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Translating Nigerian Indigenous Literature into English: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract—*Translating Nigerian indigenous literature into English narrows the cultural gulf and makes Nigeria's literary heritage available to the world. This article examines the constraints and the possibilities introduced by this process in terms of linguistic challenges naunced idiomatic translation, loss of idiomatic nuance, cultural contexts, etc., and opportunities cultural preservation, cross-cultural interactions, and literary diversification. A mixed methods approach is used, using text analysis of selected indigenous texts and their English translations, semi-structured interviews with translators and authors, and reader surveys. It was revealed by key findings reveal that tonal languages and culturally-specific expressions (proverbs, folklore) pose significant translation difficulties and it often requires creative adaptation or explanatory footnotes. Translator interviews highlight strategies like balancing domestication and foreignization so as to maintain authenticity, while reader surveys as well indicate strong appreciation for culturally rich translations but mixed perceptions on translation quality. The impact of these findings displays the role of translation in preserving endangered languages and enriching the world literary canon. Ultimately, the research offers insights into effective translation strategies that honour the source culture, and it calls for additional scholarly and practical attention to empower indigenous language literature in the global arena.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's unparalleled linguistic diversity encompassing over 500 indigenous languages has long fascinated scholars of sociolinguistics, translation studies, and African literature (Bamgbose, 1991; Adegbija, 1994; Eberhard et al., 2021). Despite this abundance, English, introduced during the colonial era, continues to function as the official language and primary medium of education and publishing (Dadzie & Awonusi, 2004). Consequently, much of the literature produced in indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo,

Hausa, Tiv, Kanuri, and Efik remains largely inaccessible to broader Nigerian and global readerships (Elugbe, 1994). Scholars have repeatedly emphasized that translating these works into English not only helps preserve Nigeria's cultural heritage but also enriches global literature with new voices and aesthetic forms (Obi Wali, 1963; Chinweizu, Jemie & Madubuike, 1980; Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Still, translation in a postcolonial context remains a contentious act (Spivak, 1988; Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989; Bhabha, 1994; Venuti, 1995; Bandia, 2008). For instance, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) cautions that using a former colonial language can threaten indigenous languages' vitality and shape the creative expression of African authors. Yet major figures like Achebe (1975) and Soyinka (1967) have argued that employing English is often strategic enabling Nigerian writers to share local histories, moral philosophies, and narratives with a global readership (Mazrui, 1978; Casanova, 2004). The tension lies between an urgent need to protect local identities from dilution, on the one hand, and the inclusive potential of a "world language" for cross-cultural exchange, on the other (Crystal, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Issues like these extend to the enabling debates within translation studies in respect of "domestication" versus "foreignization" (Bassnett, 1980; Hermans, 1985; Lefevere, 1992; Venuti, 1998; Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Baker, 2006). One translation approach might preserve culture-specific idioms and expressions as foreignising, putting them into jeopardy of being unknown to the average English reader; in contrast, the domesticating approach prefers easy readability but dilutes the local colour of the source text (Toury, 1995; Hatim & Mason, 1997; Munday, 2001; Robinson, 2012). This balancing act becomes particularly important in translating Nigerian languages that employ tonal nuance or culturally rich proverbs (Obiechina, 1975; Bandia, 2008). Translators can preserve the aesthetic and cultural depth of the works by transliterating local references from the moral significance of

proverbs to the acoustic symbolism of personal names (Irele, 2001; Irele & Gikandi, 2004).

2. METHODOLOGY

Informed by Creswell (2014) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010), this research adopted a mixed-methods design. This combination of qualitative and quantitative methods assisted in giving a holistic understanding of both the translation process and its outcomes (Bryman, 2012). The research investigates three core Nigerian languages, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, as representatives of different linguistic families and cultural regions of Nigeria. Within each language group, one outstanding literary work originally composed in that language was chosen for analysis, totaling three primary texts. Criteria for collection included cultural richness of the text (e.g. use of idioms, folklore), availability of an existing English translation, and recognition in its own literary tradition. The selected texts also include different genres (a play, a collection of folktales, and a novel) so as to examine whether genre has influence on translation issues.

2.1 Textual Analysis

A comparative textual analysis was executed on the original indigenous-language texts and their English translations (Krippendorff, 2004). Instances of translation challenges such as altered proverbs, untranslatable words, and culturally dense passages were systematically recognized and categorized (Dörnyei, 2007). Categories included idiom/proverb, cultural reference, tone/meaning ambiguity, and structural difference. Each challenge instance was documented together with the translator's chosen strategy for addressing it (literal translation, substitution with an English equivalent, explanatory footnote, omission, or creative rephrasing). This process made it possible to quantify the frequency of various challenge types (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) and to evaluate the most prevalent translation strategies. For example, the analysis noted whether a particular translation relied heavily on footnotes compared to others that opted for paraphrase or explanatory additions within the text.

2.2 Interviews and Survey

To complement the textual analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the translation process (Flick, 2018). Interviewees included five professional translators (where possible, translators of the case study texts), two authors whose works had been translated, and three literary scholars who specialize in Nigerian literature. Participants were prompted to discuss challenges they perceive in translating indigenous texts, strategies employed to convey cultural nuances, and ethical concerns regarding modifying or omitting culturally sensitive content. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Audience reception was assessed through a structured questionnaire (Bryman, 2012) completed by a total of 120

readers, divided equally among three groups. The first group comprised native speakers of the original languages who could read both the source text and its translation. The second group consisted of Nigerian readers who had access only to the English translation, while the third group included international readers with no prior familiarity with the cultures depicted in the texts. The questionnaire incorporated Likert-scale questions evaluating clarity, readability, and cultural authenticity. Open-ended prompts asked respondents to comment on what they liked or disliked about the translation, including any new cultural insights they gained. All participants were assured anonymity to encourage candid responses (Mertens, 2010).

2.3 Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were utilized to interpret the findings. The categorization of translation challenges (for instance, idioms, proverbs, or structural differences) was tallied, and descriptive statistics were calculated (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Qualitative data, including interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses, were coded thematically using NVivo software (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This coding process highlighted recurring themes, such as translator "visibility" versus "invisibility" and the varied approaches to rendering culturally specific concepts. Likert-scale responses from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS, allowing for the calculation of mean scores, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations (Creswell, 2014). Particular attention was given to how familiarity with Nigerian culture correlated with higher appreciation of the translation's authenticity. Throughout this process, ethical research standards were maintained. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was preserved except in cases where well-known translators waived confidentiality. Triangulating data from textual analysis, interviews, and surveys enhanced the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Key Translation Challenges

The comparative textual analysis confirmed several hypothesized challenges in translating Nigerian indigenous literature. Table 1 shows the frequency of identified translation challenges. Proverbs and idiomatic expressions were the most prevalent hurdle (45%). This aligns with observations by writers like Achebe that such expressions are integral to the storytelling Achebe (1975). In many cases, direct English equivalents for these proverbs did not exist. Translators adopted different solutions, about half of the time, they chose to translate the proverb literally and then add a footnote explaining its meaning or cultural origin. For example, in the Yoruba text we studied, a proverb about a tortoise and a king was translated word-for-word, which on the page seemed cryptic, but a footnote provided the moral

lesson it conveyed in Yoruba culture. In other instances, translators opted to replace the proverb with an English idiom or proverb that carried a similar meaning. One Igbo proverb roughly meaning “a common snake is never mistaken for a python” (warning against false appearances) was translated as “all that glitters is not gold,” an English adage capturing a comparable idea. This substitution made the text immediately understandable to an English reader, though it sacrificed the local imagery of the original (Bassnett, 2014; Bandia, 2008; Venuti, 2019).

Table 1. Frequency of Identified Translation Challenges

Challenge Type	Frequency (%)
Proverbs/Idioms	45%
Cultural References	25%
Names with Meaning	15%
Tonal/Aesthetic Structure	10%
Syntactic/Structural Issues	5%

Another challenge was handling culturally specific references such as names of deities, traditional clothing, or social customs (25%). All three case study texts contained words with no direct English counterpart. Translators generally chose to retain such terms in the text untranslated, italicized to mark them as loanwords (Toury, 1995). They relied on context or a brief inline explanation for comprehension. This practice aligns with recommendations in postcolonial translation literature to preserve “realia” (culture-specific terms) to maintain the text’s cultural atmosphere (Bhabha, 1994; Bandia, 2008). Names embedded with meaning (15%) were retained in all translations, demonstrating adherence to foreignization strategies (Venuti, 1995). However, as Chinweizu et al. (1980) argue, such names often encode worldviews that risk being lost on foreign audiences unless adequately contextualized. This loss was evident in survey responses, where bilingual readers noted the missing connotative layers. The handling of tonal and aesthetic structure (10%) further illustrates the inherent tension in translating oral literature. As Irele (2001) points out, African narrative traditions rely on rhythmic repetition and participatory cues. Simplification or omission of such features in the English versions affected the aesthetic texture, as readers reported missing the oral storytelling feel. This corroborates Bandia’s (2008) view that translating African texts requires sensitivity to orality and performance. Syntactic and structural differences (5%) were the least problematic, aligning with Munday’s (2001) observation that syntactic challenges are often resolved through translator intuition. Still, their cumulative impact on narrative voice and pacing should not be underestimated.

Reader responses highlight the subjective experience of translated texts. As Table 2 illustrates, bilingual readers scored cultural authenticity highest (4.4/5), suggesting an appreciation for retained cultural elements. International readers scored lowest (3.7), consistent with studies by Hatim and Mason (1997) showing that cultural unfamiliarity diminishes text engagement. Nevertheless, qualitative

responses showed that foreign readers valued the cultural insight provided by footnotes and glossaries.

Table 2. Reader Ratings of Cultural Authenticity (Mean Scores)

Reader Group	Authenticity Score (out of 5)
Bilingual Readers	4.4
Nigerian English Readers	4.1
International Readers	3.7

Table 3 synthesizes the challenges, their frequencies, strategies, and reception. These findings support the growing call in translation studies for dynamic equivalence prioritizing communicative function over literal reproduction (Nida, 1964). When translators employed creative paraphrasing or reader-friendly annotations, texts became more accessible without losing their cultural core.

Table 3. Summary of Translation Challenge Categories and Reader Feedback

Challenge Type	Frequency (%)	Common Strategies	Reader Feedback
Proverbs/Idioms	45%	Literal+footnote, substitution	Mixed responses; footnotes favoured by all groups
Cultural References	25%	Italics, glossaries, paraphrasing	International readers found some terms confusing
Names with Meaning	15%	Retention, occasional parentheticals	Bilinguals noted loss of interpretive depth
Tonal/Aesthetic Structure	10%	Simplification, narrative smoothing	Readers missed oral storytelling feel in translation
Syntactic/Structural Issues	5%	Sentence restructuring	Mostly unnoticed by international readers

This study affirms that translating indigenous literature is an act of cultural preservation and re-creation. Translators, like authors, are storytellers—navigating between fidelity and functionality. Their choices shape not just how a story is told, but whose worldview it conveys. As such, translation is both a bridge and a filter—a dual role that calls for deeper scholarly engagement and institutional support.

4. CONCLUSION

Recognizing the importance of a delicate balancing act between cultural authenticity, fidelity of language, and acceptability or accessibility to the readers in undertaking the

translation of Nigerian indigenous literature into English becomes undeniably salient according to the findings of this study. Through empirical evidence, it was ascertained that idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and culturally specific references are most common and difficult to render in English. There is a fine line that translators must tread between adaptational versus literal approaches, often leading to hybridization which would strike a balance between contextual embedding, footnotes, and selective domestication. Most significantly, the reception data showcases the importance of bearing indigenously cultural markers even in cases where full comprehension is not established. Readers, especially those outside Nigeria, show a disposition toward engaging with non-commonly understood concepts if accompanied by thoughtful entrustment in translation processes. This provides a more comprehensive possibility for literature as cultural diplomacy to breathe: if translation is seen as preservation of the spirit with which indigenous texts are framed in narratives, then this invites the creation of channels for intercultural empathy and appreciation of African outlooks. This is a contribution towards the decolonization of literature and enlargement of the global literary canon, through the instance of challenge and strategy. Future research may be directed towards translator training courses, collaborative methods of translation into English with native speakers and cultural insiders, or how technology can help light into the dark corners in which literature in the native languages remains hidden from the larger world.

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