

TRANSLATING ACHEBE INTO IGBO LANGUAGE

By

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Abstract

During his life time, Chinua Achebe was not read in the Igbo language. His literary creation was limited to the English language. But his first and most popular novel, Things Fall Apart, has been translated into more than fifty languages of the world. Although he desired it, an Igbo translation of his novel did not materialize while he was still on this side of eternity. What reasons could be adduced for this absence? Did the novel resist re-expression in the author's own mother tongue? Or did Achebe's kinsmen fail to see what the rest of the world saw in the novel? This paper is a sample of an experience of an attempt to translate Things Fall Apart into Igbo language.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe requires no introduction, not in Africa nor in the rest of the world. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, (TFA), published in 1958, is now considered a world classic and a reference material and ...' one of the seminal moments in the history of African literature in English language'.(Gikandi 2009) His was not the first novel to be published in the continent; Amos Tutuola, Peter Abraham, Sol Plaatje and Cyprian Ekwensi had all published before him, but “Achebe's novel has become the starting point for many discussions of the African novel”(Gikandi 2009). To date, Achebe's first novel is not only the most known and widest read novel in Africa, it also the most translated work, having been translated into more than fifty world languages.

The theme of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, (TFA) and the later ones span the later period of institutionalized colonization of Africa and the first few decades of political independence and have been of tremendous interest in highlighting major characteristics of African culture. According to Emenyonu (2009), “Because of the important place his works occupy in the teaching of African literature, there is a sense in which Achebe has become the nexus for the history and the criticism of this tradition of letters”. To corroborate this assertion, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, has this to say about *Things Fall Apart* (TFA): the novel

... is a milestone in African Literature. It has come to be seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English and is read in Nigeria and throughout Africa. Of all Achebe's works, it is the one most read, and has generated the most critical response, examination and literary criticism. It is studied widely in Europe, India and North America, where it has spawned numerous second and tertiary analytical works. It has achieved a similar status in India, Australia and Oceania. Achebe's *magnum opus* has sold more than 8 million copies.

Achebe's work is appreciated as an important historical and cultural document. As a creative writer, he artistically represents and preserves the momentous encounters of the continent during and after colonialism. The encounters portray both the political and also the cultural ones.

The success which has greeted the translated versions of TFA has been due to the realism in the portrayal of the characters. I read somewhere that a reader of the work in an Asian language, probably Chinese or Japanese exclaimed: "Okonkwo is my father!" Such is the power of the realism of the work and that of accurate translation.

Thus, readers in lands far away from Achebe's native land have had the privilege of 'meeting' Okonkwo, while the writer's kith and kin in Igbo land remain ignorant of this character, who, in the German translation of the work, overthrew the original title to become simply, OKONKWO. Curiously, in the Igbo language, there is no translation of this work which has made the rounds of the literary world. One wonders why this is so. Is it that Achebe's kinsmen have failed to see what the rest of the world has seen in the work? In this regard, one may not pass off this uncomfortable situation as a case of a prophet having no honour in his homeland. The absence of an Igbo translation of TFA may just be as a result of the fact that the culture of translation has not taken root among the Igbo speaking scholars, and especially where it has to do with translating into the indigenous languages.

Credit should be given to Yoruba speaking writers and scholars who have readily labored in writing and in translation of foreign works into the Yoruba language. Examples abound as may be ascertained from Timothy-Asobe's work (1987). According to this source, works by such authors of the antiquity as Plato, Crito, Plautus, Meronto, Sophocles, Vergil have been translated into the Yoruba language. Even Twentieth Century francophone writers like Sembene Ousmane and Beckett have equally been rendered in that Nigerian language.

Translation activities have been known to enrich the target language by way of new words and expressions that could be introduced into the target language from the source language text. The target language could also be constrained by the translation to coin new words and expressions, neologisms that hitherto were strange to its culture and world view, thus enriching itself.

If interest in working on the Igbo literature and language through translation had been imbibed by Igbo scholars over the years, probably most works by Achebe and by other writers would have had their Igbo versions by now; and with that, translation criticism of such translations would have developed and the readership of such (literary) works would have been encouraged, together with scholars and students, to make various kinds of academic enquiries in the Igbo language, thereby strengthening the language.

The language of TFA

TFA was published in 1958 when the author was 28 years old, and a first degree holder. The high level of the language of the novel, the eloquence and brilliance of it are an eloquent testimony to the high standard of education of the day. Achebe, like others of his generation, was an exemplary product of the colonial education that alienated Africans from their roots and largely took away from them the ability of expressing themselves seriously in their God-given mother tongues. Thus, Achebe and those of his generation were more comfortable expressing their thoughts in the English language rather than in Igbo, Hausa or Yoruba.

This state of affairs has been considered a betrayal in some sense- the fact of Africans writing in English, French or Portuguese- the languages of the colonial masters of the continent. But nothing can be done now to reverse this fact; the works of Africans in these languages are living their lives in those languages. Thanks to them, the African voice has been and is still being heard all over the world. But more than fifty years after the ‘birth’ of TFA, it has no version in Igbo or in many other African languages to our knowledge. That is where the issue of translation comes in.

Achebe so possessed the English language to the point that he could constrain it to become a mold for his Igbo thoughts and idiom. He succeeded in rendering in English the thoughts of his characters in such a way that an Igbo reader feels that only a thin covering of the English language was thrown over the Igbo expressions. This feeling should have been enough to lead some scholar to undertake the re-expression of the novel into the Igbo language. That enterprise would have been laudable and would have enriched the body of literary works in the Igbo language in quality (the quality of the translation, that is) and in number.

Body of literature in Igbo

The first generation of creative writings in Igbo language date back to 1933, with the publication of Pita Nwana’s *OMENUKO* by Longman Green of London, followed by D. N. Achara’s *Ala Bingo* in 1937, by the same publisher and Leopold Bellgam’s *Ije Odumodu Jere* in 1963, equally published by Longman’s. These authors published only one book each, with Pita Nwana being considered as the father of the modern Igbo literature.

After these classic works by these blaze trailers, other artistic productions in Igbo language have not rivaled TFA in reach or renown. The reason is simple; Igbo is a language of limited diffusion (LLD), spoken only in the south –eastern parts of Nigeria, parts of Rivers State and Delta State. But the fact that TFA is in English gave it a world- wide reach which the work would never have known if it was originally composed in Igbo. But now that the artistic production of Achebe has put Africa on the literary map of the world, it should be time now to let Achebe be read in Igbo.

Why translate TFA into Igbo

The success story of Achebe’s book would come full cycle when it is translated into Igbo language. Hitherto, the fame of the work could be likened to the oil bean tree that flings its fruits far afield, away from the tree, for others to gather, while the person at its foot gets nothing. Not less than fifty world languages have seen reason to enrich their literatures with the translation of TFA into those languages, but sadly, up until now, the Igbo culture to which Achebe belonged and Igbo language which is his mother tongue cannot boast of their version of TFA.

The reason could not be that the Igbo language is not able to vehicle the ideas espoused in the novel. It certainly can. An Igbo version of TFA would increase the volume of literary works in the language with a title that has made a name all over the world. Igbo students and scholars alike would have a standard text to study and criticize. Such a version in the language of Ndi Igbo will encourage other scholars to undertake translations of other works into the language, thereby creating jobs and wealth both for the translators and their publishers. And of course, as has been the case in the West, secondary and tertiary works will emanate from the translation. When a translation into the Igbo language is taken seriously, it will impact on the perception of the Igbo person vis- a- vis his language. Taking pride in the language would probably come all by itself and

because the language would be further used in discussing serious things other than just the daily news on electronic media; the print media may find reason to produce newspapers in the language, taxing it to account for specialized terminology in various domains of knowledge.

Obstacles to an Igbo version of TFA

A number of admirers of Achebe would have eagerly produced versions of TFA in Igbo. In fact, some manuscripts of the work in Igbo may even now be lying in drawers, awaiting publication. These manuscripts may stay long in waiting on account of a wish expressed by the author that any translation of the novel in question must first be preceded by a version in his native Ogidi dialect of the Igbo language. Since I heard this said at a conference some years ago, I had often reflected on what could have informed this embargo.

One thing that is clear, then, is that Achebe desired that TFA should be read in Igbo. So, if he could have appointed a translator of Ogidigbo extraction to do that job, he probably would have done so. But literary translators are usually not constrained to translate any work if they do not have any affinity with the work or with its author. Could it be assumed that not even in his home town did people appreciate the author and his classic work? Or could it be that no one has been enthusiastic enough to carry out the author's wish? Or is it that the Igbo language cannot carry such serious thoughts as expressed in TFA? These questions had been coming to my mind until I came across an interview that Achebe gave to a foreign newspaper who may have questioned him concerning the absence of a version of his most successful novel in his own mother tongue.

The interview was with the Paris Review in 1994 as recorded by Wikipedia, and Achebe opined that standard Igbo was created by combining various dialects, creating a stilted written form. In his words:

...The novel form seems to go with the English language. There is a problem with the Igbo language. It suffers from a very serious inheritance which it received from the Anglican mission. They sent out a missionary by the name of Dennis. Archdeacon Dennis. He was a scholar. He had this notion that the Igbo language which had very many different dialects should somehow manufacture a uniform dialect that would be used in writing to avoid all these different dialects. Because the missionaries were powerful ...This became law. But the standard version cannot sing. There is nothing you can do to make it sing. It is heavy. It is wooden. It doesn't go anywhere.

Such was Achebe's assessment of the Igbo language in 1994 when he granted the interview from which the above quotation was taken. His attitude to the language had not changed by 1999 when he delivered a lecture to a pan-Igbo audience; according to Emenyonu (2009), Achebe called for a total abolition of the standard in which Igbo literature had been created since 1973. Condemning the way and manner of the derivation of the form, he called that writers should write freely in their local dialects until a time when a completely acceptable standard was evolved and agreed upon by all Igbo speakers. Still according to Emenyonu, 'this intra-ethnic feuding' would throw production in Igbo literature into a prolonged blackout which it might not survive.

Gains from translating

Among other things to be gained in translating TFA into Igbo, would include:

- A sense of fulfillment for Ndi Igbo that at last TFA has a version in Igbo language;
- increasing the volume of literature in Igbo with a classic work;
- enrichment of the language with neologisms;
- a possible increase in volume of readership in the language;
- provision of a good material for critical analyses and questioning in the language;
- provision of job for the translator(s)...

Reading TFA in Igbo

Very recently, I read from the net that as far back as 2006, a certain Nigerian writer and award-winning journalist of Igbo extraction, Isaac Umunna .., sought and obtained permission from Chinua Achebe himself to translate TFA into Igbo. A tentative date was set for the commencement of the work in July 2006 and completion date was set for fifteen months from then. (<http://www.vanguardngr.com/articles/2002/features/arts/at623042006.html>). It would be pleasant news if the project was successful. But while waiting to read Umunna's translation, I present here a sample of part of my translation of the opening page of TFA, first in Standard Igbo and then in a dialect close to Achebe's Ogidi dialect. Which of the dialects 'sings' better? Which is more 'wooden'?

A personal experience

I had read TFA a number of times and at each recent rereading, since I got interested in translation, I found pleasure rendering the thoughts and certain expressions mentally in Igbo. But to my utter surprise, it was a different situation when I sat up to do the actual translation. Where was the simplicity that I thought I saw in the mental enterprise? I spent long hours poring over just the first page. How does one deal with expressions such as 'solid personal achievements'? Is there not a single word in the Igbo language for the word "honour"? Do the words 'wrestling' and 'fight' refer to the same reality? A stickler for fidelity in translation, 'ne rien mettre, ne rien omettre', as the French recommendation to translators has it, do not add or omit anything, I found myself struggling with certain words whose equivalents in the Igbo language could not remotely come to mind. What possibly could be the adequate rendition for "a spirit of the wild", "sa wily craftsman", for example? Then how would the language express the words "nerves", "a severe look", "to walk on springs", "to pounce" in Igbo; what could that be the correct Igbo expression for... ? I really started to doubt my knowledge of my own mother tongue now that specific thoughts were to be expressed.'

I found that there was a struggle between theory and practice of translation. The admonition to translate meaning and not words has its limitations; at some points, the translator must re-express the text at the level of words so as to convey the details of the meaning of the original text. At other points, the translator interprets to translate. All told, the work has been tedious but worth it, being largely done for largely personal patriotic reasons. I would gladly compare my production with that of Umunna when I see his in print. At least, at last, the jinx of not having an Igbo language version of *Things Fall Apart* would have been broken.

Original text, page 3

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by

throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their clan engaged a spirit of the wild in for seven days and seven nights .

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and on their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end, Okonkwo threw the Cat.

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time, Okonkwo's fame had grown like bush fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out- houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father.

Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few coweries to quite substantial amounts.

Standard Igbo

Okonkwo bụ nnọ onye a ma ama gburugburu obodo itolu ndị ahụ na kwa n'obodo ndị ọzọ di ha gburugburu. Ude ya dabeere n'ihe ndị dị ọkpurukpu ọ rụputara n'onwe ya. Mgbe ọ bụ okorobia gbara afọ iri na asatọ, o wetaara obodo ya ugwu na nsọpuru mgbe o turu Amalinze, onye a na-akpo Nwamba, na mgba. Amalinze bụ okamgba onye nke, ogologo afọ asaa, o dighi onye turu ya n'ala na mgba site n'Umufia rue Mbaino. A na- akpo ya Nwamba n'ihia azu ya emekataghị rue ala. Ọ bụ nwoke a ka Okonkwo turu na mgba nke ndị okenye kwekoritara na ọ bụ otu n'ime mgba sikachasiri ike site n'oge onye hiwere obodo ha ya na mmuo gbasiri mgba ogologo ubochi asaa na abali asaa.

A nọ na-akụ nkwa, na-egbukwa oja; ndị b́jara ilere anya ejide ume ha. Amalinze di oke akọ, ma Okonkwo na-amjamị dika azu nọ na mmiri. Akwara nile di ha n'aka, ma nke di ha n'azu, nakwa nke di ha n'apata ukwu gbaputachara; ọ dika ana-anu ebe ha gbatiachara na-achọ idobi. N'ikpeazu Okonkwo turu Amalinze.

Nke a mere otutu afọ gara aga, ihe dika afọ iri-abuo maobu kari. N'oge a, ude Okonkwo dere ma gbasakwaa dika oku n'oge uguru. O toro eto ma gbaakwa agba; iku anya ya rujuru eruju na imi ya sara mbara mere ya ka ọ dika onye ihu-atọ-ochi. Iku ume ya na-ada uda; a na-ekwu na mgbe ọ na-arahu ura, na ndi nwunye ya na umu ya na-anu uda iku ume ya site n'ulo ha. Ọ na- aga ije, ikiri ukwu na afodu ka ha hara imetu n'ala, ya adi ka ọ na-aga ije n'elu igwe a kukoro- akuko, dika ọ

na-aga imakwasị mmadu n'ahụ. Ọ na-amakwasịkwanụ mmadu ọtụtụ mgbe. Ọ na-agba nwobere nsu, ma mgbe ọ bụla iwe were ya ma o nweghị ike ikwuputa okwu ngwangwa, ọ na-esu mmadu ọkpọ. Ọ naghị enwere ndị na- anaghị eme nk'oma ntachi obi ọ bụla. O nwereghị nna ya ntachi obi.

Ụnọka, nke a bụ aha nna ya, nwurụ afọ iri gara aga. Mgbe ọ nọ ndu, ọ bụ onye umengwu nke na-anaghị eche echiche maka echi. Ọ bụrụ na ego ọ bụla abata ya n'aka, nke na-anaghị eme mgbe nile, ngwangwa ọ na-aga zuo ite mmanya ole m'ole, kpokolata ndi agbataobi ya, bido inwe anuri. Ọ na-asị na mgbe ọ bụla ya huru onu onye nwuru anwu, na ya na-ahụ nzuzu di na mmadu erighi ihe o nwere mgbe ọ di ndu. Ụnọka bụ nnoo onye na-eji ugwo. O ji ndi agbataobi ya nile ugwo, site n'ego ujari nta rue na nke di ezigbo ukwu. (My translation)

OGIDI DIALECT

Ọkọnkwo bụ onye ama ofuma n'aka iteghite di n'obodiye ma na mba ndi ozọ. Udiye bụ maka oke mbọ ya na mmeli n'ime ndu ya. Nwokolobia a, mgbe ọ di arọ ili n'isato wetaalu obodiye ugu na nsopulu site n'imeli Amalinze a na etu Nnanwuledede na mgba. Amalinze a bụ onye a ma a ma na mgba; nsokwu nsokwu arọ isaa ọ nwenuro onye melii ya na mgba. A na etu Amalinze a Nnanwuledede maka na azu ya adeelu ani ma ncha. Ọ Ọkọnkwo a bụ onye tuu ya naani na mgba fa gbaa melu ndi okenyere ji wee kweta na fa afunuro idi mgbaa eri nna obodo fa na mmuo malu aka mbosi isaa na abani isaa.

Ekwe na oja wee n'ada. Ndi mmadu wee jide ume fa aka, Amalinze bụ onye aghigho ma Ọkọnkwo na-amị ka azu nọ n'ime mmili. Akwala fa kwusi oto n'aka fa, ma na azu na apata ukwu fa, nke bụ na mmadu na-anu mgbatị akwala fa ka fa na- agbaji agbaji. N'ikpeazu Ọkọnkwo wee tu Amalinze Nnanwuledede n'aani.

Ife a mee ututu arọ gala aga, ife dika ogu arọ ili na uma. Ma n'ime ubosi ndia ude Ọkọnkwo agbasago ka oku bianwulu n'ofia n'oge ugulu. Ọkọnkwo daa dimkpa, topu etopu; iku anyia dika oshia na imie dika imi ozọ mee ya ọ na-atu egwu ine anya. Ọ na-alaru ula, ume ọ na-eku na ada uda nke na ndi inyom ya na umu fa na-anu ya na mkpuka fa. Ọ na-eje ije, ikili ukwu ya adaa emetusi ani ofuma, dika ọ na-amani enu enu, na-eme ka na-eje iti mmadu ife. Ọ na-tikwo mmadu ife otutu oge. Ọ na-asu nwobele nsu. Iwe wee nya, ọ bulu na ọ wero ike ikwu ife ọ choo ikwu osiso, o tie mmadu ife. Ọ deenwelu ndi nadaa agba mbọ na ndi nadaa aga n'iru ndidi. Ọ nwerolu nniya ndidi ma ncha.

Unoka bu nniya nwuu n'aro ili gal'aaga. Ụnọka bụ onye umengwu na-adaakpata ife olii, ọ daa echedu echiche maka echi. Ego batara n'aka, nke nadaabu oge njine, ọ welu ya golu ite mmanya ozugbo, kpokoo ndi agbatobiye, fa enwebe anuli. Ọ na-asikalị na mgb'obuna ọ fuu onu onye nwuanwu, na ọ na-afu nzuzu di na mmadu eliro ife onwee mgbe ọ di ndu. Ụnọka bụ ojii ugwo. O ji ndi agbataobiye nine ugwo ego ayolu, site n'obele ego lue nnukwu ego, o nweru nke ọ na-akwakuwu. (An Ogidi speaker's translation)

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to make enquiry into the reason for the continued absence of an Igbo translation of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Whatever other reasons that there may be outside Achebe's earlier insistence on any Igbo translation to be made, first and foremost, in his native Ogidi dialect of the language, this world classic which has been translated into more than fifty

world languages can very well be translated into Igbo. It is gratifying to note that there is hope for the appearance of an Igbo version of *Things Fall Apart* more than fifty years after the publication of the English original, the author himself having granted permission to one individual to undertake the translation, while acknowledging that other attempts to do the same were ongoing.

We presented a sample of our own experience of an attempt at the translation of Achebe's TFA into Standard Igbo and in the Ogidi dialect. Which dialect 'sings'? Which dialect is 'wooden'? TFA in an Igbo dialect that is wooden and cannot sing is better than a zero absence of the Igbo version when the roll call of the translations of the work is done. Since no one translation is definitive product, especially with regards to works of fiction, the prospect of retranslations keeps open the possibility of an adequate and universally acceptable translation in a day to come.

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