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“Boht I Noh Yehri FINM Na Di Il ehn dehm ehn de Kehv dehm”: Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart in Krio

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“Boht I Noh Yehri *FINM* Na Di Il ehn dehm ehn de Kehv dehm”:

Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in Krio¹

“Proverbs are the palm-oil
with which words are
eaten”²— Chinua Achebe

“Owe l’ esin òrò, b’òrò bá
nù, òwe l’ a fín nwa.”
(Proverbs are the horses of
words. When
conversations flag, we
revive them with
proverbs)— Yorùbá Proverb

Sing dohn, wohd lehf

(The song is done, but
words remain) — Krio
Proverb

Introduction

“Boht I Noh Yehri *FINM* Na Di Il ehn dehm ehn de Kehv dehm”:
Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* in Krio” came about as a response to
the ‘Call for African-language Translations’ by the Translation Caucus
of the African Literature Association (TRACALA) in February 2008.
Cognizant of the global response to the 50th anniversary of Chinua
Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (*TFA*), TRACALA intended its specific call for
translations of *TFA* in African languages not only as its own
contribution to the global celebrations of the novel’s 50th year but also
as the distinctive event marking its own inauguration as a caucus of
the African Literature Association (ALA). Importantly, the translations
were not only to be in African languages, but they were specifically to
be featured as “readings.” Eight translations of randomly chosen
sections of *TFA* were submitted and performed in a panel titled, ‘African
Language Performance Panel: *TFA* in Translation – Yoruba, Igbo,
kiSwahili, Gikuyu, Tigrinya, Wolof, Zulu, and Krio.’ By all accounts, the
reading performance was an august meeting of African languages – an

occasion which invoked the two most notable among the list of ten principles of the Asmara Declaration, namely the recognition that 1) “African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for the continent” and 2) [since] “Dialogue among African languages is essential, African languages must use the instrument of translation to advance communication among all people, including the disabled.”³

The resolutions that culminated in the Asmara Declaration (‘Asmara’) are rightfully the distillation of the many and various ideas from debates and arguments, which African writers and critics, notably Chinua Achebe, Obiajunwa Wali, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Gabriel Okara, B. I. Chukwukere, and Dan Izevbaye, had engaged in over the decades-long discourse on the language question. Undoubtedly, the Declaration’s mandate to “use the instrument of translation to advance communication among all people” has its roots in the decades long crusade of mother tongue creative writers, who not only see the potential of inter-lingual translation as a source of dissemination for the rich corpus of African mother tongue literatures to national and international readership but also firmly believe that the rich resources of language, literature, culture, and philosophy must remain accessible to the masses, particularly the illiterate majority.⁴ The centrality of translation as an integral process in the creation of modern African literatures had never been an issue. Asmara was merely a much-needed reminder of past discourses and a renewed call to action. The Krio sampler of *TFA* which follows below is but one testament to the ideals of ‘Asmara.’

Transliteration and Engli-Igbo

Arguably, Achebe’s often quoted quip, “...proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten,” had become the yardstick by which critics have measured his merit as a world-renowned artist in the last fifty years. Translations of his works into as many as fifty-two different European and African languages⁵ speak volumes about his yet unsurpassed achievement as the leading African novelist. To date, *TFA* has retained its unquestionable literary merit and withstood its reputation as the first African novel in English. As a gifted ventriloquist, Achebe is known stylistically for his sensitivity to rhythm in his characteristic “bending” of the English language “to

carry” his African experience.

More importantly, how translations have, in turn, managed this language bending makes for interesting investigation. This paper attempts to engage in this investigation experientially, through a literal translation of a section of Chapter 12 of *TFA* into Krio. Thus, it is important at the outset to state that even before I decided on the passage to be translated, the circumstances and impetus for the translation were allowed to define the prospective “problem.” Since the translation exercise was made specifically for a public reading, I had determined that it would necessarily have to be driven by euphony and stylistic concerns. In other words, the initial concern was to determine what issues occur in the attempt to match Achebe’s “language bending” from a transliterated, Igbo-influenced English source language (SL) into Krio, a tonal, syllable-isochronic, English-oriented target language (TL).

Much has been written about Achebe’s own description of the pulse of Igbo orality/conversation. And in the fifty years of the numerous examples through which he has espoused the defining proverbial principle of Igbo discourse, we have come to expect the “musicality” of words, what Yoruba writer, Akinwumi Isola, describes as a preoccupation with “beautiful (dramatic) language,” that is, the yardstick by which we measure the success of creative works by African writers. Thus, whether writing in europhone languages or in their own mother tongues, first- and second-generation African creative writers have striven to regale their audiences with “unusual and unique” language styles.

In this regard much has been discussed and written about the multi-level creative process in which African creative writers engage when they write in English, a language, which for many, if not all Anglophone African writers, is a second, even third language. Plainly put, to speak of the creative process in African literature in European languages, is to speak of a *transcreative* process in which the writer has to express his/her mother tongue idioms through a multi-level thought-process. Ezekiel Mphahlele best described this process as *transliteration*, a term used to mean “the act of thinking and conceiving in one’s first language but expressing the substance thought or conceived in one’s second language such that the second language expressions used

contain some salient linguistic and rhetorical implants from the first language.”⁶ It is fair to claim that it is Achebe’s famous response to the language question more than that of any other Anglophone African writer that best describes what took hold as a well-touted theory of African creative writing and criticism in the late 1960s through the 1980s. In response to “the language question,” Achebe’s sentiments were unequivocal:

...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a *new English*, still in full communion with its ancestral home *but altered to suit its new African surroundings* (*Morning* 84 – my emphasis).

In other words, the African writer needs to craft a “new” kind of English language in spite of himself or herself. And in response to the question of whether or not Africans *could* or *should* write in English, Achebe offered the clear and brilliant formula: a “bending” of the English language “...in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost” (83). Inevitably, for many African writers, the level of this language bending process is sometimes ternary, even quinary. In the case of Achebe, for instance, the ternary process went from Igbo thought process/idiom (SL1) to Standard English (TL1) to *Engli-Igbo* (TL2). Thus, Achebe’s conscious deviation from Standard English produced a “new English,” in which Igbo idioms and tropes, as Onwuemene noted, are “inlaid among unadulterated standard English matrix sentences *like jewels on a ground material* (my italics, 1061).

The simple example of the “palm-oil proverb” will suffice to illustrate the end result of this transcreation/transliteration, known as semantic translation in translation theory (Onwuemene 1058). In translating/transferring the Igbo saying, “*Nmanu nkwu eji eri okwu*” (literally, *oil palm that is to eat words*) into Standard English, Achebe could have easily rendered it as, “without proverbs conversations (words) are flat.” However, the peculiarity of the Igbo idiom, in its cultural context, does not adequately express the essence of Igbo discourse. Better yet, in culinary terms, words themselves are but morsels and proverbs are the spikers, the oilers that ensure the palatability of

conversations. Thus, in paying attention to culture specific nuances and the peculiar linguistic turns of phrase that characterize his Igbo language and culture, Achebe bends the standard English (TL1) further to an ethnic Nigerian English best described as *Engli-Igbo* (TL2) to carry “the weight” of expressing his “African experience.” In similar fashion, fellow Anglophone writers, notably Gabriel Okara in the late 1960s, gave free rein to their creativity, even engaging in language experimentations that produced various ethnic West African pidgins and Englishes.

As a result of these experimentations, creoles and pidgins evolved, many of which have recently gained legitimacy as languages in their own right even though scholars⁷ had noted their linguistic, social and political significance as early as the late nineteenth century. As Sulayman Njie observed, specifically, in Africa today, creoles and pidgin languages have emerged from the cloud of inferiority under which they had existed for a long time (4). By the early 1950s, a number of West African writers, among them Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Aig Imoukhuede, had begun to experiment with, and in some instances were already writing in a number of Pidgin English (PE) and Creole languages to produce a growing body of literature. Notably, even before Ekwensi used PE in his famous novel, *Jagua Nana* (1961) or Achebe in his modern novel, *A Man of the People* (1963), pamphlet literature of Onitsha market fame had long paved the way for the emergence of PE both as a language of commerce and of mass communication – the *de facto* lingua franca of West Africa – as well as a viable language of literary output. By the 1970s writers, including Wole Soyinka, had boldly introduced varieties of pidgin English into their prose and poetic works. Ken Sarowiwa’s bold experiment in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (1985) is notable in this regard.

Undoubtedly, the evolution of PEs and creoles is evident in their widespread use in novels, works of drama, poetry, and in music, particularly “the highlife music of West Africa” (Njie 4). These various genres not only distinguish them from the English language, but they further legitimize them as languages in their own right. For instance, the emergence and development of the Krio language is illustrative of how pidgin and creole linguistic systems evolved into autonomous languages.⁸

Krio Language

Krio is a West African language of the Krio people of Sierra Leone, spoken as a mother tongue by some 250,000 people in and around Freetown and as a second language by many more Sierra Leoneans.⁹ Distinct from PE, Krio is a language in its own right with distinctive linguistic properties of grammar, syntax, lexicon, and a rich, fast growing literary and theatrical tradition.¹⁰ Although it is often described as an English-oriented creole, the Sierra Leone Krio lexicon defies any strict pigeon-holing. A cursory glance at the lexicon suggests that the language that has evolved today is the result of the vigorous commingling of different groups of resettled emancipated slaves and other indigenous groups in the Freetown area. Minimally, Krio is a conglomeration of borrowings and input from a wide range of language and culture contacts, the most discernible of which are English, Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof, Fula, Mende, Temne, Portuguese, French, Fanti, and Arabic.¹¹ Although the proponents and opponents of the Krio language question were dogged by sometimes partisan, if not rancorous, debates about “linguistic processes,” their arduous quarrels and “cultural identity” birth pains during the 1930s eventually resulted almost fifty decades later in a proposed standard semi-phonemic orthography,¹² which, in turn, paved the way in 1980 for the publication of *A Krio-English Dictionary*, a well-crafted, comprehensive dictionary, compiled by Clifford N. Fyle & Eldred Jones, making Krio the only fully standardized West African Creole.¹³ To date Krio has been designated the *lingua franca* of Sierra Leone and boasts a burgeoning literary tradition, which includes translations of parts of the Bible, and a growing body of literature, including plays, poems, prose, and most notable, Thomas Decker’s translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and an adaptation of *As You Like It*.¹⁴

Ironically, it would be through the medium of translation that Decker, ardent proponent of Krio language and identity, tested his claims about the inseparability of language and identity and debunked the social class allegiance of his “black Englishmen” opponents. As he observed in the introductory note to his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *As You like It*, Decker needed to prove that Krio was not only a language in its own right, one that is distinguishable from English and pidgin varieties of English...[and] could be used for any type of writing...” but also a culture.¹⁵ More importantly, bent on establishing the intrinsic qualities of Krio as “an expression of the (African) soul of the people

who spoke it” (Shrimpton 533) and showcasing the parity of Krio with other languages, Decker used translations of English classics such as Shakespeare and Longfellow as effective tools “to prove to everyone that Krio was a suitable vehicle for great literature” (541). Decker explained as follows the method to what his critics saw as his madness:

...when I set out to translate *Julius Caesar*, my aim was twofold: first to make propaganda for the Krio language *by proving that the most serious things can be written and spoken in it*, and secondly, to make it possible for people who did not have the opportunity of reading Shakespeare at school to taste of the excellence of this great writer by seeing one of his most popular plays staged in their own language (my emphasis).¹⁶

Thus, in choosing to make a translation of a passage from *TFA* into Krio for the celebratory reading, my aim first and foremost was to swell the list of African language renditions of *TFA*, and secondarily, to put to test Decker’s claim that “*the most serious things can be written and spoken in [Krio].*”

The Translated Text¹⁷

As a first attempt to write Krio formally, the experience was both exhilarating and humbling. The literal translation was made in two systems: a) the recommended Fyle-Jones regularized semi-phonetic orthography (1980), and b) the less technical, more accessible, reader-friendly one used by Akintola Wyse and others. However, for ease of production and because of proper font transfer concerns, the latter system is featured in the body of the essay in its entirety, and the former appended as an appendix, in part, to showcase the language simply for its own intrinsic merit and to illustrate the issues of accessibility, readability and rhythm that later trumped my initial

preoccupation with the concerns of euphony and style.

KUSKAS DOHN KAM O!¹⁸

Ay-ay, una foh kam si di neyba dehm pan gladi gladi. Obierika, Okonkwo in frehn, dey sehlibreyt in gyal pikin in "uri." Di uri na da tehm wey di ohkoh kin tot pam-wayn kahm foh tehl de fyuchoh inloh ehn ohl dehm fambul na di ole ton adu adu. Dehn kohl ohl man kam – ehvribodi – ohl man, uman ehn pikin! 'una foh mehmba sey uri noh to gladi gladi foh ohl di wohl – uri na uman gladi gladi noh moh – di gyal pikin, in mami ehn ohl dehn padi dehm.

Do jehs klin, ehn ohl man dohn grap, dehn dohn swala it dohn kwik kwik. Ohl di mami ehn dehn pikin dohn bigin kam na Obierika in ose foh kam ehp di iyawo ehn in mami foh kuk ohl di it wey dehn go sav eoribohdi.

Wehn do dohn klin Okonkwo in fambul seh foh dohn mekes grap, lehk ohl man, dehn dohn dohn foh meykeys go na Obierika in ose. Nwoye in mami ehn Okonkwo in lili wehf ehn ohl dehn pikin dehm dohn rehdi foh kohmoht. Nwoye in mami tot yam, wan baskit wit sohl ehn smok fish foh go gi Obierika in wehf. Ojiugo, Okonkwo in lili wehf seh foh tot plantin ehn kokoyam baskit, ehn wan lili pam-ai poht. Di pikin dehm seh foh tot watapoht na dehn eyd.

Da wahala las neht dohn meyk Ekwefi taya bad. I noh tey wey dehn kam bak na ose. De mohri man bin geh foh krohl pan in behleh lehk wey sneyk dey kohmoht na de shrayn wit pikin wey dey slip na in bak. I noh evin meyk lehk sey Okonkwo ehn Ekwefi dey dey wey i dey pas dehn ose dehn tinap nia de shrayn in domot. Wehn i dohn kohmoht, i luk treyt ehn jehs dey waka go bak na tohn. Okonkwo ehn in wehf leh i waka go lili bit bifoh dehn waka saful saful bihen am. Dehm bin tink sey i go waka treyt ohl ohboht na tohn fohs bifo i go na Okonkwo in ose, boht bifo dat i waka pas in obi ehn go treyt to Ekwefi in yon rum. Na da tehn dey i put Ezinma dohn saful wan na Ekwefi in beyd. Wehn i dohn, i jehs waka kohmoht kwayet wan go na do; i noh sey fing to enibohdi.

Ohl man don grap go na do, boht Ezinma in wan greyn bin stil dey slip. Na da tem dey Ekwefi ahsk Nwoye in mami en Ojiugo foh tehl Obierika in wehf sey Ezinma go fala di ohda pikin dehm wehn i slip dohn . Bifo da tehm dey, Ekwefi insehfbin dohn rehdi in kokoyam ehn fish basket foh kohmoht, boht i bin geht foh weyt foh di titi foh grap fohs.

Nwoye in mami luk Ekwefi teytey dohn i sey, “bo, Lohd ar marci, luk wey slip stil ful yu yaay. Yu foh go ley dohn lili bit.”

Di tehm wey dehm dey tohk so, Ezinma grap kohmoht na do, i dey rohbi in yai dey treyt pan di slip wey stil leh na in lili bohdi. Na da tehm dey i si di ohda pikin dehm wit dehm watapoht; i kam mehmba se dehn ohl bin dey go tot wata kam na os foh Obierika in wehf. Insehfbin go tot in yon watapoht foh fala dehn.

“ehnti yu dohn slip du, nau ehn?” in mami ahsk am.

Yehh, ar dohn slip du; leh wi dey kam go noh.”

“Noh, noh, noh. We noh dey go nohnsai. Yu geh foh it yu brekfas. Kam it fohs, ya.”

In mami grap go wam di plasas wey i bin dohn kuk de neht befo.

Nwoye in mami tehl Ekwefi, “leh wi dey go. Wi go tehl Obierika in wehf sey yu ehn di pikin dehm dey kam.” Dehm kohmoht – Nwoye in mami ehn in fo pikin dehm ehn Ojiugo ehn in yon tu pikin dehm. As dehn dey waka pas Okonkwo in obi, Okonkwo hala aks wus wan pan dehm dey kam bak foh kam kuk yit foh in.

Ohl man kin si sey Okonkwo insehfbin taya bad bad. ehnti nohbohdi bin no boht wetin ahpin las neht; slip noh tohch in yai wan tehm. I noh mehk enibohdi no boht ow i bin frehyd bad bad. Di tehm dey wey Ekwefi bin fala de mohri man, i bin weyt lili bit bifoh i grip in kohtlas na an ehn bigin fala dehm go di shrayn, na da sai wey i tink se dehn go dey. I dohn rich dey dohn bifo i abul mehmba sey di mohri man kin wan mahch rawond de vileyj dehm fohs. Okonkwo meykeys go bak om foh go sidohn wayt. Wen i tink sey tehm dohn pas du, ehn in dohn sidohn wayt du, i grap foh go bak nah de shrayn. Boht i noh yehri fing na de ll ehn

*dehm ehn di Keyv dehm — di pleys mehk yeng lehk greyvyahd.
Okonkwo kan dey go dey kam, dey go dey kam, dey go dey kam ohp ehn
dohn, i noh yehri finm, i noh fehn enibohdi. Wehn i kam bak di wan wey
mek fo tehm, wey i dohn niali tohn kreysman, na da tehm dey i fehn
Ekwefi.*

The bustle in Obierika's compound was ant-hill like, with children fetching water from the stream, women cooking, and the men splitting firewood. The air was expectant and festive with the killing of goats, the endless pounding of foo foo, and the cooking of vegetable soup in preparing for the marriage ceremony. The gifts to be given, the good cheer to be exchanged, even the stories, myths and legends to be shared. The stray cow that interrupted the anthill activity had been safely corralled and the engagement festivities had begun in full tilt – 50 pots of palm-wine, a big goat, the traditional breaking & sharing of the kola nut of goodwill followed with feasting and merriment.

*Wehn do dohn dey dak, dehn dohn dey laite ohl de oyl pan lamp, ehn
ohl di brah dehm wey dey pley musik dohn bigin dey sing. Ohl di agba
agba dohn sidohn rawond wan big sakul, ehn di brah dehn dey kam tel
dehm adu wan by wan en sing boht denn. Dehn geh sohmtin foh tohk
ehn sing boht wetin ohl man dohn du – de wan dehn wey na greyt fama,
ehn de wan dehn wey dehn moht swit pan tohk: ehn lehk Okonkwo, di
brah wey dohn rahsul ehn feht, wey ohl man no sey nohbohdi na dis
wohl noh abul am. Wehn dehn dohn sing dohn, dehn sidohn insyd de
sakul. Na da tehm dey dehn lili dans titi dehm bigin foh dans kohmoht
kam insai de os. De iyawo noh fala dehm kam di fohs tehm. Boht wen i
bigin dans, wey i hol di kakh na wan han so, ohl man gladi gladi; dehn
ohl bigin ala ehn klap. As i dey dans kam na in yon ol, ohl di dans titi
dehn dey kohmoht na rod foh leh i go pas. I tot de kakh, dohn i go gi de
yungman dehn wey dey play musik befoh insehfkam bigin dans. As i dey
dans na so i dey sheyk de sheyk sheyk wey i wehr pan in fut, ehn de
bundu pan in bodi de shaine na de yala laiht. Noh to kohmon pley dehn
pley, wan song jehs dey fala de ohda. Ohl man gladi gladi. Dehn ohl
kam sing da wan sing wey ohl man dey lehk foh sing:*

“Wehn yu ol in an

*I go sey, "bo, duya, lehf mi o!"
Ifyu tohch in fut
I go sey, "bo, duya, noh tohch mi o"
Boht wehn ar ol in jigida
I kin mek lehkse in noh no."*

*Do dohn dak wehn de ohkoh in fambul dehn grap foh go om.
Dehn teyk dehn iyawo foh go tap wit in ohkoh ehn in fambul foh sehwin
makit wik. Dehn dey sing as dehn dey waka dey go. Bifo dehn put fut na
rod bifo dehn go om, dehn tap na rod fohs foh tehl ohl dehn bigman dehn
lehk Okonkwo, adu adu. Bifoh dehn lehf, Okonkwo gi dehm tu kahk foh
tehk go om.¹⁹*

Translation Issues

Preemptive assumptions about prospective literary and stylistic difficulties during the translation exercise turned out to be less immediate and engaging than the linguistic and technical ones that dominated the exercise from the outset. Comparatively, the former concerns turned out to be premature and less problematic than the latter concerns. Because Krio had been predominantly a spoken language for a long time (Jones 31), naturally, its written form has mainly consisted of haphazard, individual sound-oriented spelling systems until prior to and even after Thomas Decker's suggested semi-phonemic system. By all accounts, adoption of the semi-phonemic orthography recommended in 1980 by Clifford N. Fyle and Eldred D. Jones is not without glitches and difficulties for the rank and file populace. In light of this and without the benefit or convenience of a Krio keyboard or a font system,²⁰ my inclination as a bilingual speaker, faced with experimenting with writing Krio "formally" for the first time, was to exercise the principle of convenience and render the translation in a self-invented, (English) sound-based spelling system. Needless to say, while the resulting non-phonemic piece sufficed for convenience and ease of reading, it was idiosyncratic and unsatisfactory, at best.²¹

Generally, even though much has been accomplished in the long process of standardizing the Krio orthography, scholars, linguists, and writers concede that problems with writing and reading Krio still arise despite all the inevitable modifications and the tremendous progress made thus far.²² To date, the possible choices, still debated, are: 1) the non-phonemic, mixed orthography of the rank and file – “the ‘an-to-mot’ sector of the society, in Jones’ own words; 2) the Thomas Decker, semi-phonemic spelling system;²³ and 3) the Fyle-Jones semi-phonemic, regularized, ‘official’ system.²⁴ In keeping with linguistic trends, the eventual choice of the Fyle-Jones orthographic system for the translation exercise instead of my home-spun, mixed spelling system (not unlike the many versions of the “an-to-mot” citizenry), raised issues of readability and accessibility, not to speak of the time-consuming, painstaking technical difficulties of inserting manually the phonetic symbols of the new orthography (eh/â, oh/, . . , ½). The following sample sufficiently illustrates the technical complexities for general scripting and readership.

KUSKAS D^N KAM O!

Ay-ay, una f, kam se de neba d;im pan gladi gladi.
 Obierika, Okonkwo fr;in, de s;libret in gyal pikin in uri.
 De uri na da t;im way de ,k, kin tote pam-wayn kam f,
 t;l de fyuch, inl, ;n al d;im fambul na de ole t,n adu adu.
 D;n k,l ,l man kam, ;vrib,di, ;vri man, uman ;n pikin!
 Una f, m;mba say uri n, to gladi gladi f, ,l de w,l. Uri
 na uman gladi gladi n, m,, j,s de gyal pikin, in mamie ;n
 ,l d;in padi.

Do j;s klin, ;n ,l man d,n grap, D;n d,n mekes
 swala yit d,n. ^l de mamie ;n d;in pikin
 d,n bigin kam na Obierika in os f, kam ;lp
 de iyawo ;n in mamie f, kuk ,l de yit wey

d; n go sav ;vrib, di.

W; n do d, n klin Okonkwo in fambul s; f d, n mekes grap, l; k ,l man, d; d, n d, n f, mekes k, m, t na os f, go Obierika in ose. Nwoye mamie ; n Okonkwo in lili w; f ; n ,l d; n pikin d; m d, n r; di f, k, m, t. Nwoye mamie tot kokoyam, s, l ; n smok fis baskit f, go gi Obierika in w; f. Ojiugo, Okonkwo in lili w; f s; f tot plantin ; n kokoyam baskit, ; n wan lili pam-ail p, t. De pikin d; m s; f tot watap, t na ed.

Da amb, g wey Okonkwo ; n Ekwefi pikin amb, g d; m de n; t bif, d, n mek Ekwefi taya bad. I n, tey wey d; n bin kam bak os. De m, ri man bin g; f, kr, l pan b; l; l; k snek k, m, t de shrayn m, t wit slipin pikin pan in bak. I n, ivin mek l; k say Okonkwo ; n Ekwefi de dey as i pas d; m usai d; n tinap nia de shrayn kavmot. W; n i k, m, t d, n, i luk tr; t ; n j; s de waka go bak t, n. Okonkwo ; n in w; f l; f an l; i waka go lili bit bif, d; n saful saful dey waka fala an. D; m bin tink sey i go waka tr; t ,l ,b, t t, n f, s bif, i go Okonkwo in os, b, t rada i waka pas in obi ; n waka tr; t go Ekwefi in rum. Na da t; n dey i sahful put Ezinma d, n pan in mamie bed. W; n i d, n, i j; s waka k, m, t na do, i n, sey ping to n, b, di.

Further, the issue of availability of *TFA* in Krio to a wider reading audience seemed to obtrude the underlying purpose of making it possible, like Decker did with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for people who did not have the opportunity of reading Achebe at school to read

his novel in Krio.”²⁵ Simply, by virtue of its seeming complex, phonetic representation, the Fyle-Jones semi-phonemic orthography privileges a closed audience of readers advantaged by a knowledge of (transferable) English phonetic symbols.²⁶ This problem was complicated further by the variances between standard Krio and other varieties of Krio.²⁷

As an English-oriented Creole language, Krio is made up of about 70% words of English origin (Fyle and Jones 1980: x). The argument or assumption then that a translation of a passage written in English should consequently lend itself pliantly to transference into (an English-oriented) Krio could, perhaps be made superficially, even at the risk of ignoring the details of a linguistic analysis to justify such an assumption. However, the fact is that cursorily, the original English text of *TFA* is not exactly an English text in the sense of, say, a Shakespearean or Yeatsian text, but is a variation, a hybrid of sorts – what some critics have simply described as a creative expression of “Igbo thoughts” in (British colonial) English.

Although concern for rhythm in translation is almost always associated with the translation of poetry rather than prose, the preoccupation with the importance of rhythm in prose translation is a legitimate one. Inevitably, challenges abound in the transference of the sound patterns inherent in the rhythm of “African vernacular style” as a number of the many inter-lingual translations of *TFA* would undoubtedly bear out. Inter-lingual translation problems, or more appropriately, transference problems, abound from one stress-isochronic SL (e.g. English) into another stress-isochronic TL (e.g. French), not to speak of intra-lingual problems from one tonal, syllable-isochronic African SL (e.g. Yorùbá) into another, in this case Krio.

Consequently, in addition to attention to culture-specific nuances and stylistic idiosyncrasies, translation of Achebe’s creative prose works would necessarily have to carry the twin burden of interpretation as well as the simulation of his Igbo idiom, what Bernth Lindfors (1968) once described as Achebe’s “African vernacular style,”²⁸ the TL notwithstanding.

What follows is a response to my own translator’s query: How does Achebe’s “African vernacular style” transfer into Krio, another African language? The transference exercise from Achebe’s *Engli-Igbo* to

Krio yielded some interesting examples. A few will suffice to illustrate the characteristics of this so-called African vernacular style, which includes an array of phono-aesthetic devices including the creative use of repetition for emphasis, wordplay, folktales, proverbs, code switching, code mixing, inter-textual translation,²⁹ ideophones, onomatopoeia, etc. Achebe uses several of these aesthetic and other stylistic devices, among them: ideophones but most prominently the Igbo proverb, two features, which are problematic in inter- and intra-lingual translations.

Ideophones abound in many African languages and feature prominently as one of the unique features of traditional and modern African literatures. African writers exploit them for their semantic and phonological possibilities in literary expression, most especially as a tool to fuse sound and meaning. Because of their characteristic emotiveness and expressiveness, ideophones are not translatable and therefore can and do pose problems for the translator. For this reason alone, possibly, one might argue that that is why Achebe, *transcreatively*, chose to fuse them, italicized in their original Igbo, into his Engli-Igbo text.

Apart from a few clear instances in which Achebe uses onomatopoeia to simulate the drum beat of the *ogene* and *ekwe* drums and to capture the orison of Chielo, the Priestess of Agbala through the villages, ideophones do not feature as distinctively in *TFA* as they do in his other works, especially in *Arrow of God*. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that in *TFA*, Achebe uses onomatopoeia strategically to capture the *untranslatable* rhythm and cadence not only of the ‘call-and-response’ of Igbo socio-communal discourse (81) but also the distinctive sounds of Igbo traditional drums, to and through which the people speak and hear the language. For example:

“*Umuofia kwenu*”

“*Yaa!*”

“**Umuofia kwenu**”

“**Yaa!**”

“Umuofia kwenu”

“Yaa!”

Contextually, the individual vocation may be variously translated simply enough, if at all, as: “Greetings!” or “Attention!” or “I call on you sons (and daughters) of Umuofia.” However, a similar attempt to translate the communal refrain, “Yaa!” as anything but “Yaa!” becomes problematic and will defy any kind of simplistic interpretation or rendering outside its cultural peculiarity. Its socio-cultural relevance is unmistakable. Hence, Achebe’s choice to preserve meaning and sound by retaining the onomatopoeic “Yaa!” rather than resorting invariably to some kind of “cushioning.” The same could be said for the following examples in which rhythm and sound are preserved: “*Diim! Diim! Diim!*” replicates the recognizable boom of the canon at intervals (109), as distinct from the “*Gome, gome, gome, gome*” (80) boom of the hollow, metal *ogene* gong (9), while the untranslatable rhythm of the Igbo *ekwe* ‘talking’ drum is reproduced in ‘*Go-di-di-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go-di-di-go-go*’ (109). Importantly, the intent and message are clear: the timbre, the pulse, the atmosphere, and the socio-cultural, communal exchanges are solidly grounded in Igbo sensibility.

Specifically, in the translated Krio passage three examples of ideophones/ onomatopoeia are noted.

- *I noh sey ping to enibohdi* (She...went away without saying a word to anybody –101).
- *Boht i noh yehri finn na di Il ehn dehm ehn de Kehv dehm* (But the Hills and Caves were **as silent as death** – 1 02).
- *di pleys mehk yeng lehk greyvyahd* (The place was as still as a graveyard –102).

As in Igbo, ideophones are common stock in Krio lexicon. The examples above are drawn from the scene in which Okonkwo and his second

wife, Ekwefi, anxious for the welfare and safety of Ezinma, their *ogbanje*³⁰ child, had secretly followed Chielo, the Priestess, into the deep, dark forest to the shrine of Agbala. Contextually, here is the original *Engli-Igbo* text:

Ekwefi was tired and sleepy from the exhausting experience of the previous night. It was not very long since they had returned. The priestess, with Ezinma sleeping on her back, had crawled out of the shrine on her belly like a snake....She looked straight ahead of her and walked back to the village. Okonkwo and his wife followed at a respectable distance...she went to Okonkwo's compound. Passed through his obi and into Ekwefi's hut ...into her bedroom. **She placed Ezinma carefully on the bed and went away without saying a word to anybody** (my italics, 101).

Na da tehn dey i saful saful put Ezinma dohn pan Ekwefi in behd. Wehn i dohn, i jehs waka kohmoht go na do; I noh sey ping to enibohdi.

Okonkwo was feeling tired and sleepy, for although nobody knew it, he had not slept at all last night. He had felt very anxious but did not show it. When Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his matchet to the shrine, where he thought they must be...When he thought he had waited long enough he again returned to the shrine. **But the Hills and Caves were as silent as death. It was only on the fourth trip that he had found Ekwefi, and by then he had become gravely worried** (my italics,102).

Boht i noh yehri *fimn* na di Il ehn dehm ehn de Kehv dehm — di pleyhs mehk ying lehk greyyvahd. *Okonkwo kan dey go dey kam,*

dey go dey kam, dey go dey kam ohp ehn dohn, I noh yehri finm, I noh fehn enibohdi. Wehn i kam bak di wan wey mehk foh tehm, wehn i dohn niali tohn kreysman, na da tehm dey i fehn Ekwefi.

Despite Okonkwo's notoriety as a heavy handed, compulsive, severe man, his fear of failure and weakness, his obsession with hating everything his father had loved, and being "not a man of thought but of action," arguably, two instances in the entire novel handily betray his sensitive and humane side. First, the description of his love of and fondness for the young ward, Ikemefuna, (the boy who called him "father," but whom he cut down because "he was afraid of being thought weak," 55) and secondly, the uxorial concern for Ekwefi and paternal love for his daughter, Ezinma, acted out in spite of himself, in the passages quoted above. The pervasive sense of movements and gestures and the absence of elemental sounds in the above excerpts from Chapter 12 cut through the heart of the evidence to this point in the novel of Okonkwo's fearless but fear-obsessed, action-man nature. The ominous silence of the forest the night before, the wordless interaction among Ekwefi, Okonkwo and the spirit-possessed priestess with the sleeping Ezinma on her back, cut a deep contrast with the buzz of the next morning's prenuptial preparations of Obierika's compound. We are reminded in the same chapter that "the Hills and Caves were *as silent as death*" and "Obierika's compound was *as busy as an ant-hill*." The unnerving experience visibly rattled Okonkwo's signature steely carriage, showing him sleep-deprived, "very anxious" and "gravely worried." This rare but very important glimpse into Okonkwo's anxiety and inner torment, situated within the context of the ominous elements, is as telling as is the "*as silent as death*" simile itself. The passage, I argue, is a crucial one, without which any kind of character sketch and/or analysis of Okonkwo and his demise would be woefully incomplete and wanting. Equally important in this passage is the treatment and perhaps final ritual cleansing of Ezinma's *obanije* condition, and its heavily charged glimpse of Igbo mythological belief and traditional-medicinal lore. Simply, to miss these points contextually in translation is to devalue their socio-cultural relevance. Such was the case in the Yorùbá translation of *TEA* ³¹ in which the crucial sentence, "But the Hills and the Caves were as silent as death," was translated simply as "Kò bá enikéni nínú àgbón [p.70]" (But he

found no-one there).

Hence the question: How difficult is it to convey the sense and meaning of utter, eerie, in-the-stillness-of-night silence that is as silent as death in Krio? Ideophones came to the rescue. In Krio idiom, the ideophones *ping*, *yeng* and *finm* come closest to conveying this kind of absence of sound. *Ping* conveys a sense of absolute, complete, and dogged wordlessness as in '[the priestess] went away without saying a word to anybody' – *I noh sey ping to enibohdi*. Her task was done, the 'ritual cure' had been sanctioned by and in the silence of the elements, and intercessory words inside the sacred shrine had already sealed the *ogbanje*-patient-child's cure with peaceful slumber. In other words, all that needed to be said had been said and sealed in the elemental silence of the Hills and Caves. Similarly, *finm* and *yeng*, accompanied by the characteristic movement, gestures, and intonation that usually accompany African ideophones, convey a sense of "complete nothingness" – *I noh yehri finm, ...di pley meh k yeng* as in absolute, utter, deafening, graveyard-like silence.

Perhaps these ideophones are a fortuitous find, but they are such an exacting find that holds promise for further discoveries from the treasure trove of Krio idiomatic expressions with its peculiar bent for "borrowings" from other African languages, including Igbo.

Conclusion

Despite the linguistic issues mentioned above and whatever residual reticence might remain among writers, playwrights, and actors in fully embracing the new orthography, Decker's pioneering example of using translation to establish the potential of Krio as "a suitable vehicle for great literature" continues to propel the growth and expansion of the language. Not unlike other African languages, Krio is a growing language, whose language issues, when resolved may, over time, evolve a metalanguage as Yoruba successfully did in 1992.³² To date, as Jones pointed out, "Krio vocabulary is being stretched to accommodate the new realities of a technological and scientific world" (Jones 34). The growth of literary output, especially in theater, is remarkably healthy. The experience of translating the short passage of *TFA* is reassuring that Krio idioms can adequately carry the weight of Achebe's Igbo idioms. And as Jones noted, "borrowing is inevitable, and the translator must therefore rely on adaptation." Furthermore,

“[I]n instances where Krio idiomatic expressions do not exist” the translator, Jones instructed, must “stretch existing words or employ periphrasis or explanation in order to convey the ideas in his original” (34). Fortunately, the technical issue of keyboard and/or font availability pales compared to resolving the issue of reticence. A colleague’s gracious offer to create a special computer font program has resolved the former issue and will facilitate word processing, transference and printing, thus ensuring continuation and completion the language continues its inevitable evolution and with the translation of *TEA* in Krio. The latter issue will resolve in

time as emergence of more and more written literature in Krio.

Notes

¹ This chance translation was undertaken in memory of the late John Conteh

Morgan, scholar, teacher, brother-friend and native speaker of Krio, whose brilliance and Krio humor made such music to my ears, awakening and validating all the latent Krio language and culture in me, and to Miriam, Derian and DeMarie, mi krio fambul.

² My colleague, Professor Phaniel Egejuru of the English Department at Loyola University, New Orleans, gave an approximation of this proverb in Igbo to me as “Nmanu nkwa eji eri okwu”.

³ At the historic conference, “Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the Twenty-first Century” (January 11-17, 2000), over 400 African writers, artists, scholars and critics gathered in Asmara, Eritrea from every region of the African continent and from around the world and collectively disavowed the incongruity in European languages (still) speaking for the continent, and affirmed on the last day of the conference “a new beginning by returning to its languages and heritage” in what is now known as the “Asmara Declaration.”

⁴ In this regard contemporary Yorùbá writer, Akínwùmí Isölä is an ardent proponent of the goals of Asmara.

⁵ To date, *TFA* has been translated into European languages, including Swedish, Polish, German, French, Italian, Austrian, Spanish, Portuguese, and African languages, including Yorùbá, Swahili, Zulu, Xhosa, and Sepedi. Five different translations into Igbo are in progress, including one by Isaac Umunna and one by Achebe himself.

⁶ Quoted in Michael Onwuemene’s “Nigerian Writers’ Endeavors toward a national Language,” p. 1058.

⁷ Njie, p. 4.

⁸ See Njie, Wyse, and Jones,

⁹ Shrimpton, p. 8.

¹⁰ A “non-rhotic, syllable-timed, and tone language,” Krio is made up of seven pure vowels, i, e, i, a, o, u/ and three diphthongs ai/ay, au/aw, oi/,y” which give it its tonal characteristic The Krio alphabet consists of 36 letters: a, aw, ay, b, ch, d, e, ê, f, g, gb, h, i, j, k, kp, l, m,n, ny, ½,o, , , y, p, r, s, sh, t, th, u, v, w, y, z, zh.

¹¹ Oyètádé and Fashole-Luke, p. 122-123.

¹² See essays of Thomas Decker

¹³ Shrimpton records the evolution of the language name from creole to Krio, spearheaded by Thomas Decker, in “Thomas Decker and the Death of Boss Coker.”

¹⁴ Decker titled this adaptation, *Udat De Kiap Fit*, undated, but it has been reissued in the UmeaUniversity *Krio Publications Series*.

¹⁵ Neville Shrimpton, “Thomas Decker and the Death of Boss Coker,” *Africa* 57 (4) 1987, 535.

¹⁶ Thomas Decker, from an introductory note in his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *As you like It (Udat de Kiap Fit)*, quoted in Shrimpton, p. 541.

¹⁷ Although the translated text itself was read at the African Literature Association Conference in Macomb, Illinois in April 2008, the subsequent essay was prepared for and presented on a panel on TFA in translation at the *Things Fall Apart 1958-2008* conference organized by the University of London and University of Kent, October 10-11, 2008.

¹⁸ Literally, ‘Trouble Has Come/Calamity is Let Loose,’ a possible translation choice for the title “Things Fall Apart” had I translated the entire novel.

¹⁹ *TFA*, Chapter 12, pp.100-108. I owe a debt of gratitude to my colleague, Professor Abioseh Porter, for offering encouragement and some native-speaker idioms.

²⁰ According to The Sierra Leone Project at the University of Umea, Sweden, a font system was procured in from two font editors, Fontastic and Fontography, produced by Altsys Corporation. A number of Internet sites advertise professional translation Services as well as general Font software for African languages. Most recently, long after this translation was completed, I obtained an AfroRoman font from Linguist’s Software, Inc. of Edmonds, WA.

²¹ Following is a sample of my idiosyncratic, home-spun Krio spelling system:

Eh, eh. una foh kam se de neba dem pan gladi. Obierika, Okonkwo fren de selibrate in gal pikin in “uri.” De uri na da tem we de oko kin tot pam-wayn kam foh tel de fuchaw inlaw en al dem fambul na de hol ton adu. Den kawol awol man kam – everibodi – evri man, uman en pikin! ‘una faw ‘mamba sey uri naw to gladi gladi faw awol de wol — uri na uman gladi gladi naw maw – de gyal pikin, in mamie en awol den padi. Matonin jus de cam, en awol man don grap, den don mekes swalla yit don.

Awl de mamie en den pikin don begin cam na Obierika in os faw cam elp de iyawo en in mamie faw kuk awl de yit wey den go sav awl man faw yit.

²² See evidence in the seven essays that comprise *Reading and Writing Krio: Proceedings of a Workshop Held at the Institute of Public Administration and Management, University of Sierra Leone, Freetown, 29-31 January, 1990.*

²³ As pioneer and ardent proponent of the status of Krio as a language in its own right from the late 1930s until his death in 1978, Decker was the first to attempt regularization of Krio by creating a semi-phonemic orthography, which he used for his *Udat Di Kiap Fit*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Unfortunately, it did not gain traction but was followed by another attempt by Clifford N. Fyle and Eldred D. Jones, and unveiled in the 1980 publication of their *Krio-English Dictionary*.

²⁴ This semi-phonemic orthography, used in the Fyle-Jones *Krio-English Dictionary*, has been recommended as the standard Krio orthography.

²⁵ ...taste the excellence of this great writer by seeing one of his most popular plays staged in their own language See footnote 15.

²⁶ A native speaker colleague confirmed this point, based on her own difficulty in reading the copy I had sent to her.

²⁷ In addition to a standard type, Krio has many variants influenced by geographical, temporal, and social class mode of acquisition. See Alex Johnson, "Varieties of Krio," pp. 21-30. Unfortunately, even the compromise to replace the phonetic symbols **ɕ**, **ɟ**, **n** and the diphthong **ai** with **e** (where **ɕ** and **e**, **ɟ** and **o** will be written as **e** and **o** respectively) will be to ensure accessibility and to facilitate reading and writing by the general populace, is still problematic.

²⁸ Bernth Lindfors is, perhaps, one of the first critics to write extensively on Achebe's works. See his essay, "The Palm Oil with which Achebe's Words are Eaten." *African Literature Today: A Journal of Explanatory Criticism*, N°1 (1968): 3-18.

²⁹ For a detailed discussion, see Paul Bandia, "Code-Switching and Code-Mixing in African Creative Writing: Some Insights for Translation Studies."

³⁰ According to Achebe's glossary page to *TFA*, *ogbanje* is "a changeling: a child who repeatedly dies and returns to its mother to be reborn. It is almost impossible to bring up an *ogbanje* child without it dying, unless its *iyi-uwa* is first found and destroyed" (190).

³¹ Translated as *Ìtàn Ìgbésí Ayé Okwonkwo* by Wale Ogunyemi. Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1997, p.70.

³² The intensification of linguistic and literary activity in Yoruba

between 1842, when the language was first reduced to writing, and 1991, when the first Yoruba studies doctoral dissertation, written entirely in Yoruba, was defended, is remarkable and is attributed to the longstanding patrimony foregrounded by the Egbe Omo Oduduwa and later formerly advanced by the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria (YSAN). The major features of this phenomenal evolution are: the availability of a scripted literature in 1848, barely six years after the language's first orthography; the evolution of several orthographies (the most recent in 1976 by Bamgbose); a two-volume metalanguage system: *Yoruba Metalanguage Volume I* and *Yoruba Metalanguage, Volume II* edited by linguists Ayo Bamgbose and Oladele Awobuluyi, respectively; and a considerable wealth of written literature in poetry, drama, fiction, the short story, and film.

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