STUDIES IN AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

Oyekan Owomoyela

The AFRICAN DIFFERENCE

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WITSWATERSRAND
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PETER LANG

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Owomoyela, Oyekan.
The African difference: discourses on Africanity and the
relativity of cultures/Oyekan Owomoyela.
p. cm. — (Studies in African and African-American culture; vol. 10)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Africa, Sub-Saharan—Civilization. 2. National characteristics, African.
3. Blacks—Race identity. I. Title. II. Series: Studies in African
and African-American culture; vol. 10.
DT352.4.096 967—dc20 95-22507
ISBN 0-8204-2881-7
ISSN 0890-4847

Die Deutsche Bibliothek-CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Owomoyela, Oyekan:
The African difference: discourses on Africanity and the relativity
of cultures/Oyekan Owomoyela. – New York; Washington, D.C./Baltimore;
San Francisco; Bern; Frankfurt am Main; Berlin; Vienna; Paris: Lang.
(Studies in African and African-American culture; Vol. 10)
ISBN 0-8204-2881-7
NE:GT

Published in the United States of America
by Peter Lang Publishing.

Published simultaneously in the Republic of South Africa
by Witswatersrand University Press,
1 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg, 2001, South Africa.

ISBN 1 86814 295 7

Cover design: Photoprint

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America.

Preface

When one considers the record of African performance since the 1960s, when the wind of change caused the emergence of several independent African states out of territories colonized by Europe, when one considers especially the almost universal slide into disorder that has prompted once-enthusiastic champions of the cause of Africa and Africans to abandon it as ill-advised, one might justifiably wonder if it was not perhaps perverse to defend, and even valorize, an African difference. After all, is that difference not a mark of the much advertized African insufficiency and the cause of the African morass? Is it something to celebrate and be garrulous about in the face of reminders that it also proved its worthlessness by the ease with which it delivered the continent to inconsiderable forces of European slavers first and colonizers later? And, in any case, does insistence on an African difference, even if it was not a discredited complex of values, traits, and practices, not amount to promoting a pure and unitary African essence in disregard of the obvious diversity of Africanities and in a world of hybrid cultures and identities?

The essays in the following pages were prompted by a realization that, despite the end of the era of direct colonization, and despite the post-independence celebration of the African personality, the disappointments of post-coloniality were lending fresh impetus to the colonialist narratives that had been silenced, or al least considerably muted, by the movements that effected decolonization. So bold indeed have some Western observers of the African debacle become that they openly suggest the recolonization of Africa, this time with the sanction of the United Nations, citing as a first step in the process the 1992 landing of United States marines in Mogadishu to impose order on the chaos of Somalia.

The pervasive state of anomie on the continent has conferred credibility on the short view that Africa's problems began with the departure of the colonizers, and that one can legitimately ascribe the blame for them only to the crop of corrupt and often murderous politicians and dictators who have plagued most of the continent since the end of European rule. Calling attention to the continuous rape of the continent and its people for the last five centuries and its debilitating impact on the victims' sense of social and civic responsibility is, in this view, a refusal to acknowledge African innate perversity in preference for deflecting culpability to foreign agencies. That argument has won

converts even among Africans, resulting in the sort of self-alienation that engenders embarrassment about descent from ancestors who failed to hold off European marauders, to an eagerness to obliterate racial and ethnic identity or difference, and to a yearning for assimilation of and into the spirit of Europe.

These essays issue from an unabashedly pro-African conviction, and a realization that the debate on Africanity is of much greater import than a mere intellectual exercise. Stated or implied in the arguments against it is the suggestion, responding to centuries of European demonization, that it deserves to be exorcised as an offense to humanity. To its defenders falls the task of correcting the centuries-long misrepresentations of it, and combating the attractiveness of subordinating the long-term prospects of the African way to present expediencies, or put differently, of pandering to the fashions of the moment at the expense of the African heritage. After all, if we feel justified to blame our ancestors who, lacking knowledge of the nature of their European visitors, fell prey to their perfidy, would posterity not have greater cause to denounce us if, knowing what we do, we opt to preside over the end of Africanity? Discussions of our language preferences, of our culturally sanctioned gender relations, and of our developmental teleology, for example, must be responsive to the grave responsibility that is our lot.

Without doubt, unbridled and uncritical allegiance to the African past can be an insurmountable obstacle to recognizing and acknowledging those structural and behavioral adjustments necessary for modern times. Those scholars, African and non-African, who warn against traditionalism (automatic preference for tradition in all its aspects over modernity) and its deleterious effects do have a point. Their concern must, however, be balanced by a wariness of modernism and all its ramifications as an automatic preference over all things traditional. Nor must we be scared off standing up for African cultures by imputations of retrograde particularism. The debate in the United States over the desirability of including the study of non-Western cultures in the educational institutions of the country requires us to look with renewed interest (and suspicion) at the charge that defence of Africanity is an undesirable pursuit of a pure African essence. The conservatives who mount the ramparts in the United States to oppose liberalizing the cultural narrowness of the academy do so explicitly in the interest of maintaining the putative purity of their European culture. My point is not to recommend their example, but to show that, even where there is less legitimacy or logic for doing so, people feel called upon to defend their heritage.

Difference simply for its own sake may be perverse, but antipathy towards difference in any form (call it alterity) is a worse form of malady, for its end is the loss of self and of identity, in other words, self-annihilation. For us, fear of difference from Westernity or from Europeanity (to use a vulgar term) is patently illogical; European interaction with non-Europeans, and especially with Africans, has been predicated on the fiction of the singularity of history, and the sole legitimacy of the European (or Western) way. That fiction sanctioned and rationalized such projects as the "civilization" and Christianization of the "natives." The decolonization process debunked it as arrogant, presumptuous, and baseless, insisting instead on the plurality of histories, cultures, and civilizations. Africans cannot be party to any tendency that has the effect of restoring credence to that discredited notion.

The fight for African liberation, emancipation, and historicization must continue as long as the belief in the essential pathology of Africanity can boast a proponent. The physical expulsion of the colonizer has not sufficed for African liberation; the more important task of undoing the mental conditioning that was part of colonization remains if true decolonization and the restoration of Africans to themselves and to history are to occur. The British system of Indirect Rule had its logic—to delegate as much of the maintenance of the colonial structure as possible to the colonized peoples themselves; Anglophone post-coloniality seems thus far not much different from perfected indirect rule. Indeed, African post-coloniality in general seems above all to guarantee the erstwhile colonizers all the advantages they used to derive from colonialism but without its headaches. The assertion that post-coloniality is no more than neo-coloniality carries great force.

The discourses to follow, then, are in the nature of an invitation to join the battle for Africa (and Africanity), which is in a new and more difficult phase than during colonialism, more difficult because in the earlier phase the lines were clearly drawn, and the choices were simple—submission to alien rule or insistence on self-determination. The enemy was also easily identifiable: he was a foreigner and an oppressor. Now the issues are not so clear-cut and the adversary not so easily apparent. He/she is not necessarily foreign, and his/her rhetoric is often patriotic and bolstered with a concern, undoubtedly genuine, for "development," or scientific and technological advancement.

All of the essays gathered in this volume were originally presented at scholarly forums over the years. Readers might find in those that address similar subjects ideas that are repeated, but such instances are

few and, I believe, insignificant. In certain cases the stamp of the circumstances under which the essay was written is clearly discernible. For example, the writing of the material that constitutes Chapter Eight coincided with President Bush's build-up for and prosecution of the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein. The essay was in response to an invitation from the Center for African Studies at The Ohio State University, Columbus, to present a paper at their spring 1991 Symposium on "Technology, Culture, and Development in the Third World: Examples and Lessons from Africa." Some of the others have earlier appeared in scholarly journals. The material in Chapter One was published with the same title in *Research in African Literatures*, as did a much shorter version of that in Chapter Four. The content of Chapter Two came out in *The African Studies Review*, which also published what makes up Chapter Eight, but with the title, "With Friends Like These . . . A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodology."

Contents

Chapter One

Language, Identity, and Social Construction in African Literatures

english
is a foreign anguish
MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIP

conceptions of the self are culturally relative . . . to
research the self we need to study language.
POTTER & WHETHERELL

Literature is inconceivable outside the context of language. Questions pertaining to language routinely arise either implicitly or explicitly in any discussion of the subject. They assume much greater importance with regard to African literatures than in relation to other literatures. Africanist literary scholars are familiar with the reasons for this interest in the language question and with the terms of the debate that has raged since Obi Wali's famous prediction of a "dead end" for literatures which, although purporting to be African, are written in non-African languages. What is the connection between language and cultural identity? What danger does the continued ascendancy of European languages pose for the vitality of African languages? Are there deleterious implications for African societies in the social stereotyping perpetuated by the European-language proficiency of African writers? What will be the consequences of refusing to act on the lessons of history with respect to the perils of failing to preserve one's language until its demise is more or less complete?

The anomaly at the heart of the debate is a legacy of colonialism. Postcolonial social and political structures ensure that European languages will enjoy stronger institutional support than African languages and seem more attractive to ambitious Africans. Moreover, in a continent preoccupied with closing the developmental gap between itself and the industrialized world, those who identify "development" with European languages can always marshall "progressive" arguments to counter seemingly sentimental and retrogressive campaigns on behalf of indigenous mother-tongues. Against such arguments, even the claim that campaigns for the use of African languages are logical extensions of the anticolonial struggle or efforts to heal the unnatural linguistic fissure between segments of contemporary African communities have proved unavailing.

Chidi Amuta provides a good example of an argument aimed at defusing the anticolonial, communal cohesion gambit. Problematizing the language in which African writers choose to write, he asserts, is elitist, redundant, and pointless. Those who perceive this situation as a problem do so, in his view, only because they have an extremely narrow conception of "language." As a corrective, he suggests, language "needs to be conceptualized to mean the totality of the *means* available for communicating a cultural form to the greatest majority in a manner that will clearly define cognitive-ideological effect in the consciousness of the audience" (113). What matters for him in African literatures is not language in its conventional sense, but language in the sense of "all avenues of cultural communication" for revolutionary purposes (113–14). Language, he insists, is "the totality of communicative devices deployed in literary communication" (163). Having redefined language in such terms, he turns specifically to the socio-political argument. Whereas others are inclined to view the role of European languages in African societies in a negative light, Amuta regards them as unifying factors. Accordingly, he dismisses the lingering colonial stigma that attaches to them. Since they serve as a cohesive force in contemporary African nations, he argues, they have "negated their originally negative historical 'mission' as an instrument of colonization" (113). On this question his attitude is consistent with that of his fellow Marxists, Chinweizu and his collaborators, who, despite their vaunted Afrocentrism and their declared intention to decolonize African literatures, nonetheless champion the retention of European languages. Such a choice is certainly implicit in their rejection of language as a criterion for defining African literatures (1983: 12–14).

By contrast, Omafume Onoge, another Marxist, believes that committed African writers should be on the side of the masses, not aligned with the elite, as their defense of European languages proves them to be. Onoge accepts the fact that language *does* constitute a problem, for he laments: "Yet [for the writer] to break with this [elite] audience, as he must, in order to adopt the *people* as his constituency poses communication problems which have no easy solutions at the moment. For in the African case it is not just the colonial tongue which isolates the writers from the people. There is also the question of mass illiteracy even in our own languages" (40). The perception of European languages as unifying forces in Africa's postcolonial "nations" is valid, but so is the argument that these languages were left behind by the colonizers as a means of maintaining the structures they had erected. Because African "nations" are colonial creations, a prior question must be asked: is the cost of unity commensurate with the gains that it

brings? In answering this question, we must frame the underlying proposition in unambiguous terms: Africans are being called upon to abandon their centuries-long commitment to a sense of identity based on kinship (symbolized by a shared language) and religious beliefs in favor of one imposed by colonizers for their own interest and profit.

From an anticolonial perspective, Amuta's proposal is hardly defensible. His recommendation that we reconceptualize language as undifferentiated communication is a throwback to prelinguistic primitivity, for speech (or verbally coded communication) is one of the characteristic features of humanity. Along with double consciousness (the capacity to act and simultaneously reflect on one's action) and the ability to manipulate the environment (or nature) it distinguishes human beings from other species. Indeed, says Derek Bickerton, the capacity for speech makes the other two qualities possible (4).

If speech separates humans from other animals, language (which is more specialized than speech) distinguishes one culture from another. Language is not primarily or exclusively a means of communication. On the contrary, it is "a system of representation, a means of sorting and manipulating the plethora of information that deluges us throughout our waking life" (Bickerton 5). Nearly all scholars insist on this link between language and culture; for example, Timothy Shopen states that "[c]ultures have intimate links to particular languages: take a language away from a culture, replace it with another, and that culture will be radically altered" (ix). For the American scholar H. E. Newsum, another Marxist, "language is a basic and necessary component of any culture. The English revere their language," he adds, "and the measure of its widespread use is the measure of British superiority and imperialism" (58).

In this regard, scholarly opinion accords with popular usage, for the practice of designating peoples and cultures in relation to their languages is both venerable and widespread. The Yoruba word for nation (in the geographical sense) is "*orílè èdè*" (the land of [a] language), and the territory inhabited by the Yoruba is, therefore, "*orílè èdèe Yorùbá*" (the land of the Yoruba language). Alternatively one hears "*ilèe Káàárò; O ò jíire?*" (the land of Good Morning; Did you wake well?). On the other hand the Yoruba refer to the Igbo as Yánmínrín, because that is what they hear when an Igbo speaker says, "*Yem mili*" (Give me some water). For their part, the Igbo call the Yoruba Ngbati-Ngbati (literally, "When-When") on account of the Yoruba sound represented by the sign *gb*, which seems peculiar and humorous to the non-Yoruba ear. Similar instances of nicknaming people according to their speech habits can be found elsewhere in the world as

well. For example, when Dutch immigrants flooded into England in the wake of the accession of William of Orange and Queen Anne, their English hosts quickly dubbed them Nit-Wits because they responded to every question by saying, "*Ik niet weet*" (I don't know). Such designations are not terms of endearment, for each conveys pejorative overtones about the "outgroup." Beyond merely recognizing and acknowledging cultural differences, people tend to be motivated by a desire to demonstrate the superiority of their own culture over all others, and they are quick to implement measures to prevent intruders from diluting or corrupting their culture.

C. N. Mgbo-Elue recently conducted a study of Yoruba attitudes toward the Igbo and Igbo attitudes toward the Yoruba. After specifying the linguistic identity of a speaker, he asked his subjects to evaluate the speaker in terms of a certain number of personality traits. On the basis of this experiment he concluded:

> The Ibo speaker was downgraded in evaluation by the Yoruba judges on all traits. Ibo judges, however, evaluated the Ibo speaker positively and favorably on all traits. In the same vein, the Ibo judges evaluated the Yoruba speaker very negatively on all the personality traits. (159)

In this light a shared language appears to be a significant factor in social interrelations and a powerful instrument for establishing empathy among individuals and cohesiveness within a society.

The idea that people identify more with those who share their language and speech habits than with those who share their culture (Gudykunst and Schmidt 1) has significant implications for contemporary Africa. If this proposition is true, the African elite who use European languages identify more closely with Europeans than with Africans who do not use these languages. Since European languages are an index of the domination of Africans by Europeans, Africans need to be aware of the fact that "linguistically dominated groups who regularly adopt the language of the dominant groups experience a degradation of their subordinate group identity" (Banks 22). The point is that the adoption of European languages by Africans implies a degradation of their African cultural identity. Such behavior is also demeaning, for as James Coleman observed European colonizers ridiculed Africans who attempted to be like them (145); we have no reason to believe that their attitudes changed after independence.

According to Harald Haarmann, the boundaries people maintain between themselves and others may be "perceived as positive (*e.g.*,

pride in one's language and culture) or they may be experienced as negative and passively suffered (*e.g.*, fading self-awareness among minorities under extreme pressure of assimilation)" (39). Those who perceive the boundary as positive are usually members of the dominant "ingroup," while those who perceive it negatively usually belong to the subordinate "outgroup." In situations where language use determines social status, the language habit of the dominant class becomes "standard," or "unmarked," and any deviation from it is regarded as substandard, or "marked." Since power is associated with unmarkedness, members of subordinate groups feel pressured to breach the boundary between them and the "ingroup," for doing so constitutes their only hope for obtaining advancement and acquiring a share in power (Banks 21–22). As for the members of the "ingroup," they constantly devise new stratagems (e.g., jargons) to frustrate the would-be converts to their idiom (Gudykunst and Schmidt 11).

In this context, arguments about the cohesive benefits of European languages must be viewed with extreme skepticism unless we deny the existence of the majority of Africans who speak no European languages. Even among those who do, categorization (or stereotyping) still takes place according to markedness or unmarkedness. Newsum illustrates this propensity by drawing attention to elite attitudes toward pidgin and those who use it. African literature in English also abounds with examples of those who are stigmatized for using standard English imperfectly (according to elite standards). For example, Wole Soyinka's You-Mean-Mayself, one of the "strays" who drifted in and out of his childhood at Aké, briefly served as a butt of childish ridicule by Wole and his siblings. The author recalls that he and the other children poked fun at this man's peculiar accent, "and would entertain ourselves and Wild Christian with mimicries that sent her friends falling over with laughter" (1981: 115). Soyinka gives him no other name than You-Mean-Mayself, for the man's mispronunciation of English is apparently more important than any proper name he might have had.

Soyinka explains the origin of this nickname when he describes the man's response on being asked by Essay if he had eaten:

> Mayself's face then rose from the journal in which he had buried it during Essay's planning for breakfast. He looked up, startled, stared at first in any direction except the one from which the question had so clearly emanated. Suddenly he realized his mistake, turned to the questioner, registered visibly that the question had, surprisingly, been directed at

> him. There followed a quick intake of breath as the novelty of the question, one which could never before have been pronounced in his hearing, etched a huge surprise on his face. Only then came the predictable, ritual answer:
>
> "Oh, you-mean-mayself? Ny-ou." (116–17)

The recreation of this scene is followed by the explanation that the first section of the man's answer "emerged clipped in spite of a full exaggeration of the vowels. The second, the 'Ny-ou' by contrast, which faded into an upper register, was like the mewing of our cat and it was this . . . which sent us into paroxysms of laughter . . . " (117).

You-Mean-Mayself is an object of ridicule ostensibly because he is in the habit of arriving at Essay's residence in time to share his meals, having made sure, of course, that Wild Christian was off the premises. He is a legitimate buffoon because he lacks a quality important to the Yoruba—the quality of self-respect. He ignored the children's derision, and not until Wild Christian pointedly disgraced him did he cease his thick-skinned leeching. Nevertheless, his major character flaw is signalled by his imperfect control of English. For good measure, Soyinka completes his portrait of the man by alluding to his physical grotesqueness, adding that he was "short, rather light complexioned and had a small, box-like head" (116). The treatment of You-Mean-Mayself recalls that of Club-foot, Governor of Temoko in *Season of Anomy*. Here also, speech habit ("Most interesting you should be interested, in that particular laydeee. . . .") becomes a mark of moral inferiority. He too has grotesque physical features, his unfortunate club-foot among them (1973: 282–83). Soyinka is not alone in this practice; Ayi Kwei Armah adopts the same tactic in characterizing the contractor with adventitious teeth in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Chinua Achebe depicts Chief Nanga (*A Man of the People*) in a similar way, although he spares his subject any physical deformities.

Henry Louis Gates's discussion of the "black vernacular" is relevant to the choice of language for literary and other purposes in Africa. According to Gates, black vernacular is an index of blackness, a sign of black difference, a "blackness of the tongue" that has survived all attempts at integration (1988: ix). He traces the constituent features of this "sign of difference" back to Africa and interprets their persistence in America as a testimony to the resilience of African cultures. Addressing those who doubt the possibility that Africanisms could have survived under the conditions of slavery, he affirms:

> The notion that the Middle Passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies. The full erasure of cultures as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveler as the classic cultures of traditional West Africa would have been extraordinarily difficult. (4)

Although the slavers did not create a "tabula rasa of consciousness" in the slaves, they were sufficiently worried about the revolutionary potential of the slaves' native languages that they adopted drastic measures to stamp them out. Even so, the slaves created a new culture, as Gates points out, a "colorful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal threads" made up of "the most useful and the most compelling fragments" of the surviving patrimony (4). The logic of Gates's argument leads to the conclusion that if black difference in North American society resides in black English (which reflects the remembered linguistic resources from an African past), then the African difference must reside in African languages and what they connote.

After a recent reading, Marlene Nourbese Philip was asked to describe how she felt about the necessity of writing in English, a language which she describes in one of her poems as "a foreign anguish." In answering the question she compared her feeling about the language to one's love for one's abusive mother. As a Caribbean woman, she had no other language but English, but she could not recall without pain or anguish the history of her inheriting that language as a mother-tongue. People from the Caribbean dull the pain of remembering, she said, by taking recourse to what Edward Braithwaite terms "nation languages," that is, languages which, though based on English, subvert English at every turn. As Philip's answer and Gates's argument suggest, uprooted Africans in the Americas have lost their African languages. For them, Africans on the African continent, with their linguistic patrimonies still intact, are objects of envy, not pity. What would they not give to have a language that might replace English—a language that would enable them to excise from their collective memory the traumatic history that English recalls? To adopt Philip's analogy, the African who is infatuated with any other language is like a child who voluntarily insists upon remaining with an abusive kidnapper, even when its loving parent pleads with it to come home.

Gates embraces "blackness of the tongue" at least partly because it is a "closed vernacular tradition" that offers African-Americans the opportunity to keep certain rituals "away from the eyes of outsiders"