

Shakespeare's Language and Cultural Politics in *Othello*: An Analysis of the Metaphor of the "Turk" and the Concept of Cultural Hybridity

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Cet article est une analyse de la métaphore du «Turc », et du métissage culturelle dans *Othello* (1604), l'un des drames le plus controversé dans l'œuvre du dramaturge anglais William Shakespeare. Par une analyse du discours, nous tenterons de démontrer que la métaphore du «Turc », et par extension celle du Maure, structure non seulement l'intrigue, mais révèle le revirement dans la politique culturelle anglaise envers l'alliance avec le monde musulman, au lendemain de la mort de la reine Tudor Elisabeth 1^{ère}, et de l'accession au trône du Stuart Jacques 1^{er} en 1603.

“Why how now hoa? From whence ariseth this?/ Are we turned Turks? And to ourselves do that/ Which Heaven hath forbid the Ottomites.” These are the words which will no doubt keep resounding in the reader's mind of William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) or for that matter in that of the spectator, both contemporaneous and contemporary. Othello the black moor general of the Venetian army stationed in Cyprus addresses them as a rebuke to those involved in the general riot within the walls of the city that has divinely been saved from Ottoman conquest. Earlier during the day and out of stage, the “winds of God,” a tempest wrecked and dispersed the Ottoman fleet. This godly victory and the arrival of the newly wed (Desdemona and Othello) from Venice offered a good occasion for the inhabitants

to feast and celebrate. Mindful of keeping his soldiers from excess drinking so that no brawls might rise as a result and fright the inhabitants, or disgust them with the new-landed forces, Othello charged his lieutenant Cassio to stay on guard duty for that night. The chess board is laid and Iago starts the theatrical game whose final objective as in the game of chess is to corner the King which in his case is Othello who had promoted Cassio over his head. Wearing all types of friendly guises, the revengeful Iago makes the first move against Cassio by enticing him to drink toast after toast to the happy couple during a drinks party. Cassio soon finds himself drunk and involved in a provocation prompted by Roderigo a gulled gentleman who has come over from Venice with the vain hope of regaining the hand of Desdemona. The provocation ends with a scuffle during which a worthy gentleman by the name of Montano was wounded as he tries to interfere between Roderigo and Cassio. To amplify this slight drunken quarrel, Iago causes the castle-bell to be rung with the intention to alarm Othello that some sort of general mutiny is under way and concurrently get rid of Cassio for the transgression of military discipline. Such is the general context in which Othello invoked the “Turk” to rebuke those who broke out the riot into domestic tranquillity.

There is no doubt that you realise already that the “Turk” as an external enemy (a referent) is defeated militarily with God’s intervention only to come back in the form of internal, domestic enemy which in linguistic and cultural terms is rendered as a trope or metaphor for circulation and management of the public space. The image or representation of the “Turk” in Renaissance literature has of late received considerable attention from critics interested in the relationship between early modern England and the Dawlet-El-Othman and the Muslim world at large. However,

only short space is devoted to that processes of tropic discourse involving the representation of the “Turk” in Shakespeare’s play *Othello*. I would argue that unless the reading of this play is placed in the global context of the time during which the Ottomans exerted as much economic, political and cultural power over the world then as the Americans do today, the full understanding of the wide circulation of the metaphor of “turning Turk” by Shakespeare will be missed for the contemporary reader. In his book about hybridity, Robert Young affirms that products of cultural contacts like Creole and pidgin and miscegenated children show that it is through language and sex that processes of hybridity motivated by colonial desire are best preserved. In this paper, I would add that in addition to the cases of creolised and pidgin languages that Young cites as examples of hybrid forms, metaphors and tropes like that of the “Turk” in Shakespeare’s *Othello* are also hybrids speaking of conjunctions and disjunctions in the process of identity formation at a transitional period of English history marked by both a shift in dynasty, from Tudor to Stuart Dynasty, and a change in English foreign policy in the Mediterranean basin after the accession of the foreign born James I to the English throne. If the “hybrid has developed from biological and botanical origins, (p.6)” as Young put it, so too, it seems, is the matter with the origins of metaphor as the following definition by Aristotle shows: “Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another, or by analogy (Quoted in Ching, Haley and Lunsford, 1980:44).”

The “Turk” is a pervasive figure throughout the play. Indeed, it is so persuasive that the play closes with the suggestion that it is not concerned with *The Tragedy of Othello*

the Moor of Venice, a Venetian tale from which Shakespeare is said to have inspired the writing of his play, but rather that of the “Turk within him.” These words that Othello transmitted to the Venetian Signiory before he murders the “Turk within,” besides being a moral coda for some sort of morality play involving all kinds of issues, including the tragic consequences of passion in love relationships, it also provides a global framework that takes the reader all the way back to the threatening military presence of the Turks at the beginning of the play:

Othello: Soft you; a word or two before you go:/ I have done the State some service, thand they know’t: No more of that. I pray you in your letters,/When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/ Speak of me, as I am. Nothing extenuate,/Not set down aught in malice./ Then you must speak,/ Of one that lov’d not wisely, but too well:/ Of one, not easily jealous, but being wrought,/ Perplex’d in the extreme: Of one, whose (Like the base Indian) threw a pearl away/ Richer than all his tribe: Of one, whose subdu’d eyes/ Albeit unused to the melting mood,/Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees/ Their medicinable gum. Set you down this: And say besides, that in Aleppo once,/Where a malignant, a turban’d Turk/ Beat a Venetian, and traduc’d the State,/ I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog,/ And smote him, thus./ He *stabs himself* (137-138).

The last verses invite us to reconsider the status of the Othello in the play. After all that is said about him, Othello confesses in some sort of a self-erected scaffold speech where he imagines himself as a “malignant, a turban’d Turk,” “a circumcised dog” in that central Eastern trade centre of Aleppo, doing violence to both a Venetian merchant and indirectly to the Venetian State, and who out of murderous regret wilfully kills himself in the market place. Admittedly Othello’s self-erected

scaffold speech and self-punishment has a direct relevance to a local national domestic tragedy, but it gives a more global or international scope to his actions in the widening of the theatrical space, which until this final scene is confined to Venice and its colony Cyprus, to Aleppo. Othello speaks of the local, national, or domestic matters in terms of the global, giving birth to that linguistic hybrid that is known today as the glocal.

At this juncture, one might ask who Othello really is. I want to start answering this question by coming back to Othello's confession that he was all through the play but a "malignant, Turbaned Turk." The first remark to be made is that in the literature of Captivity Narratives which Shakespeare could hardly have failed to come across, "to wear the turban," or "to turn Turk," are tails and heads to a similar coin circulated in the cultural market of the time as a metaphoric way of speaking about apostasy or conversion to Islam. You will remember no doubt that the whole tragedy of Othello turns around the issue of the handkerchief or napkin, a family heirloom that his mother passed to him to be handed to his would-be wife. You will also remember that in due course Othello presented this oriental "magical handkerchief" to Desdemona as his first marriage gift, which the latter inadvertently drops out as she tries to wind it round her husband's aching head. This silken handkerchief or rather turban retrieved by Emilia, Iago's wife and attendant maid on Desdemona, in order to be passed it to her revengeful husband Iago, is the one cloth or textile which the latter later brings out as evidence of Desdemona's adulterous relation with her husband's lieutenant. Iago drops it in Cassio's way, where it might be found. It is this self-same handkerchief or turban that Iago said that he saw "Cassio this day wipe his face with." Iago makes Othello becomes so obsessive with the silken

handkerchief that before he declares himself a “malignant, a turbaned Turk,” he has already metaphorically put it on. As Iago un/winding the text/textile, he makes Othello involved in a type of cross-dressing that ultimately reveals him as a “Turbaned Turk” on the self-erected scaffold farewell address.

It follows that Othello “was,” as Dymphna Gallagher writes it, “a white man (1996: 193-215),” but I shall here add that he was also a “Turk.” To demonstrate that Othello was “white” “not in the sense of the critic I quote,” she writes, Gallagher lays bare the cultural politics of representation in the Renaissance which while admitting Moors as exhibits in non-mimetic representations, excludes them along with women from theatrical representation or mimesis. In developing her arguments as to this artistic exclusion, Gallagher seems to suggest that Renaissance drama had politically rehearsed the Aristotelian concept of mimesis that looks at art as an imitation of life, or to use a Saussurian terminology as an arbitrary sign with no necessary connection with its outside referent. Mimesis just as the linguistic sign is over-determined by artistic conventions propped put by a white-male nascent capitalism. As a cultural economy, Renaissance mimesis does not demand the presentation of hard copies or coins, but cosmetic species in the form of Blackface and White Face in order to affirm white masculinity and ensure the fluidity of its economic system across racial and cultural differences.

While I admit the perceptiveness and subtlety of Gallagher’s analysis of the workings of Renaissance drama that she carries mainly with reference to *Othello*, and while I agree with his demonstration that its central character “was white,” I find that her emphasis on the question of the aestheticisation or cosmeticisation of skin pigmentation in Renaissance theatricals

has obscured the importance of looking at Othello as a “Turk”. What is overlooked in the emphasis placed on the true colours of Othello is that as a “Moor,” his ethnic or racial origins are subsumed under that of the “Turk.” I shall venture the analogy that in the English and cultural system at the time a Moor was to a “Turk” what the other nationalities or other ethnicities in the British Isles are to an English man. Today to comply with the politically correct we call British, citizens hailing from the United Kingdom though we think of them in terms of English. More than that, in the usage, the sign “Turk” was so floating, so completely detached from its cultural and geopolitical referent that it could be applied nationally within the frontiers of England as well as cross-nationally to refer to potential internal and foreign enemies against “Things English.” The wide scope of application of this generic sign has, as recent studies shown, due to the cultural and political dominance that the Dawlet El-Othman had in the Renaissance period.

I would argue that what allowed Shakespeare to bring the representation of a Venetian drama close home to refer to “Things English” is the national and trans-national application of the cultural and linguistic sign “Turk.” The reference to the menacing presence of the “Turk” is recurrent in Scene Three, Act 1. Reports about the Ottoman fleet strategically bending its course to the Island of Cyprus to regain it from the possession of the Venetians causes the Duke to call the Venetian Senate to council in order decide on the appropriate military strategy to defeat this invasion. The urgency of the situation is complicated by what seems to the contradictory nature of Venetian intelligence about the “Turkish fleet.” The “letters,” of one Senator report “a hundred and seven galleys,” another “a hundred and forty,” followed by equally contradictory messages

about its deployment, one saying that the “Turkish fleet” is “bearing up to Cyprus,” and another that it is “mak(ing) for Rhodes.” The debate closes when a final messenger comes in with the news that indeed “The Ottomites ...[are]/ Steering with due course toward the Isle of Rhodes,/ Have there injoined them with an after fleet..../ Of thirty sail: and now they re-stem/Their backward course, bearing with frank appearance/Their purposes towards Cyprus.” With the exact number of ships in the enemy fleet established and the final destination of its deployment clear, the Duke at last has enough military intelligence to organise his defence. It is at this climatic moment of Scene Three, Act One that Othello comes into the Senate in Council. Othello, it has to be observed, is solicited both as a military man for employment “against the **general** enemy Ottoman,” (note the importance of the word general) as well as a “thief,” a pirate, I would say, and therefore, an outlaw to be judged by the same Senate. In Scene One, Act One, Othello and Desdemona privately get into wedlock transgressing in this way the paternal and state laws of Venice. Othello, who is so to speak, arrested in some sort of hue and cry, is escorted by Brabantio, at once Desdemona’s father and Senator to answer for the charge of having bewitched and pirated his daughter.

One remark needs to be pressed home in relation Othello’s social position. First, Othello is a type of foreigner and stranger that Julia Kristeva would have called the “metic.” Julia Kristeva tells us that in Ancient Greece, “les étrangers qui ont choisi de s’installer dans le pays et dont on juge l’artisanat ou le commerce utiles à la Cité représente la catégorie des métèques, des résidents domiciliés, le terme indiquant chez Eschyle le changement de domicile (cf. *métoukein*) (1988 : 73).” Citing in support Marie-Françoise Baslez, Kristeva adds that the metic is

bound to the Greek City by an economic contract that makes of him a “homo economicus” divested of political and civil rights. What allows strangers or foreigners to elect residence in Greek cities are economic necessities. From here follows the analogy that she establishes between twentieth-century immigrants/foreigners in European countries and the metic in Greek cities. In calling Othello a metic following in this Julia Kristeva, I do not want to qualify her argument that metics in Greek Cities do not participate in national defence, though for the contemporary period I can cite the Foreign Legionaries. What I want to point out, instead, is that what in the Renaissance is called the “art of war” is the trade that Othello follows, and it is this ware that he seems to have so successfully marketed in the Venetian marts whose main interested customer is the Senate. To use today’s commercial jargon, Othello, I would say, is a warrior-trader who has brilliantly managed to sell himself to the best bidder.

To carry the argument above further I would also claim that Othello is to Brabantio what the Greek metic is to the “prostate” and “proxénie.” Kristeva borrows these Greek terms to refer to the patrons or hosts under whom the metics are placed to ensure their civic protection. “Her father lov’d, oft invited;/ Still question’d me the story of my life,/ From year to year: the battles, sieges, fortune/That I have (p.40),” Othello says in refutation of his host’s or patron’s accusation in the Senate that he has bewitched his daughter. In his capacity as a metic warrior, Othello cannot escape all the ambiguities implied in the English term “commerce.” As he advertises his wares or what he humbly calls the “unvarnished tale” of his life in his host’s home, in words or coins minted in the imaginary of his time, his commerce assumes unexpected contours. The dangers associated

with commerce with the outside world will be discussed. For the moment, it is enough to note that Othello is summoned to the Senate as a metic, a trader-warrior, knowing well that he incurs no punishment for breaching the rules of commerce because “My services, which I have done the Signiory/ Shall out-tongue his [Brabantio’s] complaints (p.30).”

Political expediency allows Othello to depart from the Greek metic counterpart in his commerce with his hosts. While the latter, Kristeva tells us, is denied property, Othello bids for the capital of Venice by making away with the Venetian icon Desdemona. Brabantio turns out to be wrong when he thinks that “my brothers of the State,/Cannot but feel this wrong, as ‘twere their own, /For such actions may have passage free, Bond-slaves, and pagans shall our Statesmen be (p.33).” Ironically, state reasons makes the Senate turn into “pagans” kneeling at the foot of the fetish “Othello” that it sought to propitiate by granting him Desdemona’s hand just in order to aver the danger of a “Turkish invasion” of Cyprus. The Senate might well have condemned Othello for witchcraft, in spite of his claim that he has won Desdemona’s hand through an “unvarnished tale,” not through the administration of a bewitching potion. Such a defence would have sounded untenable for the Elizabethan and the Jacobean people accustomed to the political discourse of the time that associates “dangerous words” like Othello’s with poison. Iago makes this analogy in the course of the play and Othello seems to be aware of this association when he declares that his tale, the one he has recounted to his hosts in high sounding words, to be unvarnished. And yet, the Duke in Senate whitewashes Othello by declaring him Brabantio’s “son-in-law... far more fair than black (43).”

Frank Kermode rightly associates the image of Othello to the idea of “magnificent North African Potentates” with whom, he says, “the Londoners of the time were familiar (2000:180).” He supports this association by citing Philip Brockbank who borrows information from one of the theatrical sources of the times (*The Calendar of Dramatic Records in the Books of the Livery Companies of London 1485-1640*) revealing that “The Black, or tawny soldier-hero was a figure in festivals long before he reached the Elizabethan stage... These Moorish shows were resplendent, soldierly and sensual... The role of the Moor in public conception of power and sexual potency in public spectacle in the early stages of Tudor empire (Philip Brockbank quoted in Kermode, 2000:180).” The most interesting feature in Kermode’s quote in relation to the argument developed in this paper is the geographical and cultural location that he assigns to the Moor in *Othello*. However, the link of Othello with “North African potentates” does not fit in with the textuality of European or English history about North Africa of the time. In view of the wide circulation of terms like “Turks” and “Barbary shore,” to refer to North African States of Algiers, Morocco, Tunis, and Tripoli in history books of the time, a more apt appellation for their rulers might well have been that of “Turkish Potentates.” Kermode seems to have been determined in the choice of words by the historical context from which he is writing his critique of Shakespeare’s language. Since the Kemalist reform of the 1920 s the usage of terms like “Turk” or “Turkish” has been circumscribed to refer solely the geopolitical and cultural reality known today as Turkey. In doing so, Kermode has not managed to break away completely from the de-historicising tendency of reading *Othello*.

I would contend that the detachment of an exhibit or a Moorish figure peculiar to the “Moorish shows” of the Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods for animation in a Shakespearean play has much to do with the historical and strategic importance that the “Turks” in command of Algiers assumed in English history, especially during the Elizabethan period. I join Sir Godfrey Fisher in his claim that the European “Barbary legend” woven around the North African states within the Dawlet-El-Othman has obscured, with the later complicity of some English historians and chroniclers, the strategic and commercial importance that “Algiers under the Turks” and the Porte played in the emergence of the British Empire. One of Fisher’s arguments is that left alone neither France nor England would have escaped Spanish conquest. To support his claim Fisher refers to the Franco-Turkish alliance of 1535 concretised in the disembarking and the encampment of a huge Ottoman military presence under the Admiralty of Khair ad-Din in Toulon in defence of Francis I’s France against the Spanish territorial encroachment. Once bitten twice shy. Fisher informs us that when England’s turn during Queen Elizabeth’s reign, came for soliciting an alliance with the Ottomans against the Spanish threat, the diplomatic offer was amicably turned down. The memory of the humiliating experience that Turkish forces had undergone during the Franco-Spanish war nearly fifty years earlier, and other strategic and military dangers that the removal of fighting forces to the Western Mediterranean might entail, made the Porte keep to what the English diplomats of the time called “promises.” And yet as Fisher suggests these “promises” were not made in vain because the Regency of Algiers fulfilled some sort of delegated military mission from the Porte by their repeated attacks against the Spaniards on land and sea while

providing access for English ships to the port of Algiers. Officially, there is no Anglo-Algerian military alliance against the Spanish, but the first official appointment of an English consul to Algiers in 1584, just two years before similar appointment in Constantinople, reads like one if placed in historical context. Following Fisher in the way he describes the relations between “Turks” of Algiers with England, one might say that the contemporary term of “containment” used by the American historian John B. Wolf (1979) in reference to the Spanish occupation of some strategic strongholds in “Algerian under the Turks” describes better the important role that Algiers played in containing the Spanish forces, which might otherwise have killed many emerging European nationalities and empires like that of Britain in the bud.

This is the historical reality that helps account for Shakespeare’s animation of a Moorish, I would rather say a “Turkish,” exhibit, from the popular show of the time, and its assignment of a central role in a theatrical representation staged before the court. In reading the first act, we witness what we might call as a carnivalisation in reverse. Mikhail Bakhtin’s uses the term “carnivalisation” to refer that to that process of demotion or downgrading which he regards as the hallmark of popular festivals and their modern counterparts in mock-epic literature. Instead, Shakespeare’s play with a mock-epic tone down-grading that “great arithmetician,/One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,.../ That never set a squadron in the field,/Nor the division of a battle knows/More than a spinster....(p.23).” The elopement of Desdemona with Othello provides Iago with the occasion for squaring accounts with the foreigner general for having promoted another foreigner Cassio over his head, in total disregard of the laws of “preferment.” Iago’s first attempt at

squaring accounts finds expression in the charivari which he urges Roderigo to start outside Branbatio's house for his own end. Charivari, Kermode tells us "was an old custom: if you disapproved of a match as being incongruous in some way, for instance if you deplored of a disparity in age (or in colour) between bride and bridegroom, you could call your neighbours and make a disturbance outside their dwelling (2000: 167)." It is what Iago and Roderigo intend to do when Iago and Roderigo by setting uproar to alarm Branbatio's household and its neighbourhood. The billingsgate language such as "luscious Moor," "you'll have your daughter/covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins: and/gennets for germans," falls within the scope of charivari denouncing a natural disruption of the order of things that the antagonists seek to correct. However, the charivari, or what Iago calls the "rough music" is interrupted with the intervention of state agents demanding the presence of Othello in the Senate. The folkloric, carnivalesque or mock-epic treatment of Desdemona's marriage with Othello in the popular court of charivari is suspended to be taken over in the Senate, the official state court which ceremoniously declares Othello and Desdemona, husband and wife, the popular verdict notwithstanding. I understand the deflation Iago's instigated charivari and the elevation of the conflict to epic and romantic proportions in the last scene of Act One as evidence of the importance that the Moor and what I call the "Turk" assumed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

In this last scene of Act One, we see the conflation between "Turk" within and the "Turk" without. To the Duke's sentential verdict that Othello and Desdemona's bonding is irremediable based as it is on the inexorable forces of love, and that

Branbatio has consequently has to take it with a smile, Branbatio responds with this ironical analogy denouncing the tone of fatality in the Duke's judgement: "So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile,/ We lose it no so long as we can smile: He bears the sentence well, that nothing bears,/ But the free comfort which from thence he hears (p.40)." The marriage of Othello with Desdemona is put on a par with the conquest of Cyprus by the Ottomans. In the course of the play the "winds of God" spare not only Cyprus from Ottoman occupation but also the mixed marriage of Othello and Desdemona, who are hailed in this Venetian outpost almost as a royal couple. As has already been pointed out by many critics, marriage at that time is looked at as an ad/venture that might be wrecked on the sea storms of life. That the couple has managed to weather out the tempest can also been as a divine or hallowed confirmation of the mixed marriage.

To understand Shakespeare's enabling conditions that allow for this conflation of the "Turk within" and the "Turk without," we need to historicise the reading of the play. By now it has become place a critical commonplace in Shakespeare's criticism that if the dramatist often sets his plays in remote places and times, principally in Italy, it is in order to speak of things closer at home with more freedom. Suggestive analogy allows the treatment of thorny domestic, local or national issues and speaking the truth to power in global terms without raising suspicions of subversion as was often the case at the time with the theatre. It has to be noted Shakespeare's *The Globe* performed off central London on the liminal periphery for many years during the last years of the Elizabethan period before being enrolled as the King's Men by the Stuart King James I. If the global, for Shakespeare, has local implications, it follows that his

reference to the conflict between Venice and the Sublime Porte over Cyprus is also a wink to the conflict between England and Spain during the Elizabethan reign. On reading the play, one can but wonder what the former refers to exactly in terms of the history of the encounter of these two political entities in the Eastern Mediterranean basin. Is the conflict in the play, for example, a reference to the battle of Lepanto of 1571 in which Venice took part as a belligerent, and which saw the defeat of the Ottoman fleet regarded as the “general enemy” in the play? And is the marriage of Othello and Desdemona also reference to the second marriage of Khair ad-Din with the Italian princess from Reggio? I contend that in not providing definite historical bearings with which the reader can anchor or rather moor the staged love story of the Moor of Venice with Desdemona at Cyprus, Shakespeare purposefully lets drift it to the “warlike island,” that is Britain.

The spectator of the time cannot catch Shakespeare’s historical drift as he refers to the tempest dispersing the Ottoman fleet at the approach of the “warlike island” of Cyprus by linking it to that tempest that wrecked the Spanish Armada in the Channel in 1588. A similar tempest dispersed another Spanish fleet which came in support of the Tyrone Irish rebels in 1599. These historical parallels reshuffle the signification of the term “Turk” in the play to refer not to subjects of the Sublime Porte but the Spanish Catholic enemy which a permanent threat to Protestant England all through Elizabethan times. Arguably there is an ideological connection to be made between the wars that Catholic Spain waged against the Moors and “Turks” against Muslim North Africa after the fall of Granada in 1492 and the ones that she declared against Protestant England with the Pope’s benediction. These wars against Protestant reformers in England

and all over Europe, Moors and “Turks” in North Africa are indistinctly considered as holy wars against heretics. Most of them fall within the theological scope of the *reconquista* whose best architect is Cardinal Ximenes. In this regard, Mathew Dimmock pertinently recalls the conflation made between the Muslim world and England as part of Protestant Europe in Catholic propaganda during the half-decade between 1590- and 95 which witnessed in his words the emergence of a form of a “crusading piracy” between Spain and England. Dimmock quote one of these propaganda sources wherein the “English are identified as ‘the new Turkes’ of Europe, who ‘would exchange their *Geneua Bible* for the *Turkish Alkoran* had they not been ‘so far distant,’ and accusations that their ‘new confederates’ were ‘the great *Turk*, the kinges of *Fesse*, *Marocco*, and *Algiers*, or other Mahometains and Moores of Barbarie, all professed enemies to *Christ* (2007:87-88).” For domestic consumption English propagandists resorted to a similar conflation by associating the Spanish Catholics and their sympathisers with ‘Turk,’ what the Duke in Shakespeare calls the “general enemy, the Turk.”

In 1603 with the death of the Tudor Queen Elisabeth I, the Scottish-born James IV, accessed to the English throne as James I of England. The Anglo-Spanish treaty of peace of 1604 marked a dramatic change in English cultural politics. James courted Elisabeth’s Spanish enemies, desperately trying to weave a matrimonial alliance through the marriage of his son Henry and then Charles with a Spanish Princess the better to seal the peace while keeping yesterday’s Muslim allies at arm’s length with the same aim of pleasing and reconciling with the Spaniards. This reversal in English cultural politics is reflected in the tragic reversal of the romantic plot in *Othello* through the complicity of

the English playwright Shakespeare with his barely disguised Spanish character Iago, who together plotted the fall of the Moor/Turk. Admittedly, Shakespeare gets Iago arrested after having tricked Othello to murder his wife and arrange for the assassination of his lieutenant Cassio, but put within the political context of James's cultural politics, it is easy for the spectator of the time and today's reader to infer that out of stage Iago will be pardoned if not elevated to the rank of hero. This is not the case of Othello who is made to recognize his "infidelity" to Desdemona before he does justices to himself by stabbing the Turk within him on the stage. It is in this way that Shakespeare, one of the King's Men, follows in the footsteps of James I by exorcising or abrogating on the public stage the alliance that Queen Elisabeth I made with the Turks in the third quarter of the sixteenth century. In other words, Shakespeare's literary disavowal of the Elizabethan rapprochement with the "Turks" as a "monstrous" hybrid publicly seals King James' deal with the Spaniards. This foreshadows that the brief but intense exogamous romance of the English with Moors and Turks is over supplanted by "a politics of plunder" culminating with Robert Mansel's attack on Algiers in 1621.

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**Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity in Achebe's *Things
Fall Apart: Proverbial
Quoting or the Art of An Mbari House***

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“Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten (1958:5).” No doubt, those of you who have read Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* still remember this comment that Achebe’s narrator and mouthpiece throws in the process of reporting a conversation between Unoka and Okoyo in the first pages of the book. The latter is on the point of reclaiming a debt from the former who is an inveterate debtor, and of whom the central character Okonkwo is ashamed in a culture that highly values economic success. Instead of going straight to the point, the narrator tells us that Okoyo stopped “talking plain” and “said the next half of dozen sentences in proverbs (p.5).” Further on, we learn that Unoka has understood the gist of the proverbs that his visitor has served him and has answered him with a sudden burst of laughter and an anecdote illustrating through “groups of short perpendicular lines of chalk (p.6),” drawn on one of the walls of his Obi the insignificance of this debt in comparison with the big ones that he has contracted with other fellow villagers. He sums up his conversation by saying that “I shall pay, but not today,” quoting a proverb in support of his decision: “The Sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.” By this sample of the art of proverbial

conversation, Unoka means that he shall “pay his big debts first, (Ibid).” Obviously, Unoka is as good a proverb user as his guest, since the narrator goes on telling us that “Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed (Ibid.)” as if ashamed that he has come to reclaim such a little debt while the owners of the bigger ones have not yet presented themselves.

While this anecdotic episode is quite illustrative of the function of proverbs as “a particularly suitable form of communication in situations and relationship of potential or latent conflict (Finnegan Ruth, 1988:412),” it also shows the centrality of proverbs in what the Ibo call the art of conversation. On the whole, Achebe cites more than 127 proverbs in the course of his narrative, which shows that his aesthetics abides to a large extent to the Ibo proverb marking the beginning the novel: “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” Many critics have already investigated the issue of the use of proverbs in Achebe’s novel. But so far these investigations are limited to the discussion of the traditional Ibo proverbs cited in the text, overlooking in the process the larger implications of the literary significance of proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*. In this paper, I shall argue that unless we move from the cited Ibo proverbs as such to the cultural practice of proverbial quoting that explain the appearance of a profusion of proverbs in the novel, we can miss the artistic complexity of the novel, an artistic form that Mikhael Bakhtin defines as a hybrid genre. As many comparative studies of Achebe’s novel have sought to show, Achebe quotes not solely the proverbial repertoire of the Ibo, but also European intertexts, sometimes in the same breath. I consider that the many European intertexts that we find in Achebe’s are cited in the same spirit of traditional Ibo proverbs. In other words, the inherited impulse of proverbial quoting has

made for a hybrid proverbial space where Ibo proverbs and European intertexts stand side by side in some sort of conversational dialogue.

In *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) Achebe puts the Ibo cultural practice known as Mbari festival at the heart of African art and culture saying that Mbari is an eminently syncretic or hybrid artistic space that allows generous room for tableaux of indigenous as well as foreign figures that came with the British colonisers. He specifically refers to the inclusion on an equal footing, images of indigenous life and customs with an image of a white man with his bicycle in an Mbari house, an image which comes back in *Things Fall Apart*. On another occasion, Achebe makes a parallel between the Mbari festival and African literature, including his own, saying that both fulfil the same function which is that of the “restoration of African culture.” Indeed, I shall contend that in the manner of an Mbari artist, Achebe the novelist quotes indistinctly Ibo proverbs, which are types of verbal images or metaphors, and European intertexts of major European literary figures to build some sort of an Mbari novel housing or accommodating cultures more in a spirit of comparativism or dialogue than that of separatism no matter the degree of conflict that might have existed when they first came into contact or encounter under colonialism. In terms of cultural criticism, the Mbari festival to which Achebe affiliates his novel evokes the Bakhtinian interplay between languages, cultures, and texts, an interplay giving rise to linguistic and cultural hybridity.

Before dealing further with proverbial quoting as an art of crossing cultures, I want first to give examples of language practice to show that in spite of the fact that Achebe wrote his novel at the eve of the Nigerian independence, he did not go at it

with a spirit of vengeance to conform to the nationalist or nationalitarian spirit of the times. To quote the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, I will say that Achebe wrote back to the British empire “with an Igbo or African accent,” always mindful of transcending cultural and linguistic binaries and to develop cultural understanding. This explains the use of the technique of cushioning or shadowing that consists of tagging English calques onto indigenous words in order to give approximate translation of the terms and hence avoid the reduction of one cultural reality to another. Examples of such calques are “*agadi-nwayi*, or old woman (p.9), “the elders, or *nidiche* (ibid), “*chi*, or personal god (p.13) etc. Calques like these help bridge the gap between the cultures and languages and produce some sort of reciprocal creolization. When calques are not used Achebe resorts sometimes to apposition to explain Ibo words, (e.g., Idemili title, the third highest in the land p. 5) and sometimes to contextualisation where clues are provided to guess the meaning of Ibo words like Harmattan or “to the intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene* (p.5). Finally, metaphors and similes are creolised when they don’t block linguistic understanding. The novel starts with one good example: “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan (p.1).”

It follows that in terms of the usage of English in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe conforms to his public pronouncements that he made during the “language debates” of the 1960s. In these debates Achebe defended the position that in spite of its historical imposition from an outside colonising power, English remains for some African countries like Nigeria a lingua franca and a national language in which a national literature could be written. The literatures written in Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Effik,

Edo, Ijaw, etc are called ethnic literatures. Politically, he writes, one must “give the devil his due: colonialism in Africa disrupted many things, but it did create big political units where there were small, scattered ones before.” While qualifying his statements with reference to colonialism and the creation of Nigeria, Achebe adds that it “gave them a language with which to talk with one another. If it failed to give them a song, it gave them a tongue, for sighing.” For Achebe authors writing in English or French are as patriotic as those who have decided to write in indigenous languages. To the argument of those who claimed that literature in English “can lead only to sterility, uncreativity and frustration,” arguments coached in a language that calls to mind terms used as criteria to refer to hybridity in nineteenth-century cultural discourse, Achebe retorts by giving examples of J.P.Clark and Christopher Okigbo and saying that on the contrary:

I do not see any signs of sterility anywhere here. What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa speaking of African experience in a world-wide language. So my answer to the question “Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? Is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. I have in mind here the writer who has

something new, something different to say. The nondescript writer has little to tell us, anyway, so he might as well tell it in conventional language and get it over with. If I may use an extravagant simile, he is like a man offering a small, nondescript routine sacrifice for which a chick or less will do. A serious writer must look for an animal whose blood can match the power of his offering.

In this quote, Achebe speaks about the necessity of proceeding to linguistic hybridity when it comes to English language use in Nigeria. He refutes the argument that linguistic hybridity leads to sterility. He instead speaks of breathing a new voice, or new Nigerian accent into English which paradoxically has become an international language during the imperialising process. It is through a “double-voiced” English (the term double-voiced is Bakhtin’s) that Nigerians can make themselves heard at home and abroad. The option of maintaining English in its purity in order to sound native is rejected for another option consisting of bending, accentuating, or playing a variation on English to make it express the new Nigerian experience without destroying the language or adulterating it beyond the limits of intelligibility. In Achebe’s advocacy for linguistic hybridity, Achebe recalls many points Bakhtin’s definition of linguistic hybridisation:

What is hybridisation? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.

That some other factor in Achebe’s case of handling English is the difference between the native speakers of English

as former colonisers and Achebe's nationals as ex-colonised speakers of English.

For Bakhtin as much as for Achebe, hybridity describes that condition of language's fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same but different through the processes of accentuation and stylisation:

What we are calling a hybrid construction,[Bakhtin writes] is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but that actually contains within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two 'languages,' two axiological belief systems.

I have already cited calques, contextualisation, creolised metaphors in *Things Fall Apart* as examples of language that is "double-accented" and "double styled." Now I will add that the quoting of traditional proverbs in the first chapters of the novel before the incursion of the British colonisers into Umoafia participates in the same process of accentuating the English language and literature to give it another voice. As I said earlier there are at least 127 traditional Ibo proverbs, all of them coming in the first chapters. This makes these first chapters read as a Biblical version of the book of proverbs giving insight into the knowledge and wisdom of traditional Umoafia. This book of proverbs does not resemble the usual fares of collections of proverbs served to us by anthropologists like Evans-Prichard but included in varying contexts and situations of dialogues involving all aspects of Umoafian life. What we come to appreciate more in this method of accentuating or "eating" English words are not the traditional proverbs themselves but the proverbial quoting which captures for the reader the speech manners, the style peculiar to the Igbo art of conversation and the axiological belief system that it embodies.

Ruth Finnegan has demonstrated that proverbs in various regions in Africa have a “close connection with other forms of literature (p.390).” Terms like *mwambi* for the Nyanja, *Olugero* for the Ganda, *mboro* for the Limbo are umbrella terms which refer indistinctly to what we sometimes call story, riddle, parable, fable, poetry, maxim, allegory and proverb. In regions where there is no such overlap in terminology, Finnegan adds these categories of oral literature share similar functions and contexts of use. Furthermore, in some cases proverbs are nutshells of other oral artistic forms just as they can, in their turn, be expansions of proverbs. In *Things Fall Apart*, proverbs are distinguished from other forms of orature, but they abide to that same principle of quotation, citation or reiteration peculiar to proverbs. In other words, proverbs, anecdotes, stories and other forms of oral literature stand as an eminently quotable material that gives the novel its distinctly Ibo flavour in terms of both language and culture. When we know that in traditional Ibo culture, quotable material is reserved solely for an initiated category of people, we can guess that proverbial quoting for Achebe is just another way of affirming his authorship as a Nigerian writer in English. The lack of strain in his citation of this quotable Ibo material in English speaks of one of the categories of hybridity that Bakhtin calls “organic hybridity.” Bakhtin differentiates between intentional hybridity as a site of contestation between two voices in an utterance and organic unconscious hybridity as an inherent historical principle of language change and accentuation.

As the narrative of the novel unfolds traditional quotable material decreases gradually before practically disappearing at least from the surface of the narrative at the end. Within the framework of the novel, this may be stand as a linguistic and

cultural marker signalling the theme of the novel which is that of “things Ibo falling apart” as they encountered things English at the turn of the nineteenth century. Yet what is worth noting is that citational representation similar to the proverbial quoting of the first chapters of the novel continues, though the quotable material now comes principally from British culture. I want to argue that this quoting of quotable material from a different culture participates in the same process of affirmation of authorship this time with reference to Anglo-American authors.

Much has been written about Achebe’s adversarial stand against English authors like Joyce Carey, Joseph Conrad, Graham Green and many others. This is particularly evident in the criticism written from the nationalist perspective. While I agree with critics who claim that Achebe wrote back to the authors of the empire in order to correct colonial misconceptions and *idées reçues* about Africa in general and Ibo land in particular, I will contend that the invocation of these authors through proverbial quoting or citation is not always inflected towards intentional hybridity as the emphasis of these critics may suggest. Even when Achebe himself takes publicly a stand against Conrad by qualifying *Heart of Darkness* as a “racist novel,” it is in novel writing that he best expresses his attitude towards the Polish-turned English writer with whom he shares many things in common, especially their hybrid position. Ralph Ellison writes that “the best way to criticise a novel is to write another novel,” and when looking close at it this seems to hold true in the case of Achebe’s citation or quotation of the Polish writer in *Things Fall Apart*. The glances that Achebe the novelist throws at Conrad’s intertext in terms of the construction of his plot or that of his central character Okonkwo are not made solely from an adversarial position. Indeed, there is contest or

clash over the African referent as Achebe tries to give a “thick description” of the Ibo culture, but Achebe also stylises Conrad in the proverbial quoting of his style. To use Bill Ashcroft’s words, I will say that Achebe abrogates Conrad’s misconceptions about Africa by giving a thick description of it, but he appropriates his style by deliberate citation.

Achebe, as he suggests it himself, does not consider himself solely as a celebrator of the Ibo culture but also as a cultural critic. This is evident in the hybrid narrator of the novel who sometimes acts “native” by being close to the narrative material that he reports and some other times distances himself from his culture just as an “alien” would do by talking about the Ibo as “these people.” This hybrid narrator acts as some sort of participant-observer of two cultures in contact and what is most interesting in his observations is the spirit of comparativism consisting of bringing together cultures rather than separating them through citation or proverbial quoting. For example, the narrative of Okonkwo’s economic ascent is a citation of the type of plot peculiar to the literature of the self-made man like those of Samuel Smiles in England and Horatio Alger in the United States. The motivation of the character’s actions by the appeal to oedipal conflict with his father who is a failure is also a quotation of the literature of psychological realism. Okonkwo looks like an African Oedipus. In the larger context of Achebe’s trilogy *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer At Ease* and *Arrow of God* the symbolic killing of Unoka triggers a tragedy for the house of Okonkwo that looks like an Ibo version of the Atreus house in Greek tragedy.

This leads me to the overarching citation or proverbial quoting of European intertext that Achebe makes in the novel as a cultural critic. This intertext is quoted from Mathew Arnold’s

Culture and Anarchy that deals more or less with the same historical period that Achebe depicts in his novel. Though Arnold defines culture as the best thought and written, he sees the English culture of his time as essentially hybrid in character. It is composed of two impulses that he calls the Hellenic and the Hebraic. The Hebraic is associated with economic competition and success whereas the Hellenic recalls the “sweet and light” of Greek civilisation. At any one time, one of these impulses dominates culture, but Arnold claims that a healthy culture is the one where the Hellenic principle acts a guide. This is in a nutshell the quote that Achebe makes from Arnold in his depiction of Ibo cultural life at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The subtle citation of Arnold puts the two cultures, the British and the Ibo on a par. Ibo culture, just like British culture, emerges from the novel as a hybrid culture where the Hebraic forces of competition and strict application of laws and the Hellenic impulse of Ibo life that we see at work in the various Ibo festivals interplay in a permanent contest.

I shall conclude this essay at cultural criticism by saying that the quoting or the citation of proverbs and other quotable material whether from indigenous or foreign sources contributes to a large extent to the understanding of the cultural and linguistic hybridity of Achebe’s novel. Looked at from the perspective of proverbial quoting, Achebe’s novel emerges as a proverbial space similar to an Mbari house constructed in order to celebrate cultures in contact. Proverbial quoting has its source in the indigenous artistic forms of the the Igbo *Illu* or proverb in English and that of the Mbari festival. This indigenous form of intertextuality or dialogism is far from being connected solely to the question of the Other as post-colonial criticism often makes it look like but to the issue of connecting cultures.

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