Cook stew of pidgin

MOBA JESSE

A study of the resourcefulness in Frank Aig-Imoukhuede's *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*



[Following Cameroonian academic practice, the author provides an abstract in both English and French, which we include for interest here.]

Abstract: This paper discusses pidgin English, and far from calling it a corrupt and decayed form of the English language (as has been the case in many well-meaning literary circles), shows that pidgin has poetic resources capable of expressing a wide range of mentalities, tastes, customs, and even fashion itself. Because of this flexibility, pidgin reveals a high degree of closeness to the original speech patterns, notably in an attempt to preserve syntactical equivalents. Thus, if pidgin is adopted as a lingua franca throughout the sub-Saharan African region, it will enable Africans to take new pride in their artistic traditions and non-Africans to share in the joy and excitement of Africa's art.

Resumé: Cet article aborde le pidgin en se gardant de le traiter comme une forme impure et décadente de la langue anglaise, contrairement à certains milieux littéraires plutôt influents. L'article soutient à l'oppose que le pidgin dispose de ressources poétiques qui permettent d'exprimer une vaste étendue de mentalités, de goûts, de coutumes, voire même la mode. Grâce à sa flexibilité, le pidgin épouse quasi fidèlement les modèles de discours originels, notamment dans le souci de préservation d'équivalents syntaxiques. Ainsi, si le pidgin est adopté comme lingua franca en Afrique sub-saharienne, il fournirait une nouvelle source de fierté chez les africains dans leurs traditions artistiques ainsi qu'il permettrait aux non-africains de partager la joie et la passion de l'art d'Afrique.

Pidgin is an urban language widely spoken in parts of Central and West Africa, particularly in Nigeria and Cameroon. One of the major problems confronting the modern African writer today is that of choosing a language as his medium of expression. This dilemma of the African writer is the historical consequence of a colonial experience which compelled each African state to adopt at least one European language as its medium of expression.

In Nigeria, the language issue is unquestionably handled in a way similar to that suggested by the Irish playwrights at the turn of the 20th century in defining their own position. According to J. P. Clark (1970:72):

> Education and class consciousness which presuppose and actually create levels of speech and language in European societies have, thank God, not done that havoc to the non-literate tongues like Ijaw style, imagery, etc; these are what tell one user of a language from another – not grammar or class....

In fact, what Clark opposes is the practice in modern naturalistic writing of separating "fidelity to facts" from the living imagination of the people, which is made up of imagery, proverbs, riddles, incantations, and the like so as to "render the message" in a way that "the actual flow, images and devices of speech used are well recorded". Frank Aig-Imoukhuede is of the same frame of mind as J. P. Clark and since the thoughts, aspirations and anxieties expressed in his pidgin poems are all concerned

MOBA JESSE teaches in the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences at the University of Douala in Cameroon, Central Africa.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the lives of the Ibo people of Nigeria, he is primarily concerned with the selection and organisation of the most apposite expression, conforming to Clark's (1970:23) observation that it is a matter of "style and register", of "conscious exploitation of [the level of] language for purposes of persuasion and pleasure".

Frank Aig-Imoukhuede's experiment in his *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead* (1980) introduces a measure of freshness, originality and liveliness to modern African poetry as well as attempting a resolution to the question of language in modern African literature that had become a bone of contention in the second half of the 20th century. According to Aig-lmoukhuede, contemporary African literature, beginning with the Negritude poets and extending to more recent writers like Ngugi wa Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mongo Beti, and Chinua Achebe, has been engaged in the quest for self-liberation and this quest can find eloquent expression in the use of an African lingua franca: pidgin English.

Some critics of African literature still consider pidgin an embarrassment as a literary language, and have dismissed it as a decayed and corrupt form of language: hence, paradoxically the place of pidgin as a language for registering social ills, the grosser aspects of life, best suits its attributes. The title poem, "Pidgin Stew", best illustrates the writer's choice of this humble language. Pidgin, he declares, is generally not considered as a language to be used on serious occasions and for serious purposes. Accordingly it should be used as the language of truth, since the truth it embodies, especially if fault finding and bitter, may escape the immediate attention of the tyrant and the man of power.

> Pidgin, you say, no be language
> For serious 'profundity';
> But I tell you big morsel
> Dey hard stronghead swallow
> Unless you get good stew
> Tickle um for him bellef.
> So cook stew of pidgin.
> Give tyranny chop.
> He go chop so-tay, lick
> Finger dey laugh as
> Dem dey rub im blockuss
> For public place.

The facts of the statements border on the humorous character of pidgin here concretised as "good stew". The humour resulting from the use of pidgin portrays it as a pleasant language. The dramatic situation contained in the poem establishes the argument that when pidgin is used to criticise, the tyrant will "chop" (amuse himself with) it willingly in spite of himself as "Dem dey rub im blockuss/for public place". Equally, criticism of leadership does not obtain in a society perverted by exploitation, tyranny and suppression of freedom of speech.

In the poet's society, straightforward language takes criticism home to the ruthless man of power but criticism couched in pidgin may avoid his immediate attention. As the tyrant amuses himself, "dey laugh", with the humour in the odd turn of speech, and he may miss the point:

> Use cudgel fight tyranny.
> Na firing squad dem go take reply;
> Use concobility vex man of means and power
> You go talk true for prison yard;
> For like your mout' heavy
> With grammar per-yard per-yard,
> Na him cudgel dey heavy for back.

Straightforward language is called "grammar", referred to in the poems as "concobility", which as it unfolds from the mouth of the grammarian is compared to the unfolding of rich fabric material measurable by the yard. Standard British English in pidgin-speaking regions of sub-Saharan Africa is commonly referred to as "grammar". The simile in which grammar is likened to the unfolding of fabric material, illustrates the African mode of measurement and thus locates the audience as being familiar with the African landscape. So, as the poet sees it, to avert the tyrant's wrath the critic should resort to pidgin.

> So cook me pidgin stew
> Give man in charge chop;
> By time he lick stew
> Reach bottom pot
> Message done reach home.

The caution in the use of the language of criticism as Aig-Imoukhuede advocates, presupposes that the poet's butt of attack is ruthless dictatorship. This caution in the use of language suggests that ruthlessness and criticism can never be bedfellows, thus, highlighting the theme of the dialectical relationship between tyranny and criticism.

The very first poem, "Flood Done Come", not only captures the theme of injustice but expresses it in a form that demonstrates the poetic resourcefulness of pidgin English. In the poem, we observe that elections are rigged, a man moves into power, and no sooner does he

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

establish himself firmly in the position of authority than he unleashes a reign of terror on the people to whom he is supposed to be responsible. This injustice is pictured as a flood and the tyrant himself is said to possess two heads:

> The flood wey reach us
> Lef' we man with two head
> And 'e no matter say
> We 'tunda dey look
> As country scatter for we head;
> Byforce no be likeness:
> Rape na rape
> Whether na gun or strong prick.

Here, the poet is obviously talking of the rape of democracy and freedom of speech by force of arms. However, the success of the poem depends on the language. By referring to the wave of fraud as a "flood", the poet substantiates an abstract phenomenon. The image of a flood conjures up the biblical event of Genesis 7 when God used a flood to cleanse the world of its "corruption and rot". But in the context of the poem, it is the negativity of flood that is emphasised. Here, power is negatively and obsessively pursued, and criminally used, confirming Obiechina's (1992:21) observation that:

> ... violence is used by the corrupt to break the will of the victims, to render the oppressed pliable, to instil the culture of fear in the population and enable the corrupt to carry on without being challenged.

On the one hand, the image of the man with two heads evokes a Manichean society that is sustained on polarities, very often with no middle ground where one could stand and stretch one's legs and define choices. On the other hand, "scatter for we head" does not only register the thought process directly but also reawakens the sense of generalised disorder and helplessness. Indeed, "man with two heads" and "scatter for we head" mean ruthlessness and the extent to which things have degenerated.

"Flood Done Come" succinctly illustrates the poetic resourcefulness of pidgin in its musical patterns and its bold use of metaphoric transfer. The last two lines, "Rape na rape/whether na gun or strong prick", are illustrative of pidgin's lyrical patterns. These patterns are also noticeable in the regulated rhythm of the entire poem with its assonantal and alliterative devices:

> Flood done come
> And tear dey borku for eye
> And you say
> You no/know say
> Rain fit kill corn for farm.

The assonantal device is apparent in the use of the front vowel /ʌ/ in the first line while the alliterative device is much more apparent in the employment of the voiced labio-dental fricative /f/ in the last line. Here sound patterns account for melody that is intimately connected with traditional African poetry.

A metaphoric transfer, as indicated above, is a case in which a word is placed in a context where it is forced to function as a metaphor although in normal usage, it cannot be metaphorical. In "Flood Done Come", two examples occur in the use of *watchnight* and *baby nurse*:

> Who no' know say
> Cat be wrong watchnight
> For fried meat?
> Who no' know say
> Hawk not to
> Babynurse for fowl?

Watchnight and *babynurse* are pidgin equivalents for *watchman* and *baby-sit*. Accordingly, a cat cannot be employed as a guard over fried meat just as a hawk cannot baby-sit a fowl. In either case, the result is obvious. The "cat" and the "hawk" refer to the leadership while "fried meat" and "fowl" refer to the nation's wealth, showing the collapse of the people's trust in their leaders. These metaphors are of an elemental grandeur and serve to expand the emotional range. Yet, through the poet's astute handling of language, this amplification costs but few words.

In *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*, Aig-Imoukhuede sees the masses as wearied labourers whom he refers to as "sufferheads" and the society represents the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest. This instance is most developed in the title poem "Sufferhead" – the poet's name for the wearied labourer who is denied the fruit of his labour.

> Grumbling and hard work,
> Sweating wit' bitter belleh;
> Craze for head
> Smiling like eunuch –
> Baboon chop monkey work.

This passage is pregnant with figurative expressions designed to exposed the suffering lot of the underdogs of society. Figurative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expressions such as "smiling like eunuch" and "baboon chop monkey work" show helplessness and exploitation respectively. The image of smiling like a eunuch in Africa is a common feature of impotence and thus highlights the sense of helplessness of the "sufferheads", while "baboon chop monkey work" is an idiom which means exploitation. The monkey refers to the masses who do all the work and the baboon to the exploitative leader(s) who reap(s) all the reward.

The poet's images are primal and not technologised at all, evoking local colour through such words as *baboon* and *monkey*.

The theme of ruthless exploitation also finds expression in "Black-Man's Consolation". In this poem, the social ill is the consequence of a racial superiority complex. The poem vividly portrays the suffering of the black man and further questions the rationale in the logic whereby God should create some people black and others white.

> If na true God be God of justice
> Why, na why he make man white at all at all
> You tell me whiteman be my broda
> But look now wetin whiteman done me;
> De whiteman done chop for my pot
> Lef him shit remain for me
> God, why wen you bin make me
> You go make me black like soup pot?

There is enough evidence that the speaker is hurt, disappointed and bitter but the injury, disappointment and bitterness are so intensely felt that their expression is painfully controlled and are only evident in the questions that the speaker poses. The expression, "de whiteman done chop for my pot / lef him shit remain for me" is an African idiom which expresses an abuse of hospitality on the part of the white man and hence discontent on the part of the black man. This poem like the preceding ones is spiced with expressions that are closely associated with its African setting. By likening the colour of his skin to that of a pot blackened by soot, the poet conjures a typical African scene where firewood is the main source of energy for cooking.

The consequence of such a practice is that as opposed to advanced societies where cooking is done with more sophisticated non-sooty equipment, in Africa the pots become so black as a result of the soot produced on them by the flames of the blazing firewood. The black man's colour contrasts with that of the white man and it is on the basis of this difference that such colonial motivated pejorative words as *black monkey*, *black magic*, *black power* and the various black colour stereotypes associated with Satan and other spirits find regular expression in the colonist's reference to black Africans. Paradoxically, these pejorative attributes are perpetrated and perpetuated by white missionaries who from the onset pretended to be the black man's brother ("broda"), only just to turn round and degrade him. In this vein, the speaker finds justification to doubt the reliability of Christian dogmas; evidence in the absence of capital letters in pronouns that directly refer to God as in "he" and "you". This is postulated notwithstanding the fact that pidgin has no written conventions. In fact, the speaker would have wished to be in the white man's shoes so as to be in a position to oppress the white man showing clearly that oppression, exploitation and other forms that degrade the dignity of man are not the preserve of a particular race:

> Me too for dey knack conga for di Afroman
> head;
> 'A for donne get ma own big farm
> Put plenty darkie inside am
> Dey do afamaco work.
> 'A for dey ride blackman like jackass
> Gim kide for belleh when he haller.

Important for the poetic effectiveness is the social significance of the words "Afroman" and "darkie" on the one hand and "afamaco" and "Jackass" on the other. "Afroman" and "darkie" refer to a black African "sufferhead" who works for free (*afamaco work*) like a donkey (*jackass*) on the white man's "big farm". The social relation endows the words with a sense of immediacy and significance that permits us to recall or revisit the heyday of slavery when those words were in common usage. The extent to which this explanation forms part of the critical statement is that it enables the reader or audience to enter the lore of the people and to see the emotional significance of the issues being handled.

However, the speaker contents himself with the belief that "after the judgement day" there shall be a reversal of roles when the black man shall be as white as an angel and the white man shall be blackened by hellfire. The kind of Christian Salvationist ethic that the speaker is projecting here is what obtains in African literary works of the colonial period, like Kenjo Jumbam's *The Whiteman of God* (1980).

In the poem "The Day Samson Die", the poet sees the black administration as not being any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

better than the colonial administration it ousted because they have become worse by having perfected torture, intimidation and cold-blooded killing as weapons to cow dissidence. And because these leaders believe that they are accountable to no one but themselves, and having the ultimate weapon of brute force (the army) at their beck and call, they have come to see governance as a matter of how long they are able to cling to power.

In "The Day Samson Die", the poet uses the instance of capital punishment to highlight the method of rule of the leadership:

> The day Samson die
> Be like Empire Day parade.
> Dem bring trumpet dem bring drum;
> Dem bring ice cream and cocacola;
> And people borku de'like sand.

The day Samson is executed is compared to the Empire Day which in colonial times was celebrated with pomp and pageantry throughout the British colonies on May 24th (Queen Victoria's birthday). The celebrations were characterised by military parades and the feasting of school children, as suggested by "trumpet" and "drum" on the one hand and by "ice cream and coca cola" on the other. Hence the freshness of the comparison to the day Samson died. The speaker describes the scene as a "cinema for free of charge" . Such a description suggests that capital punishment for political dissidents had become part of the people's daily rounds which they enjoyed as public entertainment.

There is nothing Samson can do but "smile like a eunuch". To smile like a eunuch, as seen earlier in "Sufferhead", suggests Samson's helplessness in the face of his impending death. The poet-persona likens his treatment to that of a sacrificial lamb:

> Sallah ram better pass am.
> Dem tie am for stick
> (I no go forget how people face:
> Dem chop am finish with eye!).

Through the dramatic and graphic technique of the excerpt, the poet is able to create a sense of horror and the feeling of pity in the readers. In this context, "Sallah" means the feast of the Ramadan and a "sallah ram" is the Muslim sacrificial ram of the Ramadan feast. The comparison of the treatment given to the Muslim sacrificial ram is necessitated by the fact the Muslim sacrificial scene is usually very gory, because of the way that the ram is tied and handled after being slaughtered. The second half of the excerpt literally means to be happily consumed with the eyes: a description of the sadistic enjoyment and the symbolic participation of the spectators in the physical act. Read in the light of the biblical Samson (Judges l4–16, Hebrew 11: 32), and the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ, the poem assumes a far greater significance than at first meets the eye. The case of Samson as "sallah ram" evinces those abuses of democracy which have been swept aside in the afterglow of power drunkenness in sub-Saharan African countries.

Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead also handles the theme of culture conflict. The aspect the poet handles is marriage. In the poem, "One Man, One wife", the poet pokes fun at monogamy by questioning its rationale in an African context, where the status of a man is determined by the number of wives he has and the number of children – especially, male children – those wives can produce for him:

> My fader before my fader get him wife borku
> E no' get equality palaver; he live well
> For he be oga for 'im own house.
> Bot that time done pass before white man
> come.

The features of language here include the use of kinship terms and of tense. The kinship term announced in the first line of the excerpt, "fader before my fader" is an African idiom which means "grandfather". As regards such idioms, Siga Asanga (1980: 113) claims:

> The speakers resort to the use of linguistic resources that pertain to and express an experience or social vision of a local community, and by always trying to communicate the deeper concerns of the community, this fixing of what Synge calls the "psychic state of the locality", gives rise to the evolution of the so-called sense of place.

Indeed, the fact that Aig-Imoukhuede's pidgin poems aspire for and actually create an Ibo world-view constitutes a deviation from the main tradition of English poetry written in the context of Judaeo-Christian tradition, from which much of English verse has taken its power.

Again, "fader before my fader" registers African thought directly through the pidgin technique of transliteration. This pidgin technique has clarity, and does not sacrifice meaning in ambiguity. Its dominant tense is the present tense, evident in "get", "be", "live", "come", and "pass". Further more, "One Man

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One Wife" is noticeable for its use of euphemism or indirection. This linguistic technique avoids vulgarisms and shocks.

Jus' tell me how one wife fit do one man;
How man go fit stay all time for him house
For time when belleh done commot.
How many pickin, self, one woman fit born
Wen one wife be for one man?
Suppose, your wife sabe book, no sabe make chop;
Den, how you go tell man make 'e no go out
Sake of divorce ? Bo, dis culture na waya o!

This lampoon is directed against the new culture of Christianity and also obliquely indirectly against the egoistic African husband who perceives marriage simply in terms of satisfying his carnal desires, having many children, and being provided with ready meals. Such expressions as "one wife fit do one man", "stay all time for him house", "chop", "no go out", and "belleh done commot" among others are the poet's use of language to attenuate the horrible. The effectiveness of language here derives from the fact that Aig-Imoukhuede reverts to indirection to avoid using direct sexual imagery. Here, according to J. P. Clark (1970: 93), the fact that the poet does "not approach the business on hand with the directness of an arrow, does not mean that the [poet] is unappreciative of the importance of speed and despatch".

As a matter of fact, the calm and quiet manner with which matters connected with sex are handled testify that pidgin stretches into and explores grounds where formal English speech cannot go without standing on the brink of pornography, as in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*. The diction of the poem "One Man, One Wife" is simple and the phrasing is adaptable to the music of the ballad and African folksongs. The expression "na waya o!" is an exclamation, rejecting the intruding culture.

The gentle song of the boatman in the poem of that title reveals pidgin's poetic resourcefulness through its sheer lyricism and beauty of form. In it, the boatman sings to the river as someone singing to a maiden. Thus, the lyrical patterns and the beauty of form of the poem is occasioned by the song which gives the poem a structure similar to that of both a ballad and African folksongs:

Snake water,
Sof'ly sof'ly
Do me like yesterday wife.
Carry me fast, But do me sof'ly,
Till I reach
Jesse waterside.

The striking stylistic device found in the passage is that of the speaking voice where the speaker personifies and addresses the river directly. The meandering river is described as a sliding snake. The steady and the gentle flow of the boat gives the boatman some measure of tenderness and pleasure comparable only to that received by a newly married girl, "yesterday wife". The boatman's appeal is for the river to carry him along faster because:

Sweet soup dey wait me for Patami
Soup wey sweet pass sugar:
My yellow rose Koshare
With breast like ripe mango –
Jolly Papa man, my frien'
No dey for sufferhead.

Koshare is presented here as food – "sweet soup" – and as an emblem of excellent beauty. The boatman's sensuality for the lady finds expression in such expressions as "sweet soup", "sweet pass sugar", "yellow rose", and "breast like ripe mango". The soft sound of the words and the alliteration of the verse are as appealing to the ear as the "food" itself is appealing to the eater. The boatman relies on auditory, visual, and gustatory images to build up his image of Koshare. If "soup" refers to Koshare's physical self, it follows that "sweet soup" suggests the woman's tenderness and the sexual act itself. The handling of material relating to sex as in "One Man, One Wife" relies on the technique of indirection for its success as the boatman refers neither to sexual parts nor sexual acts directly by name which is taboo in public in the African tradition.

Aig-Imoukhuede's integration of names of items (such as *otoko oki*, and *ejiri*) among others from his mother tongue into his pidgin medium is a testimony of the desperate situation of the African writer writing in a foreign language. The tendency is for him to always find himself describing situations where there are no equivalents in the foreign language he uses. Consequently, the use of names of items as they occur in the mother tongue is Aig-Imoukhuede's attempt to overcome his linguistic dilemma. This technique presents the African writer as a bilingual if not a multilingual writer in a multilingual culture.

Frank Aig-Imoukhuede's successful use of pidgin to exteriorise his feelings shows that creative writing is not confined to so-called literate

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press

societies. The total linguistic environment of *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead* is neither the mother tongue nor English but, for Aig-Imoukhuede, a leap from the mother tongue to pidgin. The use of pidgin therefore illustrates the freedom of a multilingual balance in the joyous exploitation of the West African extension of diglossia. Aig-Imoukhuede chooses pidgin because pidgin registers African thought processes directly, captures the narrative devices of African languages, and consequently has a diction that is close to proverbial expression. Translation from an indigenous language to pidgin reveals a high degree of closeness to the original speech patterns, notably in attempts to preserve syntactical equivalents. And because pidgin has a simple structure and grammar, it is fashionable and attractive because it is easier to manage. In all, pidgin has qualities of straightforwardness, simplicity, saltiness, humour, and "nativeness" that force us to accept it as a language in its own right and as an African language as such. Thus, pidgin is important, for the uniqueness of Frank Aig-Imoukhuede as a poet lies in its special nature. ■

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1981. 'The African Writer and the Language Question.' In his *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann.

Aig-Imoukhuede, Frank. 1982. *Pidgin Stew and Sufferhead*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Asanga, Siga. 1980. 'Language in the Drama of Clark and Soyinka.' In *Canadian Drama*, Spring issue, pp. 102–133.

Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa & Madubuike. 1980. *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature.* Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.

Chukwukere, B. I. 1960. 'The Problem of Language in African Creative Writing.' In *African Literature Today* 3, 15–26.

Clark J. P. 1970. *The Example of Shakespeare.* London: Longman.

Irele, Abiola. 1981. 'African Literature and the Language Question.' In his *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. London: Heimemann.

Ngugi wa Thiongo. 1986. *Decolonising The Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature.* London: Heinemann.

Obiechina, Emmanuel N. 1982. 'Parables of Power and Powerlessness: Exploration in Anglophone African Fiction Today.' In *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, XX/2, 17–25.

Roscoe, Adrian. 1971. *Mother is Gold: A Study in West African Literature.* Cambridge: University Press.

Spencer, John, ed. 1971. *The English Language in West Africa.* London: Heinemann.

Young, Peter. 1971. 'Tradition, Language and the Reintegration of Identity in West African Literature.' In Edgar Wright, ed., *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*, pp.23–50.

SNIPPETS 4

[Some years ago, Alma Denny regularly contributed light, bright linguistic verse to *ET*. It was a pleasure to receive the following from her recently. Alma, now 93, still publishes her poetry in 'Metropolitan Diary' in *The New York Times*. – Ed.]

Bustin' out all right

What is so rare as a day in Joon
wid absolutely nuttin' doon?
Nobody bein' graduated,
Bon-Voyage'd or welcome-gated?
Nobody bein' birthday-fêted,
Testimonialized, or mated?
Joon's okay but we'd like it bedder
Widout such a lot of gettin' togedder.

– Alma Denny,
New York

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078401003066 Published online by Cambridge University Press