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Universidad de Antioquia

Colombia

Bariki, Isaiah

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# Translating African Names in Fiction<sup>\*1</sup>

Isaiah Bariki<sup>\*\*</sup>

Este texto estudia la significación sociocultural y etnopragmática de los nombres africanos, tal como estos son asignados por los yorubas e izons de Nigeria y los akans de Ghana, para mostrar, desde la antropología lingüística, su naturaleza no arbitraria, y de qué manera tal significación debe mantenerse en la traducción, especialmente de textos de ficción.

Palabras clave: nombres personales africanos, funciones socioculturales de los nombres personales, traducción de nombres personales

In this paper, we study the sociocultural and ethnopragmatic significance of African names as used by the Yoruba and Izo of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana. From the perspective of linguistic anthropology, we show the non-arbitrary nature of these names and demonstrate the need to translate them, particularly in fictional texts, so that their significance may be preserved.

Keywords: African personal names, sociocultural functions of personal names, translation of personal names

Ce texte étudie la signification socioculturelle et ethnopragmatique des noms africains, tel que ces derniers sont assignés par les Yorouba et les Izons du Nigéria et par les Akans du Ghana, dans le but de mettre en évidence, à partir de l'anthropologie linguistique, sa nature non arbitraire, et de quelle manière une telle signification doit être conservée dans la traduction, en particulier dans les textes de fiction.

Mots-clés : noms personnels africains, fonctions socioculturelles des noms personnels, traduction de noms personnels

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Onomastics is the “study of the history and origin of proper names, especially personal names” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1999:1996). But a less popular term is “anthroponymy” which is the study of the cultural imperatives of personal

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1 The paper was presented at the XVIII World Congress of the International Federation of Translators which held in Shanghai, China from 4th-7th August, 2008.

In discussing Fagunwa's works, L. Murby the editor of Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* expresses his inadequacies in the following words that appropriately tell our own story: «My knowledge of them has unfortunately been obtained at second hand from reading them in translation and from discussing with Yoruba friends. » We wish to thank in particular Professor Tunde Ajiboye and Dr Lere Adeyemi of University of Ilorin for their patient explanations and great encouragement.



names. Anthroponymy does not cover as wide a scope as onomastics, but will be more appropriate for our study. It has attracted intellectual discourse among linguists, anthropologists, philosophers of language, sociologists and experts in religious studies. Initial works by linguists and anthropologists were mainly pre-occupied with the classificatory function of naming and the relationship between names and social structure. Later classificatory researchers beamed their searchlight on the syntactic functions of names as linguists took greater interest in African personal names (cf Ekundayo, 1977). Linguists have amply demonstrated that the variety of the structure of personal names in Africa can be appreciated through the grammar of the language in question. Later works veered towards linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics with a heavy dose of cultural values and their import on names (e.g. Akinnaso, 1980: 1983; Agyekum, 2006).

Syntactic values and the sociolinguistic import of names present rich opportunities of study for translators and translators. These opportunities have, however, been hardly exploited, especially as they relate to African names.

Peter Newmark (1991:3) seems to be one of the few that appreciate the need for the translation of names and gives two contexts for doing so:

1. where there is a recognized equivalent
2. where additional information may be considered vital in carrying the reader along with the full cultural weight of the name.

Newmark (1991:3) calls the latter “information translation”.

Recent works on anthroponymy have been quite stimulating (cf. Fernandes, 2006; Tymoczko, in Fernandes *ibid.*, A. Formakyzk, 2007). Tymoczko (in Fernandes *ibid.*) hits at the head of the nail of anthroponymy translation problems in the following words:

There is a widespread disposition that names should be translated unchanged in textual writings (...) indeed, a naïve or inexperienced translator (...) may look forward to the proper names in a text as islands of repose – unproblematic bits to be passed intact without effort into the new linguistic texture being created across the language gap without alteration, in the sense that a saint’s relics are translated from a resting place to another.



Lincoln Fernandes' article treats the subject in detail even though it is pre-occupied with names in children's fantasy literature. Fernandez initially recognizes three things translators generally do with names (viz substitution, transcription and outright omission). He, however, relies heavily on Herman's (1988) ways of rendering names and identifies ten translation procedures in Portuguese - English parallel corpus on children's fantasy literature. These he gives as: renditions, copy, transcription, substitution, recreation, deletion, addition, transportation, phonological replacement and conventionality. Anna Formakcyzk's interesting article also deals with children's literature.

Our paper differs from the two orientations above in the sense that it looks at the importance of translation of personal names from an African perspective. Besides, it has primarily the adult reader in mind. Specific African texts or social situations will be examined to see what translators have done, should or could do, with personal names. In order to drive home our point, it is crucial that the reader be given a good socio-cultural and ethnopragmatic background of personal names and naming. Our examples will be drawn from Nigeria (our native land) and Ghana (where we lived for over seven years). Within Nigeria, Yoruba and Izon examples will be preferred; the former being my wife's language among whose people I have lived consistently for thirty-four years and the latter is my mother tongue. The narrowing down of the scope of names to just two countries is imperative so as to avoid falling into the pitfall of overgeneralization. While there are many recognizable and broad common traits of naming in Africa, it will certainly be a fallacy to talk of a monocultural approach to personal names in so big and diverse a continent as Africa.

In talking about translation generally, we hold the view that translation goes beyond what is textually recorded, but captures or should also capture what important associative meanings go with it. A word in the mind conjures in one a meaning and at times an image. This is applicable also to personal names in Africa.

This crucial introductory note leads us to personal names and naming in Africa.



## 2. WHAT NAMES ENTAIL IN AFRICA

In many African languages, personal names have a strong historical, socio-cultural and ethnopragmatic bearing that go beyond mere identity or referentiality. In most cases, the names are neither arbitrary nor asemantic. This is not to imply that names in other climes are entirely arbitrary as all cultures have their parameters for naming. What is obvious is that African names have a strikingly semantic and semiotic load. In other words, they have communicative functions. Personal names in Nigeria are multifunctional despite their mono-referential status (mono-referential in the sense that they refer to one person only).

The cultural specificity of personal names should be appreciated. For instance, among the Yorubas and Izos of Nigeria and the Akans of Ghana, circumstances surrounding a child's birth dictate the name to be given it. Thus, social contexts play a vital role in appreciating African names. Besides, names have attributes. Kofi Agyekum aptly describes Akan (Ghanaian) names as "iconic-representation of complete social variables that indexicalize and relate to the name and the person". Relying on Duranti, Agyekum uses the term indexicality to refer to sociocultural interpretation of names. Agyekum's typology of Akan personal names is similar in many respects to that of Yoruba and Izo:

(1) Day names, (2) Family names, (3) Circumstantial names, (4) Theophorous names, (5) Flora and fauna, (6) Weird and incarnate names, (7) Achievement names, stool (i.e. royal) names, religion, occupational, (8) Insinuating and proverbial names (9) bodily structure, and (10) Kinship etc. Kofi Agyekum (op. cit., p. 206).

The foregoing list is by no means exhaustive but can serve to ignite an imaginative mind as to the wealth of African personal names and explain the information embedded in such names. The names here are hypothetical except the last one; hypothetical in the sense that they do not refer to anyone we know: Kofi Annan is well known by the elites of Africa

1. Taiwo Abiodun Olufunmilayo Dada



2. Ogrigbomu Shanghai Goodluck
3. Kwame Piesie Afriye
4. Kofi Annan

## 2.1 Taiwo Abiodun Olufunmilayo Dada

This is a Yoruba name. Taiwo is the first of twins or triplets. S/he is, however, believed culturally to be younger than the second of the twins or triplets whose name is Kehinde. Kehinde, in his/her capacity as the older person, “sends” Taiwo to “survey” the world awaiting his/her (Taiwo’s) arrival. Oko will be the third of the triplets. Idowu and Alaba are the automatic “God-ordained” names of the children born next to twins or triplets.

Abiodun: This name shows that the child is born during festivity - Christmas, New year, Muslim festivals, period of worshipping a local deity, etc.

Olufunmilayo means “the Lord has given me joy” and may simply bear Funmi as a hypocoristic term. Like most Yoruba names, Olufunmilayo is made up of common words of Yoruba lexicon. Such names obey Yoruba grammatical rules and are easy to translate. Of course, the circumstances of birth connote joy. Semantically, this name has no sex deixis, but is given almost always to girls.

Dada, like Taiwo, is an *amutorunwa* name i.e. it is “brought from heaven”. It is given to a child born with curly hair. *Amutorunwa* names are predominantly “non-lexicalized names... constituting an esoterical lexical domain” (Akinaso 1983:141). A few other *amutorunwa* names among many others are:

Ige: child born with the legs (rather than the head) presented first.

Ojo: male child born with the umbilical cord twined around its neck.

## 2.2 Ogrigbomu Shanghai Goodluck

The first name indicates that the bearer is Izon (man or woman) from Nigeria’s turbulent Niger Delta region. “Ogrigbomu” means centipede and is a death-prevention name. This weird, unattractive and insulting name shows that a family has been a victim of frequent infantile mortality. The insulting name is given to



discourage the child's acceptability in the "underworld" if it tries to return there. There is, however, a tendency of bearers of such names to change them when they are of age. This is similar to the Akan practice where "people with circumstantial names normally change them when they grow up [...]" (Agyeman 2006:209). Names portraying a kind of defensive mechanism against further deaths are called *bagyina* or *apendin* in Akan, *abiku* in Yoruba and *ogbanje* in Igbo.

"Shanghai" here will be an anthrotoponymy, a personal name denoting the place of birth. For an Izon, it could also connote an admiration of this Chinese town or simply a longing to be there. If, during or shortly after the XVIII World Congress of the International Federation of Translators in Shanghai (where this paper was first presented), my wife gave birth to a baby, an appropriate name could be "Shanghai" or "China". It is not uncommon to see Isons who bear names like Freetown, London, Liverpool, etc. Examples of this kind make it difficult in some situations to distinguish toponomastics from anthroponomy in Izon.

The third name, Goodluck, is a prayer, a desire or a confirmation of a recently-enjoyed favour. The desire is that the 'power' behind goodluck follows the bearer. Such is the case of Nigeria's current Vice president, an Izon man, who attained this position and many others on what many consider to be a platter of gold.

### 2.3 Kwame Piesie Afriye

The bearer is a Ghanaian of Akan stock. Kwame means Saturday - born and is expected to be creative (Obeng in Agyekum, 2006). Agyeman (2006:212) attests to the reality of temporal deixis where every Akan "has an automatic birthday first name that points to the day of the week that s/he was born". The first name in Akan is called Kradin (i.e. soul's name, a name offered to the bearer by his/her soul. The particular day is expected to affect in one way or the other the behaviour, fate and future of the child. According to Agyekum, Piesie is an ordinal, and a beautiful metaphorical name denoting the first born. The name has two interesting semantic segments: *pie* and *sie*. *Sie* signifies an anthill and is metaphorically used to stand for the woman's stomach from where the first child is conceptualized as erupting (*pie*). After Piesie come



Manu, Mensa (or Mansa for a female child), Anane / Annan etc. All these names represent Akan numerals.

Afriye is given to a child born during a time of economic boom.

## **2.4 Kofi Annan**

This is another Akan name. Kofi Annan, whose name meant that he was born on a Friday, and also that his father was the fourth child of the family lived up to the expectations as he became a one-time Secretary General of the United Nations. The great success he attained was a good match for his name Kofi, connoting adventure.

The foregoing illustrations are a mere tip of the iceberg as there are more numerous and fascinating examples that portray the multi-faceted functions and nature of African names. The question then arises: how do all these relate to translation?

## **3. TRANSLATION OF NAMES**

It is our view that translators cannot afford to treat African names in fictional contexts, especially allegorical ones, as “a saint’s relic” (to use Tymoczko’s metaphor) to be transferred undisturbed all the time. African names are too rich to be left untranslated in certain fictional texts, especially allegorical ones. Where they cannot be translated, recourse to cultural adaptation or substitution can be useful if the objective of the translator is to attempt to produce a similar effect and readability in the target language.

The fictional texts alluded to in this paper are mainly allegorical in nature. They portray a mixture of two kingdoms—the animal kingdom and the human world. Virtues and vices that are fundamental to the message are enshrined in personal names, hence the need to fathom the meaning of such names. Inability to understand the meaning of the names reduces the reader’s appreciation of the function of such names, a situation that automatically confines the names to a mere referential level—which in turn reduces the impact of the message. Characters behave in



accordance with their names. For instance, if there is a quarrel between Anger and Pride, either Patience or Humility or both are expected to play a vital role in resolving the issue(s) at stake.

The opinion expressed here is akin to Fernandes' (2006:56) where he asserts that personal names often act as "dense signifiers that give clues about the destiny of a character or indications of the way the storyline may develop."

#### 4. SPECIFIC TEXTS

This segment will concentrate on the examination of a few Yoruba texts and their translations and a popular play *Ozidi* with its root in Izon legend. Others are untranslated Yoruba texts where we will discuss the translation implication of names. The texts to be considered are:

1. *Igbo Olodumare* by D.O. Fagunwa (2005), translated into *The Forest of God* by G. Ajadi (2005).
2. *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* by O. O. Fagunwa (1950), translated into French by Olaoye Abioye (1992): *Le preux chasseur dans la forêt infestée de démons*.
3. *Irikerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954) by D.O. Fagunwa, translated by Dapo Adeniyi (1994) as *The Expedition to the Mount (The Third Saga)*.
4. *Oriade kii sun ta* by Olu Owolabi (yet to be translated).
5. *Ibu Olokun* by J. O. Ogundele (yet to be translated).
6. J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Ozidi* (2001), translated from oral Izon literature into English. A subsequent version *Ozidi Saga* (2006) has both English and Izon versions in the same book.

Our emphasis is on D.O. Fagunwa's books, the first of which is *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1950) published by Nelson Ltd in Hong Kong. We will summarize the greatness of Fagunwa, this Yoruba author, through the comments of L. Murby (in Fagunwa, 1950, Editor's Foreword):

I have been able to see that in their treatment of character and story (i.e. Fagunwa's epics or allegories), in their use of myth and legend and



allegory, and in their proverbial and epigrammatic language they bear definite resemblances to the *Odyssey* and *Beowulf* and the early medieval romances on the one hand, and on the other hand to that great cornerstone of the English novel Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress*.

#### 4.1 Ajadi's Translation of D.O. Fagunwa's *Igbo Oludumare* into *The Forest of God*

Describing Fagunwa as a "skilful nomenclaturist whose characters match their roles in the narratives", Gabriel Ajadi (2005) opts to retain or transplant original names while giving copious explanatory notes. His recourse to footnotes is borne out of a conscious attempt to narrow down the linguistic and cultural dissimilarities between Yoruba and English. However, the numerous footnotes can easily disrupt the flow of reading. The translator's refusal not to translate the names in the body of the work reduces the probability of retention of such names by foreign readers, especially where the names are long and have strange graphological forms leading to pronunciation problems. Moreover, the reader will have to turn to the notes to appreciate the virtues or vices which these names personify. In fact, for some categories of readers (e.g. children), an additional problem—that of readability—is created. Readability is a cogent enough reason for the justification of translating anthroponomy in fictional texts where such names are crucial to an appreciation of the author's message. *Igbo Oludumare* is replete with high sounding Yoruba names:

- |                              |                           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Baba – Onirungbon – Yeuke | – The man with long beard |
| 2. Enia – se – pele          | – A gentle person         |
| 3. Esu – Kerere – Ode        | – A gnome                 |
| 4. Ijambaforiti              | – Accident rests its head |

Some of the names are nicknames (e.g. Aguntan – inaki: Sheep Monkey).

Ajadi's use of notes reminds me of Dominic Aury's words (preface to Georges Mounin 1963: ix: "La note en bas de page est la honte du traducteur"—"Notes at the bottom of a page constitute a shame to the translator", our translation). The sheer number of footnotes leads to some clumsiness that slows down the reader.



In the *Forest of God*, Enia - se - pele marries his daughter to a friend, a situation that partly explains the virtue of his names. It should, however, be observed that Fagunwa, the foremost Yoruba author has, in some instances, worked out a strategy that makes the reader to appreciate the name:

‘Nigbati emi ati Enia-se-pele ri ara wa a di mo ara wa ni, on na si so opolopo nkan fun mi. Ibiti a ti nyọ ayọ yi ni mo ti nwo okunrin kan bayi ti o ti bere si rerin lati igbati mo ti de odo awon alejo wonyi, nigbati mo si wo o daradara mo ri i pe eniti mo ti mo ni. Alaigbon enia patapata gbã a ni, iwa re si dabi iwa eranko, beni irin ese re dabi i aguntan idi re na si ni eyi ti gbogbo awon ara ilu wa fi ma npe e ni aguntan-inaki, dongiṣolá okunrin. [Fágúnwà, 2006 :132-133]

When Enia - se - pele and I saw each other, we embraced each other, and he also told me a lot of things. As we were rejoicing, I was looking at a man, who had been laughing since the time I had reached these guests’ place, and when I looked; I saw that it was the fellowwhom I had known (before), he was completely an unwise person, his behaviour was like that of an animal and his steppings were like those of sheep. This was the reason why all people of our town used to call him Aguntan - inaki, a dumb man. (Ajadi, 2005:161)

This approach is similar to that of Chinua Achebe who in his great work *Things Fall Apart* (1958) reveals reasons for the adoption of the certain names.

Ajadi also retains Reseli instead of its conventionalized English form Rachel; a situation that robs the reader of the Christian background of the character and in fact of the author. Reseli as an exonym does not pose a translation problem, but its ‘untranslation’ leads to some loss. The loss of meaning is at the semiotic level where names act as religious; historical and other signs.

It will be very tempting for a non Nigerian to interpret Ajadi’s translation in terms of foreignization. Foreignization—a term created by L. Venuti—implies in translation studies the conservation of the foreign identity (in this case the name) in the target text. Indeed, an untranslated name is a good cultural marker of a foreign text. Recourse to foreignization aids the reader to enjoy



the cultural otherness of the text. But foreignization as enunciated by Venuti has some fundamental characteristics that are at variance with Ajadi's views and "translational environment". Foreignization "entails choosing a foreign text and developing a method along lines which are excluded by dominant cultural values in the target language" (Venuti). "Semantically exocentric expressions" or "intraorganism meanings" (to use E. Nida's words in Natalia Vid, 2008) are unchanged, so are names. In other words, in foreignization, the author is undisturbed in the manner described by the German translator F. Schleiermacher (in Bariki 2007). The local audience is culturally enriched in the process, but the crucial point to observe is that Dr. Ajadi translates from Yoruba, his mother tongue, into English, his second language and language of academic specialization.

As for the difficult names, a way out of tediousness and unreadability could be by having recourse to clipped forms, a common feature in Yoruba anthroponomy. Names of characters may be retained by using shortened forms. The following names can be retained thus and will certainly be more reader-friendly:

Ijambaforiti	Foriti or Ijamba
Esu-Kekere-ode	Kekere
Enia - se - pele	Sepele

Of course, in real life situations an Izon name such as Tamaraufiriweniarerepade (one of the names of my daughter) has to be shortened (if only to allow it to be accommodated in the certificate; at home, we call her Arerepade). Using shortened forms is common in Yoruba.

In the translation of names, Ajadi has a zero approach and the foreign target text reader is therefore deprived of the joy of simultaneously appreciating the sociolinguistic import of Yoruba names as he reads the text. Besides, as earlier pointed out, the names are not reader-friendly.

Since Ajadi clearly prefers to retain the Yoruba names (an approach which is by no means unacceptable), we would suggest the shortened Yoruba forms to facilitate pronunciation and encourage reader-friendliness.



## 4.2 Olaoye Abioye's Translation of *Igbo Olodumare*

Abioye's approach contrasts with Ajadi's in the sense that he translates the names of characters and puts them in parentheses, e.g. Agbako (Le Malheur). Thereafter, he maintains the approach or uses either the original name or the translated version only. We are yet to appreciate the inconsistency in approach, but the more crucial thing is that the translation makes the reader feel at home. It is reader-friendly and the reader stands a better chance of enjoying and appreciating not only the novel but also the Yoruba worldview of virtues and vices and the importance of names vis-à-vis the characters. The multi-functional dimension of names as opposed to their mono-referential quality is passed across to the foreign reader. Abioye also translates title of names: "*Je porte le nom Alade-Igbo, Chef de la forêt*". "Chef de la forêt" is the translation of "Alade-Igbo". Here the non Yoruba reader's knowledge of Yoruba is enriched. He also has recourse to notes, but not as profusely as Ajadi.

Just as in Ajadi's translation, there could be a misplaced tendency to have recourse to L. Venuti while discussing Olaoye's translation. This time domestication, and not foreignization, is what seems to matter. Our understanding of Venuti's concept of domestication and readings of Olaoye which were further reinforced by personal interactions have convinced us that imputing any sense of domestication will be most inappropriate. Venuti (1995:20) defines domestication as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to the target language cultural values, bringing the author back home." Domestication is not applicable here because Abioye, a professor of French, is translating from his native language to a foreign one, French. He is thus exporting the author abroad and not bringing him back home.

It will also be instructive to add that the concepts of domestication and foreignization are hardly evident and therefore undiscussed among translation exports in texts involving Nigerian languages and foreign ones. The concepts with their ideological undertones are more relevant to colonial and postcolonial African literature written in European languages. Most of such translations are done by Europeans and often come under severe criticism. A typical example is John Reed's English translation of *Une vie de boy* (cf. Ojo-Ade, 1980).



### 4.3 Dapo Adeniyi's Translation of *Irikerindo Ninu Igbo Etegbede* into *Expedition to the Mount of Thought (The Third Saga)*

In Dapo Adeniyi's translation of Fagunwa's *Irikerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954), some names are translated and this certainly allows the exotic elements in the work to be better appreciated by the target text reader.

*Ba mi ki awon omugo ti nbe ninu ile Omugoparapo wonni*  
 Extend my greetings to the other dunces in the House of United  
 Fools  
*Emi ni iyawo o re atijo* *Aiyedimeji*  
 I am your former wife Life-in-duplicate  
*Omugodimeta g'ori oye, Soponna gbe Omugodimeji*  
 Triple-Foolishness ascends to the throne, Small-Pox snatches  
 Double-Foolishness away

It is interesting to note that such names as *igberaga* (Pride), *ibanuje* (Sorrow) and *ahondiwura* (Precious) are spelt with initial small letters in the original Yoruba work. But the translator opts for capital letters, thereby bringing to the fore the fact that these are personal names in the context. At least one can talk of personification. Adeniyi leaves untranslated some crucial names: Akara-Ogun, Ogundayepo, Irikerindo, Gongosutakiti, Inakigori-ite, etc. These are certainly difficult names that can impede readability and enjoyment. The translator could have 'demystified' them through translation. Translating them would further have revealed the "inventive imagination" of the "enthusiastic raconteur" (Soyinka, 1982:6) that Fagunwa is.

### 4.4 Olu Owolabi's *Oriade kii sunta*

It is yet to be translated, but any future translator of this work may also have to carefully examine readability. Olu Owolabi's characterizations vis-à-vis readability reveals that Owolabi portrays temperamental as well as physical features of this character (Ogunsina, 1992:29). For instance, *Okoko meki Ajinuta Oogun* creates the impression of a "tall, hefty imposing and gigantic" person. There is also *Ale ranja-logbon-orun*, among others that may hamper readability.



Physical symbols are not lacking in Fagunwa either. *Akaraogun*, which denotes “magical cake bean”, is a Nigerian food that symbolizes, in this context, physical and spiritual strength as amply demonstrated by the character’s ability to survive his mother’s murderous ordeal. Strange events happening around him confirm the ontological significance of his names. Being very conscious of the power behind his name, Akaraogun boldly declares:

Kabiyesi Okunrin le ke si  
Your highness, you are indeed addressing a man (Ogunsina, 1992:29).

Any translator of Ogundele’s *Ejigbede Lona Isalu* will have to also decide on what to do with the strange characters and their rather weird names —names that are considered strange even by Yorubas e.g. *Ojiji logbologbo*, *Laburukeseye* and *Lagbondoko* (a human character). The names are influenced by their supernatural nature and character.

#### 4.5 J.O. Ogundele’s *Ibu Olokun*

Modeled after Fagunwa’s books, Ogundele’s work is full of names that typify the character’s mission. Morality sermonizes through the names and their characters. Translating the names will therefore be necessary:

Suru Patience  
Inufufu Irascibility  
Akekereke Lightness  
Irele Humility  
Imeleburu Idleness is evil  
Omuti - gbage - ise The drunkard forgets his suffering.

These are examples of common abstract nouns that are not only proper nouns, but also assume proper nouns and personal names.

#### 4.6 J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *Ozidi*

The reader should not, however, have the erroneous notion that all African names have semantic or syntactic values or functions in terms of being



deciphered. What is sure is that there is almost always an undercurrent cultural expectation or explanation to a name. A case in point is an Izon (Nigerian) name and the title of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's famous play *Ozidi*. *Ozidi* nonetheless conveys the picture of a tough and bold leader who successfully defies opposition without knuckling under pressure from sinister groups. In J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's work, *Ozidi* is a great leader, but is killed in a rebellion by powerful enemies. His son, given birth to posthumously, bears the same name and avenges his father's death. In *Ozidi*, the author who translates the work from Izon into English and vice versa, adopts pair translations in the English version as evidenced in the following names:

*Kemepara* the Half - man  
*Bouakarakarabiri* the Wizard of the Forest  
*Tebekeewene* the Head - Walker  
*Agonodi of the Sky-face*  
*Ewiri* the Tortoise  
*Engbesibeowei* the Scrotum - Carrier  
*Tebesonoma* of the Seven Heads

In other words, *Kemepara* means the Half-man while *Engbesibeowei* stands for the Scrotum-Carrier.

#### 4.7 A Daring Approach

A translator can afford to be more daring if he has a clearly-defined objective that matches the target literary genre. In that instance, what s/he does with names transcends translation in its elementary definition. S/he may venture into the realm of adaptation or substitution. A future translator of Yoruba novels may want to see to what extent names like Harpagon (a miserly person), Tartuffe (a hypocrite) may be incorporated into a French version. The translator may even go as far as adopting name like Dreyfuss bearing in mind the famous "l'affaire Dreyfuss", depending, of course, on the relevance of the name to the study.

The points discussed above tend to confirm Marmaridon's assertion (see Fernandes, 2006:46) that names in literary works operate at two levels: the "level in text" and the level "between the author of the work and the reader



and somehow operate above the text”. The first level is merely referential, but the latter conveys with it the diverse sociocultural and pragmatic meanings applicable to the names. It is indeed a “network of relations” which surpasses Firth’s definition of meaning (see Newmark 1991:24).

The translation methods employed by the various translators are simple. There are evidences of copy, rendition (literal translation) and transcription. Perhaps future translators could be more innovative and daring e.g. by having recourse to substitution (i.e. adopting a semantically unrelated name in the target language and literature). Substitution in this case would be similar to recreation, i.e. inventing a name in the source language text with a view to reproducing a similar effect in the target cultural setting. This can be done if the translator has a good grasp of the culture and relevant literary genre of the target language. It could also imply domestication.

Recreation strategies could also be an attempt towards domestication which its proponent Venuti (1997) defines as “an ethnocentric reduction of foreign text to target language cultural values, bringing the author back home”. Cases of domestication are non existent (to the best of our knowledge) in translations involving Yoruba and English or French texts. We are enthused by the slovenized (i.e. domesticated) names in various Slovenian translations of Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s *Uncle Tom Cabin* by Janez Božic, Malavasć and Silvester Kosutnik (in Darja Mazi-Leskovar, 2003). Below are a couple of the examples:

Tom becomes Tomaz  
George Harris becomes Ivan Harij

Slovenized names were used in harmony with Slovenian grammar in an attempt to create in Slovenian readers a sense of familiarity.

It should be remembered that the translator’s daring approach is partly fuelled by a desire to sustain readership just as the author of the original allows himself to be inspired through the choice of names. The words of a Nigerian author, Dr. Saviour Agoro will be instructive in this regard:



What about the names you give to your characters? It depends on the setting of the play, but it has to do as an artist too (sic). Most a times I give characters names in my language, Epie... Each name I give must have a meaning for me. That meaning helps me in sustaining the inspiration. Let me illustrate with the characters in *Caught at Last*. There are three characters in the play namely: Fiense, Abara and Udama. Fiense means overcome, become victorious over an obstacle or problem. Abara means blood. Udama is temptation. Abara reminds me about the blood of Jesus Christ that one can cleanse the sinner of his sins, if only he would allow him. Fiense suggests the situation of a struggle. There is a desire to overcome. But victory must be over a problem or difficulty. Udama, temptation, now comes to tempt Fiense to drag her down in her faith as a Christian. When in the end both Udama and Fiense are convicted of sin, it is Abara who shows them the way to the cross.

(Saviour Agoro, *Caught at Last*, unpublished)

## 5. CONCLUSION

In his discussion of translations, Peter Newmark (1999) discusses four main translation issues that would influence the translator as s/he gets down to practical work: the intention of the text, the intention of the translator, the reader and the setting of the text, the quality of the writing and the authority of the text. In analyzing these four vital points vis-à-vis translation of names in a fictional African setting, our view is that if the translator appreciates the intention of African fictional texts generally and cares to pass the vital message through “literary enjoyment”, s/he (translator) cannot but align with his/her author by attesting to the linguistic and cultural importance of names. Such an alignment can only lead to a conscious translation of names, a situation that is facilitated by the lexicon / grammatical nature of African names.

Besides, translating the semantic and semiotic values of African names with ample evidence of spatial, temporal, personal, religious, historical and gender deixis can be stimulating to a foreign reader whose worldview of the African culture and literary genre in question would be greatly enriched.



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## THE AUTHOR

\*\* Dr. Isaiah Bariki is a Senior Lecturer of French in University of Ilorin, Nigeria. His research interests include translation theory and practice, naming, orthography, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. He has published several articles, some of which have appeared in *Babel*, *Translatio*, *Le Linguiste*, *International Journal of Translation* and *International Journal of Current Research in the Humanities*. E-mail: [ozibar2002@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ozibar2002@yahoo.co.uk)