

THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATING AFRICAN ORAL LITERARY TEXTS INTO THEIR WESTERN EQUIVALENTS

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ABSTRACT: *It is commonly believed that one of the problems of African literature, and particularly oral literature scholarship, has been how the African writer can render cultural effects, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and sensibilities from the vernacular culture into English, as authentically and imaginatively as possible, in a language that is quite alien to the cultural environment being portrayed (Obiechina 56). The challenge posed by the evocation of equivalent feelings and association as well as fidelity to social and cultural facts has crucially installed and inscribed translation studies in the discursive dialectics of African oral literature and cultural studies. Drawing insight from the perspective on the theory of anthropological relativism and the need to anchor oral literary research on African cultural milieu with a view to account for or understand certain beliefs and behaviours in their local contexts (Eagleton 62), this study investigates this problem within the discourse of African oral literature which is fraught, as it were, with a number of prejudices and misconceptions. It therefore makes the case that the scope of translation studies in African oral literature be widened to achieve what has been referred to as conceptual recuperation whereby certain aspects of African concepts that have suffered distortion, demonization and marginalization are recovered and reinstalled (Opata 74).*

KEYWORDS: Translation, Oral literature, Culture, Tradition communication.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of translation has remained as thorny as it is attractive in African oral literary discourse since the Portuguese priest, Andre Fernandez, in 1562, translated *Inhambene* song, the first translation of African folklore into European language (Doke 2 –5).

It has continued to engage the attention of scholars probably because, in this age of globalization, good translation has the capacity to reveal close parallels in human thought in different cultures and languages as well as achieve universal understanding of arts and life. According to E.N Obiechina, one of the problems of African literature, and particularly, oral literature scholarship has been how the African writer can “render cultural effects, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and sensibilities from the vernacular culture into English”, as imaginatively as possible, without doing violence to the reception of meaning in both contexts (56). The place of the mother-tongue is seen not only to be very crucial and central to the encapsulation and expression of human thoughts and ideas but also a validation of his identity and existential essence. Okoli states:

The role of the mother tongue as the embodiment of a people's culture, creative genius and identity can hardly be over-emphasized. It is not only the repository of cultural heritage, intrinsic values, and philosophic leanings of a society, it is also essentially a means of expressing a people's "being-in-the-world", a total perception of the universe with its real or imagined forces as well as their relationship with them (205).

Translation is therefore saddled with the task of straddling polar cultural contexts to create meanings that are communicatively acceptable and comfortable to both contexts. The evocation of equivalent feelings and associations as well as "fidelity to social and cultural facts" becomes an imperative in the transference of such meaning, a task which Gregory Rabassa regards as impossibility (24). Drawing insight from the perspective on the theory of anthropological relativism which posit that "all interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture" and the need to anchor research within African cultural milieu with a view to account for or to understand beliefs and behavior in their local contexts (Eagleton 62), this study investigates this problem within the discourse of African oral literature which is fraught, as it were, with a number of prejudices and misconceptions.

The paper is, therefore, a modest contribution to the above concern and it is based on theoretical analysis and appraisal of existing scholarly discourses on translation especially as regards finding Western equivalents for our traditional literary practices and arts. Oral literary texts across Africa are also examined to highlight translation problems specifically encountered in such texts.

The Place of Translation in Communication

The term, translation, comes from the Latin word "*trans-latus*", meaning "carried across". According to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (1987)*, it is "the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language (the 'source' language) is turned into the meaning of another (the 'target' language), whether the medium is spoken, written, or signed" (344). Also, *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia* defines translation as "the process in which a message that was expressed in one language for a first audience is changed or transferred into a second language for communication to a second audience" (475). From these two definitions, it is obvious that translation plays a crucial role in the exchange of information, the communication of meaning, and the exchange of human experiences. It therefore stands to reason that a distortion in translation is capable of resulting in communication breakdown, discontinuities of meaningful relationships and even possible foreclosure to the appreciation and preservation of universal human experiences and cultural values. It is for this reason that David Crystal advises that it is important that in translating a phenomenon or, in this case, traditional literature from the source language one must have a thorough understanding of the body of knowledge covered by the source material, as well as knowledge of social, cultural and emotional connections that may be implied or expected in the target language (*Encyclopedia* 344). This means that a text cannot be appreciated in isolation of the culture that begets it and a translator not conversant with the socio-cultural environment and reality that produces a text ends up distorting the realities inhabiting the text, and consequently remaining insensitive to the spirit of the culture. A good translation should therefore, as Blackburn recommends, transcend cultural, historical and linguistic boundaries and the translator should be able "to feel what the author feels, letting his life enter his own deeply enough to become part of him" (*Troubadour*, 616). Here

lies the dilemma of the translators, a situation that has introduced serious complications in the study, interpretation, and evaluation of African literature in general and oral literature in particular.

Translation in African Oral Literary Text

Though the concept of translation has been quite problematic in the communication of human experience from time immemorial, the problem is much more complicated, for us in Africa, because of our peculiar historical encounter with literacy. According to Obiechina, the Christian Church was the chief agent in the spread of literacy and the introduction of literary activities and “collection of African oral traditions; folktales, tales, myths, proverbs, riddles, songs, and historical fragments and their permanent recording in writing” (*Language and Theme*, 10–11). He, however, reasons that in as much as we applaud this laudable contribution towards literacy and the restoration of our oral cultures, we must not fail to observe that the attitude of early missionaries was more of ambivalence to our traditional African culture than a sincere, genuine and singular determination to promote and propagate the culture. D.U. Opata, in his rigorously investigated book, *Ekwensu in the Igbo Imagination* (2005), bemoans and vehemently debunks the mischievous (not just erroneous) translation of *Ekwensu* as the equivalent of the Christian devil, a translation that distorted its original meaning in Igbo cosmology as a heroic deity. Opata further asserts that the same Christian translators found convenient equivalents for such concepts as “*missa*’ for “mass”, ‘*Jesu*’ for ‘Jesus’, ‘*Chukwu*’ or ‘*Chineke*’ for God Almighty, but resorted to our traditional deictic and heroic symbol for capturing the image of the devil (86).

Apart from the above observations, there are other kinds of problems associated with translating a text. One of such problems arises out of both the culture-specific nature of language and the use the creative artist makes of that to exclude the outsider and be able to effectively express himself as well as reveal the richness of his culture (Chaka, xix). The translator finds himself mediating these extremes so that while trying as much as possible to remain faithful to the original in terms of the author’s intention, the idiom of the receiving language must not be tampered with or sacrificed on the alters of cultural and authorial fidelity. Kunene advises that whatever one’s purpose in translation might be, the safest strategy will be to find a harmonious way of conveying the idiom of the original language through a revelation of the writer’s intimate knowledge of the structure and idiomatic versatility of his language without, in so doing, distorting the receiving language (Chaka, xx). This effort requires high poetic sensitivity on the part of the translator. But hardly was this the case with our early translators. Isidore Okpewho accuses early translators of tampering with the repetitive structure and diction of the original text claiming that in African poetry, “thought are condensed in terse language, making their translation into English a hazardous venture” (*Oal*, 294). He also says that these early translators indulged in summaries of texts collected because their interest lie in ideas and social content rather than the literary merits of the texts.

In dealing with the problem of culture-bound words or expressions, one strategy is to retain the original language, say Igbo language for instance, and precede or follow it by a defining statement aptly woven into the narrative as unobtrusively as possible, for example, the Igbo believe in the philosophy of ‘eziokwu bu ndu’, ‘truth is life’ and exploit every opportunity to remind her citizens of the necessity of always being honest and upright in one’s dealings (Opata, *Essays*, 71). Though direct equivalents are not always possible, this strategy is, no doubt, helpful. It is only adequate cultural and historical information on the part of the

translator that can enable him to translate ‘ezi’ and ‘okwu’ (real word) as one English equivalent, “*truth*”. Closely tied to lack of cultural information is what M.A. Okoli identifies as ‘restraint in vocabulary, inadequate critical thinking’ or consciousness and limited imaginative reach, tendencies which make the translator often resort to line by line or word for word translation (*Major Themes*, 216). In idioms for instance, the original imagery is usually so striking that no close or literal translation would make sense in English, and it certainly takes a translator with expanded consciousness and power of imagination to be able to provide meaningful translation. Kunene says that he tries to get around the difficulty by the use of paraphrase of the original. In his translation of Mofolo’s *Chaka the Zulu* (1981), he writes that where Senzangakhona “swallowed a stone” while expelling his second wife and son, “The pain was like swallowing a stone,” or when Chaka is made to ‘have a liver’ while being strengthened, he writes it as “in order that he would also have bravery in his liver” (43). Yet, he acknowledges that these paraphrases and amplifications are not altogether useful.

There is also the problem of how to capture the music of idiophones as well as other irrepressible stylistic features such as parallel structures. Idiophones are sound impressions which echo or represent certain gestures, mannerisms, and attributes not easily conveyable by a particular grammatical category. According to Helen Chukwuma, they are “descriptive sounds which give added dimension and flair to words” (*Igbo Oral Literature*, 173). Though not a separate category, their meanings are adumbrated in the categories of verbs, adverbs, adjectives and modifiers and in such capacities constitute a marked and pervasive feature of story telling and other traditional oral literary practices. Such repetitive idiophones as “gidim gidim” or “gwodom gwodom” (representing heavy falling sound or unwieldiness), and “nyaka nyaka nyaka” (clumsiness), are difficult to represent in English and attempts to represent them have produced feeble results. Isidore Okpewho proposes two approaches for tackling such tasks:

One is to leave such idiophones exactly as they are, since English does not normally use that device in the way African languages do. The other approach is to find in English an effect as poetically forceful as the idiom has in the indigenous text. (*Aol* 352)

He however advises that whichever approach is adopted, the translator should be able to bring in high poetic sensibility to achieve effectiveness.

Closely related to the problem of idiophones is the difficulty of dealing with certain parallel structures which are devices employed by the oral artist to bring ideas and images, together in harmonious relationship. Okpewho states that parallel structuring of tales helps the narrator to achieve a sense of order and harmony in the large amount of folk tale material swimming around in his or her head at any given time (82).

Kunene also has a strategy of dealing with the problem of parallel structures which places more emphasis on diversity and contrast than on similarity of paradigmatic features. He exemplified this strategy by translating the rhythmic pattern where Mofolo describes Chaka’s first battle and the adeptness, courage and grace with which he literally carves a path through the enemy’s rank thus: No sooner had he entered, /no sooner entered/battle/the son of Senzangakhona/than he felled men with his short spear/and he opened up gaps in the enemy ranks (52). Similar structure also occurs in the long praise salute to Shaka the Zulu where in what Okpewho identifies as the ‘consecutive bundles of lines’, Chaka is portrayed as a ‘joke’, a ‘beast’, and a ‘fire’ (81).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we have seen that the problems of translating aspects of our oral literature into their Western equivalent are traceable to certain linguistic and cultural imperatives which are insurmountable. This has consequently led to certain foreclosure in the effort to achieve a holistic and equivalent translation of aspects of our traditional orature. Gordon Innes argues that translation often flattens the emotional flavour of a phrase or praise names in a narrative, leading to the loss and compromising of affective values, emotive powers, and the heroic aura of the translated text. He discusses that the translated versions of the *Sunjata* epic narratives hardly affects the English reader emotionally whereas in the original Mandinka, they produce powerful emotional effects to Mandinkan audience (104). Innes attributes this to the complex artistic manipulation and creation of the artist during performances which are untranslatable into English. He too acknowledges that though much success has been recorded in translating aspects of our oral literature as close as practicable to the original, an effort that has, no doubt, inscribed it as a serious field of study. He still argues that for certain aspects of African traditional literature to be accorded its best and rightful place in world literature, an appropriate translation strategy has to be adopted (108). What this strategy might be we are not told. What this means, therefore, is that we shall ultimately agree with Niyi Osundare who argues that, though enormous success has so far been achieved in translating aspects of African life and world-view, there are still certain aspects that cannot find adequate equivalents in the foreign languages and therefore untranslatable. He states:

No matter what the extent of African writer's proverbialization of European language, no matter how much stylistic acrobatics he may employ in an attempt to bend the borrowed language, there are innumerable aspects of African experiences that defy rendering into a foreign medium. (*Major Themes* 217)

This is why Solomon Iyasere holds the view that the “modern African writer is to his indigenous oral tradition as a snail is to his shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind” (*African Studies* 107). His view underlies the imperative of understudying the cultural background which give birth to and nurture literary productions and as Cora Agatucci advises: “to more fully understand and appreciate African story-telling traditions, one needs to study them in the content of the cultures, which produce the stories” (2). Nothing more needs to be said than that given Cora's advice, which should also stand the translator in good stead, there is need to juxtapose the cultural background of both the source and the target authors with the aesthetic mode of translation. This is in tandem with David Crystal's suggestion that aesthetic translation is best for literary materials because it focuses on preserving the emotional as well as cognitive content of the work, while maintaining some level of stylistic equivalence (344). Finally we agree with Emmanuel Obiechina's advice that the African writers' need to render cultural effects, ideas, thoughts, feelings, and sensibilities from the vernacular culture into English should be matched with his “ability to transfer sets of realities from the vernacular into the operative linguistic medium which in this case is English” (56). To achieve this, the power of the imagination is necessary because meaning in translation goes beyond direct, ‘symbol reference structure’ to include structures of feeling and association.

The above suggestions, it is believed, could inscribe the translation and study of African literary texts within the discourse of global literary corpora. To achieve this, we suggest that the scope of cultural studies be widened and incorporated into the curricula of both the

secondary and tertiary levels of education. Government must demonstrate a sincere effort to encourage and fund the teaching of vernacular languages at all these levels of our educational system. This is because, as we have seen from the analysis above, one needs to be culturally and emotionally grounded in the idioms and thought patterns of his linguistic environment to be able to make a sense of equivalent translations of his experiences into another language. Within this framework, translation studies should also be reconceptualized as cultural studies to be included and legitimated as part of the educational curriculum proposed above.

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