

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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