

African Languages and African Literature

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Abstract

In the 1960s, much diatribe was exchanged by African literary artists within their caucus, and outside with different scholars interested in African literature. Wali demonstrates this disagreement. He comments, "... until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncertainty, and frustration." In reply to Wali, Achebe expresses, "...you cannot cram African literature in a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but as associated units – in fact, the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa". The disagreement is no longer conspicuous. However, the question that demands an answer is, "Have African languages become productive in African literature?" This paper argues that they have not, maybe, yet. It assesses this situation, providing factors responsible. One of such factors is the non-development and underdevelopment of the African languages. Besides, the paper makes recommendations that can salvage the situation; one of which is instituting awards for literary works in African languages.

Introduction

Language is a medium of communication of ideas or feelings via conventional signs, sounds or marks with distinguishable denotations and connotations. The views of Sapir, Hall and Trager cited in Crystal (396) corroborate this: Sapir comments that language is a purely human and non-

instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols; Trager views it as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which the members of a society interact in terms of their total culture; and Hall argues that it is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols. The roles of language in communication as suggested above make Essien to see it as the “quintessence of humanity”.

The use of language in communication illustrates its relationship with the mind. Chomsky’s Universal Grammar Theory (UG) evidences this relationship. According to Cook (2), the importance of UG is its attempt to integrate grammar, mind and acquisition at every moment. The mind here suggests creativity. Hence, Emenanjo argues that language cuts through artifacts, socio-facts, and menti-facts. Artifacts form from the flora and fauna of a cultural area; socio-facts come from political, social, legal and economic structures, while menti-facts yield from language in its multifaceted and multidimensional realizations which are represented in ideas, beliefs, and oral and literary creativity. Literature is clearly one of the menti-facts resulting from its employment of the decoding and encoding and constructing and deconstructing capabilities of language in the course of establishing reality, which is its object. In other words, literature depends on language.

Language is instantiated in various forms. Here, it is externalized language (e-language). What a speaker knows about language is internalized language (i-language). This is represented in the mind/brain, Chomsky (3). More elaborately, Carnie (4) explains:

... when linguists talk about *Language* (or i-language), they are generally talking about the *ability* of humans to speak any (particular)

language. Some people (most notably Noam Chomsky) also call this the *Human Language Capacity*. Language (written with a capital L) is the part of the mind or brain that allows you to speak, whereas *language* (with a lower case l) (also known as e-language) is an instantiation of this ability (like French or English).

The point here is that there is a difference between language and a language. English, Igbo, Hausa, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Kiswahili, Urhobo, Ewe etc are instantiations of language and when we state that literature depends on language, we mean any one of the languages or any one of the languages of the world. This is why it is possible to talk about literature in English, literature in Igbo, literature in Urhobo, literature in Ibibio, literature in Ewe etc or more broadly literature in African languages, literature in European languages etc.

However, literature in a language is a shallow representation of what literature is. This is because the life of a people is embedded in their literature (Ukpai and Orji). May we note that life as used by Ukpai and Orji refers to the cultural values of the people. This and more is indicated by Obi, “Literature has become an important means of understanding and interpreting human beings and aspects of society such as politics, religion, economics, social conflicts, class struggle and human condition”. In other words, in talking about literature two factors are essential, a language and a human society that speaks the language, where the language is the medium of expression and the society, the provider of beliefs and manners which are expressed. In this, it is possible to talk about English literature, Ewe literature, Kiswahili literature, Tamil literature, Igbo literature or

broadly African literature, European literature, Asian literature, American literature etc.

This paper focuses on African literature. Particularly, it attempts at assessing the extent to which African languages are involved in African literature. Indices of the assessment are more of Nigerian. In the sections below, the assessment is presented. Also, the importance of African languages in African literature is discussed and factors responsible for inadequate utilization of the languages in African literature are given and discussed. Recommendations to change the situation are proffered. They are followed by conclusion.

African Literature and the Language Issue

African literature had been predominantly oral up to the 19th Century when attempts to put some African languages into written forms began considerably (Ukpai and Orji). The attempts became more productive in the 20th Century. For instance, the earliest Igbo novels, *Omenụkọ* and *Ala Bingo* were published within 1905 – 1909 (Nwadike). The attempts however dwindled towards the mid-20th Century. The reason for this stemmed from the acceptance of foreign languages by Africans in attending to almost all their affairs. This is evident in Bamgbose (78). He comments, “Nigerians have learnt to adore, and perhaps overestimate the value of a foreign tongue”.

The overestimation of the value of foreign tongues is rather overwhelming in Africa today. Mbagwu and Obiorah point out that there is hardly any African country in which an indigenous language plays an official role completely. In their words, “What exist are African countries that have indigenous languages standing with exoglossic languages as official languages. Kenya and Tanzania ... are evidence. Nigeria is another.” With this situation, African languages have not striven well in literature. In fact, in the 1960s there

was heated argument over the appropriate language of African literature. While a few argued that African languages were suitable for African literature, many argued in the contrary. The 1962 Conference of African writers was a demonstration of this.

Wali was the voice of those who were pro-African literature in African languages while Achebe was understood to be anti-African languages in African literature. Wali, in his criticism of the 1962 Conference of African writers, explains,

He is not to discredit those writers who have achieved much in their individual rights within an extremely difficult and illogical situation. It is to point out that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected.

Wali's position, as his words show, is that African languages should not be underestimated and relegated to an irrelevant status to the exaltation of exoglossic linguistic norms. Hence, he comments, "... until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration".

Achebe's essay, *The African writer and the English Language*, in every respect is pro-African literature in foreign languages. Ezenwa-Ohaeto (102), in reviewing the essay explains,

Achebe points to the issue of the confusion of values ... He touches on the linguistic question, submitting 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 and not out of innocence’.

Achebe’s position here predicated on his view, “you cannot cram African literature in a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but as associated units – in fact, the sum total of all the *national* and *ethnic* literatures of Africa”.

The foregoing reveals the extent to which African languages are involved in African literature, even though it seems the disagreement has disappeared. Indeed, the number of novels, plays, and poems turned out by Africans in English and French on a yearly basis is far more than the number of such works turned out in African languages. In Nigeria for instance, while there is a commendable production of literary works in Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, particularly, because of their regional official status, there is absence or negligible presence of such works in the myriad of other languages in Nigeria.

The Importance of African Literature in her Languages

Literature is a reflection of the past of a people and a projection of their aspiration for the future (Duvignand, 67). In other words, its task is keeping the collective imagination of a society alive such that its members will be able to channel their energies to communal social construction (Caudwell, 145).

The people who are pro-African literature in foreign languages will find some support in the above. This is because the African novels, plays and poems in English or French in particular entail the reflection of the life of African people and their collective imagination. However, they miss the point expressed earlier concerning the difference between, say, English literature and literature in English.

English literature is about the English people in their language while literature in English is about any people, say, Yoruba or Hausa people in the English language. In other words, the people's identity is incomplete.

According to Dathome (1),

Literature in the written vernacular languages of Africa provides an imaginative and essential link with unwritten indigenous literature; this literature indicates the adaptability of oral tradition in that through the written vernacular literature the oral tradition expresses its versatility and diversity.

Dathome is talking about a veritable means of the preservation of oral tradition and this is writing in vernaculars. African oral tradition cannot be preserved if foreign languages are adopted for African literature. In fact, as African oral traditions die, African languages and culture follow (Nwadike, 18).

Wali comments that literature is the exploitation of language. Obi supports this. In her words, "Literature encourages the use of language not only for oral communication, but also for discourse within the community ... the creative writers have the very important duty of promoting the use of languages through creating imaginative literature unit". The point here is that the fear of cramming African literature in a small neat definition as expressed by Achebe has led most Africans to exploit foreign languages, promoting their use. The effect of this is non-development and underdevelopment of African languages: a situation that classifies them into the different levels of language endangerment as identified by Wurm. That is, some of them are potentially endangered; some, endangered; some,

seriously endangered; some, terminally endangered; some others, dead or extinct.

Overall, the importance of African literature in her languages includes defining the complete identity of African people and upholding and preserving it. Again, it will provide the facility that will allow the expression of the versatility and diversity of African oral tradition. By this, the African oral tradition will be preserved. The preservation will affect the life span of African languages and culture. Lastly, it will serve as a locus for the development of African languages and the promotion of their use.

Factors Responsible for the Underutilization of African Languages in Literature

A serious factor emerging from the previous section is undeveloped and underdeveloped African languages. Writers cannot write in languages that have not been developed to have a written form, or languages that have not been developed to the level at which they could be used in literature.

Government policies that could encourage the use of African languages in African literature are absent. For instance, no African language is the only official language in any African country. African languages that are official are regional. This is the case of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria. Truly, Kiswahili is a functional national language in Tanzania. However, its role is limited to trade (Mbagwu and Obiorah). Moreover, there is no African country where a credit pass in an African language is a criterion for promotion in the civil service, admission to a university or employment. With this situation, African languages will not be maximally utilized in literature.

Complex linguistic situation is a very serious factor. Heine and Nurse cite Grimes as putting the number of

African languages at 2035. It is claimed that this number is not fixed since some African languages are still being discovered and others with few speakers are disregarded. What this means is that African languages exceed the given number. This situation is possibly responsible for the lack of government policies that could encourage the use of African languages in literature. Mbagwu and Obiorah capture the situation thus, “Perhaps, because every African country is multilingual¹, there is a convenient resort to exoglossic languages to douse the flame of overt or covert disagreement from the choice of one indigenous language over another”. Besides, this factor has an implication for the non-development or underdevelopment of African languages.

To develop a language is capital intensive. It is therefore difficult to develop all the languages of Africa. In Nigeria alone, there are 505 indigenous languages (Udoh, 18). Out of this number, only the major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba; and the main languages, Edo, Urhobo, Izon, Fulfude, Igala, Ogoni, Ibibio, Efik etc have received positive attention of varied degrees for development. More than four hundred and fifty others are undeveloped or underdeveloped. Literature in them is therefore impossible.

Commercial value of novels, plays and poetry books written in African languages is infinitesimal compared to such works written in English or French. Solarin cited in Ezenwa-Ohaeto (119) reveals this in contending against the support of Achebe for African literature in English, “It is sickening reading Chinua Achebe defending English as our *lingua franca*. I do not blame Achebe or any other Nigerian novelist, taking the same stand. Their books are, commercially speaking, necessarily written in English”.

May we note that the very low commercial value of African literary works in African languages could have something to do with African languages not being fully

official or national in African countries: definitely, the works have small areas of distribution.

Illiteracy in the African languages is a major factor that affects the commercial value of the literary works written in the languages. Records have it that most African people are illiterate in their own languages. Mbagwu corroborates this using Igbo. With this situation, literary works written in the languages will have negligible commercial value: people will hardly buy them to read as they will not be able to read them.

Recommendations for Optimal Utilization of African Languages in Literature

The section above suggests certain recommendations. However, recommendations not directly deductible from it have been made.

- i. Undeveloped African languages should be developed and underdeveloped ones should be fully developed to encourage writers to employ them in creative writing.
- ii. Literacy in the developed languages should be pursued with vigour. This will enhance the commercial value of literary works written in them: a situation that will make more writers to delve into the area.
- iii. Policies that could encourage writing African literature in African languages should be formulated and implemented by government of African countries. In fact, there is no harm in making any developed African language an official language in its domain of dominance in any African country, making sure that people who speak the language do not get government employment or admission to institutions of higher

learning etc if they are not literate in their language.

- iv. Million dollar prize awards should be instituted for literary works in African languages. It is unfortunate that there is the Nobel Prize and other prizes awarded by foreign institutions for, of course, literature in foreign languages and Africans have won some of the prizes and are encouraged to write more in the languages. Indeed, if similar awards are instituted for African literary works in African languages, people will be encouraged to write in the languages.
- v. African literary artists should be sensitized to see the foreign languages as secondary languages. Their works should appear first in African languages and afterwards in the foreign languages; not the other way round. Some African writers attempted this. Unfortunately, they could not continue. If they continued, African literature, we believe, would have had a better definition.
- vi. Publishing of literary works in African languages should be subsidized by public and private organizations. This will increase the number of the works in the languages produced yearly. It will also improve their standards. Particularly, writers would stop producing novelettes as novels with the reason that the cost of financing the publishing is high and rests solely upon them.

Conclusion

African languages have been underutilized in African literature. What exists more is African literature in foreign languages. The argument in the 1960s over the appropriate language for African literature achieved little or nothing.

Even more, the glaring importance of literature in the language of its owners as we pointed out here has not engendered any radical change. This paper has highlighted a few of the factors responsible for the worrisome situation. They include undeveloped and underdeveloped African languages; absence of government policies that could encourage writing African literature in African languages; complex linguistic situation; commercial value of literary works in African languages; and illiteracy in the languages. Recommendations to handle the factors have been made. A good number of them are clearly suggested by the factors. The ones not clearly suggested by them are: million dollar prize awards should be set up for literary works in African languages; African literary artists should be sensitized to write in their own languages before their works are translated into foreign languages; and publishing of literary works in African languages should be subsidized by public and private organizations.

Indeed, African literature in foreign languages does not define African literature adequately. Attempts should be made to change the situation. Our recommendations could go a long way in ensuring this.

Note

1. Mbagwu, D. U. 'Complex linguistic situation and its implications' in Emejulu, Ify and Umezina, Chukwuemenam (eds.) 'Humanities for tertiary institutions' (2009) argues that the complex linguistic situation describes the existence of many languages in an area. This applies to Nigeria and has so been used here. He restricts multilingualism to its conventional meaning, the ability to speak more than two languages, and identifies it as an implication of complex linguistic situation. However, Mbagwu and Obiorah have used multilingualism in the sense

of complex linguistic situation and it is retained in direct comments from them.

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