The Logos-Eaters: The Igbo Ethno-Text

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Abstract
A decade and a half after Achebe revised Conrad's jaundiced vision of men-eating Africans in his first novel, Things Fall Apart (1958), sociolinguists were noting that the anthropophagi were not African but European and devoured not men but words. As the French Marxist-influenced linguist, Louis-Jean Calvet, contends in his Linguistique et colonialisme (1974), 'Le premier anthropophage est venu d'Europe. Il a devore le colonise ... il a devore ses langues; glottophage donc.' 'Glottophagia' thus refers to the fact that many African languages were 'devoured' by the colonizing powers and supplanted by the European languages which, Gerard reminds us, had themselves fallen prey to the Romans' Latin linguistic imperialism. Modern colonial glottophagia was achieved, according to Calvet, by demoting African languages to the status of 'patois' or 'dialects' in a way analogous to the Victorians' demotion, in the vocabulary, of African kings to chiefs and of non-Muslim priests to 'witch-doctors'. Calvet pushes the argument even further by suggesting that the turn-of-the-century practice of linguistics inexorably completed the process of glottophagia in the colonies under European rule: 'La linguistique a ete jusqu'a l'aube de notre siecle une maniere de nier la langue des autres peuples, cette negation, avec d'autres, constituant le fondement ideologique de notre "superiorite" de l'Occident chretien sur les peuples "exotiques" que nous allions asservir joyeusement' (Linguistique, p. 10). Linguistic imperialism is here presented as the most insidious and pervasive aspect of colonialism, for, more than economic or political imperialism, it depersonalizes the colonized to the extent of estranging him from his own language and his linguistic group.

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A decade and a half after Achebe revised Conrad’s jaundiced vision of men-eating Africans in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958),¹ socio-linguists were noting that the anthropophagi were not African but European and devoured not men but words. As the French Marxist-influenced linguist, Louis-Jean Calvet, contends in his *Linguistique et colonialisme* (1974), ‘Le premier anthropophage est venu d’Europe. Il a dévoré le colonisé ... il a dévoré ses langues; glottophage donc.’² ‘Glottophagia’ thus refers to the fact that many African languages were ‘devoured’ by the colonizing powers and supplanted by the European languages which, Gérard reminds us, had themselves fallen prey to the Romans’ Latin linguistic imperialism.³ Modern colonial glottophagia was achieved, according to Calvet, by demoting African languages to the status of ‘patois’ or ‘dialects’ in a way analogous to the Victorians’ demotion, in the vocabulary, of African kings to chiefs and of non-Muslim priests to ‘witch-doctors’. Calvet pushes the argument even further by suggesting that the turn-of-the-century practice of linguistics inexorably completed the process of glottophagia in the colonies under European rule: ‘La linguistique a été jusqu’à l’aube de notre siècle une manière de nier la langue des autres peuples, cette négation, avec d’autres, constituant le fondement idéologique de notre “supériorité” de l’Occident chrétien sur les peuples “exotiques” que nous allions asservir joyeusement’ (*Linguistique*, p. 10). Linguistic imperialism is here presented as the most insidious and pervasive aspect of colonialism, for, more than economic or political imperialism, it depersonalizes the colonized to the extent of estranging him from his own language and his linguistic group.

My own recent findings bear witness to a form of glottophagia or even neo-glottophagia in West African Europhone literature.⁴ We shall call it ‘textual glottophagia’, an extension of linguistic glottophagia. Such a phenomenon is most apparent in the case of ‘indigenization’, that is, when the writer attempts to convey African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic features via the European medium. This is most pointed-
ly epitomized in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, where the sedimentary Ijo etymons gnaw at the European language and where, conversely, the repressed Ijo tongue falls prey to a textual glottophagia by which English devours the African etymons and morphemes which now function as the linguistic debris of a near-extinct language. By an analogous process, the Ijo world-view becomes a decaying vision. By exhibiting the dominant language's protean possibilities of adaptation, indigenization ('relexification' in linguistics) can thus help revitalize and recirculate the target language in a perversely neo-colonial fashion at the expense of the source language. This mutual cannibalism is endemic, I believe, in all acts of indigenization and, more generally, in all strategies of literary decolonization and revanchism.⁵

When extended to the Igbo-informed novel and, more specifically, to the Igbo gnomic or proverbial discourse in the Nigerian novel of English expression, glottophagia becomes discursive and, as we shall see, this glottophagia provides an ironic comment on the manducation of the word, since proverbs are made of words which are destined to be 'eaten'.

The Igbo-informed novel is made of discursive segments that belong to the vast corpus of African traditional oral material like the myth, the panegyric, the agonistic contest in eloquence, rules of address, praise-names, dirges, proverbs, maxims, apophthegms and epigrams. When transposed to the written text of West African novels, in an attempt to recapture traditional speech and atmosphere, these discursive elements constitute what Alioune Tine has called the 'ethno-text'.⁶ I here propose to analyze the stuff the Igbo ethno-text is made of and, in the latter part of this paper, to theorize over the eventual death of all African formulaic tradition.

The grafting of the ethno-text onto the novel is common practice among Europhone West African writers. The first characteristic of the Igbo ethno-text is that its constitutive elements recur in various forms in all novels that share the Igbo ritual patrimony. Such is the case with the prayer over *oji* or cola made every day in Igboland. Variants can be found in *Things Fall Apart* (p. 22), in Onuora Nzekwu's *Blade Among the Boys* (p. 48) and Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda* (p. 13).⁷ All three variants of the prayer over *oji* have a common denominator: the characteristically Igbo proverb or *ilú* concerning the kite or hawk and the eagle: ‘Égbé bērè ụgọ bērè nké sì ibè yá èbélá, kwá yá nkù.’⁸ This *ilú* marks the ethno-text as specifically Igbo.

African proverbs have been described as repositories of communal wisdom, mnemonic devices for effective communication, and educational tools. Because they have their origin in specific communal experiences and are reproduced by a memory, their epistemological basis may give
us insight into the (male) African apperceptive mode. In the Igbo art of conversation, proverbs are both modes of communication and retrievers of communication. As the Yoruba say: ‘Owè l’esan òrò bí ìrò bá ìṣònrù òwe l’a fi nwá a’, that is, ‘proverbs are the horses of speech; if communication is lost, we use proverbs to retrieve it.’

The use of proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s native culture-based novels - Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God (1964) - had often been considered as an embellishment or a stamp of authenticity and it was only in the early seventies that critics became aware of their functional significance. Bernth Lindfors, for example, convincingly ascribes to proverbs ‘a grammar of values’ after Herskovits’s phrase. Austin Shelton is the only scholar thus far to have provided a detailed analysis of those ilu in Achebe’s fiction. His work also has the merit of initiating the shift away from what Arnold termed ‘the tired, basic topics ... like “oral elements in the writings” of a few well-known authors’ on to a refinement of concern for the specificity of the ethno-text.

Shelton distinguishes three types of proverbs: ‘those drawn from ilu used among the Igbo in general, those of Achebe’s Awka-Onitsha area, and those which he created or modified’ (Shelton, 109). Although it is incorrect to credit Achebe with any proverbial ‘creation’, I will focus on the modification that he may have brought to the original ilu. I will therefore expand and systematize Shelton’s thematic organization, as it applies to Arrow of God. These new categories of proverbs bear witness to both an evolutive itinerary and a gradual erosion, as if words were eaten away at.

The first category of proverbs are those that are recognizably Igbo ilu used (although less and less) among the Igbo. For example, let us consider these two proverbs in Anambra Igbo which are related to change, as most proverbs in Achebe’s novels are. Both proverbs comment on the Igbo village’s first contact with the new religion, although only the first appropriately identifies Christianity as the ‘white disease’:

(a) ‘As soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace’ (AG, pp. 177, 42), relexified from

\[ \text{if you take person body-white('s) hand, } \]

\[ \text{he want(s) that you him } \]

\[ \text{print/press.} \]
b) ‘The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit’ (AG, p. 163; also pp. 72, 178) from the Igbo,

Ónye kpátara nkú ahůhu ziri ngwere ọkụ. (Shelton, 104)

Person who carries in firewood infested by ants invites lizard.

or a variant from another area of Igboland:

Ónye kpátara nkú arụrụ di
Person (who) fetches firewood ants are (in)
yá lèé anya ụgwere n’ụlọ yá.*
he (should) look eye (for) lizard in house his.

The second category groups proverbs whose usage may be restricted to Achebe’s Oka-Onitsha area or to the speakers of a particular area, as in this ilú of ‘riverside Igbo origin’ (Shelton, 105): ‘The Chief Priest raised his voice and pleaded with them to listen but they refused saying that they must bale the water while it was still only ankle-deep’ (AG, p. 159). Incidentally, this proverb, couched as it is in English aphoristic terms, may lure one into assuming that it is English and therefore foreign to the Igbo ethno-text.15 On the other hand, this Central Igbo ilú – ‘When a man chases two rats at a time, he ends up catching none’ – is only remotely related to what is in use in Achebe’s area: ‘We are like the puppy in the proverb which attempted to answer two calls at once and broke its jaw’ (AG, p. 232):

Ńki̇tá zaa {úzọ ọku ụbụọ ọku úzọ Ụbụọ ágba ékwọjie yá.*

Dog answer call places two jaw { breaks it.

Although this last proverb, like many others, can easily be translated into English proverbial wisdom, the cultural context from which it originates is not easy to identify for the non-African reader. Indeed, it refers to the dog which, while being within hearing distance of nursing mothers calling him to come and lap up their children’s excrement, hears two such calls simultaneously and gets confused. This proverb is unambiguously traditional and rural, for this social reality may be on the verge of disappearing in urban centres. If the social reality that sustains it disappears, the proverb will not survive oral mnemonics.

The third category of proverbs are ilú that Achebe modified by (a) substituting elements (i.e. the slave for the chicken) or (b) omitting elements such as the reference to slavery and slave-catching:
(a) ‘Let the slave who sees another cast into a shallow grave know that he will be buried in the same way when his day comes’ (AG, p. 32), from the Igbo:

Ọkúkó nórọ ụgà ạnanbọ

(Let) chicken remain where they are butchering

ọkwa mara ọtu esi ábó yá. (Shelton, 100)
bush fowl to know how to butcher it. (i.e. how it would be butchered)

(b) ‘When the handshake goes beyond the elbow we know it has turned to another thing’ (AG, p. 16), from the Igbo:

Ifkwé n’aka feéla isi-hkụ áká,

(If) to shake the hand passes elbow,

ó ghọglá ọkpụkpa. (Shelton, 103)
it has become seizing (as one snatches a slave).

Achebe’s omission to slave-catching, in the second example, may be construed as a concession to his audience (but it is unlikely because in the first instance, the original chicken has been replaced by a slave), to the English language or, more conceptually, to text-formed thought. Yet, it may also be interpreted as a ‘structural amnesia’ reflecting what may happen in contemporary Igboland for, as Walter Ong contends about the Gonja’s genealogies in Ghana, ‘the part of the past with no immediately discernible relevance to the present [will] simply fall away.’ Homeostasis thus refers to the subordination of the integrity of the past in proverbial discourse to the integrity of the present.

Contrary to the proverbs of the third category that tend to expand meaning, these proverbs in the fourth category abstract the essence of an original ìlu, albeit in a more prolix style: ‘If anyone asks you why you should be sent to learn these new things tell him that a man must dance the dance prevalent in his time’ (AG, pp. 233-34):

úrì púłara n’azí,

Dance (that) came out for a generation,

azí a gbá yá. (Shelton, 103)

(that) age-group should dance it.

The movement from the first to the fourth category corresponds to Achebe’s itinerary from synchronic to diachronic representation. Indeed, he moves from the representation of ìlu as Igbo speakers would make use of them (e.g. between 1850 and the turn of the century in Things Fall Apart) to the literary, imaginative use of gnomic speech. The dual function of the ìlu is thus to lend verisimilitude to Igbo traditional speech and to allow the writer’s artistic temperament to shape the literary situation. In his commitment to this dual function, Achebe takes it upon himself to be the retriever of communication when the narrative
cannot by itself carry the full weight of the Igbo ethno-text. Achebe does what an ingenious user of ilú does: he proverbalizes.

As a proverbalizer, Achebe adapts original proverbs and maxims as used in the traditional/rural milieu to the urban milieu by bastardizing the terse form of the ilú and vulgarizing its meaning. This is an immediate consequence of homeostasis, the symbiotic link a proverb establishes with the present moment. For instance, in A Man of the People, Mrs Nanga, the wife of a corrupt politician, says: 'My brother, when those standing have not got their share you are talking about those kneeling.' This in fact refers to an ilú which is rendered in its full form in a novel set entirely in tribal society, Things Fall Apart (p. 5): 'Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them' from an original Igbo ilú:

Ánwú gá-éti ndí kwụ ọtọ túpù o tțwé ndị gbúsíri íkpèrè

Sun will shine those standing before it shine (on) those kneeling knee

nà-ókpúrú há.*
at-under them.

Similarly, Mrs Eleanor John in the same novel tries to render an ilú in Pidgin. The result is one of 'utter trivialization and vulgarization', as Obiechina remarks:18 'My people get one proverb: 'they say that when poor man done see with him own eye how to make big man e go beg make e carry him poverty de go je-je' (MP, p. 16), meaning that when a poor man realizes what is involved in becoming a big man, he will beg to carry on with his poverty without ceremony. In this and other examples, Achebe aims at showing how the urban Igbo speaker is alienated from the traditional art of conversation and the proper use of proverbs. The implication is that what may survive is, for reasons linked to homeostasis, the Pidginized form of the original Igbo ilú.

If we except a novel like Things Fall Apart (which contains 29 ilú, presumably to show the falling apart of things proverbial), the density of proverbs in rural novels (a minimum of 129 in Arrow of God) are in inverse proportion to their scarcity in urban novels (a minimum of 27 in A Man of the People). This testifies to their gradual extinction in increasingly urbanized contexts. This does not mean, however, that any ilú transposed to an urban setting is systematically bastardized. Achebe simply adapts them to modern realia, when advisable. Such is the case with sayings involving the Igbo concept of chi, which are used in various forms, depending on the rural or urban setting. The core conflict of the individual vs. the community in Things Fall Apart revolves around the Igbo concept of 'chi' that Achebe rendered as 'personal God'. The 'Chi' often comes up in this common saying:
or in several variants involving the bird 'nza': 'His [Okonkwo's] enemies said good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi' (TFA, p. 22) which is said of Okonkwo when he beat his wife during the Week of Peace. This can be traced to two variants of ìlú:

(a) ñà rijùè áfó ó mákwàgh ónyé kéré yà.
    wren satisfied belly, he knows not who made him.

(b) ñà rijùè áfó gà, échéfùè chi yà.
    wren satisfied belly his, forgot chi his. (Shelton, 91)

The Chi-based adages can be traced not only throughout Things Fall Apart (e.g. pp. 13, 19, 92) but also throughout Arrow of God, for Okonkwo's breaking of the communal bond may be compared to the village Umuaro's conceit when going to war against another village (AG, pp. 14, 27). It is also therefore appropriate that in No Longer At Ease, set in an urban milieu, Joseph Okeke should use Igbo to caution to Obi, Okonkwo's grandson, who has just been acting cockily at a job interview: 'And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his chi to a wrestling match' from 'Mmadù ánàghí échéré chi yà ákà mgbá' (Shelton, 93). Here the saying has been adapted to suit the urban modalities of 'wrestling' with a prospective employer in the post-colonial, pre-Civil War context of No Longer At Ease. Wrestling is here controlled by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now' (Ong, p. 47). Wrestling may thus become an archaic reference, a noetic 'white' metaphor that is empty because no longer homeostatically linked to the present. The reference to the Chi or to the bird nza in turn may become the meaningless 'trace', to use a chirographic metaphor, of a traditional ìlú, like children's nonsensical syllables from orally transmitted songs. Moreover, such a proverb, not being part of the original, vituperative context, is no longer agonistic and thus ceases to exist as proverb.

Referring to a popular politician's challenge of the national hero at the end of No Longer At Ease, Achebe deftly juxtaposes the seemingly insipid English 'translation' with the Igbo ìlú:

'He is a foolish somebody,' said one of the men in English.
'He is like the little bird nza who after a big meal so far forgot himself as to challenge his chi to a single combat,' said another Igbo.
Incidentally, the chi-based sayings can be traced not only through Achebe's novels but also in any novel with an Igbo ethno-text such as, for instance, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, which contains thirty references to the Chi.\(^{20}\)

To understand the gradual erosion of gnomic speech, it is crucial to understand what proverbs are and what happened to them when reduced to writing in English. Before being written down, proverbs were rhythmic, mnemotechnic, and formulaic. Proverbs are essentially 'word-events' (from the Hebrew 'dabar' meaning both word and event) that were 'sounded' and thus power-driven. Their structure is mnemonic, that is intertwined with memory systems (Ong, pp. 33-34) and thus highly rhythmic, for rhythm aids recall. They reflect orally patterned thought and are therefore not occasional as they are in Achebe's novels but incessant. They used to form 'the substance of thought itself' and even 'the substance of the law' (Ong, p. 35).

Since proverbs come from a sound-dominated verbal economy, committing them to writing has a 'diaeretic, separative function' (Ong, p. 61). Writing is closely associated with death. This is best illustrated in the still widespread practice of pressing living flowers to death between the pages of a printed book (or the modern *liber*) and of appending both proverbs and locutions in Latin, now a dead language, to the *Petit Larousse illustré*. But, paradoxically, just like the deadness of a text ensures its endurance and its phoenix-like capacity for resurrection into limitless living contexts, the Igbo *ilu* may be resurrected by its own destroyer, the urban English-oriented context, or recuperated by another genre outside of the novel or by the new electricity-based orality.

Transposing proverbs from the oral to the written medium is thus disabling and foreshadows the death of a species, for proverbs are generally collected in writing when about to die. The further transposition of orally-bound formulae into an alien language is thus doubly disabling. This phenomenon has historical antecedents. It is similar to the disappearance of the Aramean *besōretā* and all mnemotechnic procedures that ensured its oral transmission, when it was committed to Greek writing.\(^{21}\) Achebe himself in his foreword to Whiteley's *Selection of African Prose* had mentioned the difficulty of 'translating Igbo proverbs and riddles (INU) because of the resulting isolation from the whole pattern of allusion and direct cultural reference in the African language'.\(^{22}\)

Thus isolated and cut off from their original context, proverbs fall prey to a textual glottophagia whereby Igbo proverbs are 'eaten up' by the English words of the European narrative. Yet, 'proverbs,' Achebe tells us, 'are the "palm-oil" with which words are eaten' (*TFA*, p. 4) - *ilú ká n’ėjí èrí úkà* (Shelton, 86). In order to be memorized orally, words had to be manducated or 'eaten', as if by a mandibular mouth.\(^{23}\)
In the universal tradition of ‘eating the Book’ before or during alimentary rites, oral proverbalizers are thus mouths or articulate mandibles that recite and recall.

The eating of words is not only characteristic of the Igbo art of conversation but also, for instance, of European medieval vocalization when manuscripts were commonly read aloud or sotto voce. Poised vocalization helped the reader ‘eat’ the words qua sound units that were going to become visual units in print cultures. Proverbs thus function not only as the main discursive elements of the Igbo ethno-text grafted onto the novel but also as the oral mindsets that reveal the historical origins of all literature out of oral verbalization.

As in all oral or residually oral cultures, the words of the Igbo proverb are taken from the mouth of the proverbalizer to another mouth to be eaten. Committing these proverbs to writing is thus a treason in many ways: in the sense in which the familiar Italian maxim understands transliteration and translation as treason, ‘traduttore, traditore’; in the sense in which Robert Escarpit understood ‘creative treason’ as adding one’s ‘creative mite to a continuous, collective creation’, but specifically as a treacherous kiss. The kiss that signalled the beginning of echoic recitation between the talmid and the Rabbi has been turned into a Judas kiss. The message has indeed been corrupted in that it has not been transmitted from mouth to mouth. It is not ‘echoed’ nor ‘sounded’ when reduced to writing. To pass the proverbs on from mouth to text, that is not by word of mouth is unnatural to the proverb or the byword, as a proverb is also called. To further pass them on from text to the reader or ‘eater of the book’ short-circuits the original process, for the mouth that receives those nurturing words can only swallow, digest and churn them into ‘food for thought’.

Because the proverb, in the Igbo art of conversation, is compared to the ‘palm-oil’ that aids digesting or manducating the words, the proverb may be considered as a discursive lubricant. Once the palm-oil of the Igbo traditional art of conversation, proverbs are now more like a narrative lubricant helping in the expert transplanting of the ethno-text onto the Europhone novel. Like a scion grafted onto a main body, the ilú remains an unfamiliar utterance.

Proverbs in the Igbo-informed novel of English expression have thus been reduced in quantity and quality and are now part of a residual orality. Proverbs, like other gnomic material, are becoming a minor rhetorical device or a minor gnomic tool in both the society and the novel, as was the case in European societies after the Renaissance period, when proverbs were deliberately down-graded. Although, as Gérard reminds us, ‘it is often unwise to regard literary artifacts as faithful reflections of a social situation’, the Igbo-informed novel mirrors not the
present but a future where Igbo culture will become increasingly chirographic at the expense of proverbial discourse.

The gradual extinction of a discursive species such as the Igbo ilu and other orature-based devices recuperative of the ethno-text could signify the gradual death of Igbo and all African oral formulaic tradition. In a chirographic context, discursive glottophagia replaces the manducation of the word. What is being eaten here is the logos or verbum of the proverb or proverb. Achebe qua proverbializer voices non-sounded words. The present-day proverbializer is thus textually bound to be a logos-eater.

NOTES


8. My original informant is Mr Oko Okoro, Dept of English, University of Lagos, Nigeria. His samples are marked with an asterisk. They were later nuanced by Cyprian Ekwensi (‘Personal Interview With the Author’, Dakar, Senegal, 22 March 1989).


12. Austin Shelton, ‘The “Palm-Oil” of Language: Proverbs in Chinua Achebe’s Novels’, Modern Language Quarterly, 30, No. 1 (1969), 103. Further cited in the text and referred to as Shelton. The samples are his, unless otherwise indicated. The diacritics have been provided by Prof. Philip A. Nwachukwu, Dept of Igbo and Linguistics at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, Nigeria, and the Center for Cognitive Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, U.S.A.


15. Kenneth Harrow contends that this ilú is an English aphorism and therefore a ‘foreign element’ that has ‘fatally infiltrated Okika’s speech to Umuofia in Part Three of TFA’. He concludes that the proverb using the metaphor of Eneke the bird preceding this ‘English aphorism’ is in fact ‘now recalled, not as a living word but as a relic’. In ‘Ringing the Changes: Proverb and Metaphor; Master Tropé/Feminist Discourse in Things Fall Apart’, a paper read at the ALA Conference in Dakar, 20-23 March 1989, MS, p. 11.


21. The example concerning the *besōrētā* and all mnemotechnic procedures is a bit more complex than it appears at first, for the targoumiste's words are the result of oral calquing, rendered accessible through the targoūm *midrāshisan* from the Hebraic written word of the *Tôrâh*, the *Miqra*, that which is shouted, into the Aramean verses of the *Mishna*. See Marcel Jousse, *La Manducation de la parole* (Paris, 1975), p. 193, n. 37.


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