

# EXPLORATION OF THE INTERFACE BETWEEN ENGLISH AND AFRICAN VALUES IN CONTEMPORARY AFRO-WESTERN RELATIONS

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/og.v12i1.8>

## **Abstract**

The English Language has come to stay in Nigeria and Africa at large. The basic structure of African society recognized by its customs and beliefs is described as “heart of darkness” until English begins to inform the world through its native and non-native speakers that Africa has robust world views worthy of study, emulation or distortion. This paper explores the connection between African values and English as currently being transmitted and distorted by English in aiding Afro-Western relations, and, in so doing, sends African languages, reeling from this incapacity to tell the world about Africa. The concept of superstratum, where “the language of a socially powerful element in a society influences the language of less powerful groupings”, is adopted to showcase the weakness of African Languages in promoting African values currently being done by English since its contact with Africa and her languages. The result is that anglicized Africa, Frenchified Africa, and Portuguese Africa have become the new garb of Africa.

## **Introduction**

African values embodied in African writings and/or literatures and made available to the West and the rest of us are facilitated by the introduction of the English language into Africa. Literature is all embracing. It is writing about any field of study or subject matter. Therefore African values as regards birth and death, marriage and divorce, warring parties and friendly parties, or rules and regulations guiding and guarding social relationship written by African writers of literature, education, medicine, sociology, anthropology, politics for the world to know Africa better are made possible by the English language. The indigenous languages could not withstand the formidable inclination of this language in implanting its culture, in overruling African cultural values, and in anglicizing African

people. How Africa is relating with the West, introducing her socio-cultural values to the West, and nodding her head in satisfaction for the camaraderie infused by this relation have English as the perceptible denominator in this human relation. Also, the choice of English is the absence of any language, acceptable and intelligible, as well as the limitations of memory storage and oral transmission of ideas, and above all, the absence of writing in the continent of Africa.

### **African Values, African Languages and the Choice of English**

African values recognized by her customs, beliefs, philosophies, mores and heroic exploits had been stored in the living memory of the people and continually transmitted orally from generation to generation. The oral transmission represented in folk tales “serve to celebrate or examine basic human experience – birth, love, war, death and supernatural intervention – as well as the morality of human conducts”. (Taylor 42)

In the course of time certain unique writings and mnemonic devices (carved objects) invented aided the memory in keeping records of events and traditional habits. The NSIBIDI writing was developed by a secret society to keep records of issues exclusive to this society in the Calabar – Ogoja axis. The hieroglyphics or picture writings were used by the ancient Egypt to keep account of important events in their civilization. However these aspects of writing in Africa were limited, and so, the medium of recording events was oral. In spite of the limitations of memory storage and oral transmission, their authenticity was proven by Alex Harley in his epic work, *The Root* through oral tales Harley traced his ancestral root from America to Kinta Kunte, a boy hunter from Gambia, captured and sold into slavery five hundred years ago.

Memory limitations, unwholesome oral transmission, unreliability of many mnemonic devices, non – pervasive systems of writing have since reduced reliance on these record keepings of events and practices. This disregard to these tools, according to G.T Basden, is that “since the assumption of the administration of the country by our Government...the result is a complete upheaval of the political, economical and social affairs of the country. Every native institution has been shaken in its foundations and, at the present rate of progress, a great many of the most interesting facts

concerning the primitive customs of the people will soon be matters of history and tradition only..., when the old shall have been overwhelmed by the new.” (20). Indeed the majority of African languages are becoming a matter of history and tradition, as the theory of superstratum, adstratum, and substratum explains language contact effect. According to Millar,

In substratal contexts, the language of a socially powerful element in a society influences the language of less powerful groupings. This is a commonplace post-colonial experience, with words from the colonizers language finding their way into the language of the colonized.... Adstratal influence where two (or more) languages come into contact, but there is no dominant community. Substratal influence involves influence upon a dominant language by a less dominant one (often one which is losing native speakers). (388/89).

The concept of superstratum captured veritably the contact of English and many African Languages. “English (has) been successfully transplanted into vast swathes of the globe, where (it has) become the first language of hundreds of millions of people on every continent and the everyday second languages of hundreds of millions more. In the process, they have already exterminated many hundreds of indigenous languages, and this process is accelerating all the time. Hundreds of other surviving languages have been reduced to insignificance and are struggling for survival, often vainly” (Millar 426).

The dominance of the English language has reduced most African languages to insignificance...These insignificance and struggling for survival have completely suppressed transmitting African values to the outside world in African languages. Arguing in favour of English, Elechi Amadi explains that “thought” which is basically the same can be presented in any languages: “My view is that language is merely a vehicle of thought and not thought itself. Thought, and not the vehicle it rides, is what is important. Throughout the world, human thought, which is basically the same, rides hundreds of thousands of linguistic vehicles.... *The African*

*child* is unmistakably African. So is *Things Fall Apart*. Would Achebe have explored the Igbo world better in Igbo? My answer is an emphatic no, and the reason is not far to seek. Igbo and other Nigerian languages lack the elasticity and subtlety which the vast vocabulary of the English language makes possible". (14/15). Amadi's polemic on the choice of language found elaboration on Gabriel Okara's treatise. Okara introduced three groups of scholars arguing on the language favourable to writing about Africa's cultural heritage: "The Neo – metropolitan (argues that) Africa should use English as the native speakers do and that an African should not waste his time and energy worrying himself... about the Africanness of his writing..... The Evolutionist/Experimenters (opine) that while English remains, at least, for the time being, their medium of expression, it must be used in such a way as to make their creative writing indisputably African in concept and execution to reflect African culture in their works. The Rejectionists advocate the total rejection of all metropolitan languages as the languages of African literature. African languages only should be used in African writing in order to reflect the authenticity and integrity of our African culture". (24/25).

The argument on the choice of language by these schools of thought on the language question for (creative) writing of African values is argument on the superstratal influence of English in writing. The rejectionists standpoint did not hold water as "it falls far short of the Pan-Africanist idea of a Pan – African literature.... (and that) it would only create pockets of continental literatures". (Okara 25). Supporting Okara, and throwing more light on the negative effect of writing in African languages, Herbert Igboanusi avers: "The main danger with writing African literature in African languages is that of isolation. Many writers in African languages have complained of their works not known outside their ethnic environment. Others have even complained of non-invitation to any African writers' conference". (10). And so, to avoid isolation with the literary world, world bodies, Afro-Western relations, Afro-Chinese relations the English language has been accepted, happily by many but grudgingly by few, as the language for telling the world about African values. Igboanusi sums up this thus:

Despite the stiff debate on the problems of language use in African literature, the indigenization of English has helped African literature to acquire an identity that has been able to arouse a global interest. It is the sustained use of English creatively that will enable African literature to contribute a great deal to world literature. (14)

### **African Values and English Transmission**

Africa prior to colonialism was replete with cultural differences together with differing languages. The values and practices in these heterogeneous tribes were identities marking them out from others. Suspicions of attack were rife, and, in reality, wars intermittently broke out between tribes. People rarely ventured outside their towns for fear of abduction, kidnapping or slaughter. Writing about the Igbo, Basden (202) says: "In common, I suppose, with savage peoples, the Ibos, prior to the British occupation of the country, occupied their spare time with fighting, generally town against town.... It led to the isolation and independence of each town through the perpetual state of fear which existed. It was never safe to venture far beyond the confines of the town, nor was this done except by bands of men armed ready to defend themselves." The limitation posed by intercommunal warfare in transmitting certain ideas made it impossible to relate with those beyond the town, communities or tribes.

However, with the advent of Britain to Nigeria and Africa at large, the hinterlands were exposed to outside relationship and accommodation. Again, Basden summed up the glee among the Igbo over the introduction of new values by the English." Discontent with primitive conditions comes only with the introduction of novelties from the outside world, and then, like a child, the Ibo covets what he sees. Left to himself he neither needs nor desires foreign luxuries, but once the possibility of securing them presents itself, be they so ever incongruous, he will not relax his efforts until they become his cherished possessions." (45). The Scramble and Partition of Africa in 1884/85 at Berlin West African Conference formally endorsed European presence in Africa and the introduction of European values facilitated by the English language. "Foreign luxuries" were introduced, the possibility of securing them presented itself, and

Africans have since never relaxed in making these luxuries their cherished possessions. In 1869, the Anglican church established the CMS Grammar School in Lagos; the Irish Roman Catholic followed suit in 1900 by establishing King's College also in Lagos. Through these institutions, reading, writing, arithmetic and religion all in English were inculcated, and native education, lores and mores began to be relegated to the background. Writing in English letters about Igbo, Nigeria and Africans became the order of the day, and continues till today.

The first African values considered are social, cultural and economic values generally subsumed within education in all its round of foundationalism. BabsFafunwa outlines this education as having encompassed all facets of pre-colonial Africa: (1) physical training (2) development of characters (3) respect for elders and peers (4) intellectual training: the poetic and prophetic aspects (5) vocational training: agricultural education; trades and crafts (6) community participation (7) promotion of cultural heritage" (20). The channels of transmission were oral, observation and imitation. There was nothing written down, and so, the death of a master craft man, poet, medicine man meant the end of such knowledge.

On the contrary, writing from the West was introduced, and African scholars started recording ideas as existed in the living memory of the people. BabsFafunwa, Akinkpelu, B.O. Ukeje, and a host of other Nigerian/African educationists recorded, in English, African educational values for the world to appraise and cease considering Africa as the Heart of Darkness (Joseph Conrad) "bereft of language and given only to unintelligible cries" (ChalieSugnet in Ihekweazu (ed) (91). or as "shallow buffoons" (Mr Johnson" without culture who aped everything White (Joyce Cary).

The second African values projected by the English language are national and international politics. Nationally, no Nigerian language is used in administration, at least, at the centre. For this incapacity, English has become the language of government administration, educational administration, legal administration, legislation, wider political campaigns of presidential candidates. Internationally, English is the major medium of communication at the common-wealth of Nations, the United Nations, African Unions, Economic community of West African States, etc. In short, it is the medium of communication in any human relations. The widespread

of internationalization of English is emphasized by Barbara Seidlhofer in her article, “English as a lingua franca”.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a result of the unprecedented global spread of English, roughly only one out of every four users of the language in the world is a native speaker of it. This means most interactions in English take place among “non-native” speakers of the language who share neither a common first language nor a common culture, and who use English as a lingua franca (ELF) as their chosen language of communication. (R92).

Talking about national governance as touching on African interests, or international relations to safeguard African concern is talking in English. There has never been any recourse to any African languages in international affairs.

The third African values being done for the interest of the world are literary creativity and artistic values. Literary writers are divided on the language for writing about Africa. NgugiwaThiong’o in Igboanusi (9/10) advocates that “an African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with the peasants and workers in Africa – in other words, he should write in an African language”. This is rejectionists school of thought’s stand on African writing to reflect our African culture. In contrast to this postulation, Achebe in Igboanusi (12) “submits that those who can do the work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought patterns must do it through their mastery of English...” This mastery of English and giving it African coloration and flavours are excumplified in *Arrow of God* by Achebe.

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring back my share. The world is like a mask, dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not be

friend the white man today will be saying, “had we known” tomorrow. (29).

Achebe’s pattern is in line with the evolutionist/experimenters’ stand. This standpoint along with those favouring metropolitan view has taken over African writings in English. Writings about South African values wrestling with apartheid, writings about the political upheaval in East Africa heralding Mau-mau movement, writings about West Africa announcing culture conflict and (post-independence) disillusionment were mainly put forward in English. The world reacted when a one-time prime minister of Britain proclaimed that “a wind of change is blowing over Africa”. This announcement understood by African nationalists which expedited action on self – government was broadcast in English and not in any African languages. And when independence was subsequently granted writers in English launched themselves into international limelight: Achebe, Soyinka, Chimamanda, Amah, Awooner in West Africa; Nurudeen Farah and Franz Fanon in North Africa; Nadine Godimer, Dennis Brutus in South Africa; WaThiong’oOkoiP’itek in East Africa.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

Many African languages have died or are endangered. The cause of this sorry state is what linguists called language shift. According to Millar, “most often, the speakers of a language simply abandon it in favour of some other language which is seen as more prestigious or more useful. Such shifts of language have undoubtedly happened countless times during human history” (425). The death of the Igbo language with some other African languages has variously been fixed in 2025, 2035 and 2050. The Igbo easily adopt and adapt to new values. And one such value is the English language used to write and project their values. The consequence of a dead language is described by Fromkin *et al*: Through its grammar, each language provides new evidence on the nature of human cognition. In literature, poetry, ritual speech, and word structure, each language stores the collective intellectual achievements of a culture, offering unique perspectives on the human condition. The disappearance of a language is tragic; not only are these insights lost, but the major medium through which a culture maintains and renews itself is gone

as well.” (525/26). The dead, the dying or the endangered African languages which began by the inability of Africa to develop languages unencumbered by a foreign language is suggestive of Africa abandoning its values to be recorded by this foreign language, African continent, governments, economies and cultures are talked in English. So, what we have now is anglicized, frenchified and Portuguese Africa talking about Africa and her values.

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