

## The Language of African Literature

The language of African literature cannot be discussed meaningfully outside the context of those social forces which have made it both an issue demanding our attention, and a problem calling for a resolution.\* On the one hand is, let us call a spade a spade, imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial phases continuously pressganging the African hand to the plough to turn the soil over, and putting blinkers on him to make him view the path ahead only as determined for him by the master armed with bible and sword. In other words, Imperialism continues to control the economy, politics and cultures of Africa. But on the other hand, and pitted against it, are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euroamerican-based stranglehold and to usher in a new era of truly communal self-regulation and self-determination. It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put are central to a

people's definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in the Africa of the twentieth century.

The contention started a hundred years ago when the capitalist powers of Europe sat in Berlin and carved an entire continent with a multiplicity of peoples, cultures and languages into different colonies. It seems to be the fate of Africa to have her destiny always decided around conference tables in the metropolises of the western world: her emergence from self-governing communities into colonies was decided in Berlin; her more recent transition into neo-colonies along the same boundaries was negotiated around the same tables in London, Paris, Brussels and Lisbon. The Berlin-drawn division under which Africa is still living was obviously economic and political despite the claims of bible-wielding diplomats, but it was also cultural. Berlin in 1884 saw the division of Africa according to the different languages of the European powers. African countries, as colonies and even today as neo-colonies, came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of Europe: English, French or Portuguese-speaking African countries.

Unfortunately writers who should have been mapping paths out of that linguistic encirclement of their continent also came to be defined and to define themselves in terms of the languages of imperialist imposition. Even at their most radical and pro-African, in their sentiments and articulation of problems they still took it as axiomatic that the renaissance of African cultures lay in the languages of Europe. I should know!

## The Domination of English

In 1962 I was invited to that historic meeting of African writers at Makerere, Kampala, Uganda. The list of participants contained most of the names which have now become the subject of scholarly dissertations in universities all over the world. The title? 'A Conference of *African Writers of English Expression*'.

I was then a student of *English* at Makerere, an overseas college of the University of London. The main attraction for me was the certain possibility of meeting Chinua Achebe. I had with me a rough typescript of a novel in progress, *Weep Not Child*, and I wanted him to read it. The year before, 1961, I had completed *The River Between*, my first ever attempt at a novel, and entered it for a writing competition organized by the East African Literature Bureau. I was keeping in step with the tradition started by Chinua Achebe with his publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1959 or even earlier by Peter Abrahams with his output of novels and autobiographies from *Path of Thunder* to *Tell Freedom*, or the tradition started by their counterparts in French colonies, that is the generation of Sedar Senghor and David Diop included in the 1947/48

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Paris edition of *Anthologies de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache de Langue Française*. They all wrote in European languages, as was the case with all the participants in that momentous encounter on Makerere hill in Kampala in 1962.

The title, *A Conference of African Writers of English Expression*, automatically excluded those who wrote in African languages. Now on looking back from the self-questioning heights of 1984, I can see this contained absurd anomalies. I, a student, could qualify for the meeting on the basis of only two published short stories, *The Fig Tree (Mugumo)* in the student journal *Penpoint*, and *The Return* in the new journal *Transition*. But Shabaan Roberts, then the greatest living East African poet writing in Kiswahili with several works of poetry and prose to his credit, or Chief Fagunwa, the great Nigerian writer with a number of titles published in Yoruba, could not possibly qualify.

The discussions on the novel, the short story, poetry and drama excluded the main body of work in Swahili, Zulu, Yoruba, Arabic, Amharic and other African languages. Yet, no sooner were the introductory preliminaries over than this conference of African Writers of English Expression sat down to the first item on the agenda: *What is African Literature?* The debate which followed was animated: was it literature about Africa or about the African experience? Was it literature written by Africans? What about a non-African who wrote about Africa: did his work qualify as African literature? What about an African who set his work in Greenland: did that qualify as African literature? Or were African languages the criteria? OK: what about Arabic, was it not foreign to Africa? What about French and English which had become African languages? What if a European wrote about Europe in an African language? If . . . If . . . If . . . this or that, except the issue: the domination of our languages and cultures by those of Imperialist Europe: in any case there was no Fagunwa or Shabaan Roberts or any writer in African languages to bring the conference down from the realm of evasive abstractions. The question was never seriously asked: did what we wrote qualify as African literature? The whole area of literature and audience, and hence of language as a determinant of both the national and class audience, did not really figure: the debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and geographic habitation of the writer.

English (like French and Portuguese) was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African people in the same nation and between African and other nations. In some instances these European languages were seen as having a capacity to unite African peoples against divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicity of African languages within the same geographic state. Thus Ezekiel Mphahlele later could write, in a letter to *Transition* number 11, that English and French have become the common language with which to present a nationalist front against white oppressors, and even 'where the whiteman has already retreated, as in the independent states, these two languages are still a unifying force'. Or in the literary sphere they were often seen as coming to save African languages against themselves. Writing a foreword to Birago Diop's book *Contes D'Amadou*

*Koumba*, Sedar Senghor commends him for using French to rescue the spirit and style of old African fables and tales. 'However, while rendering them into French he renews them with an art which, while it respects the genius of the French language, that language of gentleness and honesty, preserves at the same time all the virtues of the negro-african languages.' English, French and Portuguese had come to our rescue and we accepted the unsolicited gift with gratitude. Thus in 1964 Chinua Achebe, in a speech titled *The African Writer and the English Language*, said: 'Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a *dreadful betrayal* and produces a *guilty feeling*. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it.'

### A 'Fatalistic Logic'

See the paradox: the possibility of using mother-tongues provokes a tone of levity in phrases like *a dreadful betrayal* and *a guilty feeling*; but that of using foreign languages produces a categorical positive embrace, what Achebe himself, ten years later, was to describe as this 'fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'.

The fact is that we all, that is those of us who opted for European languages—the conference participants and the generation that followed them—accepted that fatalistic logic to a bigger or lesser degree. We were guided by it and the only question which preoccupied us was how best to make the borrowed tongues carry the weight of our African experience by, for instance, making them 'prey' on African proverbs and other peculiarities of African speech and folklore. For this task, Achebe (*Things Fall Apart; Arrow of God*), Amos Tutuola (*Palmwine Drunkard; My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*) and Gabriel Okara (*The Voice*) were often held as providing the three alternative models. The lengths to which we were prepared to go in our mission of enriching foreign languages by injecting Senghorian 'black blood' into their rusty joints, is best exemplified by Gabriel Okara in an article reprinted from *Dialogue, Paris* in *Transition* magazine in September 1963: 'As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as medium of expression. . . . In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.' Why, we may ask, should an African writer, or any writer, become so obsessed in taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues? Why should he see it as his particular mission? We never asked ourselves: how can we enrich our languages? How can we 'prey' on the rich humanistic and democratic heritages in the struggles of other peoples in other times and other places to enrich our own? Why not have Balzac, Tolstoy, Sholokhov, Brecht, Lu Hsun, Pablo Neruda, H. C. Anderson, Kim Chi Ha, Marx, Lenin, Albert Einstein, Galileo,

Aeschylus, Aristotle, Plato in African languages? And why not create literary monuments in our own languages? Why in other words should Okara not sweat it out to create in Ijaw, which he acknowledges to have depths of philosophy and a wide range of ideas and experiences? What was our responsibility to the struggles of African peoples? No, not these questions: what seemed to worry us more was this: after all the literary gymnastics of preying on our languages to add life and vigour to English, and other foreign languages, would the result be accepted as good English or good French? Will the owner of the language criticize our usage? Here we were more assertive of our rights! Gabriel Okara's position on this was representative of our generation: 'Some may regard this way of writing English as a desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?'

How did we arrive at this acceptance of 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature', in our culture, in our politics? Berlin of 1884 was effected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle, a process best described in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel *The Ambiguous Adventure*, where he talks of the methods of the colonial phase of imperialism as consisting of knowing how to kill with efficiency and to heal with the same art. 'On the Black Continent, one began to understand that their real power resided not at all in the cannons of the first morning but in what followed the cannons. Therefore behind the cannons (was) the new school. The new school had the nature of both the cannon and the magnet. From the cannon it took the efficiency of a fighting weapon. But better than the cannon it made the conquest permanent. The cannon forces the body and the school fascinates the soul.' Let me illustrate this by drawing upon experiences in my own education.

## Colonial Education

I was born in a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children. I also belonged, as we all did in those days, to a wider extended family and to the community as a whole.

We spoke Gikuyu as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikuyu in and outside the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of story-telling around the fireside. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We the children would later the following day re-tell the stories to other children as we worked in the fields picking pyrethrum flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords.

The stories, with mostly animals as the main characters, were all told in

Gikuyu. Hare, being small, weak yet full of innovative wit and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can out-wit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against the hostile nature (drought, rain, sun, wind), this confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of cooperation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beast and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.

There were good and bad story-tellers. A good one could tell the same story over and over again, and it would always be fresh to us, the listeners. He or she could take a story told by someone else and make it more alive and dramatic. The differences really were in the use of words, images and the inflexion of voices to effect different tones.

We therefore learnt to value words for their meaning and nuances. Language was not a mere string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. So we learnt the music of our language on top of the content. The language, through images and symbols, gave us a view of the world, but it had a beauty of its own. The home and the field were then our pre-primary school, but what is important for our discussion today is that the language of our evening teach-ins, the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one.

And then I went to school, a colonial school, and this harmony was broken. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture. I first went to Kamaandura, missionary run, and then to another (Maanguuu) run by nationalists grouped around Gikuyu independent and Karinga schools association. Our language of education was still Gikuyu. I remember that the very first time I was ever given an ovation for writing was over a composition in Gikuyu. So for my first four years there was still harmony between the language of my formal education and that of the Limuru peasant community.

It was after the declaration of a State of Emergency over Kenya in 1952 that all the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became much more than a language: it was *the* language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference.

### The Suppression of Gikuyu

Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment—three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks—or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with the inscription:

I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford. And how did the teachers catch them? A button was initially given to one person who was supposed to hand it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button at the end of the day was the culprit. Thus children were turned into witch-hunters and in the process were taught the lucrative value of being a traitor to one's immediate community.

The attitude to English was the exact opposite: any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded; prizes, prestige, applause; the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in the arts, the sciences and all other branches of learning. English became *the* main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education.

As you may know, the colonial system of education, in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation, had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary middle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from the primary into the secondary were through an examination, in my time called *Kenya African Preliminary Examination*, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from maths to Nature Study and Kiswahili. All the papers were written in English. But nobody could pass the exam if he/she failed the English-language paper, no matter how brilliant the result in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all the other subjects but did not pass in English. He therefore failed the entire exam and went on to become a turnboy in a bus company. I who had only passes but a credit in English got a place at the Alliance High School, one of the most elitist institutions for Africans in colonial Kenya. The requirements for a place at the University, Makerere University College, were broadly the same: nobody could go on to wear the undergraduate red gown, no matter how brilliantly they had performed in all the papers in all the other subjects, unless they had a *credit* (not even a simple pass!) in English. Thus the most coveted place in the pyramid and in the system was only available to holders of an English-language credit card. English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom.

Literary education was now determined by the dominant language while also reinforcing that dominance. Orature in Kenyan languages stopped. In primary school I now read simplified Dickens and Stevenson, alongside Rider Haggard. Jim Hawkins, *Oliver Twist*, Tom Browne (not Hare, Leopard and Lion), were now the daily companions in the world of imagination. In secondary school, Scott and G.B. Shaw, together with more Rider Haggard, John Buchan, Alan Paton, Captain W.E. Johns. At Makerere I read English: from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot with a touch of Graham Greene. Thus language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds.

What was the colonial system doing to us Kenyan children? What were the consequences of, on the one hand, this systematic suppression of our languages and the literature they carried, and on the other the

elevation of English and the literature it carried? To answer those questions, let me first examine the relationship of language to human experience, human culture and the human perception of reality.

## Language and Human Reality

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture. Take English. It is spoken in Britain and in Sweden and Denmark. But for Swedes and Danes, English is only a means of communication with non-Scandinavian peoples. It is not a carrier of their culture. For the British and particularly the English, it is additionally (and inseparably from its use as a tool of communication) a carrier of their culture and history. Or take Swahili in East and Central Africa. It is widely used as a means of communication across many nationalities. But it is not the carrier of the culture and history of many of those nationalities. However, in parts of Kenya and Tanzania and certainly in Zanzibar, Swahili is inseparably both a means of communication and a carrier of the culture of those peoples to whom it is a mother-tongue.

Language as communication has three aspects or elements. There is first what Karl Marx once called the language of real life, which is basic to the whole notion of language, its origins and development. This refers to the relations that people enter with one another in the labour process, the links they necessarily establish among themselves in the act of a people, a community of human beings, producing wealth or means of life like food, clothing, houses. A human community really starts its historical being as a community of cooperation in production through the division of labour, from the simplest between man, woman and child within a household, through the more complex divisions between branches of production (between let's say those who are solely hunters, solely gatherers of fruits, solely workers in metal, etc) to the most complex divisions in modern factories where a single product, say a shirt or a shoe, is the result of many hands and minds. Production is cooperation, is communication, is language, is expression of a relation between human beings and it is specifically human. The second aspect of language as communication is speech and it imitates the language of real life, i.e. communication in production. The verbal signposts both reflect and aid communication or the relations established between human beings in the production of their means of life. In fact language as a system of verbal signposts makes that production possible. The spoken word is to relations between human beings what the hand is to relations between human beings and nature. The hand through tools mediates between human beings and nature and forms the language of real life; spoken words mediate between human beings and form the language of speech. The third aspect is the written signs. The written word imitates the spoken. In fact where the first two aspects of language as communication through the hand and the spoken word historically evolve more or less simultaneously, the third aspect, the written, is a much later historical development. Writing is representation of sounds with visual symbols—from the simplest knot among shepherds to tell the number in a herd, through the hieroglyphics among the Aagikūyū

gĩcaandĩ singers and poets of Kenya, to the most complicated and different letter and picture-writing systems of the world today.

Now, in most societies the written and the spoken language are the same: they represent each other, so that what is on paper can be read to another person and be received as that language which the recipient has grown up speaking. In such a society there is broad harmony for a child between the three aspects of language as communication. His interaction with nature and with other men is expressed in written and spoken symbols or signs which are both a result and a reflection of that double interaction. The association of the child's sensibility is with the language of his experience of life.

### Language as Culture

But there is more to it: communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge. These are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited new basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. There is a gradual accumulation of values which in time become almost self-evident truths governing their conception of what is right and wrong, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, courageous and cowardly, generous and mean in their internal and external relations. Over time this becomes a way of life distinguishable from other ways of life, as people develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, its sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language, which is the collective memory-bank of a people's experience in history.

Language as culture has also three important aspects. Culture is a product of history which it in turn reflects. Culture, in other words, is a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it. But culture does not merely reflect that history, or rather it does so by actually forming images or pictures of the world of *nature* and *nurture*. Thus the second aspect of language as culture is that of an image-forming agent in the mind of a child. Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, both individual and collective, is based on those pictures and images, which may or may not correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with *nature* and *nurture* which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture therefore mediates between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being. And this brings us to the third aspect of language as culture. Culture transmits or imparts images of the world (and reality) through the spoken and the written language—through the capacity to speak,

the capacity to order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension. This is the universality of language, a quality specific to human beings. It corresponds to the universality of the struggle against nature and between human beings. But the particularity of the sounds, the words, and the laws of their ordering into phrases and sentences distinguishes one language from another. Thus a specific culture is transmitted through language not in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Literature (written literature) and orature (oral literature) are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries.

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, their politics and the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

## The Roots of Colonial Alienation

So what was the colonialist imposition of a foreign language doing to us children? The real aim of colonialism was to control the people's wealth—what they produced, how they produced it, and how it was distributed—to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life. Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economics and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control its tools of self-definition in relationship to others. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction, or the deliberate undervaluing of a people's culture, its art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orature and literature; and the domination of a people's language by that of the colonizing nation.

Take language as communication. By imposing a foreign language and suppressing the native languages as spoken and written, the colonizer was already breaking the harmony previously existing between the African child and the three aspects of language as communication. Since the new language was a product reflecting the 'real language of life' elsewhere, it could never, as spoken or written, properly reflect or imitate the real life of that community. This may in part explain why technology always appears to us as slightly external, *their* product and nor *ours*. The word *missile*, for instance, used to hold an alien faraway sound until I recently learnt its equivalent in Gikuyu, *Ngurukubĩ*.

Learning, for a colonial child, became a cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience.

But since the new imposed languages could never completely break the native languages as spoken, their most effective area of domination was the third aspect of language as communication, the written aspect. The language of an African child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language. So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school (even his spoken language within the same compound) became divorced from his spoken language at home. There was thus often not the slightest relationship between the child's written world or the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community. For a colonial child, the harmony existing between the three aspects of language as communication was irrevocably broken. This resulted in the disassociation of his sensibility from his natural and social environment—what we might call colonial alienation. This became reinforced in the teaching of history, geography, music, where bourgeois Europe was always the centre of the universe.

In fact this disassociation, or divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment becomes clearer when you look at colonial language as a carrier of culture. Since culture is a product of a people's history which it in turn reflects, the colonial child was exposed exclusively to the product of a world external to himself. He was made to stand outside himself to look at himself. *Catching Them Young* is the title of a book on racism, class, sex and politics in children's literature by Bob Dixon. 'Catching them young' as an aim was even more true of a colonial child. Once implanted, the images of this world and his place in it (or even where he stands in it) take years to eradicate, if they ever can be eradicated.

Culture does not just reflect the world but actually conditions a child to see it in a certain way. Since the images of that culture are mostly passed on through orature and literature, the colonial child would now only see the world as in the literature of his language of adoption. It does not matter from the point of view of alienation—that is, of seeing oneself from outside as if one was another self—whether that literature carried the great humanist tradition of the best in Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy, Gorky, Brecht, Sholokhov or Dickens: the location of this great mirror of imagination was necessarily Europe and its history and culture, and the rest of the universe was seen from that centre.

But obviously it was worse when the colonial child was exposed to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his colonizer. Where his own native languages were associated, in his impressionable mind, with low status, humiliation, corporal punishment, slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism, this was reinforced by the world he met in the works of such geniuses of racism as Rider Haggard or Nicholas Monseratt, not to mention the intellectual pronouncements of such

giants of the Western intellectual and political establishment such as Hume ('the negro is naturally inferior to the whites'); Thomas Jefferson ('the blacks . . . are inferior to the whites on the endowments of both body and mind'); or Hegel (whose Africa was comparable to a land of childhood, still enveloped in the dark mantle of the night as far as the development of self-conscious history was concerned).

In her paper read to the conference on the teaching of African literature in school held at Nairobi, Kenya 1973, and entitled *Written Literature and Black Images*, the Kenyan writer and scholar Professor Micere Mugo related how a reading of the description of Gagool as an old African woman in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* had for a long time made her feel mortal terror whenever she encountered old African women. In his autobiography *This Life*, Sidney Poitier describes how as a result of the literature he had read, he had come to associate Africa with snakes. So on arriving in Africa and being put up in a modern hotel in a modern city, he could not sleep because he kept on looking for snakes everywhere, even under the bed. These two have been able to pinpoint the origins of their fears. But for most others the negative image becomes internalized and affects their cultural and even political choices in ordinary living.

Thus Leopold Sedar Senghor has said very clearly that although the colonial language was forced upon him, if he had been given the choice he would still have opted for French. He becomes most lyrical in his subservience to French: 'We express ourselves in French since French has a universal vocation and since our message is also addressed to French people and others. In our languages (i.e. African languages) the halo that surrounds the words is by nature merely that of sap and blood; French words send out thousands of rays like diamonds.' Senghor has now been rewarded by being annointed to an honoured place in the French Academy—that institution for safeguarding the purity of the French language.

In Malawi, Banda has erected his own monument by way of an institution, *The Kamuzu Academy*, whose function is to aid the brightest pupils of Malawi in their mastery of English. As the *Zimbabwe Herald* reported in 1981: 'It is a grammar school designed to produce boys and girls who will be sent to universities like Harvard, Chicago, Oxford, Cambridge and Edinburgh and be able to compete on equal terms with others elsewhere. The President has instructed that Latin should occupy a central place in the curriculum. All teachers must have had at least some Latin in their academic background. Dr Banda has often said that no one can fully master English without knowledge of languages such as Latin and French.' For good measure no Malawian is allowed to teach at the academy—none is good enough—and all the teaching staff has been recruited from Britain. A Malawian might lower the standards, or rather, the purity of the English language. Can you get a more telling example of hatred of what is national, and a servile worship of what is foreign even though dead?

## The African Petty Bourgeoisie

The twenty years that followed the Makerere conference gave the world a unique literature—novels, stories, poems, plays written by Africans in European languages—which soon consolidated itself into a tradition with companion studies and a scholarly industry. Right from its conception it was the literature of the petty bourgeoisie born of the colonial school and university. It could not be other than that given the linguistic medium of its message. Its rise and development reflected the gradual accession of this class to political and even economic dominance. But the petty bourgeoisie in Africa was a large class with many different strands. At one end of the spectrum were those who saw the future in terms of a permanent alliance with imperialism, in which they would play the role of an intermediary between the bourgeoisie of the western metropolis and the people of the colonies. (This is the section which, in my book *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*,<sup>1</sup> I described as the comprador bourgeoisie.) At the other end were those who looked towards a vigorous independent national economy in African capitalism or in some kind of socialism, and whom I shall here call the nationalistic or patriotic bourgeoisie. The literature written by Africans in European languages was specifically that of the nationalistic bourgeoisie, in terms of its creators, its area of thematic concerns, and its consumption.

Internationally the literature helped this class—which, in politics, business and education, was assuming leadership of the countries newly emergent from colonialism, or of those struggling so to emerge—to explain Africa to the world; Africa had a past and a culture of dignity and human complexity. Internally it gave this class a cohesive tradition, and a common literary frame of references, which it otherwise lacked because of its uneasy roots in the culture of the peasantry and the culture of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The literature added confidence to the class: the petty bourgeoisie now had a past, a culture and a literature with which to confront the racist bigotry of Europe. This confidence was manifest in the sharp tone of the critique of European bourgeois civilization; and the implication that Africa had something new to give to the world—which was particularly strong in the ideology of *négritude*—reflected the political ascendancy of the patriotic nationalistic section of the petty bourgeoisie before and immediately after independence.

We are talking initially of a literature whose background was the national-democratic revolutionary and anti-colonial liberation successes in China and India; the armed uprisings in Kenya and Algeria; and the independence of Ghana and Nigeria, with others impending. Yes, this literature was part of that great anti-colonial movement and general anti-imperialist upheaval in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. It drew its stamina and even form from the peasantry: their proverbs, fables, stories, riddles, and wise sayings. It was shot through and through with optimism. But later, when the comprador section assumed political ascendancy and strengthened rather than weakened the unbroken economic links with imperialism in what was clearly a

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<sup>1</sup> *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary*, Heinemann, trs. by the author, London 1981.

neo-colonial arrangement, this literature became more and more critical, cynical, disillusioned, bitter and denunciatory in tone, and it was almost unanimous in its portrayal, with varying degrees of detail, emphasis and clarity of vision, of the post-independence betrayal of hope. But to whom was it directing its list of mistakes done, crimes and wrongs committed, complaints unheeded, or its call for a change of moral direction? The imperialist bourgeoisie? The petty bourgeoisie in power? The military, itself part and parcel of that class? It sought another audience, principally the peasantry and the working class or what was generally conceived as *the people*. The search for new audiences and new directions was reflected in the quest for simpler forms, in the adoption of a more direct tone, and often in a direct call for action. It was also reflected in the content. Instead of seeing Africa as one undifferentiated mass of historically wronged blackness, it now attempted some sort of class analysis and evaluation of neo-colonial societies. But this search was still within the confines of the languages of Europe, whose use it now defended with less vigour and confidence. So its quest was hampered by the very language choice, and in its movement toward the people, it could only go up to that section of the petty bourgeoisie—students, teachers, secretaries, for instance—still in closest touch with the people. It settled there, marking time, caged within the linguistic fence of its colonial inheritance.

In fact its greatest weakness still lay where it has always been, in its audience: the petty-bourgeois readership automatically assumed by the very choice of language. Because of its indeterminate economic position between the many contending classes, the petty bourgeoisie develops a vacillating psychological make-up. Like a chameleon it takes on the colour of the main class with which it is in the closest touch and sympathy. It can be swept to activity by the masses at a time of revolutionary tide; or be driven to silence, fear, cynicism, withdrawal into self-contemplation, existential anguish, or to collaborating with the powers-that-be at times of reactionary tides. In Africa this class has always oscillated between the imperialist bourgeoisie and its comprador neo-colonial ruling elements on the one hand, and the peasantry and the working class (the masses) on the other. This very lack of identity in its social and psychological make-up as a class, was reflected in the very literature it produced: the crisis of identity was assumed in that very preoccupation with definition at the Makerere conference. In literature as in politics it spoke as if its identity or crisis of identity was that of society as a whole. The literature it produced in European languages was given the identity of African literature as if there had never been literature in African languages. Yet by avoiding a real confrontation with the language issue, it was clearly wearing false robes of identity: it was a pretender to the throne of the mainstream of African literature. The practitioners of what J. Jahn called neo-African literature tried to get out of the dilemma by over-insisting that European languages were really African languages or by trying to Africanize English or French or Portuguese usage while making sure it was still recognizable as English or French or Portuguese.

In the process this literature created, falsely and even absurdly, an English-(or French or Portuguese) speaking African peasantry and

working class, a clear negation or falsification of the historical process and reality. This peasantry and working class, which existed only in novels and dramas, was at times invested with the vacillating mentality, the evasive self-contemplation, the existential anguished human condition, or the man-torn-between-two-worlds face of the petty bourgeoisie. In fact if it had been left entirely to the petty bourgeoisie, African languages would have ceased to exist—with independence!

## The Renewal of Language

But African languages refused to die. They would not simply go the way of Latin to become the fossils for linguistic archaeology to dig up, classify and argue about at international conferences. These languages, these national heritages of Africa were kept alive by the peasantry, which saw no contradiction between speaking its mother-tongue and belonging to a larger national or continental geography. It saw no necessary antagonistic contradiction between belonging to its immediate nationality; to its multinational state along the Berlin-drawn boundaries; and to Africa as a whole. These people happily spoke Wolof, Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Arabic, Amharic, Kiswahili, Gikuyu, Luo, Luhuya, Shona, Ndebele, Kimbundu, Zulu, Lingala etc without this fact tearing the multinational states apart. During the anti-colonial struggle they showed an unlimited capacity to unite around whatever leader or party that best and consistently articulated an anti-imperialist position. If anything, it was the petty bourgeoisie particularly, the comprador, with its French and English and Portuguese, with its petty rivalries, its ethnic chauvinism, which encouraged these vertical divisions to the point of war at times. No, the peasantry had no complexes about its languages and the cultures they carried!

The peasantry and the urban working class threw up singers. These sang the old songs, or composed new ones incorporating their experiences in industries and urban life and in working-class struggles and organizations. These singers pushed the language to new limits renewing and reinvigorating the languages by coining new words, new expressions and generally expanding their capacity to incorporate new happenings in Africa and the world.

The peasantry and the working class threw up their own writers, or attracted to their ranks and concern intellectuals from among the petty bourgeoisie, who all wrote in African languages. It is these writers—people like Heruy Wäldä Sellassie, Germacäw Takla Hawaryat, Shabaan Roberts, Abdullatif Abdalla, Ebrahim Hussein, Euphrase Kezilahabi, B.H. Vilakazi, J.J. Jolobe, A.C. Jordan, D.A. Fagunwa, and many others rightly celebrated in Albert Gerard's pioneering survey of literature in African language from the 10th century to the present, called *African Language Literatures* (1981)—who have given our languages a written literature thus ensuring their immortality in print despite the internal and external pressures for their extinction. In Kenya I would like to single out Gakaara wa Wanjau, who was jailed by the British for ten years between 1952 and 1962, because of his writing in Gikuyu. His book, *Mwandiki wa Mau Mau Ithaamĩrionĩ*, a diary he secretly kept while in political detention, has just been published and

has won the 1984 Noma Award. It is a powerful work extending the range of Gikuyu language prose and it is a crowning achievement to the work he started in 1946. His inspiration came from the mass anti-colonial movement of the Kenyan people, particularly the militant wing grouped around Mau Mau or the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, which in 1952 ushered in the era of modern guerrilla warfare in Africa.

And finally, from among the European language-speaking African petty bourgeoisie, there emerged a few who refused to join the chorus in accepting the 'fatalistic logic' of the position of European languages in our literary being. It was one of these, Obi Wali, who pulled the carpet from under the literary feet of those who gathered at Makerere in 1962 by declaring in an article published in *Transition* in September 1963 that 'the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture', and that until African writers accepted that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would merely be pursuing a dead end. 'What we would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to,' he added, 'is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility.'

Obi Wali had his predecessors, but the importance of his intervention was in its tone and historical timing: it was published soon after the 1962 Makerere Conference of African writers of English expression; it was polemical, aggressive, poured ridicule and scorn on the choice of English and French, while being unapologetic in its call for the use of African languages. Not surprisingly it was met with hostility and then silence. But twenty years of uninterrupted dominance of literature in European languages, the reactionary turn that political and economic events in Africa have taken, and the search for the agency of revolutionary break with the neo-colonial status quo are all compelling a lot of soul-searching in some writers, raising once again the entire problem of the language of African literature.

## The Choice for African Writers

The question is this: we as African writers have always complained about the neo-colonial economic and political relationship to Euro-America. Right. But by continuing to write in foreign languages that pay homage to the metropolis, are we not maintaining, on the cultural level, that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?

While we were busy haranguing the ruling circles in a language which automatically excluded the participation of the peasantry and the working class in the debate, imperialist culture and African reactionary forces had a field day: the Christian Bible is available in unlimited quantities in even the tiniest African language. The comprador ruling cliques are also quite happy to have the peasantry and the working class

all to themselves: distortions, dictatorial directives, decrees, museum-type fossils paraded as African culture, feudalistic ideologies, superstitions, lies, all these backward elements and more are communicated to the African masses in their own languages without any challenges from those with alternative visions of tomorrow because they have deliberately cocooned themselves in English, French and Portuguese. It is ironic that the most reactionary African politician, the one who believes in selling Africa to Europe, is often a master of African languages; that the most zealous of European missionaries who believed in rescuing Africa from itself, even from the paganism of its languages, were nevertheless masters of African languages and often reduced them to writing. The European missionary believed too much in his mission of conquest not to communicate it in the languages most readily available to the people: the African writer believes too much in African literature to write it in those ethnic, divisive and underdeveloped languages of the peasantry!

The added irony is that, despite any claims to the contrary, what they have produced is not African literature. The editors of the Pelican guides to English literature, in their latest volume, were right to include a discussion of it as part of 20th-century English literature, just as the French Academy was right to honour Senghor for his genuine and talented contribution to French literature and language. What we have created is another hybrid tradition, a tradition in transition, a minority tradition that can only be termed Afro-European literature, written by Africans in European languages. It has produced many writers and works of genuine talent. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembene Ousmane, Agostino Neto, Sedar Senghor and many others. Who can deny their talent? The light in the products of their fertile imaginations has certainly illuminated important aspects of the African being in its continuous struggle against the political and economic consequences of Berlin and after. However, we cannot have our cake and eat it! Their work belongs to an Afro-European literary tradition which is likely to last for as long as Africa is under the rule of European capital in a neo-colonial set-up. So Afro-European literature can be defined as literature written by Africans in European languages in the era of imperialism.

But some are coming round to the inescapable conclusion articulated by Obi Wali with such polemical vigour twenty years ago: African literature can only be written in the African languages of the peasantry and working class, the major alliance of classes in each of our nationalities and the agency for the coming revolutionary break with neo-colonialism.

I started writing in the Gikuyu language in 1977 after seventeen years of involvement in Afro-European literature, in my case Afro-English literature. It was then that I collaborated with Ngugi wa Mirii in the drafting of the playscript, *Ngaabika Ndeenda*<sup>2</sup>. I have since published a novel in Gikuyu, *Caitaani Mutharataimi*<sup>3</sup> and completed a musical drama,

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<sup>2</sup> *I Will Marry When I Want*, Heinemann, trs. by the author, London 1982.

<sup>3</sup> English title: *Mother Sing for Me*, not yet published.

*Maitu Njug̃na*, (Eng. Trs: *Mother Sing for Me*), three books for children, *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi ĩ Mathagu*; *Batbitoora ya Njamba Nene*; *Njamba Nene na Cibũ King' ang'i*;<sup>4</sup> as well as another novel manuscript, *Matigari Ma Njirũngi*. Wherever I have gone, particularly in Europe, I have often been confronted with the question: why are you now writing in Gikuyu? Why do you now write in an African language? In some academic quarters I have been confronted with the rebuke: why have you abandoned us? It was almost as if, in choosing to write in Gikuyu, I was doing something abnormal. But Gikuyu is my mother-tongue! The very fact that the dictates of common sense in the literary practice of other cultures are being questioned in the case of an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as the normality and the normality is viewed as abnormal.

I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. In schools and universities our Kenyan languages—that is, the languages of the many nationalities which make up Kenya—were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment. I do not want to see Kenyan children growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the tools of communication developed by their communities and their history. I want them to transcend colonial alienation.

### Towards a New Harmony

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies.

So I would like to contribute towards the restoration of the harmony between all the aspects and divisions of language so as to restore the Kenyan child to his environment, to understand it fully so as to be in a position to change it for his collective good. I would like to see the Kenya people's mother-tongues (our national languages!) carry a literature reflecting not only the rhythms of a child's spoken expression, but also his struggle with external nature and his own social nature. With that harmony between himself, his language and his environment as his starting point, he can learn other languages and even enjoy the positive humanistic, democratic and revolutionary elements in other people's literatures and cultures without any complexes about his own language, his own self, his environment.

Chinua Achebe once decried the tendency of African intellectuals to escape into abstract universalism in words that apply even more to the

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<sup>4</sup> All published by Heinemann/East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

issue of the language of African literature: 'Africa has had such a fate in the world that the very adjective *African* can call up hideous fears of rejection. Better then to cut all links with this homeland, this liability, and become in one giant leap the universal man. Indeed I understand this anxiety. *But running away from oneself seems to me a very inadequate way of dealing with an anxiety* [italics mine]. And if writers should opt for such escapism, who is to meet the challenge?' Who indeed?

We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spencer, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them. This process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavour.

But writing in our languages—although a necessary first step in the correct direction—will not in itself bring about the renaissance in African cultures if that literature does not carry the content of our peoples' anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control; the content of the need for unity among the workers and peasants of all the nationalities in their struggle to control the wealth they produce and to free it from internal and external parasites.

In other words writers in African languages should reconnect themselves to the revolutionary traditions of an organized peasantry and working class in Africa in their struggle to defeat imperialism and create a higher system of democracy and socialism in alliance with all the other peoples of the world. Unity in that struggle would ensure unity in our multilingual diversity. It would also reveal the real links that bind the people of Africa to the peoples of Asia, South America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, Canada and the USA.

But it is precisely when writers open out African languages to the real links in the struggles of peasants and workers that they will meet their biggest challenge. For to the comprador-ruling regimes, the real enemy is an awakened peasantry and working class. A writer who tries to communicate the message of revolutionary unity and hope in the languages of the people becomes a subversive character. It is then that writing in African languages becomes a subversive or treasonable offence, carrying the possibility of prison, exile or even death. For such a writer there are no 'national' accolades, no new year honours, only abuse and slander and innumerable lies from the mouths of the armed power of a ruling minority—ruling that is on behalf of US-led imperialism—who see in democracy a real threat. Democratic participation of the people in shaping their own lives or in discussing their experience in languages that allow for mutual comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions. African languages addressing themselves to the lives of the people become the enemy of a neocolonial state.

Start by marking "The Language Of African Literature" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦| Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. The Language Of Africa by Edmund L. Epstein. Other editions.Â African literature written in English is not only a literature of great variety and power -- it is also a literature of world importance, entitled to the most detailed and advanced linguistic and stylistic analysis. The essays gathered together in this book meet that demand by scrutinizing the language structures and narrative conventions used by some of the most prominent African literature written in English is not only a literature of great variety and power -- it is also a literature of world importance, entitled to the most detailed and advanced linguistic and stylistic analysis. 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).Â 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. African literature, literary works of the African continent. African literature consists of a body of work in different languages and various genres, ranging from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages (French, Portuguese, and English). See also African languages; South African literature. Oral literature, including stories, dramas, riddles, histories, myths, songs, proverbs, and other expressions, is frequently employed to educate and entertain children. Oral histories, myths, and proverbs additionally serve to remind whole communities of their ancestors' heroic deed