

Proceedings of the one-day workshop on
**'THE BODY IN THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL
PRODUCTIONS: BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND
SIGNIFICATION'**



Actes de la journée d'études et de réflexions sur
**'LE CORPS DANS LES PRODUCTIONS ARTISTIQUES ET
CULTURELLES : ENTRE ESTHÉTIQUE ET
SIGNIFICATION'**

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Klohinlwélé KONÉ

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- BERGER Gaston, 1967, *L'homme moderne et son éducation*, Paris, PUF.
- DIAGNE Souleymane Bachir, 2003, « Islam et philosophie. Leçons d'une rencontre », Diogène, 202, p. 145-151.
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THE HUMAN BODY AND ITS CULTURAL MEANING IN G. OKARA'S *THE VOICE*

Klohinlwélé KONÉ
nielfang@yahoo.fr

This study explores the Nigerian writer Okara's effort to indigenize the English language by transliterating the ijaw language into this European language. He achieves this goal through a recurrent reference to human body parts such as eyes, ears, feet, inside, umbilical cord. The body is generally regarded as a mere instrument that has no sense by itself. But this study tries to make it speak and mean both linguistically and culturally. This is achieved by using the theoretical tools of linguistics and socio-anthropology of the ethnic group that serves as the cultural setting to the novel. The study succeeds in showing how English can be "appropriated" and "abrogated" by translating abstract concepts into corporeal images. Such a linguistic experimentation conveys a specific cultural worldview through a foreign language thus contributing to make languages and cultures merge and enrich one another.

Keywords: transliteration, linguistic animism, material body, spiritual underpinning, cultural body



Cette étude explore l'effort de l'écrivain nigérian G. Okara d'indigéniser la langue anglaise au moyen de la translittération de la langue ijaw dans la langue qu'est l'anglais. L'écrivain réussit à atteindre son but par un recours récurrent aux organes du corps comme les yeux, les oreilles, les pieds, le for intérieur (inside), la corde ombilicale. Le corps est généralement vu comme un simple outil qui n'a pas de sens en lui-même. Cette étude entend le faire parler et signifier au double plan linguistique et socio-anthropologique de la communauté ethnique qui sert d'arrière-plan culturel au récit romanesque. L'article parvient à montrer comment l'anglais peut être « approprié » et « abrogé » en traduisant les concepts abstraits par une imagerie corporelle. Une telle expérimentation linguistique véhicule une vision du monde particulière dans une étrangère. Cela contribue à faire dialoguer les langues et les cultures pour un échange mutuel enrichissant.

Mots-clés : translittération, animisme linguistique, corps matériel, fondement spirituel, corps culture



Introduction

If the uses of human body and its anatomical functions are obvious to all and sundry, its use as a literary motif or theme, if not unprecedented, is yet less common. When used in fiction, human body parts are generally instrumental in describing physical and emotional reactions as human sense organs are the sites where these feedbacks can be traced to. References to the body parts and their anatomical functions have been present in African literature with several writers like A. K. Armah, Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor, J. M. Adiafi, to cite a few. In their works, physical deformities are described to suggest some moral defaults and to mock characters' attitudes. The senses of readers are also assaulted ad nauseam by vivid and realistic descriptions of foul odour of unhealthy physical environments, the appalling odour of decayed body parts as a metaphor of the general social and moral corruption prevailing in the postcolonial context. Contrary to this picture of the body as a means of criticising social and moral vices, epic narratives such as Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, D. T. Niane's *Sunjata*, present readers with a culture of valorizing the human body and its healthy stature.

The Ijaw born Nigerian writer G. Okara, as early as 1964, was among the first modern African writers to initiate a narrative strategy that uses the body parts as a means of presenting the culture and folklore of his people through original linguistics devices based on the evocation of body parts. Culture is yet generally associated with products of mind, soul and other spiritual beings or values. These are opposed to the material realm to which the body parts are usually related. The main problem raised in this study is to ponder on this paradoxical relationship between body, language and sociocultural meaning. It tries to show how the author negotiate meaning in the text using lexical items of the body. In a word, it answers the following question: how is the literary body made to speak and convey cultural and spiritual meaning? How can lexical items of the body parts play an epistemological function?

The study will be conducted using an eclectic critical approach that uses findings of linguistics specifically concerned with transliteration and sociolinguistic ambience of the text and anthropology. These disciplines and theories will help analyse the author's use of language to make sense of the cultural life of a given community. The study also aims to reconnect

spiritual, intellectual and moral dimensions to the materialistic worldview of a specific African language that is transliterated into English. In this language, body parts are vehicles for cultural ideas, instruments to convey moral and spiritual beliefs.

The study will start by focusing on the innovative linguistic approach initiated by the writer by his recurrent reference to the body parts as a way of materializing the conceptual nature of any language, then it will analyse the spiritual underpinning of the references to the body parts. It will end with the analysis of the body as the embodiment of cultural norms and values which are inscribed into it.

I-Speaking and writing the body: reading a linguistic experimentation

Modern African literature over the half century of its existence has been dominated by the debate of knowing in which language writers should tell their stories. Three options, as summed up by N. Osundare (in Olowabi & Dasylva, 2004), have come out for writers to choose: the « accomodationist », « gradualist » and « radicalist » attitudes. G. Okara's option can be included in the gradualist attitude. By rejecting the radicalist option of Obi Wali and Ngugi wa Thiong'o who advocate the outright rejection of foreign languages and their replacement by indigenous African languages, the accomodationist group who opt for an outright use of the colonial imperialist languages, Okara, as his works show, is for the "de-Anglicization and ReAfricanization of the English language, to authentically convey Africa's literary sensibilities" (E. Yeibo, 2011, p. 202). This means that he neither rejects the foreign languages like English nor does he opt for their exclusive use to the detriment of indigenous ones: he rather opts for an effort to bend the English language to the syntax, ideas and world view of the African languages.

One of the linguistic devices Okara deploys to reach his goal of appropriating the English language so as to convey local sensibilities is the materializing of abstract concepts by the recourse to body parts. As a specifically oral language (as opposed to alphabetical written form), the Ijaw writer tends to translate the concepts by concrete images or metaphors. This materializing process helps disclose the writer's sociopolitical vision and the goal of his artistic endeavour. Several

examples of that concretizing process of the abstract are found in the narrative. For Izongo, the chief of Amatu, who represents the traditional power as allied with the post-colonial political elite, if Okolo, the hero, keeps on looking for the enigmatic “*it*”, it is because his “head is not correct” (p. 38). This expression accounts for the abstract concept or idea of madness.

The word “inside” that is pervasively used in the text corresponds to none of the usual academic English uses of the term. While it is generally used as a preposition or an adverb, here it acquires the grammatical function of a substantive referring to a part of the human body. A. Ravenscroft, in the Introduction to the 1964 edition of the novel, shows in which rare conditions this word is used as a noun in English: “in English the word ‘inside’, especially in phrases like ‘my inside’, ‘their insides’, is generally connected with where one’s digestion takes place or where one has had a serious surgical operation, and often facetiously so.” (p. 6) Most African readers familiarized with that materialistic modulation of abstract notions or concepts will meet less difficulties connecting the use of the ‘inside’ to semantic categories of what is English’s spirit, soul or conscience. Far from referring to a physical organ, it accounts for emotional, moral and intellectual associations. Tuere hears the “bad footsteps” from people’s “insides” while Izongo and Abadi’s insides are often described as “smelling with anger” or being bad. Some people have “ugly insides” like Izongo (p. 37) which implies that there are “good insides”. If the process of decoding is possible for a native of the English language through the shift from the conative to a denotative meaning, most readers of the cultural background of the Ijaw won’t need only that process. Through their cultural and linguistic background, the latter will easily account for the choice of these linguistic items and decode them easily.

Besides, in this post-colonial context, people’s consciousnesses and minds are only after material things to satisfy their bodies’ satisfactions to the detriment of moral and spiritual values. To translate this idea Tebewei argues that “Everybody’s inside is now filled with money, cars and concrete houses and money is being scattered all around.” (p. 50) A human being’s consciousness becomes a physical container which is filled with material things representing the materialistic ethos that prevails in

this post-colonial context. The metaphor of the container is present in the notion of “inside” which is sometimes “shallow”, some other times “open” or “close”. People’s insides are also at other times “hard”, or “filled with thoughts as hard as stones” (p. 53). The insides of the fathers of the people of Amatu, the old man argues, were “clean” and people did “straight things” (p. 50) contrary to the norms that prevail in the new

society. The insides are also presented in other parts of the text as “sweet” (p. 54) or “naïve”, light, etc. according to whether their owners are sad, angry, hopeful or happy. “Having an open inside makes one know a lot of things.” (p. 55) This statement of Tuere translates the idea of intelligence and clear-sightedness. If some insides are naïve and simple like those of most villagers of Amatu, Tuere and Ikolo

have insides that are “open” and perceptive.

To the image of the physical container is associated the spatialization of abstract concepts or referents. Thus people’s spoken words can be “true and straight” (p. 55) or crooked and false. “To speak the straight thing” (p. 54) means to be honest. When people’s behaviours are morally upright, they are said to do “straight things” and their insides contain “straight things.” (p. 50)

People’s ages are accounted for by the number of years “killed” on earth. The verb “to kill” is more expressive than spend or live. Describing the young girl sitting next to him on the boat, the narrator guesses her age and says that she “must have killed sixteen years”. The woman who is responsible for her “must have killed forty or fifty years ...” (p. 59) The eldest persons are said to have killed many years on earth. The Ijaw people of *The Voice* live near a river. Their language and socioeconomic activities reflect that natural environment. Water is a central figure or image of their language. We have a host of water divinities to whom people cry for assistance and protection. The boat, the paddle, palm trees and other mangrove swamps are common images of the pragmatic outlook of their world view and language. Iroko, kapok and palm trees standing on the river’s bank are familiar natural components of their

“A human being’s consciousness becomes a physical container which is filled with material things representing the materialistic ethos that prevails in this post-colonial context.”

everyday life. As a consequence, these elements are regularly invoked in their language. Izongo's laugh which is puerile and insignificant is a "surface – water laugh" (p. 36) while Okolo's inside, despite the violence of Izongo's men on him, remains "unruffled like water in a glass" (p. 39). Izongo claims that he and his men are soft-hearted people, that their insides are "soft like water" even if their opponents think that their "insides are filled with stone" (p. 47).

We have several other examples of modulation in which a concrete image or figure is used to convey ideas that would otherwise be rendered in an abstract language. As an illustration of this modulation we have the opening pages which linger on the description of the natural environment in which the story takes place. Okolo is standing by the window of his room and contemplates the river's landscape made up of common local pictures of swaying palm trees, a river flowing, egrets swaying up and down that water site, canoes crawling home with boatmen paddling: "A girl with only a cloth tied around her waist and the half-ripe mango breasts, paddling, driving her paddle into the river with a sweet inside." (p. 29)

The figure of speech called simile is a usual rhetorical device of that language which often needs to compare ideas to physical local objects or vivid metaphors of that natural environment to render these concepts or abstractions in more evocative terms. Thus some "insides" are "soft like water" (p. 47), some are "hard like stones" (p. 53). Tuere's "clear voice" is similar to Okolo's voice which is also "cool like a glass of water" (pp. 28; 36). Against these voices is juxtaposed Izongo's "stone voice" whose words are falling "like gravel from a tipper" (p. 36).

Feelings like shame, pity and fear are conveyed in a series of vivid images. Thus shame is rendered as falling "like rain" and touching its victims' bones. "Shame, like rain, fell on him and touched his bones." (p. 31) The feelings Okolo has when he sees his friends doing everything Izongo asks them to do is accounted for in the very concrete terms: "The pity he felt for them touched his bones" (p. 57).

Compound words are partaking of that materializing language. We have "wrong-doing filled inside" (p. 31), "hunger-killing beauty" (p. 31), "knowing nothing footsteps" (p. 34). The breasts of the bride who is being taken to Sologa to her husband are described using a local imagery

as “calabash breasts” (p. 59) to show that she has firm breasts made up of erect nipples.

The Voice is the site of another linguistic experimentation generally referring to the human body parts in a process that can be assimilated to an animist language. The consequence of that experimentation is to endow ideas or things that are otherwise inert or lifeless with human potentialities or qualities. Human feet that are usually no animated subjects by themselves are given a life of their own. We are therefore presented in the narrative with “running feet”, a “million pursuing feet”, the “caring nothing feet of the world” which thus become autonomous from the person who owns them. These “running feet” become the agents of some autonomous movements. They thus pursue the poor Okolo and the narrator does not refer to the people whose feet are doing that action (p. 28). In a similar process, readers encounter a darkness that plays a human role: “‘stay quiet,’ the darkness whispered, ‘Nothing they will do to you.’” (p. 28) Here Tuere is replaced by the darkness which is allowed to speak by itself. Other linguistic eccentricities consist in describing words as “knocking each other out into the wind and blowing away” (p. 61).

The animist language of *The Voice* endows with human body parts and qualities. Thus the sky has eyes. When the sun sets on the village, the local people think and say that the night is “clos[ing]the eye of the sky” (p. 26). Sun set will be the sky or the day opening its eye. When the weather becomes bad, it is translated as the day showing a bad eye: “Soon, the day’s eye became bad. It became so bad and black and closed that it could not be looked at. And soon lightning flashed in the day’s eye and the thunder sounded like the sound of one hundred cannons going off near your ears” (p. 61).

As another illustration of the concrete outlook of their language using body parts for that purpose, their local divinities share the same physical body traits with their human counterparts. The highest authority in Sologa is referred to as the Big One. The divinities are no abstract supernatural figures whose lives are far and detached from humans’ lives and physical attributes. They have local or clan gods like Benikurukuru or Kolokumo Egbesu. Egbesu is the spiritual deity that combats evil in the Kolokumo or Benikurukuru clans. This ethnic deity was given to the

Ijaw by the Almighty God to defend themselves in times of hardships and adversities. Its devotees are etched with scars on some hidden parts of the body. Water spirits known as *Owuamapu* are the most worshipped gods. These spirits are not different from human beings whose characteristics they share from their personal strengths to their shortcomings. According to local mythologies, humans are believed to have dwelt among these spirits before being born.¹ It is no surprise if the name for King, chief is the same with god. Egbesu which means chief is also the name by which the local divinity is called. Woyengi which literally means ‘Our mother’, shows the feminine identity of the highest divinity. This shows the logics of this community which sees creation (and procreation), which is a female prerogative, as the most important aspect of the society.

Ancestors and other divine beings are referred to as the “things of the ground”, “things of the soil of the town” (p. 63), “the Dead” (p. 109). One of the member of the Ijaw pantheon is “the one with black face”; the same deity is referred to as the “one with black black face.” (p. 63) Contrary to some cultures in which it is considered blasphemous and sacrilege to represent in human forms their highest divinities, here the divine figures share human physical and emotional identities.

All these aspects of the indigenous language that are literally translated into the English language have a mnemonic function as they create a vivid and memorable effect in the mind of the locutor. But they also contribute to the ‘defamiliarizing’ process whose poetic function has been revealed by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay “Art and Technique” (in D. Lodge, 1988, pp. 16-30). Okara’s linguistic endeavour is a poetic enterprise since words are given new meanings that detach them from their habitual usage in academic language. In addition to that linguistic function of the body parts, we also have a spiritual underpinning to the recurrent use of the body language.

¹ See “Ijaw Culture: A brief walk into the lives of one of the world's most ancient people”. Available at: <https://www.pulse.ng/lifestyle/food-travel/ijaw-culture-a-brief-walk-into-the-lives-of-one-of-the-worlds-most-ancient-people/wjfy3mb>.

2-The body and the spiritual life

If it is true that the indigenous language tends to materialize abstract concepts, the Ijaw community is no less a spiritual society in which the material or physical entities have a spiritual underpinning. Through the reference to the body parts much is learnt about the systems of beliefs, the spiritual representations of the sociocultural life of this people.

The human body in many African societies has a cosmological meaning. Corporal and spiritual principles are not opposed entities as it can be seen in some cultural and intellectual traditions. Western traditional thinking systems, for instance, set a dualism between body and soul. So did modern cartesianism with its outright “real distinction” between body and mind. For René Descartes, “it is certain that I [the person] am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.” (AT VII 78, CSM II 54) That dualism is at the same time anthropological, metaphysical and cosmological. (C. Joubaud, 1991; M. Labrune 1992; J-C. Goddard & M. Labrune, 2005, pp. 11-42) For these conceptions, the body is merely an utensil: eye, hand, ears are merely tools for human beings. For a thinker like Socrates, the person is not his body. There is a difference between what the antic philosopher regards as a mere tool and the person who uses it. A man is neither his body nor its parts (In Goddard, 2005). Although the thinking system has grown to overcome that dualism, it is still felt in their conceptions to some extent.

In most African spiritual systems as represented by the Ijaw society in the narrative, there is no such a dualism between corporeality and spiritual principles. This spirituality is ideally manifested through body organs. In various parts of this continent, body mutilations, skin, ears and teeth markings are signs of the religious life. In the Ijaw society as it appears in the narrative, local divinities are often named after their extraordinary physical traits. The sun is the eye of the sky as revealed earlier. Because of the interconnection between the body and the spiritual life, the community’s notion of sin is inscribed into strict moral codes related to the body. As an instrument of social control, religion sets the female body as the object of severe moral prescriptions. When suspicions are being aroused that Obiere and Okolo have had an affair on the boat taking them from Amatu to Sologa, the domineering mother-in-law of

the bride has the girl swear on the “things of the ground” and the Dead that she did not do anything wrong with her neighbour.

The woman expresses one strong belief of traditional religion about child deliverance used as a system of social control of women’s behaviour. A pregnant woman would be made to swear that she has not been « touched » by any other man and that the child is her husband’s when she is about to deliver. She has been educated to believe that any silence on such a moral crime of having an affair with another man will be sanctioned by ancestors and the gods who will prevent her from delivering safely the baby.

Wait until she is about to deliver a child, said the mother-in-law in a soft strong voice. ‘Yes, that is the time indeed when things of the ground and the dead will hold her and she will not be able to deliver unless she confesses. (p. 109)

Corporeal suffering is the mark that a moral or spiritual precept has been violated. For the old woman, her daughter in-law will have to confess if she wants to deliver her baby safely. Under the authority of such divine figures represented by the « things of the ground » and « the dead », no woman educated in such a context would dare retain such a secret as she is surely going to suffer from not only committing the sin but specifically from not confessing it. People are sanctioned on earth about their ethical and moral misconducts. The notion of sin is related to the break of social conventions whose sanctions are suffered on earth.

Moral norms and spiritual life are not detached from laws of the physical realm. They are inscribed into the human body. Most initiation rites, a key component of the spiritual life, consist in familiarizing the young initiates with the spiritual and moral meanings of their own bodies and the meaning that is attributed to elements of the physical or natural universe around them. Body and spiritual principles are not grasped separately. Social life, procreation functions, local architecture, etc. obey the laws of the body or are inspired by the organization of the human body. We have to find an explanation to the attitudes in the narrative in

“Social life, procreation functions, local architecture, etc. obey the laws of the body or are inspired by the organization of the human body.”

reference to sociocultural codes of many African societies. In an anthropological study of the local habitat in Mossi land, the anthropologist Zahan has this to say: “the ‘hut’ and the compound architecture are a material and spatial representation of the human body. The compound is the macrocosm of the female body which is the new womb and place of procreation” (D. Zahan, 1970, p. 93; my translation from French). The initiation in the forest, in these traditional societies, as the anthropologist shows, is a ritual re-enactment of the symbolic return to the mythic matrilineal womb symbolized by the female sexual organ. It is therefore a ritual rehearsing of the original mythic birth of humanity (*ibid.*, p. 100). In this Mossi society, the compound which is the physical rebuilding of the human body is endowed with spiritual force just like the female body parts. It is no surprise that regularly women use their bodies as an agent of self-affirmation and combat against men and political authorities. The different movements into and out of the compound evoke the taking in and ejection of food items into the body thus turning every act in social life into a spiritual one. (*Ibid.*, p. 113)

In the narrative, humans’ physical deformities have a religious underpinning as it shows out in the arguments of different characters. Ukule’s handicap is the consequence of a religious determinism. We are what we asked the Supreme Being for in an earlier life. The life in the physical world is believed to be the exact duplicate of an earlier life in the spiritual plane. It is from this earlier determinism that everything that happens now results. Far from being innocent victims for their ordeals and trials in this life, humans are supposed to have asked for what happens to them in this physical life in this earlier spiritual life. The poor on earth are supposed to have asked for or chosen poverty for some inexplicable reason. The rich are also supposed to have been wise enough to ask God for wealth. This fatalistic conception of life is pervasive in many African religious systems and paradoxically explains some of the optimism and resilience of their life conception. Why lament on a social condition that we have no power to change and which is the result of one’s own free choice? This clearly shows out in the discussion between Ukule and Tuere :

- What you came with from Woyengi will happen to you, whatever you do. So I do not fear. I asked Woyengi to make me

a cripple, so I am a cripple. Whatever happens to you, you came with it from Woyengi.

- What you say is correct. We cannot in this world ourselves recreate. If in this world we could recreate ourselves I would become a man. When I die I will return as a man. (p. 115)

This implies the belief in reincarnation. In a forthcoming life, Tuere will come back a man. She will ask Woyengi to make her a man, not a woman as she asked for in the first life. Ukule is not likely to ask for any physical disability. Thus the circle of their conception of life is never broken and death is no annihilation experience as there is rebirth into a superior form of life.

Many simple corporeal allusions in the narrative can be decoded only in reference to indigenous culture. Okolo who presents himself before Izongo stands calm “with the face of a god” (p. 120). This description alludes to a local religious belief. In sculptural art, divine figures are represented as serene and calm contrary to the figures of human faces which are disturbed and distorted to express their worries and anguishes. (P. Oliver, 2008) This representation also shows the impartiality of the divine figures who must not allow emotions to interfere with their judgements of human beings. One of the many gods of the clan in *The Voice* is “the one with black face” to whom the mother-in-law pleads for protection against the natural forces unleashed against them on the river. (p. 63) Divine beings are identified by some physical traits: their eyes, faces, etc. This physical representation of the divine figures opposes some spiritual principles where it is considered blasphemous to make a physical representation of the divinity particularly through human body traits or organs. Like ancient Greek thought, many African communities like the Ijaw think of their gods as beings in human shape. These anthropomorphic gods bridge the gulf between mortal subjects that humans are and the gods.

The shadow which is known in African cosmology as the ‘doubling’, the ‘likeness’, an inseparable other-who-is-also-oneself to whom one is bound (Ferguson, 2006, p. 17) is, with the body and breath, the living principles or forces. There is no human being without his/her shadow. Like the breath and body, the shadow dies when its owner passes away unlike the soul which survives the physical death. (RV Tempels : 37)

As a reflection of that spiritual principle, the human language, the words, also have shadows. To say that a person's words have no shadow means that they lack consistency and substance. Such words are assimilated to words in the air. That is the reason why Izongo speaks of uttering words which mean something and will be implemented. "This is the time to show everybody that we speak not words without shadows." (p. 123)

As an illustration of the vital force that links spiritually individuals of the same lineage, we have the words of Ebieri's brother. He explains that his sister belongs to him which would shock elsewhere in another culture very concerned about human physical, moral and spiritual integrity and rights. But being born from the same womb, fathered by the same man, they are attached to one another or are responsible for one another by the shared vital force. Ebieri could have spoken the same words about her brother. In agreement with the spiritual principle and the family links it implies, Ebieri's brother is responsible for her particularly at such a young age. (p. 103) All human beings of any society enter into series of material and spiritual connections. But members of the same family belong to one another and are responsible for one another as they share the vital force given to them by the same parents. The same way the body of a living being cannot be separated from his spirit and soul, the same way the shadow, a metaphysical and spiritual principle, is one with the person's self. Body and shadow are one and same thing as they precondition each other. More than this spiritual underpinning, man's cultural values are stored in the body parts.

3-The Body as a socio-cultural translator

By translator we mean that through the reference to body organs are conveyed ideas and socio-cultural values. The description of the body particularly serves as a literary device to criticize social practices that are regarded as negative. This section of the study will analyze the way the writer uses the body as a means of conveying sociocultural functions and beliefs but also as a literary device used to present some characters and attitudes under a negative light. The traditional divorce between literature and the social life is thus challenged and both planes are less clearly

distinct. The body becomes some sort of bridge between context and text, between literariness and sociocultural concerns.

Gabriel Okara has repeatedly openly expresses his indebtedness to the ideas, philosophy, folklore and language features of his ethnic background to write his fiction. He has devoted his effort to using these aspects efficiently by their literal translations in his artistic creations in English as stated here:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion (that) the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as a medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.

In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise. (G. Okara, quoted in *Transition*, 1963)

Several studies on the seminal novel of Okara have emphasized the linguistic experimentation he has initiated in *The Voice* (N. Boukari & L. Kousouhon, 2018, pp. 1-15; E. Yeibo, 2011, pp.213-221 and 2011, pp. 202-208; U. Nnamachi *et al.*, 2014, pp. 18-22; R. Hettiarachchi, 2015, pp. 14-33; F. A. Raimi, 2014, pp. 49-60). Yet, these linguistic experimental endeavours are motivated by the need to convey indigenous cultural values. In fact, in his specific use of English each word, groups of words, phrases, syntaxes are a vehicle for ideas, social norms, attitudes and values of his people. Okara's experimentation aims at sharing the sensitivity and spirituality of his people. Through the recurrent reference to the body, we learn much about the cultural life, beliefs, representations and social practices of the African society that are used as the cultural background to the novel.

Many a body organ appear in the text not as a mere utensil at the service of man. They convey ideas that would remain undecipherable outside the local cultural beliefs and systems of thought. That is the case for the “inside”, “the chest”, the bile, the umbilical cord, etc. whose unusual uses are worth studying. The merit of the author is his successful use of these body items as a social vehicle while retaining their literariness and narrative function.

The “inside” evoked earlier as a mere linguistic experimentation is an organ that is located in the abdomen. More than its digestive function, it is, according to local convictions, the site of moral convictions and the personality of its owner. But more than these linguistic eccentricities we lingered on the first part of the study, here we would to insist on the idea of greediness and corruption which are the new diseases of the post-colonial society. In this context, a person’s inside can be “bought” with corruption. As used in these sentences, the inside translates the idea of a person’s intelligence, conscience and moral integrity. People’s will and determination can be traced to their insides. The inside is the image of its owner’s personality.

The chest, as for it, is believed to be the site of all emotions. To say that a person has “a strong chest” translates the idea of that person’s courage. A member of the society who lacks courage will be accused of being effete and lacking “chest”. Okolo who is running away from a mob of villagers instrumentalized by Izongo finds refuge in the hut of the old woman Tuere for his safety. Izongo finds in that a pretext to accuse him of not having a chest or lacking a strong chest. It is also used synonymously as the person’s “shadow” as both convey the idea of courage. But the shadow has a more spiritual association as we saw earlier.

The umbilical cord has a sociocultural function. At birth it is buried into the soil of the ancestral land. To that native soil must the body of the deceased return for his soul to be reunited with those of his/her ancestors. So Okolo’s destiny is linked to the soil of Amatu where his umbilical cord was buried when he was born. Izongo’s decrees of banishment cannot prevent him from coming back and staying until he fulfils his destiny. The justification is that “his umbilical cord is in the ground of this town buried” (p. 50).

The holistic conception of life makes it hard to differentiate the physical life from the spiritual and moral planes. That is why spiritual principles are connected to corporal and physical ones. Organs' biological functions and their cosmological functions overlap as the analysis has been trying to show. The body parts play a major role in the social life at economic, spiritual and moral levels. A person's social identity is manifested through his body. Initiation and passage rites in most tribal communities of the Ijaw are written on the body with mutilation or cicatrices on, for instance, skin, nose, teeth etc. (Ossai-Ugbah & Ogunrombi, 2012, p. 2)

One important feature of the traditional social life and philosophy which is inscribed into human body is the blood pact by which members of the community commit themselves into ever lasting relationships of loyalty, brotherhood and friendship. Persons of the same age group often set this seal on agreement by making cuts on parts of their bodies and lick

each other's blood as a token of that seal. People who are allied in such a pact can talk freely with no fear of being reported to another person outside that tight circle. It often takes the form of a ritual oath to a common cause. Among people committed to such a pact, no act of disloyalty or betrayal is expected which is believed

“The body parts play a major role in the social life at economic, spiritual and moral levels. A person's social identity is manifested through his body.”

to portend heavy moral and spiritual consequences in addition to undermining the moral credibility of the transgressor. The pact is physical but its consequences are believed to be physical, moral and spiritual. The licked blood will cry for loyalty and observance of the rules of the pact. That is why between two persons who have committed themselves to this pact trust and loyalty are taken for granted. Such pacts are generally useful in situations of conflicts and dictatorship as they serve as mutual protections. The two messengers of Izongo to Okolo talk freely and express ideas they would not dare express in front of other members of the society who may report them to Izongo. The barefoot messenger who is sensitive to Okolo's revolutionary ideas and his social commitment expresses openly his opposition to Izongo's management of the village

politics. Such an open expression of one's free mind is tantamount to exposing one's life to heavy sanctions and even death by Izongo and the corrupt oligarchy composing the court. That is why the first messenger reproaches his friend with being bold only in front of him: "You are all this saying because we have licked each other's blood." His companion confirms his friend's interpretation: "Yes, I am all these things saying because of our oath. I cannot a bad thing do to you and you cannot a bad thing do to me." (p. 94) The blood substance is therefore used as a regulator of social life and makes people abide by their own commitments.

In addition to sharing the cultural values of his people through his storytelling, *The Voice* is a literary criticism of the postcolonial society. Like other writers before him, during his era or generations after him, Okara has lambasted the postcolonial elite in an original way. This originality is the fact of having recourse to the body parts as a literary device to decry the social, political and moral deviances that have become the current norms. By his recurrent reference to the body, the narrator is able to denounce the manipulation of souls, minds and bodies of the local naive people by their leaders.

Most of Amatu's residents are being manipulated and used by Izongo and his group of blind followers. Any blind and resigned victim to his manipulation can be assimilated to a body and soul being used for the comfort, satisfaction and need of their tormentor. Okolo refuses to be a body, a mind and soul at the mercy of any other person. The attitude of those who accept to be the victims of these forms of manipulation is incompatible with liberty and human dignity. No human being should allow any other human being to use his whole person, body and soul, as a mere tool for the selfish interest of the latter. Social justice, human dignity and liberty are incompatible with such social and political relationships.

The narrator's description of Amatu inhabitants as mere bodies with no thinking and conscious awareness shows a commodification of human beings. They are rejoicing over their own misfortunes unable to see that they are the victims of a dictatorial regime. Their madness is implied in this description of the narrator: "Then he [Okolo] turned and looked at the men and women dancing, singing and laughing about like

people whose heads are not correct” (p. 119). They have no autonomy of thought as their minds perceive world events through borrowed senses and intelligence. They look at things and events not with their own senses or personalities but with borrowed sense organs. Their eyes are no more theirs. When Okolo walks past the houses of the village, people, from the dark interiors of their huts “looked at him with Chief Izongo’s eyes” (p. 41). Tuere is right to say that Izongo has bought people’s insides. Many characters can therefore be said to walk with Izongo’s feet, to speak with Izongo’s mouth. In a word, the villagers, particularly the messengers, can be said to have put their persons, body parts and minds, at the disposal of Izongo.

The messengers receive salaries for carrying out the dirty jobs that they are entrusted with by the new traditional postcolonial elite. This money paid for immoral acts is labelled as “bad money” that one of the messengers refuse to use. As for the Elder Tebewei, he will sacrifice any other principle, liberty, dignity, on the altar of consumption symbolized by the “mouth full of yam”. The latter in a fatalistic mood advises Okolo not to undertake to change the current state of affairs and explains his own attitude. He disagrees with the prevailing management system but has fatalistically resigned to fight for a change in the current state of affairs:

These happening things make my inside bitter, perhaps more bitter than yours. But there is nothing I alone or you and I can do to change their insides. It is a bad spirit that is entering everybody and if you do not allow it to get you, they say it’s you that has it. So I just sit down and look. If they say anything, I agree. If they do anything, I agree, since they do not take yam out of my mouth. (pp. 48-49)

This quotation shows clearly that many persons in the community are aware that things do not work the way they should be working. They can’t be regarded as blind victims of their elite’s poor management. They only chose to sacrifice their principles and dignity on the altar of their material comfort and physical security. This is not Okolo’s option. For him, no one should give up and resign his principles and values out of fear or for material comfort: “How can I change my inside?” he asks the old man. The latter has an answer inspired by defeatism, fatalism and even opportunism: “In this world things are not like this... I see in my inside

that your spoken words are true and straight. But you see it in your inside that we have no power to do anything ...” (p. 49). As a consequence, he advises Okolo to do like everybody and accepts the current state of affairs symbolized by the hands and palms: “So if a person turns his palms down I also turn mine down. If he turns them up, opens them and shows them to the eye of the sky, I also turn mine up and show them to the eye of the sky!” (p. 49)

For Tebeowei, Abadi and the other Elders, there is nothing more precious than the satisfaction of bodies and material comfort. This conception of life is tantamount to selling one’s soul for money and material comfort. It is a form of prostitution that consists not only in selling one’s body to serve immoral purposes but also one’s soul, principles and dignity. Tuere is right to say that Izongo is trying to buy the insides of all the people in order to bolster his own position of power. By allowing Izongo and his followers to use them as their henchmen, the messengers and the other villagers are not only abandoning their dignity and moral principles but are also “selling” their bodies by serving as the body guards of the local body politics whose values they share only out of fear. This breach of one’s principles does not elude Izongo of his responsibilities in the social abuses. The same way nobody should be allowed to use another human being as a mere tool for selfish purposes, the same way no one should avail himself to be dealt with as such as philosopher E. Kant argues as a basis of his ethical principles. “So act that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (Kant, 1785, p. 429; in R. Ogien, 2010, p. 43)

When Ebieré’s brother says that his sister’s body parts belong to him (p. 103) as they come from the same womb and have the same father, this should not be understood outside the cultural pattern. It is a metaphorical expression of a traditional spiritual principle that establishes the unity of members of the same family. In the same way we cannot say that the traditional marriage arranged by the mother-in-law for her son by bringing to him a girl he has never seen or spoken to may be a cultural interference with the young men’s liberty. But this interference is extenuated by the social contract which is responsible for society’s renewal. The two persons do not consider themselves as victims in

marriage but are engaged into a fusional moral unity in which none is seeking to cause inconveniences or any unfair treatment from the start. By insisting that he “will marry” Ebieri even against the will of his mother, the young man shows that there is no manipulation in this traditional practice. “You brought her and said I should marry her, so I am marrying her” (p. 103) Despite all the moral threats, the prospective husband faces his mother for the first time. “I did not want to marry before. But I like her now and I will marry her” (p. 104). This cultural procedure cannot be mistaken with making the body or conscience into an instrument or goods for sale. This has nothing to do with the manipulation and instrumentalization of consciences that Izongo is effecting on his subjects. By trying to persuade the people of Amatu that he knows better than they do what is good for them while he is pursuing his own goal, Izongo is using them as means for his selfish material and political interests.

Contrary to these relations of subordination and manipulation, the kindness and solidarity of Tuere towards Okolo are not motivated by any will of instrumentalization and manipulation. Okolo is surprised by Tuere’s kindness towards him. She has been ostracized by the village people for long and Okolo in no way has ever shown any concern for her when she needed help. But here she is offering kindness and solidarity when he is the victim of the same rulers. Having been unjustly dealt with in the past, she understands better than anyone else how painful it is to be unfairly rejected by one’s community. She brings solidarity and help to him without expecting any material compensation. Against the logic of manipulation and materialism, the concerted action of Okolo and Tuere proposes a relation of moral fusion out of this materialistic ego and commodification principle. This relation promotes human values which enrich and strengthen both characters.

The aesthetic, religious and cultural purposes of the recurrent reference to the body parts in this “unlettered” society go beyond the mere naturalistic and physiological perspective in which the body is usually presented in literature. Okara’s option is linguistic (as we saw in the first part) and cultural. As a consequence, the narrative reveals several aspects of the local beliefs through the reference to the body parts which cut across local superstitions. The novel thus opens on three messengers sent to bring Okolo to chief Izongo’s compound. One of them hits his

right foot against a stone. For this first messenger, this is a bad omen. For the second messenger, this is rather a good omen:

- “My right foot is good to me ...”
- “To me there is meaning. If my left foot against something hits as I walk, it’s a warning be.” (p. 24)

Thus the body communicates not only with the natural environment but also with the supernatural universe. The decoding of this relation is an important component of the cultural life. There is an integral connection between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm of the human body. There is an allusion to the fusion of man with nature as when Okolo becomes one with the stream. “Okolo followed the think-nothing stream and a part of the stream he became” (p. 84). This implies that the human body gets enriched by all the elements of the cosmos which are inscribed into it. All these body parts work together harmoniously with elements composing the physical universe. A person’s mind and body should work together harmoniously for him to be a full and healthy person. His body should also work harmoniously with the surrounding environment.

In the text moral standards are conveyed through reference to body parts in which they are stored or instilled. Chastity in the culture of the protagonists is a kernel moral value. Parents, particularly mothers, will try hard to make sure their daughters’ bodies remain “untouched” until marriage. This means that the unmarried girl has never been engaged into any sexual intercourse. In the narrative, the parents of Obiere’s prospective husband want to make sure that their son is married to a “good” woman who has remained virgin until the marriage. Virginity is a moral criterium which is inscribed into the woman’s body. A virgin girl is a girl whose body has not been “touched”. The sexual intercourse which is a corporal act is morally qualified and associated to the semantic category of a person’s physical and moral integrity, his/her personal purity, honour and worth.

“The sexual intercourse which is a corporal act is morally qualified and associated to the semantic category of a person’s physical and moral integrity, his/her personal purity, honour and worth.”

The body part is synecdochically and metonymically a reference to sexual organs. The body becomes the female sex and the sex is the body. The question “Did he no part of your body touch?” is to know if she has had any sexual intercourse with Okolo which would be an immoral act. These stylistic features of synecdoche and metonymy are particularly appropriate for the prudish culture of the text and help avoid using terms that would be regarded as crude and direct reference to body parts that are held sacred.

Okara’s literary use of the body is an echo to its use as a literary motif in several other genres and epochs. Thus in Europe Renaissance, fixed rules were set which established an unbridgeable frontier between informal or familiar language and the official one. The canon of decent language had it that parts of the human body should not be mentioned or referred to in the decent or formal linguistic register. These are genital organs, the buttocks, the belly, the nose, the mouth. The latter was only to assume the expressive function. (Bakhtin, 1970, p. 319) Against this traditional conception, the body parts became the center of all interests with François Rabelais in his literary creations. With the French writer, the human body organs acquire a certain dignity and become the symbol of life in fullness, growth, happiness, regeneration and even wisdom. By the same token, they acquire the right to become a literary motif by excellence. Associated to this corporeal revolution is the motif of the carnival which turns everything upside down: the inferior becomes superior, the norms abnormal, the noble are ridiculed and the lower classes are crowned and take revenge on the prevailing norms. Ambivalence and ambiguity become the norm of that literature which represents the body and its excrescences in a light, happy and laughing mood. Even death to which are associated rebirth and rejuvenation is represented as a joyful experience.

The literary sub-genre of satire, contrary to Bakhtin’s representation which had used the human body as a vehicle for its individual and social criticism of humans’ failings and weaknesses, often lacks the ambivalence and happy mood of Rabelais’ revolution. With G. Okara’s *The Voice*, we neither have the Renaissance clear cut separation of body and mind, nor Rabelais’ happy and ambivalent representation. Okara’s satire makes readers laugh from time to time over the caricature of some characters’

physical organs and attitudes that are ridiculed. Yet this use of the body is different from the happy laughing mode of Rabelais' style. It is rather a forced, sad and sickly laugh of unease over the failings of the post-colonial society.

Conclusion

If literature implies innovation and ability to express oneself in an original way about human issues that are common and eternal, then Okara's *The Voice* is indeed a great novel. So many violations or departures from traditional linguistic norms can be noticed. The body lexical sets deployed to achieve thematization in text is unprecedented. This article has shown how the author has been able to convey the spiritual and morals standards underlying his recurrent reference to the human body. It has also been analysed as a device to account for many traditional cultural values. All these artistic efforts which are still studied in critical circles for their genuine aesthetic endeavours contribute to establish the reputation of G. Okara as one of the inspiring leading voices in the history of modern African literature.

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