

INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of *Marang: Journal of Language and Literature* is a collection of papers read at the English Department's 6th International Conference held in Gaborone, Botswana from 1-3 June, 2011 under the theme "English and the Distinctly African University". The theme which was gleaned from the University of Botswana's Mission statement, namely "To improve economic and social conditions for the Nation while advancing itself as a distinctly African university with a regional and international outlook," attracted participants from across Africa and as far afield as the USA and Sweden. Broadly, they were to seek answers to various questions such as: what exactly is a distinctly African university; is being 'African' only geographical; how can such a university enhance African languages and cultures; can African universities remain academic 'islands'; and how can African universities, and the University of Botswana in particular, claim to remain "distinctly African universities", when most of their teaching and research, including the teaching of African languages, are done in English, a language that cannot escape being associated with the colonial enterprise and its concomitant foreignness.

Officiating at the conference, the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Professor Frank Youngman remarked in part:

Part of the problem, I must concede, lies with the somewhat cryptic nature of part of the title, specifically "Distinctly African University." The individual words it contains are fairly straightforward: who doesn't know what a university is? Is it not the highest or biggest school one can attend to receive a certificate and wear a black gown? Is "distinctly" not an adverb functioning as a modifier that shows peculiarity? Each one of us has an idea of what being "African" entails. Is it not obvious that being African means being associated with the African continent, being dark skinned and proud of who you are? Is it not also obvious that an African university is one located within the borders of Africa; headed mainly by African professors under the chancellorship of state presidents and, do I hear, teaching in and about African languages, cultures and indigenous knowledge systems? If all this is true, then what has English got to do with it? How many African universities teach or use African languages both as subjects and media of instruction? Are we not in an African university right now where none of the papers during this conference will be delivered in an African, let alone a national, or is it official, language?

In seeking answers to these varied questions, the conference papers, and the consequent publication of this special issue, are involved in an engaging postcolonial project in which hitherto subject cultures and languages are "writing back" at dominant western positions and cultures here symbolized by the English language.

Running through the six articles in this issue is a constant awareness of the English language's social capital in its interaction with indigenous cultures, leading to conflicts on the one hand and the need for social coexistence on the other. The African academe/university, these articles suggest, is the appropriate setting where such interaction can be suitably debated, managed and new positions derived and then ploughed back into the service of humankind, the *raison d'être* for these institutions. Consequently, most of these articles explicitly make references to the education system as a possible bridge for obtaining, in Harford's words, "the best of two worlds".

The six articles contained in this volume are from the fields of language and linguistics, literature and theatre. Carolyn Harford's article entitled "English and the Distinctly African University: The Best of Both Worlds" sets the tone by noting that the theme "sets up an opposition between "English" and "African", and thus imposes the "challenge to mediate between two poles". The mediation should lead us into exploring the possibilities of using the status of English as an international lingua franca to preserve African languages and cultures, hence focusing on the best of both worlds.

Using Bhaktin's notion of dialogism, Sindiso Zhou's article "Contact between English and African Oral Traditions: Interfacing Warring Identities; the Case of Zimbabwe" continues the English-African inter-cultural interaction encapsulated in the conference theme. Like Harford, Zhou argues that while there is potential conflict in this dialogue between English and African cultures, there is also great potential for mutual benefit as the historical reality of conflict cannot be wished away. In Zhou's words, "the merits of this study lie in its interpretation of the intricate ramifications arising from the interface of two seemingly opposing identities and languages as well as the possible benefits of the interface."

In his article, Neil Graves problematizes the teaching of Shakespeare's sonnets to Botswana students due to cultural differences. He argues that climatic seasons in Botswana and their symbolic connotation are totally different from those of the West, a phenomenon that poses problems of interpretation and understanding. Graves further asserts that the translation of sonnets from English to the vernacular (Setswana) compounds the linguistic problem, and that this adds to the difficulties of comprehension by Botswana students.

Kennedy Chinyowa explores the contact between English and African oral traditions and the environment by presenting an 'ecocentric approach to Environmental Education through African Narrative Performance'. He argues that people's relationship with nature as expressed through narrative performance finds its genesis in their natural environment. He further asserts that performance is the most effective catalyst for children's communication and/or expression of their thoughts and desires.

Owen Seda's "Space as Resistance: Theatre Venues as Counter-Hegemonic Practice in Post-Colonial Zimbabwe" explores how theatre space can be used to

counter previously hegemonic discursive and representational practices. Theatre space, according to Seda, can be designed, re-configured, and co-opted to construct meaning, specifically post-colonial resistance, as demonstrated in the case of Zimbabwean theatre and performance venues. Post-colonial theatre practices, as shown in the case studies that Seda examines, reinforce resistance by repositioning traditional African spatial configurations and styles that address new and localized values and identities.

Connie Rapoo's article offers a similar discussion of the interlinks between theatre practice and the African experience by examining the interplay of corporeal vulnerability and post-apartheid existence as staged in Lara Foot Newton's play *Tshepang*. Newton's dramaturgy in this play centres on the use of silence—a significant theatrical strategy that evokes the specificities of trauma, lack, and isolation as experienced by the characters in *Tshepang*. The staging of silence, according to Rapoo, dramatizes the power of corporeal expression by showing how silence and trauma are inscribed onto the characters' bodies. By re-deploying the body as a site of resistance and calling forth African cultural signifiers, the play gives insight into contemporary practices of narrativizing and dramatizing African subjectivity and self-assertion.