Parallel text: a theoretical and methodological strategy for promoting African language literature in the twenty-first Century

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Abstract: This paper proposes a theoretical and methodological strategy for reconceptualizing African literature in the twenty-first century. Twentieth-century African literature was characterized by colonial concepts through which literature in indigenous African languages was largely neglected while literature in colonial languages was promoted with problematic notions such as "Anglophone African literature," "Francophone African literature," and "Lusophone African literature." African literature needs to be reconceptualized as Afriphone literature, where the notion of African literature must prototypically subsume literature in languages indigenous to Africa. African literature must be reconceptualized first and foremost as African language literature. Many scholars interested in the documentation and revitalization of African languages and cultures, which constitute attempts to preserve the collective memory of these African traditional knowledge systems, are largely in agreement with this, but how to go about doing Afriphone literature remains a research challenge. This paper proposes an approach to addressing the problem based on the theoretical and methodological notion of parallel text.

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1. Introduction

The Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma, author of the novel *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1968), has invented the term "diplosie" (Kourouma 1991) to express what he considers to be the reality that the vast majority of African writers presumably think in one language and express themselves (speak, enchant, or write) in another. It is indeed true that many African writers of the twentieth century and earlier did speak their native African languages on the one hand and then wrote many of their works in the former colonial language of their countries, including English, French, or Portuguese, on the other hand. It is also true, however, that while this has continued into the twenty-first Century more and more writers, conscious of the need to document their traditional verbal art and other collective cultural memories of their societies, are beginning to "translate" their own work.

This exercise is what I call parallel text practice or parallel-texting. More and more African writers have resolved that the only major way forward to produce literature in African languages and thus preserve these languages, big and small, is for Western-educated writers who still speak their African languages to write parallel texts—that is, produce the same texts that they wrote in English, French, or Portuguese in their African language following the theme, genre, and style of the original as much as possible but not necessarily a word for word translation. Of course, more importantly, they should write first in the African language and then translate into English or other languages, but irrespective of which language the original text is in it has the same effect of producing literature in African languages and making it available for a wider readership because the practice of parallel texts means that the two or more texts must be published concurrently and contiguously—that is, side by side.

Parallel text practice as described here is part of a comprehensive agenda by myself (Bodomo 2013, 2014a, 2014b) and a group of academics dedicated to the promotion of African language literature, as part of the general program of documenting the languages and cultures of Africa to reconceptualize African literature and general humanities in the twenty-first century.

One of the earliest African writers to set the agenda for producing literature in African languages is the Kenyan writer,

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi started his writing career by writing in English but then later realized that the best, and indeed most natural, way to promote African literature is through writing in African languages, so he started writing in Kikuyu and Swahili and translating many of his works into English, especially with works such as *Caitani Matharabaini* (translated as *Devil on the Cross*). Indeed, Ngugi at some point did not recognize as African literature any literature that was not produced in indigenous African languages, preferring to call literature in European languages written by Africans Afro-European literature, and decried the constant "Europhonism" of African writers (Ngugi 1986, 2009). The following excerpt from his seminal work of literary criticism, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), captures this thinking:

> What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages? While we were haranguing enemies in European tongues, imperialists have continued to spout their lies in our native tongues (such as translating the Bible into all African languages...). So, we're losing the battle because we haven't been fighting. And the literature that's been created should be called Afro-European, not African. (Ngugi 1986, 26)

From this angle, then, it does not make sense to Ngugi and many African writers who push for an African language literature agenda to describe African literature in seemingly obsolete, contradictory terms such as "Anglophone African literature," "Francophone African literature," or "Lusophone African literature," terms whose definitions we will have to reconsider in the "Discussion" section of this essay.

Of course, other African writers had and still have a very different position from that of Ngugi and other campaigners for an African language literature agenda. They often give reasons for why we must not worry about writing in African languages and why we must continue to write in European languages. Some of these include the fact that not all African languages have a script, and that the market share for a writer of African literature in African languages would be insignificant. They also point to the fact that European languages continue to be official languages in African countries where they serve as a lingua franca to

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speakers who speak a diverse set of languages, so writing in English, French, or Portuguese would be a way of developing a certain kind of "national" literature.

The late Chinua Achebe, one of Nigeria's and Africa's most renowned novelists, belongs to this group and, in a long polemical argumentation with Ngugi, expressed many of his counterpoints to Ngugi in his seminal "Politics and Politicians of Language in African Literature" (Achebe 1989).

Defending why he writes in English in terms of its serving as a unifying "national" language, he states the following:

> I write in English. English is a world language. But I do not write in English because it is a world language. My romance with the world is subsidiary to my involvement with Nigeria and Africa. Nigeria is a reality which I could not ignore. (Achebe 1989, 100)

Ngugi, however, points to the glaring "abnormality" of arguing for writing African literature in European languages in the following telling statement:

> The very fact that what common sense dictates in the literary practice of other cultures [to write in your own spoken language] is being questioned in an African writer is a measure of how far imperialism has distorted the view of African realities. It has turned reality upside down: the abnormal is viewed as normal and the normal is viewed as abnormal. Africa actually enriches Europe: but Africa is made to believe that it needs Europe to rescue it from poverty. Africa's natural and human resources continue to develop Europe and America: but Africa is made to feel grateful for aid from the same quarters that still sit on the back of the continent. Africa even produces intellectuals who now rationalise this upside-down way of looking at Africa. (Ngugi 1986, 28)

The foregoing shows that there is clearly a great debate going on within African literature about which language/s is/are best suited for African literature. It is of course not simply an "either–or" scenario, and it is indeed possible to write in both African languages and in European languages.

In this essay, I propose how we can write in African languages and still not lose the visibility that is implicit in many of the arguments against the use of African languages. In section 2, I define and sketch the idea of parallel texts as a theoretical methodology for doing African language literature which

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involves actually having parallel texts in African languages and in European or other languages of wider communication. The theory subsumes the following definition of African literature:

> African literature is any form of artistic creation produced in the medium of African languages, first and foremost, or any other natural language (written, spoken, or enchanted) by an artist or group of artists with substantial enough experiences of the landscape of the continental landmass of Africa and its associated islands, along with diasporic exportations of the cultures of this continental landmass. (Bodomo 2013, 2014a, 2014b)

This definition,[1] as can be seen, emphasizes the importance of African languages without necessarily excluding a role played by other natural languages, and the literature can be written, spoken or even enchanted as done in libation pouring practices in West Africa. The authors do not have to be African, but must have enough substantial experiences of Africa to be able to express its cultures, both as seen on the continent itself and also in its diaspora communities.

In section 3, I use two of my poems written in both Dagaare—my mother tongue, a language spoken by some two million people who live in northwestern Ghana and adjacent parts of Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast—and in English. The two are poems about important events in recent African history that might continue to be in the collective memory of many Africans for a long time: the death of Nelson Mandela in December 2013 and the kidnapping of about three hundred schoolgirls by Boko Haram militants in northeastern Nigeria in April 2014. Section 4 contains a brief discussion of the consequences of such an approach that involves the redefinition of a number of issues in African literature and the renaming of African language literature as Afriphone literature, along with a relation of this discussion to a society's collective memory, while section 5 concludes the essay with a recap of the major points, and points to how we might sustain the agenda for Afriphone literature in the future.

[1] Other ways of defining African literature include cataloguing the major themes and stylistic devices that recur in texts by African writers (magic, witchcraft, proverbs, etc). Ayuk (2014) is an example of such an approach.

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1. Parallel texts: theory and methodology

A parallel text, as used here, is a set of texts in which written (or even spoken and sung) literary expressions in two or more languages are mediated in the form of translation at various levels, including the graphemic, the morphological, the syntactic, the phonological, and certainly the semantic. In effect, the end result of the translation at one or more of these levels is a set of texts existing side by side for ease of cognitive processing by the recipient.

A theory of parallel texts is postulated as follows: in a bilingual and biliterate (or multilingual and multiliterate) environment, for more effective and optimal knowledge and information dissemination, language users should produce contiguous texts in at least two of the languages within the bilingual and biliterate environment.

The raison d'être for translation is in the fact that multilingualism within a speech community doesn't necessarily guarantee that all individuals within a community will be polyglottic. There is often a rather intricate distinction between plurality of language at the community level and plurality of language at the individual level. An individual who has lived all her life in a rural area and speaks only one language fluently who now arrives to live in a city where many languages are spoken may be called a monoglot in a multilingual community; on the other hand a person born in a multilingual city and most likely speaking many languages who now gets posted as a civil servant to a rural area where only one language is spoken would be a polyglot functioning within a monolingual community.

Theoretically then, since multilingualism is not synonymous with polyglottism, in a multilingual environment where one might have some monoglots, parallel texts as a form of translation are justified if we want to achieve optimal knowledge acquisition and information dissemination within the community.

The concept of parallel texts is both a theory and a methodology in the sense that, theoretically, it mediates any dissonance that exists between the number of languages at the community level and the number of languages within individuals; parallel texts mediate and try to resolve the discords between multilingualism and polyglottism, between "lingualism" and "glottism." Methodologically, it gives writers an opportunity to

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optimally express themselves by "placing" oral or written texts side by side within a given context, so simultaneous translation or interpretation is a parallel text, and poems written on the same theme and style and placed side by side constitute a parallel text, as I will illustrate in the next section.

2. An illustration with two poems

Two important events that attracted much of Africa's and the world's attention and are now arguably part of our global collective memory occurred in December 2013 and April 2014—only about four months apart. The first involved the death of the legendary South African freedom fighter, Nelson Mandela, which occurred on December 5, 2013. The other event involved the capture of almost three hundred schoolgirls in the town of Chibok in northeastern Nigeria, where Islamic militants calling themselves Boko Haram are fighting for a separate polity.

I captured each of these events in the form of a parallel text, first writing in my mother tongue, Dagaare, spoken in Ghana as mentioned above, and in English. So each of these two poems about important African events are parallel-texted in Dagaare and English—and here parallel-texting actually means producing them side by side. A piece of work written and published in a volume and later written and published in another volume is not a parallel text, it is simply a (delayed) translation. Pairs of text about the same topic and genre qualify as parallel texts only if they exist side by side, on the same page or on contiguous pages.

With this background clarification, I now present the two parallel texts, beginning first with the "Mandela" poem to be followed by the "Chibok girls" poem:

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MANDɛLA GAA LA DAPARE

N bakori mine woi	Friends
N mabiiri woi	Children of one Mother
Zenɛ Dizemba beraanuu	Today December 5
bebiri	News coming in bodes not
Te yelpaala na ba taa nimiri	well
N gaa la BBC	I flipped unto BBC
Ka N noɔre maa fɛlɛlɛ	And the news was tasteless
A gaa CNN	Clicked unto CNN
Ka N polaa teɛ kpelele	And my heart pumped
A yuo CCTV ka a ne a zu	CCTV was not any different
A gaa GBC ka a le ang deɛ	And GBC confirmed it all:
la	Grandfather, ancestor
Ka te saakoma Mandɛla	Mandela
Deɛ ba la be a tengɛ nyɛ zu	Is no longer with us on
	Earth
Te GANDAA Mandɛla na	It is our HERO Mandela!
la!	There he goes as always!
O paa yaa deɛ wa yie la!	Majestically, in his
Dagakparoo, Gangalang!	dagakparoo!
Kurilane, Sangsalang!	Gallantly, in his kurilane!
A zɛle tammo ne logiri	Bow, army of arrows in tow
A te kulo o yiri	He is on his way home
A kyaare sapare	Facing East
A te gɛrɛ Dapare	On the ultimate journey to
	Dapare

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CHIBOK MAMINE

Yɛ Mamine Bebiri Yaane!
Deyang:

A yɛ pɔgsarebilii kɔɔre ata
Da wa age mare yɛ la
A vare poɔre yɛ
A yeli ko yɛ:

Mma, ne fo Mamine Bebiri Yaane!
N puori fo la yaga
Ne fo nang wong tuo
Kaa ma ka N baa
Kyɛ zenɛ
A yɛ pɔgsarebilii kɔɔre ata nyɛ

Yɛ deɛ ba la wong ba yɛlɛ
Togitogitogi
A mang boɔle ka
Ligiligiligi

Yɛ na teɛre ka ba wa yele yeli zaa

Kyɛ yɛ kyɛlle, a kyɛlle velaa
Kyɛlle a Chibok saseɛ nang fuuro lɛ
Kyɛlle a Maidugri nuuli nang kono lɛ
Kyɛlle a Jos tangazu salingsobo nang voorɔ lɛ

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY WHISPERS FROM BOKO HARAM

A year ago
300 sweet little voices said to you:

Mom, mama, mma,
Happy Mother's Day!
You saw them smile, cry tears of love
Plastering you with ever so gentle hugs of gratitude
In Nico Mbargan language:
"Sweet Mother, I no go forget you,
I no go forget this suffer wey you suffer for me"
Today
300 sweet little voices are quietened, you may think
But listen, listen carefully
To the gentle caressing winds of Chibok
To the chirping little birds over the hills of Maiduguri

To the hissing sonics of the praying mantis up on the Jos plateau

And you will hear 300 sweet little voices
From Boko Haram dungeons

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Yɛ na wong la a yɛ
pɔgsarebilii kɔɔre ata kanga
na zaa

Boko Haram nang pɔge
bare
Kyɛ ka ba nang sɔgle yele:
Mma, Ne fo Mamine Bebiri
Yaane!

(Veɛna, Mee 2014)

Obstinately whispering to
you:
Mom, mama, Mma,
Happy Mother's Day!

(Vienna, May 2014)

In the "Mandela" poem, after hearing breaking news on most of the news media of the world, we are imagining how Mandela, our newly minted ancestor, is preparing for the journey to Dapare—the mythical homeland of all departed spirits, of our ancestors—like all men, all warriors in our Dagaare culture, he would have had to wear the smock, our war uniform, arm himself with bows and arrows, face East, and walk away majestically. . .

The smock is not only the traditional dress of the Dagaaba, the people who speak Dagaare, it is also a warrior dress etymologically, and is thus appropriate for a man like Mandela who has been a warrior all his life. Indeed, when Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, was declaring the independence of Ghana on March 6, 1957, after a long struggle, he and his lieutenants wore the smock as a dress for the victorious warriors they were. The bow and arrow are further symbols for a great warrior but also meant to help him protect himself as he goes home, and even to hunt for some game if he so desires. As for the symbolism of facing East in Dagaare culture, it expresses the idea that a good man, a good farmer must always rise early in the morning, and make sure he goes before sunrise to the farm. Women in the culture are metaphorically facing West since they stay at home and must particularly check that by sunset they prepare food for the man who comes back home from the farm, from the hunting grounds, or from the war front after a hard day's job in the wilderness.

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The "Chibok girls" poem is imagining how the mothers of these girls would have enjoyed their company on Mothers' Day and other days when they stayed close together and enjoyed each other's company. It then imagines how it would be without them when the next Mothers' Day comes around and they would be without these children.

The poem, which may be termed a "telepathic poem," then evokes instances in which the girls may be communicating with their mothers through the medium of the birds, the winds, and the singing insects in the vicinity of the Jos plateau, the most important landmark in that region of Nigeria.

3. Discussion

What are some of the consequences for an agenda of parallel texts for the promotion of African literature, and how might we relate the need to produce literary works in African languages to the issue of a society's collective memory?

Reconceptualizations. First, a number of reconceptualizations have to take place to put things in perspective as a consequence of this agenda. We agree with Ngugi that the "normal" for African literature should be African language literature. We reconceptualize that here as Afriphone literature, and claim in this paper and in previous work (Bodomo 2013, 2014a, 2014b) that the most prototypical form of African literature is Afriphone literature.

This does not in any way exclude the use of European languages in African literature, but those cannot be the norm. Indeed, terms like Anglophone African literature, Francophone African literature, and Lusophone African literature are obsolete, twentieth-century colonial notions about African literature. Rather, we reconceptualize that Anglophone African literature as used in the twentieth century is literature that was written about Africa in English. It is essentially English literature about Africa. The new conceptualization of Anglophone African literature is one of translated literature. A piece of work is, first and foremost, considered Anglophone African literature if it was first written in an African language and then translated into English. Any piece of work that was first written in English about Africa (whether or not by an African) is English literature about Africa. However, if a piece

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of work is written in English and translated into an African language, that translated version is African literature.

In the same vein, Francophone African literature as used in the twentieth century meant literature that was written in French about Africa. But we shall not refer to it like that now—we shall refer to it as French literature about Africa (whether or not written by an African). In the twenty-first century, the reconceptualization of Francophone African literature is literature that was first written in an African language and then translated into French. If a piece of work is written in French about Africa and translated into an African language, that piece of work qualifies as African literature.

Finally, Lusophone African literature in the twentieth century meant literature written in Portuguese about Africa. However, in the twenty-first century, where there is a robust agenda for the promotion of Afriphone literature, Lusophone African literature qualifies as such if the original text was written in an African language. Lusophone African literature is not literature first written in Portuguese but that which was translated into Portuguese from an African language. If however a piece of work originally written in Portuguese now gets translated into an African language, the translated text is African literature.

As can be seen from this reconceptualization of Anglophone African literature, Francophone African literature, and Lusophone African literature, the parallel text pair is a pair comprising Afriphone literature and Europhone African literature; in the case of the "Mandela" and "Chibok girls" poems, a Dagaare-phone African literature and an Anglophone African literature. Afriphone, then, in itself is a cover term for the many African language literatures that are expected to blossom from the Afriphone literary agenda in the twenty-first century.

Parallel texts and collective memory. The practice of parallel texts as outlined in this paper is clearly a specialized form of translation. This specialized form of literary translation connects to an important discussion on the relationship between literary translation and cultural memory (what I call collective memory here), as espoused in works like Long's (2008). In Long's paper, she investigates "the

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relationship between literary translation and cultural memory, using a twentieth century film version of one of Shakespeare's plays as a case study in inter-semiotic translation" (1). The work goes on to clarify that the

> common perception of translation is often confined to its use as a language learning tool or as a means of information transfer between languages. The wider academic concept embraces not only inter-lingual translation, but both intra-lingual activity or rewording in the same language and inter-semiotic translation defined by Roman Jacobson as "the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems" (Jakobson 1959, 114). (Long 2008, 1)

If more and more African writers do parallel-texting, as proposed here, the end result of this literary practice would be the documentation of the verbal art and other traditional linguistic knowledge systems, including ideophones, proverbs, and other kinds of verbal indirection towards preserving and enriching the collective memory of contemporary African societies.

The term "collective memory" as I use it here could form the basis of what one may term "African memory"[1] in the sense that it evokes some typically traditional African ways of remembering the past—including not just the oral transmission modes involved but also of recognizing some older individuals with experiences of the society's past as repositories of the history and culture of their society. In short, knowledgeable elders are considered as authoritative custodians of each rural African society's past. This fact is encoded by an African saying that whenever an old man dies it is like a library that burns down! These traditional collective memory practices have formed the basis of memory documentation in contemporary African polities, with two of the most prominent ones being attempts to document the painful apartheid past in South Africa through its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) sittings (Gade 2013), and the attempt to document the collective

[1] I would like to thank Critina Demaria, one of the editors of the present journal, for suggesting that I connect my idea of parallel text as a translation/writing process to the idea of memory documentation, and for questioning whether one can indeed talk of an "African memory."

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memory of the 1994 Rwandan genocide (Rettig 2008) in which more than half a million people lost their lives.

Parallel texts in the Curriculum. To summarize this discussion section, further consequences for the practice of African literature in school and university curricula are that African literature programs ought to focus on African language literatures and not literature in European languages about Africa. They may, obviously, do courses on Anglophone African literature, Francophone African literature, and Lusophone African literature but, in line with the twenty-first-century definition of these literatures, these must be translations into English, French, and Portuguese respectively from African language literature.

In sum then, African literature in the twenty-first century is literature that is written originally in an indigenous African language or that has been translated from an African language into other languages. It is Afriphone literature if it stays in the original African language, Anglophone African literature if it is translated from an African language into English, Francophone African literature if it is translated from an African language into French, and Lusophone African literature if it is translated from an African language into Portuguese.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have proposed the concept of parallel texts as a theoretical and methodological strategy for reconceptualizing African literature in the twenty-first century.

As described in the paper, a theory of parallel texts stipulates that in a multilingual and multiliterate environment, for more effective and optimal knowledge and information dissemination, users of language should produce contiguous texts in at least two of the languages within the said environment.

Drawing from this, a parallel text would then be a set of texts in which written literary expressions in two or more languages are mediated in the form of translation at various levels, including the graphemic, the morphological, the syntactic, the phonological, and certainly the semantic. Conclusively, the end result of the translation at one or more of these levels is a set of texts existing side by side for ease of

cognitive processing by the recipient, and may serve to document the collective memories of African traditional societies in the form of preserving various kinds of indigenous verbal art.

Two poems by the author have been used as illustrations of these concepts and it is expected that more writers would set about practicing parallel-texting, and indeed that publishers will from now onwards encourage the publication of parallel-texted volumes.

Many scholars of African languages, linguistics, and literatures are interested in the documentation and revitalization of African languages and their associated cultures. They are largely in agreement that this is an urgent task, but how to go about doing this remains a research challenge. This paper has proposed an approach to addressing the problem with the theoretical and methodological notion of parallel texts. It is hoped that more parallel-texted volumes will be published within the next ten years for the promotion of Afriphone literatures.

This parallel-text approach as a special kind of writing and translation process could indeed be contributing to the construction of a new and richer collective memory which is an instance of the idea of African memory, as discussed above.

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