



## Emenyonu and the language of Igbo literature: A review

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In *The Literary History of the Igbo Novel: African Literature in African Languages* (2020), Ernest N. EMENYONU presents how his perception of what constitutes Igbo literature has evolved overtime. For instance, in *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* (1978), a publication that resulted from his doctoral thesis at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, he defined the Igbo novel as “any novel written in English or the Igbo language by people of Igbo origin or ancestry” (quoted in EMENYONU 2020: 1). By this definition, novels written by Chinua Achebe, Chukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Elechi Amadi and a host of others novelists of Igbo origin who wrote in English fell under this definition of the Igbo novel. The same goes for novels written by Pita Nwana, D. N. Achara, Tony Ubesie and others who wrote in Igbo. This definition, however, excludes novels written in French or German by writers of Igbo origin, even if the novels express an Igbo worldview. Be that as it may, EMENYONU explains that at the time he wrote his doctoral thesis in the 1970s,

“there were in circulation fewer than six novels published in Igbo language and just as fewer well-known Igbo novelists. But names of Igbo writers dominated the list of the authors of about eighty novels published in English by West Africans at the end of the first decade of Nigerian Independence (1960s).” (2020: 3)

In other words, the novels written in Igbo at the time were so few to constitute enough data for an extensive study of Igbo ethnic literature. It then became convenient for him to extend the language of the Igbo novel to include novels written in English by writers of Igbo origin. However, decades later, after a series of intensive studies of Igbo literature, the outcomes of which he presented at various literary forums, seminars and conferences, he realized that “the language





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of expression was central to a valid and authentic definition of any literature or genre” (EMENYONU 2020: 2). Consequently, he redefined the Igbo novel as “a novel written first and foremost in Igbo language, depicting Igbo worldview (a race with a population of more than 25 million), wholly or in part, and written by an Igbo person” (EMENYONU 2020: 2). When he presented this revised definition of what constitutes the Igbo novel at the 2003 annual conference of the African Studies Association held at Boston, Massachusetts, many of the Igbo scholars at the conference opposed it. Emenyonu does not provide the arguments of the Igbo scholars against his REVISED definition of the Igbo novel. However, he dismissed their view as “sentimental” and their approach as being “more political than literary” (p. 2). The young scholars in this group received a heavier blow:

“The young literary scholars present who objected to my new definition apparently did so for some purely personal concerns. Having adopted my original definition, they had in the course of their undergraduate and graduate studies published term papers, theses, dissertations, articles, and other works in which they had classified and analyzed novels written in English by such writers as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chukwuemeka Ike, John Munonye, Elechi Amadi, E. C. Uzodimma, Buchi Emecheta, and Ifeoma Okoye, as Igbo novels. Their reputations (if not intellectual integrity) were at stake! Therefore, they ‘vowed’ to continue to define the Igbo novel to include any novel in English written by a person of Igbo origin.” (EMENYONU 2020: 2)

This patronizing stance is disrespectful of the scholars so dismissed, and somewhat distracting. On the one hand, it suggests that these scholars are not willing to grow intellectually, stubbornly holding on to a view that is no longer tenable, despite the fact that he himself, the authority on which they based their position, who had the same view in his doctoral studies days, had matured overtime. On the other hand, it is a tenuous attempt at diverting attention from the valid questions that his revised definition of the Igbo novel raises.

Emenyonu’s definition of the Igbo novel bases it on three criteria: 1) it must be written first in the Igbo language, 2) it must depict an Igbo worldview, wholly or in part, and 3) it must be written by an Igbo person. What are the real and hypothetical issues embedded in these parameters, and how successful has Emenyonu been in applying these parameters?

The first parameter inevitably excludes novels originally written in English (or other languages) and then translated into Igbo, irrespective of whether the other two criteria are met. For instance, Chukwuemeka IKE originally wrote *The Potter’s Wheel* (1973) in English and then translated the text himself into Igbo as



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*Anụ Ebu Nwa* (1999); Chinua ACHEBE's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has two translations into Igbo, namely *Ihe Aghasaa* (2008) by Izuu NWANKWO and *Agharata* (2009) by P. A. EZIKEOJIAKU. Going by Emenyonu's revised definition of the Igbo novel, these novels do not qualify as Igbo novels. Surprisingly, in his list of Igbo language novels (see Appendix, pp. 139-141), Emenyonu includes *Anụ Ebu Nwa* and *Agharata*. *Ihe Aghasaa*, the translation of *Things Fall Apart* done by Izuu Nwankwo was not part of the list. One then wonders why Emenyonu would go against the first parameter he gave for defining the Igbo novel; for these novels were originally written in English before they were translated into Igbo. What is more, in an interview with me on June 6, 2015 in Bayreuth, I asked Prof. Emenyonu whether the translation of *Ọmenụkọ* from Igbo into English would still count as Igbo literature. His response was that "*Macbeth, Julius Caesar* – works by Shakespeare – have been translated into other languages. They still remain British literature". By extension, the translation into Igbo of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Ike's *The Potter's Wheel*, novels which no longer count as Igbo literature, going by Emenyonu's first yardstick for defining Igbo literature, cannot be counted as part of the corpus of Igbo literature. Why then were translations of texts that are no longer considered to be part of Igbo literature listed as such? Does translating a non-Igbo literary work into Igbo change the status of the text? Would a translation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* into Igbo also qualify as Igbo literature? EMENYONU (2020) does not seem to agree with EMENYONU (2015); he does not seem to be consistent in his application of this parameter of the first language in which a literary work is written.

The requirement that the literary work have an Igbo worldview, Emenyonu's second yardstick for defining Igbo literature, may not be so problematic considering that it is difficult to have a novel-length piece of writing in Igbo that is bereft of Igbo proverbs and idioms. This is more so considering that Emenyonu gives the caveat that the worldview so presented may be "wholly or in part" (p. 2). As such, this criterion may not be belaboured here.

On the contrary, the third criterion on the ancestry of the author of an authentic Igbo novel is very problematic: it means that a writer who is born and raised in Igboland and probably taught Igbo in the secondary school, who decides to write a novel in Igbo may not have their novel recognized as authentic Igbo novel because the author's ancestors were not Igbo. The fact that their proficiency in the Igbo language is same as that of persons of Igbo ancestry is immaterial. The fact that their novel is first written in Igbo and also saturated with Igbo idioms and proverbs is of no consequence. Granted that there may not be such a writer yet, one cannot write off the possibility of such arising in some future period. What is more, many scholars who have championed the study and promotion of



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Igbo language, literature and culture are not of Igbo ancestry. Kay Williamson and Frances W. Pritchett come to mind in this regard. Kay Williamson was a British linguist who did a lot of seminal linguistic studies of Igbo. On her part, Frances W. Pritchett was a New Yorker who did many translations of texts from Igbo to English. Had these Igbo enthusiasts written novels in Igbo, Emenyonu would not recognize them as authentic Igbo novels because the authors' ancestry is not Igbo.

Perhaps this explains why Emenyonu does not make a single mention of Frances W. Pritchett and her translations from Igbo into English of all the novels he analysed in Chapter 5 of the book entitled "Early Fiction in Igbo – The Pioneers". Indeed, no human being, living or dead, has translated and published more works – critical and literary (prose, poetry, drama) – from Igbo to English than Ms Pritchett has done. The works she translated and published before her death include Pita NWANA's *Ọmenụkọ* (1933), D. N. ACHARA's *Ala Bingo* (1963), Betram Iwunwa Nkemgemedi OSUAGWU's *Egwuregwu Igbo Abuọ: Akụuwa na Ụka A Kpara Akpa* (1977), Chike Osita GBUJIE's *Oguamalam* (1979), J. U. T. NZEAKO's *Chi Ewere Ehihie Jie* (n.d.) and Chinua ACHEBE's Odenigbo lecture *Taa Bu Gboo: Echi Di Ime* (1999). Other works translated by Ms Pritchett but published posthumously include Leopold BELL-GAM's *Ije Odumodu Jere* (1963), J. U. Tagbo NZEAKO's *Erimma* (1973), R. M. EKECHUKWU's *Akpa Uche: Akwụkwọ Okwu Nkiri na Mbem Igbo* (1975), Enyinna AKOMA's *Obidiya* (1977), Mmụotụlụmanya ỌKAFỌ's *Onye Oma Emeka* (n.d.), Betram Iwunwa Nkemgemedi OSUAGWU's *Nwa Ngwii Pue Eze* (1977), *Ndi Igbo na Omenala ha* (1979) and *Nkem Ejee America* (2001), Walter C. ENEORE's *Echi Di Ime* (1979), and Ihechukwu MADUBUIKE's *Ighota Abu Igbo* (1981). Indeed, all her translations alongside their Igbo source texts are published open access online,<sup>1</sup> which makes these texts, some of which have gone off-print, readily and easily accessible. In effect, without her efforts, the texts in Igbo would not reach a wider Igbo audience, and her translations into English have extended the readership of the texts beyond linguistic boundaries. Indeed, some studies of these texts are based on Pritchett's translation (cf. UGOCHUKWU's 2011 and HODGES' 2013 studies of *Omenuko*). Emenyonu made no mention of any of these translations by Frances W. Pritchett, yet he mentions his translations of *Ọmenụkọ* (published in 2014) and *Ala Bingo* (unpublished). Can this omission be interpreted as "literary" and not "political"?

What the foregoing indicates is that it is yet too early to celebrate Emenyonu's revised definition of what constitutes Igbo literature. The fact that he himself

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/igbo\\_index.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/igbo_index.html)



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could not maintain some consistency is his application of his revised definition indicates that his critics are not being merely sentimental as he suggests.

Indeed, Emenyonu's essentialist definition of Igbo literature is reminiscent of the argument that raged in the 1960s about the language of African literature (see WALI 1963 and ACHEBE [1965] 1997). While WALI (1963), like Emenyonu, insists that African literature must be written in African languages and not in the languages of the former colonial powers, Achebe ([1965] 1997) maintains that African literature could be written in African languages or in the former colonial languages. Achebe's argument is hinged on the impact of the colonial experience on Africans which has made the colonial languages an integral part of the repertoire of the African writer: "Any attempt to define African literature in terms that overlook the complexities of the African scene is doomed to failure (ACHEBE [1965] 1997: 343). Emenyonu is not ignorant of the complexity of the Igbo scene. Chapter 1 of the book discusses in part the linguistic situation in Nigeria where English is the language of instruction in schools. The Nigerian government's policy statements in the *National Policy on Education* (2014) which make indigenous Nigerian languages the languages of instructions in early childhood are not enforced. So, the average Nigerian (including the Igbo) child who has had some western education has English as the language of instruction at almost all the levels of education. They are thus more disposed to be proficient in English than in Igbo or other Nigerian languages. English is a major part of their lived experiences. They could be proficient to varying degrees in spoken Igbo; but only a few manage to master the art of writing in Igbo. And if they have to write about their Igbo experience, they are more inclined to do so in English than in Igbo. In other words, the essentialist definition by Emenyonu would translate to denying a higher percentage of Igbo writers a claim to having contributed to Igbo literature irrespective of the worldview expressed in the literary work. It would mean living in denial of the history of the Igbo people. It would mean not acknowledging the present realities of the Igbo society.

The key impetus for Emenyonu's revised definition of what constitutes Igbo literature is the fact that more literary works have been written in Igbo since the publication of his doctoral thesis in 1978. When the thesis was written, he did not consider the language of the literary work important in defining the text because there were not more than six novels published in Igbo at the time and most of the authors of the about eighty novels in English by West Africans were of Igbo origin (EMENYONU 2020: 3). Today, the fewer than six novels written in Igbo has increased to more than a hundred. This is commendable. But does that suggest that writers of Igbo ancestry have stopped producing literary works in English and other foreign languages? Does it mean that during this period more



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literary works have been written in Igbo than in English by writers of Igbo origin such that the works in English are now in the periphery while those in Igbo now have centre stage in the Igbo literary polysystem (cf. EVEN-ZOHAR 1990) to justify the revised definition? Emenyonu's revised definition is premature and would hope to become tenable when these questions are answered in the affirmative. Until then, his revised definition of Igbo literature requires further revision on arrival. It needs to articulate the place of translation within the Igbo literary polysystem. It also needs to problematize the concept of who an Igbo author is.



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