

**COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND  
FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN STUDIES\***

I thank you very much for inviting me to present a lead paper for the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of this important national body, University French Teachers' Association of Nigeria (UFTAN). The theme of the conference is thought-provoking: *Langue française et cultures francophones: enjeux pour l'unité africaine/French Language and Francophone Culture: Implications for African Unity*. It makes me think of the role played by Comparative Literature, an invaluable branch of literary scholarship, in championing the cause of unity among the various peoples of a country, region and the world. I have therefore entitled my paper "Comparative Literature and Francophone African Studies".

The aim is to underscore the importance of Francophone African Studies in giving a voice to this neglected discipline in the continent. Its virtual absence in the curriculum has impoverished the African contribution to the world cultural heritage. And yet Francophone literary scholars are strategically placed to become worthy custodians of the discipline because of their mastery of many languages. Some indeed have done research in the area, as the works of such scholars as W. F. Feuser, C. T. Maduka, E. C. Nwezeh, S. Ige and O. Austen-Peters have revealed. Before dealing with their works it is important first of all to have a cursory view of the state of research in the discipline by European scholars because their scholarship throws some light on what has been done by the above scholars.

Two prominent schools of thought dominate the scholarship in the discipline in Europe: the first is the French and the second, the American. The French scholars generally stress literary history rooted in the positivism prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, hence the emphasis on sources and influences, whereas the American lay emphasis on features/movements transcending the boundaries of two or more literatures. Among the French

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are such pioneer scholars as Baldensperger, Van Tieghem, Jean-Marie Carré and Marius-François Guyard. The position of Guyard is representative:

La littérature comparée ... c'est l'histoire des relations littéraires internationale. Le comparatiste se tient aux frontières, linguistes ou nationales, et surveille les échanges de thèmes, de livres ou de sentiments entre deux ou plusieurs littératures (12).

The study of literary phenomena has to be based on verifiable historical relationships between the texts under study. Studies based on perceived unsubstantiated generalizations rooted in unverifiable influences are discouraged.

Later scholars like Pichois and Rousseau try to widen the scope of the French school. In fact, their definition of comparative literature is frequently cited by contemporary scholars such as Didier Souiller and Wladimir Troubetzkoy:

La littérature comparée est l'art méthodique, par la recherche de liens d'analogie, de parenté et d'influence, de rapprocher la littérature des autres domaines de l'expression ou de la connaissance, ou bien les faits et les textes littéraires entre eux, distants ou non dans le temps ou dans l'espace, pourvu qu'ils appartiennent à plusieurs langues ou plusieurs cultures, fissent-ils partie d'une même tradition, afin de mieux les décrire, les comprendre et les goûter (174).

The notion of comparative literature is stretched to include the relationship between literature and the other arts and traditional subject areas, a point of view earlier French comparatists were averse to.

This approach to comparatism is close to the American school which is more liberal in perspective. The definitions given by René Wellek and Henry Remak are typical. René Wellek: "Comparative Literature has the immense merit of combating the false isolation of national literary histories: it is obviously right (and has brought a mass of evidence to support this) in its conception of a coherent Western tradition of literature woven together in a network of innumerable inter-relations" (282- 283). And Remak (1961) affirms that:

Comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g. politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc., on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of literature with other spheres of human experience (1).

An important function of the discipline in Europe is to underscore the oneness of the Western civilization. It therefore buttresses the political and economic ideals of the Western world. This Eurocentrism pervades the scholarship of the researchers, even though Etiemble tries to combat it in his work *Comparaison n'est pas raison*, a study that expands the scope to East-West literary relations. The glamorous concept *Weltliteratur* introduced by Goethe which fancifully perceives literature as a world phenomenon hardly goes beyond the East as the limit of the world. Africa is frequently left out as a component of the global village.

This lacuna is being filled by such scholars as Maduka, Nwezeh, Feuser, Ige, Austen-Peters and (to go beyond the Nigerian university system) Gérard. From this perspective, Francophone African literature can be seen, just like Francophone Canadian literature and Francophone Caribbean literatures, as a variant of Francophone world literature with French literature serving as the driving force of this aspect of world literary heritage. Climbing down to various literatures in Africa, one can say, for example, that Francophone Senegalese literature, Cameroonian literature or Togolese literature are variants of the Francophone African literature. Similarly, as I said in *Across Frontiers: Comparative Literature and National Integration*, Anglophone Nigerian literature is "a variety of world literature in English like Canadian, West Indian, Anglo-Indian, Australian, New Zealandan and American literature [are each] a satellite of English literature in the firmament of world literature" (24). This clarification is necessary for the proper understanding of the issues of national literature in Africa raised by many of the scholars.



It is pertinent to recall here that Chinua Achebe's position on the issue taken several decades ago (1965) has given an impregnable stamp of authority to the idea that the national literature of an African country is that written in the language of the former colonial power because "... it has a realized or potential audience throughout its territory ... [whereas] an ethnic literature is one which is available only to one ethnic group within the nation" (56). Then he virtually closed the case by asserting that "These [ethnic] languages will just have to develop as tributaries to feed the one central language enjoying nation-wide currency" (58). Chinua Achebe hardly operates dogmatically, hence the necessity of his adding a point which critics have systematically ignored. Thus, he affirms that:

All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa. This 'reality' may change as a result of deliberate, e.g. political, action. If it does an entirely new situation will arise, and there will be plenty of time to examine it. At present it may be more profitable to look at the scene as it is (57).

It may still be possible for African leaders to have the political will to tackle the challenges posed by the problem, as one notices with the development of the various languages of the world, especially English and French. Du Bellay's historic role in producing the *Pleiade* is still fresh in our memories. Of significance is Wartburg's observation in his book *Evolution et structure de la langue française*. According to him, Du Bellay's la *Pleiadest* "intéressant surtout comme manifestation du sentiment national et parce qu'il montre que l'auteur a bien compris le rapport entre la langue d'une nation et son rôle parmi les peuples évolués" (149). This point of view validates the position taken by Obi Wali and Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the question of literature written by Africans in European languages. As Ngugi asserts, "it is axiomatic that the renaissance of African cultures [should not lie] in the languages of Europe" (5).

The studies of Maduka, Nwezeh, Feuser, Ige, Austen-Peters and Gérard on Comparative literature in Africa touch directly or indirectly on

this vexatious issue of the role of African languages and literatures in national development. Maduka asserts that:

the discipline is crucial to the cultural, political and economic development of the African nations. On the one hand, it can be used, just as in Canada, as a tool for championing the cause of national unity jeopardized by the divisive role of inter-ethnic rivalry in each nation; on the other, it can serve as a means of promoting mutual understanding among the various African peoples of the world in particular, and the members of the world community in general ("Comparative Literature: Concept and Scope 120).

He then rejects the idea of regarding English as the language of Nigerian national literature because "it focuses its audience on the crop of Nigerians who are the by-products of the British economic, political and cultural imperialism in Africa. It can still be studied because, being an osmosis of the African and European cultures, it has a role to play in world culture" (*Across Frontiers*: 24). He concludes by creating a space for the literatures in Nigerian languages: "The real national literature of Nigeria is the aggregate of the elements running through the various ethnic literatures in the country. It can only be studied from the angle of comparative literature which is a component of literary studies focusing on the inter-national or ethnic relations of literatures" (24). Maduka, therefore, sees African-language literatures as important tools for bringing about the national integration of the multi-ethnic countries of the continent. Consequently, African Francophone literatures will continue to be studied as very important variety of world literature in French and not as the indispensable agents for bringing out the national integration of the various peoples in the countries in which they operate as lingua francas.

E. C. Nwezeh, the author of the book *Africa in French and German Fiction 1911 - 1933* and the article "Littérature africaine et littérature comparée", disagrees with Maduka's definition of comparative literature which he sees as conservative and even Eurocentric by insisting



on the idea of anchoring comparative literature on the units of national literature because a single book can be studied comparatively. In taking this position he unwittingly sanctions the continued use of the literatures in European languages as the national literatures of the various African countries in which the languages used in writing them operate as *lingua francas*.

W. F. Feuser's "The Case for Comparative Literature" and "The Emergence of Comparative Literature in Nigeria" argue for the development of the discipline in African universities but caution against focusing solely on European-language literatures. Although literatures in European and African languages can offer invaluable opportunities for studies in intricate network of relationships among them, it has to be remembered that the correlation of the rise of nation-states in Europe with that of national literatures does not exist *pari passu* in Africa because of the heterogenous character of the constitutive cultures of the various nations. Accordingly, as he asserts, "An increasing number of critics would challenge the very idea of a national literature in Africa being based on an imported language" (101). But, since the various Nigerian-language literatures are in various stages of development, there can be no meaningful comparative studies between these literatures and those in other parts of Africa and the world. It is imperative, therefore, that:

The main direction of comparative scholarship in Nigeria should ... be inward. Genre study and thematology could, for example, be applied to selected "ethnic" literatures viewed both in their traditional art forms and their adaptations of imported Western models like the novel ("The Emergence..." 102).

Seun Igeh, in his monograph with the intriguing title *Comparative Literature as a Distinct Discipline: A Superfluity*, sets out to prove that Comparative Literature is not a discipline that is distinct from the existing mode of criticism of African literature. In doing so, he launches scathing attacks on Maduka and Nwezeh for trying to practise what does not exist in literary scholarship. In the process, he indulges in

fanciful unsubstantiated generalizations in places. For instance, he tells us towards the end of the essay that:

Literary criticism in Africa must be sensitive to the times in which we live, it must respond to the shrinking of the world into a global village. In particular, ours in Nigeria is a multi-lingual national literature, the development of which must be fostered by a literary criticism that should be more and more characterised by its multi-dimensional approach (29).

He does not tell us the nature of this "multi-dimensional approach". On the one hand, he argues like a scholar who believes that English constitutes the soul of the nation but, on the other, he suggests that the nation is multi-lingual in character but ignores the importance of developing a methodology that will help in dealing with the observation in literary criticism.

As to the main focus of his argument, he does not demonstrate to us why Comparative Literature is not a discipline except for a catalogue of quotations from critics, which he misread in places. He seems to belong to the category of researchers who easily give up while engaging in the rigorous search for meanings and definitions in their areas of specialization. The observations of Robert J. Clements are pertinent here:

Whereas it is not surprising when someone outside the field cannot grasp the nature — and demands — of comparative literature, it does surprise when our own partisans refuse to grasp it. One thinks of Henry Gifford in England, whose *Comparative Literature* ... states, "Comparative Literature cannot pretend to be a discipline of its own ... Rather, it is an area of interest" (2).

Although the challenges of finding a workable definition of the discipline are enormous for scholars, a significant success has been registered in this direction by critics.

We now turn to the position of Albert Gérard who has published copiously on comparative literature, questions of national literature in Africa and African-language literatures. The works "Qu'est-ce qu'une littérature nationale à l'aube du xxième siècle?" and "Toward a National



History of Ghanaian Literature: A Case Study in Methodology" are typical. In them he argues that the national literature of a people is rooted in the people's language. As he asserts,

In Ghana as in the majority of African countries, no acceptable account can be offered of the nation's literature unless it deals both with African-language and European-language writing. This implies that the study of any "national literature" in Africa is bound to be effected on a translinguistic basis, that is, with the methods and techniques evolved by comparative literature. It is only in this way that the various ethnic groups can really become aware of the value and comparative significance of their, and one another's literary output (11).

And, in "Qu'est-ce qu'une littérature nationale à l'aube du XXIème siècle?" (1981), he affirms that:

Multiplicité des ethnies, des langues et éventuellement des races; unité des thèmes, des attitudes, des préoccupations: ainsi se présentera, au xxième siècle, la littérature nationale de la majorité des états d'Afrique et du monde (8).

He then rounds up his argument by insisting that "il va de soi que ces littératures nationales ne pourront être valablement étudiées qu'avec les méthodes translinguistiques et pluridisciplinaires du comparatisme" (9).

And, finally, Omale Austen-Peters, a young Professor of Comparative Literature teaching at Kogi State University who obtained his B.A. and M.A. degrees in French at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and his Ph.D in Comparative Literature at the University of Port Harcourt. His booklet *Topics in Comparative Literature: A Handbook for University Students* is very useful as an introductory manual for initiating students into the discipline. In it he exposes the reader to the various positions held by scholars in such issues as the definition of Comparative Literature, literary reception, periodisation and literary movements.

All in all, Comparative Literature is very little known to scholars of Francophone African Studies, although it is topical as an area of specialisation. Specialising in it demands a mastery of many languages: a

knowledge of French, English (or Portuguese) and an African language is minimal for a proper initiation into it. The specialists in Francophone African Studies are therefore in a very good position to benefit fully from the riches of majoring in it. It is opportune for them to introduce young graduates of French to pursue their higher degrees in it, for after successfully completing their studies in it, they can become very proficient in handling literary issues in Francophone and Anglophone areas of literary scholarship, as well as in literatures in African languages. I hope that African presence in this area of specialization will soon be felt in world cultural heritage.

Let us now turn to the scope of the discipline by focusing on possible areas of study in the subject.

#### 1. Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone, Germanophone and Hispanophone African literatures

Themes, symbols and stylistic features transcending the frontiers of two or more of these literatures can be studied within any perspective ranging from anti-colonial to post-colonial periods of African literary history. A student working in these areas will have a clearer picture of how each of the literatures constitutes a variant of the world literature written in each of the languages. Such works as Anthony O. Biakolo's *L'étonnante enfance d'Inotan* and Adiyi Martin Bestman's *Une calebasse d'aubes* can profitably be better studied by scholars specializing in this area. The first is a novel dealing with the ethnic conflicts between the Urhobo and the Itsekiri in the Niger Delta and the second a volume of poetry evoking mental pictures even touching on the topical issue of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. Since the two authors are Nigerians living in an Anglophone milieu the works may lie unnoticed by Anglophone scholars dealing with texts from an Anglophone perspective. Although late President Sani Abacha pronounced Nigeria a bilingual country of English and French on 14 December 1996, the pronouncement is not yet fully operational, probably because Nigeria is multilingual and not bilingual.



## 2. Literatures in African Languages

Various aspects of these literatures (oral and written) are studied comparatively to help promote the cause of national and regional integration in Africa. Currently these literatures are housed in the Departments of Linguistics in our various universities and often lie fallow because most of the specialists in the departments tend to pay more attention to the linguistic components of the department (e.g. morphology, phonology, syntax, lexis and semantics). Comparatists should try to show more interest in these literatures and the languages in which they are written so that the struggle for African cultural identity will eventually yield fruits.

3 Stylistic relationships between texts written in European languages and “the various substrata of the indigenous languages and thought patterns” (Feuser, “The Emergence ...” 102). As Feuser has rightly asserted, Afolayan has done a similar study centring on Tutuola’s Yoruba English and Lindfors on the nuances of Yoruba and Igbo English.

## 4 Literatures of Africa and the Diaspora

Studies of this nature focus on the network of relationships between the features of the texts written by authors of African ancestry (e.g. works related to negritude movement, Afro-Cubanism, Haitian indigenism, Harlem Renaissance and the Black Aesthetics of the African American).

## 5. Various Forms of Literary Encounters between Africa and the West

Studies on imagology such as E. C. Nwezeh’s Africa in French and German Fiction and numerous articles by W. F. Feuser fall under this category. Even monolingual studies can be encouraged here to point out the convergences between the literatures of the European metropolises and their variants in Africa — Romanus Egudu has done such a study by comparing the poetic works of Hopkins and Okigbo. And, as is well-known, Peter I. Okeh has done an incisive comparative study of Trente arpents, a French Canadian novel, and Achebe’s Arrow of God.

## 6 Theory and Practice of Translation

Studies on literary translation are pre-eminently works in comparative literature. They should therefore be promoted as significant aspects of the discipline.

## 7. Studies on the Works of Authors of African Ancestry in the Diaspora

Such researches reveal the degrees of relationships between the literatures of the peoples of African ancestry living in the Diaspora.

Mounting Comparative Literature Programmes in a Nigerian university is very complex and rather difficult because of the dearth of material and human resources. Collaborative effort is, therefore, needed from related departments. At the University of Port Harcourt, for example, where programmes in M.A. and Ph.D degrees in Comparative Literature have been in operation since 1979, five departments work together to run a Comparative Literature Programme under a Coordinator who is statutorily a member of the Board, School of Graduate Studies: Foreign Languages and Literatures, English Studies, Linguistics and Communication Studies, Theatre Arts and Fine Art and Design. The programme focuses on Africa and its cultural extensions in the New World. Candidates for the Programme are normally expected to possess a good Honours Degree (not lower than 2<sup>2</sup>) in Literature from a recognized university. Graduates in English have to produce evidence of a minimum of two years (four semesters) of academic exposure or another language of international communication apart from English. A knowledge of an African language is imperative: any student who is deficient in speaking, reading or writing an African language will be required to take an appropriate course in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies and provide evidence of having passed that course. The title and scope of the thesis/dissertation shall involve the comparison of texts in at least two languages, quoted in the original for all critical purposes.

It is necessary for the Departments of English, Foreign Languages and Literatures and Linguistics and African Languages in Nigerian Universities to work together to ensure a proper functioning of



the discipline in the country in terms of having a viable journal of Comparative Literature, running annual conferences in Comparative Literature and reviving the moribund Comparative Literature Association of Nigeria.

The University of Port Harcourt Comparative Literature Programme in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities recently edited a book *Compass* in honour of late Professor Willfried Feuser, a pioneer member of the teaching staff of the Programme, and had the book successfully launched in order to establish a Willfried Feuser Foundation with which to provide funds for the floating of a journal of Comparative Literature entitled *African Journal of Comparative Literature*. This high-quality journal will surely stand the test of time since it is envisaged to be in production for at least the next twenty years. It will not be like the *Journal of African and Comparative Literature* published at the University of Ibadan in March 1981, which lasted for only one year before going into oblivion. It was published for the Nigerian Association for African and Comparative Literature which has long folded up.

Money from the Willfried Feuser Foundation will soon be used to convene an annual conference in Comparative Literature at the University of Port Harcourt which will be attended by interested scholars in the Departments of English, Foreign Languages and Literatures, Linguistics and African/Nigerian Languages and other related disciplines such as Music, Theatre Arts and Fine Arts. In addition, a viable national body for practitioners of Comparative Literature will be founded.

All members of the University French Teachers' Association of Nigeria are hereby called upon to support the efforts being currently made by the University of Port Harcourt to have a solid discipline of Comparative Literature in Nigeria. Africa should not continue to lag behind in world cultural heritage by not paying sufficient attention to the development of this discipline necessary for fostering the spirit of co-existence among the peoples of a country, region and the world.

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