

NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITING IN FRENCH: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

I. N. UDOUSORO

(Received 22 August 2006; Revision Accepted 27 September 2006)

ABSTRACT

Nigerian creative writing in French is a recent phenomenon compared to Francophone or Lusophone literature. Since the publication of Ola Balogun's *Sango suivi de le Roi elephant* (1968), Nigerians have shown their creative abilities in a language, which is their second foreign language after English. This paper, seeks to showcase some of the Nigerian creative works in French, explore some of their themes, comment on the linguistic output and acceptability of such creative works, the challenges Nigerian authors of French expression face in an Anglophone environment as regards production, publishing and marketing as well as suggest ways of coping with these challenges. A written interview accorded the author of this paper by a prominent Nigerian author, Femi Ojo-Ade, author of *Les Paradis Terrestres* (2003), provides useful information on this recent development in the literary arena.

INTRODUCTION

Writers and researchers have over the years proved that creative potential exists within every individual, albeit in varying degrees. Ruth Heinig et al (1981:7) are of the opinion that creative people are innovators, problem solvers, alternative testers, and adventurers. The source believes that creative people are fearless, fluent, flexible, curious, unpredictable, constructively discontented, and sometimes even a bit 'off centre'. Beyond these characteristics of creativity, Heinig et al (1981:7) insist that 'creative expression is necessary for the celebration of the individual, the one who will survive in a dehumanizing technological age and in a world that is so complex that its problems, let alone solutions, often elude us'. There is always a way of grappling with issues of life and creative writers have greatly contributed to solving some of life's puzzles in a lighter mood.

On his part, David Eka (2002:25) claims that creativity may be said to be essentially an ability to use the resources of a fertile and dynamic mind in new, fresh and uncommon ways depending on the innate abilities of individuals. Every individual, irrespective of race or colour, can and should be given the liberty to put his innate and creative abilities to use without any form of inhibition.

Actually, Nigeria has recorded a number of creative writers of English language like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola, etc. some of whom have been recognized internationally. However, as far as the French language is concerned, not much has been done with regard to creative writing in French by Nigerians, but the picture is not grim. So far, the issue of Nigerian creative writing in French is very topical from the standpoint of vehicle of communication, which is French, a second foreign language in Nigeria. Besides, a few critics who are interested in the matter seem to be bothered about the leanness of the body of works referred to as Nigerian 'literature' in French!

Undoubtedly, Nigerian creative writing in French is born, but the question is, will it be given a chance to grow or are Nigerians, mostly scholars of French, going to sing its dirge and hurry it off to an early grave? Nigerians who have a creative potential should not shy away from writing in whatever language in which they can adequately express their ideas, including French. For obvious reasons, Nigerian creative writers of French expression might face certain challenges but there are prospects too for this body of literary work. This paper attempts to probe into both areas of concern with a view to provoking more creative writers to take up the challenge of writing in French so that this young and promising body of literary work can not only grow but survive. Occasionally, the

opinions of a major Nigerian author in English, but of French orientation, who decided to make a debut with a novel in French, *Les Paradis Terrestres*, which has enjoyed good reception and publicity since its publication, will be highlighted to allow our readers benefit from the polemic of Nigerian creative writing in French from the writer's perspective.

THE GENESIS OF NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITING IN FRENCH

Since its introduction into the educational curriculum in Nigeria, French, for the most part, has been taught as an academic discipline in some secondary schools and universities in the country. Most often, French is spoken within the Faculties of Arts or the Humanities where it is generally taught, but very little has been done beyond the teaching and learning of French as an academic discipline compared to its English language counterpart which has enjoyed great patronage judging from the volume of literary works that Nigerian authors have produced in English language.

Critics generally agree that creative writing in French was launched with the publication, in 1968, of Ola Balogun's *Shango* and Anthony Biakolo's *L'étonnante enfance d' Inotan* (1980). In its early stage, Nigerian creative writing in French centred mostly on cultural and historical themes, deriving mainly from the Nigerian folklore. The aim of the authors then was probably to project the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria to the outside world. From about the year 2000, more creative works in French have appeared on the literary scene and the thematic scope of such works has also widened. Apart from projecting the cultural values of the Nigerian nation, some Nigerian authors of French expression address socio-cultural, economic and political issues plaguing their country in their works. Some of these issues will be discussed in this paper as a way of propagating the ideas expressed by the authors.

PANORAMA AND THEMES OF SOME NIGERIAN CREATIVE WORKS IN FRENCH

As has already been pointed out, the themes of Nigerian works in French have gradually shifted from mostly or just projecting the Nigerian folklore, traditional beliefs and cultural values to reflecting the present realities of Nigeria, issues of national interest which are relevant to national development. In this sub-section, we intend to do a run-down of major themes evoked in some Nigerian works in French including novels, plays and poetry. Our corpus is selected based on the availability of literary works.

In *Uwaoma et le beau monde*, the author, Ifeoma

Onyemelukwe, leaves no doubt as to her feminist inclinations. Onyemelukwe boldly advocates, through her writing, that women should be given a chance to occupy the Presidency and governorship positions which have so far been a purely men's affair in Africa and particularly in Nigeria, arguing that some 'civilized' countries of the world have had women Presidents like Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, etc., who have proved their worth in their posts and have even been acclaimed internationally. Her major character, Uwaoma, a female, becomes President of a fictitious country, Wafibia, while her friends, Ronke and Amina, also females, become Governors of two states in the Western and Northern parts of the country respectively. This no doubt translates the author's dreams of gender or 'sex equity', which, according to Aburime (2004:91), 'refers to equal access to females and males to societal and personal pursuits and accomplishments...' Onyemelukwe also emphasizes and advocates national unity and integration through interethnic friendships and marriages as underlying factors of national development. Her novel also echoes the fact that some societal ills like child-trafficking, prostitution, armed robbery, etc., are as a result of illiteracy and poverty and advocates free education at all levels for both boys and girls. This, she hopes, will reduce the poverty level of the citizens and invariably, crime rates in the country.

Another novel written in French by a Nigerian, Vince Okeke, titled *Le Syndrome 419: Le Frère Terrible* exposes and condemns the attitude of Blacks at home and abroad who defraud those who fall easy preys to them because of their skill in making up stories that easily convince their targets. These fraudulent men and women, of course, are the reason why Blacks are generally suspected and disrespected, particularly abroad. Okeke's novel serves a dual purpose: to discourage people from engaging in dubious activities that mar the image of Blacks at home and abroad as well as to sensitize people to the existence of such dupes by exposing some of their tricks or stock in trade.

Enoch Ajunwa's *Destiné à survivre* is another successful outing in Nigerian creative writing in French from the point of view of creativity, organization of thought and narration. The story which is very touching is told in very simple French and the narrative technique is picturesque. The traditions of a typical igbo society that is hostile to the girl child, the womenfolk in general, is told in a down-to-earth manner. Good always triumphs over evil, and indeed, all things work together for good in a way prearranged by destiny. Adamma and her mother, Nneka, are destined to survive in spite of the fate they suffered after the death of their father and husband. On the other hand, Kanu, Adamma's uncle, Ngbeke, Adamma's step-mother and Tina, Adamma's step-sister all reap the fruit of their wicked act to Adamma and her mother - a lesson to all humanity that Evil cannot prevail over Good.

One very outstanding thing about Ajunwa's *Destiné à survivre* is that it catalogues various things and places of interest which learners of French can really appreciate in terms of vocabulary, civilization and general knowledge. Ajunwa's novel is equally useful to learners and teachers of translation.

Femi Ojo-Ade's novel, *Les Paradis Terrestres* examines, through the experiences of Ayo, the principal character, the fate of Blacks in the Western world. Apparently dissatisfied with the level of development back at home, in Africa, the protagonist sets out to do his studies in the white man's land, hoping to obtain an immigrant's status after his studies. His hopes are dashed as he discovers that his dreams of becoming an immigrant in La Concorde cannot materialize. In the process of a verbal exchange on the issue of obtaining an immigrant status, Ayo hits the white man in charge of immigration matters, M. Grominsky. Unfortunately, M. Grominsky dies. Ayo is imprisoned and later commits suicide in his cell. For Ojo-Ade, the white man's land is not paradise on earth, neither is the Black man's land hell on earth. The author is directly or indirectly implying that Blacks can stay

back at home, develop their country and live honourably without having to be despised and trampled on by the so-called civilized world.

on earth, neither is the Black man's land hell on earth. The author is directly or indirectly implying that Blacks can stay back at home, develop their country and live honourably without having to be despised and trampled on by the so-called civilized world.

Apart from novels, some plays written in French by Nigerian authors have also appeared on the literary scene. These include Lyn Mbuko's *Chaque chose en son temps*, (2001) Tunde Fatunde's *La Calebasse cassée*, (2002) Tunde Ajiboye's *Olurounbi ou le prix d'un pari*, (2004) etc.

Lyn Mbuko's *Chaque chose en son temps* focuses on the traditions of the Moslem world that encourage early marriage for the girl child thereby denying her the right to go to school and be prepared for a bright future. Thanks to her self-will and determination and of course with luck on her side, Zenabou escapes the woe of living with the awful health condition of VVF, gets healed, trains to become a nurse and becomes useful to her community, particularly to the man who married her while she was under aged; he later abandoned her because of the health problem which she had at childbirth. Mbuko advocates education for the girl child as a right and not a privilege.

Fatunde decries corruption among top government officials as a canker that hinders national development. He is of the opinion that corrupt government functionaries should be probed and brought to book irrespective of their positions or connections. When their fraudulent activities are exposed and they are punished openly the entire system as well as the society will be sanitized.

Ajiboye's *Olurounbi ou le prix d'un pari* reenacts the dramatic situation of a village overtaken by economic depression. After much suffering, the villagers are forced to turn to their ancestral gods for a reversal of the lot of the people. As would be expected, a price must be paid. Each trader pledges part of his wares to the gods, but Olurounbi, apparently desperate and definitely covetous, pledges her only daughter, Moloma, who dies just a day to her marriage, the gods having taken their 'sacrifice'. A lesson can be learnt from this play, that when African countries or other developing countries of the world face economic depression or political crisis, they must be careful what they trade or 'pledge' for the help they get from the developed countries who act as 'gods' to them at such times. A typical case in point is Nigeria's huge foreign debts and the country's inability to persuade the world powers to write off such debts.

Unimna Angrey's collection of poems, *Sursauts*, is quite impressive. The author draws inspiration from the local scenery of his village, Ukpe, his stay in France, in Badagry, in Togo, etc. to write some poems on a variety of themes. The theme of independence occupies a premier place in Unimna's collection. The poet observes with dismay that the hard earned independence does not seem to yield the expected results. In some African countries, the military either simply refuses to quit the leadership of the so-called independent countries or they just change their Khaki uniform and put on 'Agbada' and continue to rule, making democracy nothing but a mirage. Besides, the Whites' continued interest in the countries they once colonized is worrisome. Other themes evoked in Unimna's *Sursauts* include the beauty of the African woman, love, philosophical questions on the issues of life and death, religion, nostalgia, etc. This is certainly not a bad outing.

The few Nigerian literary works in French highlighted above and the themes examined point to the fact that Nigerian authors of French expression are coming up steadily and that they are doing more than just promote Nigerian cultural values in their works. But the question is, how far can their messages go considering the issue of the vehicle of communication, French? The next sub-section will concern itself with the polemic of creative writing in French by Nigerian authors.

THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITING IN FRENCH

Creative writers usually have the liberty to choose to write in any language, be it their mother tongue or a foreign language in which they are fluent or in the language of the immediate community where they find themselves. Given that Nigeria is an Anglophone country and that most of the Nigerians who speak French learnt it in Nigeria, visiting Francophone countries or France occasionally, and more often than not, briefly, to familiarize themselves with the French language and culture in the natural environment where the language is spoken, it would not be out of place to have some reservations as to the quality of novels written in French by Nigerians. Adrien Roscoe, cited by Mike Edung (1997:130), has this to say:

The problem a second language raises for authors is acute. They face the task of giving shape and form to their creative impulse in a language not originally their own, a language whose very essence bears the mark of a culture and history which they have not been able to fully share. In circumstances such as these, how can an African writer give completely satisfying expression to his innermost vision and response to experience? In other words, how can an African writing in English convey his authentic voice and spirit.

If Roscoe expresses such misgivings about an African writing in English, Nigerian creative writing in French should naturally give both readers and critics much more concern. One of the Nigerian writers in French, Femi Ojo-Ade, in a written but unpublished interview (14th May, 2005), claims that 'with proper grounding in any given language, one is capable of speaking and writing it without any great difficulty. He believes that,

... one must learn a language properly, that is, know the grammar, be conversant with its intricacies, its stylistic particularities and peculiarities, and be engaged in its cultural aspects; treat that language with respect... When one reaches a point of harmony with a language, difficulties are minimized, and the challenges become a source of joy.

In the light of the above arguments or preoccupations, should Nigerians, being Anglophone, be encouraged to write creative works in French? Who would benefit from these writings in French in an Anglophone Nigeria? Can these works measure up to the standard of creative works done by Francophone authors? Would creative writing in French by Nigerian authors be accepted in the literary scene worldwide? These and many more questions naturally plague the mind as one considers the growth and survival of Nigerian creative writing in French.

Reading through the creative works in French highlighted in the previous sub-section, one cannot but make some observations regarding the use of the French language in some of the works. Onyemelukwe's major character, Uwaoma (P.89), claims that she decided to write her experiences in French, 'our own French' in an attempt to exercise and perfect her art of writing in French or indeed her art of writing. This appears to be Onyemelukwe's personal reason for writing her novel in French- to exercise her talent as well as perfect her writing skill in French.

One of the major characteristics of creative writing is spontaneity of expression usually seen in the relative ease with which the author relates events in his work in the language of his choice. In other words, in creative writing generally, communication should be spontaneous and the utterances of the characters should, to a large extent, reveal

their temperament and inner essence. Unnecessary embellishments from the point of view of sentence formations may turn out to be exaggerations or even unreal in some communication situations. One observes, however, that in Onyemelukwe's *Uwaoma et le beau monde*, spontaneity on the part of the characters, that would make their utterances 'natural', is more or less absent. The author tends to process and reprocess her thoughts before writing them. This, no doubt, accounts for the rather 'academic' nature of her novel. In a conscious or an unconscious attempt to score a point as far as writing in a foreign language, French, is concerned, a Nigerian writer in French might go too far, making his novel more or less 'unnatural', which should not be the case.

In *Uwaoma et le beau monde*, one observes also that there are too many igbo words and expressions and sometimes whole sentences which make the reading of the novel a bit arduous. There is no doubt that older writers like Aminata Sow Fall, Calixthe Beyala, Ferdinand Oyono, etc are known to introduce some linguistic elements in their mother tongue into their novels in French, probably for lack of finding their equivalents in French, but we do not have to follow their example blindly. While the older authors could serve as models to our upcoming Nigerian authors of French expression, efforts should be made to avoid excessive imitation. Our Nigerian authors should strive towards originality to make their own mark as far as creative writing is concerned.

On the other hand, laxity on the part of some Nigerian authors of French expression could be very costly, especially for learners of French in our Nigerian schools in particular. Some of the works done by Nigerian creative writers in French went to press with a significant number of errors of varying degrees, some grammatical, while others have to do with choice of words. Problems of orthography as well as typographical errors could at least have been avoided. Errors of this nature or magnitude could undermine the quality of these works, and nascent literature and adversely affect their marketability thereby defeating the purpose for which they were conceived and produced, particularly their educational value.

In spite of the comments made above, we make bold to say that a good number of Nigerian creative writings in French are well written, displaying a good mastery of the French language by their authors. The novels that are found wanting in terms of language use could be reviewed and revised to safeguard quality and ensure that we do not paint a bad picture of Nigerian creative writing in French.

THE CHALLENGES OF NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITING IN FRENCH

Nigerian creative writing in French, as already noted, is a relatively recent phenomenon in the literary arena. We are already familiar with the reservations people have considering the fact that Nigeria is an Anglophone country. It is, therefore, difficult to believe, in terms of quality, that any good thing can come out of literary works written in French by Nigerian authors. Other problems, of varying degrees and magnitude, like that of audience, publishing and marketing also contribute in making Nigerian creative writing in French very topical, thereby necessitating a discussion on them.

THE QUESTION OF AUDIENCE

One of the most challenging issues in respect of Nigerian creative writing in French is that of audience or readership for the finished product. Onyeanulam, cited by Edung (1997:133), opines that Nigerian literature can and should be written for both internal and external audiences. This is echoed in Ojo-Ade's comment on why he chose to write a novel in French, *Les Paradis Ferrestres*: 'I wanted to widen the scope of my audience, to include those unable to read English'. In Edung's opinion, the audience for Nigerian creative writing in French appears to lie more outside than inside Nigeria, and in his own words, the readership outside Nigeria is 'as large as the readership of Africa creative writing'.

French in general, which can be located in France and the French-speaking countries' The source in question believes that as the readers of creative writing in these countries discover and read works of African writers in French, they are bound to include those of Nigerian writers in French.

In principle, and generally, novels written in French would naturally have audiences in France and other French-speaking countries. In Nigeria, particularly in tertiary educational institutions, there is increasing need for literary works whether by French, Francophone or Nigerian authors. It is a well known fact that most of the African novels in French by celebrated authors like Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma, Aminata Sow Fall, etc., have been almost exhaustively researched into by critics and by our foreign languages students of Nigerian universities. One would naturally wish to explore new grounds and Nigerian writers of French expression have come at the right time. Their works, apart from being available, would certainly be affordable. There is, therefore, a ready audience in Nigeria for Nigerian creative writing in French, which hopefully, will be enlarged with time, if and when the dream of making French a second foreign language in Nigeria becomes a reality.

PROBLEMS OF PUBLISHING/MARKETING NIGERIAN CREATIVE WRITINGS IN FRENCH

This is one of the most gigantic problems Nigerian creative writers in French face or fear to face at the thought of writing a literary work in French. Already, according to Ojo-Ade, publishing and marketing, generally, is 'a tall mountain to climb'. He goes on to say:

As for creative writings in French, the mountain reaches the height and immensity of an Everest, or a Kilimanjaro, seemingly insurmountable, but potentially conquerable with the necessary determination and commitment. Within the country, the challenge lies in the dearth of readership, and in the lack of publishers. The problem already exists with English Language, or local-language texts; with French, it becomes even worse. Internationally, the difficulty would appear less, because publishers are richer, better organized, and more willing to take chances with an expanded, and still expanding audience on whom they can foist the monstrous propaganda machine of capitalism.

That being the case, what would the Nigerian creative writer in French do to ensure that his work does not die in his hands or on the shelf? On this issue, Ojo-Ade has this to say:

...We, as writers of French, must be aggressive in insisting on the quality and relevance of our works. Since it is recognized that French is not our official language, big houses might not want to take a chance; but small outfits will, and that is how I came about having my novel done by both national and international publishers. One other aspect is that cooperation between African and African diasporic publishers stand to be one of the best future configurations.

Ojo-Ade's views are quite relevant but appear to be long-term measures that could be taken to reduce the frustrations Nigerian writers in French face or are likely to experience with regard to the publishing or marketing of their works. The University French Teachers' Association of Nigeria (UFTAN) could rise to the challenge of floating a publishing outfit that would critically assess the quality of the creative works done in French by Nigerian authors before getting them

published. Colleagues in the profession who are capable of owning and directing publishing companies can give it a try so that works done in French by Nigerian authors can readily find publishers and marketers within Nigeria at affordable cost. These steps, if taken, particularly at this initial stage of the development of this body of writing, are most likely to safeguard its standard, quality and survival.

CONCLUSION

As shown in this paper, the polemic on Nigerian creative writing in French is predicated on the fact that French is a foreign language in Nigeria on one hand and the dearth of audience, the problems of publishing and marketing creative works in French by Nigerian authors on the other hand. That notwithstanding, this body of writing has come into the literary scene and it is growing at a steady rate, though quite slowly. Definitely, the challenges pointed out are quite significant, but not insurmountable and we cannot give up now.

In respect of themes, the bit we have examined in this paper shows that the preoccupations of Nigerian writers in French are relevant to the socio-economic and political needs of Nigeria in particular and to those of the African continent in general. This body of work should, therefore, be encouraged rather than condemned. Rather than shy away from writing in French, Nigerian writers should do all they can to master the intricacies of the French grammar and be willing to accept constructive criticisms geared at making their work better.

As a way of securing the future of Nigerian creative writing in French, a course so titled could be introduced into the curriculum of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This could create awareness among students of French in Nigeria and outside the country and possibly stir up their creative impulse or abilities, thereby generating more creative works in French by Nigerians in future. With adequate quality control in terms of language use, the proliferation of Nigerian creative writing in French would do no harm; rather, it will take its place in the arena of world literature. Nigeria, as a country, stands to gain as Nigerian literature in French would, ultimately, among other things, help to project her rich cultural heritage and values to those, particularly outside Nigeria, who cannot read English.

REFERENCES

- Aburime, M., 2004. 'Enhancing Women Productivity in the 21st Century: The Role of Gender Relations' (in *Journal of Language and Development*, Ed Dorothy Motaze) Port Harcourt, Sambros Printing Press, Pp. 85-92.
- Ajiboye, T., 2001. *Olorounmbi ou Le prix d'un pari*, Ibadan, Bounty Press.
- Ajunwa, E., 1996. *Destinée à Survivre*, Onitsha, Njoku Africana Books Ltd.
- Edung, M., 1997. 'Nigerian Creative Writing in French: A Reflection', (in *The Language Professional*) Okigwe, Fasmen Educational and Research Publications, Pp.129-138.
- Eka, D., 2002. 'Diction and Rhythm in Wole Soyinka's The Interpreters' (in *Essays in Language and Literature in respect of Ime Ikiddeh at 60*) Uyo, University of Uyo Press, Pp. 24-43.
- Fatunde, T., 2002. *La calebasse cassée*, Ibadan, Bookcraft Ltd.
- Heinig, R. and Stillwell, L., 1981. *Creative Drama for the Classroom Teacher*, USA, Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Mbukko, L., 2001. *Chaque Chose en son Temps*, Kaduna, M.O.D. Press.

Ojo-ade, F., 2003. *Les Paradis Terrstres*, Ibadan, Dokun Publishing House.

Okeke, V., 2001. *Le Syndrome 419: Le Frère Terrible*, Owerri, Carvin Publishers.

Onyemelukwe, I., 2003. *Uwaoma et le beau monde*, Zaria, Labelle Education Pubishers.

Unimna, Angrey., 2002. *Sursauts*, Calabar, Ushie Printers and Pub. Co. Ltd.,