

The Yoruba Language and Literature in the 21st Century and Beyond

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Abstract: The pervasive poor reading culture, the phenomenon of indigenous language endangerment and the dominance of new media of modern telecommunication have had condemnable impact on the survival and continuity of Yoruba language and literature. Despite the significance of language and literature in cultural expression, the value attached to Yoruba Literature is waning in our contemporary society. This paper therefore poses the question: is there hope for Yoruba Literature in the 21st century and beyond? There is no homogeneous answer to the question owing to some variables such as language attitude to Yoruba; linguistic alienation of some children for not using Yoruba Language by some homes and the negative attitude of Yoruba natives to the use of the language in eco-linguistic spheres. The paper observes that there is “literary endangerment” of Yoruba Language and literary texts written in the language because of the incompetence of the contemporary Yoruba children and youth to speak and write in mutually intelligible Yoruba linguistic codes. This paper therefore posits that Yoruba language and literature should be a compulsory prerequisite for any further study and other opportunities, particularly for candidate from Yoruba extraction.

Keywords: Oral literature; Yoruba language and literature; language endangerment; phonocentric tradition; logocentric tradition.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the historical development of literature written in Yoruba Language; the sociology of Yoruba literature written in Yoruba language from the earliest period to the present, and the status of Yoruba literature viz-a-viz the English literature in contemporary, cosmopolitan, modernist-oriented society. Thus, the paper does not engage in the thematic studies and analysis of Yoruba Language literary texts, except when and where it is unavoidably necessary.

This paper is not unaware of the harvest of existing studies on literature written in Yoruba language in journals, books and dissertations (Ogunsina, 1976, 1978, 1980; Isola, 1977, 1978; Barber, 1979, 2008;

Olatunji, 1993, 1975; Bamgbose, 2007; Irele, 1975, among others). The quality and quantity of these studies on Yoruba Language literature are pointers to the fact that the Yoruba had rich literary culture, particularly in the genres of poetry and prose, with few instances of drama before the colonial incursion and the “imposition” of English as the language of literary expressions.

From the reading and inferences made from the previous researches on the subject matter, the historical development of Yoruba Language literature can be traced to the factors of missionary activities, complimented with the development of Yoruba orthography; the growth and development of Yoruba Language newspaper industry and

the need of some sections of the population for means of entertainment.

The very beginning of books written in Yoruba Language can be traced to the publication of *Bibeli Mimo* in 1900. In the opinion of this paper, the publication of *Bibeli Mimo*, as translated from English, was not done with the genuine interest of promoting the use of Yoruba Language among the speakers. The translation and the eventual publication of *Bibeli Mimo* was done for religious purpose; it was produced to win more converts and to enhance the indoctrination of the already-converted Yoruba populace into the folds of Christianity. The missionaries still realised that majority of Nigerians from Yoruba extraction could still not read fluently text (*Bibeli Mimo*) written in Yoruba language. Consequently, they embarked upon the publication of series of *Yoruba Readers: Iwe Kika Yoruba Ekini* (1909); *Ekeji* (1910); *Eketa* (1911), *Ekerin* (1912) and *Ekarun* (1915). These *Yoruba Readers* series were meant to improve the proficiency of the Yoruba in reading. In our opinion, this was also done in order to improve the Christian religious faith of the Yoruba, particularly through the reading of the Yoruba version of the *Holy Bible (Bibeli Mimo)*. The literary, social and essence of these publications is to ensure the entrenchment of Christian morality in the minds of the Yoruba elites and

populace. *Ilosiwaju Ero Mimo* was published in 1911 when the missionaries were certain that the Yoruba audience have attained some level of proficiency in reading.

The “real” literary activities in Yoruba Language began with Adetimkan Obasa’s (1927) *Iwe Kinni Ti Awon Akewi*. Using his status as an editor of a weekly newspaper *Yoruba News*, Obasa was able to win the patronage of Yoruba audience that were looking for secular texts written in Yoruba Language. *Iwe Kinni Ti Awon Akewi* (1927) was followed by *Iwe Keji Ti Awon Akewi* (1934) and *Iwe Keta Ti Awon Akewi* (1945). These collections of poems were focused on how to uphold moral virtuosity among the Yoruba elites and populace.

Kolawole Ajisafe, a native of Abeokuta in Ogun State also had fruitful literary engagements in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the genre of poetry and prose. His important literary works include poetry: *Aiye Akamara* (1921) and *Gbadebo Alake* (1934); and a prose work, *Enia Soro* (1935).

The Yoruba literary tradition experienced the publication of the first novelette, *Igbeyin a Dun/OmoOrukan* (1931) by E.A. Akintan. D.O. Fagunwa only came to the literary scene in 1938 with the publication of *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*. Fagunwa’s second novel, *Igbo Olodumare* and third novel *Ireke Onibudowere* published in 1949. His fourth novel,

Irinkerindo (1954) was published while the fifth and last novel, *Aditu Olodumare* was published in 1961. The chronological presentation of Yoruba written literature is not fixed because of some contention that imaginative literature in Yoruba language began in 1929 with the publication of I. B. Thomas' *Itan Emi Segilola Elegberun Oko Laye*.

Considering the history of Yoruba written literature, this paper does not totally support the opinion of Bamgbose (2007:1) that:

Fagunwa can rightly be described as a pioneer in the field of creative writing in Yoruba. Before him no other writer has had the same impact on the Yoruba literary scene, nor the same influence on subsequent writers. The appearance of his first novel, *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale* marks an important stage in the development of Yoruba written literature.

Considering the lucidity, elegance and vibrancy of his themes and subject matters, Fagunwa is acknowledged as a literary writer with creative ingenuity. This does not qualify him as the pioneer of the Yoruba written literature. Literary writers in Yoruba Language and of literary substance have come before Fagunwa. Among these writers are J.S. Sowande (a.k.a. Sobo Arobiodu); E.A. Akintan; Kolawole Ajisafe and Adetimikan Obasa.

2. Yoruba Literature: The Phonocentric Tradition

The foundation of Yoruba literature in particular, and African Literature in general, was laid on the oral tradition and verbal art of a people. Yoruba was rich in oral performance and narratives before the literary literacy in writing and reading. Every discourse on Yoruba literature and by extension African literature should give consideration to the significance of oral/verbal art.

Phonocentrism is an intricate quality of literatures (oral poetry and folk narratives) of the pristine orality. Phonocentrism is premised on “the belief that speech is privileged over writing” (Dobie, 2009:169). The success of Yoruba oral literature (poetry and prose) relied upon how words are used during performance.

The practitioners of Yoruba literature of primary orality were individual adults who were schooled by age and experience. Their creative ingenuity was always demonstrated through the blend of native intelligence and linguistic virtuosity during performance. These practitioners utilised the resources of indigenous language intricacies such as proverbs, idioms and innuendoes to impress their message on the minds of the audience. Despite that Yoruba literature of the phonocentric tradition was not written, the practitioners were always able to impart their message, engaged and sustained the attention of their willing audience because words were

used in their actual habitat (with preponderance of kinesics and proxemics) for mutual interactions between them and their audience.

Ong (1982:47) has clearly identified the significance of words used in their actual habitat for semantic relationship between the practitioners and their audience. The critic writes:

Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal reflections, facial expression, and the entire human existential setting in which the real, spoken word always occurs.

The observation of Ong suggests that words were used in oral literature for the realisation of their linguistic and literary potentials. The practitioners of Yoruba oral literature usually relied on the facilities of their voice and body. It is therefore right to say that Yoruba literature of phonocentric period was participatory and collaborative between the performers and their audience.

The success of Yoruba literature of the phonocentric tradition goes beyond the literary and symbolic use of words. Performance space with congruity of interactive setting also plays significant role in the realisation of the ethics and

aesthetics of the oral literary texts. Yoruba folktales in the primary orality have the near equivalence of the contemporary written Yoruba literature. For successful performance of Yoruba folktales, the performer manipulates his/her body, voice and the performance space. This position is in line with Sesan's (2012:8) submission that:

Apart from the utilization and manipulation of the body and voice of the performer, there is also a need for the significant manipulation of the performance space. In the traditional Yoruba society, the performance space of Yoruba folktales is triangular, corresponding and interactional between the audience and the performer.

The position of Sesan, as given above, shows the centrality of performance space, the performer and the audience in the analysis and discussion of the aesthetics of Yoruba Oral Performance (YOP) of phonocentric tradition.

Yoruba literature of pristine orality was performance oriented, and for this reason, it is communal and devoid of definite authorship. The contents of Yoruba oral literature are communal and the performers only serve as the medium of the message. A performer of Yoruba oral literature only acts on the "authority" and recognition of the audience (cf. Sekoni, 1990). The unwrittenness of

Yoruba oral literature of phonocentric tradition does not disqualify it from being called Literature. Like written literature, oral literature thrives on creativity, innovation and literary imagination of individual self or collective selves in a community.

3. Yoruba Literature: The Logocentric Tradition

Missionary activities in the hinterland of Yorubaland and the development of Yoruba Language written orthography served as the catalysts for the logocentric tradition of Yoruba Literature. For clarity, logocentric tradition is used here to make reference to written discourse or literary texts.

The missionaries that came to the hinterland of Yoruba land saw written texts, particularly scriptural texts as one of the machineries for evangelisation. This action did not justify the view that literature came with white missionaries and colonialists. We rather corroborate the view of Nwankwo (1990:315) that “writing is only a symbolic way of representing speech and as such is secondary to it.”

The establishment of the University College, Ibadan (1948) but later known as the University of Ibadan led to refinement of the art of Yoruba-language literature writer. The activities of the Department of Classics, Linguistics and African Languages and Modern European Languages with Institute of African

Studies are acknowledged in this instance. These departments and the institute embarked upon purpose-driven researches on how to improve upon the literariness of the Yoruba language literary texts. With the activities of these departments and the institute, it is possible for writers of literature in Yoruba language to adapt Latin or Greek literature. Babalola (1971:54) has acknowledged the contribution of Olanipekun Esan in this instance when he writes:

Olanipekun Esan, a classic scholar of the University of Ibadan, has contributed to modern Yoruba literature. Three books of note, all of them being reproductions of Latin or Greek literary works, not word-for-word translations but recasts in Yoruba mould, with Yoruba names for the characters and the places. The books were all published in 1965: *Esin Atiroja* (written in verse and embodying the *Trojan Horse* story in Virgil's *Aeneid*) *Teledalase* (written in verse and based on Sophocle's *Oedipus*) and *Orekelewa* (a play in prose reproducing Plautus' *Mercator*).

Olanipekun Esan's literary works reflect some literary maturity because the writer (Esan) has been schooled by traditions, cultural experience, native intelligence and

the knowledge of comparative Literature.

Before the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War (1967), some writers of Yoruba-language literature emerged. Among these writers is Afolabi Olabimtan who published *Oluwa L'o M'ejo Da* (1966) and *Kekere Ekun* (1967). Today, there has been considerable number of writers of literature in Yoruba Language writing on various themes such as family issues, violence, politics and corruption. It is however disheartening that what Yoruba-language literature has gained in the quantity and quality of its writers has been lost to the absence of willing and fluent readers of Yoruba - language literature.

4. Yoruba Literature and the English Language

The fact that English is the second language in Nigeria has been acknowledged by scholars and linguists in different research documents: books, journals, monographs and inaugurals (see Adegbite, 2010; Banjo, 1996; Bamgbose, 1971 and 2001; Jowitt, 1991; Akindele and Adegbite, 1999; Dada, 2006 and Akere 2009). Apart from being the second language in Nigeria, English has become the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) and Language of Wider Mutual Intelligibility (LWMI) in Nigeria's multilingual context. Consequently, Yoruba and other indigenous languages are engaged in unhealthy

linguistic rivalry and competition with the English language for communicative purposes in writing and or speaking. Since the focus of this paper is on the literature written in Yoruba language, our focus will be on Yoruba Language.

As a result of the unhealthy linguistic rivalry and competition between the English language and indigenous Nigerian languages, Yoruba Language is being threatened for its linguistic survival. This is premised upon the understanding that when two countries/languages are in contact, they suffer in different ways and with different degrees. The dominant culture or language survives the challenges and trials while the dominated culture or language is forced into a moribund state or it is endangered. Human mobility, dynamic economic structures and the ever-changing social order make culture/ language contacts and shifts in linguo-cultural paradigms inevitable. With this position, this paper acknowledges the opinion of Kraus (1992:4-10) in the classification of languages based on safety parameters. He (Kraus) languages into three: (i) moribund languages (ii) endangered languages; and (iii) safe languages.

Kraus opines that moribund languages are no more acquired as mother tongues by children. These languages have lost their use; and thus, because of disuse or lack of use, they have become property of forgotten history. Moribund

languages have lost their speakers and the only evidence of their existence can only be extracted from archaeological findings. Endangered languages are learnt by children as their mother tongue but with no committed interest. The uses of these languages in wider communication contexts are suppressed because their speakers have been caught in the web of linguistic imperialism. In the opinion of Kraus, 40%- 75% of world languages are in this category. If urgent and well co-coordinator actions are not taken, the endangered languages will move to the category (i) of moribund languages by the end of the 21st century. Safe languages have the chance of survival and continuous use. In Kraus' view, 5%-10% of world's languages are in this category. The safe languages have the status of languages of international communication (LIC) and their speakers are spread and dispersed across the globe.

Following the line of thought of Kraus, it can be said that Yoruba language is endangered while the English Language is safe in Nigeria's multicultural and multilingual contexts. Many "modern" and elitist Yoruba children cannot read Yoruba alphabets with commendable linguistic competence. These children falter and fumble with the reading of Yoruba Language alphabets with no success. On the other hand, these children read English Language with linguistic proficiency and

competence. With the sociological and sociolinguistic evidences at our disposal, these children are not at fault. The problem begins from home and it is later compounded by the society. The contemporary reality is that most Yoruba homes have been anglicised. Children no longer acquire and learn Yoruba as the mother/first tongue from parents, siblings and neighbours because these adults desire that the children should be exposed to the use of English Language at a formative stage. The consequence is that these children are caught in the web of linguistic confusion between Yoruba language and the English language.

The situation of Yoruba language endangerment motivates us to postulate the notion of literature endangerment. In our opinion, literature endangerment occurs when literatures in a particular language have a very large number of disinterested readers to the point of near abandonment. Like Yoruba language, the Yoruba-language literature is being endangered. The endangerment of literature written in Yoruba Language is as a result of the negative attitude of children, parents and adults alike towards the acquisition and learning of Yoruba Language. Our argument is based on the fact that there is an intricate link between language and literature. A literature (oral or written) is made, transmit and share with the audience through the facilities of language. With this intricate link between

language and literature, the “death” of one will undoubtedly precipitate the death of the other. The negative disposition of Yoruba speakers to their language is reflected in their attitudes towards writing and reading in the language.

The statistics of writers of imaginative literature shows that there are more writers using the medium of English than the Yoruba medium. Social and economic factors are accountable for this. The sociology of the English language in Nigeria shows its dominance over other indigenous languages (including Yoruba language). This dominant status of the English language, consequently, accounts for the favorable social status it has. The literary writers prefer to write in English because it is the Language of Higher Domain (LHD) unlike the Yoruba that is conditioned to the status of Language of Lower Domain (LLD) by the attitude of its users (speakers, writers and readers). These literary writers want literary visibility and recognition while the established writers want to gain currency by using the medium of the English language. The literary fate of D.O. Fagunwa is instructive in this instance. Nelson, Fagunwa’s publishers gives prominence to the English translation of his novel, *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* done by Wole Soyinka. On this literary injustice, Irele (1975: 77-78) comments:

But the ultimate injustice to the memory of Fagunwa and to the nature of his achievement comes however from his own publishers who seem to have appreciated his value as a source of profitable business rather than as a writer in his own right. In the translation of Fagunwa’s novel, *Ogboju Ode*, prepared by Wole Soyinka and published by Nelson, the title page and blurb are designed to relegate Fagunwa into the backdrop as much as possible, and to bring the translator into focus, obviously, Nelson are more interested in having Soyinka on their list (with the prospect of good sales that this entails) than in giving the wider world a taste of Fagunwa’s creative genius.

For his original creative text written in Yoruba Language, Fagunwa hardly gained visibility and recognition unlike his counterparts using English Language as the medium of their literary expressions. For economic consideration, Nigerian publishers prefer publishing books in English because it is the Language of Wider Communication (LWC), hence, larger readership than the texts written in Yoruba language. The current state of Yoruba language is that there is no committed literary

engagement as compared to literary texts written in English language. Most publishers are not ready and willing to publish texts written in the Yoruba language except such texts are on the approved reading lists of the State and Federal Ministries of Education for particular examination. This situation is not the same with the literary texts written in the English language. The Nigerian publishers willingly and readily publish manuscripts written in the English language. This practice of Nigerian publishers is a limitation to the promotion literary texts written in Yoruba Language.

Going by the above observations and discussions, the future of the Yoruba language Literature in the 21st century and beyond is not certain. The survival and the future of Yoruba-language literature in the 21st century and beyond is bleak. It is in our opinion that to ensure the future of Yoruba-language literature, there should be realistic decolonisation of indigenous thinking and orientation and ideals from Eurocentric paradigms. This implies seeking redefinition in Nigeria's own languages (Omotoso, 2008:299).

5. Recommendations

Based on the aforementioned issues raised in this paper, some recommendations are made.

Since the survival of the Yoruba-language literature relies on the use of the language (Yoruba) in social communication, private and public spheres, the use of Yoruba language

should be encouraged in homes and schools. The language policy in the *National Policy on Education* should be adhered to strictly. In the policy, it is said that a child will be taught with his/her mother tongue and/or the language of the immediate environment from class one (primary) to three before his /her exposure to English Language from primary four. This will create a renewed interest in the use of Yoruba Language.

Secondly, there should be a policy that stipulates that at least a credit pass in Yoruba be made a compulsory pre-requisite alongside English Language and Mathematics for further opportunities (admission into tertiary institution and/or for employment, especially for candidates of Yoruba extraction). This policy is likely to inspire interest in secondary school students in the language.

Thirdly, incentives and special package should be given to teachers of Yoruba Language. This will motivate students to want to study Yoruba Language and Literature at Nigerian tertiary institutions. Besides, students who study Yoruba Language and Literature in schools should be given special consideration (in terms of fee subsidy, scholarship and bursary). This will motivate students to attach some special value to the study of Yoruba Language and Literature.

Fourthly, specialist teachers should be made to teach the subject (Yoruba) in Nigerian schools. It should not be made the subject for anyone who can communicate in the language.

Lastly, the departments that offer Yoruba as a course in tertiary institutions should also ensure that the course is taught in the language. Research works and dissertations should also be documented in Yoruba.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the state of Yoruba language and literature in the 21st century and beyond. It examined the evolution and development of Yoruba from the phonocentric

tradition to the logocentric tradition. It also examined the impact of Christianity on the development of Yoruba Literature. It is our observation in the paper that the Yoruba language and literature face a fundamental setback because of lack of interest in the use and speaking of Yoruba. In the contemporary Yoruba society, children, youths and adolescents do not show committed interest in the reading of literary texts written in Yoruba Language. The paper therefore makes five recommendations on how to improve on the state of Yoruba in the 21st century and beyond.

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