

# **Beyond the Language Debate in Postcolonial Literature: Linguistic Hybridity in Kojo B. Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes***

by

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## **Abstract**

One of the most persisting dilemmas African writers continue to face in their literary work is the choice between African languages and the European languages they acquired through colonization. The debate over the language question in African literature is not new and will continue to pre-occupy African writers because of the pivotal role European languages have played in the alienation and subjugation of Africans. In fact, critics argue that the European colonial enterprise would not have been so successful without the imposition of European languages on the natives on the one hand and the annihilation of the local languages on the other hand. The colonizers understood that it was only through this imposition that they could propagate their European world view, culture, and civilization in the colonies. This is what some African nationalists and theorists have realized as they vehemently oppose the use of European languages in African literature. Against this opposition, there are also some African writers who view the use of European languages in African literature as very beneficial and argue for their embrace. Today, some postcolonial African writers have decided to move beyond this debate by calling for a linguistic hybridity. Among these writers the Ghanaian Kojo B. Laing has been viewed by critics as the pioneer of this new linguistic movement. Perhaps more than any other of his novels, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* has provoked intense controversy in the postcolonial literary criticism over the use of hybrid languages. This paper argues that through his hybrid language, Kojo Laing intends to substitute the debate of exclusivity with that of inclusivity, for he believes that there are no self-sufficient languages, but complementary languages. Ultimately, Laing contests the notions of authenticity, superiority, and purity in language. Thus, for him it is no longer about the appropriate language for African literature; rather, it is about the language that reflects the diversity among the citizens of the world.

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Hybridity is a postcolonial construct that aims at countering all binaries based on notions of ethnic, cultural, racial, and political purity. It refers to the new trans-cultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. For Nikos Papastergiadis, “it is an invention of postcolonial theory, a radical substitute to the homogenous ideas of cultural identity such as racial purity and nationalism. It is an antidote to essentialist subjectivity”(189). Conversely, cultural critics like Jean Fisher stress that “the concept is too deeply embedded in a discourse that presupposes an evolutionary hierarchy and that it carries the prior purity of biologism” (qtd in Papastergiadis 169). Nonetheless, other critics continue to celebrate the positive aspects of hybridity in the current identity debate. Papastergiadis argues that the positive feature of hybridity is that it acknowledges that identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps, and contradiction is not indicative of failure. (*Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity*)

Kojo B. Laing, a Ghanaian novelist has also embraced hybridity in his texts; but it is his novel, *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, that highlights his tremendous contribution to the debate over hybridity. In this novel, Laing intervenes in the hybridity debate on many levels, including linguistic, cultural, and racial. However, linguistic hybridity is the starting point of this intervention, as exemplified in his use of Ghanaian Pidgin English and other vernacular languages alongside the English language. Laing has been criticized for targeting hybridity in his texts; his critics view his effort as purposeless. For instance, in his examination of Laing and the new generation of African writers who emerged in the 1970s, with regard to the political commitment of their literary work, the postcolonial critic and playwright, Femi Osofisan notes that: “Mythology, fabulation, polyphony – or according to some, cacophony – these are the narrative goals, and grammar, realism the satirical elements. ... Clearly, the new writers have turned away from our own burning concern to mobilize the society for political goals” (qtd. in Deandrea 78).

Osofisan’s criticism of Laing is twofold: on the one hand, he seems to be dissatisfied with the way the latter uses language, and on the other hand, he expresses his frustration with Laing and his fellow new writers for lack of political commitment in their literary endeavors. On his part, in discussing *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Derek Wright acknowledges that Kojo Laing is creating “a real and an imaginary Ghana, an actual place and an autonomous realm of pure language” (200). As for Brenda Cooper, she complains about the gaps that exist between Laing, his characters, and his readers as she writes:

His aim was to make his medium his message and to construct a new poetic language in the spirit of the oral tradition, with influence from English and a number of other languages spoken in Ghana. He has, however, created a language that is somewhat impenetrable to all but a few intellectuals, who are themselves challenged to decipher the messages of his riddles. (191)

Cooper suggests that Laing's attempt to create a hybrid language consisting of English and other languages with the devices of oral literature has failed, because his messages have become incomprehensible to even intellectuals. While I agree with Cooper that Laing's messages are difficult to understand, I don't think it is an experiment gone wrong. This paper will argue that by hybridizing his language, Laing has deliberately chosen to place it beyond the monopoly of the intellectuals. As a matter of fact, ordinary people in Ghana understand this hybrid language very well, for it is not rare to hear such a mixed language in the casual conversation of average Ghanaians. *Woman of the Aeroplanes* seeks to end the linguistic hegemony Ghanaian intellectuals have enjoyed due of their mastery of English. In fact, the most conspicuous sign of the triumph of colonialism in Africa is the zeal with which some African intellectuals show their mastery of European languages. Unfortunately, even today, as in the colonial era, mastery of English or French continues to be associated with class and status. It was a colonial practice to elevate those who could speak the colonizer's language over their fellow citizens. For instance, Leopold Sédar, Senghor, the late poet-president, and co-founder of Negritude, owed his popularity in the world less to his position as the president of Senegal than to his mastery of French. During my elementary and middle school years in the 1980s, we were Senghor's fans; that was twenty years after the official end of colonialism. We loved his use of bombastic French words which were equated to his mastery of French. Nobody wished to speak broken French, because it would be a big shame to do so. Making mistakes in our mother tongues was a non-event because nobody cared. Even to this day, more than half a century after independence in Africa, some students are still proud to identify themselves by their knowledge of French or British authors and their mastery of the languages of Molière and Shakespeare, respectively.

Recently, a Togolese blogger angrily attacked a Togolese journalist for misusing the language of Moliere. The blogger found it unacceptable for the journalist to make mistakes in French and called upon the latter to seek mastery of all the intricacies of the language before using it. Ultimately, in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, Laing intends to ridicule linguistic purists like this blogger. The following exchange between Korner Mensah and De Babo is indicative of this intention:

To deflect his distraught mood Korner Mensah asked the dozing Babo this, 'What would happen to the English language when we arrive among the native?' Kwaku gazed at him in irritated wonder, but said nothing. The pastor persisted: 'You have appointed yourself in that quiet and cunning way of yours, as the custodian of the English language...' 'But everything else is in Twi,' de Babo said, 'and you are not going to get me to be defensive about a foreign language that I knew before I could walk...' 'O no!' interjected Mensah, 'I too love the language, but I have not set myself up as the ridiculous master of it, nor do I consider that its native speakers have become soft and self-indulgent with it...' (46 – 47)

De Babo exemplifies the African elite who want to be more royalist than the king. The African elite's near veneration of European languages is a proof of the triumph of European colonialism in Africa. The elite are the reason why colonial languages continue to enjoy linguistic hegemony in Africa. Therefore, Laing wants to invent a language upon which nobody can claim mastery. Most importantly, he wants to indigenize English to the point that even the native English speaker will need an interpreter or a glossary to understand his English text. In fact, Laing's language constitutes a linguistic and literary counter-attack from the former colonized against the colonizer. Several instances in the novel demonstrate this intention, as in "She was a kind of buy-and-sell woman, she was an arrangement alombo.... Recently she had to travel to London to see the edge of somebody's tongue: to look into Roy Mackie's mouth to clinch the deal of aeroplanes and farms" (4).

Or when Kwame Atta mystifies his host,

Me I want rice and stew, cassava, bread, aboloo, abunabu, expertly-fried forest wood-maggots, pigeon-pea bean leaves, akrantie, the under-thighs of an odum squirrel, waakye and abe-wine, fufu and abenkwan gari foto withtilapia-controlled shitoh, green-green with the freshest plantain, akple, groundnut soup with brown rice, banku and okro soup, nkontommire stew with a koobi interregnum, the red and yellow flare of agushie stew with yam so fresh that it shouldn't be born yet, yoo ke gari... Hausa koko in the morning, kenkey and kyenam with deep-fried shitoh..... aaaaaah, I die! Jock stared at him with disbelief, and said with force, 'But you didn't mention fish and chips!' (130)

In the first example Laing is doing a literal translation from Akan into English. In the second, he mixes-up English with different Ghanaian languages to the point where even though he mentioned fish (kyenam), Jock still thinks he didn't. Like Jock, Laing's non Ghanaian readers face this embarrassment.

In *Narrative Shape-Shifting*, Arlene A. Elder has pointed out the difficulties Laing's texts pose to his readers. According to her, though Laing's novels' hybrid language serves his thematic purpose by modeling his desired linguistic unification of peoples, the reader is so often required to turn to the glossaries filled with Ghanaian words and neologisms that interfere with his or her comprehension of the narrative action (56).

The reader's difficulty in reading Laing's texts shouldn't make us ignore the political engagement of his works. Laing does not create art for art's sake; his use of such a language is in itself political, for it echoes his argument that man's future resides in his ability to utilize what is already available to create new things. On purely linguistic basis, *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is in constant transgression and subversion of the English language. I believe there is nothing more political than the transgression and subversion of the language that was the cornerstone of the success of colonization and oppression of Africa by foreign powers. In "Kojo Laing's Poetry and the Struggle for God", M.K. Kropp-Dakubu offers an interesting insight on Laing's works. According to her, Laing began his literary career as a poet with a mission to beat the English into a weapon for attacking cant, bigotry, and his own psychological disorientation. Kropp-Dakubu also points out that Laing has become more impatient with language in his recent literary works and his inability to escape from language is his classic dilemma and therefore his major preoccupation. Kropp-Dakubu then concludes that because the testing ground for Laing's language has been in poetry, an understanding of his poetic work is fundamental to an understanding of his literary enterprise as a whole. (235) Laing's frustration with language resides in its inability to fulfill his agenda; but he does not abandon it; rather, he seeks to transform it by stretching its borders to limitless horizons by bringing to it all the aesthetic and poetic values of its use. In another essay, titled "Search Sweet Country and the Language of Authentic Being", Kropp-Dakubu justifies Laing's use of poetic language by the latter's love of concreteness in language. He then traces the origin of the Laing's poetic use of language to Scotland and Ghana:

In an earlier paper, the language of the poetry of B. Laing was presented as a synthesis of the techniques and traditions associated with the Concrete Poetry movement (especially as practiced in Scotland during the 1960s) and with the techniques of figurative speech characteristic of formal language use in Akan.... In the present paper, I argue that the same synthesis and the same concerns are further developed in the language of B. Kojo Laing's first novel, *Search Sweet Country* (1986). The language and the linguistic imagery of the novel arise directly from the poems and build upon them. (19)

Kojo Laing does exactly the same in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, where in many instances he employs Ghanaian pidgin, Akan words, as well as what he calls enriched English, not only for poetic effect but also for authentic experience. For instance, the following expressions, "the woman, she try-O!" (84), "memaaamieeee! Ibi hard-O!" (98); that beard-beard loss is serious-OOoo " (100 ) are used to indicate the degree of seriousness of the speaker. While some readers may feel confused with such expressions, Laing's Ghanaian audience feels at home with them, because these pidginized expressions are an integral part of their everyday conversation. Another marker of authentic experience that is recurrent in the novel is "kora" (at all): "Me, I no jolly this air kora!"; "some of you don't deserve to be immortal, kora!"; "...Tale did not drink, kora!" The use of such words enables Laing to attain the concrete meaning of what he wishes to express. This also shows Laing's indebtedness to the Akan folktale tradition.

In “The Language of the Proverb in Akan”, Lawrence A. Boadi has described the techniques of Akan storytelling. According to him, good Akan and Guan storytellers change their voice to capture the mood in which a character is, such as surprise, anger, joy, happiness, hatred, love, and even death. These exaggerations, he adds, are meant to help the audience capture the incidents being described in the land of the spirits. The use of onomatopoeia in the narration aims at the same purpose. He argues that repetition in the use of reduplication is one of the devices for exaggeration. It is used to show the size, height, length, and shape. Verbs and adjectives are the parts of speech mostly reduplicated. Furthermore, Boadi points out that another way storytellers use reduplication to show exaggeration and achieve their aim is the prolongation of either medial vowel or the final vowel sound. For instance, a beautiful young woman may be described as “fefeefe” and a tall tree as “dua tenteenten, kakraa...” (Ghanaian Literature 36)

Laing himself has always been adamant about his love for the concrete. In “My Non-paper”, a paper he presented at the first conference on Anglophone African literatures held at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail, and later published in *Thresholds: Anglophone African Literatures* (2000), Kojo Laing claimed that he has always had an obsession for the concrete and abstract as friendly opposites, and that he was appalled as a teenager by the fragmentation of the Western mind, where the intrusion of dichotomy between the subject and the object left a huge emotional space. As a result, in Laing’s words, “a lot of experiences became second-hand.” He then declared:

Being somebody with a highly developed physical existence, I would sometimes feel like vomiting in the face of abstraction, this fragmentation... as an idea, not in relation to any specific Westerner. If you have that feeling when you want to stress the concrete in relation to the abstract, then you know that what goes with it is a feeling of responsibility for all the peoples of this world, hoping that my own people will never fall into this existential chasm” (104)

As a writer, Kojo Laing takes his responsibility vis-à-vis the world very seriously. He believes that he owes the world an authentic representation of all peoples’ experiences. This is made possible by what Arlene Elder has termed “oraliture”, that is the synthesis of oral and literary forms. Like a storyteller, Kojo Laing wants his readers to live the real experience of the action that is being described. Therefore, his use of onomatopoeia and linguistic play does very well have a purpose, and that is to convey experience with concreteness. Among the critics who examine Kojo Laing’s literary works, Kofi Anyidoho, in my view, explains better the former’s use of language in his novels. Commenting on Laing’s third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), Kofi Anyidoho sheds light on Laing’s use of language as follow:

The real magic of Kojo Laing's literary art is the creative and transforming power of language. In his hands, language is not a sacred inheritance, to be used with restraint and according to pre-established rules. Rather, it is a miracle tool for transforming perceptions and rearranging our thoughts into new modes of apprehension. Perhaps this is why Laing's novel makes such uncompromising demands on the reader's thought and imagination. (qtd. in Anyidoho 18)

With Kojo Laing, language transcends its main role as means of communication and interpretation of our experiences; rather, it acts as a catalyst in the making of the world he envisions. For this reason, he places language at the center of all his literary endeavors. In his novels he seeks to break up the chains that are preventing the use of language to its full extent. His non-respect for grammatical rules in his work is not inadvertent but deliberate. Laing's use of language can be traced to the role of the linguist in African oral tradition. In Akan society from which, I argue, Laing borrows his oratory techniques, the chief linguist is known as "Okyeame" (spokesperson of the chief). The "Okyeame" is chosen for his competence and good oratory skills. He performs ritual prayers, maintain liaison between the chief and his visitors, and carries the messages between the chief and his subjects. In *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Oratory*, Kwesi Yankah, a Ghanaian ethnographer, comments on the role of the "okyeame". According to him, among the chief's functionaries, the "Okyeame" is the most conspicuous, for he performs duties in various areas of activity - social, political, religious, and rhetorical - on the chief's behalf. He is the chief's orator, diplomat, envoy, prosecutor, protocol officer, prayer officiant, and most importantly, the chief's confidant and counselor. (84 - 5) The "Okyeame" is expected to perform these duties, because his mastery of rhetoric makes him a key figure within the royal circle.

Interestingly, Kojo Laing himself has laid claim to the title of "Okyeame", which he made clear during the presentation alluded to earlier in this discussion. As he declares: "My first concession to a systematic appraisal of my role as a writer is that it is related to the concept of "Okyeame", or the linguist of the chief who interprets what the chief says, usually in content and form, except that, please, substitute the universe for the chief" (104). Okyeame's power resides in his linguistic ability which enables him to beautify the chief's words and even prevent any ambiguity that may lead to crises. Commenting on the role of the Okyeame in the Akan society, Philip M. Peek and Kwesi Yankah write:

The practice of using speech intermediaries in royal discourse is partly aimed at creating opportunities for the flowering of language in the relay process. Akyeame (plural of okyeame) often say, 'We embellish the chief's words,' and they compare the treatment of the chief's words with the act of making fufu (a basic food made by pounding plantain and cassava in a mortar) to facilitate consumption.... Speaking through an okyeame leaves room for possible modification, addition of omitted detail, and the elevation of discourse to a poetic level. (604)

In the novel, we see Nana Kasa the Okyeame perform these duties. He pours libation at the welcome ceremony in Levensvale: “Akwaaba was brought out by the hosts, Okyamehene took out the schnapps and placed it beyond the heather, to pour libation after the exchange of greetings” (58). Also when Nana Bontox is angered by his subjects during their landing in Levensvale, it is the Okyeame who appeases him after adjusting the alphabet in his mouth: “O Nana, you know that we love you tootoo much, and we will love you even more if you survive the jump” (56).

However, Kojo Laing also believes that his role as “Okyeame” goes beyond that of an ordinary “Okyeame”, because he insists that he is more interested in the creation of new worlds than the interpretation of the existing worlds. As he writes:

... The creation of new worlds-some self-referential worlds – is more important to me than the interpretation of existing worlds. The only link which I have is that I believe that the incidence of broken consciousness – that’s a horrible word – is more prevalent in the west than where I come from, where there is still, through all sorts of activity, an umbilical link with the universe, where consciousness is not a fragmented entity. The only way out, back home, is for us to develop the analytical aspects without breaking the umbilical cord.... (105)

As Okyeame (chief linguist), Kojo Laing places his hope for the creation of worlds that reflect our desire for unity in linguistic unification. He believes that the creation of a language through a synthesis of many world languages may lead to unity. His vision, as he makes it clear in the glossary that opens his third novel, *Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars* (1992), is to see the world opt for a lingua franca:

The words listed in the glossary at the back of this book are the outcome of the world of Major Gentl and the Achimota Wars. The motive behind them is to internationalize the English. I believe that more parochial areas need a broadening of vocabulary – hence many of the words are repeated in my novels and poetry. Some are invented, most are direct translations from Akan and Ga and sometimes Hausa. It is usual in Ghana (with such a cosmopolitan mix of cultures) to intersperse one language with words from another. This ought to be done universally for the idea is to create one gigantic language.



In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, such interspersing is recurrent as in “I have borrowed your tower, with the help of Appa, for a small religious experiment, kakra, an experiment of logic: if your churches are emptying, and my pine necklaces in the hills are filling up, then why not take a significant part of the church to the necklace, and hope that the latter cures the former ... (89). “What a problem-*asem!*” (100). In Akan “kakra” and “*asem*” respectively stand for a little and matter/problem. These Akan words are synonyms of small and problem, respectively, and yet, Laing placed them next to each other. There seems to be a sense of complementary cohabitation between the English language and the Akan language. Implicit in this message is Laing’s belief that no language is self-sufficient and that all claims to linguistic hegemony are responsible for discrimination and hatred between tribes, regions, nations, and continents. In fact, within African countries, it is not rare to see people arguing and fighting over the superiority of one language over the other. In my native Togo, there are about forty five different ethnic groups. This means that a total of forty five languages are spoken in the country of six million people. People’s loyalty to these ethnic groups is so strong that it gets carried into the political sphere. Thus, most political violence in Africa has its origin in the ethnic tensions.

In light of preceding discussions, I argue that Kojo Laing’s language informs his criticism of the cultural- linguistic status quo amongst his fellow Ghanaians, amongst Africans, and between Africans and the rest of the world. Thus, his use of the oral form with the written form, as well as pidgin and local languages alongside the English language, aims at interrogating the artificial boundaries that continue to hinder human desire for interactions and complementary cohabitation. As Arlene Elder writes: “Laing, like Okri weaves his narratives into the strong, organic web of African oral tradition and demonstrates through his marvelous characters and unexpectedly related geographical spaces the necessity of recognizing similarities rather than differences” (56).

In fact, the gigantic language Kojo Laing envisions is a hybrid language that cannot be claimed by any specific linguistic group, thereby abolishing the divisions based upon claims to linguistic hegemony. In *Tukwan*, Kojo Laing has brought together people from different Ghanaian ethnic and cultural groups. Despite these differences, these groups are living in harmony which enables them to undertake gigantic projects such as their business visit to *Levensvale*. *Tukwan* is free of crime, sin, racism, and tribalism, because family genetics has been democratized at the suggestion of the chief scientist Kwame Atta:

He had decided without the authority of the ancestors, that there was a finite number of human type available in *Tukwan*; and that once the number has been reached, any human characteristic – whether physical or mental – was a repeat of what was already available over an agreed time span of two thousand years: so that if you talk about inheriting a leg, then you could easily inherit it out of the family pool. This will increase togetherness and rope all bones into a potential oneness. He swore that this would also reduce guilt, tribe – which barely existed in the town anyway – and then would, paradoxically, increase the space of individuality available to each person. (27)

Tukwan is possible not only because it is a utopia, but also because its inhabitants have accepted to transcend their linguistic differences and allow their languages to live in symbiosis. Laing's linguistic hybridity also addresses the language debate that dominated African literary criticism in the 1970's.

Because language was instrumental to the annihilation of indigenous cultures, the general sentiment after independence was that the salvation of African culture could only be achieved through the re-valorization of indigenous languages. This presupposes the use of African languages in African literature. The debate reached its culminant point when the Nigerian critic Obi Wali boldly postulated that: "... until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncertainty, and frustration" (qtd. in Olaniyan and Quayson 299).

Among the critics whose voices particularly dominated this debate were Ngugi wa thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. Ngugi's argument against the use of European languages in African literature centers on the devastating role these languages played in the colonization process. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, a collection of essays in which he clarifies his theory of language, he has this to say: "Language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of physical subjugation and the language was the means of psychological subjugation" (9). Ngugi saw in the use of European languages by African writers a deliberate perpetuation of this subjugation, which he believed, an African writer must take upon him/herself the responsibility to combat. He did not believe that African writers could use European languages and still achieve this goal. He went as far as calling the literature produced in European languages by Africans, "Euro African literature". To practice what he preached, Ngugi broke up with English in the 1980's and began producing in his native Gikuyu. According to him, this abandonment of English was his way of fighting against imperialism: "I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples" (28). Implicit in this decision is Ngugi's belief in the important role of working class and peasantry in the struggle against the persisting influence of colonial forces in the post-independence Africa. For him, a real national culture will only emerge after Kenyans have severed ties with English, the colonial import. He did not accept the claims that African writers could use European languages to dismantle the lingering structures of colonialism. He argues that any efforts to free African peoples from the colonizing structure without first repudiating European languages as the carriers of an oppressive value were doomed from the start.

Arguing totally against Ngugi's position on the use of European languages in African literature, the late novelist and literary critic, Achebe took a pragmatic approach. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, he remarks that it is not only convenient to use those languages, but it is necessary because they offer Africans a medium of communication that transcends all the ethnic groups.

Using Nigeria, home to hundreds of ethnic groups as example, he argues that a true national literature that will celebrate national culture will only be possible through English. For him literatures that are produced in indigenous languages should be simply referred to as ethnic literatures (93 – 95). Achebe wants the African writer to embrace the advantages offered by European languages to produce literature that will still convey his/her peculiar experience, for no one, he believes, loses anything for using languages that offer more choices in the production of literature. Elsewhere, he asks: “Is it right for a man to abandon his mother tongue for someone’s?” And proceeds to answer his question: “It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it” (102).

Given that Ngugi’s divorce with the English language lasted only a few years, it becomes obvious that Wali’s radical statement could not endure the realities of the changing time. Thus, Ngugi has returned to English not because he wanted to but because he finally realized that as the world embraced globalization, no literature could afford to remain within the local circle and survive. Because of the global dominance of the English language, it became the natural vehicle of many literatures. However, it is exactly this linguistic monopoly that Kojo Laing seeks to abolish in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*. But he does not wish to substitute English with local languages; instead, he forces English and local languages into a coexistence of convenience. The one he hopes will end the deceptive divide in the language debate.

Thus, contrary to what Wali suggested, Laing’s novels seek to end the status quo in the language debate in postcolonial Africa. His intention in his literary endeavor is to substitute the debate of exclusivity with the debate of inclusivity, for he believes, there are no self-sufficient languages, but complementary languages. He contests the notions of authenticity, superiority and purity in language. Discussing Laing’s use of language in his first novel, *Search Sweet Country* (1986), Ngaboh-Smart argues that “Laing’s comments on language raise issues such as authority, source, origin, and influence, but he treats language as a pragmatic communicative event. Just as the novel makes choice of a component of the quest for identity, it also abandons beliefs in linguistic hierarchy or existence of a metalanguage, prior to the individuals in the linguistic cauldron that is Ghana” (96). Laing makes similar comments in *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, where he mystifies both his Ghanaian and English readers. He wants neither of them to feel too confident about their mastery of English or Ghanaian languages. As Brenda Cooper remarks, “he created a language that is somewhat impenetrable to all but a few intellectuals, who are themselves challenged to decipher the message of his riddles” (191). I particularly agree with Ngaboh-Smart’s claim that Laing uses language as a “pragmatic communicative event”. Laing understands that what matters in the use of a language is its ability to carry the writer’s or speaker’s message the way it is intended. Thus, Laing’s language is shaped by the message it conveys. When Kwame Atta was asked why he was stammering, he simply answered: “Bbbbut I thought you knew sharp that whenever I mmmmention my popylonkwe, I stammer, I multiply the language...” (73).

The impression one has here is that in Laing's novels, events seem to shape language not the other way around. The act of stammering is imposed upon Atta by his unease to pronounce "popylonkwe", which means male genitals. However, it is possible to argue that Atta stammers whenever he mentions this word as an act of auto-censorship. Atta is aware of the etiquette of his cultural milieu, which he manages to observe. In some African cultures, it is taboo to publicly mention private parts or sexually explicit terms, especially in the presence of children.

Therefore, people would find ways to use a coded language to get around any terms or expressions that might be replete with explicit sexual references or innuendos. The adaptive shift observed in Laing's language owes much to the influence of the tradition of African story telling on his art. The ambiance in which Laing presents his novels - the comic atmosphere, the wordplay, the neologism, to list but a few - are devices of storytelling. The storyteller is a performer whose performance heavily depends on his or her audience's disposition. Since the aim is to please that audience, the storyteller will apply every available art at his or her disposal. In other words, the storyteller will negotiate with his or her audience through adaptation and improvisation.

To someone who is familiar with the art of storytelling, the instability observed in Laing's narrative may not be a problem, because the rendition of stories can be influenced by the audience, place, and time. For each occasion, it is possible to hear a different version of a story; thus the storyteller feels like proclaiming: "we never tell the same story twice". A good storyteller is the one who can adapt his story to the audience, place, and time. He is also the one who can improvise his stories whenever necessary. Sometimes the improvisation is necessary to avoid a language deemed offensive to the audience. The oral tradition critic, Solomon Iyasere, recalls his experience as follow:

... On another occasion I attended a story-telling session at which 'the Murder of Adesua' was again presented by semi-professional artist-critics, but before a different audience. This affected the rendition itself, the critical comments, and the recreation that followed the initial recital. When the entire performance has ended, I asked the chief performer the reasons for these adaptations and inconsistencies. He chuckled and replied, can't you see, there are too many old women here tonight. (325)

Oral literature is a communal art whose criticism is at the mercy of all the members of the audience. In fact, the participation of the audience in the performance is strongly recommended. Any audience member can challenge the artist about the meaning or a riddle, proverb, expression, or action. It is an invitation to join voices and experiences to create something for communal good. *Woman of the Aeroplanes* can be said to fit this description.

Elsewhere Elder points out that “Laing wishes us to participate in the creation of his text by supplying our own meanings for some of his words” (57). This confirms that Laing is a storyteller who understands the art of storytelling. I don’t think Laing simply “wishes us to participate...”, rather, he demands us to participate in his creation. During the performance of any oral art, the audience ceases to be mere spectators and become accomplices of the production by either voicing their agreement or disagreement with what the performer says. In *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, some statements are created in such a way that they seem to invite responses from the listeners: “Then the machine itself went off, with Atta’s face grave and broken; his heart had been made useless before Pokuaa again, but he would plod on, ampa” (96). “Believe me, ampa” LT said with conviction, “if I had my way all courts would be in the sky...” (104). “All their tongues stretched different inches, but Kwame Atta’s was the longest, anokwere” (107). The words “ampa” and “anokwere” mean true. This is a challenge to the audience’s sense of imagination, for the narrator did not need to add them to his statements. Even though the readers of *Woman of the Aeroplanes* don’t really have the opportunity for a direct objection or agreement with these statements, I believe there is an attempt by Laing to stage a confrontation between the narrator and his audience in a way that is reminiscent of the performances by storytellers in African oral traditions. Storytelling is a conversational activity between the audience and the performer; people in the audience can interrupt the performer for questions or objections. As Solomon O. Iyasere explains: “The performance of one artist would be listened to carefully, and if another expert present thought the performer had made a mistake, he would cut in with words such as:

I beg to differ; that is not correct.  
You have deviated from the path of accuracy ...  
Ire was not Ogun’s home town.  
Ogun only called there to drink palm-wine...

Thus interrupted, the performer might try to defend himself by pleading his own knowledge or suggesting that others should respect his rendition:

Let not the civet-cat trespass on the cane rat’s track.  
Let that cane rat avoid trespassing on the civet-cat’s path.  
Let each animal follow the smooth stretch of its own road” (323).

The performer reminds the challenger that there are always different versions of the same story and that instead of interfering with his rendition, the latter should simply present his version. Laing uses similar interplays in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* to advance his linguistic project. For instance, when Bobby Maclean challenges Kwame Atta about his English, the latter says, “O I assure you that it is English I’m speaking, but it’s an enriched version, ye see” (85).

Atta's response means that there are many versions of English. Through this interplay, Laing pokes fun at the linguistic purists who sought to keep the English language as homogenous as they could. Thus, the recurrence of pidgin, the linguistic mixtures, and other linguistic manipulations in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is meant to accomplish the same purpose. We recall, however, that this is what earned Laing most of the criticisms against him, ranging from dismissal of works as too playful to carry a serious political message to complaints about the difficulties critics encounter when they attempt to assess them, as discussed earlier.

Elder responds to these criticisms by pointing out that even though Laing's synthesis of oral and literary forms may make him a difficult writer to read, the reasons are to be found in his double role as Trickster/author and his playful creation of risky comic elements in his texts (56). This is a strategy that works for Laing, for it enables him to make fun of the issues confronting postcolonial Ghana. Laing has been unambiguous about his disagreement with social realist writers whose denunciation of the socio-political decadence in postcolonial Africa is straightforward. So his double role as Trickster/author and his playfulness are employed as subtle means for avoiding direct confrontation. Elsewhere, Elder acknowledges the relevance of this strategy by stating that, "the Tricksterish fun of Laing's wordplay, semi-helpful glossaries, and linguistic quirkiness may be read as an oblique response to the long-lasting debate about the 'appropriate' language for African writing..." (57).

Indeed, all the linguistic tricks the reader sees in Laing's works aims at ending the "either... or" debate. As a response to this debate, he suggests an inclusive debate through his linguistic hybridity. For him, it is no longer about the appropriate language for African literature; rather it is about the language that is appropriate for all the citizens of the world because the cultural, economic, political and racial dialogues he envisions require such a language. It is a language made of different languages of the world and which belongs to no race or nation. This language epitomizes Laing's yearning for a hybrid identity, as he makes it clear in the following humorous but serious excerpt:

I am the elephant with a difference, for they cannot tell whether I am an African elephant or an Indian elephant, nor even a third breed which was born in anyany zoo, that place of the bestial soul- once removed; my trunk costs nothing to call, and whenever the Prime Minister wants me, it is not the telephone he/she uses but radar; I am usually a dangerous entry into the airspace of my own country, I slip in the spray of water created by my own trunk, a very expensive trunk lined with gold from Obuasi and diamond from Akwatia. I have come to this machine to try hard to find out whether the honorable Prime Minister is really a racist or not. ... (97)

The passage above emphasizes the purpose of Kojou Laing's texts; that is the creation of a hybrid identity that is representative of the multiple identities of the contemporary world, and where all the differences inherent to these identities are preserved and celebrated. This process, according to Bhabha, "prevents identities from assuming primordial polarities". Thus, Laing confirms his position as precursor of Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity that "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy", as outlined in *The Location of Culture* (5). Like Bhabha, Laing's message in *Woman of the Aeroplanes* is that the solution to the polarities which exist in human relations lies in the hybridization of languages, cultures, identities, and races. Commenting on Laing's intervention in the language debate in the postcolonial Africa, Ngaboh-Smart has pointed out the stark differences that exist between Laing and his predecessors. According to Ngaboh-Smart, Laing has entered the linguistic debate in order to challenge the nationalists' hope that the revalorization of the indigenous languages will be the solution to the linguistic imperialism in postcolonial Africa. He argues that Laing sees "the unresolved clash of languages in modern Ghana as a source of strength, a criticism of the type of linguistic particularity Ngugi advocates in his seminal nationalist work *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). This, Ngaboh-Smart insists, "is evident in the way Laing globalizes the Ghanaian linguistic experience, as well as in his disavowal of identity primarily constructed on indigenous structures" (98). Further, this critic also demonstrates that Laing's novels show his awareness that Africa can no longer afford linguistic and cultural insularity in a world that has become more inclusive.

Therefore, instead of perpetuating the divisive debate over what language is deemed appropriate for African Literature, Laing is calling for a pacific co-existence between African languages and European languages. This co-existence, I believe, will mend the cultural fences broken by the imperial unilateralism. Most importantly, it will end the myth of cultural superiority, source of useless conflicts in the modern world. Once these important conditions of a sincere cultural dialogue are met, the language question in African literature will be reevaluated in order to embrace new perspectives.

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