

Language and Cultural Identity in Postcolonial African Literature: The Case of Translating Buchi Emecheta into Spanish

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Le langage n'est jamais innocent
– Roland Barthes

Abstract

This article aims to make a contribution to the ongoing project of establishing the normative foundations for a critical theory of ethical translation. By defining our purposes in this manner, it is understood that we enter difficult terrain, for the interpretations of the word “ethical” can be unstable and even arbitrary. In view of this complication, and in the interests of aiming attention at specific objectives, we can say that what drives this effort is a politically-inflected manner of looking at the issue of translation based on progressive, emancipatory values and post-colonial theory. As such, our interest in culture, diversity, otherness, identity and other social factors that can define the connotations of the adjective “ethical” has guided this research; it contemplates an engagement with notions such as the type of impact the Western translator’s socio-cultural baggage has on their translation of a text that is the product of a non-Western sensibility. This explains why we start this paper with Roland Barthes’s statement, *Language is never innocent*. The specific aim is to offer evidence that the social, religious, historical and linguistic cultural references present in Buchi Emecheta’s postcolonial writings are not “innocent” constituents of her narrative, and that they are used as badges of her cultural identity. As a corollary, we assess whether or not her deliberate acceptance has been sustained in the translation of her English-African novel into Spanish.

Keywords: translation, Buchi Emecheta, otherness, hybrid language, culturemes

Introduction: Decolonisation and the Language of *Otherness*

During the XX century and due to migration, decolonization and the dissolution of the European empires, a postcolonial literature with a *hybrid* language appeared, verbalising a distinctive *otherness* and transforming contemporary identities as a consequence. According to academics of postcolonial translation such as P. Bandia, T. Niranjana, M. Manfredi, L. Venuti, S. Bassnett and D. Robinson, this otherness must be respected and preserved by the translators.

Niranjana called for a policy of “resistance and interventionism” (1992, p. 173), and stated that otherness could be preserved with translations rich in calques and loanwords. M. Manfredi (2010, p. 47), with her examples of translating Indian English texts into Italian, declared that it is *through* translation that linguistic and cultural differences can be not only safeguarded but also transmitted to the European world.

For many postcolonial bilingual and bicultural African writers translation provides a method of exhibiting their culture, hybrid language and fragmented identity across frontiers. Some have stated that postcolonial literatures are themselves translations, and even Bandia considered “the concept of translation as a metaphor for postcolonial writings” (2003, p. 140). Other writers like Ngugi wa Thiong’o decided to be more radical. In the 70’s, from his position in the University of California, he sought to abolish English Philology Departments at African Universities in order to defend native culture, and he decided not to write in English ever since, but to use translation into Gikuyu (Kukuyu) and Kiswahili as an important act of anti-colonial resistance. He insisted on the need “to decolonize the mind”, to use vernacular languages in order to more accurately reflect African culture, enhance national self-esteem and promote cultural identity.

In 1986, while teaching at Yale, he wrote the novel *Matigari* in Gikuyu. The main character, Matigari, became a popular hero that demanded the return of his lands, which were in possession of white settlers. This fictional character influenced Kenyans in such a way that then-president Daniel arap Moi ordered all copies of the novel impounded throughout the country (Suárez Lafuente, 2017). Since 1982, Ngugi wa Thiong’o has faced strong criticism, has been arrested and imprisoned and has been forced into exile in Europe and the United States. As Bandia says: “His writings in Kenyan languages are considered to be part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples” (2006, p. 372).

In this new multicultural and hybrid order of the current globalized world, one in which the dichotomy between north/south, me/the other, colonizer/colonized is questioned, many scholars have argued in favour of what Bhabha called a “*third space*” or “*space in between*” (Manfredi, 2010:54), where cultures meet and overlap in mutual contamination.

For a better understanding of this hybrid language and third space, we analysed, for the present work, the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, written in 1979 by Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian immigrant in Great Britain. She wrote it in English, a colonial language, but with a significant number of cultural references in Igbo, her mother tongue, a tonal language written in Latin script which is spoken by approximately 20 million people from the Igbo ethnic group. Subsequently, we studied the translation into Spanish, *Las*

delicias de la maternidad (2004), in which the translator, Maya García, had to work with three languages: English, Igbo and Spanish. Fortunately, I had the chance to interview her at the University of Alcalá de Henares, and it was of great help for the present work.

In the analysis we found that all those cultural references written in Igbo were not explained in the source text. While the British have been in contact with Africans throughout colonial and postcolonial periods and are probably familiar with certain concepts, we still wondered if Buchi Emecheta wanted them to deal analytically with all those foreign words and expressions in the text. The translator, however, and perhaps due to the Spaniards' poor knowledge of the Igbo culture, explained some of them within the text and by adding 16 footnotes. The use of footnotes always means *amplification*, and although in the Spanish literary translation they are reduced to a minimum, in translating postcolonial texts they could be very useful in ensuring comprehension.

Translating Cultural References

Through the ages, people throughout the world have been developing their own distinct cultural characteristics, creating important differences between languages and social environments. These variations find expression in all their actions; eventually developing an increasing gap between individuals from different cultures. We refer to religious practice, social customs, household utensils, food, proper names, and so on, and they are defined as “references”, “realia” or “culturemes”.

Some scholars consider them “the verbal expression of a specific phenomenon in a language” (Marcelo, 2007, pp. 74–76), although it is not easy to decide when a reference is specific of one particular language. In one previous work (Pascua, 2015), following the intercultural tendency and the skopos theory (Witte, 2000, 2017), we defended that the best way to understand a cultural reference is to compare it with another one from a different culture. Finally, we adopted the definition by R. Mayoral (1994, pp. 73–78) who considers a cultural reference an element of discourse, the linguistic expression that reflects the way we see reality, a way of thinking and acting always influenced or conditioned by the culture we are immersed in.

In order to choose which theory or what strategies to use in our analysis of the cultural references manifest in this postcolonial hybrid text, we followed the principle of “loyalty” proposed by the functionalist Christiane Nord (1997): every translator should commit to both parties involved in the translation process: the author and the target reader. Venuti's method (1995) was also very useful: the translator should look at this process through the prism of culture which refracts the source text. He distinguished between *foreignization*, as the strategy of preserving information from the source text, breaking the conventions of the target language to ensure that the meaning is not lost, and *domestication* that brings the text closer to the culture of the target language. He strongly advocates the *foreignization* strategy, because *domesticating* erases the cultural values of the source text. However, and although we agree that cultural references should be preserved through foreignization, in the cases where we want to ensure the comprehension of the text and the readers' correct understanding of the cultural identity reflected in the text, “domestication” bridges the gap. So, our theoretical premise is that in this type of text we cannot use merely one translational strategy, we should look for a

balance. According to K. Gyasi, if translating from African into European languages is no easy task, the translation of this literature from one European language into another presents even more problems (Gyasi, 1999, p. 82).

Analysis

After the meticulous work of reading and studying the source text and the translation, we found more than 200 references used by Buchi Emecheta as signals of her cultural identity, and the Spanish translator perceived this intention and preserved them. We classified them into 10 categories, adapting the classification we used in G. Marcelo's doctoral dissertation (2007, p. 225).

1. Proper names: anthroponyms and toponyms
2. Housing. Transport
3. Clothing. Food
4. Expressions
5. Flora & fauna
6. Professions. Education
7. Health, medicine
8. Money. Institutions
9. Religion & tradition
10. Social realia

Only the most relevant examples will be shown:

Proper names (79):

All names were preserved as loanwords, even the most difficult to spell or write.

Anthroponyms (43): Nnu Ego, the main character, Nwokocha Agdabi, Nnaife, Ona, Obi Omuenna, Nwakusor, Dilibe, Obi Idayi, Folorunsho, Itsekiri, and so on.

–Source Text (–ST): Mama Oshia, customary manner for a woman with a male child.

Target Text (TT): Mamá Oshia, saludo que se utiliza para una mujer que tiene un hijo varón.

–ST: Oshiaju, meaning “the bush has refused him”

TT: Oshiaju, que significa “rechazado por la maleza” (maleza=cementerio)

Toponyms (32): Ibuza; Ogboli; Asaba; Emekuku Owerri; Akinwunmi Street; Fernando Po/Fernando Poo (exception); Amelika/América, and so forth.

Special dates (4):–ST: *Eke* night.../ TT: noche *Eke*.¹

¹ 1. El primero de los cuatro días de la semana ibo. 2. Día de mercado, *Eke*, que constituye el centro de la vida social para los pueblos de la región ibo. En los días *Eke*, como los días festivos en Occidente, la gente sale arreglada y elegante, al encuentro de los miembros de la comunidad y de otras personas de fuera; durante el día corren las noticias y se cotillea, mientras que durante la noche suele celebrarse un baile. (1. The first of the four days of the Ibo week. 2. Market day, *Eke*, which is at the center of social life for the peoples of the Ibo region. On *Eke* days, as in the holidays in the West, people come dressed up and elegant, meeting members of their community as well as outsiders. During the day, news and gossip prevail, while a dance usually takes place during the night.)

Housing (2):

–ST: homestead / TT: recinto²

–ST: *odo* / TT: *odo*³

Transport (2):

Calques.

–ST: “*kia-kia*” bus, meaning literally “quick quick bus”

TT: *kia-kia* que quería decir, literalmente, bus “rápido-rápido”.

Clothing (7):

Calques.

–ST: *buba* blouse/ TT: blusa *buba*

–ST: *lappa* / TT: *lappa* (Not explained. Fabric that can be used as a skirt or a dress).

–ST: *npe* cloth / TT: paño *npe*.⁴

–ST: George material / TT: tela *George*, (Not explained. Special fabric for weddings).

Food (15):

Most calques.

–ST: *okasi* soup / TT: sopa de *okasi*

–ST: *ogogoro* / TT: *ogogoro* (a drink)

–ST: *garri* / TT: *garri*⁵

Money (4):

–ST: *esusu* / TT: *esusu*, (savings among friends).

–ST: bags of *cowries* / TT: sacos de *cowries* (not explained: small seashells, used as coins; shell money)

Education (4):

–ST: Yaba Methodist School / TT: Escuela Metodista de Yaba

–ST: St Gregory’s College / TT: St Gregory’s College

–ST: Junior Cambridge / TT: certificado 4º curso, el Junior Cambridge

Expressions (9):

² *Compound*: Del inglés de África Occidental y Sudáfrica, traducida en este texto unas veces como “recinto” o “concesión” (en referencia a pueblo) y otras como “casa”, (en alusión a una casa moderna de la ciudad), se refiere al espacio físico habitado por una comunidad. En el primer caso se trataría de la familia tradicional compuesta por el cabeza de familia y sus esposas, donde el padre tiene su propia cabaña y cada una de las esposas tiene una propia donde vive con los hijos que ha tenido; sin embargo, en la ciudad, se trata de un edificio en el que cada familia solía alquilar una sola habitación en la época colonial, algo que sigue sucediendo entre las familias pobres en la actualidad. (From the English of West Africa and South Africa, translated in this text sometimes as “enclosure” or “concession” (in reference to people) and others as “house”, (in reference to a modern house in the city), it refers to the physical space inhabited by a community. In the first case it would be the traditional family composed of the head of the family and his wives, where the father has his own cabin and each of the wives, in turn, has her own, where she lives with the children she has borne; however, in the city, it is a building in which each family used to rent a single room in colonial times, something that continues to happen among poor families today.)

³ *Odo*: Maza para majar cosas en el mortero. (Echeru, 1998: 133). (Mace to grind things in the mortar).

⁴ *Npe*: Paño tejido a mano para un recién nacido (Buchi Emecheta, en conversación con la traductora). (Hand-woven cloth for a newborn [Buchi Emecheta, in conversation with the translator]).

⁵ *Garri*: Del ibo, “harina de mandioca”. (Cassava flour según Echeru, 1998, p. 53).

- ST: *Dan duru ba!* / TT: ¡*Dan duru ba!* (curse, insult)
 –ST: He, who roars like a lion” / TT: “El que ruge como un león” (The chief)
 –ST: “Cootu, cootu, cootu” / TT: cucú, cucú, cucú! (Rocking a baby)

Religion-tradition (10):

- ST: *Chi* / TT: *chi* (personal God)
 –ST: *juju* dance / TT: baile *juju*
 –ST: *dibia* / TT: *dibia*⁶
 –ST: *Mammy Waater* / TT: *Mammy Waater*⁷

Social realia (75):

These are the references that better reflect cultural identity in Emecheta’s work. We have gathered the most important in 5 topics:

Traditions:

a. Chief’s death:

–ST: The disclosure of his death would have to comply with certain cultural laws, there must be gun shots, and two or three goats must be slaughtered before the announcement. Anyone who started grieving before the official proclamation would be made to pay fines equivalent to three goats.

TT: El anuncio de su muerte tendría que cumplir con una serie de leyes culturales: debía haber disparos y debían sacrificarse dos o tres cabras antes del anuncio. Quien empezaba a llorar antes de la proclamación oficial tendría que pagar una multa equivalente a tres cabras.

b. The slaves:

–ST: A good slave was supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress.

TT: Se suponía que una buena esclava debía saltar a la sepultura por su propia voluntad, contenta por acompañar a su señora.

c. Nnu Ego’s wedding:

–ST: ...he sent his daughter away with seven hefty men and seven young girls carrying her possessions. There were seven goats, baskets and baskets of yam, yards and yards of white man’s clothes, twenty four home-spun lappas, rows and rows of Hausa trinkets and coral beads [...]

⁶ Curandero, con un contenido religioso añadido, puesto que esta figura tiene poderes con respecto a la salud espiritual del paciente. (Healer, with an added religious content, since this figure has powers with respect to the spiritual health of the patient.)

⁷ Diosa de las aguas, como se le denomina en el inglés de África Occidental y del inglés *pidgin* hablado en toda la costa del Golfo de Guinea, incluyendo Guinea Ecuatorial. En el período colonial se la representa como una diosa mestiza con una abundante melena ondulada, que podría interpretarse como un sincretismo entre la imagen de la mujer blanca colonial y la diosa acuática tradicional presente en varias religiones de la región, como la ibo (donde esta diosa recibe el nombre de Uhamiri) o la yoruba (cuyo nombre es Yemanya). (Goddess of the waters, as she is called in the English of West Africa and in the pidgin English spoken all across the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, including Equatorial Guinea. In the colonial period she is represented as a mestizo goddess with an abundant wavy mane, which could be interpreted as a syncretic image of the colonial white woman and the traditional aquatic goddess present in various religions of the region, such as the Ibo [where the Goddess receives the name of Uhamiri] or the Yoruba [among whom her name is Yemanya]).

TT: ... envió a su hija con siete hombres robustos y siete jovencitas que le llevaban sus pertenencias. Había siete cabras, cestas y cestas de ñame, metros y metros de tela del hombre blanco, veinticuatro *lappas* tejidas en el pueblo, innumerables fruslerías y cuentas de coral dispuestas en hileras.

d. Sense on community:

–ST: People say you have even stopped coming to the meetings. Well, that is very serious.

TT: Dicen que has dejado de ir a las reuniones. Desde luego eso es muy grave.

–ST: An individual life belongs to the community and not just to him or her.

TT: La vida de un individuo pertenece a la comunidad y no a sí mismo.

Colonialism:

–ST: Naafy [...], We de go back to England! [...] England de fight to Germans.

TT: Naafy! Nosotros volver a Inglaterra! [...] Inglaterra luchar contra alemanes.

–ST: ...they had a saying, “Na government work, ino dey finish”: it is government work

TT: ...tenían un dicho: “*Na government work, ino dey finish*”: “El trabajo del gobierno nunca puede terminar”.

–ST: ...I can’t speak that stuff they call `canary` English [...]

–“Pidgin English, old boy, pidgin English”

TT: Yo no sé hablar esa cosa que llaman inglés, el inglés de los canarios.

–Se llama *pidgin*, querido muchacho, es el inglés *pidgin*.⁸

–ST: The British own us, just like god does

TT: Los británicos son nuestros dueños, igual que Dios.

–ST: Are we not all slaves to the white men, in a way?

TT: ¿No somos todos esclavos de los blancos, de alguna manera?

Women’s role:

–ST: A woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman.

TT: Una mujer sin un hijo que ofrecer a su marido era una mujer fracasada.

–ST: My sons, you will all grow to be kings among men. My daughters, you will all grow to rock your children’s children.

TT: Hijos míos, todos vosotros creceréis para ser reyes entre los hombres. Hijas mías, todas vosotras creceréis para acunar a los hijos de vuestros hijos.

–ST: One thing was sure: he gained the respect and even the fear of his wife Nnu Ego. He could even now afford to beat her up.

TT: Una cosa era segura: se ganó el respeto e incluso el miedo de su mujer Nnu Ego. Ahora podía incluso permitirse pegarla.

–ST: Don’t you know that according to the customs of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin [...] I know you have children, but they are girls.

TT: ¿No sabes que según las costumbres de nuestro pueblo tú, Adaku, la hija de quien seas, estás cometiendo un pecado imperdonable? [...] Sé que tienes hijos, pero son niñas.

–ST: She belonged to both men, her father and her husband, and lastly to her sons.

⁸ Alusión al inglés *pidgin*, denominado despectivamente *parrot English* (inglés de loros) o *canary English* por los británicos en las áreas colonizadas donde escuchaban esta *lingua franca* entre la población autóctona. (Allusion to the pidgin English, disparagingly called parrot English (English for parrots) or canary English by the British in the colonized areas where they heard this lingua franca among the native population.

TT: Perteneecía a los dos hombres, a su padre y a su marido, y en último lugar a sus hijos varones.

The eldest son:

–ST: His brother has died and left behind several wives and God knows how many children [...]

Oh, dear, are you bound to accept them all? asked Mama Abby.

TT: Su hermano ha muerto y ha dejado varias esposas y sabe Dios cuántos hijos.

Eso sí que es una mala noticia. ¿Estás obligada a aceptarlas a todas?, preguntó Mama Abby.

–(Father to son) –ST: Now, young man, when are you going to take on your family responsibilities?

TT: A ver jovencito, ¿cuándo vas a asumir tu responsabilidad?

–ST: What responsibilities, Father?

TT: ¿Qué responsabilidad, padre?

–ST: Adim, Nnamdio! You two come here! These are your responsibilities, to say nothing of myself and your mother!

TT: Adim, Nnamdio! ¡Venid los dos ahora mismo! ¡Aquí está tu responsabilidad, por no hablar de mí y de tu madre!

–ST: I don't understand, Father. You mean I should feed them and you too? [...] I can't take over, Father. I am going to the States. I have won a scholarship ...

TT: No lo entiendo, padre. ¿Quieres decir que debo darles de comer a ellos y a vosotros? [...] No puedo hacerme cargo, padre. Me voy a EEUU. He conseguido una beca.

–ST: I do not wish to see you ever again, since you have openly poured sand into my eyes.

TT: No quiero volver a verte en mi vida, puesto que me has tirado arena en los ojos, con ese descaro.

Demystification. The hope of a new African woman

–ST: God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?

TT: Dios mío ¿cuándo vas a crear a una mujer que se realice por sí misma, un ser humano completo, no el apéndice de otro?

–ST: When will I be free? [...] even in her confusion, she knew the answer. Never, not even in death.

TT: ¿Cuándo seré libre? Sabía la respuesta. Nunca, ni siquiera después de muerta.

Finally, she came back to her family's village. She died quietly and alone:

–ST: When her children heard of her sudden death they all, even Oshia, came home. They were all sorry she had died before they were in position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen, and a shrine was made in her name, so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren.

TT: Cuando sus hijos se enteraron de su repentina muerte fueron todos al pueblo, incluido Oshia. Todos sentían que hubieran muerto antes de encontrarse ellos en situación de proporcionarle una buena vida a su madre. Tuvo uno de los funerales más sonados y fastuosos que Ibuza viera jamás y se hizo un altar en su nombre para que su descendencia fuera a rezarle si eran estériles.

–ST: Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children.

TT: Nnu Ego lo tuvo todo, pero nunca respondió a las plegarias de quienes le pedían hijos.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that all references found in this postcolonial African novel are signals that reflect not only the author's identity but also contribute to the constitution of a hybrid language, to the so-called "third space". Also, it is evident that the translator has followed the ethical commitment (Bandia, 2003, p. 132) to preserve cultural references when translating a European-African text into another European language.

Migration movements, independence, cultural encounters and mis-encounters among diverse peoples have created that *third space*, one where cultural and linguistic frontiers are vague, unclear, and where the local and the global have mixed and generated the so-called *glocal* (A. Rodríguez, 2016). This is a space where the "use" of a colonial language can help colonized people to be closer to international readers and make their own voice heard, creating a *hybrid literature* with which they can showcase their identity, make their mindset intelligible and articulate a different way to conceive the world.

No doubt that forging and occupying this third space was Buchi Emecheta's strategic plan in most of her writings. Due to her critical thinking as an African woman, her works are an important reference for the condition of African women in and outside the African continent. Through her work, written in a language that is *not innocent*—even the main character's name, pronounced *new ego*, means "priceless"—she reclaims her African identity and proposes a new African ideology based on *womanism* (a profound questioning of maternity, marriage, the strict rules of tradition, polygamy). In writing in colonial English while at the same time Africanising the language, Buchi Emecheta questions and challenges the historical authority of that European language, performing not only a linguistic act but also a political one, as language is also power. That is why we truly believe that:

"Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history" (Ngugi wa Thiong'o)

"Le langage n'est jamais innocent" (Roland Barthes).

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