CHAPTER 11

A Gloss on Perspectives for the Study of African Literature versus Greek and Oriental Traditions

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As in African literature in general, most African children's literature exhibits what Richard van Leeuwen calls "a broad network of texts" and "an amalgam of types of stories."[1] This is of course expected given the usual interaction between written and oral traditions in African literature, the former pointing to European cultures accompanying imperial projects. Modern African literature is essentially hybrid to the extent that it incorporates both European and African literary traditions. It is therefore born from a confluence of cultures.

Children's literature draws in many instances from traditional folklore. In any case, and until fairly recently, the first stories that children in Africa came in contact with were orally transmitted fables and fairy tales. Indeed, even to date, we still have oral and written forms of children's literature existing side by side. It is the written forms, though, that exhibit the kind of intertextual borrowing I have referred to due to their affinity with European literary traditions. In fact, it was the desire of the writers of children's stories in Africa to offer alternatives to the European narratives that had dominated classrooms in colonial Africa that led them to experiment with new forms of writing that took cognizance of the holistic environment of the African child reader.[2]

In a sense, we can distinguish three kinds of borrowing/adaptations connected to the early construction of children's literature in Africa. First, there is the reproduction of oral tales, where writers merely record and publish versions of popular folklore for children's consumption. In this category may also be placed the translation into local languages of well-known universal myths, fairy tales, and fables. Next, there is the more creative attempt to borrow from

1 Quoted after Thomas Geider, "Alfu Lela Ulela: The *Thousand and One Nights* in Swahili-speaking East Africa," in Ulrich Marzolph, ed., *Arabian Nights in Transnational Perspective* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 183 (a version of Geider's article was published earlier in *Fabula* 45 [2004]: 246–260). For the original quotation see Richard van Leeuwen, "Traduire Shéhérazade/Translating Shahrazad," *Transeuropéennes* 22 (2002): 89–99.

2 On the general picture of African literature for children, see Osayimwense Osa, "The Expanding Universe of African Children's Literature: The Why, the How, and the What of Publishing in Africa about African Children's Literature," *Journal of African Children's and Youth Literature* 19–20 (2010–2012): 1–17 (which also contains more bibliographical hints).

African folkloric materials and myths from other cultures in order to create narratives that address new African realities. Third, there is the usual category of imaginative fiction.

Let me now use a few examples to further illustrate the second category, which I find especially relevant to this project because it consciously blends African myths with mythic traditions of other cultures. I will begin with Chinua Achebe (1930–2013), a writer originated from Nigeria who is widely recognised as "the patriarch of the modern African novel" and whose borrowing from the traditional resource base has made his writings, both for adult and child readers, some of the most fascinating texts from Africa.[3] Most of us know Achebe more for his adult fiction than his children's works. Among the books he has written for children are such masterpieces as *Chike and the River* (1966), *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1972), *The Flute* (1977), and *The Drum* (1977).

The Drum is adapted from traditional African folklore. The writer reworks this on two levels, providing on the lower level basic entertainment for the child reader and on the higher level a discourse on power focusing on the collapse of a fledgling oligarchy. The main character in this fable is Tortoise, who is well known in African folktales for wit, trickery, and treachery. Other stock characters that play these roles in animal stories include Hare, Rabbit, and Spider, but also include deities in those narratives that exploit mythology deeply. Adaptations of these characters vary depending on the intentions of the authors: that is, whether they want to use the fables for overt ideological purposes or to merely pass on some useful moral lessons. In most cases the stories that leave lasting impressions are those that leave the ideological messages implicit while giving priority to the structures of the plot.

In any case, children's books with implicit rather than explicit ideological messages are in fact the most powerful because implicit "ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implications that things are simply *so*."[4] This is, in a sense, where Achebe's adaptations of African folklore derive their particular power. Ideology is encoded implicitly. In the case of the story under discussion, *The Drum*, the essence of the plot lies in the tragic possibilities of the elements of trickery, wit, and treachery that constitute the character traits of Tortoise.[5]

3 See Ruth Franklin, "After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the Great African Novel," *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2008, online at: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/after-empire (accessed June 27, 2016).

4 See John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, (London: Longman, 1992), Ch. 1, "Ideology, Discourse and Narrative Fiction," 8–46, quotation p. 9.

5 In the subsequent paragraphs on Achebe's *Drum* I repeat my analysis published in my earlier paper: "Ideological Inscription in Children's Fiction: Strategies of Encodement in Ngugi and

In this story, Tortoise stumbles accidentally into the land of the spirits as he tries to retrieve a piece of fruit which has fallen into a hole. In the Animal Country, a devastating famine has forced animals to traverse vast distances in search of food. Tortoise, searching for food like the rest of the animals, has just come upon a palm tree with plenty of fruit and has been lavishly feasting when one fruit slips through his fingers and falls to the ground and into a hole.

In the spirit world Tortoise is given a magic drum to compensate him for his fruit, which has already been eaten by a spirit boy. The drum is a sort of magic wand, for all Tortoise needs to do is merely beat the drum gently and a variety of food will appear. Upon his return to the Animal Country, Tortoise chooses to exploit the drum as an instrument of power. He constructs a hierarchy of power relationships with himself at the top, a move which he begins by recasting his incidental crossing to the spirit world as a messianic mission undertaken in order to redeem the other animals from perpetual suffering. He says:

> I said to myself: all the animals in the country will perish unless somebody comes forward to save them. Somebody who is prepared to risk his own life for the sake of his fellows. And so I decided that person had to be myself.[6]

Ideological encodement here is achieved through appropriation of a messianic idiom in which self-sacrifice is invoked to legitimise ascendancy to absolute power. Here may be seen a parallel to the self-serving ideologies of the post-independence political leadership. If Tortoise is to project himself as the unquestioned leader of the animals, he must fashion new terminologies to define this new role and induce acceptance from the other animals. Hence he now insists on referring to the Animal Country as a "Kingdom"—a strange term that Tortoise introduces in order to presuppose a King and the hierarchical structures that go with him. Indeed, after several days of feasting, the animals come to acknowledge Tortoise as their leader and benefactor:

> Everyday the animals returned to the Tortoise's compound and ate and drank and went home singing his praise. They called him Saviour, Great Chief, the One Who Speaks for his People. Then one day a very drunken

Achebe," in Myrna Machet, Sandra Olën, and Thomas van der Walt, eds., *Other Worlds—Other Lives: Children's Literature Experiences. Proceedings of the International Conference on Children's Literature, 4–6 April 1995* (Pretoria: Pretoria Unisa Press–University of South Africa, 1996), vol. 2, 29–31.

6 Chinua Achebe, *The Drum* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988; ed. pr. 1977), 18.

> singer called him King Tortoise! Thereafter the great chant of the Animals became:
> "We! Want! Our! King!
> Our! King Of! Kings!"[7]

Plans are then made for Tortoise's coronation. But if the appropriation of the magic drum ensured Tortoise's ascendancy to power, its misappropriation becomes the cause of his downfall. Kingship and the hierarchical order that goes with it demand that Tortoise cease to play certain roles like the beating of the drum. Tortoise makes a tragic blunder when he appoints Elephant to play that role. Elephant's supposedly gentle tap on the drum breaks it, and this effectively dislodges Tortoise from his position of power. His second journey to the world of spirits in search of another drum ends in disaster when he picks one whose beating yields all kinds of malicious masked spirits and swarms of bees and wasps. He later unleashes them on the other animals, who as a result "scattered in every direction and have not yet stopped running."[8] This kind of ending notwithstanding, the genre merely conceals a powerful ideological construction.

What we see in this story by Achebe is an effort to reclaim folktales and combine their motifs in new stories. We may note that even in the novels he wrote for adult readers, Achebe often incorporated folktales in new ways.

Let me now turn to a different kind of adaptation and translation in which popular western mythologies, especially Greek ones, are either reworked to suit local contexts or are translated into local languages and abridged to suit children.

Sophocles' plays are a good example in this regard. *King Oedipus* and *Antigone* lend themselves especially to different usages in African contexts: they provide material through which Greek mythology is incorporated into African self-representation and they provide metaphors for confronting conditions of domination and repression. Samuel S. Mushi translated Sophocles' *Oedipus* into Kiswahili as *Mfalme Edipode* in 1971,[9] an act that had the effect of locating the Greek legend of Oedipus within the existing myths of East Africa in an interesting process in which the written was appropriated by the oral. In this respect *Mfalme Edipode* took on a life of its own and, like the oriental stories of Abu Nuwas (756–814), it found a firm place in the local folklore told to children in East Africa. In the same vein, it may be argued that the translation

7 Ibid., 20.

8 Ibid.

9 Sophocles, *Mfalme Edipode*, trans. Samuel S. Mushi (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1971).

or transposition of *King Oedipus* by Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi in 1968 not only popularised the legend of Oedipus among African readers[10] but also transplanted Sophocles' play into a Yoruba context, thus producing a clear hybrid text, which enabled a cultural dialogue with the West even as it addressed specific events in Nigeria's history. Rotimi's adaptation, which he called *The Gods Are Not to Blame*,[11] "involves a fairly direct re-inscription of the premises, plot, characters, and *mise-en-scène* of the Greek model into a text informed by predominantly Yoruba and English cultural allegiances."[12]

Indeed, the presence of Oriental and Greek literary traditions in Africa owes a lot to translations or publications of these stories, especially by missionaries who used them for literacy classes and as texts for teaching moral lessons to converts. Koliswa Moropa reveals how 114 of Aesop's fables were translated from English into Xhosa by James Ranisi Jolobe (1902–1976) and published in 1953 with the wider intention of developing the literature of the Xhosa language in general. Moropa writes that "Jolobe's aim with this translation was to ensure that these fables be passed on from one generation to the next by parents reading and telling the stories to children still unable to read."[13]

On the other hand, the translation of *Oedipus* into Kiswahili was part of a major Tanzanian project of translating Western classics into Kiswahili. This was pioneered by the then president of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (1922–1999), who translated a number of Shakespearean plays into Kiswahili. Of course, Western canonical texts were already being translated into Kiswahili happening in the early colonial days, through missionaries or early European scholars of Kiswahili who thought they could develop Kiswahili literature through the translation of European fiction. Henry Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and many others were translated into Kiswahili as part of such a literary project. Similarly, an early adaptation of Greek myths, *Mashujaa: Hadithi za Wayonani* [The heroes: the Greek tales], was produced in 1889 after Charles Kingsley's highly popular anthology *The Heroes, or Greek Fairy Tales for My Children* (1856), and in the following year,

10 Rotimi's play would later become a popular drama text in high schools and universities across Africa.

11 Ola Rotimi, *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

12 For an in-depth analysis of Rotimi's adaptation of Sophocles' play, see Barbara Goff's and Michael Simpson's *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), quotation p. 81.

13 Moropa Koliswa, "Retelling the Stories: The Impact of Aesop's Fables on the Development of Xhosa Children's Literature," *South African Journal of African Languages* 24.3 (2004): 178–188, quotation p. 178.

Aesop's fables were also adapted as *Hadithi za Esopo*.[14] Most of these translations and adaptations available in Kiswahili were abridged versions so that a younger African generation could access them.

Like Rotimi's adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, other more ambitious and more academic adaptations or re-writings of Greek mythology include Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1994), and Athol Fugard's re-working of *Antigone* in *The Island* (1972).

So what has all this got to do with children's literature in East Africa or Africa in general? Most of these translations especially in their abridged versions, were meant for direct consumption by young readers and so from the very beginning constituted some kind of reading material for children and youth. However, the most intriguing aspect of this is the way these stories left their "written" forms to enter into day-to-day storytelling sessions in East Africa and then returned to written forms.

Take, for example, oriental tales that include *A Thousand and One Nights* and the stories of Abu Nuwas. Scholars point out that these tales were already part and parcel of East African folklore centuries before they were popularly circulated through European book culture. Ida Hadjivayanis writes that the *Arabian Nights* "have been an important part of the Kiswahili literary polysystem, initially as folklore and then for decades as canons,"[15] so that later translators like Edwin Brenn and Frederick Johnson were merely rendering into written form what was already familiar. According to Thomas Geider, the first collection of East African tales was presented by Edward Steere as *Swahili Tales* (1870) and the stories in this collection contained traces of the *Nights* and Abu Nuwas's stories.[16] However, the first Kiswahili edition of *The Arabian Nights—Alfu Lela Ulela*—was published in 1929 and was meant for a young audience and thus constitutes children's literature of a kind. In a sense, this edition merely transformed the oral into the written.

As we can see, the studies on the character and evolution of children's literature in Africa offer many challenges. In my gloss I have pointed only at some particularly important examples that make us aware of how complex this field is and what fascinating perspectives it offers.

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14 Both works published in Zanzibar by the University Mission Press, the latter in 1890. See Thomas Geider, "Die Ökumene des Swahili-sprachigen Ostafrika," in Özkan Ezli, Dorothee Kimmich, and Annette Werberger, eds., *Wider den Kulturenzwang: Migration, Kulturalisierung und Weltliteratur* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009), 379.

15 Ida Hadjivayanis, "Norms of Swahili Translations in Tanzania: An Analysis of Selected Translated Prose," Ph.D. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies (London: University of London, 2011), 199.

16 See Geider, "Alfu Lela Ulela," 248.