

CONTACT BETWEEN ENGLISH AND AFRICAN ORAL TRADITIONS: INTERFACING WARRING IDENTITIES; THE CASE OF ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

This article discusses the complexities arising from the inevitable contact between English and African oral traditions. African oral traditions are grounded in the principles of kindness, support, and reciprocity. Contact between English and African orature is a complex phenomenon that was set in motion by the educational and religious systems imposed on the African through colonialism. As oral traditions were translated from African indigenous languages to English, a hybrid arose; this was something familiar but new. Using Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory which perceives all discourse as having a dialogic orientation, and that works of art are not complete in themselves but are responses to other works and traditions situated within a current of intersecting dialogues, this article argues that the contact between English and African oral traditions is an act of entering into dialogue with warring cultures, ideologies and traditions. The article demonstrates how the contact between English and African oral traditions can account for on the one hand, the preservation of African orature and culture, and, on the other hand, their resultant obliteration. The article proposes that to avoid retrogression, the same education system that was used to disrobe Africans of their identity can successfully be used to promote the African renaissance by making inroads into cultural awareness and re-cultivation of indigenous pride. Thus African institutions and universities in particular, must play a leading role in this cultural renaissance if they are to be distinctly African.

Key words: Contact, orature, English, indigenous language, dialogic interface

1. Introduction

The contact between English and African oral traditions is a complex phenomenon that can be traced back to the violent years of colonialism when Africa was besieged by Europe for the exploitation of her vast land and mineral resources. A contextualisation of the contact under inquiry is important for the understanding of the relationship between the African and the colonising languages. The contact between Europe and Africa can be appraised as being between black and white, indigenous and exotic, all of which led to a crisis of colour and tongue. Further, it can be analyzed as being the background of the virgin confluence between literacy and oracy. To that effect, it

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introduced the rigid concepts of centre and margin, denoting Western and African ideologies respectively. These concepts assumed supremacy of the language and culture of the colonizer thereby relegating the language(s) and culture(s) of the colonized to the periphery. The contact of these two warring entities spilled into questions of identity that invariably plunged the African into an unavoidable existential crisis as is the case with the characters Nyasha in *Dangaremba* (1987) and Lucifer in *Mungoshi* (1985). I use 'warring' in both its literal and symbolic senses. First, there was the obvious and visible political and physical struggle for land and sovereignty. Secondly, there existed a more subtle and invisible war within a war. This was characterized by resistance of a psychological, spiritual, and socio-linguistic nature. The conflict dynamic following thereof, beggared recognition in every sphere of the indigenous people's lives, especially through the spoken word.

My conception of the contact discourse is such that the elements that are involved in the contact are fundamentally predisposed to substantial pressure and force that are associated with the intruding elements. In this case, the English language and culture on the one hand, and the African oral traditions on the other, all suffer a histrionic change over time. If observed from a linguistic anthropological position where language holds the crucial role of constituting society and of representing culture, we are promptly brought to the stark awareness of the power of the spoken word. Oral traditions were and still are the vital force of African society due to their insistence on *unhu/Ubuntu/botho/humanness* as the foundations of humanity. They are grounded in principles of kindness, reciprocity, moral uprightness and community. Given that oral traditions represented the inherent power and spiritual invincibility of the African, it then follows that the contact with English presented yet another dimension of the political power struggle, a politics of sound and space in the acoustic field. The African viewed the contact with disdain, as an intrusion and a violation of privacy and social order. In linguistic terms, it was a devoicing of the indigenous language phonologies. However, it was hardly a matter of choice as the power dynamic was in favour of the colonisers. Resisting the new dispensation linguistically was not as successful as resisting it politically because after only a few decades of independence hundreds of indigenous African languages are in a metaphoric intensive care unit struggling for survival.

Similarly, when English came into contact with African oral traditions, contact metamorphism took place on both sides. In a geological sense, contact metamorphism usually forms valuable minerals such as garnet and emery. Through extrapolation, one can argue that the contact between these two constructs of European and African oral traditions seems to present a case of metamorphic dynamism as the two suffer loss and register marked transformation in the process of ongoing interaction. Judging the transformation as negative or positive largely depends on the ideological convictions of the observer. In the Zimbabwean situation, various interface phenomena pointing to language attrition may be observed as a result of language and culture contact.

Language attrition typically manifests as loss of a language or fragments of that language in a situation where speakers have a language other than their L1 assuming an important or dominant role in their everyday life (Schmid, 2007). Evidently, through association, language attrition in the colonial state translated to partial death of the folktale/*ngano/inganekwana*, proverbs/*tsumo*, folk songs and the fireplace poems.

The central argument in this discussion anchors on the idea that the growth of the British Empire through colonialism brought about the contact between English and African oral traditions. Furthermore, the developments and attendant dilemmas ushered in the wake of colonialism are hardly reversible. Therefore if any benefit is to be derived from the contact discourse, it will not be from advocating a return to the traditional stone-age practices of the Rozvi and Ndebele peoples of the pre-colonial state, but perhaps a symbiosis of the indigenous languages and the oral traditions that sustained them, with the exotic English language and the modernistic culture that embodies it. It is at this point where we need to locate and interrogate the role of African academic institutions and in particular those that aspire to be distinctly African. It should be expected that in addition to other African institutions among them political and religious, African universities must be at the forefront in among other things, highlighting the symbiosis between European and African oral traditions through research, teaching and service. The conference which gave rise to this article remains relevant then as now and in the future to continuously interrogate and position the African academe in the Europe-African debate in so far as the reality of their historical contact is concerned. To avoid retrogression, this article proposes to look at the benefits and to also focus on the costs that can be reversed by using the education system to make inroads into cultural awareness and to fight back through re-cultivation of indigenous pride. The same education system that was used to disrobe Africans of their identity can successfully be used to promote the African renaissance.

2. Defining Language: African Oral Traditions

Language can be understood as a system of expressions peculiar to human beings. It sets human beings apart from, and thus gives dominion over all other creation. 'Language is fossil poetry... [it] is made up of images, or tropes' (Emmerson, 1844). This article's postulation regarding the link between the meaning of language and the contact debate at hand lies in the fact that if indeed a language transports images and tropes across generations as proposed by Emerson (1844), then we can safely view it as a celebration and commemoration of a people's past and present as well as a hope for their future. This viewpoint presents challenges given that the contact brought to the fore a new language and a new tradition of individualism to the doorstep of every member of the African community; willing or averse. In a direct way, the contact

challenged the status quo of Africans by forcing them to abandon their oral traditions, language and God in order to celebrate wholesale, the language, tradition and God of the Europeans. This was done through indoctrinating Africans to believe that colonialism was God's plan to rescue Africans from primitivism.

The concept oral tradition has been variously described due to its complex nature. It can be described as a community's cultural and historical background preserved and later transmitted from one generation to the next in spoken stories and song. Oral traditions are distinctly oral, as opposed to being written down. In other precincts, African oral traditions have been specifically referred to as Orature (Wa Thiongo, 1987). For preliterate Africans, oral traditions were a training arena in which children and adults accessed essential coaching from birth through puberty, initiation rites, and marriage right up to death. In Zimbabwe, oral traditions encompass folktales, proverbs, riddles, allegorical expressions, idioms, song and dance. Folktales known as *ngano* and *inganekwane* in Shona and isiNdebele respectively served as a vital channel of transmitting traditional values. Proverbs, idioms and riddles; *tsumo*, *madimikira ne zvirahwe* and *izaga*, *amazwi ahlakanihileyo lamalibho* in Shona and isiNdebele respectively were special means of communicating morals and conveying age-old wisdom from generation to generation.

My conception of oral traditions has a bearing on the memory aspect of the African people. It seems to me that Africans in general and Zimbabweans in particular used oral traditions for memorialization purposes. Oral traditions were at once a mode of transmission, a celebration and a memorialization of the indigenous people's rich cultural heritage. Every story told, every allegory shared, every song danced to in the summer moonlight or winter firelight was reminiscent of the philosophies that indigenous populations treasured and guarded jealously as the quintessence of being African. To this effect, the contact specifically compromised the vehicle of oral traditions, that is, the indigenous languages. In agreement with this destabilizing nature of the contact, Tirivangana suggests that the African/ChiShona/[IsiNdebele] Religion was always the basis of the African/ChiShona/[IsiNdebele] philosophy and worldview, together the glue that formed the African identity. When colonialists came they targeted this essential function of the African culture to bring about the much sought-after alienation (Tirivangana, 2011).

In plain terms, the contact between English and African oral traditions was the entry point of cultural imperialism. The potency of English tripped the flow, disturbed the cycle and introduced a new way of expressing reality thus turning society inside out. Before the indigenous people realised that they were under siege politically, they discovered with dismay that their languages were suddenly competing for space with the English language, which seemed likely to win for several reasons. The white settlers, with the adept hand of the missionaries, made sure every individual had a reason to learn the English language either for instrumental, strategic or integrative purposes. However, it must be borne in mind that the same settlers also had to learn

Shona and IsiNdebele for instrumental, strategic and integrative purposes. The development of a pidgin called *Chiraparapa* or *Isilapalapa*; a mixture of corrupted English, Shona and IsiNdebele is an example. But by virtue of the small numbers of settlers learning indigenous languages, pitted against the large numbers of indigenous people learning English, or by the existing reason that Shona and IsiNdebele among the other indigenous languages, were virtually unknown in the wider linguistic circle before colonialism; it was almost obvious that the playing field would be tilted in favour of the dominant group. In the end, indigenous languages were trivialized and oral traditions dismissed as primitive in and out of school and church. European missionaries were bent on rescuing Africa from itself, even from what they viewed as the paganism of its languages (Wa Thiongo, 1986). As a result, they banned every practice that perpetuated Africanness. It was taboo to speak in Shona or IsiNdebele in a missionary school class. Ironically, such discrimination and prejudice is still practised in some schools in post-independence Zimbabwe today, perhaps due to colonial hangover and imperial residue clouding the judgment of curriculum planners and educators alike. Post-independence academic institutions thus must promote African oral traditions and not be accomplices in their destruction. They must therefore make conscious interventions to dispel any colonial hangover and its associated imperial residue for in failing to do so amounts to perpetuating some of the problems arising from the contact.

3. Tracing the Point of Contact

The critical issue regarding the contact discourse is the atmosphere that informed the contact and the environment that prevailed at the point of contact. One is inclined to observe that had circumstances offered an alternative and had there been freedom of choice and autonomy of body and spirit, then the question of contact would not have raised critical questions. The central and problematic issue seems to be the element of subjugation, force, compulsion and linguistic hegemony that catapulted the acculturation project into unstoppable action. Having established that orature, particularly proverbs and folktales as the archives of a people's worldview; and concurring that it is through these narratives that the Africans derive and preserve pride in their identity and correlation with the spiritual realm, it follows that the effect of robbing the Africans of their source of individuality and self would be catastrophic. For pre-colonial Zimbabwe, the people's worldview fundamentally manifested itself through proverbs and folktales. The contact between English and African oral traditions manifests itself through African Literature by black Africans writing in English as is the case in Zimbabwe with writers like Charles Mungoshi, Dambudzo Marechera, Yvonne Vera, Chenjerai Hove and Tsitsi Dangaremba among others.

When oral traditions in the form of folktales/*ngano/inganekwana*, proverbs/*tsumo/izaga*, metaphors/idioms/*madimikira/amazwi ahlakaniphileyo*

became submerged within the romance and power of a new language, in this case English, the general populace found themselves in a most nervous condition, to borrow from Dangarembga (1987), as they were torn between two very important, yet conflicting, identities. As regards the English and indigenous languages, there was deliberate and visible polarization as English was presumed to represent civilization and sophistication, while Shona and IsiNdebele were deemed signs of an unschooled individual. This is still the same today in some sections of Zimbabwean society. Shona is the preferred language to Tonga or one of its dialects like Shangwe. Zezuru speakers deride Shangwe speakers even labeling them as the wretched who do not send their children to school or hospital. All these yardsticks are incidentally of international import, unbeknown to the majority of people who show off by them. They are foreign concepts that were imposed by the colonizer and were adopted by the colonized under duress.

The irony of colonialism is that it brought in its wake a different kind of oral instruction in the form of the catechisms that missionaries imposed on African scholars in missionary schools. Church and school introduced a new god at another level and a new dispensation in terms of priorities. Oral traditions were replaced by classroom instruction. The natural order of life, birth, initiation rites, marriage, worship, education and death was thrown into disarray by the settler community who dictated the rhythm of life, language and even death in a most calculated fashion incapable of being resisted.

To enumerate the injustices of the colonial regime on the African is to accept the existing imbalances that need to be attended to, notwithstanding that it has been three decades since the independence declaration replaced the war cry in the case of Zimbabwe. Justice, dignity and equity were denied to the majority of the indigenous population on the superficial and trivial grounds of skin colour, and oral traditions and indigenous languages suffered prejudice on the same grounds. When independence was attained, a more lasting war continued to be waged within the former colonies. An analysis of African literature today, which was clearly borne out of African oral traditions, seems to suggest that the contact was at once agonizing and progressive. While the cost of civilization seems irreparable, a cost benefit approach suggests positive growth of African society.

4. The Preservation Compromise: Inter-face or Face Extinction

Colonialism not only affected the politico-economic environment of the colonial state; what we now call Zimbabwe, derived from *Dzimba-dzamabwe*- Shona for 'houses of stone', but also had grave impact, at a linguistic and anthropological level, on the local people. After the settlers exerted their power on the indigenous people by seizing land, it was clear that they meant to stay; therefore, the people had to submit and adapt or

die. Survival strategies had to be crafted. For there to be continuity and change, there had to be compromise in all aspects of life.

The oral traditions that are still in use in Zimbabwe are those that could somehow be crafted into the new dispensation without causing visible disharmony as to enrage the 'master', as the white settlers were referred to. I am interested in the attempts by the indigenous people at surviving the contact between English and the sixteen languages of Zimbabwe listed in the Zimbabwean constitution. The inevitable response to the contact and the premeditated strategies of managing the overwhelming linguistic demands placed on the indigenous people actually served, and continue to serve, as the magical panacea that is keeping indigenous languages and African oral traditions by association and extension, alive, if barely so, in intensive care. A delicate co-existence of the language and culture of the colonizer and the colonized had to be forged in part through the education system where they will be taught. This coexistence may be viewed as dialogic as it engaged the two warring sides inevitably in a continuous negotiation of space.

5. Dialogism and the Case of Zimbabwe

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism helps us to interrogate the contact between English and African oral traditions. Bakhtin (1981) perceives all discourse as having a dialogic orientation. He argues that works of art are hardly complete in themselves, but are responses to other preceding works and traditions, and are situated within a current of intersecting dialogues. Their relation to other works of art is dialogic. For purposes of conceptual imaging and denotation in this discussion, English and African oral traditions are perceived as two independent texts set for what I view as interactive confrontation. In view of the dialogic nature of texts, this discussion regards the contact between English and African oral traditions as an act of entering into dialogue with a warring language and, by extension, its culture, ideology and tradition.

Dialogic Theory in this case is relevant in as far as it positions English and the African oral traditions in a space of dialogue leading to a series of processes such as confrontation, displacement, resistance, negotiation, and finally collaboration and co-existence. Bakhtin's writings on dialogicality demonstrate "how the voices of others become woven into what we say, write, and think." (Koschmann, 1999; 308) In this vein, I find the concept of intertextuality, as developed by Kristeva (1990), especially useful. Intertextuality is a term that describes an inherent property of all texts whether written, spoken or performed. Intertextuality is actually Kristeva's (1990) conception of Bakhtin's (1981) construct of polyphony where multiple voices are weaved into the production and interpretation of all texts. The relevance of dialogic theory in interpreting the contact between English and African oral traditions, therefore, is in the manner in which English unintentionally engaged the Shona and IsiNdebele languages (and other indigenous vernaculars) thus incorporating oral traditions within

itself, as its initial aim of displacing and replacing all that is indigenous with Western civilization was thwarted by resistance and political struggle. Colonialism ushered in literacy through the effective conduit of colonial education. In the blink of an eye, the written word became the latest hype replacing the folktale in the indigenous neighborhoods.

Because of the continuous dialogue between English and the indigenous folktales, proverbs, and riddles; we find the English novel by Zimbabwean writers awash with evidence of orature, notwithstanding the fact that the medium is English. If carried out, a linguistic DNA fingerprinting, that is, establishment of identity or heritage; of Zimbabwean Literature in English by indigenous writers would show mega traces of Zimbabwean oral traditions. My reading of Hove's novel *Bones* (1987) detects an intractable reverberation of African oral tradition by way of high order poetic style that reflects orality. Hove's first person narrative demonstrates the power of the spoken word and his direct mother tongue to English transliteration clearly points to the writer's thirst to speak in the language of his people whom he knows to be unschooled in the written word but greatly accustomed to the wisdom of the spoken word. My appraisal of Hove's approach senses an attempt at forcing two distinct languages and conflicting cultures into a possible interface where the ostensibly superior is made to dialogue and chronicle the convictions and traditions of the presumably inferior. Thus the teaching of Hove's novel can enhance the popularization and preservation of African oral forms not only to Africans and Zimbabweans in particular, but to English speakers as well. In this way, the dialogism between these languages would perhaps, deconstruct the hierarchies that came about during colonialism leading to the use of vitriolic language in addressing Africans: 'unhappy savages', 'boy', 'nigger', 'barbaric' to mention only these terms.

6. Contact and Continuity: A New Paradigm

Although English in Zimbabwe now shares official language status with 15 indigenous languages inclusive of ChiShona, IsiNdebele, Tonga, Venda, Nambya, Kalanga and so forth (New Constitution, 2013: 17) Chapter 1, Article 6 (4), English still retains a higher status in the linguistic space. The challenge lies in allowing the incorporation of indigenous languages into mainstream communication, education and commerce. Media pluralism has not done much for oral traditions or indigenous languages in Zimbabwe. Out of a total of more than thirty news publications in the print media, only three, *Kwayedza*, *Umthunywa* and *Umthwakazi* are in indigenous languages. The *Patriot*, a relatively new player in the media landscape, publishes a page in Shona and/or Ndebele in some of its weekly publications.

Publications that use indigenous languages enjoy a thin readership simply because the illiteracy rate in Zimbabwe is the highest in Africa (The African Economist; 2013), and literacy in Zimbabwe translates to being able to read and write

in English thus unfortunately perpetuating the increasing inferiority of the indigenous languages in the face of the globalizing forces that are inherent in the English language and culture. Given the above, unless and until policymakers prioritize indigenous languages and cultures, notwithstanding that there are not too many people subscribing to them as a result of the twin forces of colonization and globalization, the contact will ultimately result in the obliteration of African languages, oral traditions and most unbearably, their majestic *unhu/Ubuntu/botho/humanness* philosophy. A paradigm shift in which educational institutions play a significant role is therefore necessary to restore African traditions to their rightful status.

The curriculum in schools down from kindergarten up to tertiary level could benefit from having models drawn from existing oral traditions. For instance, it is a universal truth that the preferred medium for oral traditions is a people's mother tongue. Furthermore, language acquisition occurs in the formative years of a child's life. This is coincidentally the same time that marks concept formation and socialization. Therefore, in the Zimbabwean situation, oral traditions can be incorporated into the pre-school curriculum to allow children to learn the basics of African oral traditions in their mother tongue within the critical period, when it is still biologically possible for a child to acquire a language. English, as we know it today, employed to express African mores and civilizations, will most certainly produce a hybrid. The most important aspect of the hybrid is that it will have the DNA of Africa thus perpetuating African identity. It would entirely be a case of talking back in the empire's language.

Current trends and directions of this century's information age show that it would be realistic to engage the empire through the empire's medium in order to maintain a niche in the globalised world. Educational institutions could employ various advances in technology such as Facebook and Twitter in the collection and dissemination of oral material to the entire world in the shortest space of time as well as allowing discussion between several people spread over the face of the earth. That way Africa stands a chance of being heard. Notwithstanding the response, the message will get to its intended audience. This approach is not without challenges, given the compromise of translation and transliteration- the loss of meaning and the warping of intentions. Given the alternatives that Zimbabwe has at hand, I propose a two-pronged approach: teach Shona, IsiNdebele, Venda and Tonga in schools and encourage writings in any language as long as the writing reflects African perspectives and holds a promise to the development of African society and philosophy. This is not a venture to be saddled on donors but one that has to be home-grown and home funded. The commemoration of cultural festivals is a good sign that such initiatives are possible. Cultural exhibitions such as the Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF) and festivals should be held regularly in schools, technical colleges and universities in a bid to enhance indigenous consciousness. Photographs from such exhibitions can be

shared with the rest of the world and thus Zimbabweans in the Diaspora are kept in touch with fellow citizens at home.

7. Conclusion

The most challenging aspect in examining the contact between English and African oral traditions lies in the necessity to treat matters arising from the contact itself without being reductive and retrogressive. The task is challenging because an extremist and revolutionary standpoint seems likely to run the African oral traditions ship aground, to the detriment of the languages conveying the oral traditions and consequently the oral traditions themselves. It is therefore in the best interests of Africans for custodians and defenders of African oral traditions to not only be defensive but realistic in implementing strategies of retaining, where applicable, and re-introducing distinctly African idiosyncrasies and nuances into visible mainstream society. The school as it stands in Zimbabwe and in Africa, from nursery through university, singularly assumes and wields extremely significant authority and influence on the culture of current and future generations. With advances in communication technology, the lure of and tremendous adoption of this technology, the school is in a much more powerful position to influence the African renaissance.

Given that every time a language dies, certain unique cultural fragments irretrievably disappear, it should then be perceived in good light that several literary artists in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Africa as well are attempting the daunting but possible task of expressing African ideals in a foreign tongue. But I hasten to add that not all is lost since we can hardly pass Hove's English in *Bones* (Hove, 1987) for instance, as European English. This genus of English has been de-anglicized and thoroughly stripped of its original identity, so much so that it sounds like 'Shonglish': more Zimbabwean than European due to ubiquitous transliterations and direct references to Zimbabwean oral myth and lore. 'Shonglish' is a coined, initially derogatory term describing a mixture of Shona and English. It seems unarguable that some nuances of African identity and meaning are lost through translation, but it also appears to be a lesser evil likely to be overcome in future, to lose voice partially, than to be completely obliterated and replaced permanently.

What the situation on the cultural front in Zimbabwe seems to imply is that the contact discourse proffers an opportunity for progressive dialogic integration of opposites as long as there is openness to the multiplicity of possibilities in the linguistic playing field. Having confirmed that the contact has produced a most nervous condition, a hybrid where Africans have been de-Africanized to dangerous levels, I propose an exploitation of that existing situation through use of the school, especially the African University and the various media on offer because the chance that Africans can turn back the hands of time or magically perform time travel in order

to find themselves by the fireplace listening to folktales after a long day of hunting and gathering are at worst nonexistent. If Africans cannot return to the innocence of traditional African life, they can more practically adopt those aspects of the English language and culture that build on African oral traditions.

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