

# The Language Question and the Use of Paremiography in Modern African Literature: A Case Study of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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## Abstract

This paper endeavours to shed some light on the issue of language and the modern African writer. The core concern of this paper is not, however, whether it is significant for African writers to use European languages or African languages in their creative works. On the main, the paper wishes to explore the extent to which the use of transliterated proverbs in African writing contribute to the rekindling of African value systems as well as the affirmation of African indigenous knowledge systems. The analysis of the two texts will be confined to how Achebe and Soyinka abrogate the English language to infuse African speech acts as well as African cosmology through the extensive use of paremiography (proverbial language). The selection of these two texts is intentional in that they project African worldviews in a manner that can contribute to the current debate on the 'decolonisation of education' in South Africa as they negate the subordination of African values and cultures.

**Keywords:** African literature, paremiography, proverbs, African languages, African Renaissance, decolonisation of education.

## Introduction

Can African Literature truly be called 'African' when it is written in a foreign language? The corollary to this perennial question is the ostensible tautology

in the appellation ‘African literature in African languages’ (Owomoyela 1993: 347). Some are of the view that ‘naturally’ African literatures should be written in African languages because ‘African literature in English or French or Portuguese’ is a contradiction in terms (Wali 1963: 14). The use of the signifiers ‘English’, ‘French’ and ‘Portuguese’ poses a serious challenge for the critics of African literature regarding what is being read and analysed in African literature that is written in Europhonic languages.

This paper argues that there is no simple answer to the impasse over which language should be used to express the African cosmology better. The paper notes that as Africa is a continent and not a country (Adesanmi 2011), there is no single ‘African’ language (Kunene 1992: 7), due to the multi-ethnic composition of its peoples (Amuta 1989: 113; Saro-Wiwa 1992: 155), as well as the legacy of colonialism and the retention of the Berlin-drawn borders (Arnove 1993; Breytenbach 1999). My argument is couched in Achebe’s adage that even though he uses the English language to convey his message to a wider (albeit Anglophone) African audience, he does so in a language that carries the burden of his African experience.

To explore this notion of ‘Africanising’ the English language, I examine the use of paremiography in Chinua Achebe’s novel, *No Longer at Ease*, and Wole Soyinka’s play, *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The analysis of these two texts will be confined to issues that pertain to the use of paremiography and *transliterated* proverbs from the Igbo and Yoruba languages that are used by Achebe and Soyinka respectively. In the background section the paper will also consider the avoidance of ‘epistemic violence’ in university curricular offering through the process of ‘decolonisation’ of the university curricula.

## **Background, Aims and Rationale**

There is currently a growing interests in *reviving*<sup>1</sup> African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS), especially so in African academies. This move is

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<sup>1</sup> The prefix ‘re’ is of special significance here, since it symbolises the rediscovery of lost or suppressed indigenous knowledge and to divest it of any distortions expressed in the colonial education system and the colonial project at large. It also points out to the regeneration of African knowledge systems from the caverns of obscurity.

consonant with the concerns raised by some scholars in endeavouring to ‘decolonise’ the Eurocentric ‘epistemic violence’ wrought about by a curriculum ‘which remains largely Eurocentric and continues to reinforce white and Western dominance and privilege while at the same time being full of stereotypes, prejudices and patronising views about Africa and its people’ (Heleta 2016: 2).

Most researchers in the area of AIKS often cite the former president of South Africa’s momentous speech ‘I am an African’ (Mbeki 1998), which set the tone for identity and cultural *rediscovery* and *reflection* for Africans. Mbeki’s speech centres on the concept of African *Renaissance*. Initially enunciated by the Senegalese scholar and philosopher, Cheik Anta Diop, the ideals of African Renaissance ‘envisaged a marked shift in the form of African consciousness on which African unity, *renewal* and development can be based’ (Maposa 2016: 5). The keywords worth noting in the preceding quotation are ‘consciousness’ and ‘renewal’. The purpose of raising a people’s awareness about their contribution to ancient and modern civilisations will inexorably lead to the *renewal* and *regeneration* of their sense of *Being*, and disavow the distortion and description of their history as a ‘void’ prior to the advent of Europeans, as Hegel put it (Hughes-Warrington 2008: 149). This, it is hoped, will result in the *restoration* and *revival* of their human dignity, the belief in themselves as intelligent beings. This will further raise their self-esteem, and obliterate the resultant inferiority complexes that are (arguably) instilled by the extant discursive practices of the geopolitical West and further propagated by the colonial education, the purpose of which, ‘was to promote white supremacy and develop the white youth to maintain and further expand colonial society’ (Heleta 2016: 2). In concurrence with Heleta (2016), Appiah (1992) notes:

When the colonialist attempted to tame the threatening cultural alterity of the African (whether through what the French call *assimilation* or through the agency of missionary ‘conversion’), the instrument of pedagogy was their formidable weapon.... Colonial education, in short, produced a generation immersed in the literature of the colonizers, a literature that often reflected and transmitted the imperialist vision (55).

Currently, advocates of ‘decolonisation of education’ stress the need

to ‘completely *rethink, reframe and reconstruct* the Eurocentric and colonial curriculum and teaching methods at universities’ (Heleta 2016: 2). Heleta’s sentiments are akin to the experience that the ‘colonial subjects’ faced when required to absorb ‘the colonial world of knowledge acquisition’ at school as a prerequisite for them to enter into the ‘gentry’ world of ‘scientific’ discovery and ‘progress’. ‘We forget such inanities’ Nnaemeka (2002: 365) recalls, ‘at the peril of our educational advancement’. By implication, their worldviews and culture were subordinated to the cultural imperialism of Western values they had to ‘absorb’, as Nnaemeka (2002: 366) further attests:

No one bothered to ask us how we view knowledge, its formation and articulation; no one bothered to find out if we draw frames for knowledge (framework); no one cared to find out if our journey with and into knowledge is an ever-evolving, boundless love affair that sweeps us along with our neighbors, our ancestors, and those we have neither met nor ‘read’ (*‘ndi banyi si/our people said’* not *‘ndi banyi delu/our people wrote’*).

Even though, Nnaemeka (2002) reminisces about the educational system of the colonial past, the current education system still upholds Western ethos, in curricular offering, while propagating patronising and paternalist (Jeyifo 1990) views about African indigenous knowledge systems. This results in the production of African educated elite who are ‘complicit’ in the ‘oppression of traditional African knowledge systems’ (Mkhize 2004: 33). Nnaemeka (1995: 86) calls them, ‘Africans who are well-groomed by Western universities in the magic of Western thought but who have deliberately refused to register in the university of the African village’. The root cause of the latter assertion may be largely attributed to the fact that although ‘educated’, the African elite were (and remain) excluded from participating in advancing a critical discourse of their own culture and civilisation, what Nnaemeka (1995) allegorically refers to as the ‘university of the African village’. This often results in what Vilakazi (1999) conceives as the ‘Europeanisation of the educated African’. ‘Europeans in Africa’, Vilakazi (1999: 203) argues, ‘remained European, and educated Africans became Europeanised’.

A case in point was the persistent refusal to publish A.C. Jordan’s seminal novel, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya*, by the missionary-controlled Lovedale Press, under the directorship and editorship of Robert H.W. Shepherd. The

‘reasoning’ behind the reluctance to publish this novel is that it propounded and apotheosised ‘heathen’ ideas (Opland 1990). The manuscript was submitted in 1938, and after its eventual publication in 1940, *Inqumbo* was still castigated for ‘apparently’ foregrounding ‘certainly [a] triumph... for the backward people’ over and above ‘the progressive Christian party’ (Opland 1990: 141). Some held the view that the novel’s ‘weakness’ is registered in its ending, wherein ‘forces of evil, paganism and reaction, win ...’ (Shepherd 1955: 179). Indigenous African readers of this novel are likely to hold a divergent view, in that what is perceived by the European missionaries as ‘pagan’ or ‘backwardness’ is, in fact, what is called *situatedness*, a concept first broached by Jeyifo that entails ‘a political grounding... of critical discourse’ (qtd. in Nnaemeka 1995: 81).

In my opinion, ‘situatedness’ goes further than the views expressed by Jeyifo, and encapsulates an entire cosmology of a people, and propagates an indigenous system of thought and culture from the insiders who are firmly rooted in their cultural world. What I read in the novel is neither barbaric nor atavistic, but consonant with what is common cultural practice in my ‘situatedness’ in African systems of thought. I also read the historical aspect of the novel in its *revisioning* of African traditional precepts from an insider who is immersed in his cultural location. In short, the novel showcases the dire consequences of the degeneration of African worldviews and belief systems by the educated elite. The ultimate committing of suicide by the ‘schooled’ protagonist and his equally ‘educated’ wife is merely a metaphor that speaks to the eclipse of African indigenous knowledge systems propagated by those who uncritically embrace Western value systems, the African educated elite, ‘who readily assimilated missionary education in the hope of joining the millenarian society implicit in the promise of civilisation and Christianity...’ (de Kock 1996: 27).

Jordan therefore writes and projects what he knows and, in the novel, shows his ‘deep knowledge of the [amaXhosa] custom and ways of speech’ (Opland 1990: 141). It is probable that the complaint that both the missionaries and the then Cape Province Education Administration had with the novel emanated from the fact that it depicts African cosmology positively in its avowal of the ‘contribution of African literature’ to the African Renaissance project in ‘affirming positive values for Africans’ (see Vambe 2010: 258). In addition, Jordan’s novel showcases the complexity of the African worldview, and a politically ordered and democratic society, which is at variance with

colonists' and imperialists' condescending attitudes to Africa's sophisticated (read: *civilised*) culture, governance, and economic systems prior to the 'civilising mission', thought to have been introduced by the benevolent missionaries (see de Kock 1996: 65). Consequently *Ingqumbo* received,

... a less enthusiastic response from official sources: on November 21, 1940, the Controller of Stores in the Department of the Administrator, Cape Province, writes with regret to inform Shepherd that 'the Department is not prepared to accept for inclusion in the catalogue of books and requisites approved for use in the primary schools your publication 'Ingqumbo Yeminyanya' [*sic*]...' (Opland 1990: 141).

Undaunted by these negative reviews, in his reply to numerous implorations and his resolute refusal to alter the ending of this epic novel 'to give it a different and more happy ending' (Shepherd 1955: 179), Jordan gave this curt response: 'This is how it came to me' (in Shepherd 1955: 179).

It is, therefore, on the basis of the views expressed in the preceding paragraphs that this paper seeks to explore how African literary texts of fiction have been instrumental in *re*visioning history, and contributing quite significantly in the advancement of AIKS by educating the prodigious education of the African child through proverbs and aphorisms. African literature is one of the disciplines in AIKS that have been at the forefront of the battle to *re*store and *re*novate indigenous knowledge systems, especially so the earlier (often read: 'canonical') writers. As one commentator puts it, 'Pre-independence literature was largely characterised by [a] concern with Africa's plight in relation to European influence and consisted of protest against domination, calls for unity against the oppressor and assertion of the African's right to self-determination' (Jones 1996: 1). The main objectives of earlier African literature were, by-and-large, about (w)ri(gh)ting the wrongs of the past, as Ogude (1999: 1) asserts: 'Earlier African narratives have always been seen as writing against colonial discursive practices in an attempt to validate Africa's historiography denied by colonialism'. Hence this project entailed '*recovery or reaffirmation of [African] values*' (Harrow 1994: 75&76).

This paper also intends to demonstrate that the African child's education prior to centuries of slavery and colonialism, and contrary to popular belief, was very intricate, sophisticated, rational, substantive, visionary, philosophical and, in many ways, universal in its dissection of human essence

and life in general. Both texts to be analysed in this paper contain all these elements of indigenous education. The reference to these ‘canonical’ texts (as opposed to more recent/contemporary ones) is deliberate, as both Achebe and Soyinka belong to the generation of writers whose project was to *rekindle* the (almost) lost knowledge of indigenes, and to shatter the chains of mental slavery and colonisation, especially as far as African indigenous youth are concerned. In both texts, the main characters are young people, suggesting that they are largely aimed at changing the mind-set of Africa’s youth from the negative purviews they may have imbibed regarding indigenous wisdom and education through the curriculum of ‘colonial’ education, which remains a challenge (Heleta 2016; Mkhize 2004).

The other symbolic factor is that both protagonists are educated in England, ironically, the very centre of imperialism. Upon their return from England, their reactions to indigenous traditional values and cultural mores are diametrically opposed. Obi, the tragic hero of Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, is portrayed as having subliminally espoused Western values and, as a consequence, abandons the traditional values and the indigenous wisdom of his society, which results in his perilous downfall. Olunde, the hero of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, although in the process of training as a doctor in England, *regenerates*, supports and adheres to the age-old traditional cultural practices of his community, as opposed to Obi’s *degeneration* of the self-same.

In the next section, I give a summarised background on the educational and practical uses of proverbs in traditional (or indigenous) settings, using African traditional contexts as an example. I then explore the most prominent features of proverbial language used in Achebe’s novel and Soyinka’s play.

## **The Educational and Practical Uses of Paremiography in Traditional Settings**

Proverbs in traditional/indigenous (African) settings are a way of instructing people against vices and to direct them towards virtuous living. Before the Western-styled schooling system was implemented, children and the young acquired and learnt by listening to their elders (Adedimeji n.d.). The purpose of proverbs is varied, as it encapsulates children’s education, arguing legal matters and providing advice (Ngalande 2014). More elaborately, proverbs can function as tools of language that can be categorised as **rhetorical** (to persuade,

impress or influence), **axiological**, (to tell a story or incident that imparts cultural values to the listener), **didactic** (moral lessons about virtues and vices) and **analytic/epistemological** (imparting of verifiable cosmological and philosophical knowledge) (Adedimeji n.d.: 14; Nwachukwu-Agbada 1994: 194; Soares 2010: 161-62).

At a more global level, proverbs are seen as windows to the broader cosmology of a given society ‘through which we can view a particular society’ (Ngalande 2014: 53), and that the ‘meaning evoked’ is ‘always socially constituted and context related’ (Simelane-Kalumba *et al.* 2014: 54). Furthermore, ‘The use of proverbs is a social mode of communication which has a dominant role in most African societies’ (Penfield and Duru 1988: 119). It would be a grave oversight, however, to confine or relegate the study of proverbs in African literary arts to a ‘quasi-anthropological perspective... in search of preserved traditional African values, very much perceived as immutable’ (Vambe and Rwafa 2011: 1). Proverbs, like languages, are dynamic, and new proverbs are often coined to respond to various contemporary societal processes. One such example is the critiquing of gender relations, as demonstrated by Helen Yitah (2012: 9) about how northern Ghanaian women from the Kasena community ‘take advantage of a socially sanctioned medium, the joking relationship that pertains between a Kasena woman and her husband’s kin, to subvert and contradict existing Kasem proverbs or create new ones’. More than this, ‘Like stories and legends, proverbs have been a source of literary inspiration for modern African writers’ (Wautheir in Tae-Sang 1999: 84), and ‘In no aspect of its form is the African novel more ‘oral’ and ‘traditional’ than in its use of proverbs’ (Obiechina 1993: 124).

In the subsequent subsections, I review some of the prominent proverbs used in *No Longer at Ease* and *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The purpose of reviewing the paremiographical use is twofold: (1) to demonstrate the extent to which Anglophone African literary works borrow and rely on African traditional wisdom, and (2) the manner in which English language had to be twisted to accommodate the source language from which these proverbs emanate.

### **‘A man should not, out of pride and etiquette, swallow his phlegm’: *No Longer at Ease***

Achebe’s second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, appraised as ‘greatly inferior to



his first [*Things Fall Apart*] in range of conception and intensity of realisation' by Eustace Palmer (1972: 63), is set in the three years preceding independence in Nigeria, and was published in the year of its 'independence' from Britain (1960). The plot revolves around the tragic hero, Obi, who is, symbolically, the grandson of Okwonkwo, the tragic hero of *Things Fall Apart*. The tragic circumstances of these two characters are different, yet in some significant ways, very similar. Okwonkwo's downfall is due largely to his pride and pig-headedness, as is that of Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, of whom the villagers have come to accept that he is 'a very foolish and self-willed young man' (5). The extreme pride they both exhibit 'violate the basic communal values' of their societies (Shelton 1969: 90). The difference between the two characters is only in the circumstances and contextual setting rather than in substance. They exhibit similar hubris in their arrogance and stubbornness. This further demonstrates that their downfall is not due to situational factors, but rather to their own flawed character disposition, which manifests more poignantly in the character portrayal of Obi.

As much as he desires to obliterate the vices (corruption in particular) endemic in his society, Obi is, ironically, a character who is neither *influenced* nor *influential*. First, he is sent on a scholarship organised by Umuofia Progressive Union to study law 'so that when he returned he could handle all their land cases against their neighbours' (6). Instead, without soliciting anyone's views and advice, he changes his study to English literature. The villagers acquiesce to this, despite their indignation, as 'his self-will was not new' to them (6).

On his return, after just under four years in England, he comes back armed, not only with an honours degree in English, but also with a 'theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities' (35). In his impetuosity to change the Nigerian society, he forgets one fundamental Igbo proverb that, '*Whenever Something Stands, Something Else Will Stand Beside It*' (Achebe 2011: 6). This proverb is meant to caution people against both individualism and extremism. Extremism, Achebe (2011) notes, leads to an action that isolates a person from the cultural source of his or her very being, whereas the middle ground is more communal and accommodating of divergent views. Achebe (2011) further notes: 'When the Igbo encounter human conflict, their first impulse is not to determine who is right but quickly to restore harmony' (6), and to achieve amicable resolution to any form of conflict that may bring

discord to the harmony of the larger community (Agbájé 2002).

In contrast, Obi's extreme individualism often results in discordance rather than harmony. The elders of Umuofia are, however, always willing to make amends with Obi's waywardness. When he is in dire financial straits and unable to afford his standard of living, he requests further financial assistance from the Umuofia Progressive Union, which results in other members being quite indignant that 'there was no reason why the Union should worry itself over the trouble of a prodigal son who had shown great disrespect to it only a little while ago' as well as that they 'have already done too much for him' (4). To woo the hearts and minds of the people, the Chairman of the Union falls back on the didacticism and wisdom of the Igbo proverb: '*Anger against a brother [is] felt in the flesh not in the bone*' (4; see also 87); and that '*The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush*' (5).

These proverbs are used to establish harmony and to maintain social cohesion in the community, rather than to cast aspersion on Obi. Despite this wealth of wisdom, Obi's endeavours to root out corruption in his community and country at large are to no avail, because he does not learn from the wisdom of his people, despite the view that, 'When the time for warning comes the men of Umuofia could be trusted to give it in full measure, pressed down and flowing over' (5). This wisdom lies in the use of proverbs, which Obi understands, but is 'not at ease' with most aspects of his society due to the consequence of him being a 'been-to' (Palmer 1979: 76) who 'has adopted some alien ideals, such as extreme individualism' and this character trait causing him to 'become personally alienated from the *values* of his people' (Shelton 1969: 92). The 'values' from which he has alienated himself are captured in the aphorisms used throughout the novel.

One of the traits in Obi's character is his impetuosity, which is highlighted throughout the novel, which the people of Umuofia warn him about early on in the novel, during his farewell party to England: '*Do not be in any hurry to rush into the pleasures of the world like the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come*' (10). This proverb is also proleptic, as it foreshadows Obi's alacrity to assert his extreme individualism, which he assumes throughout the novel and which becomes a contributing factor to his downfall. For instance, when he is caught taking a bribe, one elder points out: '*Obi tried to do what everyone does without finding out how it was done*' (5); and that he behaved like the proverbial 'house

*rat who went swimming with his friend the lizard and dies from cold, for while the lizard's scales kept him dry the rat's hairy body remained wet*' (5). This proverb alludes to Obi's self-will and his inability to listen to the advice of others, therefore remaining *uninfluenced*.

Like all conventional tragic heroes, Obi is fully aware of the dangers of extreme pride and individualism, as he ironically notes during one of his speeches to the Union:

*Our fathers also have a saying about the danger of living apart. They say it is the curse of the snake. If all snakes live together in one place, who would approach them? But they live everyone unto himself and so fall easy prey to man* (73).

His individualism is at odds with the principles and values of his society, and while being aware of this weakness, he pays very little heed to it due to his flawed character disposition. This is also brought up in a number of proverbs used in the novel, prime among which are: '*He who has people is richer than he who has money*' (72); '*in a strange land one should always move near one's kinsmen*' (119); '*He that has a brother must hold him to his heart,/For a kinsman cannot be bought in the market,/Neither is a brother bought with money*' (117). These proverbs signify the African philosophy known in Southern African Bantu language group as 'ubuntu'/'botho' (Pityana 1999: 144; Teffo 1999: 149-54). That a person is a person because of other people, what Mbiti calls the notion of, 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (qtd. in Teffo 1999: 153).

It is also emphasised in the novel that a man who refuses to take the advice from others cannot expect others to take his advice, thus also remaining *uninfluential*. Joseph, his 'less educated' friend reminds him: '*You know more book than I, but I am older and wiser. And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his chi to a wrestling match*' (37). Joseph also warns Obi that he is not an island unto himself, that in whatever he does, he must think of the consequences of his action on the wider society and future generations: '*What you are going to do [marry the osu girl] concerns not only yourself but your whole family and future generations. If one finger brings oil it soils all the others*' (67-68). This highlights two aspects of Obi's character in relation to his grandfather in *Things Fall Apart*: 'he turns out to be the culmination of Okonkwo's disastrous **individualism** and **disregard** for **Chukwu** (*chi* in

himself as a person)' (Shelton 1964: 37 [my emphasis]).

Even Obi's 'educated' friend, Christopher feels that it is too rash for anyone to break with traditions in such a radical manner: 'You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore *all* our customs' (130). Christopher's assertion also points to the idea of Obi's inability to *influence* people, because his radical and rash moves shock rather than encourage people to follow in his footsteps. It is not so much that Obi has been overseas that is problematic, it is only his lack of discriminating between what may be suitable for one context and not the other. One elder quips: '*But it is like the palm-wine we drink. Some people can drink it and remain wise. Others lose all their senses*' (44). Obi's espousal of Western ways and his forsaking of traditional systems of thought and behaviour is the target of this proverb. His education in England has made him to lose the 'sense' of who he is as well as his alienating himself from his African roots.

As stated earlier, prototypically, a tragic hero is fully aware of his tragic circumstances, but falls prey to temptation due to his fatal flaw or weakness. One of the many ironies about Obi is that he is fully aware of the significance of the proverbs and their didactic function in his community, but either goes against them or realises their usefulness at a point of no return, when it is too late to amend the damage done. Towards the end of the novel, Obi ponders over the 'root cause' of his problems quite lucidly:

The chief result of the crisis in Obi's life was that it made him examine critically for the first time the mainspring of his actions. And in doing so he uncovered a good deal that he could only regard as sheer humbug. Take this matter of twenty pounds every month to his town union, which in the final analysis was the root cause of all his troubles. Why had he not swallowed his pride and accepted the four months' exemption which he had been allowed, albeit with a bad grace? Could a person in his position afford that kind of pride? Was it not common saying among his people that *a man should not, out of pride and etiquette, swallow his phlegm?* (141).

Although he is 'no longer at ease' with most of his own cultural belief systems, he invokes one of their teachings when he finally realises the magnitude of his difficulties. He paraphrases an earlier stated proverb that

‘anger against a kinsman was felt in the flesh, not in the marrow’ (89). He concludes that he will forthwith stop making repayments to the Union until his financial situation improves, but he will not tell them and ‘give them another opportunity to pry in his affairs’ (141-42). With his pride still a significant hindrance, he uses the proverbial teachings for his selfish ends: ‘They would not take a *kinsman* to court, not for that kind reason anyway’ (142).

Throughout the novel, the attitude of Obi’s kinsmen towards his wilfulness is always reconciliatory and seeks to maintain harmony at all costs. The kinsmen’s major concern is not Obi as an individual, but rather what he represents, the collective Umuofia as ‘*an only palm-fruit*’ that must ‘*not get lost in the fire*’ (6). They are fully aware, as Shelton (1969: 94) correctly observes, that ‘when a person causes trouble, it affects his entire group, his extended family’ as well as his entire community. This is succinctly captured in Joseph’s advice to Obi: ‘*If one finger brings oil it soils all the others*’ (68).

Most of the proverbs used in *No Longer at Ease* fall within the category of educating and giving advice, and provide insight into the ‘spiritual, social, political, and economic characteristics’ (Ngalande 2014: 53) of the Igbo traditional society, as portrayed in the novel. We are also informed that names in Igbo have significant relevance, not only as markers of events, but as rooted in proverbial meaning. We are told that Obi’s full name, Obiajulu, means ‘the mind at last is at rest’, ‘the mind being his father’s of course, who his wife, having borne him four daughters before Obi, was naturally becoming anxious’ (6). Onomasticians have come to note that ‘each proverbial name has an anchor found in proverbs, and if this anchor is lost or forgotten, the meaning is muted’ (Simelane-Kalumba et al. 2014: 54). However, as in the case of Achebe’s novel, the fear of muting this ‘anchor’ of African cosmology may cease to be a constant threat to African traditions if African writers continue to infuse oral traditions in the form of proverbs in their writing, and if critics do not overlook the analysis of this aspect in African literary works.

As I will demonstrate in the following section, proverbs are as important to understanding indigenous knowledge systems as Western philosophy is in understanding the Cartesian individualism of Europeans, *cogito ergo sum*. What African proverbs emphasise and contribute to the understanding of African indigenous knowledge systems, as indicated in Achebe’s novel, is in stark contrast to the Cartesian view of humanity. In an African setting, as demonstrated in Achebe’s novel, ‘proverbs underscore the idea of people – irrespective of gender, race or class – working together, and

in the process supporting, educating and learning from one another' (Nkealah 2016: 67).

**'When the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friends': *Death and the King's Horseman***

Soyinka's drama is described by David Kerr (1995: 121) as often characterised by a 'strong feeling for history and dialectical conflict'. Consequently, Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a tragic play that is based on a historical event that took place in Oyo, Western Nigeria, in 1946. The playwright uses his poetic licence to recreate the event and give it a tragic twist at the end. Historically, the king's horseman, Olokum Esin Jinadu, was delivering a speech in the village of Ikoye, Lagos, when the news of the death of the King of Oyo State, the Alafin Oba Siyenbola Oladigbolu 1, reached him. As a King's horseman who had 'led a traditionally privileged life' (Plastow 2013: xxvii), Olokum was expected to come back and commit ritual suicide to accompany the monarch to the next world. During the festivities of a build-up to the ritual suicide, the British colonial officer heard of the intentions of this festive mood and ordered that Olokum be arrested in a bid to stump out this 'primitive practice'. However, when word of Olokum's arrest reached his son, Murana, he committed ritual suicide in the place of his father.

The plot is similar to the actual historical event, the only difference is registered in the details of the event. The play opens with Elesin getting ready to commit ritual suicide in order to be buried with the king and accompany him into the next world. He enters the market at its closing stages, '*pursued by his drummers and praise-singers*' (7). A moment later he is draped in 'rich' attire; 'damask and *alari*' by the women, as per custom (7&15). The role of women is both significant and symbolic. It is their duty to pamper Elesin as he transitions into the next world. In the Yoruba cosmology of life cycles, life has no end. It is a cyclical process through which the human spirit evolves through three dimensions: the world of **the living**, the world of **the ancestors** and the world of **the unborn**. Since it is through women that humans move from the world of the unborn to that of the living, according to Yoruba cosmology, they should play a similar critical role when a person journeys from the world of the living to that of the cosmic ancestors. There are, as usual, festivities to the built-up to the ritual suicide, drumming and dancing.

It is at this point that Simon Pilkings, the Colonial District Officer, hears of the ritual about to take place. He enquires from his 'houseboy' Joseph the cause behind this celebration. Joseph responds that a prominent chief is 'going to kill himself'(29). Earlier on, Amusa, the native colonial sergeant intimidates the same: 'I have to report that... a prominent chief, namely, the Elesin Oba, is to commit death tonight as a results of native custom...' (27). Since it is not a crime to commit suicide, ritual or otherwise, Simon Pilkings thinks that both Amusa and Joseph actually intend to say 'murder' or 'kill' someone (27&28). The emphasis on the deliberate misinterpretation by the Colonial District Officer of concepts: 'kill himself' and 'commit murder' is of symbolic significance. It not only functions as a means to 'criminalise' a culturally sanctioned practice using foreign legal precepts. It also highlights how colonial intrusion not only unleashed on Africans **physical violence** (what Fanon calls 'la violence *visible*') it also inflicted on the psyche of the African **cultural violence** (which Fanon refers to as, 'la violence *invisible*') (in Ilunga-Kabongo 1970: 93 [my emphasis]).

Soyinka's use of proverbs closer to the source-language than the more mellowed proverbs used by Achebe and has more depth, gravitas and complexity. 'A substantial part of this complexity', Adebayo Williams (1993: 68) explains, 'derives from [Soyinka's] deep communion with the cultural paradigm of his people, the Yoruba: their mores, their myths, and above all their ritual'. Soyinka's 'deep communion' with his Yoruba culture finds its way in the manner in which he imbues his Yoruba characters, not just with Yoruba proverbs, but also with 'the rich use of riddles, sayings, similes and paraphrases' (Gilbertova 1995: 93).

Soyinka employs an amalgam of rhetorical, epistemological and axiological proverbs. This is largely because, unlike Obi, Elesin is steeped within the matrix of his culture and is thus infused with acute and exceptional knowledge of the traditional mores of the Yoruba cosmology. Elesin, however, uses this insider knowledge to his advantage and for his selfish gains. The abrogation of proverbs in the play also reveal Elesin's slyness, in that he turns most proverbs from working *against* him to working *for* him instead: 'The same proverb, in fact', Figueiredo (2013: 93-94) explains,

can be an ordinary beast of burden or a rare racing thoroughbred, depending on its use and user. To do this, he must be in complete control of their movement at all times, harnessing their versatile

energies with such skill that they cannot bolt off in directions he did not intend. He must be an expert wrangler with words.

Elesin's expertise at wrangling with the proverbs shows the extent of his situatedness within the matrix of his own cultural milieu, as well as possessing profound knowledge of his culture Elesin uses this knowledge to his advantage to achieve his personal goals, as opposed to the expected collective goals of his people. He engages in verbal jousting with the bewildered Praise-Singer (7):

**Elesin:** *When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle?* The market is the long-suffering home of my spirit and the women are packing up to go. *The Esu-harassed day slipped into the stewpot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meat. I have neglected my women.*

**Praise-Singer:** We know all that. *Still it's no reason for shedding your tail on this day of all days. I know the women will cover you in damask and alari but when the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friends.*

Elesin's knowledge of the Yoruba customs allows him to circumvent his duty in a way that even impresses (but also dupes) most, including Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer. When he asks for Iyaloja's soon-to-be daughter-in-law, Iyaloja evokes the cosmic proverb: *'Only the curses of the departed are to be feared. The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood it is impiety even to place hindrance in their way'* (22). The Praise-Singer is also impressed with Elesin's showmanship and exaggerated bravado: *'Elesin's riddles are not merely the nut in the kernel that breaks human teeth; he also buries the kernel in hot ambers and dares a man's finger to draw it out'* (9).

Elesin is eventually arrested by the colonial administrators. This is despite the successful intervention of the market women and their daughters to prevent Amusa from arresting Elesin at the command of Simon Pilkings. What results in Elesin's arrest and eventual downfall can be solely attributed to his internal conflict and not the external or situational factors. He has overwhelming support from his people and community at large, who are even willing to be arrested in his stead. The prison used to be a holding cell for slaves



before being transported on the middle-passage to the Americas, which symbolises that Elesin is a 'slave' pleasures of the flesh. He realises, like all tragic heroes, that he is the cause of his downfall and shame, he tells his new bride:

I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn, I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in at the moment of preparedness for my crossing. You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of ancestors, and perhaps your warmth and youth brought new insight of this world to me and turned my feet leaden on this side of the abyss. For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man... there was also a weight of longing on my earth-led limbs... (71).

The qualities Elesin lacks are ascribed to his son, Olunde, who takes his father's place and commits the ritual suicide. Ogundele (1994) aptly points out that although Olunde has been in England for four years, and therefore disowned by his father, he shows no sign of assimilating Western ethos, as depicted in the extract below:

**Olunde** Mrs Pilkings, I came home to bury my father. As soon as I heard the news [of the King's death] I booked my passage home. In fact we were fortunate. We travelled in the same convoy as your Prince, so we had excellent protection.

**Jane** But you don't think your father is also entitled to whatever protection is available to him?

**Olunde** How can I make you understand? He *has* protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your Prince if he refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? This ... showing-the-flag tour of colonial possessions.

**Jane** I see. So it isn't just medicine you studied in England.

**Olunde** Yet another error into which your people fall. You believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you.

**Jane** Not so fast Olunde. You have learnt to argue I can tell that, but I

never said you made sense. However clearly you try to put it, it is still a barbaric custom. It is even worse – it's feudal! The King dies and a chieftain must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get!

[.....]

**Olunde** Others would call it decadence. However, it doesn't really interest me. You white races know how to survive; I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws this war should end with all the white races wiping out one another, wiping out their so-called civilisation for all time and reverting to a state of primitivism the like of which has so far only existed in your imagination when you thought of us. I thought of all that at the beginning. Then I slowly realised that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way.

**Jane** Through ritual suicide?

**Olunde** Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course you have also mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them.

[.....]

**Jane** (*hesitantly*) Was it the ... colour thing? I know there is some discrimination.

**Olunde** Don't make it so simple, Mrs Pilkings. You make it sound as if when I left, I took nothing at all with me (57-59).

Olunde's erudition and perceptiveness displayed in the above quote suggests that he is in fact at ease with both cultures, traditional and 'modern'. This suggests that people can live in both cosmic worlds without favouring one over the other (as per the dictates of colonised curriculum, which estranged many an African youth from their cultural roots). It further implies that it is incumbent upon each succeeding generation to safeguard and perpetuate indigenous cultures for posterity.

Olunde's final act of committing ritual suicidal in his father's stead 'shows tremendous will-power and even proves pristine, if residual, strength, of the culture's worldview' (Ogundele 1994: 57); 'as well as the role of the committed individual in such rites of passage' (Osofisan 1994: 56). It also proves that Olunde is 'Strong-willed, austere, introspective and deep, he shows traits of self-renunciation and asceticism' (Ogundele 1994: 57-50), qualities

that his father lacks. In contrast to Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, the character portrayal of Olunde shows that ‘the reaction against colonialism [can be] achieved through an intellectual adherence to indigenous culture, associated with a younger generation of educated Nigerians’ (Kerr 1995: 121).

The above views notwithstanding, from my reading of the play, Olunde becomes the hero, not simply because he committed ritual suicide, but rather due to his adherence to the traditional values of his culture. It is worth taking into cognisance that Olunde does not die a *cowardly* death like his father, who commit suicide as an escape the shame he has brought upon himself, which is outside the precepts of the cultural ritual. Olunde commits the culturally sanctioned ritual suicide and as a consequence, his is a *heroic* death. It is due to this sole criterion that he survives (in spiritual terms), his name being inscribed on the plaque of valour as the venerated ancestor who will live for ever in the memory of his society for generations to come, despite his age and education.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper argued that African literary works contribute significantly to African indigenous knowledge systems. Since language is a *sine qua non* of literature, some critics have questioned the logic behind using European languages to project African value systems (Ngũgĩ 1986; 2000; Wali 1963; 1964). As it has been noted in the introductory section of this paper, the issue of language is a moot point in Africa. While acknowledging the indispensability of language in the categorisation of any literary corpus, Irele (2001: 5) also concedes to the ‘unique’ nature of literature in Africa:

The association between language and literature can be ‘natural’ insofar as language constitutes the grounding structure of all literary expression, so that the unity of a body of literature is mostly perceived in terms of its language of expression rather than by any other criterion. For historical reason, with which we are familiar, the term African literature does not obey this convention. The corpus is in fact multilingual. The variety of languages covered by the term can be appreciated by a consideration of the range of literatures in Africa.

As a result, writing in European languages led to the *transliteration* (as opposed to *translation*) of African speech acts. The main objective of transliteration, in Anglophone African literature, was to leave an African footprint on the English language. ‘The aim of the advice [to transliterate] was to condition the writers to imprint the ‘signatures’ of their natal tongues or cultures on their English-language literary expressions’ (Onwuemene 1999: 1057).

More pointedly:

Engaging such heavy subjects [i.e. imperialism, slavery, independence, gender, racism etc.] while at the same time trying to create a unique and authentic African literary tradition would mean that some of us would decide to use the colonizer’s tools: his language, altered sufficiently to bear the weight of an African creative aesthetic, infused with elements of the African tradition. I borrowed proverbs from our culture and history, colloquialisms and African expressive language from the ancient griots, the worldviews, perspectives, and customs from my Igbo tradition and cosmology, and the sensibilities of everyday people (Achebe 2012: 54-55).

The ‘imprinting’ of Africanity in African literatures is more poignantly manifested in the employment of proverbs. Proverbs, like orality, advance ‘the knowledge of the African worldview as inscribed in proverbs’ (Nnaemeka 2002: 376).

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