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Cultural Clash and the Manichean Translation of African Culture in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract: *Colonial languages have caused a serious epistemological upheaval to the mind of Africa. Many aspects of African cultural identity are lost due to the failure of these languages to name concepts that do not exist in the semantic scope of the colonial linguistic structures. This article studies Chinua Achebe's attempt to write back to the colonial discourse which has for a long translated African culture in Manichean ways that are informed by racist ideologies, most of which are used to maintain concepts and definitions rooted mainly in the anthropological imagination. Highlighting semantic gaps and ambiguities in the colonial representation of African culture, he commits himself, through his novel Things Fall Apart, to establish the ontological and epistemological perspectives of African cultural identity in an artistic manner. This novel becomes a narrative space that reflects the ideological struggle between the culture of the colonizer and the colonized for social and political dominance.*
Keywords: *Epistemology, Western thought, worldview, anthropology, holistic thinking.*
Résumé : Les langues coloniales ont provoqué un grave bouleversement épistémologique dans l'esprit de l'Afrique. De nombreux aspects de l'identité culturelle africaine sont perdus en raison de l'incapacité de ces langues à nommer des concepts qui n'existent pas dans la portée sémantique des structures linguistiques coloniales. Cet article étudie la tentative de Chinua Achebe de réécrire le discours colonial qui a longtemps traduit la culture africaine de manière manichéenne nourrie d'idéologies racistes, dont la plupart sont utilisées pour maintenir des concepts et des définitions enracinées principalement dans l'imaginaire anthropologique. Soulignant les lacunes sémantiques et les ambiguïtés de la représentation coloniale de la culture africaine, il s'engage, à travers son roman Things Fall Apart, à établir de manière artistique les perspectives ontologiques et épistémologiques de l'identité culturelle africaine. Ce roman devient un espace narratif qui reflète la lutte idéologique entre la culture du colonisateur et celle du colonisé pour la domination sociale et politique.
***Mots-clés** : Épistémologie, pensée occidentale, vision du monde, anthropologie, pensée holistique.*

1. Introduction

In his "The African Writer and the English Language", Chinua Achebe argues that if British colonialism "failed to give them [Africans] a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing.[1]" The catalyst function of English in African society and the unexpected blurring of ethnic boundaries are virtues that should be acknowledged and exploited. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* is an instance of the paradoxical situation in which the African writer tries to assert his culture by translating it into colonial languages. While writing his novel, Achebe was engaged in a work of cultural translation intended to correct the "image of Africa" as represented by the deviant anthropological translations of its cultural identity. To what extent did he succeed in translating the Ibo culture into English? In other words, is it possible to

[1] C. Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," in Asante, MK, Abarry AS. African Intellectual Heritage: a book of sources. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; 1996p.381

correct one translation by another? The unfolding of the story discloses Achebe's awareness about the pitfalls of the politics of cultural translation undertaken by the colonizer. Breaches of communications, lack of cultural equivalent in English language and the dichotomisation of cultural values and meanings are factors leading to the ambiguity of identity and cultural alienation[2].

This article aims to study Achebe's attempt to resist the colonial project of overwriting the Igbo identity through ambiguous and wrong cultural translations. These translations tend more towards the dichotomisation of native concept by blurring the semantic stratifications that exist between each pair of words. We also aim to demonstrate that Achebe's use of untranslated Ibo words in *Things Fall Apart* is exclusively relative to the cultural standards of the Ibo people.

According to Achebe, since Mr Brown is a native to the western culture of dogma and exclusion, he fails to transform the colonial encounter into a dialogue of civilisations. He does not acknowledge the consistency of the theological worldview of the Igbo when he fails to convince Akunna about the superiority and the celestiality of Christianity. This failure is caused, partly by the epistemological disparities that characterize their worldviews and, partly by the semantic ambiguities created by the translator who tried to accommodate two different cultures within languages that can never be isomorphic. Mr Brown, we are told by the eye witness narrator, goes to the village to spend "long hours with Akunna in his obi talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs"[i]

To bridge the artificial gaps of meaning between cultural values and norms, Achebe casts his narrative into the mainstream discourse of epistemological revisionism, a discourse that aims at reforming black consciousness through the demystification of colonial institutions. Moreover, the implementation of churches, schools, courts and hospitals in colonial Africa has constituted an uncompromising challenge to the native system of thinking. Epitomized by converts like Nowye and Enoch, this clash of worldviews is dramatized by Achebe in terms of the twin evils of epistemic violence and cultural hybridity. This ideological perspective is retrospective, condemning the cultural aberrations that have opened the door for the alienating effect of Western cultural values. For him, the cutting edge of western culture has already fallen on the very substance that used to hold Africans together, and, without a balanced coincidence of opposites, Africa would never recover from the violent conflicts that reign over its sociopolitical structures.

The West, in its quest for a permanent hegemonic discourse, has given up this mode of "holistic thinking" only to develop an epistemology rooted in antagonistic dualism to justify social classes, racial relationships, gender discriminations and imperial projects. The latter has been highly instrumental in the process of

[2] Gikandi Simon, "Cural Translation and the African Self" A (Post)colonial Case Study." Interventions : International Journal of Postcolonial Studies Volume 3, Issue 3, 2001

rationalizing artificial structures like colonizer /colonized, civilized / savage and center / periphery. Although Heraclites, and Nietzsche after him, have offered one of the oldest forms of holistic thinking in Western philosophy[3],a form of harmonious reconciliation of pairs of opposites, the Hegelian model has been more influential because it answers the need of the Western jingoistic warmongers for violence. Hegel's contention that the dialectical relationship between opposites is fulfilled through violence constitutes the point of demarcation between Western and African visions of cultural harmony. However, his Idea of the Absolute as a state of ultimate truth and harmony remains relevant for the ideological thrust of *Things Fall Apart* as Achebe tries to blur, if not to completely erase, the Manichean dualism of post-colonial Africa, forcefully maintained by the neocolonial system.

One of the most striking strategies of acculturation which have been undertaken by colonialism is the implementation of some English words into Igbo language by the Ibocisation of Christian words and concepts. The name Jesu Kristi is deliberately corrupted by white missionaries and their interpreters to make it sound native and familiar to the people. Moreover, in his attempt to convince Akunna that "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false[4]," Mr Brown substitutes the word "God, the Father" by the word "Chukwu." This substitution is a form of translation that aims at incarnating Christianity within the Ibo religious system.

The unreliability of translators is also another factor leading to the corruption and transfiguration of meanings when transferred from one language to another. The best example in the novel is the interpreter who translates the word "myself" by the expression "my Buttocks[5]." What is worse is surely the failure of the interpreter to correctly communicate aspects of Ibo culture to the white man. The most frequent consequence of such a failure is the emergence of the metaphorical-literal ambiguity. The esoteric language used by priests and the Egwugwu dancers is a mystical discourse intended to be understood by the divine mediators only. Mr. Smith's interpreter, Okeke, "was also at a loss[6]." When he tried to tell him what Ajofia, the leading egwugwu of Umuofia, was saying in "the language in which immortals spoke to men.[7]" Pointing to the ignorance of those Christian missionaries as to the variety of the linguistic register of the Ibo, Ajofia judges whites as well as their black interpreter as "strangers" in terms of land and culture. And so, they shall always be due to the inability of English to contain the complex semantics of Ibo culture. Another instance of communication failure is Ogbuefi Ekwueme attempt to convince the judges about "how Enoch murdered an Egwugwu,[8]" a story considered by the

[3] See Erin, O'Connell, Heraclitus and Derrida: Pre-Socratic Deconstruction, (New York: Peter Lang), 2006.
[4] C., Achebe, Things Fall Apart, London: Heinemann, 1958p. 126
[5] Ibid., p.102
[6] Ibid., p.134
[7] Ibid.134
[8] Ibid., p137

court an aspect of the mythical mind of Africa[9]. In other words, what is literal and real for the Ibo is considered metaphorical and mythical by whites, for the unmasking of the Egwugwu is considered a crime against the spirit of the ancestors while it remains a mere interruption with a dancing masquerade. Furthermore, understanding words does not mean understanding their meaning in specific cultural contexts. This is what happened to the white commissioner who was looking for Okonkwo after the killing of the white priest and the burning of the church; he failed to understand Oberieka's illusion to a case of suicide. Oberieka tells the commissioner "Perhaps your men will help us"; a sentence interpreted by the latter as "One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words[10]." Yet, the cultural meaning of the sentence is the impossibility of any Ibo man to touch the body of someone who committed suicide.

The colonial cultivation of ignorance among the Ibo is evident in the abstention of whites from correcting the flawed names given to aspects of western culture. The bicycle, referred to by the natives as an iron horse, is a form of identification by analogy. In other words, a cultural encounter compels strangers to project names by similarity, a process that generates a language which might be understood as metaphorical by the colonizer and literal by natives. The first time the Igbo people saw a white man "riding an iron horse" they killed him and tide his bicycle to the sacred silk-cotton tree,[11]" after being identified as totem that should be offered to the deity. When asked about the iron horse, the white man answers the natives through his interpreter that he "shall bring many iron horses" when he settles among them.[12]" For hegemonic purposes, the white missionaries often accept the wrong translations produced by the natives and make of them a commonplace usage because they consider it as an important step toward a final accommodation of their culture in the minds and hearts of the back people.

As a system of thinking, binarism compels the West to project itself into a perpetual quest for power through an anthropological construction of 'primitive societies.' Consequently, the hegemonic nature of the Christian Missions has made the military occupation of Africa inexorable, especially after the tremendous work of epistemological reform performed by priests like Mr Brown and James Smith on the African social cognition. Transcending this epistemological hegemony involves the deconstruction of this antagonistic worldview by a phenomenology of reconciliation and unity, a phenomenology that best reflects the communal nature of the African way of life. From this standpoint, it becomes obvious that Achebe's deconstructive impulse does not aim at abolishing differences; it rather seeks to reach a collaborative harmony between dichotomous concepts[13]. In other words, *Things*

[9] Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1966), pp. 16-19.
[10] C., Achebe, Things Fall Apart, London: Heinemann, 1958, P.146
[11] Ibid P.101
[12] Ibid P.102
[13] See Mudimbe-boyi ME. Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization. Albany: State University of New York Press; 2002. xxv, 317 p. p.

Fall Apart depicts a transcendental society innocent of the cultural antonyms, which are visible mainly in colonial languages, and ready to reach a utopia harmonized by an egalitarian cosmology.

Although the importance of Western languages for African renaissance has been acknowledged by Achebe in more than one occasion, he has expressed the lamentable condition in which the African artist finds himself as a result of his deployment of English, in a situation he defines as the "fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature[14]." Only in so far as colonial languages act as catalysers joining all African communities, an achievement that would have been improbable through the use of native languages and dialects that exceed 1200, that African artists have used it as a means of artistic expression. Moreover, Fanon's warning against the destructive effects of colonial languages on the African social, political and cultural life as early as the 50s can be considered as a prophecy which has been fulfilled gradually via the colonial and postcolonial educational systems that have been designed and maintained by the assimilated elite. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon analysis the cognitive bearings of colonial languages on the cultural identity of colonial and postcolonial Africa. He warns against the alienating effects of language when he asserts that "To speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization[15]. Similarly, Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind*, reinforces Fanon's attitude against colonial languages through his assertions about the interdependence of language and culture. The "mirror effect" relationship between language and the cultural identity of the community is pointed out by Ngugi when he asserts that "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world[16]." Next to Fanon and Ngugi, John Dewey, among other Western philosophers, warns against the immanent threats of dichotomous thinking. He points out:

> Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forced to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise[17].

[14] NgugiwaThiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London : James Currey. 1986. P.9

[15] Fanon, Franz, Black Skin, White Masks, transl. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York, Grove Press) 1967p.17-18

[16] NgugiwaThiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London : James Currey. 1986. P.15

[17] Dewey, John, Experience and Education, (Indianapolis: Kappa Delta Pi), 1998p.01

De Saussure's theory of language succeeded in digging out the structuralist archaeology of Western thought[18].Derrida pushes this philosophy into its extremes when he claims that Western languages are not only structured into pairs of opposites but also have the power of structuring worldviews and shaping reality[19]. This perception of reality is behind the ontological inconsistencies and the epistemological ambiguities that characterised colonial and postcolonial Africa.

Colonial languages have caused a serious epistemological upheaval to the mind of Africa. Many aspects of African cultural identity are lost due to the failure of these languages to name concepts that do not exist in the semantic scope of the colonial linguistic structures. For instance, the Igbo word Agbala defines a concept that falls somewhere between the English word woman and Oracle. This word is an auto-antonym communicating good and bad connotations among the Igbo people. This is not to say that auto-antonyms are absent in Western languages, yet they are conceived of as linguistic weaknesses that should be gradually eliminated.

The language used by the natives to describe their first cultural encounter with the white man reflects a deep-seated metaphorical/literal ambiguity caused mainly by the deconstructive power of African epistemology. Obierika tells Okonkwo that the first white man who appeared on the Igbo land has been riding an "iron horse[20]"; it would be quite wrong to define "iron horse" as a deliberate metaphor produced by Obierika for rhetorical purposes. However, the paradox created by the identification of an aspect of Western culture, such as the bicycle, with an aspect of Igbo culture exhibits the dominance of the Igbo cultural worldview, which is able to accommodate new cultural phenomena. Literally speaking, a horse can be made of iron according to Obierika's animist culture, a fact that would be impossible to name in Western languages except as a form of metaphoric comparison.

The novel dramatizes crucial communicative breaches between native people and white missionaries, who tried to use interpreters in their preaching of Christian faith. These breaches of communication are chiefly related to the semantic ambiguity of colonial language in its rendering of the Igbo worldview. With the dichotomy ruler/ruled in mind, white missionaries take it for granted that kingship is a universal political concept[21]: "They [The missionaries] asked who the king of the village was,

[18] See De Saussure, Ferdinand, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986

[19] See De Saussure, Ferdinand, Course in General Linguistics, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986

[20] Achebe, Chinua, Things Fall Apart. London : Heinemann, 1958 p.97

[21] Hobsbawm, Eric, &Renger Terence eds. The Invention of a Tradition. Cambridge. Cambridge University (1983) p. 2012 See Geertz C. The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. New York: Basic Books; 1973.See also G.E.R. Lloyd, Cognitive Variations. Reflections on the Unity and Diversity of the Human Mind, Oxford. Clarendon Press 2007 and Hobsbawm EJ, Ranger TO. The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press; 1983See also Appiah, Kwame A. In my father's house: Africa in the philosophy of culture. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (1992). See Wiredu, Kwasi, Cultural Universals and Particulars. Bloomington : Indiana University Press (1996)

but the villagers told them that there was no king. We have men of high title and the chief priests and the elders[22]." As the division of political power in the Igbo community becomes a central challenge in the way of the imperial project, a revision of some aspects of this culture becomes a necessity. Being educational institutions, both the church and the school committed themselves to alter the structure of political power by preaching, first, religious monotheism that soon becomes political monolithism:

> But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial. Many of these messengers came from Umuru on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the centre of their religion and trade and government[23].

Reading *Things Fall Apart* from a deconstructive point of view provides a clear idea about Achebe's motives in exploiting the semantic vacuum created by Western cultural dichotomies. The latter allows him to reflect upon an African worldview free from the Western omnipresent power relationships that underlay the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of African life. Being the embodiment of Western epistemology, colonial languages, when used for ethnographic purposes, tend to erase crucial features of African culture. Anthropologists, for instance, are likely to overwrite cultural similarities, empty some rituals from their meaning or completely eclipse some other cultural practices that do not figure in the original culture of the ethnographer. The description of the ritual performed by the *Egugu* cannot escape the English word "dance", which means much more than that in the Igbo culture. Similarly, what appears to the white priests as a grotesque masked ball performed by members of the Umuofia tribe, is, in fact, a sacred ritual, involving the spirits of their ancestors. In other words, the English language frames the social, political and cultural life of Africa by dichotomizing its components and values.

The translation of *"literature"* into *"orature" in Things Fall Apart* generates a web of semantic ambiguities. The story is a written record delivered orally by an Igbo narrator, who fuses the written word with its oral form so perfectly that it would be quite possible to hear metaphorical echoes of the oral prosody of the story. This paradox originates in Achebe's Africanist perception of language as social catalyzer. Confronted with the impossibility of bringing the postcolonial audience face to face with each other and with the artist, he does not only deconstruct the alienating nature of the written word, but also uses orality as a metaphoric narrative layer to create an imagined community unmediated by the ambiguous culture of the text.

Restoring the African story to its oral form allows Achebe to show the utopian values of the Igbo society as it deconstructs political and social dichotomies. For

[22] Achebe, Chinua, Things Fall Apart. London : Heinemann, 1958 p.105.
[23] Ibid., p. 123.

instance, the proverb "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings[24]" deconstructs a crucial paradox related to class struggle and the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The fulfilment of an egalitarian society is possible through the respect of the morals and rituals of the community, to which both ruler and ruled are subject.

Throughout this study we tried to explore Achebe's commitment to assert and sustain the cultural identity of African through the deconstruction of the western anthropological construction of 'primitive societies. Translation ambiguities are at the centre of *Things Fall Apart*'s thematic concern. The dilemma of the African artist as a cultural essentialist and at the same time as a translator of his own culture has been a major issue in this study. The communicative problems between the Ibo people and the white missionaries have also been exposed along this study. The concept of cultural translation and its importance in understanding the violence of representation and the ambiguity and hybridity inherent in the Western anthropological writings has been crucial for this study. Indeed, alien cultural patterns and paradigms have been transferred to Africa through erroneous interpretation of native culture. Perhaps the best example is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* a novel that projects western prejudices on all aspects of black African culture and tradition.

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[24] Ibid., p06.

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