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The implications of language choice in African literature: Impact of globalization, education, and publication accessibility

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The Implications of Language Choice in African Literature:
Impact of Globalization, Education, and Publication Accessibility

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Introduction

The effects of globalization can be seen in even the most remote recesses of the world. In the 21st century, issues of race, ethnicity, identity, and culture continue to become increasingly complicated with the integration of multicultural communities. A result of colonization, globalization has made it imperative for post-colonial countries to utilize the language that has been imposed upon its citizens in order to gain commercial or economical gain. Consequently, colonized peoples, even in post-independent times find themselves navigating between multiple cultural worldviews. While various scholarly works discuss the negative implications of the colonized speaking the colonizer’s language, ample resources support the benefits of using English and other European languages. Though internal dissonance may have occurred as Indigenous groups struggled between their culture and that of the West, ethnic tribes were politically united under colonial rule through language (Achebe “English” 344). Thus, the English language poses bittersweet memories for African writers. Whether the benefits outweigh the negative consequences remains debatable today. While prominent Anglophone African writers such as Chinua Achebe find it viable to use English as a resource (“English” 345), followers of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s philosophy fear that the continued use of European languages threatens the survival of indigenous languages. Struggling with the pressures of publication, the need for publicity, and financial security, African authors are faced with the dilemma of choosing a medium of publication. However, even the ideology of “choice” is debatable in the 21st century, as English education and publication accessibility leave contemporary African writers without equal alternatives (Adichie from Azodo).

When thinking about language in terms of African literature, one might view it as simply a means of communication chosen by fluency, aesthetic preference, or international accessibility. However, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o argues that language is more than a tool for communication and
publicity gains. As a carrier of culture, language has both the power to dismantle and protect one’s nationality and identity. Amongst formerly colonized peoples there is an unspoken responsibility both to preserve and share one’s culture, but the amalgamation of traditions under colonial rule has made it difficult to determine whether changes are due to innovation or assimilation. Since the 1962 meeting, “A Conference of African Writers of English Expression”, the issue of language’s impact on African literature has been widely discussed. Because literature is a reflection of a country’s development and culture, the complexity of the language debate shows how muddled questions of identity, nationality, and culture remain in a continent attempting to regain what has been lost. Prominent African writers and scholars have addressed the question of what constitutes African literature and two strong stances have emerged from the debate. The choice of language has become a major indicator of African writers’ agendas; some choose to use English as a means to promote international development of their countries while others have returned back to their native tongues as a means to preserve and recuperate what has been taken from them. It is possible that somewhere in between there is an answer, but so long as either position is seen as the only solution, it will remain unsolved.

My research begins with the history of English education within Anglophone African countries Nigeria and Kenya. After illustrating the ways in which English became an indicator of status and thus the official language of these countries, I will discuss the post-independent phase and the emergence of nation-states. The role of African authors and literature played a significant role in establishing each nation’s history as well as challenging prior accounts. The debate that follows highlights the discord over the medium of language due to the perceived influence it has over the liberation of formerly colonized countries. The two opposing stances are represented by the voices of Chinua Achebe who advocates for the use of English, and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o who
denounces the use of the colonizer’s language. Although both writers shared the goal of establishing an accurate account of the history of Nigeria and therefore building the nation, they sought very different ways of doing so. This first stage of literature, which I will define as nation building is represented within novels presenting the history of Nigeria before and during the colonial era. Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Wole Soyinka’s play, *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) both fall under this category. Although published during the period of post-independence, these two novels illustrate the ways in which authors reclaimed their history by challenging prior colonial accounts of Nigeria. Within the novels, the various characters portray both supportive and opposing views of assimilating to the West, including the use of language. Their tragic endings, in which the colonized die struggling to maintain ethnic traditions, provide warnings to those who remain resistant to change.

These two novels set the stage for Anglophone writers and depict the relationships between the colonized, the colonizer, and English education. However, while Achebe and Soyinka establish a history, the argument arises that by publishing in English, their literature cannot effectively carry the history and culture of Africa to local people (Botwe-Asamoah 752). The use of the mother tongue is not simply a matter of cultural loyalty. All writers choose language with a particular audience in mind and by writing in English, Achebe, Soyinka, and other Anglophone writers have excluded uneducated Nigerians from their homeland, the very ones they aim to teach (752). Thus, it can be argued that Anglophone writers establish international popularity and credibility at the expense of authenticity and educating their respective communities. However, Achebe and Soyinka grew up speaking both their native languages and practiced ethnic traditions before they were exposed to English education; therefore, their works do carry their culture as their perspectives had already been shaped by
their ethnicity and subsequently imposed their worldview on the English language, as represented in their works (Ojaide 8).

The implications of language choice carry different burdens and consequences for both writers of indigenous languages such as, Ibo, Yoruba, Fulani, Hausa, as well as those who write in English. The conflict between ethnic traditions and Westernization is best illustrated through the second stage, which I define as traditional novels. Illustrated in Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease* (1960) and Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965), transitional novels depict the struggles new nation-states face under developing governments and the internal conflicts colonized Africans endure as they attempt to compromise between traditional and Western worldviews. This is best illustrated through the theme of moral corruption when characters in both novels take bribes against their better judgment. Also known as a developmental stage, the transitional novel paves the way for the new generation of writers who were born during post-independence and thus are products of a hybrid culture, distinct to their respective regional affiliations.

The result of this amalgamation of cultures is birthed through the themes in contemporary literature, which escape the previous modes of history making, nation building, and conflict resolution. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013) represents the third stage, contemporary literature. Her novel encompasses past and present, traditional and modern trends. Additionally, as a female writer of African literature she brings to the table another facet of African literature that had been relegated to the background during the eras of nation building and transition: gender roles. Just as Achebe, Soyinka, and Thiong’o answered the call to reclaim a history for Africa, female African authors saw the need to present literature in which women were granted equal or primary roles within fiction (Fongchingong 137,144). Adichie’s novel is
only one example of various contemporary African works that encompass themes ranging from romance and domesticity, to immigration and identity crises. What is apparent within contemporary literature is that though the implications of language choice are still a factor in the African experience, it is no longer the primary one. Unlike African writers of the first, second, and third generation who were born with knowledge about their ethnic traditions and spoke their native tongue before attending western schools, contemporary African writers were born into an era in which both ethnic traditions and western culture were meshed together (Ojaide 8). Others of African descent have migrated to the West, complicating the definition of the African writer. Thus, globalization has transformed what began as a debate about language into one of education, identity, social class, culture, and aesthetics.

Some of the questions my research hopes to answer are: What is language? What are the economical, political, and psychological implications of speaking the colonizer’s language? Do writers of African literature carry a particular responsibility? Does language invoke a reaction from a particular audience? Is it possible to be an African writer and not write African literature? If so, is being an African writer a reflection of one’s ethnicity, and writing African literature a reflection of one’s political agenda? African literature is predominately represented in the West by a particular class of Africans with a specific agenda, plot, or message that parallels, according to some critics, a “distorted Western view of Africa” (Ojaide 15). There is an assumption that contemporary African writers, particularly those who now live in the West, experience a lifestyle very different from that of Africans in their homeland. Because they live in the U.S. they have access to publishers and their stories end up representing all of Africa, despite the continent’s apparent diversity. This leads to contemporary writers potentially creating narratives they have never lived; their works are also influenced by the need to appease Western demand and not
necessarily to empower their home countries (Ojaide 16, 17). Thus, English education threatens the recuperation of indigenous languages and the older generation of African authors fear that the new wave of authors will represent a diluted African experience.

**The History of English in Nigeria and Kenya**

The English language was first imposed upon Nigerians in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Emboldened in the belief of spreading Christianity, Christian missionaries settled in what they believed to be “savage” lands with the intentions of educating illiterate Nigerians to read the Gospel. Once colonized by the British, English became the official language of government and the Anglicized, educated Nigerians served as interpreters between the British and the local people (Taiwo 3). These educated Africans, whom Oyekan Owomoyela would later call elitist Africans, symbolized wealth, making the English language become a “marker of status” (4). Consequently, while English originally served as an instrument for communication, it later became a necessary tool for social mobility. Its superiority was evident in its use in schools and indigenous languages were gradually banned from the classroom and cultural traditions like orature—oral literature—were frowned upon (Taiwo 4). Similar practices impacted colonized Kenyans. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o reflects on the painful memories of being forced to abandon the Gikuyu language after a state of emergency was declared in Kenya in 1952, making English the language of formal education. Thiong’o and his classmates received corporal punishment for speaking Gikuyu at school and were humiliated by both teachers and other students. Students were rewarded for telling on those who had spoken in the mother tongue and an environment ensued in which the Gikuyu community was broken (11).

Unfortunately, since language is a direct reflection of one’s culture and identity, those who shared Thiong’o’s experiences became strangers to their own history and thought (12).
Although English might have initially been used as a means of spreading the Gospel, like many religious quests, what began with good intentions was soon manipulated by the love of greed. The English understood the power of language from their first steps onto the motherland. While it was a powerful tool to communicate the love of Christ, traders also saw it as an opportunity to mold Africans into useful resources for their economic gain. Their goal was to educate them enough for menial and industrial labor without teaching them enough to challenge their inferior placement in society (Owomoyela 348). Despite knowing the colonial agenda, the majority of African citizens accepted English or other European languages as their national language. According to Owomoyela, this is a result of the English model of literature and critical thought which brought dissonance between the educated African and his culture. Those who were studious grew to love and accept the words and poetic devices of white men. Consequently, "modern African literature is a product of the assimilated elite" (Owomoyela 352).

Similarly, Chinua Achebe acknowledges the painful past in which English was imposed upon Africans, yet asserts that one cannot deny its benefits in the global context. While Africans "who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance," he intends on using the language he has been given ("English" 345). "The question is, did the Igbos have any language before the advent of colonialism? If they did, at what expense was the English language given to Achebe?" (Botwe-Asamoah 749). According to Thiong’o, Kenyan ethnic groups all have their own language, and the imposition of English “spiritually subjugated” the colonized, leading them to believe they were mentally and physically inferior to their oppressors (Thiong’o 9). While English is now viewed by authors such as Chinua Achebe as a means for political development and international competitiveness, the painful remnants yet remain visible in the colonized psyche and in the lack of economic growth
within Anglophone Africa (Owomoyela 348). Yet, Chinua Achebe still insists while colonialism may have “failed to give [Africans] a song, it at least gave them a tongue for singing” (“English” 344). In other words, the ability to express oneself in the oppressor’s language provides a tool to not only challenge colonial rule but also create one’s own song, distinct from that of the West, but also more advanced than that of “primitive traditions”.

Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa of Ogoni ethnicity exemplifies this appreciation for the English language. He recollects that English served as a tool of communicating with the other boys in Government College who were primarily composed of Igbo, Ibibio, and Ijaw ethnic groups (153). Thus, he embraces the use of English as a neutral language to unify ethnic tribes. While he managed to maintain the Khana language through speaking with his family and reading the Bible, English allowed for the exploration of literature and furthering his education (154). Still one might ask, how can Saro-Wiwa look past the history of English and the sufferings of his forefathers? According to Saro-Wiwa, Nigeria without the use of English reminds him of the Nigerian civil war that broke out in the 1960s (155). Although oppressed under colonial rule, Nigerian ethnic tribes were brought together “under a single administration for the first time” (155). Africa and Nigeria were foreign to Saro-Wiwa as a child because he only identified with the Ogoni tribe. He did not gain his nationality or identify himself as Nigerian until the imposition of English and as soon as Nigeria was freed from the British Empire, that national unity was broken.

**Commonwealth and the Birth of National African Literature**

The adaptation of British literary tradition written in the English language has posited African literature within the loosely defined group of Commonwealth literature (Olufunwa 1). Countries of Commonwealth literature share a “common experience of British colonialism,” use
“English in contemporary life,” and reflect British literary tradition in their literature (Olufunwa 2). Out of Commonwealth literature, the national literatures of post-independent African countries were born. Despite the birth of independent countries, national literature continues to be categorized under the broad umbrella of African literature and is often written in a European language. Unlike French, German, or Arabic literatures, which are categorized in linguistic terms, African literature has been defined in a way that does not reflect an accurate linguistic nor political constituency (Owomoyela 360). This is due in part to a preexisting hierarchy between imperialists and the colonized that has denigrated the value of indigenous languages. It is further complicated by the agglomeration of ethnic tribes who speak different languages in Africa. “There are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the...colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication” (Achebe “English” 343). English usage is a compromise between ethnic tribes and allows them to communicate amongst themselves and the outside world through a neutral language. However, although it may be neutral amongst competing tribes, the English language carries a hostile past.

While the complex history of language does pose a problem when comprehending the idea of African literature written in an European language, it may be that it is the term “African literature” that is at fault and not necessarily the use of English language, considering that it has played a large part in the birth of nation-states. In order to solve the language question, one must first determine what is African literature? “Any attempt to define African literature in terms that overlook the complexities of the African scene is doomed to failure” (Achebe “English” 343). In her reflection of the contradictory standards that have been used to define and limit what constitutes African literature, Taiye Selasi declared at the 2013 International Literature Festival in Berlin that “African Literature Doesn’t Exist”: 
In order to believe in "African literature"—to employ the term as if it possessed some cogent, knowable meaning—we must believe that the word African possesses some cogent meaning as well. But what? The African continent consists of 55 states recognized by the UN. That's roughly the same as Europe's 50, though I've never heard of anyone placing authors from, say, Switzerland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden on a panel of "European writers." The trouble is obvious: continents are naturally formed landmasses comprised of numerous countries. If states make suspicious categories for art, continents are closer to useless [and] of all the earth's landmasses, Africa may well be the most culturally, religiously, ethnically and linguistically diverse. There are over two thousand languages spoken on the continent, over 400 in Nigeria alone; South Africa, everyone's favorite exception, has eleven official tongues. (Selasi)

European literature is divided up into French, Spanish, and English, while Africa, the second largest continent in the world, is forced to encompass a multitude of languages and ethnicities (Saro-Wiwa 155). According to Chinua Achebe, because of these multiple layers of identity, African countries should have both a national and ethnic literature. National literature reflects the experiences of the whole country, while ethnic literature is "available only to one ethnic group within the nation" ("English" 343). National literature represents Anglophone Africa's history and the culture that resulted from years of exploitation and assimilation. It is the product of the forced unity of multiethnic tribes, irrespective of their individual cultures and languages (Ojaide 12). Furthermore, it preserves a relationship between these ethnic tribes and their colonial masters which is necessary for political and economic viability.
Where national literature may miss the cultural nuances and history because of its language medium, ethnic literature fills the void by reaching the local people and authenticating the value of indigenous languages. Although African writers such as Wole Soyinka have proposed adopting an African language as the national language, like Swahili, to foster a sense of independence from the West. However, Ken Saro-Wiwa believes that hierarchies amongst tribes would lead to internal conflicts within Nigeria, similar to the Nigerian Civil War that broke out in 1967. “Apart from the fact that” adopting an African language “is totally impracticable, it seems...to lack intellectual or political merit” (156). Once a language is not one’s mother tongue, it is an alien language. Its being an African language is a moot point” (156). However, while the argument for English as a mechanism for the building of new nation-states is reasonable, it still does not address the psychological and political implications of speaking in the colonizer’s language.

Although African writers are free to write in whatever medium they please, there is an understanding that Anglophone writers are the ones who receive fame and fortune, while writers of ethnic literatures are restricted to a local audience (Thiong’o “Interview”). In an interview with HARDtalk, Thiong’o replies, “There are very many prizes right now given to African literature...on the condition that [writers] don’t use an African language”.... “Can you or anybody else imagine French literature [written] in Zulu?” (“Interview”) When African writers are forced to write in a foreign language in order to be valued by the international world, Thiong’o believes it implies that their culture, identity, and history are insignificant. Although ethnic literature expresses the cultural traditions and experiences of indigenous people, national literature takes on the role of teaching and projecting the African experience to the Western audience. Unfortunately, critics of African literature in English are “doubtful if such literary
works can be said to carry fully the reality of African experiences” (Irele 45). If so, then African writers of English language may be appeasing the needs of the Western audience and repeating a distorted history for international recognition at the expense of their nation’s cultural, political, and economic freedom (Ojaide 15).

Nevertheless, it is the resounding echo of Achebe and his supporters that English has allowed educated Africans to rewrite the histories and narratives of their ancestors and share them with the world. English both politically and linguistically has enabled an “international exchange” between African writers and a global audience (qtd. by Achebe from Owomoyela 353). Furthermore, the commonwealth umbrella that Anglophone African writers are grouped under has contributed to their international recognition and reflects the renowned authors Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, and Chinua Achebe’s success both in their own countries and abroad. Their ability to successfully navigate their narratives and preserve an authentic African identity while translating to a foreign audience has given them “the task of interpreting a continent to the world” (qtd. by Nkosi from Owomoyela 353). The need for nation building characterized much of their literature as post-independence authors attempted to reclaim their identity and culture, which they believed had been robbed from them under British rule. However, while Ngugi Wa Thiong’o does not deny the power that the English language has nor the need for international communication, he believes translation is the ultimate resolution for solving the language debate. Thiong’o believes that African countries will advance exponentially, both regionally and internationally, by publishing works in writers’ ethnic languages and then translating them. He advocates for developing indigenous languages and publishing houses as well as continuing to gain the attention of the West, but not at the expense
of African political, economic, and psychological liberation from the colonizer (Thiong'o “Interview”).

According to Harry Olufunwa, if a nation is able to successfully produce works that reflect a “distinct national identity, even though they may be written in English, [it] is often a good indicator of whether its literature has come of age” (3). His statement draws attention to the power of language and a colonial history that has stigmatized indigenous languages as primitive, stagnant, and crude. This ideology is rooted in the same historical beliefs of the colonizers that the native tongues of Africans were inferior to that of the English (Ojaide 11). It is this lens that has made it difficult not only for African writers of indigenous languages to gain publication support, but also prevents people within their own communities from reading their literature (Ojaide 16). It is no coincidence that Anglophone writers are known to the literary world while their indigenous counterparts remain restricted to their literary regions. Language politics have made it necessary for African writers to write in languages other than their native tongue for international recognition and financial stability because minimal efforts have been made by foreign publishers to publicize translated works from inside the continent (Ojaide 17).

Because of these power relations, some Anglophone African authors find the recuperation of their own languages for publication unnecessary and retroactive. First generation African authors had to use English as their medium for publication because there was a lack of literary form within their own languages. However, as efforts are made in countries such as Nigeria to expand vernacular languages, it is imperative to understand the influences that have made contemporary African authors continue to use English as the medium for publication (Owomoyela 355). Additionally, as previously colonized countries continue the process of nation
building, it is important to understand the implications of using the colonizer's language may have on their economic and political development.

The Debate

The birth of what Olakunle George calls colonial "products," led to a new era for African literature (79). The imposing of English education upon the colonized African resulted in an African literature that would bear the "linguistic and cultural traits" of the "colonizing power" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 16). It is the potential consequences of carrying traits foreign to African tradition that has led to an ongoing debate surrounding the definition of African literature and the medium of expression. At the 1962 meeting titled, 'A Conference of African Writers of English Expression,' African writers who used European languages as their medium for publication joined to discuss what constituted African literature. The use of English and French was unanimously accepted as the most productive way to combat the narratives of white authors, and in the "literary sphere, [European languages] were seen as coming to save African languages against themselves" (Thiong'o 7).

Forty years later the same discussion concerning language and literature arose, but this time it was a proposal for the preservation of indigenous African languages. In 2002, the Asmara Declaration was created at the 'Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century' conference. Scholars and writers from all over Africa convened in Asmara, Eritrea, to discuss what they considered to be the necessary measures to take in decolonizing the mind and revitalizing African culture. The declaration asserted, "the vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples." The declaration expressed with urgency the need for Africa to "[return] to its languages and heritage"
if it ever hoped to gain political and economic power. The duty of African languages was to “[speak] for the continent;” to use English was to silence that voice.

As illustrated above, two strong positions arose out of the language debate. Chinua Achebe and the authors at the 1962 conference represent the first position. Achebe and other African writers of English expression believe that cultural syncreticity is inevitable and beneficial within postcolonial societies (30). In the context of globalization, all societies are hybrid products and returning to pre-colonial traditions and identities would be unproductive, if not impossible. By using English and rewriting works within the English canon, Chinua Achebe has managed to challenge English postcolonial realities (33). However, “the political condition of colonized people is bound up with language,” continuing the never-ending debate of whether English or one’s native tongue should be used in revitalizing African identity (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 84). Consequently, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o and the writers at the 2002 conference advocate for the recuperation of pre-colonial languages and cultures and believe that decolonization will not happen until “full independence” of culture and political organization is achieved” (qtd. by Thiong’o from Thiong’o “Interview” 30).

Despite the criticism of using English, major contemporary writers follow in the footsteps of prominent Anglophone African authors, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, both of whom have received international recognition for their works. Authors of English expression function as intermediaries between Europe and Africa, which has allowed them “more opportunities to inform audiences while also preserving personal and ethnic histories and customs” (Ten “Vehicles”). While their works may be restricted to a particular audience, their voices are far from silent. As an author and educator, Achebe took on the responsibility of reclaiming African history through literature, and as a playwright and political activist, Soyinka contributed to the
liberation of Nigeria politically and intellectually. Chinua Achebe says as a writer he has been given the “task of re-education and regeneration” of African culture (“Novelist” 105). Achebe and Soyinka’s decision to use English was both intentional and political, given the historical circumstances of their emergence as writers in post-colonial Africa. They created a venue through which African culture and history could be carried and enabled the start of a dialogue concerning the role of African literature and language.

It is possible that Anglophone writers have answered a call different from those who attended the conference in Asmara. Forty years prior to the Asmara Declaration, Anglophone writers convened in Kampala to discuss the need for establishing credibility and rewriting Africa’s history through African literature. It is important to note that Thiong’o was also in attendance at the 1962 conference of Anglophone writers and at one point also used English as a means to create a name for himself (Thiong’o 5; Saro-Wiwa 157). Once a foundation was created in which issues of culture, identity, and language could be discussed, Thiong’o and others answered an ensuing call: the need to invoke a revolutionary movement of the masses to “defeat imperialism,” (Thiong’o 29). Thus, Anglicized literature paved the way for dismantling prior colonial accounts in which Africans had no history, culture, or language. Therefore, while English may have diluted African history through the process of translation, it carries with it the history of colonial-made nation-states, multiethnic groups, and the desire for unity.

Arguments for English

The issue of discussion at the 1962 conference was not the language to write from because Anglophone African writers had already decided that European languages were the most beneficial mediums of publication. Instead they wanted to determine the most efficient way to make the “borrowed tongues carry the weight of [their] African experience” (Thiong’o 7). Their
techniques involved integrating dialects, pidgin, or proverbs that would express their traditions and culture while still being accessible to a universal audience (Ojaide 8-9). However, opponents of this position argue that these authors gained widespread acclaim at the expense of their nation’s economic and political development.

In William Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, Caliban, an earthy monster, is the slave of the exiled duke, Prospero. He is often paralleled to the African slave and used to illustrate the complexity of the history of language between the colonized and the colonizer. When reprimanded by Prospero for cursing, in a spirit of indignation, Caliban yells, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/ Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!” (*I.ii.366–368*). Caliban feels that he has been cheated out of his land and mistreated by his now master; however, Prospero believes that he has been merciful to Caliban by educating him. While Caliban does not appear to appreciate having his master’s language imposed upon him, Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor views Caliban’s use of the language as a weapon against Prospero. Similarly, he believes that African writers can use European languages as “internalized weapon[s] of self-assertion...to liberate [themselves] from the strangle hold of Western culture” (qtd in Owomoyela 356). Although the language is not his own, Caliban uses it to formulate his own perceptions and challenge his master.

While Caliban’s speech mirrors that of his master Prospero, Anglophone African writers have sought to use their weapons as nuanced forms of their colonial master’s language. Similar to national literature, Nigerians have successfully incorporated their own dialects and nuances into the English language, a phenomenon Rotimi Taiwo, defines as interference (8). With the use of Nigerian Pidgin, a dialect similar to that of the Black English Vernacular, Nigerians have managed to use English in a way that both the elite and the working class can understand, while
making efforts to both assimilate and maintain their own identity (6). In his novel Sozaboy (1985), Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa creates his own language which he calls “Rotten English” and defines as “a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English, and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English” (qtd. in Gunn 3). His hybrid language serves as a voice for the outsider observing the political conflict between ethnic tribes. Although his novel is an “analogical reference” to the Biafran War, Saro-Wiwa’s use of a hybrid language, models that of a post-colonial language that carries the cultural and ethnic traits of the entire nation (Gunn 3). His hybrid language parallels indigenized English and its ability to function as a neutral and practical means of communication amongst ethnic tribes who otherwise would compete for an official language (Saro-Wiwa 155).

Chinua Achebe also advocates for the use of the vernacular to make English carry the culture of his people, which he does efficiently in Things Fall Apart by integrating Igbo, proverbs, and vernacularized English. “In his particular case...the language of the coloniser becomes a potent medium of the colonised to interrogate the colonial enterprise in its political, moral, and ethical dimensions” (Ojaide 4). By writing in English Achebe was able to portray a realistic illustration of Igbo tradition while also invoking dialogue in the Western world concerning stigmas and myths around African worldviews. As an advocate of a “world language”, Achebe believes that English has to submit to “many different kinds of use” (“English 347). African writers should be able to indigenize English enough to “carry his peculiar experience” while still preserving its form so that it can be a “medium of international exchange” (“English 347). European languages are essential for international communication and the incorporation of African traditional worldviews into the dominant language is both feasible and beneficial (“English” 347-8).
Arguments Against English

Thiong'o is troubled by the reasons writers of English expression use to justify their use of English. He talks about the sense of betrayal a writer may feel when he or she abandons their mother tongue and the positive and progressive emotions that are associated with the use of an European language. He particularly criticizes Chinua Achebe and other writers' "acceptance of the "fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in [their] literature" (7). Because English is valued in the literary market and all educated Anglophone writers have been taught British literary tradition, they see the use of English as compulsory.

Prospero in the Tempest "does not need to have to learn Caliban's language in order to get to know the secrets of the land" (Thiong'o qtd. by Botwe-Asamoah 750). Although language is an indicator of knowledge and civility to Prospero, it is only a constant reminder to Caliban of his inferiority. Thus, while acquiring the knowledge to speak to his master provides a weapon of self-assertion and liberation, it only becomes a weapon when Caliban does not succumb to the beliefs of his inferiority and remembers that he owns a right to the land and freedom that has been stolen from him. However, it is reasonable to assume that had Caliban had the opportunity to produce offspring, after generations of enslavement, his children would assume that they had always been enslaved and own no right to the land. They would see that though they spoke the language, it was taught to them as means of ensuring they remained in subordinate positions for the benefit of their master and this would undoubtedly have dire psychological consequences.

In his famous work, Decolonizing the Mind, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o reflects on his experience at the 1962 conference in Kampala. Thiong'o argues that colonial language can be viewed as a "carrier of culture" and thus has led to the dislocation or 'othering' of the colonized (15). They are forced to disassociate with the culture and identity they have learned at home and
attempt to reconcile with that of western education, culture, and language. The African child is exposed to a “world external to himself” and struggles to find a place in society (17). Thiong’o’s criticism aligns with that of Homi Bhaba, who believes that as a result of this disassociation from one’s identity, the African colonial product is forced to assimilate to white culture, yet still fails to fit in. This leads to disempowered people who struggle to defend themselves with a voice that was never theirs. Even more disturbing to Thiong’o is their praise of English as a tool of unification and globalization. “It is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues” (20).

Psychological Implications of Language Choice

According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin the emergence of American literature in the 18th century paved the way for all other national literatures. The nuances that characterized American literature illustrated that “linguistic and cultural traits [within a nation’s literature] depend upon its relationship with the colonizing power” (16). Although settler colonialists, Americans also sought the need to create an identity or history separate of the British. The acceptance of American literature paved the way for other postcolonial literatures such as Indian and Nigerian. Like American literature, their political and social histories were reflected within the literature. “Whether English actually supplanted the writer’s mother tongue or simply offered an alternative medium which guaranteed a wider readership, its use…” led to a disconnection between oneself and an imposed world (25).

In Black Skin, White Masks (1952) Fanon discusses the irony of the black man attempting to defend his identity while simultaneously mastering the English language, the primary indicator of whiteness. Like Caliban, the Black man is torn between perfecting his master’s tongue to prove his intellectual ability, while holding on to his identity. However, by
appropriating his master's language, he inevitably adopts his culture. Frantz Fanon’s publication of *Black Skin, White Masks* entails his “whole-hearted engagement in the independence struggles” of the Algerians against the French and is reflected in his devotion to decolonization theory (Nicholls “Frantz”). Growing up in France, as an educated Black man, also was not easy for Fanon; his work reflects his own dilemmas navigating within the wealthy and white French academic world. He was interested in the idea of using creolization and hybridity to form “anti-colonial cultures” and resist assimilation. (Nichols “Frantz”)

The choice of language medium is particularly important because it is “the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (15) and that history and culture is translated through literature. Fanon “examines how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors” for acceptance (Sardar x). Because everything black is associated with savagery, darkness, and immorality, the Negro becomes self-loathing. Thus, Fanon looks for a way to liberate the black man and asserts that liberation can only be obtained through acknowledgement of the relationship between black and white and the attempt to create a “new understanding of man” (Sardar xv). This recreation requires defending black culture, history, and language. However, the black man is faced with the dilemma of defending himself in the oppressors’ language and doing so results in additional problems. The black man must find ways to integrate his “‘black self’ in a language and discourse where blackness itself is at best a figure of absence, or worse a total reversion” (Sardar xv). Furthermore, with language being the carrier of culture, in speaking the language of the oppressor, the black man also learns the history and culture of the West while simultaneously dismissing his own. Thus, the question presents itself: “can the non-West develop its own self-definition by using tools and instruments of
In “Of Mimicry and Man” Homi Bhaba identifies writers of English expression as “mimic men” who bear white semblance “through a process of writing and repetition,” in an attempt to gain respect from their white counterparts, but who will never be seen as equals (129). Homi Bhaba argues that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). The effect of mimicry results in an ‘othered’ or marginalized community who normalize the western culture while their narratives and language are internalized as deviant or taboo. This juxtaposition results in a double consciousness, forcing the colonized to try to make sense of two opposing worldviews. Similarly, according to Fanon, the use of European languages is the writer’s attempt to feel equal to the colonizer (14). “To speak means to… assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (8). Thus, the better the mastery of English, the closer one is to white semblance.

Thus, we have the students who are reprimanded for speaking their native tongues in school, or the child in “Novelist as Teacher” who avoids using the word “harmattan” for winter for fear of being ostracized by his peers (Achebe 105). In Death and the King’s Horseman, the police officer Amusa functions as a “mimic man—a subject who is normalized toward a standard that, by definition, must not be attained (George 79).” Amusa attempts to hold on to Yoruba tradition while simultaneously staying loyal to western culture. As an uneducated African who speaks broken English, he is Anglicized under western pressure and strives for whiteness, but due to his social position he will never truly be English.

Fanon also compares the assimilation of black individuals to Western culture with the educated writer who unconsciously chooses to write in English for the sake of western approval (14). However, he does not deny the Negroes’ desire to create a new image of blackness to
contest prior European notions of blacks. The black man is faced with two options in redefining himself in the postcolonial era: engaging in white discourse and thus, gaining access to the resources of civilization that have been cut off from him, or rejecting all things colonial and remaining loyal to his dialect. While some may attempt to use English as a means for upward mobility, Fanon believes that submitting to European languages disempowers the black man and makes his efforts futile. He asserts that “[adopting] a language different from that of the group into which [one] was born is evidence of a dislocation, a separation” (14). A man that has become disconnected from his origins cannot prove that black civilization exists if he himself no longer associates with that civilization.

In contrast, Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa who favors the use of English believes that the English language did not colonize his mind. He still considers himself as Ogoni as ever. English provided him with the ability to communicate with others across the continent as well as reach potentially 400 million people, versus the 200,000 people of Ogoni, “most of whom do not read and write” (155). Thus, Anglophone writer’s audience is limited due to illiteracy, not necessarily the medium of publication. If the masses are illiterate, does it make a difference what language medium African literature is published in? Or is it possible that they are illiterate because the current formal education does not cater to their cultural and intellectual needs?

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o calls for a generation of African writers who empower and educate the African masses, but Saro-Wiwa’s use of illiteracy to justify his choice to write in English suggests that his goals were not to teach the masses. However, the complete opposite is found within a simple search of his life, which includes years of political advocacy for the Ogoni people and an unjust execution at the hands of the Nigerian regime while fighting for Ogoni’s rights against the Royal Dutch/Shell Group. (North “Ken”) Given that he, along with Achebe and
Soyinka were all politically involved in the independence and progression of their respective communities, it is not a question of whether Anglophone writers were abandoning their communities by writing in English, but rather their agendas were different from those writing in indigenous languages. When exploring the arguments for and against literature, it is important to note that both sides have plausible explanations for adopting or rejecting the English language and both stances play significant roles in African literature.

The Role of African Literature: Establishing A History

The famous 1962 conference at Makerere University College marked an era of regeneration, education, and innovation for commonwealth African writers. Much of post-independent writing involved affirmation and defending African culture and identity. After centuries of oppression, there was much to gain from producing a new narrative and voice for Africa. Doing so in English established the credibility of African authors as equals and scholars in the literary world. Despite Thiong'o's adamant claims against the use of English, it is this very lingua franca that brought him to the forefront of African literature (Saro-Wiwa 154). While he eventually chose to publish in his ethnic tongue, it was his international recognition that provided him with the popularity he would need to gain a literary audience.

Although Thiong'o suggests that abandoning one's language is equivalent to abandoning one's culture and the duty of African writers as teachers of African history, Achebe believes he has taken on the role of an educator. He argues that all societies share different needs and that Africa needs literary teachers who can "[re-educate] and [regenerate] the community through retellings of a history that is more complex than "one long night of savagery from which Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them" ("Novelist" 105). As aforementioned, in "The Debate," held captive for two years as a political prisoner during the Nigerian Civil War, Wole
Soyinka also devoted his life to the liberation of Nigeria. Thus, African writers who continue to publish in English are both beneficial and essential in order to establish the history and independence of African nations. Failure to continue fostering an international dialogue between Africa and the West could leave nation-states economically and politically lacking.

If the role of the teacher is an integral part of being an African writer, as Achebe states, does every African writer make the decision to carry this role? Moreover, what constitutes one to be an African writer? Saro-Wiwa confesses that while he is an African writer, he “did not consider [himself] as a writer of African literature” (154). This statement suggests that the choice to be a writer of African literature holds political associations that some African writers may not place themselves within. It also illustrates that it is possible to be an African writer in terms of identity, but not a writer of African literature, in terms of what one writes. Saro-Wiwa’s reflection implies that there is indeed a responsibility that writers of African literature take on. It also returns to that pressing question of what is African literature? Is it defined by the settings or literary traditions used within the novel? Is it determined by the ethnicity of the writer? In the 1962 conference at Makerere, Thiong’o was amused by how he, a student of two published short stories, had been invited while great East African and Nigerian writers did not qualify. When prompted to discuss the definition of African literature, the medium of language was never questioned as a factor (Thiong’o 6). “The debate was more about the subject matter and the racial origins and geographical habitations of the writer” (6) “English...was assumed to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation between African people in the same nation” as well outside of the continent (Thiong’o 6). Should language be the ultimate determinant? Is it possible to be an African writer and escape the colonial discourse that has so strongly impacted African narratives and cultures?
As products of English education, elite African authors find it more difficult to write in the native tongue than in English due to the restrictions of translation. Despite the desire to empower and recuperate through tradition and culture, the hybridity of language and culture due to colonialism is irreversible and English has become a vital resource in the globalization of the world. However, this dilemma also brings attention to the fact that African authors writing in English may serve a different purpose and it is possible that their publications should be categorized under something other than African literature (Brady “African Writers”). “You could argue that the concept...[of African literature]...served a particular purpose in a particular time and place, but that, as the context changes and as history moves on, the idea of ‘African literature’ is less and less important” (“African Writers”). African literature did not become a “recognizable category” until the 1962 conference where Anglophone writers created a space for their own literary canon. This “arbitrary distinction” can now be contested as writers from various backgrounds challenge the traditional modes represented at Makerere (“African Writers”).

If national literature, literature written in the national language, “has a realized or potential audience,” then who are Anglophone writers writing for? (343). If their potential audience is only the educated Africans and an international audience, does it mean that they have abandoned their duty as African authors as defined by the Asmara Declaration? The question of language becomes one not so much about the medium through which African literature is published but whom it is published for.

Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe has been noted for giving Africa its “first authentic voice” (Urschel “Authentic”). Interestingly, that voice happened to be expressed in English. Chinua Achebe
argues he is invested in the teaching and empowering of the masses, despite his choice to use English. He expresses his role as a novelist as equivalent to the role of a teacher. His 1958 publication of *Things Fall Apart* paved the way for an era of African literary revival and encouraged a wave of new modern African authors. A response to the colonialist account of African history, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart* successfully integrates Igbo dialect, metaphors, and Nigerian proverbs into the English language, setting the standard for African literature to come. More importantly, Achebe’s use of English is a political one, as he deconstructs a “counterfeit past that has been imposed” on the African narrative through a medium that was historically rooted in the psychological subjugation of African people (Begam 397). Achebe’s decision to use what he considers a resource, despite backlash from his peers, has allowed for international attention and acclaim as well as prompted the revisiting and redefining of African literature.

*Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s in Umuofia, rural Nigeria, and illustrates the changes in a pre-colonial society as it transforms under colonial rule. The novel is not only a precursor to African literature to come, but it is also a forewarning for those who resist adaptation. Okoknwo is given the responsibility of “[carrying] the fate of his people” (Begam 399). From its glory days to its inevitable demise, Okonkwo is a symbolic representation of Umuofia. His courage, resilience, and leadership portray the strength and power of an ancient Nigerian tribe the same way his insecurities, short temper, and inadaptability expose its faults. Through his journey, Okonkwo “personifies the destiny of his community, extending from its earliest origins to its final destruction” (Begam 399). Exposing Okonkwo’s weaknesses humanizes the African narrative, allowing the European audience to relate to a prototype that they historically wrote off as savage. Throughout the novel Okonkwo is in constant conflict with
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his chi, or personal god. He has trouble with following orders from the elders, and it appears that his defiance is rooted in a desire to claim autonomy over his own fate on his own terms. Although Okonkwo happens to be the only one who blatantly defies the gods, other characters also begin to question the unbending features of Igbo tradition. It is this underlying internal discord within Umuofia that gives colonialists the power to conquer Umuofia (Kortenaar 774).

*Things Fall Apart* is notable for its realistic portrayal of human lives, social institutions, and religious traditions. Achebe’s choice to use English has been the subject of much debate, but his choice to recuperate African culture and identity through the oppressors’ language has led to his success and international recognition. He had “a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight” (Achebe “English” 348). In the novel, Achebe not only assesses prior accounts of Africa’s history, but he also teaches his African audience the importance of being forward thinking and adapting as a means of survival. Despite criticism that Anglophone writers’ works are restricted to a particular audience, Achebe believes that the African writer does not have to write with a foreign audience in mind. In fact, *Things Fall Apart* sold 20,000 copies in Nigeria compared to 800 in Britain. His ability to reach a Nigerian audience while still impacting the global community speaks to the influence he has had on paving the way for African literature. Furthermore, it shines light on the possibility a compromising solution between recuperation of languages and depending on European languages, which could very well enhance African countries regionally and internationally.

Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*

Similar to Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, which highlights the tragic events that lead to the death of pre-colonial Igbo tradition, Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975), illustrates the intricacies of the human condition under the pressure of a traditional and
unbending worldview. Like Okonkwo who represents Umuofia and Igbo tradition, the protagonist Elesin’s story is an allegory for Yoruba culture. Despite the plot’s visible clash between western influence and African tradition, Soyinka maintains that the “Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely” and does not bear significance in the grand scheme of the play (“Note”). Instead he focuses on Elesin’s failure to execute his duty, which causes the Yoruba “world... [to tumble] in the void of strangers” (Horseman 75). At the end of the play, the praise singer claims that Elesin’s actions have left the people of Oyo “floundering in a blind future” (75). Although Officer Pilkings interrupts the ceremony, it is Elesin who ultimately halts the ritual, causing the downfall of Yoruba tradition, because he desires to remain in the physical world. By putting sole responsibility of the fate of Yoruba on Elesin, Soyinka gives the African community autonomy over their history. Like Achebe, Soyinka provides the protagonist with human faults that the audience can easily relate to. The coincidental theme of suicide, though tragic, provides both narratives a sense of choice that the European account does not offer.

Fortunately, Soyinka incorporates a dynamic group of characters within his play. While Amusa as aforementioned in “Implications of Language” may indeed fit within the “mimic man” paradigm, Olunde does not. Elesin’s son Olunde is a part of the new generation of “educated Africans” (George 79). As the son of the king’s horseman, Olunde is culturally conscience of Yoruba tradition. Although Elesin initially disowns Olunde when he chooses to study in Europe, Elesin later realizes that in “[seeking] to obtain the secrets of his enemies” Olunde has the ability to “avenge [Elesin’s] shame” (81). The secret happens to be that westernized culture has its own nuances and faults just like Yoruba culture. Soyinka shares this newfound discovery with his audience through the conversation between Olunde and Jane Pilkings. Olunde is Soyinka’s “vehicle for explicitly criticizing European cultural arrogance” (George 81). Jane is horrified by
what she considers to be “feudalistic barbarism” when she discovers that Yoruba tradition encourages ritual suicide (George 72). Olunde cleverly responds with his opinion on European wars, labeling them as “mass suicide” (Horsemən 53). Through their discourse, Soyinka illustrates the various ways different cultures “maintain sanity in the midst of chaos,” one way being no better than the other (Horsemən 53).

Likewise, those in support of English and those in support of native languages also represent two opposing worldviews, but share the same goal of liberating and redefining Africa. Neither Soyinka nor Achebe is any less African because of his choice to use English. Olunde is essentially Soyinka’s “alter ego, and the play is the idiom of redress” (George 87). Despite being Anglicized, Olunde happens to be more loyal to Yoruba tradition than his father and sacrifices his life when his father cannot. There is undoubtedly difficulty in finding ways to integrate one’s “black self” in a language and discourse in which blackness itself is at best a figure of absence, or worse a total reversion (Sardar xv). However, the works of Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe show that though some sacrifices must be made, it is possible to contribute to the uplift of one’s people through English. Although their works are different in composition, style, and plot, they share the same meaning: English expression can and will be used as a political tool of empowerment. Olunde had to speak the language of the oppressor in order to be acknowledged and respected. While his culture and tradition were still judged through the colonial lens, Olunde’s remarks left an impression on Jane. He gave her a new perspective on African culture that she had never considered before.

Under the pen of Achebe and Soyinka, African history becomes more than just “one long night of savagery from which Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe “Novelist” 105). Unlike the popular postcolonial framework in which colonialism functions as
an inescapable influence. Soyinka sees "colonial intervention [as] peripheral to the action," a
catalyst to an inevitable downfall (George 74). Achebe argues that the "fault lines" that lead to
the downfall of Igbo tradition were already present (Kortenaar 773-74). Neither author believes
in giving the colonizer credit for destroying African tradition. While the Igbo people believe that
"it is an abomination for a man to take his own life," (Things 207) the Yoruba people view ritual
suicide as a "mechanism of community regeneration" (George 72). Ironically, it is Okonkwo
who commits suicide and Elesin who hesitates to do so. These dynamic realities show the
diversity within African ethnic groups and dismiss prior notions of a monolithic narrative. It
encourages individuality, freedom of thought, and revitalizes the African identity while
empowering the community through the option of choice, which are some of the very goals that
the Asmara Declaration aims to achieve.

**Transitional Novels**

After the initial celebratory spirit of independence, there came a time when countries
realized that nation building would take much more than creating new governments and feigning
a spirit of unity for outsiders. The culture of their ancestors was no longer as they knew it.
Technological innovation, exposure, and imperialism had altered Africa and they could never
return to how it used to be. Ghana gained its independence from Britain in 1957 under the
governing of Prime Minister. Initially, Ghana’s independence looked promising but over the next
couple of years, Ghanaians suffered a sharp economic decline. Nkrumah’s implementation of domestic
policies that included a centralized government exemplify the political changes that affected
post-independent countries as they attempted to find alternatives to that of their prior Western
governments. With a lack of funding and guidance, Nkrumah drove Ghana into an economical
hole, leading to rising inflation and consequently corruption (La Verle “Ghana”). However,
while Nkrumah may not have been politically inclined to lead Ghana after its independence, he did share the intrinsic belief in the urgency of uniting Africa through Indigenous languages and feared the impact of continued use of English (Owomoyela747). Although specific to Ghana, this phenomenon is not an isolated event, as the histories of Kenya and Nigeria mirror a similar national path to “moral bankruptcy” (Ngaboh-Smart 45).

Consequently, while language still remained a hot topic of debate during the 1970s, writers turned to more prevailing issues of the time concerning the state of their nation. For example, Ayi Kwei Armah published *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), portraying the internal conflicts of one man who attempts to maneuver within newly independent Ghana. Similarly, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* (1977), shares an account of the difficulties of adapting to a physically independent, yet mentally, Westernized Kenya. The transitional novel is even better exemplified in Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960).

**From the End of Things Fall Apart to the Beginning of No Longer at Ease**

Although Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is essentially a nation-building novel, its ending segues into his unofficial sequel, *No Longer at Ease*. The ending of *Things Fall Apart* foreshadows a dire future for Nigerians who fail to adopt to change. After the climatic scene of the Egwugwu being unmasked, *Things Fall Apart* shifts from an exploration of the intricacies of Igbo tradition to a novel of conflict between Igbo worldview and westernization. *Things Fall Apart* provides two endings or conclusions that have made it attractive to an universal audience. According to Begam, the first ending is Achebe’s “killing of the messenger, his failed attempt to rouse his people to action, and his subsequent suicide” (398). Achebe is in the process of calling the men of Umuofia to action when the white messenger orders the people to disperse. In desperation, Okonkwo slices the man with his machete while the rest of his tribe stand back in
awe. With the realization that he is alone in his desire to fight against the colonists, he sees death as his only outlet. Achebe provides the African audience with a national perspective of the African tragedy in which the male warrior would rather die than submit to the oppressive powers of colonialism. As the symbolic figure of Igbo tradition, Okonkwo’s death is equivalent to the falling apart of Umuofia or the end of pre-colonial Igbo culture.

The second ending occurs when the District Commissioner sees the lifeless body of Okonkwo dangling from a tree. In his shallow attempt to understand Igbo culture, he decides to write a book sharing all that he has learned while in Africa. While the first ending is an African tragedy, the second is an example of “European triumph” (Begam 401). Although Achebe is undermining the shallow and biased European account of the African narrative through the District Commissioner’s reflection, he is also acknowledging the gravity of the loss of Igbo culture and the implausibility in attempting to recuperate something that was meant to fall apart naturally. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o argues that because language and culture are intimately linked, it is not possible to abandon one and maintain the other, insinuating that the African writer of English expression cannot successfully fulfill his purpose of educating and empowering other Africans if they no longer have a hold of their history and culture (14-15). However, if language and culture are inseparable, then separating the colonized from the colonizer is also impossible, as the two cultures have become intertwined. Additionally, through the close analysis of Achebe’s work, it is evident that he has left his audience with ample knowledge about African tradition, faults, and triumphs, as well as the role of colonialism. He has not abandoned Igbo culture, but done the complete opposite—he has re-narrated it.

These two contradictory endings are somewhat resolved with the beginning of No Longer At Ease, as Obi Okonkwo discusses the complexity of tragedy. Obi dismisses the conventional
Aristotelian tragedy as too simple, arguing that the real tragedies are the ones no one knows about, or in the case of his specific example, the suicide (of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*) (405). Set in the 1960s, *No Longer at Ease* picks up where *Things Fall Apart* ends, with the protagonist Obi representing the second generation of Okonkwo’s lineage. Achebe continues his role of illustrating the lived experiences of Nigerian people as the protagonist Obi attempts to make sense of complexities and conflicts that occur during post-independent Nigeria. In an era influenced by colonialism, Obi has taken up studying in England and Achebe depicts the internal conflicts, language dilemma, and cultural challenges that Obi must face as an educated African.

Obi represents the conflict between traditional and western culture. He essentially lives in two worlds and does not belong in either. Achebe even alludes to the African writer’s challenge of translation when Obi subconsciously has to translate his native language into English to finally comprehend the merchants’ song. Achebe also uses Obi politically and socially to criticize colonialism as well as reconstruct the African narrative. There is a powerful scene where Obi reflects on his love for orature in grade school, but confesses his humiliation of not knowing any folktales. English education and standards are imposed upon him in childhood and he is deprived of a cultural foundation to help him navigate within two juxtaposing worlds. By addressing the negative consequences of English education, Achebe alludes to his own complex views with the love and yet simultaneous guilt he has for the language.

**Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters***

In all of the aforementioned novels, the characters are faced with issues of identity, abandonment, and confusion as the picture they imagined of independence never comes true. Depending on their social class, career, or age, different people faced different hardships while adjusting to new nation-states. Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* (1965) is a critique of post-
independent Nigeria’s “inability...to displace the political and cultural hegemony of the colonizers” (Ngaboh-Smart 43). In both *Death and the King’s Horseman* and *The Interpreters*, Soyinka presents the need for community and national re-generation. Through the novel, Soyinka challenges the national narrative of redemption, progress, and sustainability, with the multiple realities of his characters.

The five friends, Bandele, Egbo, Kola, Sagoe, and Sekoni, represent an interpretive community within the nation and through their analyses, Nigeria is redefined (Ngaboh-Smart 44). For example, Sekoni is a computer scientist who after receiving his degree overseas, returns back to Nigeria in hopes of modernizing the nation. However, corruption and greed prevent him from carrying out his initial mission, and Nigeria remains technologically lacking (45). Not only does his narrative reveal the “moral bankruptcy” of Nigeria, but he also deals with navigating between the past and the future (45). He still attempts to hold on to the past, while looking forward to technological innovation but wants to avoid conflict, an impossible feat. His personal conflict is exemplary of Nigeria’s stagnancy (46).

The power dynamic between the interpreter and the colonizer has changed, allowing the now, internationally revered interpreter to successfully translate the needs of his or her people to an international audience. Although there are undeniable psychological consequences to using a language rooted in violence and manipulation, the ability to contest the oppressors’ beliefs in their own language may be more promising than protesting against them in a native tongue that is restricted to one’s respective region.

**Contemporary Issues**

Achebe and Soyinka’s illustrations of historical changes within Nigeria depict how literature evolves and reflects the issues important to a period of time. Thus, while the debate of
language remains unresolved, it may not necessarily be the primary focus for contemporary writers, particularly whose first-language is English. Achebe, Thing'o, Soyinka, and other first generation African writers, were met with the task of paving the way for a national literature, but their successors are faced with modern issues such as gender equality, accessibility, and publication. Nigerian novelist Adaobi Nwaubani, author of *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), reflects on the process that led to the successful publication of her novel in the U.S. and the challenges African writers face in the literary world. In her *New York Times* article, "African Books for Western Eyes," Nwaubani details the lack of resources that local African publishing branches have and how the success of an African author is determined by western preference. Publishing a novel in one's native language only lessens the already less-than-likely chance of publication, let alone global recognition. "Local writers without some Western seal of approval are automatically perceived as inferior" and African audiences are not likely to read or purchase an author's work until it has been circulated throughout the West ("African Book"). Thus, the African author is faced with the dilemma of writing for a western audience in hopes that their narrative will be shared and then sent back to his or her community.

The need for Western approval has also threatened the originality of African literature; critics fear the desire for publication tempts aspiring authors to create works that appease "a Western audience [rather] than to reflect Africa's reality" (Ojaide 16). This critique implies that although they call for authentic representations of Africa, older African writers still hold onto a sense of cultural purity or a monolithic narrative that does not encompass Africa's diversity in the 21st century. Immigration and globalization threatens the once exclusive community of native-born Africans. However, their fears are justified due to the power dynamics of publication between the West and Africa. Because of the lack of publishing houses and resources in Africa,
African authors can only secure their future as writers through Western publishers (Ojaide 15, 16). In retrospect, Nwaubani confesses that while her novel was “independently inspired,” “the approval of ‘white people’ was crucial” (“African Books”). Because the West determines whose literature is read both abroad and regionally, Africans are limited only to the “stories foreigners allow [them] to tell” (“African Books”). In this regard, the teaching that Achebe claims is the role of the African writer may be impossible if what the white audience prefers and what the African community actually needs are not the same.

Tanure Ojaide further explores the publication dilemma, arguing that Anglophone writers often overshadow regional African writers because they are supported by renowned publishers and consequently the recipients of international literary prizes (16). Not only that, but most literary winners reside in the West and illustrate experiences that are directly influenced by modern western thought and culture (17). Because of this, popular contemporary African writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), delve into themes such as “sex and sexuality,” that are inconsistent with “African reality” because natives do not live in such liberal environments (16). The plots and themes within what scholars define as contemporary African literature are very different from that of the 1960s. Despite apparent changes and evolutions over time, African authors are still expected to carry a history of exploitation and the political failures of their countries within their stories. It is “more authentic for Africans to make war than make love” and contemporary African authors are criticized for publishing stories about being abroad, challenging gender roles, or simply falling in love (Felicia Lee “New Wave”). However, contemporary writers’ local and international audiences fail to realize that this new wave of African authors were not born into a world where they had to choose between tradition and Western modernity; they are the products of a hybrid culture that
has evolved over the time and still attempting to hang on to an imagined, unmolested African identity.

The identity conflict that Obi experiences in *No Longer at Ease* is still shared amongst contemporary African writers who attempt to assimilate and fit into contrived categories of ethnic and cultural identities. By discounting their narratives as in contestation with African realities, critics insinuate that there is indeed an authentic African experience, even when Africa is clearly compromised of a multitude of ethnicities, histories, and nation-states. With so many African writers now living within the United States, the issues of language and African literature is now even more complex. Does geographic space and time influence who has the ability to be labeled an African writer? Is there just one experience?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie illustrates in *Americanah* (2013) that colonization and globalization has made it difficult to identify and restrict racial and ethnic lines. She breaks these boundaries by placing Nigerians within various geographic spaces and even challenges spatiality with the prospect of blogging. The protagonist Ifemelu migrates to America and then returns to Nigeria years later. Throughout her journey she records her experience through blogging and it is apparent that she has difficulty like so many other immigrants, finding her place between two competing worldviews.

The transition between past and present is evident in the way she incorporates technology to defy physical boundaries that had initially separated immigrants from their home countries. It can also be used to parallel the African’s contemporary experience with that of the post-independent experience. While in the 21st century technology functions as a medium for breaking boundaries, in the 1960s it prevented Sekoni in *The Interpreters* from developing Nigeria’s
economy because of pride, division, and greed. Additionally, while the Internet, news, and media outlets provide a space in which Africans have the ability to share current events and be present in multiple spaces, the news in *The Interpreters* was limited in terms of accessibility and was easily used to manipulate African people as well as its international audience by hiding morally corruptive practices.

A writer’s works and identity should not be restricted by his heritage, and contemporary writers have welcomed European languages with an open hand. Adichie argues that English was never a choice for her. Like her predecessors, English was the official language within schools and it is through her English education that she developed as a writer. Consequently, while her use of Igbo is sufficient for rudimentary tasks, she cannot convey her intellect efficiently through an Indigenous medium (2). As aforementioned by Thiong’o, the native people have been estranged from their Indigenous history and culture. Yet, Adichie challenges this assertion, arguing that there is no “cultural purity” because their culture has been diluted by years of colonization which is reflected in the multiple languages that people within Nigeria speak (2). Thus, while present-day Africans have indeed been shaped by Westernization, the culture they have been brought up in is theirs.

It is impossible to recuperate traditions that are alien to even Ngugi Wa Thiong’o. As Achebe describes them, African writers are “by-products of the same processes that made the new nation-states of Africa” (“English” 344). Adichie’s knowledge of Igbo language was rudimentary and to write in Igbo would have been more challenging than writing in English. The majority of her fellow educated Igbo cannot read Igbo either because they completed their formal education in English, so her efforts to translate would be futile. However, while Adichie initially tells her interviewer Ada Azodo that English is not a choice, because she was not offered a fair
alternative, she also argues that Africans have agency in their use of English because there is a "distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries" (2). Because her English is founded on her experience as a Nigerian, she believes that she owns her language.

To Adichie, it is not "whether African writers should or should not write in English but how African writers, and Africans in general, are educated in Africa" (Azodo 2). Adichie comes "from a generation of Nigerians who constantly negotiate two languages and sometimes three, if you include Pidgin" (2). Adichie calls the generation she belongs to an "Engli-Igbo generation" and consequently, Igbo culture cannot fully capture their experiences (2). Consequently, despite her use of English as a publication medium, Adichie still believes in the relevance of ethnic languages and the need to continue developing because they are a part of African culture, just not the only part. She encourages Africans to teach their children their ethnic languages in the home to preserve the value of Indigenous languages. She contemplates the irony of "African academics" who preach the need for the use of Indigenous languages but do not teach their own children their ethnic language, arguing they would be "confused’ if they [spoke] both languages” (3). While being bilingual may not confuse them, the politics of language and its reflection on one’s value may very well do the job. “I think that, beneath these superficial reasons, there are deeper questions of self-esteem and fundamental pride in who we are” (3).

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o dismisses Adichie’s assertion, arguing that when Africans claim they have ownership of English, they are simply appealing to a “metaphysical empire” (Thiong’o “Interview”). Despite whatever autonomy Adichie believe she is claiming, by writing in English she and others are “contributing to the expansion of, and dependence on, the English language” (Thiong’o “Interview”). Instead he proposes the need for translation as a means to undermine the
systemic oppression of language. Translation would allow African writers to both compete with the international world as well as build up their own nations.

Conclusion

The transformation from nation building to contemporary issues, has not only shaped the style of African literature, but it also speaks to the African experience. Adichie's novel *Americanah*, illustrates the ways in which globalization has complicated notions of identity, culture, and ethnicity that the West had so painstakingly attempted to define. Just as European colonialists forced multiethnic groups into united fronts, so have they attempted to define them as one entity under the umbrella of African literature. By lumping all of these writers together, it has made the topic of language, experience, and aesthetics complicated because the western audience comes with a biased lens of poverty, hunger, and savagery associated with the "dark continent"... When certain expectations by the West are not met because of prior misconceived notions about African experiences and history, we readily criticize contemporary writers for not being authentic enough, yet expect them to carry their culture to a universal audience through English.

Despite their different viewpoints on the use of language, "both [Thiong'o and Achebe] are concerned with the individual, cultural, and national responsibility, and ultimately, the preservation of African ideals among sustained multilingual diversity" (Ten "Vehicles") Critics of Thiong'o argue that he is "unwilling to adapt to a changing world" but Thiong'o does seek change in a move toward an independent Africa without compromising one's native tongue, the primary carrier of culture. Using the language of the oppressor disempowers authors because they "lose intricacies of their native tongues, hindering their ability to portray their cultures in an effective, authentic way" (Ten "Vehicles"). However, English provides Achebe a vehicle for
international communication and recognition that Thiong’o’s Gikuyu language alone cannot. Although some of his emotion may be lost in translation, the fundamental message of his work, which is, primarily, politically and socially motivated, is made clear to his audience.

There is no simple answer to the choice of language, as both positions require the author to make certain sacrifices and prioritize what is most important to them—a global or native audience. This half-century debate has been fast-forwarded and challenged with another option for contemporary African writers, which calls for an integration of the two—a language that embodies both ethnic cultures and the culture that has been imposed upon them since birth. Contemporary African writers have navigated through identity, linguistic, and stigma barriers and whether they are writers of African literature by descent or by choice, they have been impacted by the language debate. Rather in English, Igbo, Gikuyu, Yoruba, or Khana, they have all aided in the empowerment of their nations, by carrying their personal experiences and cultures—whether it be traditional, western, or hybrid—through African literature.
Works Cited


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