

**Evaluating the usage of indigenous languages in African literature: Biakolo's situation in
*wonderful child***

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*Language is undoubtedly fundamental to literature, and African literature like other literatures in the world depend solemnly on it for its full expression. The primary language used by the African writer is the one inherited from their colonial masters. However, during the last few decades there has been a remarkable shift in the focus of some African writers. They tend to bring into limelight some aspects of indigenous languages by way of substituting some western words with indigenous ones like Biakolo did in *Wonderful Child*. In this paper, our attention is focused on the combination of the two languages: English and Urhobo, with emphasis on how the Urhobo words are used. Biakolo made the reader to consciously or unconsciously identify with some Urhobo words. Effort will be made to determine the position of the writer as a teacher of the Urhobo language especially in relationship with its development as a minority language in Nigeria. Suggestions will be made on the analysis and which could be applied to other minority languages in Nigeria.*

Introduction

Human endeavors have been facilitated enormously by the power of language which is a principal tool for thought. Every thought form can only be expressed through language, which could be verbal or non-verbal. A language is usually learnt and used amongst people of the same speech community. The concept of speech community has been seriously examined by various linguists taking into cognizance the social and geographical spread (Labov 1989; Patrick 1999; Coates 1993). In this context, someone who can understand and speak a given language like Igbo, Urhobo, Ewe, but lives in a place thousands of miles away, could be considered as a member of the same speech community. In essence, distance is no hindrance to speech community. However, Patrick

(2012:14) argues that there are quite some occasions where there are difficulties in determining a speech community.

This article begins by taking a quick and synoptic look at the novel, *Wonderful Child*, by way of a panoramic review showing clearly where its cultural foundation stands. Next, it reflects on how indigenous languages have taken different turns with the advent of the Europeans in Africa before finally taking a cursory look at how some of the indigenous words in the novel are presented and what consequences this could have on the reader.

The novel and its background

In the novel *Wonderful Child*, the author, Anthony Biakolo, depicts aspects of daily life in a typical African setting associated with interethnic conflicts which hinder, to a large extent, the development of the continent. These conflicts which appear in news headlines and which can be very touching have attracted the attention of writers like Anthony Biakolo. In the aspect of human social identity, he shows how ethnicity plays a central role in the life of the people. A critical X-ray of the novel will prove that the author's work is a reminiscent and expository of socio-cultural aspects of a tribe - the Urhobos. Urhobo is a south western Edoid language spoken extensively in Delta State, Nigeria. It is obvious that the background of the novel is based on the Urhobo people. This becomes more evident appreciating the names of characters, places, words and certain expressions used. Each chapter is loaded with lots of Urhobo words, which will make more meaning to the Urhobo speaking readers than non-Urhobo. This leads us to clarify certain basic questions. Who are the Urhobos? Where are they found? What are their cultural beliefs? Etc. Each of these questions demands a real detailed answer, which is not within our scope in this article. However, it suffices to say that the Urhobo people have traced their genealogy to the Edo speaking people (Otite 1969:16). Today, they are a distinct ethnic group found in a territory bounded by latitude 6° and 5° 15' North and longitudes 5° 40' and 6° 25' East (Otite 1980:9) in Delta State, Nigeria. They share common boundaries with Itsekiris, Ijaws, Ukwanis, Binis, and Isokos. The Urhobo land is characterized by creeks, streams and rivers which are part of the prodigious formation of the Delta opening into the Atlantic Ocean.

Indigenous language in the African society

The multilingual situation in Africa has been brought to limelight by so many researchers like Spencer (1985:387) stressing on the complex situation especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. With the coming of the Europeans, communication in Africa took a different dimension leaving a strong threshold on language activities. Neville (2005:4) gave a very good account of their language exploit in Africa:

Colonial conquest, imperialism and globalisation have established a hierarchy of standard languages, which mirrors the power relations on the planet. The overall effect of this configuration has been to hasten the extinction of innumerable language varieties and to stigmatise and marginalise all but the most powerful languages.

New languages were added to the existing indigenous languages which would assume the status of international languages. These new languages ushered in some new vocabularies to the indigenous languages. These loanwords or borrowings according to Onose (2007:87) specifying the case of Urhobo, opined that “they were in most cases made to conform to the morphological pattern of the Urhobo before they were fully accepted in the language.” However, the Europeans did not neglect totally the presence of the indigenous languages. In short, efforts were made by the Europeans to understudy some of the indigenous languages, which were erroneously assumed to be simple. This notion was soon to pave the way for research as attempts were made to study some African languages. In Senegal for instance, Manessy and Sauvegot in an attempt to understudy numbers of works carried out on two indigenous languages, Wolof and Fula, discovered that about fifty-five works were undertaken between 1732 and 1894 (Manessy and Sauvegoet 1963: X-XV). Although, it is on record that the first important work concerning the study of African languages (indigenous languages) was published in the seventeenth century by Catholic Missionaries, the best known of these is a Kikongo grammar published: *regulae quaedam pro difficillimi consensium idiomatici faciliiori captu ad grammaticae Norman redactae* (Alexandre 1972:20). African languages have been conserved and preserved through the aid of the strong oral tradition in many hundreds of cultures, in spite of the western education (Hale 1982:790). This tradition is easily noticed. It is by the agency of oral tradition that everything about the culture of the

people is appreciated and preserved. Culture in this context is the expression of how a group of people satisfies their biological and social need and adapt to their environment (Smith 2000). This makes culture a program drawn by popular acceptance to guide the challenges of ever increasing human interaction and responses to environmental pressures and social realities.

Therefore, one could insinuate here that language and culture have become inseparable. Language has become, over the years, not only an indispensable complement but also the most permanent instrument of upholding culture. It articulates, refines and promotes cultural evolution as well as transmits and translates trends. It is sometimes referred to as the gateway to culture. It is the factor of language that the early Europeans did not understand that is why the African people suffered so much vituperation from the vilification of writers like this piece:

Africa with exception of the lower Nile and what is known as Roman Africa is so far as its native inhabitant are concerned a continent practically without history and possessing no records from which such a history might be constructed. Encyclopedia Britannica (11th Ed. Vol. 1. P. 323)

Whereas before the arrival of the Europeans to Africa, there were some African states, as history will have it that were already well developed and organized like the Bini Empire. There was a system in place and if this is true there ought to be a way of documentation and of course, there was. What startled the Europeans was the complete absence of written documents by the Africans in European standards and appreciation. Unknown to the Europeans, that carvings, certain traditional marks or lines on our walls or doors, especially in palaces or in shrines, have great historical significance. These could be read or interpreted by most Africans in their various localities.

The situation about African indigenous language is gaining real grounds in Africa in terms of writing by using European language codes. It has found its way to the African universities and translated into courses. African languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Edo, Ewe, Chi,

Swahili, etc. are studied like other European languages. Most mass media organizations rely on indigenous languages to disseminate vital information to the people. African writers are no exception to this trend. They have also employed partially or fully indigenous languages in their literary works as well as formal writings.

Indigenous language in African literature

African literature in its bid to depict the African situation in its true socio-cultural realities mounted or constructed on its natural geographical setting is as old as African people (Ogude 1983:1). It is only recently that African aesthetic production is done in European languages. This move has generated a lot of concern throughout Africa and black world in general. During the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977, in an attempt to tackle the black and African world problem in terms of cultural politics, many committees were set up. In one of them, the theme of discussion was "Black Civilization and African language an expression of cultural identity". It was agreed that no European language is fit to express African cultural values (Amonda 1978: 208). It is believed by some writers that since Africans still propel the totality of the African ways in literary circle, through non African language, clearly shows that African literature as professed today is not hundred percent African. This has been one of the strong arguments towards the *Decolonization of African Literature*. It is suggested here that the true African literature can be achieved if literary works originally written in one European language are translated into African language and vice versa (Chinweizu et al 1980: 298). This suggestion has been realized already by some writers, like the case of Fagunwa's *Ogbogu Ode* and *Igbo Olodumare*.

Biakolo's indigenous language situation

Biakolo's work written in a quasi-indigenous language belongs to the school of thought which creative writings where manipulations of African words still remain a key concept and machinery of expressing the African values and ideals. In the novel, the writer used a lot of indigenous words drawn solely from the Urhobo language. The writer consciously selects these words as he substitutes certain English words for their Urhobo equivalents. This incongruous inter-marriage between indigenous language and western language is further clarified by the author through

the aid of glossary. This could be best explained by using some examples from the book. 'Oseme, what are you planting there?' 'They are *iduebo*' (Biakolo 1993:10).

The word "cocoyam" was omitted to give way for the Urhobo equivalent "*iduebo*". A non-speaker of the language in this context is compelled to go to the glossary to check the meaning of the word. To the speaker of the language there may be no need to consult the glossary, since he or she understands the language, consequently knowing the meaning of the word may fascinate him to see his language in print. Thus, the usage of indigenous words in this context could be said to be a deliberate act, either to expose (the reader) or bring to consciousness a minute part of the language. This could be another (indirect) way of teaching a language. If the word "*iduebo*" occurs again in the text in the course of reading, it will be unnecessary to consult the glossary pages again unless the reader has a poor memory or an absent minded reader. This method of teaching a minute part or the peripherals of language could be good, effective or even successful in terms of socialization. The novel is replete with Urhobo words, which will certainly force the 'non speaker' reader to consult the glossary on many occasions. Let us take for instance these sentences:

- i. This *agware* took place under a gigantic tree (Biakolo 1993:2).
- ii. You just have to shut your mouth or go and see the *Obo* yourself (Op. cit. :3)
- iii. Okay, let's now go for the *Egor* which ought to precede the dance. (Op. cit:28)
- iv. Among the dances, there is the *Udejetor* which I like most (Op. cit:28).
- v. An immense crowd covered the *Ogba* of the oldest villager.... (op. cit:28).
- vi. Somebody suggested that we should go and settle the matter in front of the *Okpako rere* of kokori. (Op. cit:33).
- vii. Having been told that the *Ewhare* performed in a beat is particularly pleasant (Op. cit:39).
- viii. Anijula discloses to her husband her intention of going to collect cassava in her *ikobi* near the Imako forest (Op. cit:49).
- ix. It is only my *Oze* that is not large enough (Op. cit:49).
- x. I should preferably pray with it rather than with the *Udigoro* (Op.cit:21).
- xi. I don't think the *Orodeko* bit him (Op. cit: 68).

In each of the sentences above as stated earlier, a native speaker of Urhobo (may) need not consult the glossary for the meaning of the italicized words. With respect to the author, the following italicized Urhobo words have been rendered as follows:

Urhobo	English Equivalent
<i>i. Agware</i>	<i>assembly, meeting</i>
<i>ii. Obo</i>	<i>traditional doctor</i>
<i>iii. Egor</i>	<i>ancestral sacrifice or offering</i>
<i>iv. Udjetor</i>	<i>ground (masquerade dance)</i>
<i>v. Ogba</i>	<i>compound</i>
<i>vi. Okpako rere</i>	<i>eldest villager</i>
<i>vii. Ewhare</i>	<i>sexual intercourse</i>
<i>viii. Ikobi</i>	<i>farm</i>
<i>ix. Oze</i>	<i>basin</i>
<i>x. Udiogoro</i>	<i>palm wine</i>
<i>xi. Orodeko</i>	<i>snake</i>

Substituting these English equivalents in place of the Urhobo ones would have certainly saved the reader some valuable time in the course of reading, instead of turning often to the glossary. Although it may be seen that the constant combination of English and Urhobo words in sentences inhibit the flow of the lecture since the reader has to go to the glossary to look at the meaning of a word, the author sometimes takes responsibility of explaining the word right in the context which makes the reader to gain more confidence as the import of the words is expressed as soon as they are used, like these ones reflected below:

“Usually you call me ovien r'oyinbo, the whiteman' slave don't you?” You too, Cathechist, you normally call me eshu, demon. But now you're restoring to me my ancestral title, obo. It's sign of our reconciliation. (Op. cit:17)

Warden's lunch was ready. It was a bowl of ussi, fried
cassava dough, with ogwo (palm oil soup) (Op. cit. 18)

In the above examples, the Urhobo words were followed immediately by their English equivalents, which of course do facilitate reading. It could be noted from the book that sometimes, the author transcends a mere usage of words as he makes full-blown sentences.

Agware guono wa Aware guono wa
Aware kowa emunana
(Op. cit. P.29)

Agware miyerawa
Eheh
Miyerewa
Eheh
Agware, ado-o
(Op. cit. P2)

Igbeya vimoni, Ado-o-o
Eheh
Ado-o
Eheh
(Op. cit. P. 110)

In such situations, the reader who is a non-speaker is compelled to consult the glossary. At the close of the book, the reader must have come across more than one hundred and forty six Urhobo words used by the author.

With regard to the question of using indigenous language in African literature, one would notice that Biakolo has contributed immensely to exposing the African literary aesthetic in a quasi but definite and effective manner. These are some of the areas, which have opened a new vista of research opportunities, domain for reviews and cultural essays with the advent of African Literature in European literary scene (Amuta 1986:10).

The aim of using indigenous language is to help popularize African languages and an attempt to put into perspectives African beliefs and values straight by using the natural language of the people. In course of doing this, there could be a distortion in language as a result of lack of recognition of some salient misgivings on the part of the author or borne out of the absence of English equivalent words in indigenous languages. The writer has the prerogative to choose from the unlimited vocabulary of words to create his work. This poetic or literary liberty is indisputable. However, such creative freedom must be expressed within the ambit of the general accepted rules guiding the language in question. But if it is a situation where the author brings together two different linguistic codes or simply a *mélange*, the non-speaker reader of one of the languages is at the mercy of the author classifying what would have been a snag on the part of the reader through the agency of a glossary; this is quite a formidable and commendable one. But then, how does one know or ascertain the correctness and validity of the author's translation or transliteration, especially in the face of multiplicity of dialects, with varying idiolects.

In *Wonderful Child*, there may be some ambiguities in the English equivalents and Urhobo words as presented by the author due to difference in dialects. Each Urhobo clan seems to have its particular dialect and in Urhobo land, there are currently twenty-two clans (Ukere 1986:11). The generally accepted Urhobo dialect is that of the Agbon- Agbarho clans (Ukere 1986) but the author in question is from *Usiefrun* in *Ughievwen* clan. Consequently, his background might have influenced his own translation of certain words from Urhobo to English. It is obvious that his translation of certain words into English opposes the general view. His Urhobo speaking reader may not accept some of his translations as the right one. Take for instance the Urhobo word *iduebo*, which he rendered as *coco yam*. This word translates in Urhobo Handbook vetted by the Urhobo Language Committee as *idu, ikoko or ikoko-oyibo* (Erhiawarien 1991:91). How can a non-speaker of the language cope with such discrepancies?

Another striking issue is the question of orthography. There seems to be real conflict in the spellings used by the author. Take for instance the following spellings of words by the author and the ones written in the Urhobo-English Dictionary by A.O Ukere.

Biakolo	Urhobo handbook/Urhobo-English dictionary	English equivalent
Omochare	Omoshare	A boy

Imidiaka	Imidiaka	Cassava
Ewhare	Ehware	Sexual intercourse

These spellings may be minute and of no consequence to a native speaker who knows how to manage the situation but it remains a deficiency in the pattern of acquiring the Urhobo language through functional conscious and indirect way of imparting the language.

In the light of the semantic appreciation of some of the sentences, one would say in some instance that the author is not consistent to his translation of certain words. He translated and rendered the word *ogwo* as 'palm oil soup'. This translation would vehemently be challenged by any Urhobo speaking person because the word *ogwo* simply means 'soup'. There is always another word as a suffix added to it, which actually acts as an adjective qualifying or telling us more about the kind of soup. For example:

Ogwo re' garri	- Melon soup
Ogwo r'evwri/r'ofugbo	- Palm oil soup
Ogwo r'eshawo	- Okro soup

Out of the different soups mentioned above the *ogwo r'evwri* (palm oil soup), is regarded as the typical Urhobo traditional cum ceremonial soup or recipe. Very recently, non-speaker of the language prefers to call this official delicacy simply *ogwo* for convenience. The work of Biakolo is in a better place to educate the non-Urhobo speaker reader, about the people and culture of the Urhobos which includes their language. This deficient or ambiguous partial representation could be detrimental act to the development of Urhobo language in general.

Conclusion

The trend so far in African literature has brought about a clear-cut situation in African society. There is no gain saying that African literature has not, through advocacy and campaigns, brought some sanity into the African society using the mediumship of western languages. An attempt by some authors to shift ground by employing indigenous language could be appalling, if no deep knowledge is acquired before embarking on it. In the case of Biakolo, one could say there was oversight, which is quite serious on the part of the reader who may be a non-speaker of the language. To avoid this acute angle, I will suggest that anyone who intends to employ partially indigenous language in his literary work, should consult the appropriate authority in charge in

order to pass appropriate information. Like the Urhobo Language Committee or Urhobo Studies Association for Urhobo speaking people, could give their professional advice, so that there will be uniformity in the language exposed to the outside world.

In learning new languages mistakes are inevitable from the part of the learners. What is interesting here is that, these errors should teach a lesson to the reader and the author. Researchers should not depend solely on the author's interpretation but should ask other people of that linguistic community if there is contrary interpretation or ambiguity in the author's work. Authors of literary works should do well as to give room for indigenous words in their work, which would in turn make way for full indigenous work in the future. The use of the language as an integral part of our cultural life will bring us closer to the better understanding of our cultural heritage.

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