

Emerging Trends in Cultures and Identities in English Studies in Nigeria

**A Keynote Address by Rev. Fr. Prof. Dr. Christian Anieke, Vice
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Protocol

Thirty years ago I sat in the lecture halls of the old building of the English Department of this great university with my pen and paper, eyes glued to the black board and dashing between that board and the bespectacled faces of grey-haired, rather stern-looking lecturers. Their words were like the gospel and their writings on the board were like scriptural canons. We took notes religiously and meticulously. The lecturers were academic authorities with papal infallibility who held the key to the long and winding tunnel of knowledge which we all desired to find like the holy grail. That was the time when those lecturers and old library books (some pages torn off and stolen by academic hooligans) were the narrow gate to the kingdom of knowledge. Looking back on our life in those days, I always caught myself beaming with smiles and shaking my head as I watch images of a changing world flashing across the landscape of my mind. Yes, the times are indeed different. We live in a breathtakingly fast changing world, where the source of knowledge has gone beyond aging professors or mirthless scholars and old books to the endless world of the internet, robotics and

social media. As Achebe says, the world is like a masquerade dancing, and if you want to see it better, you have to choose mobility over sedentary comfort. It is this awareness of the changing nature of our world that inspires the theme of this conference: Emerging Trends in Cultures and Identities in English Studies in Nigeria. It is my hope that the English Studies in our different universities will continue to evolve to catch up with the trends in our globalized changing world.

Writing on the Changing Face of Nigerian Literature, Emma Schercliff summarizes the trends as:

1. Nigerian authors are choosing to write for Nigerian audiences
2. More Northern Nigerian novelists are writing in English about unknown aspects of the country
3. As the Nigerian writers and publishers become more self-confident, literary landscape is moving its attention away from the West.
4. Publishers are seeking to reflect authentic voices from the African continent

5. Online literary magazines are bridging the void left by physical distribution challenges (*British Council.org*)

Also reflecting on trends in Nigeria literature, Naza Amaeze Okoli (in his comments on December 19 2017 in africanwriter.com) says:

Many might agree that one of the features of early Nigerian literature which rarely appears in much of the newer writing is engagement with what might be called traditional wisdom. If the motivation for this theme at the time was the need to prove that Africa had culture before its contact with the West, then writers today must think that the West already knows this. Yet there are young writers like Rasaan Malik Gbolahan who continuously find new and ingenious ways of interpreting today's realities with insights from tradition. Gbolahan's poetry is the meeting point of the old and the new: "The first rule of death..." – begins his poem, "Of Dying", a fine depiction of the truth that we die in stages,

or that we do not die at all, since death itself is a lesson in living....“ In “Atupa” Wale Owoade finds a connection between innocence and the flickering light of the oil lamp: “I saw your light / naked / proud and erect / shining past the moonlights.” In “Omo Iya,” Oyin Oludipe invokes the power and the spirit of the talking drum: “He calls me this, with coarse / Drum syllables, fine-mannered / Stillness, like primal incandescence / Of night.”

One could also add Tomi Adeyemi’s novel called African Harry Potter, Children of Blood and Bone.

And Naza Okoli asks:

Are there, then, any identifiable patterns? Clearly, to attempt to identify commonalities shared by these writers in terms of thematic concerns would be an impossible task. But there is much to be admired in the

way in which many of them pay attention to the language and sounds of the “street” – the syntax of everyday communication. Walter Ude’s series, “Eze Goes to School”, is a great example: “Look at you too. Nwa oma, like you – see how they are starving you boys to death, did we parents tell these people that we sent our children here to be starved, eh?”...But there is also, among them, an increasing awareness of the self as part of a global community. Works of writers such as Onyeka Nwelue often push the boundaries – literally and figuratively – as they examine the ways in which cultures interact beyond national borders. In Nwelue’s new novel, *The Beginning of Everything Colourful*, language also participates in the travel: “My train departs on the ninth of December by 11:13am from Lille to Paris. You will see a copy of the ticket. It will convince you that I am saying the truth. I’m getting old now. And soy mexicano.”

Language, which essentially defines literature, has been the major preoccupation of African (especially Nigerian) writers. For Achebe and many postcolonial writers, writing was a way of reconciling with the past that was battered by colonialism. As Achebe puts it: “Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son.” This atonement consists in understanding the past and trying to restore the African humanity trampled upon by ignorance and neglect of the rich African past. In fact, one of the early concerns of the pioneer post-colonial literature is expressed by the foundational philosophy of the University of Nigeria Nsukka: to restore the dignity of man. In other words, the pioneer post-colonial literary writers from Africa aimed at using the instrument of literature to restore the dignity of dehumanized Africans. In order to do this, they used the language brought by the coloniser to convey the African world view. They tried to adapt the language in various forms in order to articulate their varied and rich African heritage.

Furthermore, what is very clear from the reflections of both Emma and Naza Amaeze is that the Nigerian literary landscape is no longer filled with the fight for the recognition of cultural values of Africans or Nigerians. The struggle for recognition and acceptance dominated the pioneer African literary landscape. Edward Said in his Culture and Imperialism explains that the Orientalists' interest in the Orient is based on the desire to dominate. The way the Orient is represented is indicative of the thirst for domination, the construction of the oriental world in a particular way under the pretext of knowing it. Orientalism is purely a matter of "discourses of power" designed to show the superiority of the West over its construct, the so-called "orient". The whole aim of oriental study (from the European perspective) is to show the "otherness" of the construct "other" as a way of stressing the difference or the superiority of the "we". This construct is of course based on the assumption of homogeneity that is non-existent. Said also analyses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and comes to the following conclusion:

Conrad does not give us the sense that he could imagine a fully realized alternative to imperialism: the natives he wrote about in Africa, Asia, or America were incapable of independence, and because he seemed to imagine that European tutelage was a given, he could not foresee what would take place when it came to an end...Since Conrad dates (sic) imperialism, shows its contingency, records its illusions and tremendous violence and waste (as in *Nostromo*), he permits his later readers to imagine something other than an Africa carved up into dozens of European colonies, even if, for his own part, he had little notion of what that Africa might be.

Like Said, the pioneer African writers believe that Conrad was not completely free from colonial mentality. They are irritated by the voicelessness of Africans especially in the novel Heart of Darkness. Achebe, for example, believes that Conrad intentionally sets Africa up as “the other world” in order to examine Europe. According him, the picture of Africa presented by Conrad is that of “the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man’s vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant

bestiality". Conrad's Heart of Darkness is, therefore, what motivated Achebe to write Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God in order to show that Africans (in this case the Igbo) have a voice, a tradition, an organised system of administration and justice before the coming of the white man. According to Achebe, "What I think the novelist can teach is something very fundamental, namely to indicate to his readers, to put it crudely, that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans."

It is as if the new writers will be surprised that such issues ever occurred. They are not protest writers as Achebe says in his There Was A Country. According to him, "In my definition I am protest writer with restraint." The new trend is a celebration of cultural diversities in literature. Literary works from the North and ethnic minorities are celebrated as much as works from the Southeast or Southwest.

Another trend is the recognition of biculturalism, which Achebe's No Longer at Ease portrays in the person of Obi Okonkwo.

Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah or George Namanai's Tears of a Fall Guy also celebrate bioculturalism in the major characters Ifemelu and Raymond with his friend Gil respectively.

Related to bioculturalism is the issue of identities. Chris Barker presents six models which helps us to understand identities and shifting identifies in our contemporary globalized society. According to him, we need to “recognize the range of cultural and national identities which are formed and unformed over time and across a variety of spaces.”

Barker puts across the following theory of different kinds of cultural juxtaposing:

- Two distinct cultural traditions are kept separate in time and/or space. We would define ourselves as Asian or British, Mexican or American. This is the domain of nationalism and ethnic absolutism.

- Two separate cultural traditions are juxtaposed in time and space. We would define ourselves as Asian and British, Mexican and American, moving between them as situationally appropriate.
- Cultures are translocal and involve global flows. Hybridization occurs out of recognition of difference and produces something new. We are 'British Asian' or 'Mexican American'.
- Cultural traditions develop in separate locales but develop identifications based on perceived similarity and commonality of tradition and circumstance. For example, an essentialist version of pan-global black or Hispanic nationalism.
- One cultural tradition absorbs or obliterates the other and creates effective similarity. This could involve assimilation (my parents are Asian but I am British) or cultural domination and imperialism (one tradition is wiped out).

- New forms of identity are forged out of shared concerns along the axis of class, ethnicity, gender, age, etc. This is an anti-essentialist position in which similarity is forged strategically. For example, a strategic alliance in which black and Asian people share a common ant-racist strategy. Equally, strategic identifications and alliances occur on other axes, such as gender, so that a shared feminism might be more significant than ethnic difference.

What we see in literature today is the exploration of cultural diversities, with a celebration of minority cultures as well shifting identities as we see in Chimamadah Adichie's Americanah. In the light of these changes, English Studies in our universities must redirect its research to explore these emerging trends in cultures and changing identities. New areas of research must therefore be explored in our English and Literary Studies departments.

In addition to the different areas proposed in this conference (which are good areas of research), I would like to suggest more work in the following areas:

1. Literary expressions from ethnic minorities which will reveal rich cultures embedded in the narratives
2. Identities: Using Barker's models modern research must identify the identities and shifting identities forged by human global ubiquity and incurable mobility
3. Interpretation of literary writings in the light of shifting identities
4. An interdisciplinary research, which will deploy the tools of Pragmatics in analysing the speeches of bicultural characters
5. Cultural studies: modern literary research must delve into cultural studies, sociology and history to understand shifting identities, a huge area of interest in literature
6. Children's literature: This huge area of literature which did not receive much attention in pioneer literary works must draw our attention and be made an area of research

7. Translations in literature: Since the pioneer literary writers were to a large extent translators of traditional thoughts and elements, research should also focus on the translations to confirm their correctness, ingenuity or defects
8. Exploration of the influence of cultures and subcultures on literary expressions
9. Oral literary expressions: Oral literature must continue to receive attention in literature and research
10. Analysis of the influence of traditional music and new Pop music in African or Nigerian literary expressions
11. Church Archives. There is need to explore Church archives to unearth some information that can help in the understanding of some of the works of pioneer literary writers
12. Study of documents or writings of colonial administrators in Nigeria and other African countries. This will yield a lot information for literary research.

Conclusion

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, using the language of Christ, I say: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” My job in this keynote is not only to discuss the emerging trends in English and Literary Studies but also to provoke you to take action rather than turn into a mute backcloth like Umuofia, waiting. I assure you that there will be no peace in our departments of English and Literary Studies until we plunge into research to discover new areas and ideas hidden in our variegated literary landscape and complicated modern world. This must be our mission. This is our vision. This is the new road we must take.

And here I rest my case!

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