offshoot of environmental literature and environmentalism in general, which tends to focus mainly on Western epistemology rooted in the environmental justice movement and postcolonial eco-criticism. The idea of African eco-criticism serves as a call to rethink Western ideology concerning the preservation of the environment. While African eco-criticism is not opposed to the continuance of environmental discourses, nonetheless, it is important to point out that the African view concerning environmental materialism has always recognized the importance and interdependence of the human and beyond-human worlds. The culture, traditions and religious sensibilities of Africans have always maintained a common relationship between humans and the ecological surroundings and how these materialisms in varying degrees expand the physical and spiritual sensibilities of the people. In this light, this article shows the connections between eco-criticism, eco-philosophy and spiritual materialism that are consistent with Africans and the appreciation of nature. This 'proximity', to quote the word of Cajetan Iheka ('Naturalizing Africa' 2), remains the forte of African eco-criticism within the diverse worlds of ecological ecosystems.

Emmanuel Egya, in looking at the idea of African eco-criticism, considers it as

> based on specific natural, cultural and social particularities of the continent – more specifically, those of Sub-Saharan Africa, … [it] recognize(s) the commonalities between the natural and human worlds that have been understood to exist in Africa … it is rather a call to let the continent speak for itself in discourses about the connections between the human and the non-human, and between literature and ecology. (67)

Egya's position on African eco-criticism recognizes the interface between nature, culture and African sensibilities. In fact, in his

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language, he refers to these intimations as the 'social particularities of the continent'. Here he draws our attention to the unique environmental characteristics that define Africans, especially 'those of Sub-Saharan' extractions who exhibit common eco-critical dispositions. The critic's ideas align with the responses of Africans towards the appreciation of environmental materialisms in the form of trees, leaves, animals, rivers (water), earth (sand), rocks, stones, cowries, the moon, the sun, and their associated relationship with the human and beyond-human world of spirits – who are in themselves considered as material agents within the ecosystem. As John Mbiti puts it, a 'majority of peoples (Africans) hold that the spirits dwell in the woods, bush, forest, rivers, mountains… and often these are associated with natural phenomena or objects' (*African Religions and Philosophy* 80). As a matter of fact, the preservation of these eco-critical entities within the African milieu transcends the Western epistemology of de-carbonization, promotion of clean air' and mitigating the effects of climate change and other scientific preoccupations. Africans consider these natural entities as the after-effect of neglecting 'the commonalities between the natural and the human worlds', especially as it concerns the cultural, biological, and spiritual efficacy of environmental understanding. In this connection, African eco-criticism becomes 'a call to let the continent speak for itself' (Egya 69) and at the same time enlighten the world about its unique understanding in 'discourses about the connections between the human and the non-human and between literature and ecology' (69).

The Benin ecological worldview is a product of African eco-criticism and materialism. This is primarily so because the Benin people are not just Africans, but they demonstrate the 'commonalities' and 'particularities' that 'exist in Africa' (69), especially within the milieu of ecological, natural, cultural, spiritual, and social constructs. To put it in proper perspective, the Benin ecological worldview is connected with the response(s) of the Benin people to ecological materials, their way of thinking, comprehension, attitude, mindset (which is rooted in their belief system), and understanding of life. This is related to what Workineh Kelbessa sees as 'environmental philosophy'. The critic goes on to state that 'Environmental Philosophy accommodates metaphysical, epistemological, aesthetic and other related issues. It argues for a much wider, more comprehensive view of the relation of environmentalism to philosophy, culture, life and thought' ('Environmental Philosophy in African Traditions of Thought' 312). The instructive thing about this viewpoint is that it controls

the perspectives of the Benin people – social, economic, religious, and educational, as well as linguistic. Moreover, their conception and appreciation of materiality are shaped by the common view of Africans that within the materials in the environment lie the supernatural world of spirits, who share a relationship with the human world. This is what Paul-Kolade Tubi considers as the 'traditional African approach to ecological sustenance' ('Afroecology of Traditional African Societies' 311). This 'approach' not only stresses but shows the 'proximity' between the human and the non-human within the Benin Kingdom and its people. In fact, the royal status of the kingdom is inextricably tied to this worldview as it shapes their perspectives on the preservation and protection of the kingdom and its royalty as well as its majestic fame and relevance to the world. The Benin people of the Kingdom of Benin are the dominant Edoid ethnic group in Edo State, South-South Nigeria in West Africa. The kingdom has as its capital Benin City, which is also the capital of Edo State. As a kingdom, the present king is Oba Ewuare II – the Oba of Benin – who was crowned on 20 October 2016, becoming the 40th Oba of the kingdom. He is the supreme head and custodian of the traditions, culture, and customs of the kingdom. He is seen as 'divine' as he commands high respect and authority (Bradbury, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking People of South-western Nigeria* 40). In terms of their linguistic background, the Benin speak Edo, or Bini, which is one of the linguistic varieties of the Edoid language family spoken in the southern part of Nigeria. In 1897, the Benin Kingdom was invaded by the British army, with the subsequent massacre of the people and the destruction of parts of the country. That invasion remains one of the most pivotal events in the history and life of the Benin people and the kingdom.

Osemwengie Ero is a member of the Uzama N'Ihiron (The Seven Kingmakers) in the Great Benin Kingdom. He hails from the family of Ero, Benin City. He is a prolific poet and an outstanding promoter of Benin culture and history, as seen through his writings in the Edo language, such as *Okha Edo (Short Stories in Edo)*, *Ekhaha Edo (Poems in Edo)* and so on. Ero gained his first and second degrees in Linguistics and the Edo language as well as the Language Art Curriculum at the Universities of Benin and Lagos respectively, in Nigeria. He is the Edobayokhae of Benin Kingdom – a chieftaincy title – conferred on him in 2010 by Oba Erediauwa of Benin. He is married and has children. A close reading of selected poems from *Ekhaha* shows his understanding of the Benin ecological worldview and sense of eco-materialism, as well as values within the context of African eco-criticism and, by

extension, African sensibilities. The poems not only grant us insights into the philosophical intimations in African eco-criticism but they also astound our imaginations with the spiritual dimension rooted in the theory.

In the poem entitled 'Okperhan' (The Big Tree), Ero poetizes in a rather philosophical and spiritual manner the understanding of the Benin with regard to the efficacy of the eco-critical materiality of 'Okperhan'. The poem is cast in the form of an apostrophe:

Okperhan ne I lẹ̀re yi	The big tree I take refuge in
Ne ọ maa gi amẹ̀ gbe mwẹ̀	That does not allow the rain to drench me
Ne ọ maa gi ovẹ̀n ka mwẹ̀	That does not allow the sun to scorch me
Okperhan ne I lere yi	The big tree I take refuge in
Irhu ne u rhie mẹ̀ lẹ̀re yi	The shade you gave me as cover
I kpọ̀nmwọ̀ yọ̀ ẹ̀sẹ̀sẹ̀	I thank you so much
Ghe ọ̀fumwegbe nọ̀	It is peaceful
Te u ghe miẹ̀ afiangbe nii	It shall be well with you

(Ekhạrhạ Ẹdo 44, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The picture that is painted here moves our visual senses to capture the speaker addressing 'Okperhan'. The language of the speaker is wrapped in reverence towards the addressee. From all indications, the materiality of 'Okperhan' is invested with divine and majestic qualities that attract our attention to the speaker's innate conception of 'the big tree'. One could deduce from this poem that in the Benin ecological worldview, there are some big trees that command reverential status. The atmosphere is one of worship at the awesome power of 'Okperhan' to protect, shelter, and guard one against external agents. In the context of the poem, the aquatic and solar imagery in the second and third lines, respectively, become pictures of materialism that elucidate the oppositional forces against whom 'Okperhan' has demonstrated strong resistance so that the speaker could remain protected.

The picture of reverence for Okperhan's protective personality is further stressed in the poem as the speaker expresses his profound appreciation for the 'peaceful' ambience that characterizes the 'refuge' of 'the big tree'. The last line in the above extract encapsulates the depth of the speaker's appreciation.

In another part of the poem, the speaker continues to paint pictures of the 'the big tree' as his appreciation mounts:

Doo, Okperhan, Okpirri	Greetings big tree, big rope
Ne ọ bọ̀ owa khẹ̀ ekhẹ̀n	That builds a home for the passersby
Wẹ̀ I mwẹ̀ẹ̀ akhaen	You are not selfish

I kpọnmwọ ye ọse kevbe uyi	I thank you for your gift and glory
Okperhan gha kpee ma kuu	When the tree drums quietly
Afiama u wu nọ	It is the fear of death
Ọkan, ọ vbe gha vanno	When Ọkan (a big tree) shouts loudly
Ugborrirri ọghe ogiuwu	It is the fear of the king of death

(Ẹkharha Ẹdo 44, trans-. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The sheer weight of the depth of admiration and reverence here espouses the view that some trees within the African environment are cherished beyond mere biological understanding of Western epistemology, extending to the realm of cultural as well as spiritual significance. That is, Africans are inclined to the spiritual, transcendental, and metaphysical properties of trees in more ways than just their biological properties. The speaker's eco-critical understanding is made graphic as he paints the picture of the considerate and generous personality of 'the big tree' within the poem's atmosphere. Moreover, there is evidence in the poem that the 'big rope', transforms, elevates, shields, beautifies, and glorifies those who accord him the respect that his personality exudes. 'Okperhan' does not discriminate between classes as his personality transcends human frailties. He is a distributor of 'gift and glory' to his associates and admirers.

In the second stanza our auditory senses are stimulated to perceive the sonic characteristics of 'the big tree'. The reader must slip imaginatively to the forest to apprehend the different sounds trees make as the wind blows through them. This 'audible aesthetic' from 'sighing trees', to quote the words of Celmera Pocock, strikes the human imagination and evokes the mystical dimension of nature ('Sense Matters: Aesthetic Values of the Great Barrier Reef'374). In the context of this poem however, 'the big tree' becomes a mystical drummer whose low tunes are laden with 'the fear of death'. Ero further heightens the sense of spiritual mystery in the poem's atmosphere as the 'shouts' of 'Ọkan' (a big tree) is evoked as a metaphor for the *ugborrirri* (fear) that the 'king of death' exudes. By implication, there is a supernatural aura that is laced with the aural qualities of 'Okperhan'. These aural qualities remind us of Barbara Holloway's insight about the 'the experience of sound in the natural world' ('The Tree and its Voices' 1).

At this juncture, it is important to state that there are some 'big trees' with cultural significance of protection that surround the Benin Kingdom. Ero paints pictures of these trees in the succeeding stanzas and their transcendental qualities. Hear him:

Uloko ne Uzẹbu haan gi okun	Uloko (iroko) at Uzẹbu is tilted towards the ocean
Uloko ne Eyaẹn maa diyi	The Uloko (iroko) at Eyaẹn does not go against the Land
Te aya ehia daa Ẹdo yi	They are all used to protect Ẹdo
Ne asọn vbe avan ya kuu	That the night and day play with
Ọkha ne ugha kpagbe mudia	The Ọkha (tree) at Ugha is standing
Ọkha ne ugo na demudia	The Ọkha (tree) at Ugo also stood up
Ne ọ khọọn uko Akengbuda	That fought the war of Akengbuda
Vbe Ogiugo sii okuo miẹdia	The war caused by the Duke of Ugo

(Ẹkharha Ẹdo 44, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The first 'Okperhan' that Ẹro draws our attention to is the 'Uloko ne Uzebu'. It is said to be 'tilted towards the ocean'. This picture is true in reality because the 'Uloko ne Uzebu' is strategically located at Uzebu quarters in Benin City, specifically at the slope axis of Ekenwan Road. A closer look at its structural frame reveals that one end or side of the tall tree's branches has a slight but noticeable tilt towards the upper Ekenwan Road axis where the Gelegele River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean, is located. However, beyond its tilted frame position is the transcendental significance of the 'big tree'. In our interview with Mr Frank Obakhavbaye (a 65-year-old Benin traditionalist by ideological leaning, based on knowledge of Benin traditional-religious, spiritual, cultural, and eco-philosophical perspectives), asserts that 'the Uloko ne Uzebu's transcendental influence stretches from its point of origin to the water of the Atlantic Ocean where the Gelegele River flows … that is why in Benin it is said that '*owen nọ rhio okun, Ọghi ni obọ ne uloko ne Ezomo n' uzebu, vbọ Okhiowie nakhue*' which translates as 'the sun that is heading to the ocean, pays homage and allegiance to the Iroko of Ezomo at Uzebu – we will see tomorrow morning'.

In a similar perspective, although rooted in a different position within the city, is the 'Uloko ne Eyaen'. This 'Okperhan' is located at the Eyaen quarters, that is, beyond the Ikpoba axis of the Benin Kingdom. To quote Frank Obakhavbaye again, 'the strategic significance of protection exerted by the transcendental forces of this "big tree" stretches from the Ikpoba River to the Eyaen quarters and beyond'. It is to be noted that the supernatural forces within these trees demonstrate a high sense of responsibility within their assigned territory. Looking at the language of Ero, we are informed in the poem that 'Uloko ne Eyaen' is an astute and disciplined 'Okperhan',

one who conforms to the divine legal codes and authorities that demarcate territories in the beyond-human world. To further buttress the point of Obakhavbaye, 'the Uloko n' Eyean does not extend its transcendental and protective authority beyond the Ikpoba River into Benin City'. This sense of material intelligence and discipline within the Benin ecological world is crucial to our understanding of the vast possibilities and impossibilities embedded in the study of African eco-criticism.

In the succeeding stanza, Ero paints the material significance of another 'Okperhan'. This time, he takes us into the 'Ugha' – the revered, sacred and hallowed chamber within the palace of the Oba of Benin – to visualize the 'Okha' tree maintaining an upright position. Now the language in this instance alludes to the authority of the Benin Monarch. The idea resonates with the fact that the Benin Crown stands sure and supreme as the Chief Protector of the Benin Kingdom. This is succinctly put by Mr Atoe Osabuohien (a 75-year-old retired School Principal from Urhonigbe area of the Benin Kingdom) this way: '*Okha n' Ugha kpagbe mudia vbe Eguaemato*' – which literally translates as 'the Okha (tree) at Ugha is standing up at the shrine of the God of iron in the Oba's palace'. The 'Eguemato' shrine is located within the 'Ugha' precinct of the palace and is considered as one of the most powerful shrines within the kingdom.

As the poem continues, the 'Okha' (tree) at Ugo – a Community at Ugoneki in the Orhionwon axis of the Benin Kingdom – is also cast as maintaining an erect position as it maintains a transcendental and protective shield over its district of authority. Ero further casts our minds back to the authority of the 'Okperhan' through the deft allusion to the 'war of Akengbuda' in the eighteenth century – in which 'the Duke of Ugo's' acts of rebellion against the crown of Benin met the might and superior fire power of the Benin Royal troops, which led to the capture of Ugo and the Duke subsequently drowning himself in Igbaghon River.

In the concluding part of the poem, Ero switches his poetic attention to another 'Okperhan':

Akuobisi ne Okperhan Ogedẹgun	Akuobisi the mighty big tree
Ne Odafen Ososomaye	The husband of Ososomaye
Ne ọ ye ogun ne Ọba soyeye	That announced Ogun the Oba

Ekhue nii, ne ọ fian vbe ukhuẹn	That charm that is as potent as Ukhuen
Doo Okperhan ni lẹre yi	Greeting the big tree I take refuge in
Ne ọ maa gi ame gbe mwẹ	That does not allow the rain to drench me
Ne ọ maa gi ovẹn ka mwẹ	That does not allow the sun to scorch me
Okperhan ni lẹrẹ yi	The big tree I take refuge in

(Ẹkharha Ẹdo 44, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The reference to 'Akuobisi' in the extract is very instructive because of its potent spiritual significance. But of striking significance is the image of might that is evoked in the passage. In our research into the 'Ogedegun' image of 'Akuobisi', we interviewed Mrs Vero Oriakhi, a 68-year-old traditionalist in Edo State, who explained that 'the Akuobisi tree is imposing and domineering biologically, in the sense that wherever it is planted, there is a kind of biological force-field around that vicinity that prevents other plants from thriving.' In other words, they just seem to wither supernaturally before Akuobisi. This understanding influences the Benin ecological worldview of the tree's might and its use in cultural and traditional-religious activities.

In addition, the 'husband' image in the second line of the extract is evocative. It strengthens the potency of 'Akuobisi', as well as stressing its valuable presence as an ingredient in the making of the 'Ososomaye' (charm). The might of the 'Okperhan' is further stressed in the third line as it is invested with the image of the privileged announcer that gives us the cheerful news about the new king. The poetic instance here catapults our imaginations to visualize the role of 'Akuobisi' in the choice of name for the heir apparent of the Benin throne. To quote Obakhavbaye again, 'the journey to this place of announcement leads the Edaiken of Uselu to Useh Community in Benin City, where he engages in some spiritual sacrifices. The highpoint of his visit to the revered shrine is the point at which he (the Edaiken) engages with the '*akhue*' (the seed from *Mucuna urens*) which is spiritually guided to hit the destined name of choice, '*Ne ọ ye ogun ne Oba soyeye*'.

Another idea in the poems of Ero that reverberates with the Benin ecological worldview and sense of eco-materiality can be seen in the poem entitled 'Uki' (The Moon). In the poem, the Benin understanding of the divine nature of the 'Uki' is underscored with poetic artistry. It reads:

Osazẹ bẹghe uki wee rre	Osaze saw the Moon appeared
Uki bẹghe vb' Osazẹ wẹẹ	The Moon saw Osazn said
'Uki ghe aro mwẹ	'Look at my front
Ghe Iyeke mwẹ	Look at my back
I maa rhia ovbiokpia	I have planned no evil against any man's child
I maa rhia Ovbiokhuo	I have planned no evil against any woman's child
Ghẹ gi ọmwa rhia ọgho mwẹ'	Let no one destroy my child'

(Ẹkharha Edo 46, trans. by Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The understanding of this poem in the context of African eco-criticism reminds us of its striking similarity with the poem 'Viaticum' by the Senegalese poet, Birago Diop. A short quote from Diop's poem will enrich our eco-critical understanding of African's religious disposition towards nature.

> I have held my three fingers to the winds
> the north wind, the east wind,
> the south wind, the west wind;
> and I have raised my three fingers
> towards the moon towards the full moon, the full, naked moon.

(19, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake)

In the above extract, Diop poetizes how he interacts with nature to make provision for his journey as his mother serves as a guide to his understanding of the African culture in relation with the powers embedded in nature within the earth's ecosystem. The acknowledgement of 'the moon' in this instance is quite significant to our understanding of African eco-critical sensibilities.

In the case of 'Uki', Osaze is seen addressing 'the moon' in prayers. The language is laced with supplications and petitions concerning his innocence in his relationships with other people. His confidence is upheld in his call for 'the moon' to investigate his present and past actions in order to confirm his petition that he has never schemed 'evil against any man's child', therefore 'let no one destroy my child'. This sense of justice towards the might of morality in the spirit world dominates the 'environmental philosophy' of intercessory prayers by Africans and it resonates with the 'African concept of morality and ethics', to quote the words of Mbiti once again (214). As a matter of fact, Osaze's quest for natural justice to prevail in his interaction with

material beings dominates his prayers to 'The Moon' in the poem's concluding lines:

'Ne ọ gha rhia ọghomwẹ 'He that will destroy my child
Ghẹ gi aro maa rẹn It will not be well in his presence
Ghẹ gi iyeke maa rẹn It will not be well in his absence
Uki miẹ evbakhue Moon, take soap
Ya khuẹ ovbuẹ n' Ogbeide' to bath your son, Ogbeide'

(Ẹkhạrhạ Ẹdo 46, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The speaker is seeking the protection of his 'son' through prayers to 'The Moon'. He wants the 'Uki' to demonstrate its sense of natural justice against anyone: '*Ne ọ gha rhia ọghomwẹ*'. The speaker's reverence for the moon's supernatural powers continues, as he further commits his 'son' to its protective powers against evil and unreasonable people. He prays for the justice of 'the Moon' to visit judgement on those people while alive and even in death. The concluding couplet of the poem forms the highpoint of the prayer as 'Osaze' presents 'soap' to 'the moon' to serve as a material point of contact for the protection of 'Ogbeide'. A further probe into the eco-critical significance of the last two lines of the poem illuminates the Benin ecological worldview. According to Mr Atoe Osabuohien, 'the *soap* in this context refers to a mound of earth and has no relationship with chemical forms or compounds. By implication, the reference is to Mother Earth from whom springs the source of life and protection.' Osabuohien goes further to let us know that 'the word *Ogbeide* in the sense of Benin traditions and customs refers to the first son – a reference to *Igiogbe* (familial hegemony) and sustainability. The prayer of "Osaze" in this instance is for the protection and longevity of the "Osaze" genealogy.'

In another poem entitled 'Oven' (The Sun), Ero relates in a rather philosophical manner the African eco-critical understanding of the solar image to humankind. The opening stanza of the poem reads:

Oven gha da yaan dee,	When the sun rises,
Ei he balo egbe	it does not emit hot sensations on the body
Rhunmwuda, ighẹ ẹvbu ye tuo	The reason is that there is still dew
Atiebe ehia lẹrẹ nẹ	All that prowls in the night are hidden
Aranmwẹ oha vbe ladian nẹ	The bush animals are out
Ahianmwẹ gha tinno vbe iso	Birds are flying in the sky

(Ẹkhạrhạ Ẹdo 40, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

The opening lines of this poem take our visual senses to the eastern part of the earth where 'the sun' initiates its rising. In the language of the speaker, one could perceive the evocation of 'the sun' as a benefactor that lavishes its generosity on humans and non-human entities. This is quite significant in our understanding of the Benin worldview in African eco-criticism, which appreciates the instrumentality of nature and its natural endowments. From all indications, the poem's tonal atmosphere stresses the discreet environmental behaviour of 'the sun' on nocturnal and diurnal animals. The recognition and consequent demonstration of generosity to the juxtaposing influences of material agents within the environment illuminates the status of nature as non-discriminatory. This insight is noticed in another part of the poem as the solar image approaches the highest point of its energy:

Vbe ovẹn ladian vb' avan wowowo	When the sun shines brightly in the afternoon
Ọna ya ikpọ araba saa, kpoo!	It makes the rubber seed explode loudly!
Gha filo emo kua ne aramwẹ oha	Throwing its seeds to the bush animals
Vbene ọ sii ọfọ vbe ohamẹ y' ọmwaegbe	Just like it makes one sweat and makes one thirsty
ovẹn balọ egbe, sokpan uki ye khuẹrẹẹ	The sun causes discomfort to the body, but the moon is peaceful.
Orhiokpa maa yarn emwata	Truth is not exclusive to anyone

(Ekharha Edo 41, trans. Kola Eke and Edafe Mukoro)

Here the poet imaginatively moves his readers to the forest to paint pictures of the generosity of the solar image in the ecosystem. It is quite telling as well as ironical that the scorching rays of 'the sun' that 'makes one sweat and … thirsty [and] causes discomfort to the body', could also be espoused as a generous benefactor to animals in the wild. This understanding extends the African eco-critical conception to a philosophical dimension that demonstrates the ingenious agentic being of celestial bodies in relation to the human and non-human world. Moreover, it astounds the imagination that Ero uses this poem to enlighten us that within the Benin ecological worldview is embedded a deep knowledge of Environmental Science. Here the highest point of the cosmic energy evokes a vast juxtaposition in the character of the celestial system, where the sun's energy is demonstrated as violent and generous, while at the same time 'the moon is peaceful'. The rare insight in this eco-critical understanding is succinctly captured in the extract's last line and espouses the sophistication of African eco-philosophical discourse.

In conclusion, the pictures of materialism in the poetry of Ero have extended our knowledge of the Benin ecological worldview of African eco-criticism. From poem to poem, one can see that the poet's exposition of African sensibilities in eco-critical discourse reveals Benin's eco-philosophical, ethical, and spiritual understanding of nature. As one with vast knowledge of the Benin royal institution, Ero takes his readers by the hand and shows them vivid pictures of materialism that pervade the Benin cultural landscape. He uses his poems to stress the connection between language, nature, culture, royalty, and spiritual materialisms. Our understanding of his poetic mastery registers the vast difference between Western eco-epistemology and African environmentalism as seen through the human and beyond-human world.

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The Swahili Mtapta

Exploring Translation in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*

IDA HADJIVAYANIS

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel, *Paradise*, a column that includes a German colonial officer and his chief *askari* (soldier) enters Chatu's town in Manyema land, hundreds of miles from the East African coast. The chief *askari*, who is fluent in *Kiswahili*, translates a complaint by Uncle Aziz, an unscrupulous merchant, whose goods he claims were stolen by Chatu. Chatu is summoned, and we have a fantastic linguistic performance where 'the chief askari translated the European's words for Chatu, and Nyundo translated the askari's words for the merchant' (170). All this takes place while Chatu is distracted by the physique of the German officer, who is a 'red man with hair growing out of his ears' (170) who, he believes, eats metal. During this performance, Nyundo, the man that the column depends upon for translation, shouts out what everyone is saying and enjoys the cheers from the crowd. He is in his element.

A few days prior to that, he had struggled to convey what he was meant to and was looked at with suspicion and mistrust by all those who depended on his 'voice'. Nyundo is the translator. He understands most of the Bantu languages spoken in the area where they are trying to trade, hence when the caravan arrives in Chatu's land, he has to accompany them to see the chief, but 'the men teased him that he was making up the translations as he went along' (155). He is a reflection of the old adage, '*traduttore, traditore*', 'translator, traitor'. Nyundo often struggles with the task of bringing across the full depth of context, meaning and emotions carried in the original utterances. He struggles to deliver everyone's words and finds himself at the centre of conversations and debates where all sides are suspicious of him. It is also implied that he is abbreviating and omitting original statements for he 'spoke for only a few moments to Chatu's minutes', effectively displaying loss in translation. He also struggles to deliver everyone's words hence all are suspicious of him. It is hard for him to remain

objective as a translator; for example, following the beating that he endured under the caravan overseer, Mnyapara, he holds a grudge and divulges this to Chatu, the chief, who then orders that Mnyapara gets beaten almost to death. There is an overall feeling that Nyundo, a term that means a hammer in *Kiswahili*, is not offering smooth, faithful translations but rather 'hammers on'. He is entangled in his own subjective views of what he is translating and whom he is translating for and to. Through Nyundo, Abdulrazak Gurnah presents one of the key roles played by translation in negotiations and power politics. *Paradise* allows the reader to understand how translations influence and shape opinions while acting as the vehicle for economic activities such as trade in the region.

There is a somewhat similar scene to the one enacted in Chatu which can be found in one of the early *Kiswahili* travelogues by 'Selemani bin Mwenye Chande [spelt Sleman bin Mwenyi Tshande in the original]… one of Velten's chief informants when he was official interpreter (*mtapta*) to the Governor of German East Africa' (Rollins, *A History of Swahili Prose, Part I* 50), although the sequence of events and locations are shifted. Chande writes that during one of his travels, he came to Tshata (Chata), which is reached before Lake Tanganyika. In *Paradise*, the fictionalized town of Chatu is beyond the lake. Chata welcomes the trading caravan but leads an attack on the men from two sides and sets fire to their camp because they refused to come out and have a conversation in the middle of the night. Twenty-two locals and ten travellers die. In the end, however, Chande manages to recuperate half his goods. Similarly, in *Paradise*, Chatu attacks the caravan and leaves the traders with nothing. Both Chata and Chatu explain that they had to attack because a trader similar to Uncle Aziz had stolen from them. Chata names this person as a certain *mwungwana* (civilized gentleman) called Matuumla. Chata then tells Chande's caravan that, if they want to recover their goods, they need to bring Matuumla to Chata. Chande's men pretend to go look for Matuumla but instead report the theft to the German authorities located on the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Chande writes that, when the men arrive where the white man is camped, his 'boy' asks them to wait for him to wake up and have his breakfast. In *Paradise*, the wait takes place as the white man washes his face in full view of the public and then has a meal. It is as though he were by himself. In Chande's travelogue narration, once the white man in ready, this is what happens:

> akauliza: 'nani aliyowapiga?' tukajibu: 'Tshata'. Akatwambia: 'walakini mimi nimesema, kama waungwana wote kwanza wafikie kwangu ! mmekwenda fanya nini kwa mshenzi? walakini haiduru, ntapeleka askari, waende wakaulize 'umenyanganya waungwana sababu nini? na nyie toeni mtu moja kwenu, afuatane na askari wangu, akasikilize maneno anayosema' (Velten, *Safari za Wasuaheli* 19)
>
> He asked: 'Who hit you?' We answered: 'Tshata'. He said: 'But, I have stated, all the gentlemen should come to me first! What do you have to do with the savage? However, it does not matter, I will send the soldiers, they should go and ask 'what is the reason you stole from the gentlemen? One of you should accompany my soldiers and listen to what he says'. (Author translation)

Chande's account is seamless and does not include any translators. It is as if everyone was speaking the same language, *Kiswahili*, which is highly unlikely. It is possible that he has removed the translators because among his own skills was that of translation: he was an interpreter, also known as a local informant, for the Germans. On the other hand, Abdulrazak Gurnah gives translations a plausible prominent position during the given interactions. Translators have historically occupied the in-between space between newcomers, including traders and colonial officials, and people of the land. They have also tended to assert themselves, by taking the side of those in power. For example, the *askari* in *Paradise* tells Chatu to bring back the goods he had taken and not shout when speaking to him; had he not heard of other big-mouthed people that the government had put in chains? (170)

I begin with the above textual analysis because it offers an insight into the mediation that Abdulrazak Gurnah must have gone through while writing *Paradise*. Abdulrazak was inspired by the early *Kiswahili* travelogues, particularly Chande's 'Safari Yangu ya Bara Afrika' from which Gurnah draws a great deal for the journey into the interior. For example, a lot of what Uncle Aziz says is also in Chande's accounts. A good example is when Chande offers the history of Arab settlement around the current Tabora area and its demise (Velten 8–11), which Uncle Aziz does too, almost verbatim (Gurnah 130–33).

Through the adaptation and embedding of the *Kiswahili* travelogues,[1] Abdulrazak Gurnah goes through a process of translation. This process is at the textual level, where he needs inter-lingual translation, at least from *Kiswahili* to English, and where there is a creative process of changing the narrative from *Kiswahili* in the travelogue to English in

the novel. There is also intra-lingual translation since the travelogues use what we can call an archaic form of *Kiswahili*. Through this process, Gurnah also explores the para-textual, where he re-writes, paraphrases, and re-creates the narratives.

Critics including Fawzia Mustafa and Maria Olaussen, provide intertextual readings of *Paradise*. Olaussen ('Shifting Paradigms: The Indian Ocean World in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and *Desertion*') suggests that the novel revisits the Koranic and Biblical story of Yusuf/Joseph and responds to or re-writes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Mustafa compares *Paradise* to Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* and highlights the similar socio-cultural contexts in which the two authors write. In fact, it seems, Mustafa argues, that Gurnah 'entangles the reader in alternative histories, mythologies, and related versions of the past, throwing into critical relief the current hegemony of the (anti)colonial order of things' ('Gurnah and Naipaul: Intersections of *Paradise* and *A Bend in the River*' 234).

All these layers add to the centring of translation within the novel. We also find that Gurnah introduces a number of *Kiswahili* words and phrases which allow him to build a special relationship with his Swahili readership. This includes the prominence of generic words that are at times translated and at other times presented with contextual clues which offer a hybrid reading that needs to be unpacked. An example of how this works can be seen in the use of words such as '*magendo*', which is referenced as 'big money' as opposed to its literal translation, 'smuggling' or 'contraband'. He also presents phrases that appear exactly as one would use them in certain Swahili contexts. An example is the phrase '*sikufanyieni maskhara*' (105) – 'I'm not joking' – uttered by the traveller who narrates the embedded story from 'Safari Yangu ya Urusi na ya Siberia' ('My Journey to Russia and Siberia' by Salim bin Abakari). This is a term that is particularly used by a coastal *Kiswahili* speaker to whom the language is their mother tongue. A non-coastal speaker would use '*utani*' rather than '*maskhara*'.

As previously stated, interpreters, *watapta*, were crucial during trade as well as the establishment of the colonial project. Traders such as Uncle Aziz in *Paradise* needed services of interpreters to communicate, and similarly, as colonialism made headway into the land mass that is Africa, they needed the mediation that the *watapta* offered between themselves and the people that they met. This meant that the *mtapta* was often seen as a treacherous figure, rarely judged by the quality of the translations produced, but rather by the position he occupied as go-between. Paul Bandia agrees with this, pointing out that translators were

'feared, mistrusted and disliked by other members of society' ('African Tradition' 296). This echoes the role of the translator in history: for instance Douglas Robinson's Mexican translator, Malinche, was seen as a traitor and was despised by her people. She was given a 'contemptuous nickname, *la Chingada*, "the Fucked"' (*Translation and Empire* 11) for being in the awkward position, at the middle of power politics: a 'multilingual among monolinguals' whose power cannot be ignored.

Nyundo takes this role in *Paradise*. He negotiates with the various rulers and guides so that the caravan, which is the size of a village, can move into the interior and trade. In a sense, Nyundo's role is similar to that of the famous Swahili *watapta* including Selemani bin Mwenye Chande, mentioned above, and Salim bin Abakari, who also wrote some of the first travel literature in *Kiswahili* including his trips to Nyassa, Berlin, Russia, and Siberia. Abakari was born on the islands of the Comoros and from there went to Zanzibar, where he met Carl Velten, who took him to Europe. In 1896 he travelled from Berlin to Russia and Siberia, up to the border with China (Velten). In *Paradise*, Abdulrazak Gurnah embeds this journey through the presence of an uncle who is said to have gone on this very journey. Another renowned *mtapta* was Dallington Maftaa, who is believed to have originally come from Nyasaland, where he was made an enslaved person in his childhood. Once liberated, he was educated by the Universities Mission to Central Africa in Zanzibar. He accompanied Stanley on his journey to Lake Victoria in 1875 and, at Kabaka Mutesa's court in Buganda, he helped Stanley translate portions of the Bible into *Kiswahili*. When Stanley left, Dallington remained at the court (Bridges, 'Dallington, Maftaa').

The *Mtapta* represented the colonial master when Swahili city states were being divided into different spheres of European influence which then amalgamated into larger colonial units. He is the person who informed the people who their new masters were as cities further north including Brava, Kismayu, and Mogadishu – '*Muyi wa mwisho*' which means 'last town' in *Kiswahili* – became parts of Italian Somalia. Mombasa and Lamu were 'scrambled' by the British as part of Kenya. In the current Tanzania, Zanzibar fell under the British rule whereas Kilwa changed hands from the Germans to the British. The Comoros, on the other hand, became 'assimilated' by the French.

Understanding the position of the *mtapta* is important because 'the history of translation in Africa during this period is closely linked to the policies adopted by the European colonial administrations' (Bandia 298). Whereas the French advocated assimilation, the British instituted indirect rule, which was fertile ground for interpreters. The

effect on literature and translation was that 'while the English allowed for some kind of development in indigenous African languages leading to the earlier indigenization of the Anglophone text, the French policy of assimilation tended to hinder the development of local languages in the French colonies' (Gyasi, *The Francophone African Text* 3). The *Kiswahili*-speaking area of Tanzania was thence inadvertently influenced by the British policies where 'vernacular education was encouraged' (Bandia 298). Thus, one finds that, as well as the oral translations, there were also a number of written translations that were undertaken into *Kiswahili*, as were a number of textbooks. The task of translating was done by Europeans who needed *watapta*'s knowhow as they undertook the task of translating.

In *Paradise*, it is not only Nyundo who carries the burden of the infamous '*traduttore, traditore*' – 'translator, traitor', but also Khalil, the other boy who is pawned by his father and becomes an enslaved person in Uncle Aziz's home – similar to Yusuf. Khalil buffers the seduction of Yusuf by the mistress, Zulekha. Initially, Khalil acts as the translator who violates all etiquette of a faithful translator by inserting his personal advice and views to Yusuf during exchanges: 'Say anything, but shake your head a few times as if you are saying no. One or two firm shakes of the head will do' (212). Khalil is fearful of his role as a translator and repeatedly says it puts his life in danger. He lives in fear that, should Uncle Aziz find out that he has been translating his wife's desires for the beautiful boy who is Yusuf, everything that he knows will collapse. He is caught in a world where his services could be his own undoing.

BRIEF HISTORY OF TRANSLATION INTO *KISWAHILI*

Translation in East Africa has been influenced by what Ali Mazrui calls its 'triple heritage' of African, European, and Islamic influences ('The Reincarnation of the African State'). In fact, literature translated into *Kiswahili* 'derived its inspiration from Islam' (Bandia 296) and was therefore initiated through the spread and adoption of this religion, which reached the East African coast as early as the eighth century (Horton & Middleton: *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* 49). We find that during the precolonial period, literature was predominantly religious and poetic in form. Poetry existed in verse as well as prose forms (Knappert: *Swahili Islamic Poetry*). This is evidenced in the existence of the oldest known surviving *Kiswahili* manuscript, a translation which dates from the early 1700s titled

the 'Hamziyya', a long praise poem or *utenzi* that narrates the life of the prophet Muhammad. The source was composed in Egypt in the thirteenth century and was translated into *Kiswahili*.

Initially, most written works were transcriptions of Swahili epic poetry, just as the advent of Islam had a similar impact in some West African societies). These accompanied the messages from the Koran which were interpreted orally to the Swahili, who memorized them in their original Arabic form. Later, the *utenzi* (or *utendi*), a literature based on the narratives of the Koran and legends about the prophet which drew upon conventions of both Arab verse and Bantu song, were undertaken either as adaptations or imitations. The *utenzi* would normally be a 'long narrative poem which commonly dealt with the wars of the faithful, the lives of saints or heroes, in short the subject matter of an epic literature' (Whiteley, *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language* 18). Parallel to the *utenzi* were the *Kasida*, which are praise songs to the prophet Muhammad. The fact that these documents were written in the Ajami script that is adapted from Arabic script is a reflection of the influence of Islamic culture on Swahili society. When producing it, Sayyid Aidarus bin Athman Al Sheikh Ali, the translator, transcribed rather than translated most of the terminologies of Islamic origin.

In Zanzibar, this culminated in the establishment of centres of Islamic learning, the most famous being the Muslim Academy at Forodhani and the Masjid al Barza or the Barza Mosque. These produced high calibre Swahili scholars including Mwinyi Baraka and Abdallah Farsy. Since these literary centres were formed around families of the educated nobility and prominent poets, we find that it is through these scholars that the missionaries and explorers were initiated into Swahili literature.

Interpretation preceded translation, and Christian missionaries such as Edward Steere in Zanzibar endeavoured to take the initial European-oriented steps towards translation. The missionaries' work generally comprised the translation of religious texts such as sections of the Bible and later of the entire Bible. For instance, in 1847 Johann Ludwig Krapf published the *Kiswahili* translation of the third chapter from Genesis and in 1868 Streere published the *Kiswahili* translation of the Gospel of Matthew.

Muslim sensitivity to having the Koran translated inhibited initiatives to translate it into *Kiswahili*. The first complete *Kiswahili* translation of the Koran was carried out by a Christian priest, Canon Godfrey Dale, of the Zanzibar-based Universities Mission to Central Africa in 1923. His primary objective was for Muslims to understand their religion,

which he felt they did not, and also to provide Christian missionaries with a better understanding of Islam in East Africa so as to combat it better (Dale *A Swahili Translation of the Koran*). Dale explains that he had decided to translate the Koran into *Kiswahili* because Islam arrived in the region before Christianity, hence the situation in the hinterland required a translation of the Koran:

> The Christian teacher with his Bible is confronted by the Moslem teacher with his Koran; but whereas the Christian teacher and his pupils understand the Christian Bible, which is in the vernacular, the Moslem teacher has only his Arabic Koran, which probably no one but himself understands, and he only partially. He may be, sometimes is, very ignorant. But, and this is a very important point, unless the Christian teacher knows Islam and can read Arabic, he cannot prove the Moslem teacher's ignorance. (Dale: *A Swahili Translation*)

Muslims rejected the translation outright, and the first complete *Kiswahili* translation that was embraced by Muslims was by a native speaker, Sheikh Abdallah Saleh Farsy, produced in 1969.

In *Paradise* Abdulrazak Gurnah does touch on the issue of Koranic translation where the debate has been concentrated around its untranslatability. Similarly, there is also the debate of who has the right to translate it, if it is to be translated at all. This debate is brought through Kalasinga, a Sikh who wants to translate the Koran into *Kiswahili*, although he does not understand Arabic nor does he know the language well (84). It seems that he would use the English translation to translate the Koran. This is what Canon Dale did for his controversial 1923 Koran translation, and this is also the case for a good number of other *Kiswahili* translations, including Alfu Lela Ulela, whose tales had circulated orally for centuries as part of the cosmopolitan world that was the Swahili civilization, which were later translated into *Kiswahili* through English source texts.

Kalasinga's reasons to translate echo those of Canon Dale:

> To make you stupid natives hear the ranting God you worship … It will be my crusade. Can you understand what it says there in Arabic? A little perhaps, but most of your stupid native brothers don't. That's what makes you all stupid natives. (*Paradise* 84–85)

Gurnah's inclusion of the statements by Kalasinga is another form of embedding running debates and discussions around *Kiswahili* translation. Godfrey Dale's translation was extremely unpopular because, not only were his reasons for translating dubious, but also his translation did not contain the Arabic original. Hence neither Kalasinga

nor Canon Godfrey Dale engages with the source text, Arabic, nor (in all probability) understand *Kiswahili* at a level that would allow them to undertake the momentous task of translation. It is therefore expected that their translations would not be received as the word of God/Allah.

Mustafa argues that, Kalasinga's parody is strong, since most of the world's observant Muslims do recite the Koran in Arabic without understanding the language. Kalasinga's crusade shows that he is 'an agent of Western mediation depending upon English translation and thus on an emerging anglophone register, within which religious texts, first, and then novels such as *Paradise* itself, are couched' (244). We can add that the given agency was part of translation in East Africa, at least, since the inception of prose translation into *Kiswahili* in the 1920s when British administrators such as Johnson strived to have prose literature in *Kiswahili* by translating English literary canons and using English source texts even for prose that was historically part of the Swahili world for centuries (Hadjivayanis 'Norms of Swahili Translations in Tanzania').

TRANSLATING *PARADISE*

This section offers a commentary of *Peponi*, the *Kiswahili* translation of *Paradise*. As discussed, *Paradise* presents a tower of Babel that avoids disorientation through translation. The novel presents a multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic society where people have ancestry spanning from continental Africa and across the Indian Ocean. The main character, Yusuf, is *Mswahili*. *Mswahili* is a term I use to refer to people who are originally from the coast of East Africa and whose mother tongue is *Kiswahili*. This is a fluid term that generally includes those who integrate into its fold; for example, Yusuf's mother is originally from one of the ethnic tribes in East Africa but is *Mswahili* at the time when we meet her in the novel. His father is stereotypical *Mswahili*, *kabisa* (absolutely, completely), as are a number of people with whom Yusuf comes into contact. This includes Hussein from Zanzibar, Maimuna from Lamu and her husband Hamid. Some of the characters that Yusuf forms relationships with include Kalasinga, a Sikh originally from India; Bati, the girl from Umanyema that he probably falls in love with; Uncle Aziz, the merchant who turns him into an enslaved person; his wife Zulekha, the wealthy mistress; Simba Mwene, a Mluguru from Morogoro; Mohamed Abdalla, *Mswahili* with Arab ancestry; Khalil, an

Arab who, similar to Yusuf, is also pawned by his father; and Amina, the *Mswahili* that he falls in love with.

The inclusion of Swahili inter-texts that have been embedded, the Swahili terms scattered all over the novel, and the prevalence of a Swahili perspective in the novel has meant that translating *Paradise* has been an exercise in bringing the text back 'home'. I should however make it clear that, since the travelogues embedded are not part of the general reading, they are not general knowledge. In fact, to many prospective Swahili readers, *Paradise* will shed new light on their own history. However, it will be a graspable history rather than one of a faraway exotic place. In that sense, Swahili readers will see themselves represented in print and see the reality of how everything transpired for their ancestors who were on the ground at the time when colonialism was making headway into the region. Also significant will be statements such as 'the Germans were afraid of nothing' (7) to Chatu's 'All these goods belong to us, because all the lands are ours' (160). The latter utterances are a reflection of the general perception of German rule in East Africa, where administrators were referred to as '*udongo mwekundu*' – red soil, because they soiled the land with the blood of the Africans who rose up against them. Interestingly, Chatu's observation is part of the nationalistic debate even to date.

Speaking about his literary language in an interview, Gurnah said that his English is not a reflection of *Kiswahili*, although he accepts that it is 'an English which is inflected by a kind of a cultural imagination, one might say, even more than language, which is not straightforwardly familiar to someone who has lived or grown up or spoken English in England or Britain' (Cronin, 'Abdulrazak Gurnah: "I Write About What I Know"'). It is that very cultural imagination that brings *Paradise* close to home for the Swahili audience, for example, the gendered spaces allocated within homes as well as on the outside of homes, and the different gender roles within the society. A Swahili reader instinctively understands that the three old men who sat on 'a bench on the terrace in front of the shop' (*Paradise* 21) made the neighbourhood's *barza* or *kijiweni* – the meeting spot which one finds in every neighbourhood. It is generally only men who occupy the given spaces and converse about this, that, and everything. This familiar phenomenon, as it observes preparations for caravan journeys, day to day commerce, and everything in between, is part of what the Swahili reader will have the advantage of discerning.

The *Kiswahili*-speaking audience will also benefit from an insider's perspective of a number of terminologies thrown into *Paradise*. For example, the Indian children call out to Yusuf '*Golo golo*' (6). This is a

term that not all who speak languages from the Indian sub-continent would understand, but it was used by Gujarati speakers to mean 'Black person'. Its literal meaning is 'slave'.

CONCLUSION

I wish to add that, in *Paradise*, Gurnah did not shy away from some slightly obscene *Kiswahili* words which resonate well and offer humour, specifically, since they are meant to tease. These include the name Khalil calls Yusuf – '*Kipumbu*' ('little testicle') and '*maluun*' – ('accursed one'). He has also used '*kifa urongo*' which he translates as 'living death'. These are actually plant leaves that pretend to die when touched.

In *Paradise*, we have people who have embraced the ways of being like an Arab as being civilized – *wastaarabu*. We also have those who have not embraced that and through the eyes of Yusuf, we see that they are all civilized. Yet, there is unease between and within these people. For example, Kalasinga, the Sikh who wishes to translate the Koran is told by Hamid 'I feel sorry for you sometimes, Kalasinga, whenever I think of your hairy arse sizzling in hell-fire after the judgement day', and Kalasinga 'cheerfully' replies, 'I'll be in Paradise screwing everything in sight, Allah Wallah, while your desert God is torturing you for all your sins' (102).

All these 'civilized' characters needed to be translated so that an objective view is presented. To a global English-reading audience, the humour in what Kalasinga and Hamid say above is unmistakable. To me as a translator whose mother tongue is *Kiswahili*, I was very aware that Kalasinga's view is relevant to his way of thinking and needed to be presented as originally intended. But given the sensitivities surrounding the *Kiswahili*-reading audience, I did wonder whether, similar to Nyundo, I was better off omitting some parts of the novel. In the end, I left the *mtapta* strategies to Nyundo and instead applied situational equivalence, hence bringing across all that is in the source – as much as I could.

NOTES

1 This is explored well by Hodapp ('Imagining Unmediated Early Swahili Narratives in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise*') who argues that *Paradise* self-references African literary genealogies and is not dependent on European texts. He points out that Gurnah is not rewriting Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* but rather imbues Swahili storytellers with interiority and agency.

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Ikponmwosa Osemwegie's Ọrọ Epic *and Translation*

The Past and Prospects of Edo Literature

UYILAWA USUANLELE

This article originates from a book project on Ikponmwosa Osemwegie, an understudied Edo-language epic poet who started writing in the mid-twentieth century, which culminated in Macmillan's publication of his collection of poetry, *Poems in Bini*, in 1965. In this article, I offer insights into the book project as a way of shedding light on the work of Osemwegie and the challenges of exploring some aspects of African literature in indigenous languages – with the Edo language of southern Nigeria as a case study.

Interestingly, it was the determination of concerned Edo people to preserve and transmit their language, history, and culture to their children (in the face of hostile Christian missionary work) in written forms that produced Ikponmwosa Osemwegie, his poems, including *Ọrọ: An Epic of the Benin-Idah War*, and plays in the Edo language. My interest goes beyond the English translation of *Ọrọ* and some other poems of Osemwegie; I'm also interested in bringing to the non-Edo or English readers the rich poetry, history, and culture of the Edo people, as well as the thoughts of Osemwegie. Apart from Nevadomsky's introduction and description of Aikay as Nevadomsky used to call him, the book also republishes a long-forgotten review of Osemwegie's *Poems in Bini*, done by one of his old acquaintances, Professor Dan Ben-Amos, in *Nigeria Magazine* in 1967. An addition is a long interview he granted me in 1997, published in the *Benin Studies Newsletter* of the Institute for Benin Studies. The interview provides a more detailed background to Osemwegie's artistic career and his contributions to enriching the cultural life of the Edo people, which he spent his life documenting and promoting.

Apart from Osemwegie's works, review, and interview, Nevadomsky also gives context to the subject matter of the *Ọrọ* epic by recounting some aspects of the Benin-Idah war. It ventures into an interpretation of the oral traditions of the war among the Benins, including the role

of women in war, or what he called a hagiography of Iyoba (Queen Mother) Idia. The weaponry or armaments of Benin war-making are also given attention, while the art and ceremonial rites the war birthed in Benin culture are not left out. It concludes with an epilogue on poetry and social history in the imagination of social memory. This book, it is hoped, will be read with profit, reawaken interest in Edo literature, and open new vistas for future research.

HISTORICIZING THE TRAVAILS OF LITERATURE IN THE EDO LANGUAGE

()R() is the culmination of a long journey in the development of literature in the Edo language, which was already in decline when Osemwegie reversed its course in continuation of the effort of the Edo people to produce literature for their children. The development of literature in the Edo language was a product of necessity for the Edo people because of its neglect during much of the colonial era. The British colonization of Nigeria witnessed the patronage of some African languages, which were adopted by both the colonial administration (National Archives, Files BP 951/1914, BP 534) and the European Christian missionaries for both government communication and education (the language of instruction) and conversion purposes. Unlike some other ethnic groups, which received both colonial government patronage and Christian missionary intervention in the development of their languages, the Edo people were not so lucky with the development of written literature in their language under British colonial rule. Still, at that time, there were different efforts made by different functionaries in the colonial administration to produce written documents in the Edo language. The earliest government anthropologist Northcote Thomas made a small start by writing some words of the Edo language and documenting some of the stories in 1910; the District Officer, H.L.M. Butcher, compiled a small dictionary of Edo words in 1932; and the Forestry department similarly compiled names of some trees in Edo for official use in the 1930s. But nothing else is known to have been done for the development of the Edo language until the 1950s implementation of the Adult Education programme under the Colonial Development and Welfare Act.

The development of the written Edo language and literature was left to the whims of the Christian missionaries and patriotic individuals. The attitude of the Christian missionaries was not uniform over time.

The Church Missionary Society (CMS), the first to arrive in Benin in 1901, swung between imposing and promoting the Yoruba language to adopting/committing to the Edo language (National Archives File BP 884/1914). In between the swings, the CMS commissioned J.E. Edegbe to undertake translations of a few books of the New Testament, and in the process, an orthography began to take shape in the 1910s. It was only after Rev. W.J. Payne complained about the failure of Yoruba language imposition in 1923 that it was jettisoned for the Edo language (National Archives Files CMS Y 2/2, 15). Alongside an influx of other Christian missionary denominations, the Edo language started to get some attention in the late 1920s. This development had come a little too late as the official English language employed in the transactions of the colonial administration was already upstaging the Edo language in many spheres, along with the more ubiquitous Pidgin or Broken English. Equally being decimated was the indigenous Edo culture and history, particularly in schools, separating the children from their culture by inculcating in them foreign Judeo-Christian cultural practices.

It was only in the 1930s that concerned individuals started to intervene to reverse the slide by writing, advocating, and implementing policies that would contribute to the further development of written Edo language and literature. Jacob U. Egharevba pioneered the writing and publishing of books of history (*Ekhere vb'Itan Edo*, 1933) primers (*Ozedu*, 1935 and *Agbedogbeyo*), and collections of stories (*Okha Edo*, 1937 and *Urodagbon*, 1948) in the Edo language for school children. Egharevba's efforts were boosted by Oba Akenzua II, who demanded from the Benin Divisional Council Education Committee the infusion of the Edo language and cultural values in the school curriculum, and he was challenged to produce the materials for the curriculum particularly by the Christian missionaries (National Archives File BP 41 Vol. IX). The outcome of this challenge by Oba Akenzua II was Egharevba's establishment of Holy Aruosa in 1945, for which he wrote catechism and hymn books.[1] He also built the Holy Aruosa group of schools (1946), which emphasized the Edo language and culture. It was in these schools that the seeds of written Edo literature blossomed, particularly written plays and poetry (Usuanlele 'Ikponmwosa Osemwegie's *Poems in Bini*: A Critical Study'). Oba Akenzua's policy intervention dovetailed into the colonial CDWA Adult Education programme of the period, which complemented it in the 1950s when other writers like S.O. Eguavon (*Ebe Edo I-IV* 1956), E.O. Igodan (*Egui nei fo vb Okha I*, 1958), etc. joined. These later writers were

former schoolteachers and school managers who took advantage of the CDWA Adult Education programme to contribute to producing reading materials for schools and the Adult Education programme in the local vernacular as required by the CDWA.

THE RISE OF LITERATURE IN EDO AND THE MAKING OF IKPONMWOSA OSEMWEGIE

Although Oba Akenzua II's Edo language and culture immersion school and the later CDWA Adult Education programme ran simultaneously, it was the former that produced Ikponmwosa Osemwegie. It was in Oba Akenzua II's Holy Aruosa School that Osemwegie was grounded in Edo language and culture. His interest in poetry writing was ignited by his teacher Owen Ehondor whom he said was a 'wizard' of poetry writing. He not only taught them his Edo poems in school but also taught them to appreciate and write good poems in Edo. Osemwegie then proceeded to 'Secondary Modern' school in Benin before he dropped out because of financial difficulties. It was during this short stint of post-primary education that he was exposed to the works of William Shakespeare, whom he claimed was his other inspiration. His elder brother, Gabriel Osemwegie, who was already winning prizes in poetry in the English language, contributed to further honing his writing skills. Rather than follow his brother's lead, he chose to write in the Edo language, employing the style of European poetry. His choice of the Edo language required him to expand his vocabulary of the language. At this time in the 1950s, there were still many elderly people whose knowledge of the language was not yet affected by the growing influence of the English language and its pidgin variant. He started to pick from the elderly people around him, particularly his grandmother, whom he said was an eloquent speaker. In addition was his acquaintance with the chants of his home village Evbokoi deity of Okhuaihe as well as his later work in the Oba's palace, which brought him in close contact with the many old chiefs that regaled him with the language, history, and culture. With such exposure, his knowledge of the language and its word stock expanded enough to be used to craft his poems.

The time Osemwegie delved into poetry and playwriting in the Edo language in the 1950s was the most propitious time for the thriving of creativity in colonial Nigeria. The British colonial government had in 1940 enacted the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CDWA)

to address the economic and social problems of its colonies, and implementation commenced gradually after the Second World War. The social welfare component of the CDWA included Community Development and Adult Education programmes (National Archives File BP 2305B). They were to address problems of illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, village reconstruction, and recreation, among other things. To this end, the programmes employed the patronage of writers to produce books in local vernacular languages for adult education, the establishment of the Boys and Girls Club, and the organization of festivals of arts and culture to engage young people. The promotion of vernacular youth clubs and festivals provided an outlet for the unleashing of creative abilities, particularly in vernacular languages.

It was in this milieu of opportunities for creative work that funding for Osemwegie's schooling dried up. Lacking employment, he engaged in writing his poems and became an itinerant poetry reciter, for which he received applause and occasional cash gifts. His recitation paid off as it enabled him to attract attention and gather a following among young people, who thronged the Boys and Girls Club to participate in play-acting, poetry recitation and writing, singing, dancing, and engagement in visual arts. Similarly enamoured were the monarch Oba Akenzua II and some of the Benin elite. They patronized his plays and the tape-recorded versions facilitated by the British Council. His recitations in schools were the biggest draw that earned him the recommendation to Macmillan to publish his aforementioned *Poems in Bini*.

Poems in Bini as the first published book of Edo language poetry was an instant hit with the people. Some of the poems in the collection were already well known to many in Benin Division, Nigeria, as Osemwegie was an itinerant spoken word poet and dramatist who traversed the division, reciting his poems to children and playing tapes of his stage plays that held audiences spellbound. Osemwegie's works were so well regarded that his poetry book received a good review from the renowned folklorist Professor Dan Ben-Amos in the *Nigeria Magazine* in 1967 ('Ikponmwosa Osemwegie: A Young Bini Poet' 250–52). But the man and his poetry gradually faded into oblivion as interest in the indigenous languages receded in many areas of Nigeria (Emovon, 'Ikponmwosa Osemwegie's Poems in Bini: A Critical Study' 103–12), especially in the minority ethnic language areas. It was with the Centenary Commemoration of the British invasion of Benin in 1996 that Osemwegie resurfaced with the writing of a play in the Edo language titled *Okuo Ebo*, meaning 'the war of Europeans' (which was publicized but not eventually staged). Then the National

Council for Arts and Culture organized a Poetry and Short Story writing competition in 1997, and his epic poem *Ọrọ* won. From there his fame was rekindled and held on until he died in 2010. Although his published plays and poetry have since vanished from the market, the recitation of his poems at social functions and social media keeps his memory alive as a writer of repute. Osemwegie had braved the odds against the English language, which had dwarfed the indigenous language among his peers and succeeding generations, to write in the Edo language. Although not a pioneer of poetry writing in the Edo language (Usuanlele 2), he popularized the genre, becoming the first published Edo-language poet and pioneer playwright.

Osemwegie's choice of language at the time he started writing was like a hearkening to the plea of another pioneer writer, Chief Dr Jacob Uwadiae Egharevba, who had in 1949 lamented the increasing adoption of the English language by his Edo people in his article '*A ma ze evbo mwan ta wiri*' (meaning 'if one does not speak one's language, one is lost') in the local newspaper *Benin Voice* (Egharevba 3). The diminution of indigenous languages like Edo and the simultaneous popularization of English among the colonized people (National Archive Files BP 553/1915, BP 2294) was a development that did not take long to manifest among the Edo-speaking people as an ethnic minority group in colonial Nigeria. They needed the English language as a requirement for white-collar employment in both government and private sector, as it was their means of communication.

Just as his choice of language morphed with Egharevba's call, so did Osemwegie's venture into epic poetry. Although the writing of *Ọrọ* started before 1965, as the first two parts were published in *Poems in Bini*, it almost coincided with the debate on the existence or non-existence of the epic in Africa that was to rage in the 1970s. Since the writing of *Ọrọ* predated the debate, it is not, therefore, out of place to argue that Osemwegie might have been influenced by long poems of the English literature which were taught in post-primary schools in Nigeria when he was a student. Osemwegie's admiration of Shakespeare further attests to the European literary influence on his work. But this does not exclude the likely influence of some African and indigenous oral tradition recitations that were lengthy, like the cult chants of *Okuaihe* during the *Ukpoleki* festival of his native Evbokoi village, the seat of the chief priest of the *Okhuaihe* cult.

The reason for choosing the Benin-Idah war of the sixteenth century from among the many epochal events in Benin is unclear. However, it should be noted that the story of Benin-Idah is very popular in Benin

folklore. It is also significant as the first major war in which Benin City, the kingdom's capital, was almost taken for the first time, and the first Benin Iyoba (Queen Mother) Idia went to war, inspiring a popular song. In addition, the victory of Benin in the war brought some new customary practices to Benin, such *Ahiamwen Oro* (the Bird of Prophecy), the *Ema Ighan* (mother drum), and *Ekassa* dance, which are now part of the annual *Ugie* (festivals), royal coronation, and funeral rites.

Ọ̀RỌ̀ EPIC, NEVADOMSKY'S TRANSLATION AND POPULARIZATION OF EDO HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

The *Ọ̀rọ̀* epic, although first published in parts before the debate on the epic tradition in Africa in the 1970s (Johnson, 'Yes, Virginia, There is an Epic in Africa' 308–26), it was only published full length in 2008 when the debate had lost steam. But it still adds to the increasing corpus of African epic literature. It is only different by not being part of the traditional oral epic in the tradition of Shaka, Sundiata, etc. that have been transcribed into European languages. This is rather a new composition, inspired by the desire to do for Edo culture what the Europeans have done for their literature with long poems. Apart from its value as a work of literature, it is also about the Benin Kingdom's military exploits and conduct of the war against Idah. It provides a rich mine of historical information on this war, which was collected from the oral traditions and old people that he was privileged to work with in the Oba's palace. There have been a few works on Benin's military history, but the Benin-Idah war, despite its significance in Benin history and culture, is yet to receive well-deserved attention from scholars on the Benin and Igala sides or from foreign scholars. Having personally listened to Osemwengie perform the story of the Benin-Idia war over two days, for over fifteen hours, I can confirm that *Ọ̀rọ̀* helps to make the detailed story available to the public while the translation brings it to the English-speaking reading audience through the painstaking efforts of Joseph Nevadomsky.

It is unclear when and how Osemwengie and Nevadomsky first crossed paths. Nevadomsky, a young American graduate of English, history, and philosophy, had come to Nigeria in 1964 on the United States of America Government's Peace Corps Program. The school poetry recitation trips frequently undertaken by Osemwengie in the 1960s are known to have taken him to Benin Provincial Teachers College,

Abudu, where the young Nevadomsky was on a teaching assignment. It is unknown if they met during these visits, but Nevadomsky already showed some interest in Edo culture then, as he claimed to have dabbled in the Owegbe cult (Nevadomsky, 'The Owegbe Cult' 187). He returned to the US for graduate studies and later took up teaching employment at the University of Lagos, where Osemwegie was now a research assistant. Their friendship and intellectual collaboration appear to have blossomed there. The relocation of Nevadomsky and his Edo wife, Professor Rebecca Agheyisi, a linguist, to the University of Benin in 1975 brought them and Osemwegie together. Osemwegie had retired to his hometown, Benin, where he was doing some teaching and research consultancy for scholars researching Edo culture. About this time in the early 1980s, Nevadomsky, who had specialized as an anthropologist, had started looking into Benin studies, a field in which Osemwegie's renowned expertise was very useful to him.

Two major developments – the introduction of Edo language studies at the University of Benin (where his wife was teaching Linguistics and Edo Language)[2] and College of Education, Ekiadolor and the coronation of Oba Erediauwa (King of Benin r.1979–2017) would have increased Nevadomsky's interest in Benin history and culture during this period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Nevadomsky became involved in many of the activities relating to Benin studies at this time, such as the Centre for Social, Cultural and Economic Research (CENSER), which provided ample opportunities for research and publications into Edo culture, along with the *Benin Series* founded by late Aghama Omoruyi-Osula to which he contributed articles (Nevadomsky, 'Edo Orthography and the Spelling of Ama'). He was later involved in the documentation of the Royal Coronation ceremonies, which he photographed. This brought him in contact with many people, including chiefs, priests, craftsmen, and cultural knowledge producers.

Writing on some of these cultural and historical issues required expert knowledge, which would have taken Nevadomsky to Osemwegie. Osemwegie was not only an informant but also a creative writer/artist, which greatly interested Nevadomsky, who had at one time engaged in some debates about Edo word spellings. Discovering the manuscripts and works of Osemwegie, which had no publishing outlet because of the increasing disinterest in the Edo language, might have made Nevadomsky decide to make these works available in the English language to a wider reading audience. Thus began the translation of the poetry work of Osemwegie by Nevadomsky.

Although Nevadomsky was not a speaker of the Edo language, he sat many long hours with Osemwegie, listening to his translation and trying to make sense of it and finding the English words that best captured the translation in a poetic form. In trying to translate *Ọrọ*, the problem would have been Osemwegie's insistence on getting an equally poetic translation. It is not known if the collaborators were ever able to attain the translation desired by Osemwegie. More frustrating was how to get the final version of *Ọrọ* from Osemwegie, who was never tired of rewriting it in his efforts to achieve poetic perfection. In between getting around these problems, Nevadomsky also translated Osemwegie's other published poems in his *Poems in Bini*. He also benefited from the assistance of his wife, Rebecca Agheyisi. It is not known if these translations were completed when Osemwegie passed on. This did not deter Nevadomsky, who continued with the work until he passed away in January 2020.

Since 1996 when Nevadomsky and I discovered each other through our writings, we had been communicating and sharing our passion for Benin studies. Both Nevadomsky and Osemwegie had told me about the translation work since 2000 and had shared snippets of *Ọrọ* and translations with me; although not involved in the work, I was interested in its outcome. But in a fateful turn of events, a few months before his sudden demise, Nevadomsky contacted me and decided to share the entire work with me. Before I could even examine the manuscript, he requested that I find out how to publish the work in Nigeria, where it would be most appreciated. While I was yet to start on the project seriously, death struck. So, I became entrusted with sharing the creative and scholarly labour of Osemwegie and Nevadomsky, who had been determined to share the richness of Edo literary culture and history with the world.

Nevadomsky has done for Benin studies and the world a great service in translating some of Osemwegie's published poems, most importantly, *Ọrọ*, the epic poem that won the First Prize in the National Council for Arts and Culture Edo language Poetry competition of 1997. Apart from showcasing Osemwegie's poetry, which was unknown to non-Edo readers, the poems, particularly *Ọrọ*, are a mine of information on the Benin-Idah war of the seventeenth century. Whereas in Benin, the war has been the subject of both oral and written history and the inspiration for other literary works – particularly plays like Jacob U. Egharevba's *The Murder of Imaguero and the Tragedy of Idah War* (1950), Emwima Ogieriaxi's *Imaguero* (1972), Pedro Agbonifo Obaseki's *Idia* and Irene Oronsaye-Agunloye's *Idia: The Warrior Queen* (2009) – as

Nevadomsky points out, this event, which is much remembered in Benin history, hardly gets any mention in Igala's written history. It is hoped that with this translation, the history of Igala will be further enriched with their access to this once-inaccessible aspect.

CONCLUSION

This article draws attention to the 2024 publication of Ikponmwosa Osemwegie's *Ọrọ: An Epic of the Benin-Idah War* (of the sixteenth century) in both Edo and the translation and exegesis in the English language by Joseph Nevadomsky. It also examines and historicizes the development of literature in the Edo language and shows that it was the local people rather than the colonial government and European Christian missionaries that drove it forward against a background of state indifference and missionaries' indecision. The local Native Authority's establishment of the Holy Aruosa schools geared towards local cultural immersion provided the training and creative environment for the emergence of Ikponmwosa Osamwegie, who, at a time of increasing English-language ascendancy and dominance, altered the course of literature in Edo by writing and publishing poetry and plays in the language. It concludes that Osemwegie's intervention with his poetry and plays in the 1950s inspired and influenced the growth of literature in indigenous languages, and it is hoped that his *Ọrọ* epic with translation will further engender similar growth.

NOTES

1 Holy Aruosa, although called a 'Cathedral', is a centre of indigenous Edo religious worship modelled on the Roman Catholic Church with its catechism, hymn books, and priesthood – based on indigenous beliefs. It was introduced by Oba Akenzua II (King of Benin Kingdom) in 1945 to counter Christian missionary preaching against Edo indigenous religion. He encouraged Edo people to worship there on Sundays, and he built schools that emphasized Edo culture, language, and religion in the Benin division, supervised by the Holy Aruosa religious establishment.

2 Nevadomsky's wife, Professor Rebecca Agheyisi was working on her *Edo-English Dictionary*, which was published by Ethiope Publishing Corporation, Benin City, 1980.

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The Panegyric of the Champion

How Wolof Wrestlers Borrowed from Female Oral Genres to Win In and Outside the Arena

MARAME GUEYE

Traditional wrestling is a transnational phenomenon in Senegal and is considered the country's national sport. But, *làmb* (traditional Senegalese wrestling) is no longer the same amateur and folkloric pastime. It is a professional sport in which wrestlers earn millions, and one would not know that there existed within *làmb* a Wolof panegyric genre of poetry and performance called *bàkku*. *Bàkku* was a performance in which a Wolof wrestler recited a reflexive poem and executed an exuberant dance at the end. In the 1990s, Camara and Mitsch were already lamenting the loss of originality in *bàkku* because wrestlers no longer displayed the verbal creativity that made *bàkku* a rich oral narrative of the self ('A'jami Literature in Senegal: The Example of Sëriñ Muusa Ka' 172). As traditional wrestling progressed into a capitalist mega sport with promoters pouring millions into matches, enticing young people who struggle with unemployment to see wrestling as a lucrative professional career, *bàkku* performances gradually disappeared. Some wrestlers tried to resurrect *bàkku* but soon realized they did not have the poetic talent of orators like Abdourahmane Ndiaye Falang, Ndiouga Tine, or Mame Gorgui Ndiaye who remain some of the greatest *bàkkukat* (performers of *bàkku*) in the history of traditional Senegalese wrestling. It is worth noting that Senegalese musicians like hip-hop singers still adopt *bàkku* aesthetics, which they consider closely related to the rap battle. While traditional Senegalese wrestling is increasingly the subject of scholarship, *bàkku* remains understudied because it does not fit into the oral genres performed by Wolof griots. Scholars primarily define *bàkku* as a genre in which wrestlers boast about their physical strength and self-aggrandize to impress the public and intimidate opponents. Babacar Mbaye views *bàkku* as an extroverted verbal performance in which the Wolof wrestler transgresses traditional caste hierarchy and embodies griot attributes by singing his own praises, therefore becoming his own griot (Mbaye

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189). My examination of *bàkku* aligns with these definitions but argues that *bàkku* also borrowed from female genres like *xaxar* (verbal battles between women in a polygamous context) and *taasu*, reflexive poems women perform at family ceremonies in which they self-aggrandize. I use my work on *xaxar* and Lisa McNee's theoretical approach to *taasu* to read *bàkku* as a gift to oneself and others. Within this gift economy, the wrestler poet denigrates opponents while entering a transaction relationship with audiences for their mutual benefit in and outside the arena. He gifts fans with a *bàkku* performance and in return, receives gifts of money and material goods. I use an interview I conducted with Mame Gorgui Ndiaye in 2014 in which he told me: '*Bàkku taasu la rekk*' [*Bàkku* is just *taasu*], as well as one of his *bàkku* to demonstrate that *bàkku* adopted female oral aesthetics to taunt opponents, reward fans, and reinforce social relations outside the arena. In the second part of the article, I discuss how Mame Gorgui leveraged *bàkku* for economic gains.

TRADITIONAL SENEGALESE WRESTLING

As early as the 1960s, traditional wrestling was considered the national sport of Senegal, and today, it is still a vibrant subculture with a transnational fandom. Paulin Soumanou Vyera's short documentary *Làmb* shows how newly independent Senegalese of all ages congregated at weekend wrestling events. Wrestling clubs, called 'stables', were often created along ethnic and locality lines. Aminata Sow Fall's 1982 novel *L'Appel de arènes* [The Call of the Arenas] also shows the centrality of wrestling in Senegalese folklore. Today, there are several *ecuries* or wrestling schools around the country, comparable to riding stables, to which each wrestler is affiliated and pledges allegiance. These are often along ethnic lines. For example, there is the *ecurie* at Fass where Mame Gorgui belonged, populated mostly by the Wolof who live in and around the neighbourhood of Fass in Dakar. At any rate, these wrestlers have become mega-stars who sign multi-million CFA-franc contracts for a single match, significantly transforming the cultural institution as a result of this transactional capitalist approach.

Traditional Senegalese wrestling was an art form that combined physical prowess, music, dance, and poetry. All these aspects were essential to what made wrestling a rich community gathering. Wrestling matches were youth festivals that originated from farming communities such as the Séreer, who organized wrestling events called

mbàppat at the end of harvest. Villages took turns hosting *mbàppat,* and each crowned a champion who later competed with winners from other towns in a general event called *làmb sarale* (Cissé, *Parole chantée et communication sociale chez les Wolof du Sénégal* 137). The form of wrestling at *mbàppat* is now called *bëré simple* (simple wrestling) because no hitting is allowed. Wrestlers prided themselves on their elegance of movement and agility. Scholars credit a Frenchman named Maurice Jacquin for introducing boxing into traditional wrestling. This form of wrestling is now called *làmb*, after a type of drum played by griots (Tang, *Masters of the Sabar*: *Wolof Griot Percussionists of Senegal* 37). Wrestlers still use some of the techniques of simple wrestling, but boxing moves are predominant in *làmb*.

Even when wrestling moved to arenas in urban areas, music, dance, and poetry continued to be quintessential components, and everyone participated in these performances. Griots sang to entice opponents to engage with each other. These songs are *woyi làmb* (wrestling songs), which still exist in wrestling. Griots also enunciated a *bàkk* to sing the praises of one particular wrestler, mostly deceased ones, to remind opponents of great champions who came before them. Drummers created *bàkk,* beats dedicated to a wrestler. Even fans participated in this rhythmic ambience as they danced on their way to *mbàppat*. This was called *lagg* (to hurry). During *lagg*, a group of fans or a wrestler and his entourage danced acrobatically towards the venue. New wrestlers also emerged from this entourage through active participation in the folklore of *làmb*.

MAME GORGUI NDIAYE

Mame Gorgui learned wrestling at *mbàppat* in his teens. He finished high school but did not pass his final exams, so his father took him out of school and sent him to apprentice as a mechanic. It was during that time that he started attending *mbàppat*. He learned his fighting skills at *mbàppat* where wrestlers used their wit to bring down opponents. To him, this was his most significant advantage when he entered 'arena' wrestling where hitting was allowed. However, his most important talent was his mastery of *bàkku*, which he says he learned by imitating Sassou Ndiaye, a senior wrestler who was also a skilled *bàkkukat*. Ndiaye noted that he honed his *bàkku* skills by listening to *taasu* that women performed at family gatherings.

Mame Gorgui Ndiaye was born in 1939. I met him at his home in Fass, a neighbourhood in Dakar where he has always lived. Fass is the wrestling hub where one of Senegal's most prominent wrestlers, Mbaye Gueye, nicknamed *Le Tigre de Fass* (The Tiger of Fass), and his brother, Moustapha Gueye, lived ('Touss ak Eladji Mame Gorgui Ndiaye dans l'oeil du tigre'.). He was not the strongest or most outstanding wrestler of his time, with a record of 101 wins, twenty-nine ties, and twenty-two losses spread over a career of twenty-seven years; but he was one the greatest *bàkkukat*. He was primarily known as '*L'enfant chèri de Dakar*' (the Darling Child of Dakar), a nickname coined by Alassane Ndiaye Alou, a reputed Senegalese sports reporter who was also his elementary school teacher. He was also called 'the wrestler poet' by poet and first Senegalese President, Leopold Sedar Senghor. Ndiaye prides himself on being invited by President Senghor to perform for former Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba, who visited Senegal in 1965 ('Le Voyage du President Bourguiba en Afrique: Le Senegal'). He also told of an anecdote in which he and other wrestlers met with Senghor, and the President performed one of Ndiaye's *bàkku*.

THE ESSENCE OF *BÀKKU*

The Wolof, particularly the Lebou, a fishing community living in Cap Vert (now the region of Dakar), introduced *bàkku* into wrestling. During *bàkku*, the wrestler becomes a poet and praises himself, showing his verbal acumen. Many scholars use the word '*bàkk*' to refer to *bàkku*, which undermines the reflexivity conveyed by the 'u' at the end. I follow Cissé, Keita ('L'Auto-louange dans la lutte sénégalaise ou quand le panégyrisé se substitue au panégyriste'), and Rapinecz ('Senegalese Wrestling Between Nostalgia and Neoliberalism') in using '*bàkk*' for the songs dedicated to wrestlers by griots or the drumbeat that a griot drummer creates specifically for a wrestler, and '*bàkku*' for the reflexive poem performed by the wrestler. Etymologically, *bàkku* is similar to *taasu*. *Taasu* comes from the verb '*taas*', which means praising or elevating someone by lauding their positive attributes. The 'u' at the end of '*taasu*' reflects the reflexivity whereby a performer lauds her attributes to challenge and provoke rivals without naming them explicitly. Even though women sometimes dedicate a *taasu* to another person, the essence of *taasu* is reflexivity. *Bàkku* comes from *bàkk*, which means to praise a wrestler or someone who has done something extraordinary. *Bàkk* can be a poem or a drumbeat dedicated

to the wrestler. Another similar oral form is *kañ*, a song performed during farm work to encourage labourers and cheer them up. When done by a labourer himself, it is called *kañu*. Therefore, as in *taasu* and *kañu*, *bàkku* is the appropriate term to convey the reflexivity of this oral performance by a wrestler. *Taasu*, is to *taas* oneself, *kàñu* is to *kàñ* oneself, and *bàkku* is to *bàkk* oneself. Mame Gorgui believes that *bàkku* is a form of *taasu* that Wolof wrestlers introduced because they were not skilled in *njuug*, an acrobatic dance that Séreer wrestlers did to greet the audience and display their muscles.

Beyond the etymological and reflexive similarities, *bàkku* parallels *taasu* because, as wrestlers self-praise, they also provoke rivals by contrasting their positive attributes to the assumed negative particularities of opponents without naming anyone. Elsewhere, I have shown that, during *taasu* and *xaxar*, praise is also a form of criticism because women use the concept of *gaaruwaale* – a form of criticism or attack in which the speaker does not name their target but offers enough detail for the addressee and audience to recognize who is implied in the speech – to insult a rival by singing their own or someone else's praises (Gueye: 'Modern Media and Culture in Senegal' 2:33). Like *taasu*, *bàkku* are usually short poems in which a wrestler exaggerates his abilities and directly or indirectly attacks opponents. Wrestling matches took place on weekends. When a wrestler won, the following Sunday he would come to the arena to perform *bàkku*. In *bàkku*, wrestlers often talk about their physique or moral values. For example, they use praise poetry to set themselves apart from opponents. In the following *bàkku* attributed to Abdourahmane Ndiaye Falang, the speaker talks about how generous and irresistible he is.

Man rafet naa	I am handsome
Tabe naa	I am generous
Yéwén naa	I am charitable
Àttan naa	I am able
Lu ma am maye ko	I give without limits
Janq man	Young women love me
Caga man	Divorced women love me
Njagamaar bu ma seen	Any young lady who sees me
Dootul Dem	Will stop in her tracks
Góor ñi sax	Even the men
Da ñu ma xaw nob.	Are sort of in love with me.

(Cissé 342)

Beyond the physical strength necessary to win, wrestlers revel in sex appeal. In this *bàkku*, the wrestler embodies two essential attributes. Not only is he handsome, but he also gives without measure. Wolof society values generosity, especially for men. He flaunts his irresistibility with women and ends the *bàkku* with a comedic poke at men, his opponents. This is similar to how women self-aggrandize during *taasu*. A popular *taasu* goes:

Bayre bi ma Yàlla may	The appeal that God has given me
Ma ànd ak moom	And that I possess,
Du ma ne rafet naa	I am not saying I am beautiful
Waaye ñaawu ma lool.	But I am not that ugly, either.

The female speaker highlights her appeal and claims to be modest by not openly saying that she is beautiful, but she does not agree that she is ugly either. This claim to modesty is thwarted by her first statement, in which she boasts about her appeal. This self-praise provokes those who might be jealous of her.

Ndiaye says he is naturally quiet, but his personality during *bàkku* was different. He used *xaxar* approaches to become an aggressive and cocky *bàkkukat*. Even during matches, he used words to 'diminish' his opponents' venom. 'Before the combat started, I told Babou Njambaan that I would not fight this time.' But right before the referee blew his whistle, Ndiaye said he insulted Babou Njambaan, and the latter took the bait, furiously charging. Mame Gorgui used that uncalculated move to bring him down.

During *bàkku*, wrestlers rarely talk about losses because they aim to present a glossy image of themselves. However, sometimes wrestlers use *bàkku* to justify a loss or get verbal revenge against a winning opponent. Mame Gorgui Ndiaye said that during a fight with Babou Njambaan, he knocked out Njambaan's tooth, but Njambaan won. So the following Sunday, Ndiaye came to the arena with a monkey perched over his shoulder and performed this *bàkku*:

Babou ngi nii,	Here is Babou,
Baboon na ngi nii.	Here is a baboon.
Yaa ma teree siiw,	You prevented me from being famous,
Maa tax nga jaal!	I am the one who caused you to lose your tooth!

Ndiaye used the monkey to make parallels between Babou Ndiambane's first name, 'Babou' and 'baboon', indirectly calling him a baboon. This is a narrative strategy used in *xaxar*. In the following *xaxar* song, the

first wives make fun of a bride by indirectly comparing her to a donkey whose hair is braided:

Ku ci amati mbaam	Next time one has a donkey,
Létt ko,	Braid its hair,
Séet bi da fa léttu!	The bride has braided her hair!

(Gueye 1:161)

Ndiaye said that even though many opponents were physically stronger, they feared his verbal weapon of *bàkku*. Ndiaye's *bàkku* combined effective delivery and comedic entertainment that annoyed his adversaries. Like the first wives do to new brides, Ndiaye used *xaxar* to verbally take his revenge over Babou Ndiambane and make his disappointed fans happy.

Mame Gorgui also used *bàkku* to *bégal* (make someone happy) his fans with the gift of performance. McNee writes that *taasu* are 'selfish gifts' that a performer offers to an audience' and that 'the individual persons involved in the exchange matter as much if not more than the exchange itself, which becomes a means for creating a relationship' (*Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Autobiographical Discourses* 41). *Bàkku* aligns with this gift exchange, with the added difference that a wrestler uses the verbal space to prepare for real physical fights. Like *taasu*, *bàkku* is an autobiography and, as McNee argues, the 'autobiographer initiates a gift exchange that allows her to give of her *self*. Furthermore, this gift of the self is selfish in another sense, for the biographer receives something from her audience in return' (130). *Bàkku* is a performance and a gift of the self to others. Although *bàkku* shows verbal dexterity and aims at instilling fear in opponents, it is a negotiation of social relations beyond the arena. The Wolof wrestler uses the poetic and performative space to strengthen social and family ties because individual and collective identities are entwined in Wolof communities. During *bàkku*, the wrestler does not limit himself to listing his victories; he also documents his connections outside the arena. This is evident in the *bàkku* I analyse here.

BEAT THE DRUMS

Most *bàkku* do not have a title, and the keyword the wrestler uses the most becomes the title. For example, Mame Gorgui has a *bàkku* commonly called *Jamil* because it is dedicated to the religious leader Serigne Moustapha Sy Jamil, and he repeats the name Jamil as a refrain. The *bàkku* I primarily examine here is called *Salar Njiin*, because these

are the first words that Mame Gorgui utters. But those words also can be a cue for the drummer to start playing since '*njiin*' is a type of drum, and during *taasu* and other oral performances, the performer calls on the drummer by '*rëkkal njiin*' (beat the *njiin* drum). Mame Gorgui utters the standard Muslim formula for starting an act, '*bismilahi*' (In the name of Allah). This formula invokes Allah's blessing and wards off the evil eye. Next, Ndiaye introduces himself to his audience through self-praise.

Mame Gorgui Ndiaye	I, Mame Gorgui Ndiaye,
Sëtu'b Mareme Diene	The grandchild of Marame Diene,
Baayi Fatou Ndiaye	Father of Faty Ndiaye,
Niiróowu maa'k ñoom.	I am not like them.
Baayi Mame Mareme Ndiaye	Father of Mame Mareme Ndiaye
Réew maa ngi ma'y soow	The country is talking about me,
Te ku réew mi'y soow	And when the country is talking about you
Bóoba da ngaa siiw.	It is because you are famous.

Ndiaye uses *tagg*, a form of praise poetry in which griots trace the lineage of people, to set himself apart from other wrestlers. This genealogy anchors him as a descendant of a great family, unlike adversaries who might not come from reputed families. Since, in Wolof culture, masculinity is significantly tied to the ability to procreate, praising himself based on fatherhood shows that he is an accomplished man. Furthermore, he highlights his successful career as both a reputed wrestler and an unparalleled *bàkkukat*.

Ndaanaan laa ñaar i yoon	I am a master two times.
Da maa man ci bii boor	I am good on this side
Man ci bee boor.	I am able on the other side.

Most wrestlers are strong hitters either with their right hand or left. Ndiaye is strong on both. Many of his opponents talk about the strength of his blows. He uses the space of the *bàkku* to locate himself in time and let those who might have forgotten him know that he is still a champion. This mastery of two 'sides' can also be a reference to him being both an accomplished wrestler and an excellent *bàkkukat*.

Ndiaye continues to praise himself using his social status by highlighting his wives' attributes.

Maa ka baax i jeeg!	Oh how lovely my ladies are!
Soo demee Faas	When you go to Fass
Binta nga fa'y baax.	Bineta is there being nice.

Masculinity is also about being able to marry and support women. Mame Gorgui shows that he is a successful man with many virtuous wives. Establishing that his wives are excellent and honourable tells his opponents that he has a great support system of women behind him. Ndiaye's emphasis on his wives' virtues serves several purposes. It suggests that he is a successful male whose masculinity is proven by his three wives and many children, but also, because his wives are good women, he has all the chances to win over his opponents. He echoes his predecessor Falang Ndiaye, one of the greatest *bàkkukat* of all time.

Yaari jongoma ma'y yafal	Two women at a ripe age feed me,
Te laaju ñu lenn ci man	And they require of me no work,
Ludul nelaw.	But only sleep.

Likewise, in his *bàkku*, Ndiaye shows that three good women care for him. The praise for his wives is also a display of fairness.

Ndey Faal ak Penda Faal	Ndeye Fall and Penda Fall,
Koo ci ne moo gëna baax	Whomever you say is the nicest,
Kóoka'y ka la neex	She is the one you like the most.
Waaye ñoom ñépp a saxoo baax.	But they're all bred in goodness!

As a polygamous man, he is supposed to treat all his wives equally. As he uses *bàkku* to brag about his many good wives, he communicates his love and admiration to them. He shows that he is a fair husband, even instructing the audience to assess his wives' characters objectively.

Women play an essential role in the career of the wrestler. The *ngemb*, the bottom attire that wrestlers wear, is made of a light cloth which is usually the wrapper of their wife or mother. But it must be a woman that the wrestler believes to be virtuous. It is thought that the wrapper of a woman who is not virtuous brings bad luck. Women also provide the twelve pieces of wrappers that the wrestler going to the arena to perform a *bàkku* pins around his waist, creating a pompous swirling effect as he moves. Women trusted by the wrestler and his entourage also cook the meals he eats before a fight lest someone puts spells in the food.

Next, Ndiaye talks about his relationship with Serigne Mbacke Sokhna Lo, a leader of the Mourid brotherhood at the time.

Serigne Mbacke Sokhna Lo	Serigne Mbacke Sokhna Lo,
Mag i Abdou Fata Mbacke	Older brother of Abdou Fata Mbacke
Ak Abdourahmane	And Abdourakhmane
Abdou Fata	Abdou Fata,

Abdou Khar	Abdou Khar,
Aliou ak Galas	Aliou and Galas.
Yéen na ma safoo lool	You are the ones who are very fond of me.
Man Ndiaye ma safoo leen	I, Ndiaye, am fond of you,
Bëgg leen,	I love you,
Naw leen.	I esteem you.

Mysticism plays a massive part in traditional Senegalese wrestling. There is a spectacular and performative display of the use of the mystic to help win over opponents. Wrestlers come to games with their mystical coach, who concocts spells openly before and during matches. Wrestlers use live animal sacrifices in front of audience members and their opponents. Beyond this public display of traditional mysticism, wrestlers also use spells and prayers from Muslim clerics. Clerics are known to back wrestlers and sometimes openly state that their favoured wrestlers will not be defeated as long as the wrestler is their disciple. It was the case of Mouhamed Ndaw, aka 'Tyson', who claimed never to use anything other than the prayers of his Cheikh Abdoulaye Niasse, the leader of the Niassene brotherhood.

This section of Ndiaye's *bàkku* is fascinating because Ndiaye is not a member of the Mourid brotherhood, led at the time by Serigne Mbacke Sokhna Lo. In one of his most famous *bàkku*, commonly called *Jamil*, Ndiaye asserts his devotion to the Tijani brotherhood, by singing the praises of Serigne Moustapha Sy Jamil. In *Jamil*, he pledges allegiance to the latter and states:

Maa ngi ci yaw	I am with you
Aduna'k Alaaxira!	On earth and in heaven!

Jamil was a gift to his spiritual leader. During our conversation, Ndiaye shared that besides being his spiritual leader, Serigne Moustapha Sy Jamil was his friend, who had done much for him. He told a story in which one of his wives had a complicated pregnancy, and when she was about to deliver, the doctors could not do much for her. According to Ndiaye, Serigne Moustapha Sy Jamil gave him a potion for his wife, and when she drank it, she gave birth immediately without complications. It could be that after *Jamil*, Ndiaye became aware that his public allegiance to the Tijani brotherhood could alienate his Mourid fans. In our conversation, he shared that Serigne Mbacke Sokhna Lo was one of his fans. Serigne Mbacke Sokhla was also known to be one of the most reconciliatory Mourid spiritual leaders. Therefore, Ndiaye's gift of *bàkku* to him could be a way to create connections with his fans across Muslim brotherhood affiliations.

Beyond having a spiritual leader, a wrestler must also have a good drummer with whom he is rhythmically and mystically connected. The

relationship between the drummer and the wrestler is very close and is very important to a wrestler's success. Ndiaye dedicates a portion of the *bàkku* to his drummer Vieux Seng Seng Faye.

Géwél ndaanaan na ma'y jiin.	It is a master drummer who serenades me.
Doo géwél bu aay gaaf.	You are not a drummer who brings bad luck.

Ndiaye's relationship with his drummer spanned his whole wrestling career, and they continued this close relationship until Vieux Seng Faye died in 2015. Like Ndiaye, Vieux Seng Faye or Seng Seng was a champion drummer. Seng Seng Faye came from a long line of griot drummers from Dakar, and even today, his children are some of the best drummers in Senegal. He was the father of Mbaye Dieye Faye, Youssou N'Dour's famed drummer and long-time companion. Seng Seng and Ndiaye were age mates and lived in the same neighbourhood. His drumming was essential to Ndiaye's performances, allowing the two to collaborate in the delivery.

Abdourahmane Ndiaye Falang also had the same close relationship with his drummer, Baye Bouna Bass. In Wolof culture, rhythm and mysticism go together as the Wolof consider the drum the propriety of *jiins*, spirits with whom the drummer must be in tune to excel in his art. Every great wrestler should possess the ability to move to the sound of the drum.

Maa ràññee jooy u nder	How I recognize the cries of the nder drum
Maa deggoo'k jooy u nder	How I am in tune with the cries of the nder drum.

The connection between a wrestler and the drum is evident in *tuus*, the moment when a wrestler announces his arrival in the arena by making incantations and facing the four cardinal points. The wrestler listens to the drums and performs an intricate dance guided by the *bàkk*, a beat specifically created for him by the master drummer, which is sometimes a tonal rendition of verbal incantations.

In the same careful manner that wrestlers choose the women whose wrappers they wear, they select their drummers. Trust and collaboration are essential as some spells and prayers are placed on the drums. When challenging opponents and looking for future combats, the wrestler uses the master drum and stands it in the middle of the wrestling ring. Any other wrestler who wants to take on the challenge would knock down the drum. The wrestler's *bàkk* often become

popular dance tunes that other musicians adopt. Many drummers became famous because of a *bàkk* they created. For example, wrestler Mouhamed Ndaw Tyson's drummer, Bada Seck, became famous in the late 1990s when he produced a *bàkk* for Tyson. He became a recording artist, leveraging his association with Tyson through *bàkk*. Ndiaye's gift of *bàkku* to his drummer reverts the roles because now he is the one who serenades Seng Seng.

Wrestlers also directly made fun of each other as women do during *xaxar*. This is usually done at the end of the *bàkku* when they list their wins and tactics to bring the opponent down. After using his social relations to praise himself, Ndiaye jubilates.

Boy Bambara	Boy Bambara,
Ba ma'y bëre'k moom	When I was wrestling with him,
Sandang laa ko dóor	I hit him with a sandang
Bàyyi ko mu'y jéex	And left him searching randomly,
Mu'y waràmbiic	He was doing that waràmbic dance,
Ma dóor ko mu toog.	I hit him, and he sat down.

Wrestling is about masculinity and being able to dominate an opponent physically. In this part of the *bàkku*, Mame Gorgui uses direct speech to poke fun at those he defeated. He boasts about Boy Bambara's disorientation under his blows and compares him to a woman twerking. The *bàkku* continues in this manner until all his wins are listed.

MATERIAL VALUE OF *BÀKKU*

Bàkku also gave wrestlers economic opportunities outside the arena. Mame Gorgui told me that *bàkku* gave him more than physical wrestling did. Even after he retired from wrestling, he was invited to matches and on the radio to perform *bàkku*, and people considered him first as a *bàkkukat*. Ndiaye also completed the pilgrimage to Mecca thanks to fans who saw him as a national treasure because of his mastery of *bàkku*. He performed the following *bàkku* to commemorate his trip to Mecca:

Yegg naa,	I have gone
Yegg naa	I have gone
Yegg naa	I have gone
Yegg naa ba ca biir Kaaba nga	Inside the Kaaba
Julli fa,	Performed by prayers there,
Fasifa fa	I said my prayers there,
Coow la jolli!	The rumour spread!

The melody and some of the words of this *bàkku* are not initially his, but he inserted himself and his experiences into it. It is the case for most *bàkku* as wrestlers borrow from each other, incorporating their experiences into existing narratives. Women also borrow from each other during taasu or xaxar. In this *bàkku*, Ndiaye boasts about his pilgrimage and the people who made it possible; however, according to him, many do not know the intended meaning of 'The rumour spread.' When Ndiaye went to Mecca that year, it was falsely rumoured that he had died there. He performed this *bàkku* to memorialize his pilgrimage, a prestigious accomplishment for Muslims, and respond to the rumours of his presumed death.

Ndiaye's ultimate leveraging of *bàkku* outside the arena was earlier in his career. Until the 1990s, wrestlers had jobs, and wrestling was just a passion or a side hustle that did not earn them lots of money. The documentary *Làmb* refers to wrestlers as farmers, herders, and fishermen (*vyera*). For example, Double Less, one of the most prominent champions of Senegalese wrestling, was a public transportation driver. Mame Gorgui proudly tells how he leveraged his *bàkku* skills to secure a job. In the late 1950s, right before Senegal's independence from France, one of Ndiaye's friends who worked at the water company, SONES (Societé National des Eaux du Senegal), invited him to perform at a celebration at work. The director of SONES then, a Frenchman, was so dazzled with Ndiaye's *bàkku* performance that he videotaped it.

Later, Ndiaye says that the director invited him to watch the tape in his office. He gave Ndiaye 25,000 CFA francs (approximately US$41–$45 in 2023 currency) as a token of his appreciation, but Mame Gorgui refused the money. 'I said to him, I do not want money; I want a job.' Ndiaye had already received his driver's licence, which was rare for Senegalese local Africans at that time. The Frenchman hired him on a three-month probation. One day, one of the comptrollers was out, and the company was short-staffed; when the director found out that Ndiaye could read and write, he asked him to take the absent comptroller's place. Ndiaye was later hired permanently and moved up the ranks. Thanks to *bàkku* and the socio-economic networks it opened for him, Ndiaye enjoyed a long and fulfilling career at the Senegalese Water Company, from where he retired in the 2000s. With a smile, Mame Gorgui told me, 'life is like a wrestling game; you need to know when to make a move'. Because he knew wrestling was not a sustainable career, he used the networking opportunities from *bàkku* and created a professional future for himself.

CONCLUSION

Bàkku is a male genre as it was performed in wrestling. But wrestlers were inspired by female oral forms like *taasu* and *xaxar,* which use reflexivity and comedic performance to engage in a transactions with the audiences. In the *bàkku* discussed in this article, which he performed at the end of his career, Mame Gorgui Ndiaye lists his victories and shows what made him a champion wrestler. Beyond documenting his illustrious career, Ndiaye shows that he indeed was a master on two fronts: he is a wrestler and an orator. This *bàkku* demonstrates his skills as an orator and shows that *bàkku* was an essential part of wrestling. The text indicates that wrestling is not just a physical sport; it is a sport that involves having social connections, wit, and a strong persona. A champion wrestler must come from a great family, have virtuous wives, a great Serigne, a trusted master drummer, and have strong social ties. Furthermore, *bàkku* had economic value outside the arena, as wrestlers could use their mastery of *bàkku* to entertain patrons and get material compensation for their performance, as do women skilled in *taasu*.

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'A People's Firewood Cooks for Them'

The Contextual Prosody of Igbo Mask Poetry and Mbem Poetics

CHIKE OKOYE & JULIET IFUNANYA OKEYIKA

INTRODUCTION

The common view that most poetry is in verse but not all verse is poetry is largely factual, especially when minor and basic constructs are considered, such as visual and concrete markers (graphology, page layout, grammar, etc). The Igbo *mbem mmọnwụ* (ancestral mask chants) is laden with the basic features that constitute traditional Igbo poetry. It encapsulates the Igbo essence of tradition, ontology, and belief system in rhythmical verse and in a contextually cryptic nature that appeals to universality and excites the imagination, as all good poetry does. Proof of such essence in poetry is the focus of this article, such that despite and beyond the maxim of 'a people's firewood' contextualization, a universalist comprehension, rooting, and relevance, as a direct result of a general and acceptable test of what really constitutes poetry, is the ultimate goal. The construct of 'a people's firewood' is about a considerable degree of sustenance and adaptations of a people over time in most aspects of life for their continued existence and, in this context, it is encapsulated in a proverb, as will be seen later. The quest for proof is akin to Matthew Arnold's rejection of historical and personal estimates in favour of the real by the application of the touchstone theory in his guide for the sublime and 'high seriousness' in quality poetry ('The Study of Poetry'). There is truth in James Reeves' conviction that the primary purpose of poetry is magical. For him, magical rituals, especially connected to birth, survival, and death, are accompanied by words embedded in magical formulas and 'are often accompanied by music and dancing. The words supply an indispensable intellectual element in what is largely a physical activity' (*Understanding Poetry* 8). The mystery of poetry that prevents a quick loss of fascination lies in constructs such as these.

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THE IGBO ANCESTRAL MASK AND THE 'FIREWOOD' CONSTRUCT

Igbo mask origins are embodied in oral tradition handed through down generations, thereby making appropriate written dating impossible; with its dateless and ancient origins, it is an embodiment of magic and mystery. This provides the element of ancestral mystique as salient flavour to its narratives and poetic chants. According to Chike Okoye's reiteration of common knowledge in *The Mmonwu Theatre*, the Igbo are known for their rich cultural heritage and are geographically native to the south-eastern part of Nigeria and domiciled in their home states of Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi, with sizeable communities in Delta, Rivers, and Cross-River states also. They are culturally bordered by the Ijaw, Isoko, Bini, Igala, Tiv, Idoma, Ekoi, Efik, and Ibibio ethnicities. Their mostly patrilineal societies basically comprise woodland farmers, hunters, traders, and fishermen. They are also known for palm-oriented enterprises such as wine tapping, fruit husking, oil milling, etc., and staple food crops such as yam and cocoyam. Their religious life before the missionaries (gradually resurfacing presently) centred on the belief in and worship of a supreme God through many other lesser gods, deities, and forces housed in shrines and groves. Their brand of ancestor worship incorporates their veneration and intercessory role in supplications to higher gods and the supreme God (Okoye, *The Mmonwu Theatre: Igbo Poetry of the Spirits* 2). In addition, there are stories of ancient migrations and resettlements from other places to and from the present Igbo, notably those of the Igala and Bini not included or referenced here.

These ancestors and other forces and elements periodically appear among the living in ritual, festive, entertainment, policing, enforcement, votary, and representative forms. In these modes they are revered, sacrosanct, and held in varying degrees of awe and dread. While actuated by human actors and controllers, these manifestations take different physical forms that range from humanoid through animal and to utterly abstract shapes and forms. They are, according to the Igbo communities and clusters involved, called variously *mmọnwụ, mmanwụ, mmụọ, ekpo, okorosha, omabe, odo, ọkọnkọ*, but, collectively, they are loosely known as ancestral spirits or masks. The use of the term 'mask' here is partly conceptual and partly synecdochical because a major part of ancestral spirit attire is mask.

While there are numerous categories of Igbo (ancestral) masks and their sub-traditions, our concern here is basically on chanting masks.

This category of masks, despite their further subdivisions into singing only, chanting only, singing and chanting, mask-only troupe, human-mask troupe, musical instruments accompanied and unaccompanied, most use a device that aids in their vocalizations. A simple, cylindrical contraption with two open ends covered with cellophane or spider-web gossamer, about three inches long with a rectangular slit in the middle, is held to the mouth and spoken into. The resultant effect is a distorted, deep, rasping, and guttural sound supposedly characteristic of the disembodied spirits. This helps give the wisdom-filled, anecdote-dotted poetic versifications they sing and chant a serious, scary, and unsettling quality that deepens the grave mien of their being, message, and aura. One of the authors of this article is an initiate of the mask group and has carried out further research from which this article has benefited.

With descriptive names that shed light on their ideology, mettle, and mission, such as *Okwuanyịọnụ* (the mouth can never tire of speech – indicative of the mask's propensity to say all things regardless of obstacles and sensitivities), *Akịka-ataokwu* (speech and word of mouth can never be destroyed by termites – showing that words outlive man), *Odogwuanyammee* (the red-eyed brave – indicative of its derring-do and courage), etc., these masks deliver verses of poetry that are both sublime and indigenously unique. This forms the major thrust of this article – that these poeticisms, complete with their prosody, paralanguage, nuances, context, and content, function for the owner-culture (Igbo) as fit-enough homegrown poetry that can be further appreciated beyond the Igbo community, if analysed while guided by appropriate critical theories. This construct is encapsulated in the Igbo proverb that propagates self-contained and indigenized cultural productions, that 'a people's firewood cooks for them' – *nkụ di na mba, neghelu mba nri*. The concern of this article is mainly the 'peoples' firewood', which in context refers to the concepts, devices, and theories that the Igbo have devised as necessary and adequate for their art productions.

Ideas such as self-sufficiency, contextual relevance, indigenization, and cultural ethnocentrism can all be linked to that same proverb: 'a people's firewood cooks for them'. This proverb in all its wit and wisdom has a downside that is largely false: it suggests that any group can survive despite the doctrine that no man is an island, and it encourages obsolescence through a shunning of possible positive external influences. In this context however, we are more interested in the germane and functional aspects where foundational knowledge of a culture's appropriate indices of artistic, aesthetic, literary, and linguistic bents are in line with other societies and are aggregated

and brought to bear on native art forms – poetry in this particular case. 'A people's firewood' therefore refers to a set of rules of literary appreciation that are unique enough to work for the owner-culture and still make sense for the stranger or outsider to the cultural product in this context. This in many ways also aligns with what can be seen as an encapsulation of what Chinweizu and Madubuike, proffer in their 'Gibbs's Gibberish' retort: 'the responsibility for the critical evaluation of African writing and the establishment of reputations for African authors belongs to Africans themselves, for they are the primary audience' (28). The project is to work out a practical perspective and application of the most fitting prosodic construct for the analyses and appreciation of Igbo and in extension (via similar domestication or fabrication), other African cultures' versifications. We offer a textual analysis of mask chants with chosen concepts and theories for their meanings, nuances, and contextual relevance.

PROSODY AND THE QUEST FOR A THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

Prosody in general involves the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech and is important in providing information not contained in the literal meanings of words and words in sentences – the elements also known as suprasegmentals. It also extends to the technical aspects of writing poetic verse – the type that contributes to rhythm, while extending to other uses of sound. This implies that prosody is concerned basically with metre and even rhyme. Essentially, it means the study of all the elements of language which contribute toward acoustic and rhythmic effects, mostly in poetry but also in prose. There are reasons poets use prosody. Apart from enhancing rhythm, stress, and sound, prosody also adds a melodious and pleasing quality to verses while providing interesting paralinguistic slivers of meaning that can be context-dependent.

This study is about Igbo verse and the need for a context-based, homegrown method of measurement and appreciation; therefore, the use of the term 'traditional' for English prosody as established by Renaissance-era scholars gives impetus for an Igbo verse justification (Hardison, *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance*). As prosody implies several important elements other than metre and rhythm, such as rhyme scheme, alliteration, assonance, etc., which influence the total 'sound meaning' of a poem, it also takes into cognizance the

historical period to which a poem belongs, the poetic genre, and the poet's individual style.

These are in line with Okoye's *The Mmonwu Theatre* on the Igbo *mbem* chant in relation to prosody and literary devices:

> The outer form of an mbem or chant and its rendition especially, is characterized by its prosody and literary devices. Inasmuch as most African verse (including traditional) is in free verse, a conspicuous rhythm is often discernible in traditional poetry and verse especially the mbem. There might not be a conscious European-like effort at stressed and unstressed syllables … by the said poet in order to create a distinct prosody, but an observant audience cannot help but notice that in its original vernacular form, the mbem mmonwu contains a type of prosody. (106)

A unique component of this custom-made prosody is what Nnabuenyi Ugonna (*Mmonwu: A Dramatic Tradition*) describes as 'igidi', a rhythm segment roughly equivalent to 'breath pause', 'pause length', and 'breath group'.

The 'igidi' is succinctly explained by Ugonna:

> In Igbo metre this succession of recurrent movements is achieved by the ordered arrangement of strong and weak elements corresponding perhaps to the raising of the foot from the ground and its being put down in the course of a measured movement or dance. This, no doubt, explains the use of the term 'foot' to imply that unit of measure in the prosodic analysis of the English poem. In Igbo prosody the concept 'igidi' (dance-step) may conveniently express the idea of 'foot'. This is because the Igbo metre may be said to have its basis in the Igbo dance. (165)

For practical analyses and proper appreciation of Igbo verses, we adopt Igbo-centric equivalents as appropriate tools where necessary; and the idea of the *igidi* is both helpful and apt.

An already developed theoretical construct that forms a bulwark projecting and justifying the *igidi* concept appears in Okoye's 2021 *Research in African Literatures* article, 'A Practical Poetics for Orality: Nnabuenyi Ugonna's "Igidi" and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's Poetics and *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*'. The essay develops and postulates a unique poetics termed 'universalist relativism' which

> relates to the poetics of orality, which is essentially culture-bound (relative) but could be understood and fully appreciated through an Eliotian 'historical sense', which is still contextual per the historicity of the parent culture and yet demanding in the sense of requiring an appropriate knowledge of aspects of the mother-culture. Universalism

> owes its essence to parts of the rubrics that are generally accepted (universally), while relativism belongs to the parent culture of the oral tradition-influenced production. (137)

This construct was derived from a then work-in-progress poetics of orality previously applied to oral chants of Igbo masks in a doctoral dissertation (Okoye, 'Igbo Mask Chants as Poetry: Mbem Mmonwu'), aiming at and succeeding as a theoretical framework in the quest to prove mask chants' poetry. Drawing from and leaning on connected conceptual forays by other scholars, one of us developed what is termed a *context-based pragmatic analysis* method which has presently birthed this new theory, universalist relativism – ultimately designed to be applied in cases featured in this article. The context-based pragmatic analysis describes the contexts where chants are explained from the perspective of their natural context, covering their functionality in reasonable terms to their milieu – *as it works for the people who own it*, i.e., 'cooking their food', but not electing to forget or ignore connections and equivalences that will enhance understanding for people who do not share the same knowledge or have familiarity with the producers of the art. To achieve this, the work looks into the conventional elements of what constitutes poetry, especially imagery (metaphor, simile, allusion, etc.). But the catch is in the home-bred method of prosody and scansion; and this is very germane because of the intrinsic differences in the tonality, intonation, orthography, and other peculiarities inherent in Igbo and other languages. The universalist relativism poetics itself is not different from the context-based pragmatic analysis method and concerns works that despite being culture-bound (relative), are made, through this poetics of appropriate knowledge, to still resonate meaningfully beyond its origins. This is made possible by being universal in the import and application of generally accepted rubrics.

Another important poetics that will complete the components of what will be tentatively termed 'Mbem Poetics' is the 'praxi-phonoaesthetics'. This model, like the universalist relativism, is relatively new, introduced in the article, 'From Minstrelsy to the Spoken Word Poet: Oral Tradition and Postcolonial Nigeria' (Okoye and Okoye-Ugwu). The need for a holistic theoretical framework to cater to the combination of variegated aspects of spoken word poetry and performances such as subject matter, voice modulation, theatrics, and the overall spectacle, especially of African and Nigerian origin, necessitated its development. It was successfully applied to samples of spoken word verses that have unmistakable traces and influences

of traditional oral elements and orature, especially Igbo and Yoruba. It essentially derives from theatre's art of experiencing, which is germane for the performance poet whose dependence on emotionally moving acts is not to be underestimated. From there, this experiencing

> is intrinsically more dynamic, engaging, and genuine than ordinary representational acting. When this is applied as the crux of performance in spoken word, it constitutes the moving visual spectacle of the performance. The other defining aspect of spoken word is phonoaesthetics or the aesthetics of sound. This involves wordplay – intonation and voice inflection – in the recitation of spoken word verses. The major essence of spoken word is sound and its manipulation; its dependence is not on the visual or concrete poetry … but on the power and range of voice modulation – assisted to a lesser extent by the accompaniment of gesticulations and theatrics.
>
> From the foregoing, the affective and causative practical realities of context and contemporaneity, the preferred mode of visual theatrics, and the defining component of voice modulation, all point to the fact of the unavailability of a tailor-made theoretical framework for interrogations of spoken word performances and texts. (7)

In the new theoretical framework model called praxi-phonoaesthetics, the 'praxi(s) (practice; practical) [prefix] covers contextual utilitarian dynamics of the text (tensions and problematics such as subject matter), the whole theatrical performance matrix, and the persuasive/affective lexes in the content' (7). This leaves out the sound component, phonoaesthetics, and this aspect 'takes care of the beauty of sound (delivery), flow and cadence, and rhyme and rhythm' (7). The best application of this model also considers the audience response (in live situations) to ensure a real and objective assessment since the product's effectiveness is easily seen in the reaction of the target audience.

In all, with our understanding of the concepts of a people's firewood, prosody, and *igidi*, and the introduction of the new theories and models, universalist relativism, and praxi-phonoaesthetics, we will engage the main thrust of this article, which is to propagate and apply appropriate homegrown models to indigenous (in this case, Igbo mask chants and poems – *mbem*) literary expressions. The chants are chosen because they are an important repository of Igbo lore, wisdom, and ontology; couched in the garb of revered ancestral spirit vocal manifestations, they are near-perfect examples of where our conceptual and theoretical expositions are best suited for meaningful appreciation.

SELECT UR-TEXTS AND ANALYSES

First, a context-based appreciation of mask chants is necessary to showcase the importance of cultural nuances and semiotic signposts. In the imagery, line delivery, and versified medium method of *mmọnwụ*, the chants are a combination that makes the subject matters of the poetry easily memorable, and this provides an advantageously seamless synergy to the whole rendition of the *mbem* (mask chants). The *Okwuanyịọnụ* is an example. This mask, whose name means 'the mouth never shies from speech' is from the central Igbo area of Agulu in Anambra state of Nigeria and is generally classified as an ancestral chanting spirit and, in the short verse below, uncannily refers to himself as dependable and fearless:

Okwuanyịọnụ na-ekwuru ndị dị ndụ e kwuru ndị nwụrụ anwụ	Okwuanyịọnụ speaks for the living and the dead
Okwuanyịọnụ bata obodo e delu:	When Okwuanyịọnụ steps in there is calm:
Akpa aka, egbe ekwue	The hair-trigger gun
Anụnụ-ebe m na-aracha akpana ya	The Perch-not tree I lick its droppings
Mbụba pụrụ ije nne ya na-na-atụ anya ya…	The wandering bull awaited by the anxious mother…
Nya bịakwaa na oge a kara aka e jenu ruo	It had better come, for the day has come

The mystique and aura created in the lines above by the mask for itself is not missed; rather the allusions and images of the magical 'Perch-not' tree of Igbo ontology, fabled for the legend that no living bird perches on it, the idea of dependable action in the vision of a hair-trigger gun, and the imagery of an adventurous and derring-do bull coming home to a worried mother – all mental pictures flush with Igbo indigeneity – underscore the importance and appropriateness of the theory of universalist relativism. More importantly, the newly generated images hold strong appeal regardless of a reader's affinity or lack thereof with Igbo culture or cosmology, keeping again in line with universalist relativism. They deepen understanding and appreciation for those with a considerable grasp of the culture and open fresh vistas for the less knowledgeable.

James Reeves rightly posits that poetry, with its compressed and compelling structure, has little time for the leisurely digressions of

prose, and thus he leans on the notion that poetry is magical speech. He adds that its 'words are full of suggestions of unrevealed meaning which grow out of them under the influence of the reader's (audience's) thought and imagination' (26). This view forms the precursor to the *Odogwuanyammee* chanting mask, from the Arọndị'zuọgụ Igbo community of Imo State, whose name means 'the red-eyed brave'. Here, it recounts elements of a mystical and metaphysical quest of African juju proportions that it embarked on:

Ha sị m tọghee ngwugwu Ihiridarịda	They asked me to untie the parcel of Ihiridarịda
Ka hanwa wee hụ ya anya	So themselves may see its contents
M wee sị ya unu ya ebili	I then said they should arise,
Ka e je wetalụ m ọjị e ji ebupụga ozu n'ịkpa	That the kolanut used in escorting corpses to wastelands be brought to me;
Ka e weta ezekaudene nke nọ n'enu osisi n'oko	That the king-vulture perching high on a tree be brought;
Ka e weta ụdọ e jiri gbata agụ n'Ikeji tinye n'ime ya	That the rope used to tie down the leopard at Ikeji be put inside;
Sị weta akị onye ogbi tàrà tinye n'ime ya.	Let the kernel chewed by the mute be brought and put inside.
E weta ama-amara ozu tinye n'ime ya	Bring the corpse's grave-mark and put inside.
Weta mkpọ onye isi tinye n'ime ya	Bring the blind man's staff and put inside.
Weta otutu ọcha onyengwọrọ tinye n'ime ya	Bring the white scars of the lame and put inside.
Ka e wee tọghezie ngwugwu Ihiridarịda	So that Ihiridarida's parcel may then be untied.

The ritual sequence in this dramatic monologue is heightened by the rhythm, repetition, and balanced structure of the lines of the verse. There are many other examples that could be fielded to prove the poetic contents of the *mbem mmọnwụ* such as metaphor, simile, alliteration, and so on. But an important focus of this article is prosody – vernacular prosody that could and actually *does* have universal appeal and relevance. The maxim of a people's firewood does not imply that the cooked food should not be edible for all to eat. Cooked food is the same everywhere – and if the Igbo food is cooked then all humans from every part of the globe will confirm that it is cooked, although tastes differ. Being weaned on or still clinging to occidental ideas, canons, and conventions of what constitutes poetry is not totally

undesirable in itself – it is only more interesting if a homegrown scansion and or prosody works *better* and validates more effectively alongside the prevalent conventions.

In practice, stress or prominence is often analogous to the tonal aspects of the Igbo language and tonal variation plays an important role in meaning and semiotics in the paralinguistic elements of Igbo mask chants. Igbo phonology uses three basic tones: *ụda-elu*: high (/), *ụdansụda*: down-step (_), and *ụda-ala*: low (\). It is the alternation and variation of these tones in the *igidi* (rhythm segment) that produces rhythm and nuanced meanings in the Igbo *mbem mmọnwụ* mask chants as well as other chants and versifications. The examples below from the Odgwuanyammee mask are the first two lines that set a down-step tone that runs throughout the four last syllables at the end of every other line. The narrative piece describes the solemn rite of passage intrinsic in the mask's mytho-spiritual journey into the ontological beginnings of the community in order to unravel the creation/birth totem of the community's guiding spirit. Such a quest is fraught with dangers that can only be fully appreciated as the encounters are gilded with the appropriate grave mien, manifest in the sombre down-step tones of the last syllables of the lines. The illustrative tone-marking below indicates the descending rhythm and diminuendo effect:

_ / \	_ /	/ _ /	_ _ _ _
Mgbe m	na-eje	wee pụta	na Ezinaanọ
When I	came	up to	the four-road junction
igidi 1	igidi 2	igidi 3	igidi 4
_ _	/ /	_ / / _ /	_ _ _ _
Obu	ekuo	m wee nee anya	neene Danda
Discovery	dawned	I looked (eyes)	it was Danda
igidi 1	igidi 2	igidi 3	igidi 4

The *igidi* segments labelled 1, 2, 3, and 4, in the above are roughly equivalent to feet in English metrical poetry. These observations about rhythm segments and their applications can be repeated in other verses with similar results in English and other European metrical verses. This is homegrown and effectively gets the job done.

There are instances of the mask chant performance spectacle that require live audiences or physical witnessing to appreciate fully, be they impromptu or deliberate. Even recorded versions are distant renderings of the physically live versions. While some are deliberately structured

as drama, others hover in that performance matrix space regarded generally as solo performance and performance poetry or chant. Such spectacles fit appropriately into the ambits of cultural productions that are best appreciated critically by applying theoretical constructs and frameworks such as the earlier discussed praxi-phonoaesthetics, which incorporates content, audio, gesture, and audience response concerns in one construct. Apt for productions such as contemporary spoken word slams and similar activities, it is also a fit model for live spectacle-oriented chant renditions and performances that contain tangible vistas of the theatric and histrionic. An example is described by Emeka Nwabueze's emphasis on the drama of the *Agaba* mask skit and the secondary supporting role of the narrative. He says:

> the first thematic performance of the Agaba is a brief dramatic skit called Efulefu. This skit is a re-enactment of the legend of a cowardly young man who, during the intertribal wars, sold his machete and wore the empty sheath to battle. ('The Aesthetics of Narratives' 86)

A good example could be gleaned from Okoye's 'The Igbo Mask as Solo Performer', a situation where an Agaba or Okwomma mask (both normally armed with machetes and known to represent destruction and force) is accosted by a wayfaring human:

> Agaba/Okwomma: (On sighting a human 'foe', takes dramatic strides to and fro, at least two strides forwards and two backwards all the time thrusting its machete in a warning and menacing motion. Suddenly it stops with both legs together quivering and bobbing its shoulders up and down). (43)

In the midst of this action, the mask in an appropriate threatening guttural voice asks: '*Ọ bụ nche ka ị na-eche m?* (Are you waylaying me?)'; [takes the forward steps]/ '*Ọ bụ anwa ka ị na-anwa m?* (Or are you daring me?)'; [takes the backward steps]/ '*Ka ọ bụ ka ị mara ebe mna-edobe isi m?* (Or you want to know where I lay my head?)'; [moves forward again with the accompanying shoulder movement]. In this performance, there is the threatening message, choice of words and accompanying action as the praxis, and the delivery tone of menace, the proper voice inflection and modulation befitting an angered ancestral spirit as the phonoaesthetics. Again, the appropriate apologetic noises and cowering withdrawal of the hapless human afraid of the mask's wrath fall under both praxis and audience response. This impromptu performance analysed using the applied model is an index of practicability even in deliberately structured chant performances

where there is an arena and an accompanying audience. Its advantages are in the holistic and wide-ranging nature of the model.

TOWARD A POETICS

So far, we have justified the positive aspects of the Igbo proverb concerning indigenous utilitarian self-sufficient firewood in the design and application of homegrown and effective critical models. These models are designed to accompany and accentuate cultural productions such as poetic performances and versifications. Their effectiveness has been proven through the examples of ontologically bulwarked critiquing and explications. The conceptual gem of the firewood proverb, Ugonna's idea of the *igidi* concept, the theory of universalist relativism and its demands for appropriate knowledge and rooting while seeking universalism, and the all-encompassing model of praxi-phonoaesthetics for performance poetry, have been coalesced into a broader poetics emanating from the original nucleic impetus – *mbem mmọnwụ*. In the same manner in which postcolonial literary theory is broad enough to house concepts such as Hybridity, Otherness, Orientalism, Trauma theory, etc., Mbem Poetics has *igidi*, Universalist Relativism, and Praxi-phonoaesthetics as concept and theoretical models, respectively. Mbem Poetics is essentially used to refer to the holistic theoretical framework or body of theories and models pertaining to the rubrics of analyses of and for mostly traditionally influenced and orature-infused performances, especially versified. It requires and advocates a deep and effective knowledge of parent cultures and their ontological, linguistic, and paralinguistic nuances.

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Reclaiming the Muted Voices of Xhosa Literature

A Personal Testament

JEFF OPLAND

A proper history of literature in the Xhosa language of South Africa has yet to be written. The majority of the few attempts at a coherent narrative tend to commence with original literature published in book form in the first decade of the twentieth century, usually with H.M Ndawo's novel *Uhambo lukaGqoboka* in 1909. My own research has served to extend the range of literary expression in Xhosa backwards, to 1837 in the case of literature in print, with the appearance of the first periodical, *Umshumayeli wendaba*, and potentially further still in the case of traditions of oral poetry, *izibongo*. What follows is a brief account of my journey, and its accomplishments in restoring the voices and reputations of major authors overlooked by African literature scholars in the past as well as in the present.

My journey as a scholar began with Arts and Science degrees in English and Mathematics from the University of Cape Town. Attracted by pre-Conquest English literature, I proceeded to MA and PhD degrees; my doctoral dissertation compared the South Slavic, Homeric, and Xhosa traditions of oral poetry, expressing my growing interest in the development of literatures from the oral to the written state. The Xhosa sections drew on fieldwork with Xhosa oral poets, *iimbongi*, commencing in 1969. The fieldwork and collection of oral poetry, *izibongo*, were initially designed to shed light on preliterate Anglo-Saxon poetry, but in time my focus shifted to the study and collection of oral Xhosa *izibongo* in its own right, an enterprise that continued through to 1988. As an adjunct to this research, I began to focus on *izibongo* in traditional form in published books, and this focus in turn extended in time to the study and collection of Xhosa poetry, and literature in general, in vernacular periodicals. My field recordings of oral performances of *izibongo*, and interviews with over a hundred *iimbongi*, together with books in Xhosa and copies of Xhosa

literature culled from ephemeral publications, form the core of *The Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature*.

With the exception of A.C. Jordan's unfinished series of twelve articles, published in *Africa South* between 1957 and 1960 under the title 'Towards an African Literature', scant attention had been paid to newspapers as a vehicle of Xhosa literature. The copies of newspaper literature in my Collection were culled from surviving Xhosa or multilingual periodicals published between 1837 and the mid-1950s. The field recordings and copies of newspaper literature have been made available to scholars as material for their publications and dissertations and have formed the basis of postgraduate dissertations. However, I came to feel that the unplumbed newspaper literature was of such magnitude and importance that it demanded wider distribution, in a more permanent form. Initially, I began with an account of my 30-year association with the *imbongi* David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi, the most powerful exponent of *izibongo* I had the privilege to meet in the course of my fieldwork. *The Dassie and the Hunter: A South African Meeting*, published in 2005, included many of my recordings of Manisi's *izibongo*, as well as extracts from his published books, but the poems were presented in English translation only. And that cleared the way for the inception of editions of previously unknown or obscure Xhosa texts in my Collection, with facing English translations, which has culminated in the nine volumes of the series *Publications of The Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature*, commencing in 2015.

Ultimately, it was David Manisi who, unwittingly, initiated my production of editions and translations of Xhosa texts in my Collection. I left South Africa in 1986 to assume a position at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Emigration effectively put an end to my fieldwork, but, if I could not continue to record Manisi's oral performances in South Africa, I might be able to bring him to the United States to work with me. An application to the Fulbright Foundation proved successful: in January 1988 Manisi commenced a six-month sojourn at Vassar as a Fulbright Fellow. Reunited, we continued our work of transcribing his recordings; together we taught a course on oral poetry, and we travelled to American universities to present lectures on and demonstrations of *izibongo*. In all, I recorded fifteen new performances by Manisi before his tenure was interrupted by the sudden death of his wife: he returned to South Africa after only four months. Manisi's American performances provided invaluable data on how an oral poet adapts his spontaneous productions to alien and inhibiting circumstances, indeed, to uncomprehending audiences. So, after his departure, I began to conceive of a book presenting these per-

formances in Xhosa, with English translations, provisionally entitled *Manisi on Campus*. Progress on that project, however, was interrupted by a more pressing initiative.

While in America, Manisi displayed an uncanny ability to detect the presence in his neighbourhood of fellow South Africans. When he informed me that Phyllis Ntantala happened to be visiting a relative in Poughkeepsie, I contacted her and accompanied Manisi on a courtesy visit. Ntantala was the widow of A.C. Jordan, a distinguished author and pioneer in scholarship on Xhosa literature. After Manisi's hurried departure, I resolved to take advantage of Ntantala's proximity. Together, Manisi and I had transcribed and translated many of his performances that I had recorded, but the overwhelming majority of the Xhosa texts in my Collection remained untranslated. I could work through translations with the aid of a dictionary, but I had little confidence in my ability to detect nuance or to understand the dense and highly idiomatic diction of *izibongo*. So I approached Ntantala for assistance with translation, she kindly agreed, and a successful application for a grant from the Vassar Committee on Research enabled me to secure and pay for her services.

In 1984, in scanning the Johannesburg multilingual newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu*, I had encountered the strident poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho and immediately recognized her significance, not only as a dominant poet of the 1920s entirely overlooked by scholars, but also as the first female poet of substance in the history of Xhosa literature; for four years, the thick file of her poetry had been nagging me: 'You've found me, now do something with me'. In Poughkeepsie, Ntantala and I discussed her literal translations of ninety-eight poems; later, five additional poems came to light, which I translated with the help of the celebrated author Peter Mtuze. I found a model for this procedure in the collaboration of W.H. Auden and Paul Taylor in the translation of medieval Norse poems. Further progress on publishing the poetry of David Manisi and Nontsizi Mgqwetho, however, was disrupted by my second emigration, this time to the United Kingdom, in 1991.

I was able to undertake brief trips to South Africa in 1994, 1997, and, ultimately, with funding from the British Academy, in 1999 that allowed me to continue my work with Manisi. As for the poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho, guided by Phyllis Ntantala's literal translations, I produced my own versions, which Abner Nyamende read through, offering me his occasional comments. Although he declined to mention this in his completed thesis, and subsequently denied it explicitly, I had offered Nyamende selections from my file on I.W. Wauchope, unrecognized as a Xhosa author, as material for his PhD dissertation, just as I had

previously provided copies of items from my files on S.E.K. Mqhayi for Ncedile Saule's graduate dissertations. My research trip in 1999 enabled me to spend two weeks of intensive work with an ailing Manisi in Grahamstown in August, in which time we completed translations and annotations of all his recorded *izibongo* in my Collection, together with some additional published poems. A few weeks after my return to the United Kingdom, Manisi's daughter called me with the devastating news that her father had passed away on 18 September at the age of 73. His death offered closure and encouraged me to consider expanding the scope of *Manisi on Campus* to a full account of his career. I had spent two periods in Germany as a beneficiary of an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation fellowship: I made preparations for a third six-month period and left for Leipzig in 2001.

The Dassie and the Hunter: A South African Meeting, published in 2005, takes its title from a letter David Manisi wrote to me:

> In 1979 Manisi mailed a poem to me with an accompanying letter. He was entrusting the poem to me, he wrote, knowing that I would make the appropriate decision about it. I would see to its publication if it had merit, or contact him if it gave offence: he expressed this relationship of trust in a Xhosa metaphor, *umwewe weembila waziwa ngumzingeli*, 'the hunter knows the dassie's crannies'. The hunter of the little rock rabbit knows its lair as well as the dassie does itself. There is a simple acknowledgement of congruent interest here: in order to catch his quarry the hunter must know the dassie intimately, and so both the hunter and the dassie come to share knowledge of the dassie's habits and domestic terrain. There is also an imbalance of power implied in the fact that the hunter perforce achieves this knowledge in order to catch his prey, but through his metaphor Manisi subverts and inverts this power differential. I had hunted Manisi for his poetry, collecting and preserving it; now he was using that established channel to send me his poetry, so that I would see to its publication if I could. (*The Dassie and the Hunter* 2)

I have accepted Manisi's claim on me as small recompense for all he taught me. The account of my 30-year association with David Manisi is personal in style, not academic, biographical and necessarily autobiographical. It is the first detailed account of the career of a Xhosa *imbongi*, a dynamic and charismatic poet, including translations of many of his *izibongo*, and it paved the way for the editions and translations of Xhosa literature that succeeded it.

I returned to the poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho. As a student of Latin, Old and Middle English and Old Norse, I had consulted

published translations in producing translations of my own. These 'cribs' served as my guides to the sense of the text, freeing me to develop a translation style of my own based on my understanding of the text. I had reworked Ntantala's versions, I felt, to better reflect Mgqwetho's anger and rambunctious swagger, as in this extract from a poem entitled 'Ukutula! Ikwakukuvuma!' – 'Silence implies consent':

Taru! Mhleli ngesituba sezi Mbongi!	Editor, thanks for the poets' column,
Asinakutula umhlab' ubolile	we can't sit silent, the country's rotten:
Xa ndikubonisa ubume bomhlaba	if I exposed the state of the country
Angabhekabheka onk' amagqoboka.	the Christians' jaws would drop.
Ukutula! Ikwakukuvuma	Silence implies consent!
Xa ungatandi ukuhlala ujanyelwa	White eyes sear us on entering a church,
Ungaphendula kwabezinye imvaba	but we're free to worship someplace else:
Akulunganga ukukonza unomkanya.	it's no fun to pray looking over your shoulder.
Lemiteto idlula eka Moses	The laws outnumber those of Moses!
Lihasa kuwe eliza ngokutula	They dish out your portion if you sit silent:
Litupa lengwe lanyatel' esangweni	it's the tracks of a leopard across your yard.
Kuba ngokutula! Bati uyavuma!	If you sit silent they say you agree.

I had located the corpus of poetry; I sought credit for the discovery. So I acknowledged the contributions of Ntantala, Nyamende, and Mtuze but published *The Nation's Bounty: The Xhosa Poetry of Nontsizi Mgqwetho* as edited and translated by myself.

In the meantime, Abner Nyamende had completed his PhD on Wauchope and had approached the prestigious Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of Southern African Historical Documents about the prospect of publication: we agreed to work on the volume together. Once again, I used Nyamende's translations as I had used Ntantala's, as the basis for my own translations, which I submitted to Nyamende for his comments. That process satisfactorily concluded, I sought Nyamende's

assistance in the challenging task of annotation to the Society's high standards, but Nyamende demurred, citing demands on his time, and he left the completion and submission of the manuscript to me, together with all further negotiations with the Society; the submitted manuscript, as well as all drafts of the proofs, were submitted to Nyamende, who raised no objections prior to publication. Isaac Williams Wauchope was credited as author; his *Selected Writings 1874–1916* appeared in 2008 as 'edited and translated by Jeff Opland and Abner Nyamende with an introduction and notes by Jeff Opland', a formulation endorsed by Howard Phillips, Chairman of the Society, who had served as one of the editors. The volume included Wauchope's subversive booklet *The Natives and their Missionaries* (1908) in English, together with outspoken Xhosa polemics and revisionist histories that I had located largely in newspapers: writings on religion and mission work, history and biography, politics and social affairs, lore and language, as well as poetry. Known previously to some historians for his involvement in early black political organizations, Wauchope (1852–1917) was established for the first time as a versatile and significant author.

Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875–1945) is to this day the most influential Xhosa writer, even though a number of his works have been lost or are currently out of print. He was a dominant *imbongi*, at times an editor of the newspapers *Izwi labantu* and *Imvo zabantsundu*, as well as the author of novels, volumes of poetry, translations, monographs, biographies and an autobiography. Some of his writings originally published in newspapers were included in his own works as well as in anthologies by editors such as W.B. Rubusana and W.G. Bennie, yet I was astonished to encounter voluminous contributions by Mqhayi under his own name, or under a number of pseudonyms, languishing unrecognized in a variety of newspapers. It was to Mqhayi that I turned next as requiring most urgent attention.

Well known as a popular author, Mqhayi's true versatility was not fully appreciated, so I approached Abner Nyamende to ascertain whether or not he was free to work with me again. He was: I commenced sending him copies of Mqhayi's historical articles for translation. We made steady progress until, yet again, Nyamende felt he could not continue at a proper pace, although he offered to contribute occasionally. The project needed urgent propping up. I managed to secure the collaboration of Nosisi Mpolweni and Koliswa Moropa, both academics, and Luvo Mabinza, a poet, with each of whom I worked independently, securing from them literal translations, which I then revised. I presumed to act in this way, first, to achieve a more

fluent and stylish translation and, second, to check the translations I received against the Xhosa-English dictionary published by Albert Kropf in 1899 and revised by Robert Godfrey in 1915, which reflected the more rural vocabulary closer to Mqhayi's language in time and frequently offered me a range of meanings or interpretations of obscure words or idioms.

The completed volume was published as edited and translated by myself with the assistance of the four collaborators, an agreed precondition of their involvement, as was their share of the royalties. However, after publication, the three academics balked, demanding a contractual agreement with the publisher, Wits University Press, failing which they refused to accept any royalties at all. The publisher refused to issue such contracts; Mabinza subsequently received royalties, Nyamende, Moroka and Mpolweni, by their own choice, did not. The unfortunate wrangling, with colleagues as well as with Wits University Press, left a bad taste in my mouth, which was a great pity: the volume, published in 2009, with an elegant Preface by the eminent historian Jeff Peires, constituted, I believe, a substantial contribution to Xhosa literature as well as to Xhosa history. Presenting sixty-five historical and biographical essays contributed to newspapers between 1902 and 1944, S.E.K. Mqhayi's *Abantu besizwe*, 'People of the nation', was the first new collection of Mqhayi's writing to be published in over 60 years.

In 1998 a collection of fourteen of my articles published between 1974 and 1996 appeared under the title *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*. The publisher, David Philip, was soon taken over by New African Books, and the volume, poorly distributed, soon went out of print. In negotiating the transfer of rights in the publication with New African Books, I met Louis Gaigher, who expressed the opinion that the volume merited republication. It seemed fortuitous that, when I approached the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press to open negotiations about a series of editions and translations of Xhosa texts in my Collection, Gaigher held an editorial position at the Press. Negotiations proceeded well: the Press agreed to launch a new series entitled *Publications of The Opland Collection of Xhosa Literature*, with Pamela Maseko and myself as General Editors; the possibility of including a second edition of *Xhosa Poets and Poetry* was accepted. The series would present diplomatic editions of the Xhosa texts with facing English translations to respect the intentions of the authors as far as possible: too many early texts have been presented in the standardized orthography introduced in 1955, thereby eliding significant linguistic information, and far too many early texts have been bowdlerized in republication, subjected to cavalier editorial practices.

For the first volume in the new series, I chose the work of William Wellington Gqoba (1840–1888), an author known largely from his liberal representation in Rubusana's anthology, but whose full output was unrecognized: *Isizwe esinembali: Xhosa Histories and Poetry*, published in 2015, assembled all of Gqoba's clearly identifiable writings: letters, anecdotes, expositions of proverbs, histories and poetry. Wandile Kuse and I commenced work on the translations and when, for personal reasons, he could no longer continue, Pamela Maseko and I completed the task. The initial translations were submitted to me for revision, and my revised versions were in turn submitted to Kuse and Maseko for approval. I then added the annotations and bibliography, wrote an Introduction, submitted the manuscript and dealt with all queries from the press. Proofs were submitted to both Kuse and Maseko for approval. This division of labour has been followed throughout the series. All that has changed, perhaps, is the evolution of my style in revision: apart from checking the initial translations against Kropf-Godfrey's definitions and seeking a more fluent reading, my revisions increasingly strove for a more compact diction, for a rhythm and cadence more closely reflecting the oral declamations of the *imbongi*'s poetry, with a penchant for alliteration that echoed the euphonic concords of Xhosa syntax. Proverbial and idiomatic expressions were kept as close to the original as possible to preserve the metaphors rather than glossing them.

Gqoba, trained at Lovedale as a wagon-maker, assumed responsibility as editor of the Lovedale Mission's newspaper *Isigidimi sama-Xosa* in November 1884 and presided over an efflorescence of Xhosa literature in its pages, mostly written by Gqoba himself. He wrote pious poems and poems expressing condolence on the passing of associates; he displayed a keen interest in folklore and contributed extended historical narratives as well as amusing stories. His major achievements, however, are probably his two poems depicting a debate on Western education and a discussion between a Christian and a non-Christian, subversive in representing both sides of the argument, sometimes forcefully so, as in this extract from one of the speeches:

Mz' wakowetu okunene	Really, my fellow countrymen,
Ngamadoda atetile	one by one the men have spoken,
Abebonga amagwangqa.	singing praises of the whites.
Kanti noko lon' ikeẗe	They maintain discrimination
Noko sebe likanyele	is a figment of our fancy,
Liko ̇ lona okunene	but it really does affect us
Kwinto zonke ngokumhlope.	palpably in every aspect.

Fan'selana sekupina	Everywhere that people get to
Umnt' omnyama esebenza,	you can find a black man working.
Eko̱lisa, sele qwela,	Often, by the end of day,
Won'umvuzo uyintshenu,	his pay amounts to nothing,
Okunene kut'we ku̱nu.	it's been completely docked.
Oligwangqa uyinkosi	As for the white man, he's the boss
Nakuw' pina umsebenzi,	wherever people are employed.
Fan'selana esidenge	He could be the biggest dummy,
Abantsundu bemqwelile,	even though blacks are his senior,
Nange ngqondo bemdlulile,	even though their brains surpass his,
Kupelile wozuziswa	he alone will be rewarded,
Umuvuzo owangala	earning piles and piles of pay
Kwanegunya lokupa̱ta	and authority and power
Abantsundu, abamnyama.	over those with dark skins, black folk.

(Isizwe esinembali 162–63)

Gqoba's two debate poems, published for the first time in full translation in this initial volume in the series, were, on their appearance, the longest poems written in Xhosa.

What is now one of the longest poems written in Xhosa was included in the second volume in the series, in which I honoured in part my obligation to David Manisi. As Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University, I issued seven volumes in a series of *ISER Xhosa Texts*, designed to bring into print works unlikely to attract the attention of commercial publishers. Most of the Xhosa literature published under apartheid was designed as required reading in schools or universities, to ensure profitable sales, or reprinted (often bowdlerized) earlier classics by authors such as Mqhayi, Jordan, and G.B. Sinxo. The *ISER Xhosa Texts* were selected on merit alone and enabled the authors to bypass the stranglehold on publication. Three of the volumes were written by D.L.P. Yali-Manisi, the third of which, *Imfazwe kaMlanjeni*, was an epic poem on Mlanjeni's War, a brutal conflict fought by the Xhosa people against colonial forces between 1850 and 1853.

Xhosa *izibongo*, like praise poetry elsewhere in Africa, is a genre distinct from narrative, but Manisi, unlike most *iimbongi*, displayed a flair for narrative poetry, whether improvised in performance or written for publication. Even Mqhayi, the greatest of all *iimbongi*, failed to express himself poetically in explicit narrative. Manisi was thus, to my knowledge, the only practising *imbongi* to produce narrative poetry by choice, and this unusual circumstance seemed to justify a volume devoted to his poetic narratives. *Iimbali zamanyange: Historical Poems*, the second volume in the series, edited and translated by myself and

Pamela Maseko, with a Foreword by Peter Mtuze, contained eight of David Manisi's narrative poems, oral and written, including his rousing frontier war epic *Imfazwe kaMlanjeni*, in which, following his account of hostilities, Manisi turns to reflection and, in the manner of the *imbongi*, exhortation:

Iinto zalo mhlaba ngamajingiqhiwu,	Life on earth has its ups and downs,
Zaye zixaka kambe nabazaziyo.	perplexing even the sages.
Namhl' asisebantu siziimbacu,	Today we're not a people, we're drifters,
Imbandezelo nenzim' isambethe;	swathed in oppression and hardship;
Lingaphum' iKhwezi siqeshiwe,	we're at work before the morning star rises,
Saye siya kubuya ngocolothi;	we return in the evening twilight;
Sinyathel' izindlu zeentakazana,	we tread on the nests of little birds
Sityumze naloo mantshontshwana –	and so doing crush the fledglings,
Asiboni sithwabaz' emnyameni …	sightless, we fumble about in the dark …
Iinzima zisibandezele,	we're weighed down by our afflictions,
Iintlungu zisongamele.	overwhelmed by manifold torments.
Azi xa kunje nje nje ngoku	Now the state of affairs is unbearable,
Kothi kuphi kube kuyini na?	how long shall we suffer like this?
Yini na le bantwana bohlanga!	O, you children of my nation!
Yini na cwamb' oluhle logaga!	O, you beautiful cream of the soil!
Zinzwana neenzwakazi zomthonyama!	This land's lovely men and women!
Bantwana bakaMthetho kaMthetho!	Children of the Law of Laws!
Ibuyambo bantwana bakokwethu,	Challenge your thinking, compatriots,
Masiwalahl' onke la manyingilili,	let's scrap all these fads and fashions,

Siphuthum' ukulunga nokulungisa,	and retrieve our worth and justice,
Siphuthum' ukundila nokundileka,	and retrieve our grace and gravity,
Siphuthum' isidima nokuzakha,	and retrieve our honour and dignity,
Njengoko kwakunjalo koobawo bethu.	as it was in the days of our fathers.

(Iimbali zamanyange 175, 181)

Mqhayi can be established as the author of the first Xhosa novel, now lost; John Solilo can be established as the author of the first volume of original poetry. Copies of Solilo's pioneering collection *Izala* are now lost, but, by extreme good fortune, while I was working with Peter Mtuze on Solilo's poetry, Mtuze discovered that, before copies of the book disappeared, Godfrey Vulindlela Mona had made a photocopy, which he kindly passed on to us. The third volume of the series, John Solilo's *Umoya wembongi: Collected Poems (1922–1935)*, with a Foreword by Ncedile Saule, contained the sixty-four poems in *Izala* and twenty-eight more, ninety-three poems in all by a poet almost entirely overlooked by historians of Xhosa literature. One of Solilo's poems in the volume is a tribute to his contemporary S.E.K. Mqhayi, and it was to Mqhayi that we next turned for the fourth volume in the series.

Characteristically, as an *imbongi* Mqhayi produced poems, both oral and written, on occasions of significance. Peter Mtuze and I assembled sixty poems by Mqhayi, constituting a chronicle of the nation, that were published, with a Foreword by Barney Pityana, Mqhayi's grandson, as *Iziganeko zesizwe: Occasional Poems (1900–1943)*. As I noted in the blurb for the back cover,

> Wars feature prominently in these occasional poems – the Boer War, the First World War, the invasion of Abyssinia, the Second World War – as do political deputations to England, visits from British princes and the death of British kings, the appearance of Halley's Comet and meetings with Ministers of State. Running through the collection is Mqhayi's proud and fierce determination to maintain an identity rooted in custom and history in the face of territorial dispossession, the loss of title deeds and the vote, and the steady erosion of human rights.

Any extension of Mqhayi's canon is significant. This volume allowed me to exemplify further my conviction that no proper assessment of Mqhayi's unrivalled contribution to Xhosa literature can be undertaken until all his published work is restored to the public domain.

The time had come, I felt, to set the authors in the series in context, and to respond to the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press's interest in producing a second edition of *Xhosa Poets and Poetry*. Volume 5, therefore, with a Foreword by Russell Kaschula, was devoted to a second edition 'updated and revised', and Volume 6, *Xhosa Literature: Spoken and Printed Words*, with a Foreword by Peter Mtuze, contained fourteen of my articles and unpublished conference papers. That done, I returned to a project begun some forty years previously that assembled Robert Godfrey's contributions to *The Blythswood Review*, the organ of a mission college: Volume 7 in the series, published as *Lexicography: Notes on Xhosa Lore and Language (1909–1934)*, contained Godfrey's informal articles on folklore (children's games, riddles, proverbs, taboos) and the Xhosa language (flora and fauna, the year, place names, John Bennie, grammar). The bulk of each section was made up of Godfrey's exploratory notes on bird names and bird-lore that contributed to his book *Bird-lore of the Eastern Cape Province* and an invaluable assembly of additional entries for his proposed third edition of Kropf's dictionary, a project that failed to come to fruition.

Peter Mtuze and I once again collaborated, happily, to produce our third volume for the series, *Iimbali zamandulo: Stories of the Past (1838–1910)*, with a Foreword by Jeff Peires. Nothing in the course of developing this series has offered me greater pleasure than my collaboration with Mtuze, especially during face-to-face sessions barnstorming over the meaning of a word or the implication of a phrase in a joint search for the most apt translation. The volume consisted of forty-four historical testimonies by Xhosa writers providing 'fresh insights into the history of the Xhosa-speaking peoples, providing their own perspectives on their own past', as my blurb put it. It was intended as a corrective to colonial histories that talked down to the Xhosa experience. Some of the texts had been cited by historians, but none of the Xhosa texts, many of them contributed to newspapers and thus intended for a Xhosa-speaking audience, had been definitively translated, let alone assembled.

The most recent contribution to the series to date is the one that perhaps I am most proud of. Jonas Ntsiko (1850–1918) is a name only occasionally mentioned, most frequently through a misrepresentation of A.C. Jordan's translation of a brief extract from one of his poems. Very little was known about him; celebrated in his day, none of his work was in print: 'Jonas Ntsiko is a ghostly presence, defined by his absence, an ancestral shade invoked by no one' (*Hadi waseluhlangeni* xxv). Educated at an Anglican school in Grahamstown, he spent three

years studying at St Augustine's mission college in Canterbury; on his return to South Africa in 1871, Ntsiko was ordained as a deacon but never promoted to the priesthood. He spent ten years in church service before his licence was withdrawn, and he retreated, blind, to serve out his days as an interpreter to a rural magistrate. After his return to South Africa, too, he began contributing to *Isigidimi sama-Xosa* articulate, polemical articles on social and church affairs, many under the pseudonym *UHadi waseluhlangeni*, the national harp. His contributions ceased abruptly in 1884, at about the time of his dismissal by the church, but resumed after a decade's silence and continued until two years before his death. *Hadi waseluhlangeni: Collected Writings (1873–1916)*, with a Foreword by the celebrated novelist and historian Marguerite Poland, includes seventy-two previously unknown items by Ntsiko, as well as two substantial essays on his life and career.

The tenth volume in the series, Mqhayi's *Izibongo zoogxa: Poems on Contemporaries (1902–1944)*, edited and translated with Ntombomzi Mazwi, with a Foreword by the historian Andre Odendaal, has been submitted and will soon go into production. A selection of David Manisi's poems, intended as Volume 11, is in progress.

Whenever, rarely, I field social enquiries about my work, I often have recourse to analogy: it's like knowing about Victorian English literature but suddenly, miraculously, coming across the unpublished writings of three obscure sisters from rural Haworth and introducing the Brontës to the world, or knowing about Shakespeare's plays but suddenly coming across his unknown poetry. I recall the distinguished novelist Gcina Mhlophe reading the Xhosa texts at a launch in London of *The Nation's Bounty* and thrilling at the restoration of Nontsizi Mgqwetho's voice. Excitement, of course, was tinged with pride and, in time, gratification at the public recognition of my work: five of the volumes in the series have won South African Literary Awards in the category Literary Translations, and I was accorded the National Order of Ikhamanga. 'His work exhumes stories of the dead and brings them to life so that the living can continue to learn', according to the citation. Pride and gratification however, were accompanied by puzzlement at the indifference of professional Xhosa literature scholars, most of whom studied under apartheid, despite the efforts of Pamela Maseko to celebrate the revelation of the hitherto muted voices, a puzzlement moderated by the openness of a younger generation of scholars, who have grown up after the demise of apartheid, who study the writings of Mgqwetho and teach Gqoba's poetry. And my puzzlement calls to mind a prescient *izibongo* performed by the *imbongi* D.L.P. Yali-Manisi

on 10 May 1979 in which he referred to me as *Umthandi wamaXhos' engamazi*, 'a lover of Xhosa who doesn't know him', continuing by citing the revered prophet Ntsikana: *Uhlanganis' azibel' imihlamb' isalana*, 'who gathers and brings squabbling flocks together', before addressing me directly.

Watheth' isiXhos' ungenguy' umXhosa,	You speak Xhosa though not a Xhosa yourself,
Wawashwankathel' amaXhos' uwaxhom' uwaxoza,	you shape the Xhosa, lift and peel them:
Wod' ube ngumXhosa na?	would you ever be a Xhosa yourself?

(Opland: Xhosa Poets and Poetry vi).

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Four Poems

CHINUA EZENWA-OHAETO

MONOLOGUE WRITTEN AFTER WATCHING A ROBIN LIFT FROM A TREE BRANCH

A legend goes that a man is first a man.
And then the legend questions itself.
I want to know yesterday and its cognates,
But what actually is tumbling in my thought is the image of whirling
Spittle in the mouths of two adults kissing in a public toilet.
Sometimes my thoughts deny me the freedom of hearing my
arraignments.
And every time I walk onto a pond, I take it to not mean someone's tears.
It's another day today and I have taken an axe and dismantling my
boundaries;
Let the morning birds, bearing with them
Mozart's pears and Igbo waffles, wet crystals and twigs,
Fly into my body and fill in the spaces where I lack.
I lack in excitement. In openness. And in finding.
In gardens. In roses. And in metaphors.
I lack in my country. Lack. Lack. Lack.
And I have staged my country many times before
Men and women, before my past and present,
Wanting to know if I did any wrong living in it,
If I did any wrong tendering my mistakes and verity in it.
I carry wishes I have for my country with two hands God gave me
And with care so they don't fall apart, so they don't
Someday turn to pines riddling my back and its cord.
I understand that sometimes we cannot defeat our supplications.
And my friend who loves playing chess often tells me that
At the end of a tunnel we sometimes find a leopard's claw
Or, in all probability, we find a train coming upon us.
But I don't want to believe it. But I don't want to believe it.
It's another day today and I am wondering about its arms and legs.

I AM ON A ROAD AND MY MOUTH IS FULL OF QUESTIONS

about the ways in which we have become so full of paralytic
appendages, so full of shortcomings, hunger and silences.
I am always with questions because there's something
in what doesn't need to be forgotten; I mean we
sometimes see a man and our voice becomes his voice.
In the morning, I arrange my conscience into justice.
I believe in justice because I understand.
And because I believe in justice and understand, I often want
to compare my days to that night before Christ's crucifixion.
And I have been wondering how much Christ must have felt.
I am nearer to my pains – it's the only way I weigh my punctured
clouds, the only way I know I would save myself again. And again.
And the only way I keep stitching my identity and keep taming
my tongue rising with mollusk and rusting prayers.
I wonder sometimes if one can forget (his pains)
by dressing his tongue with another language.
I wonder sometimes if one can suppress (his loneliness)
by downing his tongue in another language.
There's something about _____ that we keep
returning to those moments someone rejected us.
Perhaps, we need so we can be needed.
I often stretch my hands to memorize the shape of my memories.
And the one memory I can never tire of is that of my
father who I lost at fourteen. These days, I arrange my nameable scars
so the past wouldn't mistake me for a dog howling at night.
But I wish to ask: what purpose is this conversation if the birds still
look down upon us and wonder about the places we're never tender?

WHAT THE LORD SAID

for Adedayo Agarua and Kolawole Samuel

When the Lord said,
'My Cup runneth over,'
O dear, it was my
Beauty it meant.

URIAH IN THE BARDO

Yesterday, my mother called to
know if I am safe where I am.
I asked her why, she said she heard from the
news that there have been gunshots
at my end since Friday and
now and then, people pack up
their goods and run. Nobody
knows what is really happening,
and you don't wait for your dead body
to be why people find out.
You run. You are safe.
After the call, I began to think about
Uriah: how people who are blind to
a situation use their own
legs and run into a shark's mouth.

Three Poems

AMAKA BLOSSOM CHIME

LOCKDOWN IN BIAFRA

When silence echoes loudly
lips droop in shame
words are afraid to perch

eyelids battle the unseen
ears become an open garbage heap
that stink from gossip
lies spread-eagled their legs
the unborn is fated to live
in the womb of maggots and
chemistry

let me wallow in silence
covered with akwete
its whiteness hide my coal-skin

I must chew the cud
and vomit a forest of nostalgia
coal lights a fire that burns
in regiments

I search for truth in between your testicles
clawing my white nails
frozen by years of rejection

my body is a temple
naked and desirable
to beckon the wanderer to explain

why do my roots sag on both sides
why did the ofo tree in an embrace
with me uncover my past?

I am made of more. pure
bronze and fired clay
kola and the aftertaste of bitter-leaf

I am the dot, the locus
of a circle
the mother of pain and joy
boxed into the center of cowards
hiding behind bandits, herds, and men

I am Igbo, the land of
of oracles and thunder
the beginning of the passage
the yearning for the caves and hills
the incantations of the flute
the struggle of rivers flowing ceaselessly
in the veins of the earth to our roots
and fronds dripping blood

give me freedom like a wrapper
without strings
loose at both ends.

THE PRISON DOOR

I know your name
but can't remember
why the oxen fit not the yoke
nor the chariot its rider

Shall I call you a country
when oceans run into streams
Elephants battle trees for space.
The trees fall. Grasses die from
too many rain-tears. The eyes are worn out
like moth-eaten clothes

Shall I call thee a country
in nets and traps. Eagles
migrate to higher rocks
ravished by endless yearning for crumbs
from the master's table.

I shall call thee an anthill
spread across the savannah
trampled by beasts in uniforms
on their collar reads:
'let's turn blood to wine'

KYPHOSIS

Our mother moves in timeless toil
carrying her angry rebellious children
their noses smell water
their tongues poke accusations
charging against their cradle of origin
there is more space in outer space
our mother's breast has no milk
the fetus has iron teeth
the womb is ruptured
the trees render an apology
the rainbow bursts open
with a trail of foul smoke
and the creeks hold no weed
Oh mother mother!
Where is my voice?
Echo the silence
cords run from both ears to
the left pocket
they flow like the Nile.

My days are dry, with stripes
dusty roads and gasping tongues
why we do ache and break
Where is the waterfall that leads to my mother's hut?

My days ate the moon
Our urine turned black like the sun
the cobbler mends hearts too
the heart of a woman is in different places
find the one near our placenta
the one with seven rivers
hide in the water that keeps us calm
till her soul like the music of the Niger
flows earthbound.
She may begin her flow eastward
while her children tired from wandering
in suits fall back into her arms,
now our mother
like the milking cow
pours blood from her teats.

Four Poems

BLESSING EZINNE OKAH

AMBITIOUS

Knocking down and holding up
Loving here and hating there
Taking this and giving that
Whether bind or whether tear
Scurry scurry goes the rat
All in a hurry man keeps up
For you the obscure pumping heart
Ambition
Goldie treasures all for you
Think no leisure but your bread?
Can't you see the apian way?
All in that poor little head
That has to lead to goodies' way
See how it is killing you
You that craved the path you led
Ambitious

Sometimes it's all so very vague
How alien turns the haven you draft?
How brutally they consume you?
What you create, your little craft
Will consume or harbour you?
You feel the ache, it's like a plague
Of experience you have a raft
Content !

SHAKE *IT* OFF

What's *it*?
Sour through the bone
What bone?
The big N's, queen of the savannah's spinal
Say *it* is a cancer
Gazelles gadding about the game
Disobeying their curfew at self expense
Buffalos beckoned by butchers
Losing sleep on account of the lords
Rein doe rocking their rear
Regurgitating what predators ate
Greyhounds guarding the ghouls in grunt
Standing to get their pat, a bone and a kick
Falcons fresh from Florence
Egging on their young through their avian routes
Calves come from common castrate camps
Groveling in companies for seeds of own testes
Night birds in nests of nestlings unknown
Neglecting nigh their forts, these they pick to foster-sit
Capons careful to be called cubs
Filling up their cranky core with crying bloods
Ducks daring not to shake as if they are of rubber
Making them stores of stolen grains to earn some plume
And these, and those, and name *it*.
In the big N, Africa's giant

Yet the lords lament *it*
They lament
The sour through the bone
The spinal cancer
As though they see not *it* be upon them
That gazelles will stay in the ranch if they cease to expend
And buffalos will sleep when they are content
That rein doe will eat when they gag the predators
And greyhounds would race if their ghouls feel secure
That falcons will soar again if they sink their avian routes
And calves will use the forages if they take naught from them
That night birds will sit on nestlings if they are their kind
And Cockerels will grow into cocks and be glad they are not cubs

That ducks will remember to shake if they are not rubber ducks
And the rest will join to shake and together we'll shake *it* off
Till the queen stands to grin
And the savannah is green again
All these, and those, till then,

ACADEMIA

See now it's towering, towering high
The ladder called academia
In a leaves-withering green
On a blood-drunk land
who stands,
See them at zenith grasping, grabbing all
Upon this ladder called academia
In this stem-rotting green
On this blood-drunk land
How unperturbed,
See Professors standing, standing tall
Prof-Esaus too
the one fighting for the right to water our green
The other trading same on the platter of ready porridge
They know what
Hunger,
Lecturers scaling, scaling up
Leak-surers too
the one watering our green
The other working anti-team
They feel what
Hunger,
Assistants labouring, labouring hard
Assist-ants too
The one fetching cans and water for our green
The other licking and sucking away, all up
They crave what
Porridge Servings,
Should this green having no water,
Water not washing blood's tears,
Tears' blood flowing sinks this land,
Land sinking collapses this ladder,
Ladder collapsing…oh no
Let not highest fall hardest

Nor even lowest, lightest
Let bring now water for our green
let there be balm for this land
So let us stand

AHOA, 2022

You are at last born today
Like others, without delay
  Welcome, welcome
  Youngest of years
You for whom mankind yearned
May hearts rejoice when you've earned
  Welcome, welcome
  Most craved of years
Bring us morrows of might and mirth
This breath of health and wealth to birth
  Welcome, welcome
  Finest of years
We hope to see pleasant surprises
As day by day your sacred sun rises
  Welcome, welcome
  Most fruitful of years
Soothe them he gulped their fathers
Hearts he left wounded, your latest of brothers
  Welcome, welcome
  Kindest of years
Bathe them all, who he left battered
Homes and Cities that he left shattered
  Welcome, welcome
  Most promising of years
You who come bringing two$_s$, triple
Doubles dominate any zero, simple
  Welcome, welcome
  Bravest of years
Make merry the memories, for men of El
Looking forward to a fairest farewell
  Fare well, Ahoa
  Most fair of years

Pulse on Martin Niemöller

ALEXANDER OPICHO

Pastor Niemöller sang of those who kept quiet
When peddlers of terror came for Jews, Socialists, trade unionists
And also the Communists, but those to speak out kept mum –
because
They were not one of the victims of circumstances, until they came
For them and no one was left to speak for them,

Then they came for black people
Razing them up through Caribbean enslavement
And then African colonialism before having
Them on the universal slaughter-slab of Neo-
Colonialism – but we all kept quiet as if we were mute
Because we are not black in our skins,

Then they came for Arabs of Muslim persuasion
Hunting them out from their dens of faith and worship
On charges of being terror-peddlers, hunting them down
To Guantanamo bay for detention without trial in sight –
But we kept quiet because we are not Arabs nor Muslims,

Then the Israelis came for the Palestinians, dishing them
With terror of full-sized apartheid perfectly dehumanizing
All Palestinian populations on the streets of Jerusalem –
But we kept quiet because we are not non-Israelis in Gaza,

Then the Chinese came for Uighur Muslims, lynching them
With brutality of megalithic station, dreaming to recreate them
Into new human species acceptable for China's Neighbourhood
But all was done in most cruel manner devoid of modern logic –
But we kept quiet because we are not Uighur Muslims,

Then they came for migrant workers, the workers running away from war
And ecological as well social climate unfit for human habitation
But labelled illegal migrants in the style of giving a dog a bad name
For sanctified flogging, thrashing and pummelling with hostility –

But we kept quiet because we are not those looking for a new home,

Then they came for African-Americans, kneeling on their necks
Until they can't breathe for their insignificant black lives
As if black lives don't matter in the white world of America –
But we kept quiet and very aloof from demos of black-lives matter
We backed-off because we have never had a knee of a policeman on
our necks,

Then post-colonial politics of Africa came for the powerless and
Poor citizens, looting from them in exchange of mediocrous life in
all avenues
Forcing the people down the hell-hole of poverty, want, disease
And collective despair. The hopeless sons and daughters of Africa –
But we kept quiet because we are not citizens of Africa,

They came for Gays and Lesbians just as they did to all the gender-fluids
Terrorizing them with a cult of ignorance dressed in the gear of
homophobia
Denying them space and right of freedom to choose feelings and
pleasure
Totting them with public violence, verbal hostility and irrational
loathing – but
We kept quiet because we are not lesbians, gays, intersex,
transgender or bi-sexual,

Then Idi Amin Dada came, he chose to serve the instincts of black
inhumanity
At mercy of British racketeering, out to muffle commercial voice of
India in Uganda
He converted Ugandan Indians into pathetic refugees, victims of
state-funded terror
Wallowing up and down in the mire of hopelessness with no roof
on their heads –
But we kept quiet because we are not Indians in Uganda under Idi
Amin Dada,

Then they came for women, enslaving them to the tether of
patriarchal taste
Rendering them powerless before the cult of virginity-test on the
wedding night
As domestic violence freely exchanges position with gender-pay gap
in the arena
Celebrating foul history of cutting the clitoris short in service to
purity myth

As if the terror of beauty myth in the red tent has never served
patriarchy well –
But we kept quiet because we are not women within the realms of
Patriarchy,

Now they have come for us in our kingdom of negative silence
Exterminating the aged among us at slaughter-house of vaccine
nationalism
To oil and grease voracity of conveyor belts of corporate greedy
For those own and know, knowing better to a station of tyrannical
experts –
But the world is now silent, no one has been left to speak for us,
Our kingdom of negative silence swallowed all that could speak for us,

Two Poems

STEPHEN OLADELE SOLANKE

EONS BEFORE

eons before

we were the gods
when the world was a baby
then we thought all we did
were godly

in our ignorance
we troubled the masses
who we thought
had no fire

eons during

they were the gods
and outwards into spacelessness
they expelled us

nothing remained of us
of them

in our compound complexity
we and they felt
godly

eons after

a space less nothingness
devoid of all
we and they
existless
nothing floats

eons in eons

God
in Its all knowingness
tested we and they

we and they failed
fell
but
a light shines
and …

WHAT!?

it was the year
it flew
and we stood
agaped

it was our life
it went
and we watched
stunned

it was our country
it burnt
and we gaped
perplexed

it was our soul
it fried
and we metamorphosed
nothingness

Poem

AISHA UMAR

WILD GRIEF

The wilderness of my heart
Runs races of yearnings
Down the road of expectations
On the eve of hopeful disappointment.
The cascade of pain
Erodes my gullible hope
For a dream rewind.
I'm not a friend of grief
for grief is it, that strips me of joy.
The world, adorned in the regalia of grief
Crawls blindly on me
Searching for what never will be
Meaning is meaningless to me
Like a dry river is to fish.
My knowledge fails my knowing
My sight, blurred
Steps failing.
This lonely path I tread unaccompanied,
But for my painful smiles
A stranger you are to my pain
For you reap from the gains of my pain
Leaving in your wake.
The debris of your inequities,
My thorny steps to walk.
A lone friend in majority you were,
You held my hands,
As I throttle through the red sea of life
Then,
You let go your grip
Embarking on an endless journey,
You alone chose to travel
No goodbyes

But the reality of your present absence
All there is left
Are the Debris of your heart
The Echoes of your laughter
The gaiety of your steps

The glow of your smile
The benevolence of your hands
No sired possession
Nor decent siblings
Instead, scavengers of your wealth
Claiming legality to what you hold dear
With professed pain, but gladdened hearts
They scavenge your wealth and world
Paying no attention to the bell of time.
There's no absolution to this pain
The epiphany of your departure,

Ties that Gag

FELICIA MOH

They survived. Malaria that attacked each person at least once in every three months. They survived. Drinking water from the muddy brown pond which served as the community's source of water; water that had guinea worm eggs which matured into live worms as they entered the human system. They survived measles, whooping cough, and countless cases of flu brought about by lack of immunization. They survived under-nutrition and a heavily carbohydrate-based diet. Egg was for adults, and any child that was raised eating eggs would steal in the future. They survived. Eating rice and stew only on Sundays. Because Sunday was a special day and they were a Christian family that went to church. After church, Mama would make rice and stew with tripe of cow and hides and skin. As the 'things' within the stew were shared according to seniority, you dared not choose out of turn or eat yours immediately. You wore the 'towel' on your finger and ran out to show other children the great feast that happened in your home. They survived the chiggers that burrowed into their shoeless feet as they did the 'five-kilometre' trek to their school and back every day. As Mama tenderly cut open the affected toe to pick out the flea, she rubbed hot sizzling oil into the wound and put a plaster on it. That foot must be protected from stones and from getting contaminated. Many a child died from tetanus infection. They survived poverty. So how did they not survive running the same prosperous business they had both contributed to nurturing?

They enjoyed the moonlight games and the tropical rains. They would run into the rain naked, glad that they could have a full bath without the hassle of fetching the water. They felt the biting wind and cold of the harmattan season when one would stand for several minutes wishing the cold water could miraculously turn to warm water before using it to bathe. But bath in the cold water, they must. So they began by testing a little with the feet and working up gradually

to the head. That is if Kachi or Ogeri didn't mischievously pour some ice-cold water on them from behind.

Uche and Azu were born eight years apart to Papa and Mama Mkpume. Uche was the older. Between them were two sisters; Kachi and Ogeri. Their parents were subsistence farmers in Amasiri, an Igbo village in Nigeria. Even though there were only four children in a monogamous household, providing for their needs was still tough. Their father, Pa Mkpume, planted yams and rice. Their mother grew cocoa yams, groundnuts, cassava, and vegetables. They depended on the benevolence of the weather. Groundnuts could provide bulk money, but just one incident of flooding, especially when it occurred close to the time of harvest, was enough to wipe out both capital and profit that would have accrued from the farm. They were living from hand to mouth.

The mango season was always a period of relief. The fresh green and yellow mangoes quenched the pangs of hunger. They were 'stoned' down or pulled down. Little boys and girls climbed the trees, ignoring ants and bees, as they reached the prized possessions. Up there, you could eat as much as you wanted before throwing some down for the weaklings below.

Maize grew fast and augmented the mangoes. While waiting for the yam to mature. They could be boiled in hot water and eaten with boiled *ube*. They could be roasted over a wood fire and eaten with roasted *ube* or coconut. They could be pounded with mortar and pestle and made into a pudding. Or de-husked and cooked soft with vegetables, palm oil, and fresh pepper.

Uche and Azu went to the same primary school. Azu inherited Uche's teachers.

'Why are you not like your brother? Uche would never talk to me like that,' Miss Bernice would complain.

It hurts being a younger sibling. Azu never got new clothes except for Christmas; he inherited Uche's old clothes. He inherited his rickety bicycle. He inherited his second-hand tattered jeans. He inherited his textbooks. He even inherited his enemies. If Uche fought someone in school and overpowered the person, the victim sought Azu later and retaliated. He was beaten up for fights he never started.

Uche completed primary school and was enrolled in the Community Secondary School. As he became more aware of the financial status of his parents, he set out to help as much as he could. He bought raw cassava and joined his sisters to process it to *garri* which his mother sold. He picked 'bush' mangoes, shelled them, and ended up with

measly cups of *ogbono* for sale. He hired himself out to richer farmers where he helped them to make ridges and earned a daily wage. He set traps that caught game that they sold. He fished in the stream, kept the tiniest of his catch for his family's use, but sold the bulk. He picked and sold snails. He made vegetable gardens and diligently watered the plants until they were ready for harvest and sale. During the holidays, he worked extra hard to raise the money for his next term's fees. As a child, he was assuming more and more adult responsibilities. It wasn't considered child labour, but contributing one's quota as the oldest son. As he completed secondary school, Azu enrolled in the same school. His placement interview had been surprisingly easy.

'Your brother, Uche, was a hardworking student. We hope you can do as well as he did,' the principal told him.

'I will do even better than Uche,' Azu promised them. He was admitted into the school.

Uche would have liked to go to the university, but he knew his parents couldn't afford it. Scholarship opportunities were as rare as comets. He threw himself into supporting his family more. He was doing whatever manual labour he could find. He looked wistfully as his classmates, some of who were no better than him in school, arrived home for the long holidays from their various universities. Some of them were no longer friends with him because they were way out of his league. They dressed smartly and spoke funny accents of English as a fitting tribute to their new status. They wouldn't be caught dead speaking the vernacular. Even his village sweetheart had no time for him any more once the university boys were around. It hurt, but he understood. Women are pragmatic beings who can see a person with better financial prospects. He let her go with her engineer-in-training admirer. His own time would come, and love and women would all fall into place.

Fortune smiled on him from an unexpected source. Uncle Itiri came from Lagos to the village to look for a sales boy. Uche gladly volunteered. He would serve him for two years after which Itiri would 'settle' him: give him capital and start him off. It was all good. He joined him in the sale of second-hand clothing. As a sales boy, he was the first to come to the shop and the last to leave. Sometimes, he would sleep in the shop if Itiri had visitors to host in his one-room apartment which he shared with his wife and three children. He swept the shop and kept the record of sales.

Uche learnt the ropes very quickly. Itiri gave him recommended retail prices for the clothes, so whatever he pitched higher was for

him. He was sending money home to support his parents. They had encouraged him to be faithful and truthful. He served Itiri for the two years agreed and he 'settled' him with a grant of two hundred thousand Naira to start on his own. Uche rented a one-room in a '*face-me-I-face-you*' slum part of town. He sent for Ogeri, his younger sister, to join him. She had completed secondary school. She doubled up as a sales girl and housekeeper. They lived frugally.

With time, they moved to a bigger shop and a one-bedroom flat. Azu had completed secondary school and Uche encouraged him to go to the university. He paid for his little brother to get a sound education. He waited until his brother graduated from the university before he got married to Eleje. Like him, Eleje had only the senior secondary certificate. She had a large and kind heart. She was regarded as the second mother to the whole family. Azu joined him in Lagos after graduation. They agreed that instead of looking for a job, he should join Uche in his business.

Azu's joining the business was like the proverbial Midas's touch. Due to his level of education, he plugged loopholes that were draining finances and accessed bank loans. The business boomed and profits soared. They were making in one month what Uche and Ogeri were unable to earn in one year. Uche couldn't believe his eyes when he saw how well they were doing. Finally, he would go to the village and show his classmates that, despite not having a university education, he was also doing well for himself. He bought a better car and changed to more comfortable accommodation. He and his family were still living modestly.

Azu was different from Uche.

He had an elitist taste. He refused to live with his brother in the slum part of town. He wanted a more decent accommodation, especially as they could now afford it. That was just the beginning of their misunderstandings. The younger brother thought the elder was too miserly, while the elder felt his younger brother was too wasteful. They had a misunderstanding too on the type of country home to build: Uche wanted a functional block of flats, but Azu wanted a palatial residence. Uche wanted them to keep building the business to yield more money, but Azu felt that they needed to move in an environment where he felt they could think better and plan better. What Uche considered luxuries were bare necessities to the educated Azu.

Azu had also married a well-educated career lady, Ugonma, and her taste was influencing him. The women sided with their husbands and there was a cold war between the two families. Uche and his wife Eleje

were on one side; Azu and Ugonma on the other. They couldn't see eye to eye. Their parents watched helplessly as the relationship between their two sons soured. They came from the village to reconcile them.

Papa Mkpume brought a pack of brooms. He asked each of them to pick a broomstick and try to break it. Of course, each could do that easily. He now asked each to try to break the bundle of broomsticks. They couldn't. 'So you see that when you're united, nothing can break you,' he concluded. But money was involved. Loads of it. Uche argued that he made Azu who he was. And he was right. But Azu argued that his skills grew the business to what it had become. And he was right too. Uche felt insulted and disrespected by his younger brother, but the younger brother felt that the elder was out of touch with reality because of his limited education.

Azu and Ugonma wanted their combined assets to be shared. It pained Uche because the business was originally his and he hadn't wanted his brother to be his competitor. As the brawl intensified, Uche and Eleje finally reconciled themselves to the inevitability of separation. But how could their joint assets be shared without rancour? They needed find a way to share the business and neither would yield to the other. Their parents left without making any headway.

One day, they began their arguments as usual. Hot and unkind words were flying up and down.

'Who do you imagine that you are? I made you who you are,' Uche shouted at Azu.

'You did, but my wisdom made the business what it is,' Azu replied.

The women and the children were watching helplessly.

'Please ignore the ingrate,' Eleje shouted at Uche. This infuriated him the more.

'I paid for his education! I brought him to join me, and he wants to take MY business from me,' Uche was shouting.

'Ignore the semi-literates,' Ugonma advised her own husband. 'No wonder Alexander Pope said a little learning is a dangerous thing. They're envying us because we are more educated than them.'

The comments from their wives were exacerbating an already volatile situation. Until emotions got so high that Uche gave Azu a stinging blow. With bloodshot eyes, Azu picked up a full bottle of beer nearby and hit Uche on the head. Uche fell, hitting the centre table before crashing to the floor. There was blood everywhere. Time stood still. In that split second, Azu realized the horror he had caused. He shouted for help. Neighbours ran in, picked up Uche, and rushed him

to the nearest hospital. He was pronounced dead on arrival. Killed by his own blood brother. Azu was picked up by the police. Homicide!

Eleje couldn't believe the misfortune that had just befallen her family. She was sad and she was angry. So this was the reward that Azu could give the loving brother that went through many privations to bring him up! Why do bad things happen to good people? Why must it be her husband that would die? It took the restraining hands of neighbours to stop her engaging Ugonma in a physical fight too. She was mad with rage. Some passers-by spirited Ugonma to safety. They took Uche's corpse away and deposited it in the mortuary.

Eleje was mourning for Uche. She went through the entire cycle of shock, anger, and resentment. Between her and Ugonma, a battle line was drawn. She would never forgive and she would never forget. Ugonma's comment was part of the reason the fight became bloody. She had hit at Uche's source of inferiority: his limited education. Instead of speaking soothing words that would calm the angry men, Ugonma had caused her husband, who was never given to violent behaviour, to hit his own brother. She knew that she would be interrogated in court. She would tell the court of all her husband's efforts to help his brother and his family. She would convince them that it was premeditated murder. Ugonma did not deserve to have a husband when she, the longsuffering wife, would be a young widow. They were now sworn enemies. For life. She thought of revenge, but what could she do? Should she kill one of Azu's two children? If she did, she would go to jail, too. Or should she consult a powerful witch doctor who would do the job silently for her? She often stayed awake all night plotting what the revenge would look like. She wasn't just sad, but she was very bitter. She wailed at the whole wide world and there was no solution in sight. Her health was deteriorating fast too. She had no reason to live other than to avenge her husband's death. Whoever caused her this pain deserved to perish with his entire household. Ugonma had visited her, but she refused to respond to her greeting even though that one was weeping profusely.

Then Mama Mkpume visited them in Lagos. She was a fraction of her former size. Seeing the grieving older woman tore at Eleje's heart. Here was a mother who had lost one son and was on the verge of losing the second. These were her breadwinners too. What would she, Eleje, gain if Azu's family was also destroyed except adding to the grief of the aged woman? What satisfaction would any form of revenge serve her, if not putting a bigger and deadlier wedge between the two families?

Mama's arrival tipped the scale. Her resentment of Ugonma began to thaw. She saw that, like her, Ugonma was a victim. Victim of the men's uncontrollable rage. She softened. Ugonma with a husband in prison wasn't having it easy. The emotional burden of her husband being the killer of his own brother wasn't easy. Unfortunately too, people were already bad-mouthing Ugonma as the evil woman who entered the family and destroyed it beyond repair. The stigma was mortifying. If she managed to go out of her house, people pointed at her as the wrecker of her home. After all, were the two brothers not living in peace before she came in as a wife? She would run back, sobbing into her house.

Eleje decided that they would fight this battle together. Papa Mkpume might die of heartbreak and grief, but whatever it cost, they would ensure that Azu didn't die for as long as possible. Her children must have a living uncle and Ugonma would have a living husband. As these thoughts took hold in her mind, the knot on her chest lightened. She felt better. She extended forgiveness to Azu. He was suffering as much as she, the widow. She could feel the negative energy leaving her heart. She exhaled. And in so doing, released the prisoner, who was herself. Harbouring vengeful feelings was like drinking poison hoping another person would die. As she forgave even Azu, she felt accelerated healing. She could laugh again. She knew he already felt terrible with what he had done. Uche wasn't coming back. They had only one direction to face: forward.

The legal team was working tirelessly. It was a race against time. They must succeed in converting the case from homicide to manslaughter, since it wasn't a premeditated killing. Eleje knew that manslaughter meant life imprisonment, but at least, Azu would still be alive. Even if he was behind prison doors, there was the psychological satisfaction that he could still be seen and heard. Her sister-in-law, Ugonma, would still have a husband. Her children would have an uncle and her young nephews and nieces would still have a father. Her aged parents-in-law wouldn't be deprived of two sons at once. How would Mama Mkpume, who was already hypertensive, cope with the loss of another son? Who knows? Azu might behave so well in prison that a benevolent head of state might grant him pardon.

Ugonma came to see Mama Mkpume at Eleje's house. She stood hesitantly at the gate, not sure whether Eleje would let her in or not. But the latter called her cheerfully by name and asked her to come in. She let out a loud wail, came inside the sitting room, and fell at Mama Mkpume's feet. Mama and Eleje joined her. None could console the

other. At length, the emotions subsided. Eleje didn't need to tell her that she was not angry with her any more. She just told her, 'I prepared some fresh soup for Mama. Please, go to the kitchen and dish for yourself,' which Ugonma did. Some days later, the three women went to visit Azu in prison. His disheveled appearance showed he wasn't eating or sleeping well. Mama Mkpume and Ugonma were wailing. Eleje was the one that spoke.

'I forgive you, Azu. What has happened, has happened. Be strong because we need you alive. We shall hire a good lawyer and while you're here, I will be bringing you food every day.'

She put her hands around the other two women, led them to her car, and drove home with them. From that day, Ugonma and her children moved over to Eleje's house and they lived together. Mama Mkpume joined them later after they buried Papa. Three women united in their shared grief. They all survived: the women, the children, and the business.

Featured Articles

Costume as Mystico-Metaphoric Communication in Toni Duruaku's A Matter of Identity*:*

A Semiotic Analysis

UKACHI WACHUKU

Costume encompasses all the garments and accessories used in a theatrical performance, in addition to 'all items relating to hairdressing, and everything associated with face and body makeup, including masks' (Barranger, *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* 247). Costume indicates the historical and geographic settings of a theatrical presentation, and portrays characterization (Eze & Akas, 'Costume and Makeup as a Tool for Cultural Interpretation' 23). Furthermore, it indicates the relationships among characters, such that members of the same groups, for example, would be recognizable by the similarity of their costumes. In addition, costume changes may signal corresponding changes in the relationships between characters and their roles (Umukoro, 'Traditionalism in Ola Rotimi's Drama' 107). Costume also ensures that the audience understands how each character fits into the production (Ommanney and Schanker, *The Stage and the School* 348). In effect, costume possesses, and in the hands of a good director, is consciously designed to embody a high communicative potential. It may, therefore, be considered a vital non-verbal communication code in theatre (Eze & Akas 23), and a fundamental part of the total design of a theatrical production. In spite of its importance however, costume has not been adequately documented or researched (Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* 31).

This article explores from a semiotic perspective the symbolism of costume and its aesthetic and semiotic functions in a theatrical production of Toni Duruaku's play, *A Matter of Identity*, which was presented as the finale of the 2010 Convocation of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria by Heritage Theatre Network, Owerri, an organization founded by the playwright

and focused on African theatre, hybrid drama modelling, culture, and the translation of drama in English into Igbo.

All the costumes used in this production (apart from those of the ancestral spirits) were designed and produced by the author of this article in her capacity as Costumier for the production.

Directed by Duruaku himself, this mythical metaphoric play depicts an imaginary postcolonial community, Umukwenu. Unable and/or unwilling to preserve, develop, and uphold its indigenous cultural identity, Umukwenu is on the verge of cultural death. The community has rejected its own cultural values, and has, instead, chosen 'wholesale adoption' rather than 'adaptation' (Duruaku 54), of a foreign culture, with disastrous consequences. This theme is a metaphor for contemporary Igbo society, in which the foreign often seems to be considered better than the indigenous, to the detriment of the traditional societal values which form the bases of meaningful life in the communities.

Umukwenu is preparing for the annual Festival of the Rising Moon, which is a celebration of life, development, and communal successes. However, the preparations are brought to an abrupt halt by a message from the Oracle that the festival must not be held, for the consequences would be dire. The only remedy to the situation is to send special emissaries into the Never-Never Land of the Ancestors to seek for absolution, purification, and instructions on what the community can do to ensure positive change. The two – a boy, Okoli and a girl, Nkechi – who meet the requirements for this task, are sent into the Never-Never Land to consult the ancestral spirits Eké, Óriè, Àfò, and Nkwo. They undergo the judgement of the Ancestors as scapegoats for the entire community, and are found guilty. Nevertheless, they return safely to relay the commands of the Ancestors to the leaders of the four clans that make up the community. Unfortunately, the clan leaders, Ntagbu, Obiocha, Ocheze, and Mbagwu, lack the will to take positive and conclusive action. There is no resolution. The play, which begins with a scene of panic, ends with the same scene of panic and trepidation.

A theatre performance is largely ephemeral and not easily captured for posterity (Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre* xxii). For this reason, each stage presentation, even of the same play, is more or less unique. It therefore becomes necessary to consider how various aspects of theatre performance may be systematically documented for archiving and retrieval purposes, but more so in order to make them easily accessible to students and practitioners of theatre. An effective documentation and archival is one that is not only robust and can be retrieved for new

uses, but one that views both processes from the perspectives of their potential contributions to the history of and innovations to practice, both traditional and contemporary. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the documentation and analysis of stage costuming principles and techniques within Igbo symbolism. It is also hoped that the study will contribute to an increase in the awareness of the semiosis of costume among theatre practitioners, and students especially, and highlight the function of costume as a communicative tool in theatre in education in African performance discourse. Finally, it is hoped that the study will provide a basis for further research into the semiosis of costume in traditional and contemporary African performance and theatre.

The semiotic analysis of costume in this stage production of *A Matter of Identity* derives from the structural linguistic model proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure; namely, semiotics, which is generally considered to be the study of signs and meaning. Its basic notions are the sign and the symbol. In terms of Saussure's model, a sign is regarded as anything that stands for something else. Signs are dyadic, and are composed of a signifier, which is the form that the sign takes, and the signified, which is the mental concept that the sign represents (Littlejohn & Foss, *Theories of Human Communication* 35).

Semiotics studies the sign systems and codes that operate within a medium, genre, or society, and the texts and messages that are produced by them. A theatre performance is an audio-visual text. Within the context of this study, *text* refers to 'an assemblage of signs constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre, and in a particular medium of communication' (Chandler, *Semiotics for Beginners* 9); the genre in this case being theatrical performance, and the medium, the three-dimensional visual code of communication in which costume is presented. The study is concerned with a semantic analysis of the costumic sign system in the aforementioned stage performance, which entails the identification and description of the principal semantic units, and determination of the types of meaning created. Basically, two types of meaning, denotational and connotational, are involved (Chandler, *Beginners* 89).

The denotation of a costume is its principal or literal meaning, a meaning that is closely related to the story line and usually transparent to the audience. For instance, grey tints in the hair and age lines on the face are an obvious indication that a character is aged. Connotation on the other hand, refers to a secondary or implied and associated meaning. It is the meaning assigned to a sign/

symbol on the basis of the socio-cultural and personal associations that arise in the process of decoding a text (Ubersfeld 16). Such associations are a product of the values and conventions that operate within the society to which the actors and their audience belong, in addition to the codes to which they have had access (Elam 7). An example from the text is the *ọfo*, a wand carried by the ancestral spirit Àfò. This is an element of costume in the text, but it additionally symbolizes the high value assigned to justice, fair play, and sincerity in the Igbo world view (Ajaebili et al. '*Ọfo*: The Tangible and Intangible Heritage of the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria' 105).

The semantic analysis of this text follows a structural approach, whereby the constituent units in the sign system are identified, and the connotations in the use of the symbols highlighted. There are numerous costumic signs in the text, but the study is focused on those that are considered most important. These are presented and discussed below.

Table 1 Signs Pertaining to Setting.

Signifier	**Signified**
1. The costumes of Ntagbu, Obiocha, Ocheze, and Mbagwu (the clan leaders): i. The hand-woven Akwete cloth ii. The red caps with eagle's feathers iii. The decorated leather fans iv. The horsetails	Traditional Igbo setting
2. The costumes of Nkechi, Okoli, and the other youths: i. T-shirt and shorts/trousers (boys) ii. Simple frock/skirt and blouse (girls)	Contemporary setting

In line with Ubersfeld (16), the signs shown in Table 1 may be classified as denotations, in that they help to indicate the time and place settings of the production. However, these signs represent not only the historical and geographical settings; they also symbolize the psychological setting of the production. Taken together, these signs suggest opposition between the old and the new/young. They indicate that the community is in a period of transition between traditional and modern society. This is the symbolic essence of the tension in the community: the people are unable to constructively reconcile the old ways and the new.

Table 2 Signs Pertaining to Characterization.

Signifier	Signified
1. The costumes of the clan leaders: i. The rich, colourful hand-woven Akwete cloth ii. The red caps with eagle's feathers iii. The decorated leather fans iv. The horsetails	 i. High social status ii Wealth/ Affluence iii. Power/Authority
2. The grey-tinted hair of the elders	Advancing age
3. Facial aging makeup	Advancing age
4. The costume of Ntagbu, the Chief of Rituals: i. The red and white wrap ii. The red, black and white striped woollen cap iii. The forehead brand iv. The white clay eye makeup	Role shift from clan leader to Chief of Rituals
5. The costumes of the other ritual functionaries: i. The white wraps ii. The half-face masks	Role shift from clan leaders to ritual functionaries
6. The costumes of Nkechi, Okoli and the other youths: i. T-shirt and shorts/trousers ii. Simple frock/skirt and blouse	 i. Youth ii. Low social status
7. The costumes of the two emissaries: i. The jute costumes ii. The white clay body masks iii. The tender yellow palm fronds	Role shift from village youths to emissaries to the land of the spirits
8. The costumes of the ritual acolytes: i. The white wraps ii. The white clay body masks iii. The tender yellow palm fronds	Role shift from village youths to ritual acolytes

9. The costumes of Eké, Óriè, Àfò, and Nkwo (the Ancestors):	
i. The full body jute masks	i. Supernatural power
ii. The iron ceremonial staffs	ii. Sacredness
iii. The branches of sacred trees, carried by Eké and Nkw	iii. Justice
iv. The symbol of industry (ikeǹgà), carried by Óriè	iv. Objectivity
v. The symbol of fair play and justice (ọfọ), carried by Àfò	

The signs shown in Table 2 denote the social status, age, and functions of the characters in their different roles. The costumes of Ntagbu, Obiocha, Ocheze, and Mbagwu in their roles as clan leaders signify their economic affluence and their positions of authority in the community. The rich colours, red, gold, purple, and emerald green, and the sheer volume of the fabrics used in the costumes of the four clan leaders are indicators of their high status. Their accessories; namely, the red caps, the eagle feathers, the leather fans, and horsetails are recognized among the Igbo as symbols of wealth, power and authority (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 'Promoting Minority Cultures through Costume and Makeup' 135). These characters have dual roles in the production; they are not only community leaders, but also spiritual leaders. This is indicated by the costume change that signals their role shift from human political leaders to ritual spiritual intermediaries.

In the same vein, the simple contemporary costumes of the characters Nkechi, Okoli, and the other village youths denote their roles as daughters and sons of Umukwenu. These roles are transformed into those of ritual intermediaries and acolytes with the change into costumes of the same rough jute fabric as those of the ancestral spirits. This costume change brings the roles of these characters into sharp contrast: first, in their individualism, and later, in their collectivism as representatives of the endangered present and future generations.

In line with Elam (7), Nkechi's and Okoli's costume change is indicative of more than a shift in character role. The change from the simple contemporary costumes that symbolize their ordinary life, into their ritual costumes and body masks, is an indication of their entry into the realm of the supernatural. As they enter into the rituals that open the way into the Never-Never Land of the Ancestors, Nkechi and Okoli become separated from the ordinary concerns of life in the community. To make that journey, their bodies are masked with

a mixture of white clay and water, thereby signifying that they are required to interact with spirits. This is a protective device against any negative supernatural influence they may encounter during their interaction with the different forces of the universe (Amankulor, 'Masks as an Instrument for Dramatic Characterisation in Traditional Igbo Society' 56). They are garlanded at waist, ankle, forearm, and forehead with tender yellow palm fronds, and the acolytes who guard their sleeping bodies hold tender palm leaves between their lips, signifying their apartness, purity, and sacredness, and the sense of danger that surrounds them (Olumati, '"Omu Ngwo" (Omu-Furled – Tender Palm Frond) Symbology in Ikwerre, Rivers State' 227). Thus, the acolytes are completely immersed in the ritual, completely separated from the rest of the clan. They do not speak, and may not be spoken to. Furthermore, in this symbolism, the palm fronds ensure that Nkechi's and Okoli's sleeping bodies remain undisturbed, so that they can return safely into them at the end of the journey to the ancestral realm.

After Nkechi's and Okoli's ordeal in the land of the Ancestors and upon their return to the community, they and the acolytes reappear in contemporary costumes. The girls appear in simple frocks, and the boys in t-shirts and shorts or trousers. Again, the significance of this reversion to contemporary costume goes beyond characterization; it symbolizes the quintessence of the community's dislocation from its roots. The lessons of the Ancestors have not been learned.

According to Amankulor (52), in addition to body painting, a mask may consist of a head-piece designed to be worn on top of the head; a face mask, or a full body mask made from cloth, leaves or other plant material. The costumes of the Ancestors, Eké, Óriè, Àfò, and Nkwo in the production are full body masks covering the face and entire body, including the hands and feet of the wearers. Made from jute fibre fabric, these masks in addition to the accessories; namely, the iron ceremonial staffs (*ójì*) they carry, the branches of the sacred plants *ábtoshi* and *ògírìshì* held by Eké and Nkwo respectively, the *ikeǹgà* staff held by Óriè, and the *ọ́fo* wand held by Àfò, denote the characters of the Ancestors in the performance.

On the connotational level, these masks are representations of the ancestral spirits of the Igbo traditional market days, which are themselves symbols of the communal life of the people. Primarily, these costumes call into focus the communal identity of the clan. Secondly, they introduce and reinforce the metaphysical and ritual importance of what the community is required to do in order to survive into an unfettered and balanced future. Furthermore, several elements of their

costumes hold deep cultural or esoteric meanings. The branches of *Aboshi* and *Ògírìshì*, held by Eké and Nkw respectively, are symbols of sacredness. *Ìkeɲìgà*, held by Óriè, symbolizes the high value of industry among the Igbo, and *ọfo* , held by Àfò, symbolizes the importance of sincerity and justice in Igbo world view (Ajaebili et al. 109).

Table 3 Signs Pertaining to Colour.

Signifier	**Signified**
1. The sombre general colour scheme	The dire situation of the community as it moves towards cultural death
2. The dark colour of the dance costumes	The tragic and dolorous atmosphere, indicating the seriousness of the situation
3. The vibrant colours of the costumes of the four leaders: Red, gold, emerald green, and purple	i. Wealth/ Affluence ii. Power/Authority as clan leaders
4. The combination of red and white in the costume of the Chief of Rituals	i. Spirit involvement ii. Importance of dual gender
5. The pure white costumes of the other ritual leaders	Spirit involvement
6. The pure white costumes of the acolytes	i. Purity/Chastity ii. Spirit involvement
7. The white clay masking of the emissaries and acolytes	i. Purity/Chastity ii. Spirit involvement iii. Apartness/sacredness
8. The white clay makeup around the Chief Priest's eye, and the forehead brand	i. Supernatural power ii. Spirit involvement iii. Apartness/sacredness

Colour is a significant costumic sign in the production. In Table 3, the meaning of the jewel-like colours of the costumes of the four elders, signifying their high social status and power as clan leaders (Utoh-Ezeajugh 135), may be seen as denotational. The red and white costume of the Chief of Rituals, the pristine white wraps of the other ritual leaders and the acolytes, and the white clay masks of all the participants in the ritual may also be classified as denotational, inasmuch as they are indicative of changes in character roles.

However, the colours white and red are also deeply symbolic in the text. According to Jell-Bahlsen (*The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology: Ogbuide of Oguta Lake* 219, 222), white in Igbo colour symbolism is female, cool, and balanced, a symbol of purity, fluidity and fecundity. It also symbolizes 'communication across the worlds of humans and spirits' (217). White clay (kaolin) is liberally used as makeup for the group of characters comprising the emissaries to the spirit realm, the Chief of Rituals, the other ritual leaders, and the acolytes working with them. It encircles the Chief of Ritual's left eye and marks his forehead, the seat of his destiny, thereby signalling his supernatural power, and his ability to communicate with supernatural beings (Jell-Bahlsen 219; Eze & Akas 28). It is used as a full body mask for Nkechi and Okoli. The acolytes who support them during the ritual are also painted with ritual designs in kaolin over every exposed area of their body. This signals their purity, chastity and involvement with the world of spirits (Amankulor 56; Jell-Bahlsen 217, 218, 220).

On the other hand, the colour red is male, hot, aggressive and dangerous. It represents physical energy and the life force (Jell-Bahlsen 222). Jell-Bahlsen recognizes dualism in the colours red and white in Igbo culture. She notes that these two colours are combined in the worship of the land and water deities of the Igbo, in recognition of the need for dual gender and balance in the cosmos (222). The contrasting colours, red and white, combined in the costume of the Chief of Rituals, symbolize initiation into mysterious rites of passage, and the need for male and female partnership in procreation and for the progress and development of the community (222).

The general colour scheme in the production is sombre, however. This is seen throughout the play, and sets the tragic tone of the production, which is sustained by the dark colour of the dance costume during the ritual dance in preparation for the journey into the ancestral realm.

This study reveals that, in the text, connotations are more numerous and more marked than denotations. In fact, there are few purely denotational meanings in this text. Even those signifieds that seem most transparent can be assigned secondary or connotational meaning in addition to their denotational meanings. The evidence from the analysis of these costumes, colour schemes, and props as purveyors of meaning in theatrical communication suggests that the connotational meaning of a sign usually becomes more important than its denotational meaning; and that the meanings of costumic signs, being culture-specific and conventional, are essentially, connotational.

The study reveals that most of the signs in this text are polysemic (Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* 138). The costumes of the clan leaders, for instance, have multiple signifieds. They signify the specific cultural and geographic setting. They also signify high socio-economic status, power, and authority. Again, the colour white, as in the white body wraps and painted body masks, variously signifies supernatural power, spirit involvement, purity, chastity, apartness, and sacredness. These significations in each case may be connotative, denotative, or even a mix of the two types of meaning.

The study further reveals, in line with Ubersfeld (20) and Chandler (*Beginners* 114, 123), that the cultural code is the most important code driving this text, in addition to the visual sub-code. The messages embedded in the costumes are coded on the basis of the visual culture of an indigenous Igbo society, the environment in which the production is set and performed. Consequently, the text may seem transparent because the audience knows how to read it, since the signs carry familiar cultural connotations in their real lives. For instance, the white clay makeup around the left eye of the Chief of Rituals would signify more than an adornment for the audience within the Igbo cultural milieu. Its connotations would include spirit involvement and danger. Thus, costume designers encode costumic signs on the basis of cultural codes, and audiences decode them on the same basis, and on the bases of age, gender, and ethnicity (Chandler, *Beginners* 129). A sign such as the above would, therefore, be transparent to most members of Igbo society, on which the performance is based, but perhaps not to members of a society whose members are not familiar with the conventions of Igbo society. It is even possible that this sign would be opaque to some younger members of the audience, though they may be of Igbo extraction. In other words, if the encoder and the interpreter have not had access to the same or similar cultural codes, certain signs would be meaningless on the connotational level.

This article has attempted a semiotic analysis of costume in a 2010 stage production of Duruaku's metaphoric play *A Matter of Identity*. It has provided a detailed description of the principal costumic signs, and determined their meanings in terms of their denotations and connotations. It has also attempted to establish how the symbols identified make sense within the Igbo socio-cultural tradition. In so doing, an attempt has been made to analyse how each of the costumic elements communicates information symbolically.

The article postulates that the symbolic information communicated by the combinations of the costumic elements in this production

signifies and represents an assemblage of the human, natural, and metaphysical forces that attend or are represented in ritual performances, in particular (Ukaegbu, *The Composite Scene: The Aesthetics of Igbo Mask Theatre* 79). The gathering of these distinct forces of the Igbo cosmos may be regarded as a valuable component in the celebration, reinforcement, negotiation, and re-structuring of the social and sacred identities of any traditional Igbo community, as Duruaku's dramatic text argues. This was the focus of the production. Thus, costume was crucial not only in the making and communication of meaning; it was the frame through which character and cultural signification were threaded into a metaphorical statement.

Clearly, this semiotic analysis reveals the need for in-depth study of costume from the perspectives of the diverse traditions and cultures of the indigenous communities of Nigeria, and of Africa as a whole. This would enable costume designers and students of costume design to observe the vestimentary conventions, norms, and realities of the particular cultures within which they are working. Although some of the costuming and design concepts of Igbo performance traditions are in danger of being lost, very little is being done to document and archive them for pedagogy and practice. This article therefore recommends further research into costumic sign systems, in order to develop a rich basis for the teaching and learning of this technical aspect of theatre from a practical standpoint.

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Decolonizing Trauma Studies:

The Recognition-Solidarity Nexus in Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*

CHIJIOKE ONAH

DECOLONIZING TRAUMA STUDIES

Given that various African states have witnessed different forms of social and political unrest since independence, it is not surprising that the representation of violence remains a central theme in African literary imagination. This article focuses on Uwem Akpan's representation of postcolonial conflict in his collection of short stories, *Say You're One of Them*. Analysing three stories from the collection, I draw from postcolonial trauma studies to show the devastating effects of violence in African societies, and how such violence affects various African states. The article, however, argues for the need for a decolonized trauma studies perspective in analysing traumatic experiences in postcolonial societies. I will offer the recognition-solidarity nexus as an essential perspective in decolonial trauma discourse critical to understanding the specific socio-political dynamics that African writers, like Uwem Akpan, articulate.

The project builds on the work of postcolonial critics, such as Stef Craps, who have critiqued the traditional trauma theory for imposing a Western understanding of trauma on other cultures, privileging the individual manifestation of trauma, as well as restricting the trauma canon to Euro-American contexts. Craps argues that the trauma theory of the 1990s, with its firm grounding in Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist deconstruction, should be radically revised. He contends that the traumas of non-Western or minority groups must be acknowledged 'on their own terms' and 'for their own sake' (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* 19). Should trauma theory refuse to decolonize, Craps warns, it may risk 'assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities' that are contrary to the field's promise of promoting cross-cultural solidarity (2).

This article agrees with Craps that trauma theory should be 'reshaped, resituated, and redirected so as to foster attunement to previously unheard suffering' (37). I would add, though, that its areas of analysis should equally be extended by broadening the postcolonial trauma canon. Rather than a continued obsession with colonial trauma, most exemplified in the writing-back model, Akpan foregrounds the necessity for trauma critics to pay attention to the ways postcolonial writers engage with the plurality of traumatic encounters in the postcolony. I position Akpan's text as representative of the current move within postcolonial studies to decentre the West as a constant reference point in the study of non-Western societies (Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* 2009; Schulze-Engler, 'When Remembering Back is Not Enough: Provincializing Europe in World War II Novels from India and New Zealand' 2018). Most importantly, the text is significant for how it portrays everyday forms of suffering that do not necessarily conform to the traditional model of trauma, thus challenging the universalist tendencies of the Western trauma model.

Consequently, the article uses the last three stories in the collection to articulate the recognition-solidarity nexus as an important perspective for understanding traumatic experiences in postcolonial Africa. My discussion of Akpan's text will show that individuals caught up in catastrophic events walk through and survive by recognizing their fellow victims, and establishing cross-cultural solidarity with them. When this recognition fails, the individual can be 'doubly traumatized' or risk not surviving the catastrophic event. While this affirms the claim that trauma can create solidarity, it then shows that, by requesting recognition, traumatized victims have moved beyond their individual experiences to align their suffering with an/other, thus underscoring the centrality of the collective – as against the individual – in postcolonial trauma studies. As texts bearing witness to postcolonial violence in Africa, Akpan's stories invite the reader to recognize the sufferings of the other, and how such recognition leads to cross-cultural solidarity. This is what I wish to explore here, as the recognition-solidarity nexus of working through trauma. Significantly, our articulation of this nexus moves the theorization of trauma from the emphasis on the Freudian *death drive* canonized in trauma discourse to a vision of life through survival and healing in the aftermath of traumatic wounding. The nexus also shows how trauma in the postcolonial context is inherently collective. As Cajetan Iheka surmised, 'even when trauma is apprehended in individual terms, it

is often done in relation to the collective or community' ('Ecologies of Oil and Trauma of the Future in *Curse of the Black Gold*' 70).

The centrality of this nexus in working through trauma is explicit in the short stories under study from Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*. The text is a collection of five short stories about postcolonial disillusionment and conflict in Africa. The first story in the collection, 'An Ex-Mas Feast' deals with a family's struggle to survive crunching poverty that leads to the disintegration of the family. It subscribes to the claim that trauma must not necessarily emanate from a single catastrophic event, but from the daily struggle to survive in many parts of the world where not just the future but even the present looks bleak. It is this concern with poverty and survival that connects 'An Ex-Mas Feast' with the second story in the collection, 'Fattening for Gabon', which deals with the attempt to survive not just poverty but the AIDS epidemic as well. The last three stories in the collection – 'What Language is That?', 'Luxurious Hearses', and 'My Parents' Bedroom' – however, deal with politico-religious conflicts in post-independent African countries and their aftermaths. Drawing from the historical experiences of Kenya, Benin, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Rwanda, the five stories invite a critical engagement with the dysfunctions in the postcolonial African nation-states and the various socio-political problems on the continent.

In titling the collection *Say You're One of Them*, drawn from Maman's instruction to Monique in 'My Parents' Bedroom', Akpan insists that readers recognize not only how they are implicated in these characters' trauma, but that they also identify with the characters in their quest for survival. It is this recognition of our shared humanity that will lead to the new egalitarian African societies that Akpan envisages. This cross-cultural empathy might not just result in cross-cultural solidary but may equally lead to political actions against the systems that enable traumatic wounding to persist on the continent.

FROM RECOGNITION TO SOLIDARITY IN 'LUXURIOUS HEARSES'

The recognition-solidarity nexus hinges on the idea that during traumatic events, victims might work through their trauma by identifying with their fellow victims, and by so doing, create a new form of community that helps them achieve healing and survival. This argument is inspired by postcolonial trauma critics who have stated

that listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and the creation of new forms of community (Craps & Buelens, 'Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels' 2). However, it is a trauma theory purged of its Eurocentrism that can enable 'visions of cross-cultural solidarity and justice to emerge from the recognition of pain' (Dalley, 'The Question of "Solidarity" in Postcolonial Trauma Fiction: Beyond the Recognition Principle' 374). Such a decolonial vision aligns with traditional trauma studies' ethical aspirations which, according to Cathy Caruth, is to form a 'link between cultures' (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* 11).

Through my reading of Akpan's text, I extend the field's ethical aspiration by arguing that the recognition-solidarity nexus showcases instances of cross-cultural engagement. I opine that the nexus also places a responsibility on the reader by demanding a sympathetic engagement with the trauma victims. As Dalley posits, 'postcolonial literature is replete with works that represent traumatic suffering, inviting readers to *recognize* characters' pains, and – perhaps – to use that recognition as the basis for cross-cultural, transnational, or global solidarity' (Dalley 371, original emphasis). The reader of Akpan's text, therefore, is not passive, but an active witness to the pains and sufferings of these victims.

First published in the United States in 2008, 'Luxurious Hearses' represents the perennial ethno-religious conflict in post-independent Nigeria, particularly the Kaduna Sharia crisis of February 2000, and the counterprotest in southern Nigeria. The crisis led to ethno-religious killings, the displacement of thousands of people, and protests in various parts of the country (Suhr-Sytsma, 'Forms of Interreligious Encounter in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction' 677). In 'Luxurious Hearses', we see traumatized victims pour into the bus park on the outskirts of Lupa. These are primarily southern Christian Nigerians being driven away from the predominantly Islamic northern Nigeria. Their intention at the bus terminal is to go home to the south. This situates the mental turmoil of these displaced individuals as those who have accepted the fictional northern city of Khamfi as a home struggle to understand their new reality. This is even worse for Jubril, who has imbibed the attitude, religion, and even accent of the group he is fleeing from – the place that he has long considered his home – so that identifying with this crowd at Lupa Motor Park becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for him. However, Jubril's survival depends on how much he can identify with this new group and immerse himself into this new community of Southerners vis-à-vis Christians from his natal

home. It is here that we see the complication involved in recognition because forming a new community after traumatic events, which Craps and Buelens argue can be enhanced by trauma, depends on forming a shared identity or at least recognizing each other's identity.

The most potent form of community formation through the creation of a shared identity, as seen in Akpan's collection, occurs in 'Luxurious Hearses', where the narrative concretizes Hamish Dalley's argument that by creating the link across cultures, trauma helps to bridge the gaps between cultures, thereby enabling visions of cross-cultural solidarity and justice to emerge from the recognition of pain (374). As the story unfolds, one sees that Akpan's text is investing in creating visions of ethno-religious encounters in the face of this crisis. While the conflict rages, a Muslim leader, Mallam Abdullahi, and his family entrust themselves with protecting the Christians caught up in this rage by welcoming them into his house where his 'sacred mat' creates a new form of community of different people united by suffering. It is this mat which shelters them, hiding their presence in the house. This significantly undermines 'perceptions of northern Nigeria as a cultural or religious monolith' (Suhr-Sytsma 672) – a perception that has turned Khamfi into the 'corpse capital of the world' (Akpan 235) – as religious fundamentalists go about slitting each other's throat, while in Mallam Abdullahi's house are these same diverse groups, working together for survival. Their shared fate as hunted individuals unites them, shattering their hitherto divergent identities. Those who would otherwise not share a cup of water, now share a religious mat. By bringing divergent voices and experiences together, Akpan not only reaches for the commonality of humankind but uses literary imagination to create a new form of community where survival and flourishing happens.

As embattled Jubril notes, the survival of this new community under Mallam Abdullahi's religious mat depends on how they can steady the mat – collectively. So Jubril's Christian neighbour extends a hand of empathy to the amputated Jubril and helps him to steady his end of the mat. Interestingly, Jubril's disability stems from his Islamic religious belief, through which he submitted his right wrist to be cut off in accordance with Sharia law as punishment for theft, thereby proving his faithfulness to the Islamic faith. Ironically, it is not just that this symbol of Islamic piety could not save him from his fellow Muslims; he is here not judged by it. If anything, he shares a mat with southern Christians he would have otherwise considered enemies, if not murder himself in the current conflict. However, it is the unveiling of this stump, and thus, his perceived religious identity, that costs his

life on the bus among his southern kinspeople, where the pagan Chief and the Christian refugees are accomplices in executing him. Akpan, thus, satirizes the folly of religious intolerance and makes a case for the recognition of shared humanity and suffering. What makes the difference is identification, nay, recognition of a shared fate. In Mallam Abdullahi's house, their existence becomes very much tied up so that whatever happens to one affects the whole. By extending empathy to Jubril here, his neighbour is not simply saving Jubril but himself too, as the whole members of the community will be doomed if Jubril's end uncovers. Protecting Jubril is forced on the collective by their shared precariousness. Solidarity, thus, emerges from the recognition of their collective vulnerability as victims facing a common threat of death.

It is interesting to contrast this to the victims on the bus who bicker over the issue of religion, even though their current displacement is a result of religious conflict. They ban the mention of '*Muslim*' or anything associated with it on the bus. Even as Christians, they struggle over their differences. The Catholics on the bus raise their voices and talk about the beauty and superiority of their church whenever Madam Aniema temporarily exorcizes the demonized – read traumatized – Colonel Usenetok, '"We no be like all dis *nyama-nyama* churches" one Catholic man said from the back … "Because we've been in this church business for two thousand years now"' (290). However, Madam Aniema herself becomes uncomfortable when Emeka berates the child baptism received by Jubril (and by extension all orthodox Christians) and throws Jubril's Marian medal through the window. They become only one as Christians in their vexation and collective insecurity when Chief talks of his traditional religion or when Colonel Usenetok ventures into pagan worship. Even Chief identifies with the Christians he condemned earlier instead of supporting his fellow traditionalist in condemning Colonel Usenetok's open practice of his religion on the bus, even if that is precisely what the Christians do.

This religious squabble, through which the author exposes the fault lines of religious intolerance in Nigeria, disappears in the house of Mallam Abdullahi where all the adherents of disparate religions pray in their different voices for survival. However, to read the disunity in the bus as a contrast to the unity formed by interreligious solidarity in Mallam Abdullahi's house obscures how the victims in the bus rally together whenever their existence is collectively under siege. This explains why they were readily exploited by the pagan Chief in their collective effort to eject Colonel Usenetok from the bus. Through this story, Akpan critiques religious barriers that inhibit shared human

encounters. By elevating religious fundamentalism to the level of the absurd, he satirizes the various ethno-religious borders that afflict post-independent Nigeria. Akpan uses the metaphor of a bus stranded on the road to interrogate and transcend the various shades of differences, biases, and social prejudices that have incapacitated the Nigerian postcolony while cautioning 'against simplifying the conflict to northern Muslims versus Southern Christians' (Suhr-Sytsma 679). Deconstructing these barriers, as Akpan's text does, is constitutive of the process by which recognition and solidarity are accomplished.

Our analysis also supports the claim that trauma can lead to the formation of a new community or increase cohesion and enhance a sense of common identity after traumatic events. As Marilyn Braam reads in 'Luxurious Hearses', their shared desperation to survive created 'a fluid unity' between the commuters. Such necessary but tenuous unity constitutes a rallying counter-nationalist response (*States of Displacement: Voice and Narration in Refugee Stories* 58). Braam is referring to an incident in the narrative when the TV report shows the severity of the violence in Khamfi, their erstwhile place of domicile. Since many of the refugees on the bus are from the country's southern area, with an abundance of crude oil exploited by the central government and the multinationals, they feel a sense of entitlement to the country's petrol. Nevertheless, there in Lupa Park, they are stranded because of the scarcity of fuel to take them home to the Delta. As the TV reportage shows, the same fuel is a common commodity used by the murderous mobs in Khamfi. This sense of inequality brings to memory years of injustice suffered by the people of the oil-producing Niger Delta region, galvanizing emotions among the stranded commuters. Thus, the 'refugees rose to their feet at the sight of hungry-looking *almajiris* running around with fuel and matches, setting things and people afire … In the bus, anger replaced shock and passive complaints … The shouts of the refugees rang out into the approaching darkness and rallied the people outside the bus. The verandas emptied, and everybody came together, milling about the bus like winged termites around a fluorescent bulb' (Akpan 235). Notice how the refugees on the bus and those outside are united by a shared experience of suffering, victimhood, and economic deprivation. These shared experiences unite them, necessitating a sense of civic consciousness and activism among the refugees in the bus terminal so that 'for a moment it sounded as if the bus would explode with anger' (236). The commuters, thus united, discuss how 'best to stop the government and multinational oil companies from drilling for oil

in the delta' (237). Their determination to execute this plan is only sabotaged by the driver's inability to secure petrol to take them home.

This collective action supports Kai Erikson's claim that trauma 'can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can' ('Notes on Trauma and Community' 186). After all, trauma has a 'demonstrable power … in creating communities' even if 'volatile and temporary' (Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* 213). Drawing on these trauma critics, I argue for the centrality of the recognition-solidarity nexus in building new forms of communities in the face of trauma. Through traumatic encounters, victims can identify with their fellow victims and thus form a new sense of solidarity which helps to achieve resilience and survival.

SURVIVING TRAUMA THROUGH THE RECOGNITION-SOLIDARITY NEXUS

While the Freudian *death drive* is a cardinal principle of the traditional trauma model, it is instructive to see from the analysis so far that the characters in Akpan's text are instead preoccupied with survival and resilience. As Irene Visser noted, trauma, in a postcolonial context, calls for 'a turn to life' ('Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects' 255). Michael Rothberg insists that the postcolonial traumatic encounter often emanates from 'the suffering of survival' ('Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response' 231). This turn to life is underscored in Akpan's text where we see the traumatized characters exploring different avenues to live. Neither of them accesses the same agency for survival. In 'What Language is That?', which centres on a religious conflict in Ethiopia, Best Friend and Selam explore the language of the heart that transcends the barriers of religion, language, or distance. The narrative revolves around how these children are traumatized by the gulfs created by their parents, anchored on the general religious war going on in the community. Best Friend's trauma is highlighted as the narrative reveals her point of view. The 'endless giggles' and 'loud recitations' of these two best friends are gone in the wake of the conflict:

> But suddenly, Selam tiptoed onto the balcony. Against the burned-out flats, she looked like a ghost. Her face was pale against the afternoon sun and seemed to have deep wrinkles, like the top of *hambasha* bread. She looked skinny and even shorter in the few days you hadn't seen her. (183)

Best Friend, on the other hand, could not eat, but nibbles her food. She even turns down the offer of travelling to Addis to see her relatives; a certain kind of special treat that the parents think will help her move on.

But healing is initiated when the friends 'meet', and, although unable to hear each other, discover 'a new language':

> The next afternoon you came onto the balcony. Selam also appeared, on her balcony. You looked at each other without words. You followed each other's gaze … Slowly, Selam lifted her hand and waved to you as if the hand belonged to another person. You waved back slowly too. She opened her mouth slowly and mimed to you, and you mimed back, 'I can't hear you.' She waved with two hands, and you waved with two hands. She smiled at you … You opened your mouth and smiled, flashing all your teeth … You embraced the wind with both hands and gave an imaginary friend a peck. She immediately hugged herself, blowing you a kiss. (185)

Crushed by the path both sets of parents adopt in the aftermath of the crisis, both friends suffer pain, struggling to make sense of it all, yet unable to find meaning in their ruptured social lives. Even when they meet, they are not sure of the other's reaction. They discover their shared pain and build their friendship even if they cannot share it physically. It is the recognition of their pains that leads to a reaffirmation of their friendship, leading to the discovery of a new language of love and tolerance uninhibited by geographical distance. With this new language, these children counter the adult world of religious fanaticism and intolerance, while they look forward to their future where the religious walls might be shattered. By renewing their friendship, the children signal that renewal is possible after catastrophic wounding. As utopian as this may be, it exhibits Akpan's optimism that the continent will not be consumed by the hatred and violence which has engulfed it. This optimism requires that both the reader and the witnesses recognize the suffering of others and come together to create a common front to construct a more egalitarian future, thus showing the potency of the literary form to deconstruct failed systems, while reconstructing an enabling future for human progress on the continent.

Recognizing the pain of another is the first step towards traumatic survival. As Craps reads elsewhere, postcolonial trauma novels support the 'idea that trauma provides the link between cultures, and that working towards a fuller appreciation of the nature, extent, and ramifications of the pain of others can, indeed, help efforts

to alleviate it' (58). Best Friend is re-traumatized by her parent's failure to recognize her pains and thus their neglect of her trauma. Eventually, she cannot embrace the future they envision for her, for addressing her trauma must first begin with recognizing it, which is what Selam offers her. This quest for survival and healing in 'What Language is That?' is also foregrounded by Monique in 'My Parents' Bedroom', which narrativizes the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Drawing on the traumatic experience of witnessing her Hutu father being forced to murder her Tutsi mother, Monique transcends the crippling trauma of witnessing the violent collapse of her family by insisting on survival. She not only survives but walks enthusiastically to the future.

Maman has equipped Monique to fight for survival by forecasting the fate that would befall the family. She gradually hands the nine-year-old girl the responsibility of not just surviving but protecting her younger brother, Jean.

> 'When they ask you', she says sternly, without looking at me, 'say you're one of them, OK?'
>
> 'Who?'
>
> 'Anybody. You have to learn to take care of Jean, Monique. You just have to, huh?'
>
> 'I will, Maman.'
>
> 'Promise?'
>
> 'Promise.' (327)

It is this covenant that leads Monique on, as she resolves to survive. It is worth noting that despite Monique's extraordinary closeness with her father, her survival draws from this covenant with her mother. When she takes Jean into the bush to survive the onslaught, we read,

> I slip into the bush, with Jean on my back, one hand holding the crucifix, the other shielding my eyes from the tall grass and the branches, my feet cold and bracing for thorns. Jean presses hard against me, his face digging into my back. 'Maman says do not be afraid,' I tell him. Then we lie down on the crucifix to hide its brightness. We want to live; we don't want to die. I must be strong. (354)

Shortly before this, we read a line that shows the deeper covenant that the children have with their mother: Maman's blood 'has dried into our clothes like starch' (354). Monique's inspiration to survive draws from the brutal death of her mother which she witnessed, leading to a bonding cemented with blood. This experience, rather than forcing Monique to withdraw into herself as feared, becomes the springboard

upon which she survives. She recognizes her mother's suffering and finds their precarious lives in unison with her death.

In his study of pain and suffering in Akpan's text, Yildiray Cevik finds in Maman the archetype of the Mother of Sorrows: 'Maman who awaits her death from her husband's hands is the ironic version of the conventional representation of the mother as the Mother of Sorrows' ('The Pain and Suffering of African Children' 54). Maman's death shows Monique the depth of Maman's love for them, and the sacrifice becomes glaring. Her trauma is underscored by the mind which is no longer hers. As Monique narrates,

> I cry with the ceiling people until my voice cracks and my tongue dries up … I want to sit with Maman forever, and I want to run away at the same time … My mind is no longer mine; it's doing things on its own … I wander from room to room, listening for her voice among the ceiling voices. When there's silence, her presence fills my heart'. (351–52)

While Jean might be too young for us to appreciate his traumatic wounding, he equally takes part in this final bonding with their mother. Seeing what has happened to their mother, he 'tries to wake her … He tries to bring together the two halves of Maman's head, without success. He sticks his fingers into Maman's hair and kneads it, the blood thick, like shampoo' (351). These experiences indicate the deepening of the bond between a mother and her children, so that, although the children's behaviour show signs of psychic splitting from their witnessing of this horrifying uxoricide, they draw strength rather than despair from their identification with their mother. Monique, in particular, now understands her mother's sufferings before her death, which has remained a puzzle for her – 'all the things that Maman used to tell me come at me at once … she stopped Papa from telling me that he was going to smash her head' (352). Her promise to Maman to survive and take care of Jean, therefore, becomes clear to her, and she immediately resolves to fulfil it. It is this resolve to live that saves the children as the religious inferno consumes other adult characters. Rather than embrace death and despair, the children in Akpan's text choose to 'walk forward' in survival (354).

Irene Visser writes that 'postcolonial literary texts often engage with trauma in ways not envisioned in the currently dominant trauma theory, or in ways that reverse trauma theory's assumptions, for instance by depicting victim's resilience, resistance, and eventual triumph over trauma, or a community's increased cohesion and an

enhanced sense of identity after a traumatic event' (Visser, 'Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies' 130). This becomes explicit in the selected short stories of *Say You're One of Them*. The resilience that Best Friend and Monique exhibit in the face of trauma is noteworthy, and this is possible through solidarity with a fellow victim that appreciates the survivor's pains. Through this, they engage with healing processes and look towards the future. Best Friend, in announcing her readiness to go to Addis after her encounter with Selam, opens a new channel for life – a sort of working through that shows resilience and triumph over the trauma that almost overwhelmed her.

Having learned a new language and a new form of relationship with Selam that transcends the various borders enacted by their parents, she is no longer isolated like Jubril, but finds a more profound sense of solidarity with Best Friend. Monique fights for survival with her brother and announces that she wants to live. This helps her to work through her trauma, thereby validating the claim of decolonial trauma theory that healing is possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding (Visser, 'Decolonizing Trauma' 255). The final page of Toni Morrison's *Home* foregrounds this trend, as it reads:

> It looked so strong
> So beautiful.
> Hurt right down the middle
> But alive and well. (147)

This creates the imagery of something battered, crushed but not annihilated – alive and well. That Monique, Jean, Selam, and Best Friend are battered by the incomprehensibility of the catastrophic events they have witnessed is obvious. However, they are able to survive through recognition of each other's pain, and solidarity with the one who understands this pain. Jubril's aloofness, on the other hand, accounts for why this conflict consumes him.

NOTE

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Tribute

Funded by the Knowledge Unlatched Select 2024 collection,

Remembering Gerald Moore

(22 August 1924 – 27 December 2022)

JAMES GIBBS

Gerald Moore, a formidable, industrious, ubiquitous, pioneering critic, was involved in 'the scramble for African literature' and produced critical writing on various African authors that was published (mostly) by British publishers 'staking claims' in the field of African literature. Below, I have begun to draw attention to some of the projects he was involved with, and I have tried to identify some of those benign and malign presences, fairy godmothers or greedy vultures, that clustered around the 'cradles of the new literatures'. Along the way, I take note of conferences funded by the CIA that Moore attended during the early 1960s and imply that it is misleading to regard the conference of 'writers of English expression' held at Makerere in 1962 as simply a 'Writers Conference'. This is because a glance at the list of those present and a look at some of the encounters that took place at that conference reveal how essential it was that various 'agents' were also present. Neglected by organizers of 'anniversary conferences', Moore would have had important insights to share with those interested in the 1962 Conference. He had been a privileged observer of the emergence of African literature and was aware how very vigorously it was promoted in English and French.

In 1963, Oxford University Press published Moore's pioneering *Seven African Writers*. It appeared in the Three Crowns series and showed him writing with authority on a clutch of the authors who were becoming familiar to those interested in what Africans had to say: Leopold Senghor, David Diop, Camara Laye, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, and Ezekiel Mphahlele. Some nine years later, Evans Brothers turned to Moore as a groundbreaking critic and published his monograph on Wole Soyinka. This was the first title in their 'Modern African Writers' series, and in it Moore set the tone for that series both implicitly and explicitly. The book embodied his

approach, and his prefatory essay about the series indicated how he expected it would develop.

Moore began that essay by referring to the 'initial excitement and misunderstanding surrounding African literature in English and French' and went on to draw attention to the 'small but growing number of writers who may be called "serious"'. He then anticipated that the MAW Series would be varied in approach. ('No single school or method of criticism will be favoured in the selection of contributors.') He went on to express his intention that the selection of subjects for study would respond 'to every major development in African literature and criticism.' He might have added 'in English or French' to that, for the basic assumption was made that the concern was African writing in European languages.

Just five titles followed Moore's *Wole Soyinka* from the critic's desk to the bookshops, and the subjects chosen were limited to Nigerians or Southern Africans. These were *Christopher Okigbo: Creative Rhetoric* (Sunday O. Anozie, 1972); *Cyprian Ekwensi* (Ernest N. Emenyonu, 1974); *Doris Lessing's Africa* (Michael Thorpe, 1978); *Nadine Gordimer* (Michael Wade, 1972), and *Peter Abrahams* (Michael Wade, 1972). This was not, by any means, covering 'every major development', but it was responding to some of the more important ones in some of the wealthier countries! It is apparent that, for Evans, GDP was a consideration.

Proper assessment of the impact of the Modern African Writers series will have to await the scrutiny of various sources, including the critical responses to individual titles and the sales figures for each volume. However, even from a glance at Moore's study of Soyinka, one can gather something of what Moore wanted the series to achieve. He wrote with exemplary vigour and confidence and with admiration that stopped short of adulation. I think he expected those invited to contribute to the series to follow his example.

In preparing to write on Soyinka, Moore, the 'old Africa hand' who had worked in Nigeria during the early 1950s, drew on conversations with those close to Soyinka, including Wale Ogunyemi and Segun Olusola. As a personal friend of the Nigerian author, he was able to 'acknowledge' the 'kind assistance of Mr Wole Soyinka who (had) read the manuscript and commented on several points of detail'. While this confers a certain 'authority' on the critical study, it should not be taken to mean that Soyinka approved what Moore had written. In the half century that has passed since Moore's study was published, Soyinka has written extensively about his life and his ideas, and those writings

have added immeasurably to our knowledge of the poet/ playwright/ novelist/ critic/ 'interventionist'. It is to Moore's credit that, even without access to that material, his study still reads well and makes valid points.

Gerald Moore's monograph for Evans was an innovative, sustained, and critical assessment of a substantial body of writing by an African author, and it contributed to consolidating Soyinka's status as a 'serious writer'. The critic's independent assessment was particularly significant in a world in which there were some who argued, and who continue to argue, that Soyinka's reputation was fabricated by sinister forces determined to derail African self-realization.

At an early stage in Soyinka's career, Moore recognized the Nigerian writer's precocious achievements and wrote about them with insight.

During the early 1960s, Moore became director of Extra-Mural Studies at what was then the University College of Makerere, Uganda. In that position, he hosted the (CIA-funded) Conference of Writers of English Expression held during June 1962, and, as host, he was in a good position to observe how British and American agents of various kinds interacted with creative Africans. Better than anybody, he knew that there were publishers and editors at the 'writers' conference' and that these men were scouting for talent, waving contracts, dangling offers, and 'making arrangements'. Among those present were representatives of publishers, such as Oxford University Press (OUP) and Northwestern University Press. There were also editors and critics. (For the names of those who attended see the Makerere Conference list on the Chimurenga Chronic website.[1])

Some of the ways in which the conference made publishing history are well known. These include the 'story' of about how Chinua Achebe recommended Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work to a Heinemann representative at the Conference, Van Milne, and how Van Milne then phoned Alan Hill in the UK, with the result that Ngũgĩ's book was accepted for publication 'sight unseen'. (See, for example, the account quoted in James Currey's *Africa Writes Back*.[2])

Other 'stories' remain, as far as I am aware, untold, or, perhaps, locked in the archives. I have wondered what passed between J.P. Clark, Cameron Duodu, Wole Soyinka, and André Deutsch. Those four men were together at the Makerere Conference, and Deutsch, who had already established the African Universities Press, subsequently published *The Gab Boys* (Duodu, 1967), *America, Their America* (Clark, 1964), and *The Interpreters* (Soyinka, 1965). I can't believe that was pure coincidence. Is there a 'story'? Were addresses exchanged,

understandings reached, or arrangements made in Uganda? Following up on that I wonder what, if anything was said about *Reflections: Nigerian Prose & Verse* in Kampala? That 1962 anthology was published by African Universities Press and included work by the following who were at the conference: Achebe, Clark, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo, and Soyinka. It was to be, edited by one of the very few women present: Frances Ademola.

Ademola, incidentally, subsequently took a position at the Transcription Centre in London. That organization was funded by the CIA and headed by Dennis Duerden – who was present at Makerere. The university campus in Uganda provided, it would seem, opportunities to not only meet up but also, perhaps, to talk about the future. There are also 'stories' connected with the Americans present. That diverse group included the energetic anthologist Langston Hughes, Otis Redding, and Robie Macauley, who is the one I want to say a few words about here. In his biography of Okigbo, Obi Nwakanma writes that, while in Uganda, Okigbo and Macauley discussed the possibility of publishing the former's *Limits* in the US.[3]

Tantalizingly, Nwakanma adds 'nothing came of it' but does not say why not. Macauley, it is important to know, was not only a novelist and university teacher but also editor of the *Kenyon Review*, and a government operative. During the Second World War, he had been an agent in the Counter Intelligence Corps and, from 1953, worked for the International Organizations Division of the Central Intelligence Agency. His links with clandestine organizations were not referred to on the published list of those attending the conference! However, I think we can assume that he was in touch with the newly established CIA base at Langley and was reporting from Kampala to a 'higher authority'. In interacting with Okigbo, he could have been working as an editor, or as spook, or as both. Moore was present at Makerere in several roles; he was, for example, a host and a speaker. Significantly, he continued his contact with CIA-funded conferences by attending gatherings in West Africa (Dakar 1963; Freetown 1963), and, for good measure, he actually edited the proceedings of those conferences. In other words, he had a part to play in how the conferences were remembered and how their stories were told.

Because of the many roles he played during the early 1960s and indicated in part above, Moore must have had privileged insights into the forces at work on African writing at that time. These forces became visible at the 'out-dooring' conference held in Makerere during June 1962. It is very regrettable that Moore did not contribute to either the

London conference of 2017 – that marked the fifty-fifth anniversary of the out-dooring, or to the Ibadan Conference of 2022 that marked the sixtieth anniversary. Moore would have been in a good position to distinguish the fairy godmothers from the greedy vultures that gathered for the event, one that was clearly much more than (just) a 'Writers' Conference'. It may be that the formidable, industrious, ubiquitous, pioneer critic of African writing in European languages carried his observations to the grave.

NOTES

1 Conference of African Writers of English Expression. https://chimurengachronic.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/excerpt-congress-for-cultural-freedom-1962-conference-of-african-writers-of-english-expression.pdf (accessed 3 July 2023); Otosirieze Obi-Young. '55 Years After Makerere Conference, University of London's SOAS to Host Memorial Gathering', 27 October 2017. https://brittlepaper.com/2017/10/50-years-makerere-conference (accessed 10 July 2023).

2 *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series and the Launch of African Literature*. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2008.

3 Nwakanma. *Christopher Okigbo, 1930–67: Thirsting for Sunlight*. Oxford: James Currey, 2010; Okigbo. *Limits*. Ibadan: Mbari Publications, 1964.

Reviews

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Do Not Burn My Bones and Other Stories*

Lagos State: Purple Shelves Publishers, 2022, 133 pp. $14.99
ISBN 9789789998739, paperback

As an educationist, theorist, and a creative writer, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo offers transitions and doorways from the past to the present in her incorporation of Igbo traditional knowledge systems in her works of fiction. But she is not negligent of the future. Her disposition is tripartite, in that she leans on the past to influence the present and construct the framework for a better future. This is unequivocally exemplified in her formulation of the thought-provoking Snail Sense Feminism – a feminist theory that builds on Igbo knowledge systems and worldview to engage with and raise questions about gender inequality and influence in our present while setting the roadmap for the future. Her scintillating trilogy – *The Last of The Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001), and *Children of The Eagle* (2002) – lends credence to this as she challenges patriarchal assumptions and inscribes feminism as the necessary panacea to an ailing, modern nation state.

In *Do Not Burn My Bones and Other Stories* (hereafter referred to as *DNBMB*), the writer continues her journey with the short fiction genre that started with *Rhythms of Life, Stories of Modern Nigeria* (1992) and produced over five collections of shorts. Although not her most prolific, the short story genre holds a pivotal position in Adimora-Ezeigbo's oeuvre as it avails the writer a wide canvass to tackle topical issues of social relevance and social consciousness in Nigeria and beyond. Written in the thick of the Coronavirus pandemic, the author in its Preface notes that the collection 'is a visible result of [her] determination to keep writing despite the multiple challenges' (ix) of surviving Nigeria and the times. Most of the stories in this collection are set in Nigeria against the backdrop of poverty, violence, and insecurity, gender-based violence, inequality, and societal malformation. The few stories that are set in the UK centre on varied migrant experiences.

DNBMB is made up of thirteen stories. The opener sets the tone for the entire collection with a strong female lead Mabel Duru, the Iron Lady. In this human entanglement story, the reader is left with the nagging feeling that whoever crosses the Iron Lady does not live to tell the tale. The title story, 'Do Not Burn My Bones' was a real page turner for me. Nneka's strange visitor from the grave has a wild request. A request that takes Nneka on a mission from London to Nigeria. I was mesmerized by the intrigues and the fantastical. I kept asking what happened next and

yearned for more pages of it. But the author teases and I was left wanting more, in a good way. That, for me is an indication of skilful storytelling. The short story genre is a tough genre to conquer because of its brevity and the essential element of surprise. And a lack of surprises tends to dull the excitement and render some stories boring.

In 'Dilemma of a Senior Citizen', Mark's relocation to Nigeria in old age after decades of living in Ireland takes an unexpected turn for the worse when he encounters several setbacks. Eager to live in his village of Umuokpa, Mark's desire is cancelled when the villagers are attacked and murdered by 'marauding herdsmen wielding dangerous weapons, especially AK47' (70). Confronted with the lurking and overt danger that are occasioned by living in Nigeria and the injustice that prevails, Mark decides to return to the United Kingdom. There is a restlessness that provokes a return to the homeland in the immigrant and the complexities that ensue when said homeland is not welcoming are heartbreaking. It is a sad reality when Mark declares 'I think I am a misfit in this country. I stayed away too long and now I know I don't belong here' (71). Beyond criticizing the constant insecurity in Nigeria, Ezeigbo raises crucial questions on the concept of home for the immigrant. In 'One Frontliner is Enough', Matilda struggles with her decision to quit her cleaning job in the thick of the pandemic. With an old and ailing mother, Matilda's decision sounds like a no-brainer but as her family struggles to cope with each day, Matilda wonders if she made the right decision even as she navigates anxiety and uncertainty in a scary time of colossal crisis. In such an uncertain time, the kindness of a stranger uplifts Matilda and her family. It is interesting to read stories of human kindness, women helping women, and of female bonding, especially after the rough few years we have experienced with the pandemic. However, the author is a moralist, and this infiltrates some of the stories rendering them didactic and tedious.

DNBMB is a good read with a few memorable and haunting stories. I found myself returning to the story titled 'New Skin' in my search for understanding. I pondered on the rationale for including this story in the collection as it veers from the theme of female empowerment that occasions most of Ezeigbo's works. The protagonist, Lotanna, is victimized for dating a man who misrepresented himself as a single man. After subjecting Lotanna to severe bodily harm, and emotional and psychological abuse, her assaulter walks away free and continues to threaten her. But it is Lotanna who is shamed, embarrassed, and compelled to grow a new skin (which connotes responsibility) in the story. I find it unnerving that the author chose to blame the victim

in this story, and by so doing, she has unwittingly approved and encouraged brute force and aggravated assault over conversations. The story also chooses to turn the other eye or even exonerates the bad behaviour of the male character. This conclusion slaps one in the face as it is thinly veiled. In a story where nothing is said about demanding accountability and responsibility from the barely mentioned male character, it is revolting to punish and victimize the protagonist. We cannot build women up and tear young women down in the same breadth. It is worrisome and daunting that Nigeria remains a vast crime scene and maybe that is the message the author is passing? *Do Not Burn My Bones* is a slow read and perfect for those who enjoy such buildups.

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Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Broken Bodies, Damaged Souls and Other Poems*

Lagos State: Purple Shelves Publishers, 2022, 105 pp. $14.99
ISBN 9789789998715, paperback

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo occupies a prime position in Nigerian female writing and critical thinking in terms of literary and creative output. Very few women writers and thinkers equal her phenomenal contributions to Nigerian, nay African scholarship and writings in general. Adimora-Ezeigbo is a prolific poet with eight collections to date written in English and in pidgin English. Sectioned into seven movements, *Broken Bodies, Damaged Souls and Other Poems* covers timely themes like the Covid-19 pandemic, sexual violence and inequality, migration, and freedom to name but a few. The author in the Preface writes that the collection 'is [her] attempt to advocate justice and equity by highlighting the pains, cries of marginalized and oppressed individuals, minorities, especially women and to celebrate resistance' (ix). An ambitious offering in terms of its wide thematic concerns, *Broken Bodies* is gut-wrenching, and heavy. The poet is tasking the readers to engage with uncomfortable conversations.

In the section titled 'Songs in The Time of Covid-19 Pandemic', Ezeigbo humanizes the anxiety and fear that overwhelmed people during the crisis. The poet persona queries, 'is this the way they feel who await confirmation/of a life-threatening condition?' (15). Written during the height of the pandemic when 'the possibility of death looms large' (15), it is no wonder that the opening section of the collection centres on the novel virus that left the world shaken. The poet bemoans isolation and the various restrictions that were put in place to combat the deadly virus. The room in which the poet persona is sequestered in 'forced captivity' is 'an enlarged coffin' (22) as they search for new ways to retain their sanity. Although her lines take us back to a dark time, they are infused with hope and an unwavering human spirit. The poet celebrates the survivors and lauds medical personnel and frontliners: 'undeterred by the tidal wave of death/ you throw punches of care to stem its surge' (20). In conclusion, Ezeigbo affirms that the disease is but a visitor, '*Obiara ije nwe ula, uwa ga-adi* / it's the visitor that owes a debt of departure; / the host prepares for the inevitable event' (34).

In 'Echoes of Sexism and Sexual Violence' Ezeigbo gives voice to sexual violence survivors and criticizes the failure of the society in disbelieving and othering survivors. In the aftermath of such a violation, the poet persona laments, 'I am a broken calabash / my soul, the aftermath of a tsunami'// Forty years after, still voiceless / my violator stalks the land, free as air' (37). The poet's choice of the verb 'stalks' in its present tense is loaded with meanings. To stalk the land connotes a brazen and threatening devouring which the author cirticizes. To counter the prevalent culture of disbelief, shame, and silence that encircles rape and its survivors, the poet in the poem '#MeToo Movement' applauds the movement and the impact of speaking up. The author encourages women to break the silence and share their story to heal. The section closes with a worldwide call to women to challenge the rise in Feminicide.

In 'Migration Songs', Adimora-Ezeigbo explores the dilemma and travails of the immigrant, a stranger in a strange land. The author points to the abysmal conditions back home that force people to endanger themselves in their search for greener pastures. The author queries if those pastures are greener after all. It is in the section titled 'Haiku Symphony' that the poet's craft flourishes. Written in the traditional 5-7-5 syllables and in three lines, the concerns are diverse, the knowledge encoded is deep, and they almost sound proverbial. It is the culmination of the primary themes of this work. However, I

do wonder about its placement towards the end of the collection. In 'Weep Not for America, Weep for Nigeria' where the poet writes on police brutality, there is emphasis on police brutality in America with no mention of the incessant police brutality in Nigeria on the youth and the poor. Sweeping sentences such as 'my country that is on its knees, panting/ like a creature on the throes of death' (77) however true that is, do not acknowledge the lives lost during the #EndSars peaceful protest that turned into a massacre in Nigeria. The poet earlier on emphasized the power of speaking up with the #MeToo movement that was also started online. So why this obvious silence on a crucial issue? There is an apparent disconnect and missed opportunities for speaking up which plagues the section 'Songs of Freedom' that almost leaves the collection tone-deaf.

Broken Bodies, Damaged Souls and Other Poems is an intense and compelling read. The writer's myriad focus is timely and sure to attract different readers and scholars of African literature. There is ample sophistication in the approachable style used by the writer. The two poems written in pidgin English are perfect as a communal call because pidgin remains the most accessible means of communication for most people in Nigeria. Written against the backdrop of violence and heightened insecurity in Nigeria, the elegies and the lyric poems add a gloomy touch to the collection. But overall, it is a call to action: to end gendered violence, police brutality, sexual assault, and most importantly, silence on issues that matter.

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Al-Bishak, *Black Papyrus: Global Origins of Writing and Written Literature Traced to Black Africa*

Supreme Black Communications, 2022, 183 pp. $17.85
ISBN 9789789993802, paperback

Al-Bishak's *Black Papyrus, Global Origins of Writing and Written Literature Traced to Black Africa* is a kind of rewriting of the 'History of Writing'. It is a meticulous and comprehensive survey of the evolution and development of the Egyptians, as well as their civilization. Tracing the origins of the Egyptians from Ethiopia, Al-Bishak notes that they enjoyed imperial acclaim and expansion especially as the emperors, called Pharoahs, were interested in massive territorial enlargement, thereby having up to one hundred and ten vassal states or countries in Western Asia, and China in East Asia, as well as Greece in the south of Europe.

The major objective of Al-Bishak's book is to establish the origins of writing and scribal or written literature in the world. The book investigates the socio-economic relations of ancient Egypt and other nations in Africa and other continents like Europe and Asia (Eurasia). It seeks to resolve the controversies surrounding the facts, firstly, that Egyptians were originally black prior to the racial modifications that arose from contacts with Europeans, Asians, and other races; and secondly, that the typical black African is bereft of language suitable for conveying intelligent information since he is sub-human and lacks the critical thought abilities and mental aptitude for any intellectual engagement, imaginative tasks, and inventive work.

Egyptians believed that their skill of writing came from their god, Tehuti, and because of that divine origin, they called their writing *medu.netjer*, which means 'words of god'. The Greeks called *medu-netjer hieroglyphics*, meaning 'sacred carving' or literally, 'language of the gods'. Ancient Egypt was reputed to domicile two of the famous Seven Wonders of the ancient World, viz, the Great Pyramid of Gizah and the Lighthouse of Pharos of Alexandria. Located at Saqqara, close to Gizah is the first prominent Egyptian pyramid called 'Stepped Pyramid' that housed the oldest Egyptian historical, religious, and literary documents, collectively described as 'The Pyramid Texts'. Those texts are believed to have been crafted over 4,000 BCE (Before Common Era, the modern historical dating that replaces BC – Before Christ). Also in Egypt was the famous Royal Library of Alexandria, established in the third century BCE, which is reputed as 'the greatest library in the ancient world'. It provided intellectual materials and services to leading scholars of the ancient world including Aeschylus (525?–456

BCE), Sophocles (496?–406? BCE), Socrates (469–399 BCE), Plato (428?–347 BCE), Aristotle (384–322 BCE), and others. There is direct evidence of the ancient Egyptian written literary influences on the writings of these Greek writers.

To prove that the continent of Africa was wholly inhabited by blacks, and Egyptians were originally blacks, Al-Bishak deploys the studies of early scientists of different races and their scholastic records to argue that Africa is the 'cradle of mankind'. From the British natural scientist, Charles Darwin (1808–1882), through the British-Kenyan paleoanthropologist, Louis Leakey (1903–1972), to the famous Senegalese Egyptologist, Cheikh Anta Diop (29 December 1923 – 7 February 1986) established that the first human being originated as a black man, specifically in the Eastern and Southern sub-regions of Africa where there are clear evidences of the oldest human vestiges in the world.

Generally, historical accounts indicate that Africa was a 'Dark Continent', and Africans acquired literacy – the skills of writing and reading – from their contacts with Arab Muslims and Christian missionaries. Africans are often conceived as savage creatures whose humanity is questionable because it does not reflect the familiar traits and skin colour of the foreign invaders. These are the misconceptions and fallacious perspectives that Al-Bishak's book has invalidated and rectified by focusing on Egypt as a prototype African nation.

Due to the significance of Egypt to the configuration of the global scripting culture and inventive structures, diverse races were both curious and envious of those features because they called into question the country's reputation as the world leading literary culture. In consequence, Egypt became a site to be explored and possibly overcome, controlled, and stripped of those noble legacies. This rationale explains the reality of Egyptian invasion by foreigners in a complex sequence, which accounted for the convoluted composition of the populace, and the peculiar identification of the people.

The Asians first invaded Egypt in 1730 BCE and also in 1640 BCE (the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries respectively). Then the Persians, led by Cambyses II, ruled Egypt from 530 to 522 BCE. Cambyses II was the son of Cyrus the Great, who founded the Persian Empire. By 525 BCE, he made Egypt a part of the Persian Empire. Another Persian, Darius I ruled over Egypt from 522 to 548 BCE, and was succeeded by his sons, Darius II (423–404 BCE) and Darius III (336–330 BCE). Thirdly, the Greeks took over Egypt from the Persians after a series of wars, and Alexander the Great ruled in Egypt from 336–323 BCE. The original name of Khemett was changed to Egypt

under the Greeks. The Romans, under Augustus Caeser, fought and took over Egypt from the Greeks in 27 BCE. In 639 BCE, the Arabs led by General Amr ibn-al-Asr, overcame the Romans and took over Egypt, and expanded it to be considered as a part of Arabia in Southwest Asia. From 1517 (sixteenth century BCE), the Turks invaded Egypt, and took over from the Arabs.

In 1798 CE, the French, led by General Napoleon Bonaparte took over Egypt, and introduced significant innovations, which upset British mercantile interests and instigated wars, and the French rule was terminated in 1801. At that point, there was a vacuum in the Egyptian power structure, and an obvious state of flux in the determination of the control apparatus. The British army regulated Egyptian affairs, and the British increasingly found Egypt a viable outlet for its gainful ventures, and made it a British colony in spite of the presence of the French and some other races in various systems of the Egyptian daily activities. British control spanned through World War I between 1914 and 1918. There were serious Egyptian nationalist agitations especially between 1919 and 1922, which earned Egypt total independence in 1922 from Britain under monarch, Ahmed Faud (born 26 March 1868, and died 28 April 1936).

Over the period that Egypt was under the rulership of Eurasians (Europeans and Asian nations), the indigenous writings and arts were truncated, while the foreign writing models and art forms flourished. That accounts for the emergence of the erroneous and misleading notion that African literacy came from Eurasia. Al-Bishak asserts that it is colonial mentality to claim that Africa had neither civilization nor credible language prior to its contact with Eurasia. African literary traditions were abolished as the Eurasians arrived and entrenched their education, religion and other values among the African peoples.

The above is an explanation of the contacts of Egypt and Eurasian cultures, which engendered the diversity and multiculturalism that are characteristic of Egypt till the present time. The multiple invasion and colonization of Egypt were replicated all over the African continent from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries through military conquests, exploration of new lands, enslavement, and occupation through contentious accords with African leaders.

With the importation of the printing technology from the West, the Roman and Arabic alphabets became widespread in Egypt, and the indigenous modes of writing gave way to the Eurasian languages of English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese. But Al-Bishak's research stresses that it was inappropriate for the Asians that ruled over Egypt to

attempt to excise Egypt from Africa to the Middle East simply because they regarded Egyptians as white, not black Arabs. The Eurasians extended this argument to imply that Egyptians, not being fully black in complexion as the typical black Africans, are culturally not part of Africa but Eurasia. And accordingly, their scribal literature is the product of the white not black people. But the major contradiction is that Egypt is located in North Africa, which is neither Europe nor Asia.

Generally, Al-Bishak's *Black Papyrus, Global Origins of Writing and Written Literature Traced to Black Africa* is an invaluable resource because it has succeeded in disproving with incontrovertible evidential facts that modern African scribal literature is an extension of the European scribal literature since it is currently written in European languages. Al-Bishak describes much of the culture, languages as well as physical characteristics of contemporary Egyptians as reflections of the outcome of intercourse among Roman, Libyan, Persian, Greek, French, Turkish soldiers, and the black women over the centuries. The racial mix that characterizes modern Egypt cannot, therefore, change the reality of the black African origins of the Egyptians.

The significance of Al-Bishak's treatise derives in the deconstruction of the *fons et origo* of the art of writing, as well as the rewriting of the dysfunctional and controversial narrative of the Africanness of Egyptians. These aim at reorienting modern scholars and researchers, especially as the Egyptian literary activities were not included in the early studies of the history of literature, perhaps because the writings of ancient Egypt were inaccessible until the nineteenth century when they were translated into European languages.

In spite of the above laudable contributions of Al-Bishak's book to scholarship and its prospects among contemporary and future scholars and researchers, the production of the book is fairly user-hostile because of the very small font size as well as the compact line spacing. Those combine to make the book a difficult read. However, Al-Bishak's *Black Papyrus, Global Origins of Writing and Written Literature Traced to Black Africa* is highly recommended to contemporary scholars and researchers for a reconceptualization of the genesis of the art of writing and the place of Egypt in the global narrative on scribal literatures.

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Olu Obafemi, *Ajon! (The Legend Who Made a King/Dom)*

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The review of a drama text without observing the performance of the artistic piece can come off as myopic and a disservice because performance lends credence to dramatic art. *Ajon!* was staged in April 2020 in Ilorin with an ensemble that included drummers, choreographers, and an orchestra. But when reading, the imagination is sufficiently aided and guided by the creative expertise of playwright, Olu Obafemi. Reading through, the senses are not dulled but rather alert due to the playwright's powerful use of dramatic tools and techniques to enrich the reading experience and bring the action to life, almost. One such technique is the breaking of the fourth wall where the presence of the audience is acknowledged in the pre-opening scene.

In describing the play, the director notes that *Ajon!* 'is a dramatic history of Queen Ajon' (v) that 'attempts to reconstruct the fragmented Republican, individualist pattern of settlement of the Kirri nation into a unified nation' (v). In the play, it is Ajon's guile, persistence and determination that results in a unified Kirri kingdom under one king in the lower Niger valley of Kogi State. With many facts unknown or lost in history, the playwright combines Kirri mythology, songs, and lore with his creative impetus to actualize what he terms 'a fictionalization of history' (vi). What Obafemi achieves is the immortalization of a daring and powerful woman in a literary piece that is both seamless and evocative. However, some may wonder, where does history end, and where does the fictive mode begin in this intriguing work?

The dramatic style of *Ajon!* is sophisticated and elevated. The use of proverbs, riddles, idioms, songs, chants, and the inclusion of the Yoruba language complements the work. The lines are poetic and befittingly regal. The spectacle of the performers, dancers, and singers conveys the celebration, rituals, and worldview of the community. The chants are coated with deeper meanings, which aids the dramatic tone and amplifies the orality of the work. The musical accompaniments, with sounds of and from the environment, elevate the reading experience. The 'morning streamside banters of damsels of Ajon's age grade who balance their Oru (pots) on their heads to as many Kirri springs and rivulets as possible' (3) of the opening scene welcomes the reader into the community and sets the stage for the tension that ensues.

The author utilizes a linear plot structure to unpack the hero's journey and the conflicts she contends with as she prepares to

undergo the quest. One such conflict is the exacting sacrifice her quest asks of her. Irrespective of this, Ajon is resolute in her pursuit of a united Kirri land even if she must give up motherhood to achieve it. Her sacrifice is both noteworthy and puzzling because it is neatly tied up with destiny and the will of the gods. Throughout the work, the character is hailed as 'the model of beauty', a 'queen' (13), whose 'path is cut by Olodumare', and a 'woman of mission' (18). Upon embracing her mission, Ajon clarifies that, 'rallying the Kirri people to salvation / is the mission of [her] marriage' (19). As a hero touched by the divine, the burden of fulfilling said mission is only multiplied by the personal toll the mission takes on her womanhood. Ajon is represented as a character who is given the illusion of choice by the gods. What Obafemi achieves beyond etching Queen Ajon's name in stone is to emphasize the contributions of women (from precolonial times) to societal growth.

Embedded with chants and chorus in Yoruba language, the author offers an appendix of songs in Yoruba with English translations which will guide a non-speaker of the indigenous language. Olu Obafemi circumvents patriarchal norms and rules in this work by offering an alternative way to envision king-making, kingship, and nation building. Scholars of Yoruba and Kirri literatures, oral literatures, indigenous historical fictions, African literatures in indigenous languages, and indigenous drama will benefit from this work.

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