

Post-Colonial Reading Strategies and the Problem of Cultural Meaning in African/Black¹ Literary Discourse

by

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Abstract

This paper is part of the author's research into the possibility of carving a distinct critical canon for the reading of African/Black literature. It has been observed that postcolonial theory is fraught with many assumptionist errors, one of which is to read all postcolonial discourses as if they are products of the same cultural, aesthetic and historical consequences. Another problem is the shallow application of Western induced meanings on the rather cryptic semiotic and semantic cultural meanings of African writings, arts and aesthetics, which often lead to misinterpretations of the emotions and signatures of 'Africanness' and blackness in the works. Thus, the prefixes 'pre' and 'post' to which Western critical theories attach base-morphemes like 'colonial', 'modernism', 'structuralism', etc are no African categories of reading and signifying meaning. The paper argues and illustrates that African names of humans, flora and fauna, and objects as used in African literary and cultural discourses are ritualistic and historical. They carry some dense sacred meanings. Drawing examples of colonial misconceptions, the paper interrogates Jean Copans' claim on the eve of the 21st century that "there is nothing like African studies ..." and conflates this with Biodun Jeyifo's Soyinka Nobel Anniversary lecture (2006) to interrogate his ideological construction that present generation of African scholars are "Unfortunate children of fortunate parents" of the second and third generations. It draws practical examples and concludes that there is a domain of cultural meaning requiring the services of active bearers of the tradition to decode.

Keywords: postcolonial, African/Black discourse, Copans, Jeyifo, sacred meanings, prefix, decode.

One of the greatest intellectual bugs in African Studies since the 1950s has been the nationalist search for African cultural, literary, social and political emancipation anchored on the quest for universal acceptance and recognition. There has been an artificial and human created perplexing cultural identity problem which has not only challenged intra-African studies but has also misunderstood the transformational cultural and semiotic codes that govern the production of African cultural continuities in the Diaspora. Arguably, the 1980s qualify as the golden age of African discourse emancipation when the decade is weighed on the balance of an ambiguous cultural appropriation and resistance to Euro-American models of literary interpretation². However, the 1990s till date has witnessed attempts at discourse cultural revivalism and redefinitions that are distilled from “the voiced and unvoiced stories and interpretations of African conditions before, during and after colonialism” (Parker and Starker, 1995:11).

The consciousness to create a code for African cultural interpretation informed the first International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 with focus on the “The Crisis in Negro Culture”. Subsequent conferences and congresses of African-American writers and critics have examined the negative impact of writing or book-culture (literary theory and interpretation) on the drive for a black critical aesthetics (Fashina, 1997:11). Several cultural genetic factors foreground this sense of nationalism and pan-Africanist consciousness. Among them was the need to create a theory of Africanism and Blackness, which is distilled from the homogeneous pattern of emotive and mythical interpretations of values in contrast to the European induced images and conceptions of our universe. This is what Abiola Irele (1990:54) describes as “the organic aspect of African imagination” and what Fashina 1994:73) indicates as “the symbiotic aspect of African collective consciousness”.

Quite against this strive for African nationalist consciousness in culture and literary studies is the European standard interpretation of African studies as mere mental construct than a researchable reality. A renowned French Sociologist, Professor Jean Copans, in a lecture entitled “ African Studies on the Eve of the 21st century”³ delivered at the Drappers Auditorium, Centre for African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria on April 12, 1999, re-echoed the same old colonialist view about Africa, African cultural studies and the indigenization of cultural theories. He argues that:

... there is no such thing as an African society understood as a continental one. And, for Africans, the study of their own societies land culture has nothing specifically African to it. We do not call the study of French sociology French studies! But there is a French tradition of African Studies. And I have to recall it for it is quite different from the Anglo- American one. The multi-disciplinary tradition in itself is an interesting feature and it spells out a kind of hierarchy of social sciences. To conclude this review of traditions, we should ask ourselves if there is such a domain as African Studies (MS, p.1).

This critical onslaught on the domain of African Studies is, ironically, significant in many respects. First, the venue of the lecture was the Institute of African Studies in a benchmark African University. Professor Copan's submission is invariably tantamount to a plea for the closure of that renowned center for African studies and, perhaps, the immediate dismissal altogether, of the Professors and researchers of African Studies at the center. For Professor Copan, "there is no such thing as an African society understood as a continental one", and there is nothing that is African-specific in Africans' study of their own societies. He bases his argument partly on the dependence on Western theories and analytical models in Anthropology, Sociology, political Science, economics, Literature and other cultural studies.

Copans' Ibadan Lecture of April 12 1999 tends to dwarf the status of African studies on the eve of the 21st century. And that was thirteen years after the Western literary hegemony conferred recognition on African literature by awarding the prestigious Nobel Prize in literature for the first time to an African writer, Wole Soyinka. While we say Copans' polemic is provocative, Biodun Jeyifo in another Public Lecture organized by the Association of Nigeria Authors to mark the 20years of Soyinka's Nobel award, gave a lamentation on the "Unfortunate children of neo-globalization" (Ile-Ife, 2006). This often besetting argumentation about the domain of African discourse becomes a blackmailing irony. The irony is triple-headed: One, the academic audience at Copans' lecture were largely in the class of Jeyifo's fourth and fifth generations of African studies faculty, and that is the class Jeyifo categorizes as the "Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents." Jeyifo laments,

... the psychological conditions that African writers, critics and scholars of the fourth and fifth generations have had to endure in the last two decades which correspond to the period of hegemonic liberal globalization have been nothing short of nightmarish, compared with the situation of the writers and critics of the first, second and even third generations⁴ (The Guardian, Friday Sept.8 2006).

The second irony is more heart cutting than the first: Copans' denial of the material existence of African Studies, and invariably, African literature is a negation and seeming falsification of the acclaimed golden age (second and third generation) of the discipline when, according to Jeyifo, "writers, critics and scholars of modern African literature, both foreign and local, were responsible for bringing the literature into existence, were in the main produced by 'national universities', both in the colonies and in the metropolitan centers of the global order" (29).

If we allow Copans' thesis as a factual inscription, then Jeyifo's class of "Fortunate Parents" do not exist at all. And so the children are worse than being "Unfortunate" because their 'parents' have no historical literary legacy that existed and that is worthy of being inherited or appropriated to modern African writing, criticism and scholarship. But I must quickly add that there is problem either way we chose to receive or read Copan' submission.

The problem is such that elements of the older generation who were present at the Copans' IFRA sponsored Lecture maintained a culture of diplomatic silence and even were cautious to allow the infant faculty (among the best of the infant academic) to interrogate the French Professor of Oriental Sociology. Well, the possible reason being fear of losing the largesse of Research grants and Fellowships at Copan' disposal. I felt too unaccountably embarrassed and overwhelmed by the intimidating silence of senior colleagues – a consumptively begotten and inherited fear of being branded immodest and disrespectful has delayed my completion and publication of this rejoinder to Copans' assault on the epistemology of African Studies in 1999, at one of our 'first and best' "national universities ... breeding grounds for the nascent nationalist elites of the post-colonial nation-state and society in Africa and other parts of the developing world" (Jeyifo, 29). What an irony that immediately reckons itself by calling the third irony, which I suggest to be that ANA's celebration of the 20 years of the Nobel Prize in literature award to Soyinka at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, would have been better tagged immemorial or Death Anniversary if we accept Jeyifo's (2006:29) thesis of "penultimate barbarisms of the present era" whereby "in the last two decades, since 1986, many of these ideas and movements (ideology of literature and social liberation) have been either totally abandoned or are in fractious and messy disarray" (words in parenthesis mine).

A conjunctive relation of Copans' onslaught and Jeyifo's backlash, though very widely different in terms of their underlying ideological templates, would foreground a possible conception of current African writers, critics and scholars as being better described as Cultural and Literary Orphans⁵ rather than the seeming Jeyifo-esque characterization of this present generation as "The Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents". While Jeyifo privileges their own generation of African letters and describes them as "fortunate parents", Copans' argument serves to checkmate that thesis. For Copans' African literature may not be reckoned to exist since the language, style, form and theory for reading it are essentially derived from the same colonial textual infrastructures that pro-African scholars use as reading strategies on the one hand, only to turn around at the other hand and claim that those Western instruments are inappropriate. Thus to Copans' there is nothing like African literature, but there are French, British, Portuguese, Spanish, etc traditions of African literature. This is a frontal interrogation of Jeyifo's claim that there exists "Fortunate Parents" of "Unfortunate Children" in the literary history and tradition of African literature. Invariably, this means the absence of a "Fortunate" generation of African scholar-writers and critics. Copans asserts that cultural plurality, and the disparity of colonial experience based on the different modes of colonial partition and governance of Africa by the French, British, Spanish and Portuguese have tended to create a culturally, socially and linguistically heterogeneous ethnic nationalities, groups and communities across ex-colonial Africa. He argues that these pluralities foreclose any claim to cultural nationalism in Africa. Again this claim may stand on the truism that most Africans do not communicate intra-continentially, because we do not have an African specific continental language of communication. We rely on the use of European languages for sharing the ideas and meanings in us.

Thus, we have to travel in language terrain through the tongue of our colonial masters beyond the atlantics in order to exchange meanings with our own African brothers. In spite of this constraint however the language of works that can really stand for African literature is not cast in European phonological, lexico-semantic and discursive patterns and standards. Rather, African literature displays the linguistic, gnomic and cultural symbols as well as oral verbalization aesthetics and convolution both of cosmic, ethereal and terrestrial space, which make it to maintain a unique identity even in its relative hybrid status. For this, we can argue that quite against Copans' submission, there exists an African tradition of literature with a confluence of contribution to the global ocean of literary, linguistic and cultural studies. Today, literature and language studies of the hegemonic metropolitan order is not complete without a consideration and inclusion of, for example, the traditions of Africa and the orient cast in form of other 'Englishes'. This imposes a presence of inextricable varieties of African English on the study of English as used by the native speakers in Britain. Thus, the colonized has gained the seizure of the colonizer's language and tradition of literature; in addition to the former's largely orate tradition of versification and interpreting discourses. The latter has also gained from the creative enrichment of its values through the presence of the African 'Other' as an alternative tradition.

After almost 50 years of Africa's independence it is hoped that such whimsical claims by Copans and lamentations by Jeyifo would be on the wane, for Copans made a spurious claim in his paper –

African Studies are today a misnomer in that it includes both studies of African societies by outsiders and insiders whereas when the expression was coined it was just (emphasis mine) a multi-disciplinary complex of Western sciences devoted to foreign cultures. Therefore we have to understand the historical logics that have created cultural areas studies since African Studies is but one case out of many more (MS, p. 3)

Professor Copans' critical denial of the vital discipline of African cultural studies, deliberately or mistakenly, obliterates the various African archetypal and anthropological antiquities and other living or extinct cultural ingredients, monuments, collectaneas recovered or discovered in Africa by carbon dating historians and oral historiographers since the dawn of African cultural studies. For instance, one may ask what social scientific theories and models informed the unwritten constitutions of great African Empires like Ghana, Mali, Benin, Kanem Bornu and Oyo Empires. One may also ask what European induced social scientific theory or model gave technological enablement to the pre-historic cave drawings, engravings on bones, stones, paintings and use of cracks and mappings employed as pigments which were usually made from animal and vegetable substances. The ancient Egyptians used papyrus for writing hieroglyphs while the antecedents to record keeping in Mesopotamia and commemorative inscriptions were done on clay tokens and narrative art, respectively. And the use of talking drums invented by the Yoruba of Western Nigeria which later spread to Guinea and Zaire has been subject of exotic myth and a standpoint in African oral cultural studies.

These are only a brief panorama and slight exhibition of the fodder and grounds for the reality of African cultural studies. In spite of the variations in language and cultural pluralism informed by the heterogeneous colonial experience in Africa sub-region, efforts have been made by Africanist scholars to trace the unbreakable thread of cultural link that ties together all Africans as well as other African continuities in Diaspora.

In fact, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1984) has foreclosed all European induced pessimism about the existence of a unitary rallying point of African cultural convergence and homogeneity:

Esu Elegbara in Nigeria and Legba among the Fan of Dahomey whose New World figurations - Esu in Brazil, Uchu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in the pantheon of the Ioa of Voudou in Haiti, and Papa La Bas in the Ioa of Hoodoo in the United States - speak eloquently of the unbroken arc of metaphysical resuppositions and patterns of figuration hared through space and time among the black cultures in West Africa, South America, the Carribean and the United States (286)⁶

This great code of Africanity and blackness can be seen via the lens of the sociology and cultural study of Africans wherever they co-exist and interact socially and culturally anywhere in the world. And this is part of the “great signature of blackness” and Africanity which elsewhere we have described under the broad study of the symbiotic contextual and cultural configurations in Africa.

It is least significant perhaps to interrogate Copan’s submission that the term “African Studies” was a “coinage” by a Western establishment – the social sciences devoted to foreign cultures. But one needs to remind proponents of this kind of absence theory of Africa and African epistemology that criticism, theory and dialogical reasoning and philosophy are not alien to African culture and traditions. The history pages are replete with records that court historians and poets did exist in the palace of African monarchs, kings and emperors of the early African empires before the invasion of the continent by Western colonial forces in the 18th century. The historians and poets were court officials. Although they were not appointed or designated by formal university tradition as research fellows and scholars, they never the less perform such roles and functions in their relative conditions, age and time as researchers in history, ethnography and culture. They were the unacknowledged sociologists and anthropologists of the African space of their time. And the pedigree of their records and informal archives have formed part of the data sites collected by early European historiographers, ethnographers and social researchers whose works form the templates for today’s modern interpretations. Thus, regardless of whether the European social science establishment was the biological parent or midwife that took delivery of the now orphaned African Studies, the fact remains undeniable that there had been a form of informal study about Africa and its culture, even though in unsophisticated scale, before the invention of the now canonized term, African Studies, whose paternity Jean Copans decides to push to the bench of scholarly dispute.

However, one would inevitably resist the temptation to succumb to the mis-teaching that African Studies embody the 'Other' - non-western cultures, which are primitive as they are "foreign". Jean Copans' kind of inscription is tantamount to herding the whole of the postcolonial world into one confluence of culture. And this cannot produce a truly objective and scientific result since Africa has its distinct social and cultural criteria that are quite different from those of the other postcolonial world. The peculiarity of each postcolonial society and their identity, even within the realities of commonly shared experience of European political and economic domination, social and cultural repression as well as subversion of values, has been remarked by scholars of various research persuasions. An example is the one contained in Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization*, translated into English by Mercer Cook, New York, Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974.

Copans' enunciation of the absence of African Studies except as a construct of European social sciences recalls Bill Ashcroft et al's idea about the way the West project "authoritative pictures of themselves" which is an act of "representations of Europe to itself" and to others which are of course "a projection of European fears and desires masquerading as scientific/'objective' knowledges" (1995:85). No wonder Edward Said's discourse on the Western invented concept of "Orientalism" (1978) is not just in reference to the orient, but about its invention by the self-proclaimed Western civilizing praxis. It is probable, however, if the sense of the oriental which the West has constructed is accessible and understandable to the Western 'super-machine' of cultural theory and social science. Can the Western episteme share the complex landscape of cultural signifiers encoded in the so-called oriental studies? We concur that the marginalized subsidiary episteme of the colonized is quite difficult for the alien super-efficient (?) critical lens of the great tradition to understand. According to Bernth Lindfors (2002:3) "Bearers of a culture are better equipped to interpret that culture than aliens who have experienced its realities only vicariously. Those who share a writer's background can more readily comprehend the full implications of his message".

The discourse theory of the black man which has a long history of profound nurturing, influence and enslavement by the Western dominant tradition can decode and even recode the colonial discourse as a way of writing back in anger by using the colonizer's political, economic, linguistic, literary and cultural cudgel against the colonizer. Bill Ashcroft et. al. (1989) has observed, "Instead of one hegemonic English we get a plurality Englishes. Thus, the alienating process, which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the margins, turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, multi-farious" (12). It becomes clear that the marginality and plurality of cultures which have seemingly negated the otherwise valid claim to national African cultural studies ironically becomes a source of pluri-mental vigor and legitimization of the ironic hold of oriental cultures on the dominant colonial cultural praxis. This fact is an inescapable reality from the viewpoint that even commonwealth discourse will not be complete should it write out of relevance the post-colonial discourses that are cast in the new Englishes.

Invariably, this critical standpoint has been foregrounded in Homi Bhabha (1994: 115) in his submission that the dominant colonial knowledges may “become articulated with forms of ‘native’ knowledges”. This conjunction of colonial and pre-colonial knowledges is the hallmark of cultural and literary hybridization which today has changed the shape and character of both western and post-colonial societies.

If Jean Copans (1999) maintains that there are no African studies, one can justifiably ask whether there are Commonwealth studies, American studies, Canadian studies, Caribbean studies and Asian studies. He affirms that the diversity of colonial experience in Africa is an antecedent that which provides the template for heterogeneity of African society. This criticism comes with the heat and blow of imperial theory of the colonizer. And it is a misnomer. The diverse linguistic, social, political, cultural and mental influences of the colonial superstructure on the colonized had afforded the latter a pluri-mental approach to the mastery colonial strategies. Karin Barber (1995:28) has implied that the “colonized had mastered and subverted the colonial codes. This pluri-mental approach to the learning of the master code brings together the “literature of the whole non-metropolitan English-speaking world” (Barber, 30). The shared experience of linguistic and cultural diversity, which is informed by the problematic presence of the colonizer’s language, has tended to further reduce the political, historical, cultural and linguistic ‘distances’ that existed among the colonized societies. This shrink of distances leads to the sharing of uniquely identical experiences that make the otherwise diverse societies to become homogeneous to the extent that a continental African society is evolved. The acquisition of European languages, in spite of its culturally deadly consequences, has led to the ability of otherwise linguistically heterogeneous African societies to communicate across geographical and cultural boundaries with mutual intelligibility, thus partially dissolving the linguistic borders that had existed and created divides that mitigated African nationalism and continental consciousness before colonialism.

However, the European language speaking post-colonial world share the burden of problematic presence of European languages in terms of the influence of colonial language on systems of thought and philosophical reasoning and the consequent erosion of indigenous cultural values and the super-imposed instinct of the educated African which craves for pro-European standards. Barber (1994) presents a generalized model of a binary world – the colonizer and the colonized – which ensures that analysis focuses on the presence of the imperial language, which is imbued with the values and experiences of European metropolitan center, thus making the language to speak for the colonized and marginalized. No doubt African Studies and even indigenous African language studies are done in European languages and language structures as well as European analytical models. African writers, sociologists, anthropologists, historiographers and ethnographers do evoke the theoretical formula of the West in their studies of African cultural praxis for the partial reason of contributing an African dimension of knowledge to the great Western tradition, and as a way of internationalizing their scholarship.

Since the Western social sciences has propagated itself as the most efficient code of studies in universal cultural humanism, and since this is the mega research methodology and data analytical tool that has regimentation in universities globally, there can probably be no African specific method meant for global consumption. Thus, the colonial system – cultural, aesthetic, literary and political – posits itself as both the master code and the post-colonial episteme, which all other cultural studies must inevitably consult. And this is the underlying reason for the unfortunate trend whereby interpretation and critical processing of texts in post-colonial society adopts reading strategies that are conscious of the colonial, neo-colonial and post-colonial variables in African social life and discourse.

There is cause to worry however, if African ex-colonial literature texts can be interpreted, criticized and theorized only with reference to the base-morpheme ‘colonial’ a term to which other bound morphemes like ‘pre’ and ‘post’ become affixes. Thus, unfortunately, coloniality becomes a standard literary, theoretical and political premise for interpretation of African textual discourse. There is, in deed, the need to receive with severe caution, the critical discourses that tend to police literary interpretation and theorization of African texts only in the direction of a particular ‘post’ such as post-structuralism, post-deconstruction, post-modernism, post-coloniality and so on, a situation which Niyi Osundare (1993, 2001) describes as an empty text-technology with no relevance to the nature of African knowledge. A theory like deconstruction/post-structuralism that denies the origin, originality, authorship and authority of a work of art transgresses and violates the cultural precinct of the work and thus reduces it to an orphan.

In one of Chinua Achebe’s essentially polemical essays entitled ‘Colonialist Criticism’ which he first delivered as a lecture at Makerere University, Uganda, in January 1974 and reprinted in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), Achebe quotes the American critic, Charles Larson who in the course of evaluating the work of an African writer, suggests that this particular novel is ‘universal’. Larson declares, “If a few names of characters and places were changed, one would in deed feel that this was an American novel. To this prescriptive evaluation Achebe responds bluntly:

Does it ever occur to these universities to try out their games of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works? But, of course, it would not occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So – and so’s work is universal; he has truly arrived! As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel out far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home (51).

This proposed method of names slotting would fail in African cultural context where names of persons are not just nomenclatures and where names of fictional characters bear heavy carriage of cultural meanings, which cannot be understood in their full contexts except with reference to their cultural semiotic and historical implications.

African names have depths of mythic, historic and cosmological significance and the total essence of such naming for a character goes beyond mere naming for identification purposes as it is practiced in some Western contexts where a Mr. Stone, Mr. Clay, Mr. Wood or Mr. Stanley may not really carry a spiritual significance which has cultural implication for the meanings of the life patterns of the individual or character. But, societies with contiguous cultural frameworks such as the Jewish, Greek, Roman, Indian, Asian, and African, etc attach esoteric significance to names. Thus, a person who has little or no knowledge of the semiotics of cultural, cosmogonic and meta-physical implications of names within the signifying province of other peoples' texts cannot understand the very depth of meanings that are resident in them as products of other people's cultures. Anne Pym, a professor of Rhetorical Studies in the Department of Communication, California State University, Hayward, writes, "For people living within oral traditions, spirit is what is real and all is alive with spirit. They hold materiality to be more flighty in substance and motion than that which is of spirit."(17). She also makes reference to D. Abram (1997), who argues that

...it is not only those entities acknowledged by the Western [read literate] civilization as 'alive,' not the other animals and the plants that speak, as spirits, to the senses of an oral culture, but also the meandering river from which those animals drink, and the torrential monsoon rains, and the stone that fits neatly into the palm of the hand (14).

Thus, names and objects are sacred, and their articulation evokes certain effects whether positive or negative, and the contexts of their implications and transformations from one space to another, and their semantic, semiotic and cultural configurations can only be understood fully by the sharers and stakeholders in the culture.

From the Jewish perspective, Bible names like Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Israel and so on, have ritual cultural and historical implications for their life patterns and course of actions in their time. In the same way, names that are prefixed with the names of African god figures like 'Ogun' and 'Sango' as in Ogunkoroju and Sangodele, respectively, in Ola Rotimi's historical play, *Kurunmi* as in other African texts, carry some quintessential cultural codes whose meanings have full implication for the interpretations of such texts. A social anthropology of Yoruba names would reveal for example that names and naming carry historical, ritual, cosmic and esoteric significance among the Yoruba of Nigeria. And this assertion is resident in a Yoruba proverb that says "*Ile laa'wo k'a to so'mo lo'ruko*": it is family history and background that one observes or considers before naming a child.

According to Akinwumi Isola, each important Yoruba family has its pantheon of deities, gods and goddesses which are often consulted in order to determine which of the *Orisas* accompany the child to life and through life passage, as a worship deity or spirit-guide mentor⁷. This reason accounts for the naming of many pre-Christian/Islam Yoruba children after one deity or the other, as in the following examples:

Esubiyi: born by Esu, the trickster god of mischief.

Esugbayi: saved/redeemed by Esu

Ifagbemi: favored by Ifa, the god of divination wisdom and knowledge

Ogunbiyi: born by Ogun, god of iron and metal

Ogundele: incarnate of Ogun, god of iron and metal

Osunbiyi: born by Osun river goddess

Osunmade: crowned by Osun river goddess

Osanyinde: an Osanyin, god of vengeance, deity incarnate

Sangodele: incarnate of Sango, god of thunder, lightning and electricity

Akinwumi Isola gave an example of his own last name, which has deep level divinatory and ritualistic connotations that spring from etymological and cultural epistemological factors. I observe that the name 'Isola', like most Yoruba and Igbo indigenous names, of course, is a Noun Clause in its Deep Structure (DS) syntactic form. It is deletion transformation, as in Chomskian theory, that leads to its Surface Structure (SS) realization as a condensed form. Otherwise, this name like most Yoruba names, are sentential, clausal or phrasal, carrying some density of semantic and cultural semiotic versatility of meanings. This condensation by way of deletion and elision transformations, leads to ambiguity of meaning. Thus, we cannot talk of one possible semantic and semiotic meaning, but a chain and frequent friction or continuum of possible meanings, as follows:

1st level meaning: Ise ola or Ise ti ola se: the work done by providence (literally 'ola' means wealth. But when words meet in association or co-occur, their meanings change a bit. Therefore, it is more appropriate to interpret 'ola' as providence rather than wealth in that context.

2nd level meaning: Ise ti ola n'se: the act of providence ('ise' has the 'e' alphabet without a diacritic. That indicates its semantic transformation from 'ise' with 'e' with diacritic (work) to 'ise' (act).

3rd level meaning: Eni to n'se ola: one who dwells in honor. Within the present context, 'ola' means honor, wealth. It is hardly appropriate as 'providence' in this context.

The name Isola in its oral cultural context appears like a praise name, "oriki". The person bearing the name most often has real names, such as Olawale, Oluwasola, etc. But, in moments of high spirits, his parents or grandparents, elders, chiefs or associates, may chant the name 'Isola' as a praise name to eulogize him.

The work or act of providence, which the name refers to a cultural package indicating affluence, power, and freedom to worship a deity of its choice. According to Professor Akinwumi Isola, each child born into every important traditional Yoruba family is never named without consulting and receiving its name from their lineage oracle⁸. The oracle would reveal which kind of deity is consequential to destiny and migration of the child to the world through conception and delivery of the baby or which of them the child is destined to worship. When this is revealed, the baby is named after such a deity as seen in the list of pro-deity names presented earlier in this paper⁹. But, if the oracle says the child has no specific deity it is destined to serve, such a child is revered with awe and respect. Therefore, the child would have no pro-deity name, as it is free to worship any god of its choice in life. Such a special child with exception is then named “Isola”¹⁰.

Now, with the problem of African/Black literary interpretation and meaning in mind, the foregoing analogy shows clearly the processes by which literature bears the burden of historical, cultural and ritualistic or religious contexts, which cannot be ignored if scholars must get to the very roots of cultural meaning. And that sounds a note of caution about the way scholars of African/Black literature and culture swallow the late postmodernist project of cultural and literary globalization, which Biodun Jeyifo (2006) labels as an “Unfortunate ... neo-liberal globalization” (34). When we therefore apply Post-structuralist theory to the interpretation of African Language texts, or texts cast in the new linguistic and post-colonial cultural contexts of Africa and African continuities, we reduce such texts from their historical, cultural and ritualistic essence ideals, thereby making them mere cultural orphans, or making them look grotesquely gothic and hence ridiculous in the prying eyes of the Western world. How may African/Black world distill a poetics of textual meaning and epistemology from a jaundiced reading that denies the work of its soul and life – its history, rituals, gods, and its ‘grand narrative’ of ideological praxis and propagation? How would a cultural outsider understand the grave and dense cultural significations of meaning encoded in the cultural trope of the warning “Do not uproot the pumpkin from the homestead” as declared in Okot p’Bitek’s lit-orature poetry, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ochol*? The ‘pumpkin’ in the Acoli tradition carries ethereal significance, not just as a leguminous crop edible and rich in vitamins necessary for good health. Rather, the pumpkin has a pictorial, ritual and archetypal significance, as a denizen of the forest and a co-habitor with man and ancestral spirits in the homestead and lineage. The pumpkin of the homestead is history, and it is a databank for understanding the people’s cultural epistemology. The pumpkin is an elaborate figure and icon of power, tradition and magic. It is a character in its own right and its presence evokes the principle of ‘presence’ as against ‘absence’ from the process of negotiating existence within the cultural ideology of the homestead and clan. The outcry against the uprooting of the pumpkin is an outcry against denial of social justice and equal rights in a postcolonial, post-humanist nation-state where ideological divides on political grounds are punished with assassination and extinction, a situation for which to “uproot the pumpkin from the homestead” becomes an elaborate metaphor, and a potent indictment of anti-humanist politics both of national post-colonial grades and of the international, United Nations, level of power politics.

Thus, while such texts are cast in the new Englishes with all the post-colonial imperatives, there is the inextricable cultural anchorage of the texts on African indigenous systems of relative epistemology. These co-exist with the ingredients of European textual principles such as language and form, which are resident in the discourse. Therein lies the double consciousness of the colonized, which ultimately defeats the notion of a singular and monolithic cultural and interpretative framework for texts both of the colonized and the colonizer in post-colonial contexts. Richard Rives in his award winning play about racism in the then apartheid South Africa creates two nameless characters HE and SHE, the former being male and black, and the latter female and white. This is to be seen as a deliberate act of decontextualizing and demystifying the mythic essence of naming. The play subtly relays the intensely psychological implication of naming of characters in drama or any other genre. In general, a character in literature is a fictive configuration, an aggregated set of values meant to distinguish his or her role from the others' in a work of art. Sometimes the name of a character may bear no relevance or coincidence of reference to any specific individual in society. Otherwise such a projection might be libelous and the victim may sue the writer and or publisher for libel. In Rives' "Make Like Slaves" the characters are designated in personal pronouns as *he* and *she*.

A pronoun is a grammatical function, which bears anaphoric reference to a named antecedent or noun. Thus, using masculine pronoun 'he' as reference to a male person say 'John' hypothetically implies a grammatical representation of John. This I would regard as a process of dehumanization, whereby the spirit essence and evocative power of name-calling is made to whittle down. Pronoun cannot conjure the essence ideal and materialist co-efficient of that esoteric power and god nature in the human. It is a generic grammatical element for maintaining cohesive ties and tidiness of the NG structure in avoiding repetition of co-referential nouns in a sentence or text. The use of pronouns *he* and *she* is therefore a process of 'dehumanizing' the characters and probably foregrounding only their sexual or gender identities. It removes the reader or audience's perception of characters as real humans. It is a self-referential text, which proclaims itself as a work of imagination that recreates and imitates reality. HE could be any Blackman or African while *she* could be any white woman that has race or skin superiority consciousness and complex. Thus the characterization chart in Rive's "Make Like Slaves" kindles our psychic perception and contemplation of the unreality and anonymous nature of characters. They are mere images, and mental effigies infused with human attributes, foibles, and emotions, whose acts for the duration of the play fantastically suspend our sense of disbelief and ignite or conjure in us visual and mental images of familiar totems.

Rive's presentation of these characters is with deliberate intent, perhaps, to use the mask idiom of employing pronouns to replace the need to characterize the two indexical or symbolic characters with names in order to make them more universal and generic. Thus, *he* is anybody, any Black male and *she* is any white woman. But, then their obvious skin identity foregrounds identity of their race and gender. They are blank characters in the light of their namelessness and mere representations in grammatical pronominal.

The play is thus a seeming transgression of Black or African cultural semiotics and occult numerology that attach coded significance to names. In the context of African and African continuities, real names have souls and they enigmatically can stand proxy for the bearer in prayer or ritual contexts, thus creating a telepathic link of affectation between the name as vicarious presence of the bearer and the very body bearing it. Thus, one is wont to ask how easy is it for a non-literate scholar-critic in a people's language and cultural idiom to transgress the boundaries of cultural meaning of literary texts whose signifying essences are coded and cryptically ensconced in the ancient genealogical and dark codes of antiquated history. How can a white man interpret the signifying cryptic emotions studded in a black man's slang and idephonic signs of meaning and meaning of signs? How may the gulf of color that inferiorizes the black from the white become suddenly dissolved for a snap-shot moment only in such a circumstance that would enable the white to read his inferior 'Other' and digest the Other's repulsive culture, texts and artifacts to the depth and the earth-crust essence of the Other's humanity. No, if that gulf exists in the configured material reality of elaborate supremacy of Western texts and praxis, Western culture and epistemology over those of the African and Oriental regions, then it necessarily does exist in the fixed boundaries of parallel discourse reading strategies and interpretation.

Neil Kortenaar (1995: 32) assert that whereas racist colonial regimes and their discourses insist that "humanity is not one". They privilege the white and male. On the other hand, post-colonial writers have argued that the colonized "belong to the same world and are not absolutely other." In post-colonial world, Western writers respond to the situation just as the colonized also respond albeit with different meanings and interpretations in mind. However, none of the two varieties of discourses can insulate itself from the practice of annexing the resources of the other, either as reference point for validation or for negation of ideas. Therefore, the colonizer is also a product of relative double consciousness like the colonized. Thus, the question of white against black does not arise in this case. Rather there is a conflation and 'conjunction of impulses' anchored on commonly shared identities of colonial consciousness in both Western and African discourses. None of both sides may be textually silenced and crippled as to suffer denial of textual and cultural recognition. While Sartre in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* posits a mono-polar approach that seeks integrative paradigm of "racist humanism" (1961: 12), Wole Soyinka (cited in Parker and Starkey, 1995:7) argues for a plural aesthetic, directed towards the readers of history and literature focusing, not on the authority of the author / the state, but on the power of the reader/the people. Thus, he accuses nationalist aesthetics of a narrowing focus.

Achebe is seriously averse to European theoretical configurations of African literary texts as a subset of Western universal discourses. He calls for the banning of the word 'universal' from the discourses of African literature until such a time when people cease to use it as a synonym for the narrow self-serving parochialism of Europe; until their horizon extends to include the entire world.

Recent discussions of post-colonial literary theories have not confined themselves to evaluating the practice of writing in the new Englishes but to a consideration of how post-colonial readings of canonized texts might construct new meanings in the service of a post-colonial ideology.

This process also highlights the cultural practices that construct the Westerners as more professional readers and producers of cultural meanings of texts. How for example do English natives of the United Kingdom read texts by non-English citizens such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo and Salman Rushdie? If they read so differently from the non-English, then literary texts clearly do not have single unitary meanings that it is the task of critics to identify. How exactly do the metropolitan speakers of English in the UK accommodate readings by the oriental English of the new Englishes in say African post-colonial societies? Definitely, there are different ways of constructing meanings from a text depending on the cultural and ideological influences of the reader.

Notes

¹ My idea of African/Black discourse is not the location bound paradigm that distinguishes between African writing in Africa and in the Diaspora. Rather, I think Africa remains one in spiritual cleavage even in spite of distance in space, time and psyche owing to accidents of slave trade and colonialism. Sometimes, it takes an African American to intone the Diasporic element in speech before I know s/he is not one of my cousins I left back home in Nigeria. Africans, either home or abroad, breathe the same life breath.

² The Nobel Prize award to Soyinka in 1986 brought two parallel reactions by Africanist scholars – one of feeling of African literary emancipation, and another of negative feeling that it is accepting the supremacy of Western literary hegemony as worthy of validating or invalidating our cultures, using their Western standards.

³ All bibliographic references to this paper are according to the pagination of the manuscript as presented then.

⁴ See excerpts of the paper, “ The Unfortunate Children of Fortunate Parents: Reflections on African Literature in the Wake of 1986 and the Age of Neo-liberal Globalization”, delivered at the Association of Nigeria Authors, (ANA) colloquium in Anniversary of 20 years of the Nobel prize in literature award to Soyinka, in 1986. The vent was at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife on August 2006.

⁵ This is my own coinage.

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⁶ See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, New York, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988.

⁷ Professor Akinwumi Isola, a renowned professor of Yoruba language literature and oral traditions gave me this hint at an informal interview at the University of Ibadan, recently.

⁸ This information is given to me within the same context of informal interview as in note 7.

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¹⁰ The list of pro-deity names supplied in this paper is by no means exhaustive. There are tens of scores of such names in Yoruba.

¹¹ There are many of such names, but that is better left to full treatment in another paper.

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