The Strangling Hold of Zurrjir: Nigerian Writers and the Burden of the ''Half-Bodied Baby''

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N AMOS TUTUOLA'S sprightly variant of a popular folktale, an ungainly Skull rented sundry human parts and a full outfit of fine clothes and matching accessories, and was transformed automatically into a "Complete Gentleman." He made straight for the market and engaged in commerce with genuine human beings. There was a certain vain lady, described as "very beautiful as an angel," who casually dismissed every suiter as ineligible and shabby. As soon as she set eyes on the "Complete Gentleman," she abandoned her wares and trailed him in the busy market. She was enamoured of the "Gentleman" and followed him home. The concomitant "reversal of fortune" whereby the "Gentleman" systematically returned all his borrowed anatomy until he became an ordinary Skull once more, is of course well known. Upon reaching home, the unsentimental Skull clamped the maiden in bondage. Eventually, she was rescued by the "Palmwine Drinkard" and was brought back safely to her father. In gratitude, the lady's father gave her to the rescuer in marriage. Later on, an abnormal thing happened, as the Drinkard narrates:

... when I completed three and a half years in that town, I noticed that the left hand thumb of my wife was swelling out as if it was a buoy, but it did not pain her. One day, she followed me to the farm in which I was tapping the palmwine, and to my surprise when the thumb that swelled out touched a palm-tree thorn, the thumb bust out suddenly and there we saw a male child came out of it and at the same time that the child came out from the thumb, he began to talk to us as if he was ten years of age.

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Within the hour that he came down from the thumb he grew up to the height of about three feet and some inches and his voice by that time was as plain as if somebody strikes an anvil with a steel hammer. Then the first thing that he did, he asked his mother, "Do you know my name?" His mother said no, then he turned his face to me and asked the same question and I said no; so, he said that his name was "ZURRJIR ..."¹

This child became an instant threat to his parents. He drank up all the palm-wine, and even as the alarmed parents were plotting to abandon him in the forest, he had already found his way home and consumed the family lunch in the kitchen. He swooped on the food reserved for supper and when a man sought to restrain him, the wonder child laid the full-sized adult low and thrashed him thoroughly. Enraged, everybody in the household descended on the boy; but he conquered all of them, smashing all property within his reach, including livestock. Now uncontrollable, he became the ruler of the house. He became a local nuisance and went around burning down houses. He was a scourge. One day, in the dead of night, the beleaguered parents set their home ablaze while the child was sleeping, and fled the town. Naturally, the child was presumed dead and charred. Before long, the Drinkard's wife decided to return to the burnt house to retrieve her gold trinket. As she was poking the ashes, the "half-bodied" child materialized from the rubble and forced his mother to carry him on her head and continue her journey. The Drinkard and his wife were thus compelled to carry the "half-bodied baby" in turns; and he menaced them further by eating up all the food they bought along the road. Famished and confounded, the distressed couple trudged on with their painful burden.

This anecdote is a practical illustration of the meaning and terribleness of Zurrjir. Zurrjir is an Incubus, a blood-curdling horror. As far as his parents are concerned, he is not an imaginary being, the type one sees in dreams induced by flatulence and immoderate ingestion of liquor. Zurrjir is a visible distress, an annoying shame and encumberance weighing down his parents like an accursed millstone. The effect of Zurrjir's existence on his parents is untold mental agony as well as physical weariness and tedium. In short, Zurrjir constitutes a serious psychosomatic danger to his parents.

The thrust of this paper is that English language is Nigeria's Zurrjir. I do not think that this is an original or even startling revelation; I am only using a new analogue or metaphor for expressing an old idea. The English language came to Nigeria through an irregular, illegitimate route, like Zurrjir. Yet it has straddled us; and we carry it, in spite of ourselves, even at the risk of being strangled. The English language is Nigeria's nightmare; it conditions the thinking of the Nigerian elite, influences their utterances and determines their actions. The language has, as it were, secured them firmly on its Westminster leash. Like Pavlov's dogs, their mouths are always watering and leaking grammar, and they are proud to be her majesty's cultural guard in John Bull's other Island. It is no surprise that Udo Akpan, the Nigerian A.D.O. in T. M. Aluko's One Man One Matchet talks and acts like a white expatriate. He is appropriately called a "black white man."

If the English language has enslaved the elite, it has equally become a source of sorrow to the ill-educated Nigerians. This teeming population of embarrassed people would normally have preferred to use the vernacular or Pidgin for communication; but because of "official demands," they are forced to use English. This unhappy group includes primary school leavers and illequipped secondary school graduates, mediocre undergraduates and prospective graduates of the "Open University," police recruits and army privates, self-taught technicians and "Managing Directors" of "Groups of Companies," import and export businessmen and itinerant salesmen, manufacturer's representatives and insurance brokers: small-scale industrialists, contractors, suburban politicians and all those who speak English with about as much ability as a disgruntled butcher would perform an operation for appendicitis. Indeed, according to Bala Usman, "very few Nigerians use English in ordinary life (perhaps 100,000 in a nation of 60 million) and they often cannot express their important feelings and ideas in it."2

In his nationalistic argument in favour of mother-tongue education, Professor Afolayan described the Nigerian situation whereby English rides rough-shod over indigenous languages, as "the incubus of linguistic enslavement." Understandably, Professor Afolayan sees the English language as a Zurrjir that has enslaved the mentality of Nigerians and held the people's culture hostage. Pursuing further, Afolayan declares that the Yoruba who is thoroughly versed in his language, culture, and economy and who can consequently live a very useful and happy life, is indeed an educated man — even if he does not know a word of English.³ Professor Afolayan's thesis is bound to shock and scandalize the entire squeamish population of Nigerian Levites!

In this essay I shall not concern myself directly with the pedagogical question as to whether or not English should be used as Nigeria's official language or the language of literary expression;⁴ nor will I bother to recapitulate the private and public knifethrowing between the upholders and repudiators of English. Rather, I will examine the indirect statements made by some Nigerian writers in their creative works, with a view to demonstrating that although these writers seem on the surface to be at peace with the English language, they are in reality worried at both the conscious and subconscious levels that they may not be doing the best thing after all by creating in English. Nor is this hypothetical guilt reaction surprising, since creating in English or any foreign language for that matter — tends to attenuate the originality of the Nigerian or African writer.⁵ According to James Russell Lowell:

The first postulate of an original literature is that a people should use their language instinctively and unconsciously, as if it were a lively part of their growth and personality, not as the mere torpid boon of education or inheritance.⁶

The Nigerian writer in English is not only likely to feel that he is unoriginal; he is also likely to feel that he is "insincere" or attitudinizing; for, no matter the individual family backgrounds of the present generation of Nigerian writers, all of them acquired English as Lowell's "mere torpid boon of education or inheritance." Originality is a very important matter, and no serious writer can afford to be faulted on the score of originality. Professor Jackson Bate has revealed that the two ideals of "originality" and "sincerity" lie heavily on the shoulders of almost every English-speaking writer, and almost every western writer.⁷

How has the Nigerian artist responded to the demands of originality and sincerity? Christopher Okigbe typifies the latent dissatisfaction of the Nigerian artist with his medium of communication. Early in his career, he seemed to be fully satisfied with his mastery of language of expression and wrote the cryptic privatist poetry of the isolate. He cultivated the allusiveness of the modern European academic poets and appropriated "airs from sources as diverse as Malcolm Cowley, Raja Ratnam, Stephane Mallarmé, Rabindranath Tagore, Garcia Lorca...."⁸ The poet once declared that he didn't write for non-poets. He was quite aware that he was singing "tongue-tied, without name or audience," that he was only "making harmony among the branches." Yet he remained unconcerned with seeking the Africanness of an expression; what interested him was the intrinsic expression, no matter the source of the energy that powered its articulation:

> And who says it matters Which way the kite flows Provided the movement is Around the burning market — *

Towards the end of his career, however, Okigbo becomes disenchanted with his "art for art's sake" pursuits; he can no longer derive any thrill from playing the symbolist pranks of transferring the modality of one thought to another. In humility, the prodigal retraces his steps home, seeking reconnection with his African roots. He spurns his hitherto cherished western individualism and is chilled by the fact that he is the sole witness of his homecoming. The renegade becomes rehabilitated and courts the home audience. He will henceforth attempt to utilize to the utmost the rich resources of the African oral tradition. He frantically wishes to be given back "our hollow heads of long drums," and realizes that "[t]he eye that looks down will surely see the nose."¹⁰

Michael Echeruo is another artist who started off his poetic career with the confident assurance of the erudite scholar who is at home in the western literary tradition. He seems to be wholly satisfied with his language of literary expression. Trained as an Ibadan University graduate of English in the 1960's to value masculine strength and challenging complexity in poetry, he wrote abstract, deeply intellectual personal poetry, the most typical being the hard-boned philosophical disquisition called "Sophia." Echeruo's attitude then seems to be that poetry is not milk for infants and weak-chested people, but dry meat for strong men with distinguished dentition. It is as if the poet is bluffing the reader, challenging him to forge a mental pick-axe for uprooting a defiant stump.

But a significant shift in style is noticeable in Echeruo's later poetry gathered in the collection, *Distanced*.¹¹ The voice is more communal and homely, more immediate, domesticated, sympathetic, and arresting. The language ceases to be the language of polished bookshelves and aluminum carrells and becomes the person-to-person language of the open air. It is apparent that the poet's attitude to language has undergone a marked change. Indeed, even in *Mortality*,¹² the maiden collection that features much of Echeruo's academic poetry, there are occasional indications that the poet has advanced from seeing language merely as a means of personal communication, into seeing it as being also a means of national communication, it was being also a means of national communication, 'Talk, Patter, and Song'' in an apparent mood of "homecoming," the poet feels contrite, renews his pledge of loyalty to his country and regrets that he has been enchanted by the "folksong of a far-away land":

> But the love I swore to you, My country, That only will I keep. You only can feed me from the harvest Of our mother's pot.¹³

Kalu Uka is a poet who began by toying with word sounds. He regards "wild to weird as a matter of sound," and attempts to weld Eliot, Okigbo, and Soyinka together, and melt their styles simultaneously into his poetry. This sort of sound-and-sense exercise, which Peter Farb might call "wordplay," can best be undertaken by someone, presumably a specialist, who is so satisfied with the language he is using that he feels inspired to further explore its possibilities. It is therefore a rather surprising anticlimax when the poet suddenly recoils from his pleasant divagations and abjures English literary and language studies altogether. He feels that it is an unpatriotic venture for a Nigerian to abandon his rightful duty of building his own culture and stray into the frivolous activity of hunting for the "rare nectar" of other lands:

> The acme of singleness, seated away In alphabetical contemplation of English studies. A Nigerian private in English verbiage, Permutation of scenes not seen in England Doing battle in cultural rescue Leaving themselves no time to pray¹⁴

As a Romantic poet and a cultural primitivist, Gabriel Okara is deeply interested in language and seriously concerned with the process of "communicating an idea to the reader in the absolute state in which it was conceived." Since his aim is to de-emphasize English, he endeavours in his words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, he had to eschew the habit of expressing his thoughts first in English. Rather, he first expressed himself in Ijo.15 Like Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass in its time, Okara's The Voice is a "language experiment." The Voice bespeaks Okara's disenchantment with English language and his groping for an alternative expression that will highlight the Africanness of the writer. He is anxious to recapture and rehabilitate our past and nullify or expose the falseness of Europe's presumptuous claim to have "civilized" Africa. Okolo, the hero of The Voice, is an idealistic youth who is committed to precision of thought, feeling, and language.

The "spoken words" of Okolo's father, not political doctrines lifted from books, are one of the major impulses for the youth's rebellion. Okolo has always been conscious of his ethnic identity and has always cherished the accumulated tribal wisdom which he received as a birthright from his revered ancestors. Refuting the timid and rather defeatist logic of the sullen and sceptical Tebeowei, Okolo remarks emphatically:

Our fathers' insides always contained things straight. They did straight things. Our insides were also clean and we did the straight things until the new time came. We can still sweep the dirt out of our houses every morning.¹⁶

Okolo is here emphasizing the "straightness" and "cleanness" of mind which is the hallmark of the genuine traditional African. The authentic traditionalist is expected to keep his mind straight, uncomplicated, and clean. His words are always plain and simple because he is always truthful and honest. He lacks "diplomacy" because he has no need for prevarication and doubletalk. The implication of this is that a worthy African who is truly publicspirited and "straight" should speak to his people in the native language they can understand. Only when the African becomes crooked and westernized, only when he turns into a career politician, does he need to resort to a foreign language for the purposes of dissimulation and diplomatic mass deceit. Okolo never loses sight of the deep gulf between the two speech registers. He uses Standard English while talking to a white man in Sologa but sticks to the vernacular while addressing his own people. As Emmanuel Ngara has correctly noted:

Although he is educated, Okolo does not use the white man's language, when talking to his own people. He uses an English which echoes the language of the people's fathers and thus demonstrates, even in the language he speaks, that he wants to preserve the good traditions of his people.¹⁷

Chinua Achebe is a nationalistic writer who, right from the onset of his career, has been conscious of his paternity and the anomalousness of a Nigerian writer using "Queen's English" for literary expression. He has on several occasions commented on the need for the African to domesticate the English language. His adoption of a simple and direct narrative style is part of his calculated strategy to keep as close as possible to homespun natural speech. One of his early short stories, "Chike's School Days," seems to me to be a semi-autobiographical piece in which he records his decision to adopt a sincere, modest style. The hero of the story is a young boy who, like most Nigerians of the period, was "brought up in the ways of the white man; which meant the opposite of tradition." Chike hated Arithmetic, "but he loved stories and songs. He liked particularly the sound of English words, even when they conveyed no meaning at all. Some of them simply filled him with elation." Chike seems to have acquired this taste for highfalutin words from his teacher whose "favourite pastime was copying out jaw-breaking words from his *Chamber's Etymological Dictionary.*" In other words, Chike and his teacher contracted that laughable habit of the westernized African which Professor Ali Mazrui calls "linguistic exhibitionism."¹⁸

However, Chike soon recoils from his teacher's example. It seems that he has all along been ruminating on words, brooding over language. Words begin to have for him a fairyland quality of a different kind. This fairyland quality is *simplicity*, and he got it from his *New Method Reader*. It filled him with a vague exultation. It is going to alter his entire career: "Once there was a wizard. He lived in Africa. He went to China to get a lamp." The youth is enthralled and makes a song of it. Simplicity becomes "a window through which he saw in the distance a strange, magical new world."¹⁹ Incidentally, *simplicity* is the key to the secret power and charm of the oral tradition.

Although critics have commented extensively on the religious and metaphysical nature of Professor's quest for the Word in *The Road*, they have largely failed to associate the Word with language. And yet in the figure of Professor, Soyinka seriously examines, albeit obliquely, the African's lamentable linguistic predicament. Viewed from this new perspective, Professor is not an "intellectual fraud" and his life is not "meaningless," as Professor S. E. Ogude contends.²⁰

Professor is Soyinka's subtle disclosure of the etiolation and heat-wave that is bound to afflict those who set about designing a tropical house on a temperate model and building it from the top downwards. Professor is the Nigerian version of Mista Courifer, that unabashed imitator of European ways, so memorably sketched by Adelaide Casely-Hayford.²¹ Like Mista Courifer, Professor dresses formally, like a Victorian gentleman. If his outfit is "thread-bare and shiny at the lapels from much ironing," it is only intended to symbolize the anachronism and foreignness of his orientation. Like a Victorian, he lives between two worlds, the one dead, the other virtually impossible to be born.

It should be noted that Professor began his career as a perfectionist. He so much pursued purism that it became an idée-fixe. "He would go up after service and correct the organist where he went wrong." He cherishes propriety and exactitude in the use of English language. He is an orator, and guards jealously the euphony and sonorousness of English words. Indeed, he is, to use Okigbo's metaphor, the "watchman for the watchword" at grammar's gate. Actually, Professor's early quarrel with his bishop arose from his point of view on grammar. Recounting the incident, Samson, imitating Professor "[whips out his notebook and stabs it with furious notes.]" He adds: "That means serious grammatical error. Bishop done trow bomb!"22 When Professor carries "four enormous bundles of newspaper," this should not be seen as a mere mark of eccentricity. He is actually taking an inventory by observing the health and progress of words; for as we learn from Danlola and his group in Soyinka's Kongi's Harvest, "there's a harvest of words in a penny newspaper."23

But Professor soon realizes that he has been pursuing a dead end; that moribund English culture and starched language have invested him with a schizoid personality. Although Professor's speech is lofty and possesses all the "transport" recommended by Longinus, he nevertheless recognizes eventually that he needs to master the fresh, well-ventilated, home-made speech of his own people. This is why the hitherto punctilious gentleman erects a shack on which is displayed an all-time shocker for grammarians: "AKSIDENT STORE — ALL PART AVAILEBUL." The purist has polluted himself! He has come to accept that true language ought to be simple and sincere and functional and should not be placed beyond the reach of those it is meant to serve. He has thus placed his stamp of approval on what Professor Mahood calls "writing that would make dramatic use of the lively speech of those who are semi-literate in English."²⁴

It seems therefore, from the foregoing, that the Nigerian writer has not settled with any finality the cultural question regarding his use of English language for literary expression. J. P. Clark's assertion that the English language "is a positive step back from Babel's house of many tongues,"²⁵ tends to give the false impression that English has been accepted as a fortunate alternative to the "accursed" indigenous languages.

Of course, the issue is far from settled; the problem is far from solved. It is doubtful whether any Nigerian writer can be so enthused over English as to shout the slogan of Keats that "English must be kept up"; or make the kind of pronouncement which Wordsworth made out of cultural and linguistic pride:

> We must be free or die, who speak the tongue That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold Which Milton held.²⁶

No matter how intimately the Nigerian writer has befriended English, he still has the nagging feeling that in improving English he is in fact promoting an alien culture and carrying "the white man's burden."

Let us return to the metaphor of Zurrjir again. In Tutuola's story, the three creatures that freed the Drinkard and his wife from the strangling hold of the "half-bodied baby" are Drum, Song, and Dance. Zurrjir quickly released his hold on his parents as soon as he sighted Drum, Song, and Dance. Drum, Song, and Dance are really the distinctive qualities of Africa. They are the qualities of orality and gesture; the factors responsible for African suppleness and rhythm, verbal spontaneity and paralanguage. They are precisely the qualities which Professor in *The Road* lacks, as a result of his being hidebound in the rigidity of the English print culture. He cannot sing and dance, having become a "lead tethered scribe," like J. P. Clark's persona in "Agbor Dancer."

As a concluding illustration of how the right language can liberate us and how an African-based language can combine the essences of Drum, Song, and Dance, let us quote in entirety a poem by Bayo Sobanje-Fuwape, a young Nigerian writer from Ijebu-Ode.

MY PIDGIN

Tricklish pidgin Hilarious tongue: With lucid brain

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Repository of pathetic Laughs! My pidgin! Lexicon at finger-tips (No recondite explorations into the labyrinths of astral meanings) Nuances from low earth. Pidgin, Fathered by anathema Fostered by plebeian earth! Ambitious language, With an eloquent today Tongue that goes out of its way, To woo the hearer, He invites philosophy to jocular discourse And grates on officious ears! O pidgin! Linguistic of bravity Researcher of precis Smile to pidgin he go answer with tears Cry to pidgin He go holler back Like a hyena on the crest of laugh! My pidgin! Brusque handler of queen's english Sour of souls Detractor of nasal sounds! My pidgin!27

Further commentary would be superfluous!

NOTES

- ¹ Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), pp. 31-32.
- ² Yusufu Bala Usman, For The Liberation of Nigeria (London: New Beacon Books, 1979), p. 206.
- ³ A. Afolayan, "Mother-Tongue in the education of the Yoruba child." Paper read at the Seminar on Yoruba Oral Tradition in Poetry, Music, Dances, and Drama: Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, 1974. Quoted from Nduka Okoh, "Plurilinguality/Pluriculturality as tools in the development of a healthy Nigerian Personality." Paper read at the national seminar on "Culture and Personality in Nigeria" held at Kaduna, September 13-18, 1982.
- ⁴ For an exhaustive treatment of the problem of a national language for Nigeria and an upbraiding of Nigerian elites for equivocating on the

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matter, see Michael C. Onwuemene, "Empires and Vernaculars: The Future of the Nigerian Mother Tongues." Paper presented at the *Modern Languages Association of Nigeria* held at Benin City, March 27-29, 1980.

- ⁷ Catherine Acholonu has mauled Charles Nnolim, saying that "one gets the impression that Nnolim is only at home with the English novel. Often his criticism makes useless analogies between these and the African novels." See "The Wild Geese: Good/Bad Critics of the African Literary Scene." Paper presented at the 6th Annual *MLAN* conference at Calabar, April 20-21, 1983. Actually, novels written by Africans in English cannot entirely escape the sort of critical treatment to which Achelonu objects. Adrian Roscoe has stated categorically that "if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinized accordingly." See *Mother Is Gold* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, (1971), x.
- ⁶ Lowell, *The Biglow Papers* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1898), p. 212.
- ⁷ W. Jackson Bate, The Burden of the Past and the English Poet (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), p. 107.
- ⁸ Christopher Okigbo, Labyrinths (London: Heinemann, 1971), xii.
- ⁹ Labyrinths, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Labyrinths, pp. 45, 67.
- ¹¹ Michael Echeruo, Distanced (Enugu: I.K. Imprints, 1975).
- ¹² Echeruo, Mortality (London: Longman, 1968).
- ¹³ Mortality, pp. 27-28.
- ¹⁴ Kalu Uka, Earth to Earth (New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1972), pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁵ Gabriel Okara, "African Speech ... English Words," Transition, 4 (September 1963), 15-16.
- ¹⁶ Gabriel Okara, The Voice (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 50.
- ¹⁷ E. Ngara, Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 51.
- ¹⁸ See Ali Mazrui, "Some Socio-political Functions of English Literature in Africa," in Fishman, J. et al. (eds.): Language Problems of Developing Nations (New York: Wiley, 1968), pp. 183-97.
- ¹⁹ Achebe, "Chike's School Days," in Girls at War (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp. 35-40.
- ²⁰ S. E. Ogude, "Professor, The Word and the Problem of Meaning in Soyinka's *The Road*," *Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria*, No. 1 (1981), pp. 52-65.
- ²¹ Casely-Hayford, "Mista Courifer," in An African Treasury, Langston-Hughes, ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1960), pp. 134-43. Professor E. Obiechina has described the mentality typified by Mista Courifer, as "Couriferism."
- ²² Wole Soyinka, "The Road," in *Collected Plays*, Volume I (London: OUP, 1973), p. 163.

- 23 Wole Soyinka, Kongi's Harvest (London, OUP, 1967), p. 1.
- ²⁴ M. Mahood, The Place of English Studies in an African University (Ibadan: Ibadan Univ. Press, 1955), p. 3.
- ²⁵ J. P. Clark, Introduction to A Reed in the Tide (London: Longman, 1965), viii.
- ²⁶ William Wordsworth, "Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty," XVI.
- 27 Okike, No. 13 (January 1979), p. 19.