

**AFRICAN DRAMA LITERATURE:**

To Be or To Become?

An Inaugural Lecture

By

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## DEDICATION

This lecture is dedicated to my sister, Modupe Coker; my colleagues and students- past and present; and to the entire spread of fans- the known and the unseen.

On all your ranks i lavish THANKS! For indulging me these many years in the illusion that, despite the fears, i might be doing something right!

-OLA R.

Predictably, this lecture will begin with a preamble. This is intended to clarify the operative words in the topic: African Dramatic Literature: To Be or To Become?

“African,” of course, is the adjective for Africa. The term “Africa”, in turn, identifies the geo-political base for the topic under consideration. Briefly, occupying a land mass of nearly 11.7 million square miles – three times the size of Europe; the second largest continent on the planet Earth: aboriginal homeland of the Black race on the planet Earth: Africa is where all of us here present, exist today – both foreigner and autochthon.

By Dramatic Literature, we refer to written drama. Synonymously, we mean the text of a play. Simply, the phrase. “African Dramatic Literature,” denotes that kind of written drama that treats an African experience.

Let us now examine the purport of the phrase: To Be or To Become? The Oxford Universal Dictionary saliently defines “**To Be**” as follows:

1. To have place in the realm of fact, to exist, to live.
2. To come into existence, come about, happen, take place

This lecture is adopting the first sense in which the dictionary conceives the infinitive “to be”. In specific terms, by “to be” we mean:

“To have place in the realm of facts; to exist”.

The same Dictionary points up the meaning of “Become,” inter alia, as follows:

1. To come to be (something or in some state).
2. To happen, to befall.
3. To come (to a place), to arrive.

Again for this lecture, we are employing the sense adduced by the Dictionary as a meaning of “To Become,” namely:

“To come to be (something or in some state).”

Clearly, the use of these infinitives: “To Be” and “To Become” in this lecture, suggests that they are not equivalent in meaning.

Perhaps, to help shed light on the difference between them, we need turn to the discipline of Philosophy. Here, we shall recall the debate on the distinction between FORM and MATTER. In brief, Aristotle resolves this debate by identifying MATTER as a base. By contrast, FORM is that which emanates from a manipulation, a treatment, a shaping of that base. In other words, FORM fulfils an innate capability of MATTER. To this extent, the one is a conditioned emanation of the other. Note that the word “conditioned” is being used purposefully here. Its contextual value will be evident later in this discourse.

If we may sum up this comparison, MATTER is FORM tampered with and tempered for a purpose. Note again that the words TAMPER and TEMPER will be invoked later in this lecture, to further elucidate its thrust.

Meanwhile, let us return to our prime words: “TO BE or TO BECOME.” In doing so, let us see how the analogy of our comparison of MATTER and FORM applies to them.

We did establish earlier that our working definition of “TO BE” is:

“To have place in the realm of fact; to exist”.

We have also affirmed MATTER as the base of FORM, and FORM as the manipulated consequence of MATTER. The dictionary defines MATTER as: “.....everything in space which can be seen and touched...” On the other hand, FORM is described as: “shape; appearance; figure; image.” Of these options, let us settle for “shape”. FORM is shape.

Now then, if MATTER is anything that can be “seen and touched”, it follows that MATTER is that which “has place in the realm of fact” To have a place in the realm of fact is “to exist.” Therefore, MATTER “exists”. Then again, we are told that “TO BE” is also “to have place in the realm of fact; to exist.” By mathematical axiom, things that are equivalent to the same thing are equivalent to one another. Therefore, MATTER and TO BE are conceptually equivalent. They are conceptually equivalent in so far as MATTER and TO BE both belong in that realm of existence that is BASIC.

On the other hand, FORM, we agree, is MATTER changed from its basic state. Which is to say that FORM is matter that, through space and time, has “come to be something” else. By our dictionary definition, “to come to be something” is To Become. Mathematically then, FORM and “TO BECOME” are equivalent.

Conclusion: if MATTER equals “to be”, and FORM equals “to become”, and if MATTER and FORM are situationally different, it therefore stands that semantically, TO BE is not TO BECOME.

Suffice this argument as explaining the assumption of this lecture: TO BE is not TO BECOME.

To advance this assumption, we shall now move away from the fields of Philosophy, Mathematics and Linguistics, onto those of Social Sciences and finally come to rest in my own constituency – which is Literature: Dramatic Literature.

It is worth explaining at this juncture, that this lecture on Africa and on African Literature is confined to the sub-Saharan, predominantly Negroid, region of the continent.

Starting with Ghana, in 1957, the countries in this region acquired political sovereignty from colonial rule. The pace of political sovereignty became sweeping in the 1960's. There is no denying that since the attainment of sovereignty, African nation states have embarked on a search for solidarity to impel their progress under the pressure of TIME. And like any preoccupation under the pressure of TIME, that search for solidarity has, at one stage or another, displayed aspects of the bizarre. A classic highpoint of this has been the incessant alternation of power between democracy and stratocracy; civilians and the military! Sometimes the search for solidarity and progress lapses into perversion, demonstrating an even more bizarre oscillation of political power between Kakistocracy (government by the worst sort of citizens) and kleptocracy (government by barefaced thieves).

What all this is hinting at, is a continent that is simmering, testily simmering with problems: bold, explosive problems; transient, volatile

problems – all waiting, needing to be tackled in the interest of survival both of land and man; survival both of Africa and the African.

In a large measure, the nation-states of Africa share the same kinds of afflicted destiny, the same vicissitudes with such other countries on planet Earth that have come to be known variously as: the Developing Nations, the Less Advanced World, the Growing Nations, the Underdeveloped Countries, the Third World, the Less Developed World, or simply, the South.

Nigeria, Algeria, Guiana, Ghana, Puerto Ricco, Morocco, India, Indonesia, Uganda, Uruquay, Vietnam, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Mali, Togo: the list seems endless. These countries all experience similar developmental straits. They manifest a common socio-political pathology symptomatized by: a high blood pressure in illiteracy; acute diarrhoea in population growth; psychotic tendencies in human rights violation; technological epilepsy; industrial anaemia; a high mortality syndrome; a recurrent state of political distemper; a malignant tumour of ethnicism, and corruption aggravated by atrophying tissues of superstition; and finally, the “mother” of all maladies, an Acquired Immune Deficiency in economic growth.

Indisputably, following the liquidation of colonialism, African nations assumed a sovereign presence in the comity of world nations. This equates with a state of political “TO BE”. Politically, they exist. In this sense, they are each an identifiable, geo-political MATTER. National sovereignty, however, expects the exercise of a people’s socio-economic and political freewill for the benefit of the majority. This, is where the maladies cited above tend to fossilize African nations in an inchoate state of “TO BE”. To the extent that, since independence, African nations are yet to evolve a political-economic order that proves beneficial to the generality of their peoples; to the extent that since independence, the socio-human conditions of Africa are yet to better the privations under colonial rule; to all this extent, African nation-states have continued TO BE. They are yet TO BECOME. Indeed, TO BE is not TO BECOME.

Now, to literature. Let us straightaway focus on the central personality with whom this discourse is expected to deal; The WRITER. Where does the African writer fit, in the debate on TO BE or TO BECOME?

Directly, the African writer, too, like the land that gave him birth, is to a large extent in the state of TO BE. This implies that, like African nations, he too is yet “to become”. This is in the sense that his creative personality is yet to permeate the consciousness of his people at large.

We may ask here: what are some of the major factors that have tended, and still tend, to stymie the currency of the African writer among his peoples? More pointedly: what are the factors that have hindered the African writer’s transition from a state of “TO BE”, to a level of “BECOME”?

The first of these factors is (again an index of underdevelopment), a high level of illiteracy. The effect of this on the reception of the African writer by the masses of his peoples, is self-evident.

Added to high level illiteracy, are other equally alienating factors. For one, reading in Africa seems to be a mere means to an end. This end is not the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of vitalizing one’s discretion and initiative the better to serve the human condition. Rather, the end of education in Africa seems more to be the acquisition of a certificate, by whatever mean, the better to energize one’s personal hustle for high social status.

Some critics may even depose that the “reading habit” is intrinsically alien to Africa, anyway. Anthropologists may readily endorse this position with explanations that, prior to the advent of Arabic Islam and European colonialism, the communicative culture of Black Africa was one singularly steeped in ORALITY, SOUNDS and SIGNS. In a broad sense, this is true. All the same, what was missing from the communication system of traditional Africa was not the means for an effective impartation of knowledge; rather it was means for a more permanent preservation of knowledge. To this extent, there is no need for Africa’s oral and symbolic arts to be eternally apologetic.

Let's now look at the issue of language in this discussion of alienation of the African writer from his peoples. It cannot be that the lacklustre attitude of the African to African literature arises from the intrusion of a foreign language between him and the text. African literature written in the home language has not recorded wide reception outside the classroom either. Could the estrangement have arisen from a failure on the part of African literature to articulate the concerns of its African world? An assessment of the themes that have engaged the attention of African literature through the years, would negate this conjecture, as well.

Thus far, there have been FOUR major thematic concerns of African literature. These concerns have, appropriately, been in response to the socio-historical traumas of the African peoples themselves. In the era of colonialism, for example, the passion of African literature was for the redemption of the integrity of the Black man. This fixation was quite valid in the face of sustained foreign domination. It crystallized itself on the theme of NEGRITUDE. The next epoch marked the collapse of colonialism, with an attendant state of flux caused by an encounter between old and new life-styles. The theme of "culture conflict" provided the rubric for the treatment of this situation in literature. Under this head, the African writer not only appraised the cultural dilemma that bedevilled our peoples especially in the 1950's and 60's, he also helped, through pointed laughter or shared anguish, to sedate our people under such stresses.

From about the mid-sixties, a third theme began to form with Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967)! Definitely by the 1970's it was clear to all that, economically and socially, African political independence had failed the people as a collective. In consequence, disillusionment gave rise to anger in the people. Anger gained head and found expression in mordant PROTEST. ANGER and PROTEST joined forces and underscored a two-pronged theme for African literary creativity of the time. This theme will be described here as ANGST. ANGST, originally a German word, is being used here as deriving from a conflation of the first three letters of ANGER, and the last two of proteST. ANG-ST.



Anger took the form of indictment. It was indictment of African political chieftains over acts of misrule and profligacy. Protest on the other hand, found its target in the perpetrators of inhumanity to man as epitomized in the odium of South Africa's Apartheid creed.

A fourth theme has since come to the fore. This will be described here as the "theme of UTOPIAN MODELS." Briefly, this is a theme of hope in the face of seeming unrelieved, national despair. It will be elaborated on later. Suffice for the moment that, generally, African dramatic literature has responded sensitively to the socio-political spasms of the African World and its peoples. The argument that irrelevance of content is a reason for the hiatus between the African reader and African literature is, ipso facto, untenable. What other factors can be responsible for this hiatus?

It is true to say that, again, for reasons of high communal illiteracy, a limited readership, and the unrelenting sabotage from book piracy, the writer in Africa cannot make a living from writing full time. As a result, he is ineluctably compelled to a distracting compromise. He has to take up employment full-time with an establishment. Whereupon, he manages to make the best of his literacy calling: part-time. Clearly, an occupational half-measure.

Aggravating the situation of the writer in Africa is the attitude-ambivalent at best- of most governments to the arts at large. They are yet to see the arts as a supportive adjunct to a people's struggle from a stage of national "To Be" to that of universal "Become". By and large, the national policies of most African governments, long practised and by now blissfully routine, conceive the nation's arts as mere temporal souvenirs. Nigeria not excluded, it is on occasions of a visit by a foreign Head of State, that our arts are heroically remembered, frenetically fetched out, penitently dusted over, and soulfully brandished under an impressively fearsome label: "Command performance"! Which done, and the foreign visitor gone, the arts may return to coerced slumber in the cobwebbed catacombs of dank oblivion, till an occasion calls again to regale another world figure with "exotica Africana"!

We come now to the most formidable problem blocking the transition of the African writer from a state of TO BE to a level of TO BECOME. By this, of course, we mean from a state of being just a writer, to that of a writer whose thoughts not only encapsule the socio-cultural truths of the land, but also address the positive yearnings of majority of his diverse peoples to whom his works should be vastly accessible. This problem is LANGUAGE. We shall at this point try to examine this problem in its detailed aspects. Such examination is crucial to the heart of this lecture. It is also crucial, perhaps, for re-directing a debate that has troubled the literary scholar as much as the layman for years now.

First, this background. The African continent bears over 800 traditional languages. Not dialects. Languages. At present, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish are the official languages of Black Africa. All these are indisputably FOREIGN languages.

It stands to reason that, ideally, for its “official language” an African nation should adopt one of its multifarious traditional tongues. Another ideal option could be for it to evolve a monolithic language (as in the case of Kiswahili), that draws upon as many as possible of the indigenous legacies. This, indeed, would be a consummation (to borrow from Shakespeare) – “a consummation devoutly to be wished”!

The logical question at this juncture is: so, why haven’t most African nations tackled this problem? After all, apart from it emerging from a number of universal languages, English, for example, which we in Nigeria have so ‘tipsily’ come to embosom as our “official” language, itself gained primacy from no fewer than THREE other languages that compound the linguistic cosmos of the United Kingdom namely: Gaelic, Welsh, and Irish. Why haven’t Africans cast off those foreign languages altogether, and come up with indigenous tongues for “official” languages?

In pursuing this line of argument, we need recall the history behind the rise of English over Gaelic, Welsh and Irish. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, we are told become a political Union from TWO developments. These are Conquests and Marriages. Conquests in the name of the throne of England, and marriages revolving around the

throne of England. The English example applies, with varying degrees of cogency, to any situation in the world where a monolithic language has evolved as the nation's *lingua franca*. In most cases, conquest has presaged linguistic imposition<sup>2</sup>

Let us now apply this option to the Nigerian situation, for example. We need one "official" and indigenous language for Nigeria. To this end, let us test-run the efficacy of ethnic battles and see which ethnic groups are cleanly wiped out, and which luckier few survive to welcome domination by an ultimate linguistic power. Did the Holy Bible (Matthew 12:25) say: "A house divided against itself cannot stand?" Did the holy Prophet Mohammed himself (the peace of Allah upon him) warn against rebellion within a united people?

Manni Kharaja minat tooati wa  
faraqol jamaa ta, famaata  
maetatan jahiliyyatab<sup>3</sup>.

"Whosoever goes out of allegiance  
... from a united group, dies a  
death of the days of ignorance."  
(As reported by Abu Hurairah in  
the Hadis).

Have memories of a gruesome Civil War – by nature the most cataclysmic of wars, stopped haunting the conscience of our nation? Certainly we cannot again afford a precipitation of another situation of abundance to nourish the vultures! It is man who needs nourishment, one should think.

The language issue and its potential for national chaos are not being exaggerated here simply to boost one's perception of the depth of this problem. The day that any one local language, however obliquely, is unleashed upon all Nigeria as the "official" language, is the day Nigerians will again seek the bushes to relive the travail of another civil war. It happened in South Africa – the cause of the Soweto conflagration of 1976 when Blacks chose to die than accept the imposition of Afrikaans upon them. It happened in India. It happened in Eastern Europe. For two-hundred and twenty-three years, starting from 1763, the French-speaking

people of Quebec battled against the “imposition” of English by a dominantly English-speaking Canada. Peace came only some five years ago, when Canada finally conceded French to be a second “central language” for Canada. With just two local languages, the solution to a nation’s problem of linguistic plurality may come easy. But what kind of solution can one proffer for a typical African nation compounded and confounded by anything from 4 (as is the case in Liberia), through Sierra Leone’s 10, Kenya’s 12, Uganda’s 13, Ghana’s 17, to Nigeria’s over 400 traditional languages? Again, here we mean languages, not dialects.

The above background does show that, socially, administratively, and politically, the use of a foreign language by African nations today, is dictated solely by the imperatives of peace and stability. It is simply impossible to winkle out one local language from a myriad, foist this on the peoples at large, and not invoke atavistic fears of ethnic domination in the minds of the “neglected” groups.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, “the death of a language in Africa,” to quote Ali Mazrui, “... is the death of an ethnic identity.....”<sup>5</sup>

We need not waste time examining the efficacy of cross-cultural marriages in educating a common national language of local derivation. While cross-cultural matrimony is invaluable for inter-ethnic mutuality, it is hardly a dependable means of fostering the kind of monolinguality we desire from our present Babel of tongues.

Having identified aspects of the problem of evolving a monolithic language for an African nation (even Kiswahili is decidedly a scion of Arab ‘colonialism’), we shall now look at how this problem affects modern African literature.

We know that language is the soul of literature. By extension, language it is that, first and foremost, confers any literature with its peculiar, national and cultural selfhood. It follows then that the employment of a European language as handmaiden in the service of communication between an African author and his peoples, is clearly anomalous. The question that arises here is: why do African writers still prefer this obvious anomaly? Before we answer this question, it would be helpful to affirm that no

African writer normally writes in a foreign language different from that of his colonial background. No Kenyan ever writes in Portuguese or Swedish. No Nigerian writes in Chinese or Greek. No Senegalese creates in German or English. No Angolan works in Japanese or Russian. And to boot, no Black South African writes in Italian or, for that matter, Afrikaans! The colonial factor, it can be inferred, has been the sole determinant of the choice of foreign language by the African writer. In essence, the choice has never been arbitrary, or ingratiatingly imitative.

A question follows at this point, why choose the language of a colonial era? Shouldn't the African writer, indeed, take the lead in uprooting the straggling vestiges of colonial overlordship? The answer to these questions brings us to the circumstances compelling the adoption of a foreign language by the African writer. It is true that the partitioning of Africa into territories that later became colonies, was lacking in rationality. This irrationality is reflected in the character of the colonial territories in which disparate African cultures and languages were randomly hemmed together. Faced with that situation of linguo-cultural incompatibles, the colonial Administration introduced a central – and locally neutral – language. Essentially, that central language served for administrative convenience.

With the collapse of colonialism and the emergence of African nation-states with Blacks now ruling Blacks, the role of that central language changed crucially. The cruciality pointed less to administrative necessity, and more to a political imperative. The same rationale holds for the African writer. His use of a central - albeit foreign – language underscores a political imperative with connotations of ethnic neutrality.

Having made that case, the next question is: considering the relatively high rate of illiteracy in Africa, who is the writer in a foreign language targeting?

At present, the target readership is patently the literate minority. Admitted. But is it not this same literate minority that determines the socio-political course of modern African nations? Short of being hypocritical about this, the literate minority, it is, that provides the

personnel for the machinery of government: by this we mean the advisers to the ruling class, as well as the executives of policies promulgated by the ruling class.

Numerically, the literate class may constitute a minority; functionally, it is an influential majority. To target this literate “ruling” class, therefore, is to address the “heart” of the nation. It is by this token, perhaps, that modern African literature may validate one of its claims to national relevance, despite an alien garb.

With the foregoing arguments, one may conclude that, for it to be pertinent, for it to be worthwhile, the debate on, African literature today should no longer dwell on WHY but on HOW. It should no longer be: Why must African authors write in European languages? No. Rather the debate should most usefully focus on: HOW...

HOW does the African writer handle that foreign language, so as to make it more accessible to his people? Accessibility it is, that holds a major key to the writer’s ascent onto a stage of “BECOME”, from the Wings of “TO BE.” Accessibility – the wider the more vindicative of the writer’s social relevance.

Mao Tse Tung finds the answer to this problem of ACCESSIBILITY, in the writer’s ability to “domesticate” the language he uses. To “domesticate” is to “tame”... to condition something to home environment. We talk of “domesticating” an animal. Usually, the purpose of doing this is two-fold. One, we domesticate the animal (apparently dislodged from its natural habit), in order to condition him to the milieu of a human family. Second, we do so to eventually impress that animal into gratifying our own needs – for pleasure or work. Most of the time for both purposes: like Dog the playmate, and Dog the watchman. By analogy, a foreign language adopted from necessity must be conditioned by the writer toward serving the cultural, political, and social needs peculiar to his peoples.

Suffice all the foregoing for relevant background.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, from this point on, it seems necessary that the style of this discussion change. It will change from the more detached,

impersonal formal of scholastic discourse to one which specifies the first person singular pronoun. 1. This change is dictated by the expectation of a lecture of this kind. An inaugural lecture seems to be an occasion when the temptation to forego scholastic modesty, for a change, sways the academic, when a professor, for that matter, is exhorted to proclaim to the world, the singular contribution he has made to the advancement of knowledge in his discipline. This now is what I propose to explain, from this point on: my singular contribution, or contributions, to the advancement of African Dramatic Literature, from a state of To Be, towards that of Become.

I started my career as an academic in September of 1966, having obtained a post-graduate degree with specialization in Playwriting and Dramatic Literature. On returning to Nigeria, I observed that both Playwriting and Dramatic Literature in Africa were in their fledging. In other words, they were in a state of "To Be." Stylistically, the firstlings of African Dramatic Literature at that time were in a foreign language. Tanzania's KINJEKETILE (1969), written in Kiswahili by Ebrahim Hussein was a rare exception. Furthermore, I also observed that those works of dramatic literature were being weaned on nutrients from proverbs, metaphors, images, allusions, songs, and similar yields from the vast tillage of Africa's traditional oral arts. All these, without question, were efforts aimed at infusing traits of Africanity into such works of dramatic literature. Understandably, I too followed that orientation.

Then came a sobering moment. I soon felt convinced that I was wasting my time, and that all my labours were unshakeably doomed to gaping failure and despair. Use of stylistic local colouring was one thing; the language applied to that enterprise, another. It seemed to me that unless both cultural nutrients and the flavour of language blended towards easy consumption by the peoples whose taste the writer claimed to be catering for mainly, he laboured in vain to raise his literary menu from a footstool of "To Be" to a table of "BECOME".

The language enigma stared me starkly in the face. Should I write in Yoruba – the language of my father? That would reach out to about 20% of our Nigerian peoples. Alternatively, with a few months of brushing up,

I could recover facility for the language of my mother – NEMBE. But that would be reaching out to 0.20588%, or approximately 0.21% of the Nigerian peoples. What about pidgin English? I am quite at home with that – so much so that I am working on what may be its first dictionary. Pidgin English would draw a multitude, no doubt – something like 45.5% of Nigerians. On the surface, this seems to proffer a solution to the language problem, in terms of seepage through Nigeria’s ethnic barriers. But that is a fallacy. At least, FOUR robust problems stand up at once against the potency of Nigeria Pidgin English. One – pidgin speakers are city dwellers. Pidgin therefore lacks the grassroots penetration which traditional languages possess. Pidgin English may boast of a horizontal spread across language cultures, but it lacks a vertical reach into the hinterland. There, a homogeneous mother-tongue is the reality. By implication, the reach of Pidgin English is just as confined as is the reach of English. Second, the nature of Nigerian pidgin is not as generic as some may think. There are regionalisms, and nothing like standard Nigerian pidgin - a problem yet to be tackled by linguists. Third, like the oft-cited kiswahili which is nourished on the basal staple of foreign Arabic, Nigerian Pidgin itself depends on English as its substrate. This is that same ‘foreign’ English which we seem passionately dutied to discard! Where really do we stand? To put it in context: “na wush one dey?” Fourth, the assumption is valid, in any case, that whoever could read Nigerian Pidgin is, de facto, literate. By extension, that person is also capable of reading English, since the letters that make up the orthographies of Pidgin English and Standard English are derived from both the alphabet and the phonetic symbols of “English – English”. To some extent, the same argument holds for the ability to read any of the local languages. Some degree of literacy is immanent.

A writer normally concentrates on one language as creative tool. In that period of my dilemma, the question that confronted my penmanship was direct: which language must I use? To resolve that dilemma, I had to first sort out its strands into what I considered to be their proper perspectives. Certain issues needed to be cleared up in my mind. For instance, need one’s choice of a foreign language suggest negligence of one’s duty to develop the local languages? To hold such a view, it seemed to me, was to



muddle up two different issues in contemplating the dilemma. That one chose a foreign language from impulsions of socio-political expediency, needn't mean that the local languages are, ipso facto, betrayed to extinction. Our local languages must be developed. Agreed. But the line needs to be drawn between a creative writer, and a scholar of linguistics whose business it is to develop a language. A primary business of the Writer's is to enrich, to vitalize a language. It is therefore, unfair to encumber him as well with the technicalities of developing the nation's languages from orality. Furthermore, because one resorted to the necessity of a foreign language, needn't mean that one's work couldn't be translated into any of the local languages by whoever so desired. Again, the line must be drawn between a creative writer, and a translator. Now, back to the story of my development as a writer.

So much for dilemma; now, the moment of decision. As a writer, my business is to use words to address the human condition. To use words, I need a language. For all the reasons advanced earlier, and chiefly because of its 'neutrality' among the over 400 language claims in our Nigerian motherland, English had to be chosen by me, and Vice-Chancellor, Sir, that was that.

Having chosen, the next and vital question I had to answer, took me back to the word "domesticate". How do I "domesticate" that egregiously foreign language: English. In answering that question, I had to embark upon an experiment. It was an experiment on the use of language. Started less wittingly in 1965, the experiment became purposeful and intense from 1968 onwards with my writing of *The Gods Are Not To Blame*. The objective of that experiment can be summed up as: "a conscious effort to TAMPER with the English language, so as to TEMPER its Englishness." To this end, I aimed at simplifying the English expressions and style enlisted to serve the thoughts for my work of dramatic literature. I had hoped that by this, the work might easier be understood by the averagely literate Nigerian. In this context, I had conceived persons within the span from primary six passed, to a Professor of English. It was my aim that such persons should be able to understand

my thoughts allowing, of course, for varying levels of perception and judgement among their ranks.

I held this as a creed: one way in which African Dramatic Literature could advance from a position of “Be” to that of “Become” was to tackle that language problem. And I have stated earlier, is simplicity in the choice of words for my dramatic writing. I normally employ monosyllabic, disyllabic and rarely trisyllabic works. Second, is the arrangement of these words syntactically, that is, In this regard, I have tried to intimate the cadence of traditional African speech – using Yoruba and Nembe Ijo as my mental guides.

It must be stressed that the effort to this end aims at being simple without being simplistic or jejune. In trying to simulate traditional African mode of speech, I have sought for its inherent texture of poeticism. To the sensitive ear, traditional folk speech is steeped in an evocative simplicity that accords it a poeticism pitifully lacking in modern speech. To have a sense of what I am driving at here, let us look at a passage from King James Version of the Scriptures which is closer to what I term the evocative simplicity of African folk speech. We shall compare this passage with a modern version of the same text which to me sounds bland. The passage (Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 19, verse 16) tells the storey of a madman who single headedly assaulted seven false prophets.

First, the modern version:

The man who had the evil spirit in him attacked them with such violence that he defeated them. They all ran away from his house, wounded and with their clothes torn off.

Now, the old, King James’s Version:

And the man in whom the evil spirit was, leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so

that they fled from that house naked  
and bruised.

If one purpose of poetry is to conjure up pictures with words, it is clear which of the two citations above fulfils that role more succinctly. This is achieved in two ways. First is through the choice, and second, through the arrangement of simple, direct words.

I shall here read you a composite excerpt of monologues from some of the original manuscripts of my plays. The piece illustrates my attempt, in English, at capturing the mode of traditional African parlance, at least, in spirit. I find this mode akin to old Biblical speech both in cadence and in imagistic vigour.

The subject of the reading is paranoia – morbid fear that enemies abound, stalking the life of the speaker (Read Appendix 1).

It is noteworthy that this experiment has since been advanced beyond the specificity of English. My stylistic technique has since reached out to engulf traditional languages. Again, the aim is to accord the expressive idioms of my dramatic writing, features with which our diverse peoples can identify themselves. The form of this experiment has gone beyond pastiches of expressive snippets nipped from local orality and tacked on to a literary work. Rather, the experiment now strives to sustain traditional African languages through the stretch of dramatic dialogue and plot. This new dimension to my work on the language problem, came about in 1979 with my political drama: IF. In creating this drama, no fewer than 8 local Nigerian languages vied with English for my attention.

The scene which you are now going to witness, illustrates THREE distinct strains of languages in Nigeria. You will find these out yourselves, as much as, unaided by an introduction from me, you should readily grasp the human trouble which the scene is dealing with.

(Dramatization of Mama Rose-Fisherman-Banji scene in IF pp.25-27. See Appendix 11).

My latest major play has gone even farther. Hopes of The Living Dead, a drama written in 1981, admits some 15 candidates from the linguistic

catchments in Nigeria: Nembe, Kalabari, Hausa, Igbo, Ibibio, Edo, Ejagam, Idoma, Yoruba, Tiv, Urhobo et cetera, et cetera.

It is not enough, of course, to parade a galaxy of home languages in a work of dramatic literature. The challenges stand out when those languages are intermingled with English in such a way that the outcome does not:

1. appear tendentious;
2. unduly prolong the duration of performance through superfluous interpretation by other characters;
3. cause boredom from sheer wordiness of text.

These are the challenges that this new experiment poses.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, the secrets to handling these challenges, and the challenges to an understanding of those secrets, both designate one specific kind of knowledge to which students are exposed in my classes in playwriting where Dramatic Literature is created.

I can only add, more from empirical fact than from vanity; more from documented assessments by critics than from subjectivity; more from the reactions of audiences within and outside Nigeria than from egotism: that the reception of my dramatic style by a reasonable spread of ordinary people who as far as I am concerned, are the ultimate judges of drama, has been most heartening.

Let me further clarify my achievements in the matter of dramaturgic style, by codifying them. For background, there is no denying that of all forms of literary enterprise, drama aspires most to verisimilitude in the depiction of man and his universe. Shakespeare sees this ultimate purpose of drama as a fixation to:

hold as 'twere the  
mirror up to Nature.

African playwrights have themselves been engaging in reflections of realism. By reflections of realism, we are alluding to depictions of

VERISIMILITUDE. Verisimilitude is defined by the dictionary as “the appearance of being true or real.”

As concerns African Dramatic Literature to date, I can identify two broad approaches to verisimilitude in the matter of style. These are what I’d describe as “CONCEPTUALIZED VERISIMILITUDE”, on the one hand, and “CONDITIONED VERISIMILITUDE,” on the other. Briefly, by “Conceptualized Verisimilitude.” I am referring to that kind of style adopted by the playwright to SIGNIFY the general particulars of realism especially in the creation of dramatic speech.

Some salient features of “Conceptualized Verisimilitude” in the style of African dramaturgy are as follows:

- (i) Generally, unrestrained use of the vocables of the adopted foreign language.
- (ii) Free use of traditional proverbs and images from the local flora and fauna, to identify the speech of a character who would normally be expressing himself in a traditional language.
- (iii) Use of the correct syntax and idioms of the adopted foreign language to make out the speech of a character grounded in Western education.
- (iv) Occasional injection of local words where equivalents in the adopted foreign language are either non-existent or less evocative.
- (v) Occasional use of the pidginized form of the adopted foreign language confined to monologue, and rarely shared in dialogue.
- (vi) Occasional use of lyrics and recitation drawn from traditional African oral arts.

As noted earlier, the second approach to realising stylistic verisimilitude in African Dramatic Literature to date, is through “CONDITIONED VERISIMILITUDE.” I would define this as “that kind of style adopted by the playwright to signify the intimate particulars of realism, especially in the area of dramatic speech.” Note that the use of the verb “signify” in both definitions, is an admission that the two approaches are approximations, rather than actualizations of realism.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, it is in initiating the stylistic approach described here as “Conditioned Verisimilitude,” that my contribution to African Dramatic Literature stands out. In contemplating the stylistics of African Dramatic Literature, the concept of “Conditioned Verisimilitude” can be said to differ from that of “Conceptualized Verisimilitude” in THREE main respects. These are:

- (i) Restrained use of the vocables of the adopted foreign language (i.e preference for simple words).
- (ii) Full use of the pidginized form of the adopted foreign language in dialogue.
- (iii) Free use of traditional African languages for sustained characterization.

All told, “Conditioned Verisimilitude” is some steps farther from “Conceptualized Verisimilitude” in the progression of African Dramatic Literature from a state of “Be” to that of “Become”. This progression, of course, equates with the search for affinity between African Dramatic Literature and the African peoples.

In addition to the three traits identified above, “Conditioned Verisimilitude” also embodies the following features of “Conceptualized Verisimilitude”:

- (i) Free use of traditional proverbs and imagery of the local flora and fauna, to identify the speech of a character who would normally be expressing himself in a home language.
- (ii) Use of the correct syntax and idioms of the adopted foreign language to mark out the speech of a character grounded in Western Education.
- (iii) Occasional injection of local words where equivalents in the adopted foreign language are either non-existent or less evocative.

Yet another contribution which I have made to African Dramatic Literature is the consolidation of a new them. It would be recalled that at the earlier stage of this lecturer, I identified THREE broad themes

that have engaged African Dramatic Literature, from colonial times to the present, and promised to elaborate on the fourth. The three themes are: the theme of Negritude; the theme of culture conflict, and the theme of ANGST (anger and protest). The last two are post – Independence themes. If the theme of “culture conflict” has focussed more on situations involving “normal” personages caught in some social or domestic contretemps or other, the theme of ANGST has dwell pungently on rulers of modern Africa. Without exception, works of Dramatic Literature dealing with the theme of ANGST, have all been damnatory. They customarily depict embodiments of insatiable lust for power, of misrule, and of betrayal of the people’s cause. They all display NEGATIVE heroes. It seems that despite these negative mirrorings, not much as impaired misrule in modern Africa. No sooner would a reckless ruler be overthrown, than a new one came forth, exuding recklessness more vicious than his predecessors. The virulent cycle goes on.

The question crossed my mind: could it be that our African peoples have become sickened from witnessing spectacles of bad rulers in office and on the stage, so much so that their idea of positive leadership has gone awry, become blurred, finally consigning them to stunned fatalism and fatigue? Perhaps it was time writers started emitting some twinkles of hope – hope that the ‘beautiful ones’ can yet be borne from the scuttled ranks of our peoples. The idea of flaunting the image of an “ideal” leader as a foil to the negative stereotypes, inspired me to consolidating a new theme for contemporary African Dramatic Literature. This theme - thus far, perhaps, the fourth, will be labelled here as “the theme of UTOPIAN MODELS,” It is a theme that saliently circumstance, a hero worthy of the appellation: “leader of the people.”

If we accept that a major obstacle to the transition of African nations from a stage of political “TO BE” to that of “BECOME”, is the daunting problem of leadership, than an insight into the solution of the problem should also be a major concern of African Dramatic Literature. Like most African playwrights, I have myself addressed this problem. It is no exaggeration to say that every one of my major works of dramatic

literature has probed the question of leadership from one perspective or another. Who is my ideal leader? Or better: what are the attributes of my ideal ruler or leader? I recognize FIVE cardinal attributes.

First, my ideal African ruler or leader must be a man or a woman who is unreservedly detribalized. Only in this state can that leader's judgement subordinate bias to principles.

Second, the person must be committed to the well-being of the generality of his people. Which means that he/she must be selfless.

Third, that person must be action-bound, happiest in his madness for purposive results.

Fourth, the person must be forthright in the pursuit of FAIRNESS as in the dispensation of JUSTICE.

Finally, he /she must possess that distinctive trait that separates man from brute. Philosophy describes man as "a laughing animal." That is being charitable. Some men seem to have too much of the animal in them to laugh. My ideal leader must also possess a sense of humour, for only thus can the mystification of his/her greatness be decoded into terms accessible by the ruled. So much for another background.

Starting partially with the hero in *The Gods Are Not To Blame* (1971), and with Papa in *IF* (1983), my work on the theme of Utopian Models has thus far found its apogee in my creation of Harcourt Whyte. He is the people's leader in *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1989). An intention for his creation is to raise Hopes of the possible in the minds of the oppressed peoples who compound the bulk of the rules in all Africa today. In this thinking, it is proper to say that Harcourt Whyte has reinforced antecedents like Odewale (1971) and Papa (1985) by me, Dedan Kimathi (1976) by Micere Mugo and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Kinjeketile (1969) by Ebrahim Hussein. Together they have thrust forth a new theme for African Dramatic literature.

Of course, a dramatic silhouetting of an "ideal" leader cannot literarily be self-sufficient. An assessment of the followership as well, should be an obligatory complement to that. This is the second preoccupation of



the dramatic literature on this theme. Third, is its focal stress on the cruciality of SOLIDARITY – solidarity among ethnically diverse peoples, convinced that herein lies the vital key to collective progress and true national selfhood.

May I sum up that it is in pursuance of the ideology of SOLIDARITY – multi-ethnic solidarity, that my latest stylistic innovation in the use of many languages, underscores its ultimate socio-political relevance.

I hold this truth to be self-evident, that attenuation of this problem of LANGUAGE is crucial to the thrust of African Dramatic Literature from an insular matrix of TO BE, to a demotic reach of BECOME.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, in the plain words of the hymn book.

This is my story  
This is my song.

## APPENDIX 1

### PARANOID INVECTIVES

*Some people dread trouble,  
Others swim in it!  
Some birds dread water,  
Ducks swim in it!  
The toad too loves water,  
But not when that water is boiling. I look about me- eyes: white,  
Vacant, innocent.  
Who knows what fresh scheming  
Lies behind those eyes: white eyes, vacant eyes, innocent eyes?  
Evil doers! Schemers of trouble to life  
I may be their victim next-  
Me a stranger in our midst.  
If fire can consume the tortoise –  
Him with the iron coat,  
What will it not do to the fowl  
She with the feathered gown?  
You stare at me, wanting me to name names?  
Well, I will not name names. In time you all shall know them.*

*Why, all lizards lie prostrate,  
How can one tell which lizard suffers from bellyache?  
Oh, but in time, the ache will force one lizard  
To lie flat on its back:  
Then shall that which has been unknown,  
Be made known.  
I shall not name names.  
But this I know: henceforth I treat men lightly no more  
Indeed, too late now have I learnt that  
If, like soap, you try to wash men clean,  
Like soap you will waste in the act.  
Innocent as I was, I came into your midst to live, and I was happy:  
Ignorant that plots, intrigues, and vile schemings,  
Shall forever keep me company.  
A cockroach, in my ignorance, I flirt in dance in a gathering of fowls.  
Not believing that my death  
has come.  
Nothing from me can give you peace.  
Indeed, in your midst, mine is the sorrow of an orphan:  
Without mother, without father,  
Nothing I do  
is right.  
When I do not to take a bath,  
You beat me and say:  
I stink!  
When I make bold  
To take a bath,  
You beat me again and say:  
I waste water!  
Evil doers all – they think I'm blind to the secrecy of their ill-will.  
But they forget, they forget it is the gods that made me Head  
over them all. People of the land,  
I said the gods it was that made the silk cotton-tree strong,  
erect, stout and elegant.  
You crooked fig trees, go rest your jealousy!  
For yours is the empty boasting of the neck that forgets that  
however long and muscular it may be,  
on top of it, must always sit a Head;  
And however sharp and ill-willed a knife may be,  
it cannot chop off its own head. It lies!*

*The evil doer soon learns, in his idiocy,  
That there is power and there is power.  
No two powers are equal.  
Let those lovers of trouble carry on.  
Because their evil triumphed yesterday  
does not mean it will go unbroken today.  
One does not say: "Make way, make way," for a man today,  
because  
we saw him yesterday,  
Riding a horse.  
To thunder is not to rain.  
Let them try me and we shall see  
Whose power stands  
Supreme.  
If idiocy makes a youngman boast  
Of having more new clothes than  
His father  
Can he also boast of having  
More rags?  
The idiot daughter it is who says, "Mother, mother sit down,  
Let me teach you how to bear children."  
No two strengths are equal, I say.  
Why, the tortoise is not tall,  
But it is taller than the snail.  
The snail is taller than the crab  
The crab is taller than the lizard;  
The lizard is taller than the millipede;  
The millipede is taller than the spider,  
The spider is taller than the fly,  
The fly is taller than the ant  
The ant is taller  
than the ground on which  
it walks!  
Everything on earth has its own order,  
Its level, its place  
(Invocatory Chant)  
Now I turn to those among you who think no evil,  
Plan no evil, aim no evil at me  
For you, I shall ever raise my voice in prayer!  
(Invocatory chant continues to an end)*

*Let everyone now go home  
and ponder on my words.*

## APPENDIX II

- MAMA ROSA: (introducing Fisherman) Dis na my broder wey I go bail now-now for police station, sah. Dem catch am for fishing-port say e no pay tax. Monday no court. Broder, I no know anybody for this country. I beg, make you helep me.
- BANJI: I see. What really happened?
- MAMA ROSA: (to Fisherman, in Kalabari language) Mioku, duko opirii. Ye goyegoye duko o pirii. (Meaning: Now tell him. Tell him everything).
- FIRSHERMAN: Duko o pirii, yeri njibabo
- MAMA ROSA: He say him be Fisherman
- FISHERMAN: Tari i da so njibaboo
- MAMA ROSA: Him papa na fisherman
- FISHERMAN: Ida da so tari, njibaboo
- MAMA ROSA: Him papa papa na fisherman
- FISHERMAN: Toru me anie wamina dumo doki yee
- MANA ROSA: Na river be dem life
- FISHERMAN: Mioku torume dikibujiri ofori bara ke fi korotee
- MAMA ROSA: Now di river done spoil finish
- FISHERMAN: Pulo ida ogbome pulo ke toru memgba wasama famatee!
- MAMA ROSA: Oil company dem done pour oil for all di river
- FISHERMAN: Wamina pembe kurukuru apu so benki bu sote pulo. Ke wamina njiba toruma buu sara tamatee.
- MAMA ROSA: Our black people dem done join white people, take oil spoil di river.
- FISHERMAN: Mioku wamini njibapuma gbosibi fikorotee. Deri nji so bari oforii pei be ye so. Mioku waeri bari ye pulo sukume minji torume wasamate gba wa dikiari!

FISHERMAN: Fisherman dem no get anytin again. Fish for sell no dey; fish to eat sef, no dey, so-so black oil full up for river, dey look dem for face!

MAMA ROSA: Tombo namakoriba, te ani buu igbigi nyanaba tereme anie mbo inete komsini oso igbigi gbeba anibara oko a?

MAMA ROSA: A nim .... (meaning that's right) person go work, get money before he pay tax, nobe so?

FISHERMAN: A biim o gboru ye mie wa pirii. O mie bari munoso o mie bia-a?

MAMA ROSA: He wan to beg you to do one thing for am. He say you go fit?

BANJI: What is it?

MANA ROSA: Anie tie?

FISHERMAN: Wa alagba biari.

MANA ROSA: E say make you give dem gun.

BANJI: Give them what?

MAMA ROSA: Gun, gun!

FISHERMAN: O duko ke komsini piri mine ini alabga ke wa pirii miete wa inote pulo ida-ogbome na owusu bari bara.

MANA ROSA: He say tell Government make Government give dem gun to fight di Oil Company dem.

FISHERMAN: Pulo ida ogbome na owosome mweni Komsinime bala famari bebe wamini njibapuma wa balafa-aa. Kuma yee komsinime pa anie mie ke wa pirii. Alagba ke wa pirii. Fatee.

MAMA ROSA: If Government dey fear di oil people, di fisherman dem no day fear. So, tell Government to give dem gun, Das all.

BANJI: I see. Tell him that that won't work.

MAMA ROSA: Ori mee anie sarasara-aaa

FISHERMAN: Tie gote?

MAMA ROSA: Why?

BANJI: Tell him it is the same Government that has given power to the Oilmen to look for oil in the river

MAMA ROSA: Ori mee paa gbori komsini anie koro ke pulo ida piriye mine n pulo idea toruma bio

FIRSHMAN: (incredulously) Komsini, I-ya-h (meaning our Government? Impossible).

BANJI: And that Government will arrest anybody who dares to disturb Oilmen!

MAMA ROSA: Ani saki komsini mbo oloba ani boo te pulo ida dasema boo.

FISHERMAN: Kura pulome ani wa bari.

MAMA ROSA: But di oil dey kill dem.

BANJI: It's the oil that gives life to the nation

MAMA ROSA: Ori me puloma anie dumo ke se me piriari ye.  
(Fisherman lowers to a squat, unnerved, confused)

FISHERMAN: Okpai!

### NOTES

1. All parenthesized dates of play cited in this lecture are publication dates – the implication being when the plays become “dramatic literature” in contrast to dramas.
2. It is certainly too late now in the development of Africa, to try the ultimate solution of conquest. History seems to have wrested that initiative from the thrust of Old African Empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Zulu, Oyo, and Benin and advantaged Euro – Arab incursions.
3. Arabic statement in English orthography.
4. To look at another Nigerian example of recent memory ..... Nigeria is at present preparing for another test in democratic government, due in 1992. The third Republic. A revised constitution was approved for this new political order. It is significant to draw attention to Clause 53 of the revised Constitution prepared by a Constituent Assembly in 1989. The

Clause treats the language problem with particular regard to the languages to be used in the Nigerian Parliament, from 1992 onwards. The choices are Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, to complement English. The decision was taken on Thursday, January 12, 1989. But not without a crises. "More than 100 members of the Constituent Assembly from the minority tribes," we are told "worked out," Continues the National Concord Vol. 9 No. 92684 of Friday, January 13, 1989:

The protesting members who were mainly from the Plateau, Benue, Rivers, Akwa-Ibom, Bendel and Cross River States, were of the opinion that the adopted provision was a calculated attempt to impose the additional three major languages on them.

Some two weeks after, the national atmosphere was still amply tense as to evoke a major press comment in an Editorial in The Guardian of Thursday, January 26, 1989. It concluded by highlighting the crux of "the Language Question" viz:

The fervour of ethnic pride and linguistic self-consciousness is not a quality of only majority ethnic groups. No matter how small the group, the sense of identity enshrined in the language of the group persists.

It would seem that if the protest by the ethnic minorities was less violent, and if we can now hope that actual implementation of Clause 53 would not precipitate a further national imbroglio, the reason could be one factor. This is the factor that Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are NOT being mandatorily prescribed for mastery by Nigerians at large. Other Nigerians outside the Yoruba-Hausa-Igbo 'troika' may suffer clause 53, so long as the "official" use of those three languages remains manacled within the premises of parliament.

5. Ali Mazrui, *The Africans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1986), p. 89.
6. Pun on Ayi Kwei Armah's classic novel of "Angst": *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Lond: Heinemann. 1988).
7. Reinforcement of my ideas on the theme of Utopian Models was inspired by an aspect of the inaugural lecture by a colleague, Professor

Charles Nnolim. Distinguishing the nostalgic kind of Utopian evocations epitomized in Negritudist literature of the colonial era, from a futuristic Utopia that inspires positivity, Professor Nnolim challenged African writers to “begin to depict Africa as a ... continent with a great future...” despite its lingering, debilitating policy.

Charles Nnolim, *Literature and the Common Welfare*, Inaugural Lectures Series No. 8 (Nigeria: University of Port Harcourt, 1988).

8. It is in the context of this crucial message of solidarity, that dramas like *Langbodo* (1979), by Wale Ogunyemi, and to an extent, Femi Osofisan’s *Morountodun* (1982), also come in for mention.