Translating from Igbo (Nigeria) – A Bumpy Journey

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Abstract: Literatures in African languages have remained largely untranslated and thus unknown outside their linguistic domain. This situation led the ELLAF http://ellaf.huma-num.fr/ team to start gathering oral and written texts and build an online encyclopaedia of literatures in African languages. Igbo language, one of the three major national Nigerian languages, is also one of the eleven African languages chosen for this project. Igbo rich oral and written literature remains largely unknown to this day, with only one translation into French, that of its first novel, Omenuko (1933). This article will present the difficulties and challenges experienced by the French translation of the Igbo text during this long period, from a first attempt in the 1990s unto its 2010 publication in Paris. It will equally contribute to the on-going reflection on challenges facing the translation and publication of literary texts in African languages.

Keywords: Nigeria, igbo, novel, translation, Omenuko.

Literatures in African languages hardly find readers, and, because they are rarely translated, are poorly appreciated and rarely studied, even if efforts are made in this direction (Iyalla-Amadi, 2018; Williams & al., 2022). The field of translation and study of works in African languages remains therefore largely unexplored today. Nigeria's linguistic patchwork, in particular, characterized by the multiplicity of languages (520 listed),[1] defies any in-depth linguistic analysis. English, the official language, and Pidgin[2], developed in the south of the country during the colonial era, have been facilitating communication from one end of this immense federation of 923,768 km^2 to the other. In regions where one of the majority languages dominates, such as Igboland, it is this language that serves as language of communication. In areas of linguistic melting pot, characterized by the coexistence of several lesser languages – in the Central Plateau (with more than 40 languages) and Delta (with 7 languages) States for example – Pidgin generally serves as lingua franca.[3] This complex situation has remained a major obstacle to the publication of works written in Nigerian languages and their translations.

This situation led the ELLAF team to work on a project to put online a first sample of oral and written literature in African languages.[4] Igbo, Nigeria's third language by the number of speakers, and whose literature is still very poorly disseminated since there are very few translations of it, is one of the eleven languages represented in this project. This article, based on personal experience, presents a first-hand account of the challenging journey of *Omenuko* (1933), the first novel in Igbo[5], from Igbo to French. The sixteen years of sustained and relentless efforts separating the novel's translation in 1994 and its publication in 2010 will now be considered, in a bid to contribute to the reflection on the difficulties of translating and publishing works produced in African languages and on the means of overcoming them.

A WIDELY IGNORED LITERARY PRODUCTION

Igboland, in the southeast of the federation, has a population of 35 986 million, one of the highest population densities on the continent (CIA *World Factbook* 2025), not to mention its huge diaspora. The development of Igbo linguistics, which led to the publication of grammars, dictionaries and a valuable literary production, certainly owes much to the work of missionaries, notably the French SMAs and Spiritans (Ugochukwu, 2000) whose research and work on Igbo language predated that of the British and who can be recognized as precursors not only linguistically but also as having paved the way for the current cooperation between France and Igboland within the framework of Franco-Nigerian relations. This region, homeland of

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[1]https://www.ethnologue.com/country/NG

[2]Nigerian speakers of Pidgin / Naija, estimated at more than 75 million (Ihemere, 2006; *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (*APiCS, 2017*) https://apics-online.info/about), usually learn this language very early in life to communicate with the outside world, after learning and practicing their first language at home with their family. While the structure of Pidgin is the same throughout the country, the vocabulary bears the marks of the dominant language of each region. https://www.eva.mpg.de/linguistics/past-research-resources/typological-surveys/atlas-of-pidgin-and-creole-language-structures-apics/?Fsize=0%252C%252B%2540&cHash=83ceb14c63a5891b8b090e7ddb995fdc

[3]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r37p66CXhUo

[4]http://ellaf.huma-num.fr/

[5]For details, cf. the English publication of Nwana, *Omenuko* transl. Ernest Emenyonu, 2014: ix.

anglophone writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, Emecheta, Ike, Okri, Nwapa, Okigbo, Iweala, Adichie, Obioma, Okorafor, Unigwe and others, as well as of the popular English-language literature from the Onitsha market, is now known throughout the world for its literature in English. But it is also heir to a literature defined as "written first and foremost in Igbo language, depicting Igbo worldview […], wholly or in part, and written by an Igbo person" (Emenyonu, 2020: 2), boasting of hundreds of titles, which has been developing since the publication of the first novel in Igbo, *Omenuko,* in 1933 (Ugochukwu, 2015; Emenyonu, 2020).

The Nigerian Independence, and the adoption of an official orthography for the language in 1961, have led to the inclusion of Igbo in schools and university curricula, and in turn to the publication of numerous novels, plays, collections of poems and essays to be used as textbooks. The first Igbo novel, *Omenuko* (1933), was followed by many others, starting with *Ala Bingo* (1937), *Ije Odumodu jere* (1963) and *Elelia na ihe o mere* (1965), to which were added, among others, Ogbalu's compilations, Emenanjo's manuals, an array of novels by Ubesie, novels and plays from Nwadike, Onyekaonwu, Chukuezi and the Odunke group of artists, Ofomata and Maduekwe, collections of poems from Achebe, Udechukwu, Emenanjo, Nwadike, Chukuezi and Uba-Mgbemena, to name but a few. However, for this literature to be appreciated outside its linguistic domain, the language barrier needs to be broken. Yet these works are still looking for translators and publishers (Ugochukwu, 2006).

A SEMINAL TEXT

Omenuko, released in 1933 in London after winning the first prize in the literary competition organized by the International Institute for African Languages and Cultures and covering the entire continent, earned its author, Pita Nwana, the prize for literatures in African languages. The journey of this first Igbo novel can be considered as a model worthy of supporting a reflection on the difficulties of publishing African works in translation. Its French translation took more than fifteen years to find a publisher, although this little book should have been of interest in more ways than one. This romanticized biography first opens a window on an era that has long remained in the shadows apart from Achebe's first novel. It retraces the life of Omenuko, the fictitious name of the very real Chief Igwegbe Odum (1860? – 1940) from Arondizuogu, in Imo State of Nigeria. The setting is the hinterland of Okigwe, and, beyond that, the present-day States of Imo and Abia[6], with their villages, their walled concessions home to several members of the same extended family, their prosperous trade and their markets. The story begins at the end of the nineteenth century and ends with the hero's return home at the end of October 1918, the last chapter evoking the 1929 depression and allowing us to date the end of the story from 1930. We are therefore dealing here with two distinct generations: the one before 1900 and the following one – the latter bearing witness to the control exercised by the British colonial administration over the whole of the Igbo country and illustrating the transition from one era to another.

From a linguistic point of view, it is possible to confirm that Nwana's novel is the culmination of the linguistic work of the missionaries, both those of the CMS[7], who arrived in Onitsha in 1857, and their French Catholic counterparts who arrived in 1885. With the help of the Igbo catechists and starting from the Igbo translation of the New Testament, those early linguists published grammars, lexicons and manuals, and developed Igbo reading and writing, while collecting folktales, legends, epics, songs, riddles and proverbs (Ugochukwu, 2000). The disagreement between Catholics and Protestants over the spelling to be adopted for the writing of Igbo, and the successive orthographies adopted by printers, while delaying the progress of Igbo writing and printing, were never a hindrance to this first novel. The first edition of *Omenuko* used the Protestant orthography, but the success of the novel is due in large part to the fact that it was published successively in all available orthographies. Once the official orthography adopted by the government, it was implemented in all schools and in 1963, the Longman Publishing House of Nigeria published a new edition of *Omenuko*, transcribed into the new official orthography by Iroaganachi.

A WITNESS AND A COMPANION

In literary terms, this text, written at a time when traditional Igbo culture was still flourishing and preserved, is in the direct line of tales, proverbs and other oral narratives: the author-storyteller is

[6]The Igbo linguistic and cultural area covers the present-day states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, and part of the Rivers and Delta states, all in Southeastern Nigeria.

[7]Church Missionary Society, British Anglican missionary society with evangelical tendencies.

omnipresent and the novel is interactive, frequently and directly addressing the reader and eliciting his contribution; the tone is didactic, and the author makes abundant use of proverbs and sayings. The text gives ample space to discourse and dialogue, central to Igbo culture and whose translation has tried to render the formal and sometimes rigid character as best as possible. The subject of the novel, on the other hand, is resolutely modern and offers a unique viewpoint on the history of the relations between villagers and colonial administrators, and on the difficult position of the intermediaries – the warrant chiefs and interpreters (Afigbo, 1972)[8]. It is also significant that this first Igbo novel is a fictionalized biography, if we consider the central place that orality and genealogies have held for centuries in the transmission of local history in Igboland (fieldwork, Igboland, 1972-1996).

Another interest in the novel lies in the key role it has played and still plays in education in the region. Most published Igbo literary works are normally intended, by their authors as well as by the publishers who take the risk of printing them, for teaching, and quickly included in primary, secondary and higher education curricula.[9] Reprinted several times by Longman, this little novel remains the most widely read Igbo classic, despite the publication of many other works in Igbo since then – novels, plays, collections of poems, tales and proverbs. It has remained in the secondary and university curriculum and can be found on the shelves of every Nigerian library. “Generations of Igbo children began their reading in Igbo with *Omenuko*, and those who did not have the opportunity to go to school still read *Omenuko* in their homes or at adult education centres. Omenuko was a legendary figure, and his sayings became part of the Igbo speech repertoire that young adults were expected to acquire” (Emenyonu, 2014: ix). However, this first novel remained untranslated for a long time, depriving generations of valuable access to colonial-era Igbo society[10].

A FLURRY OF CONCURRENT INITIATIVES

After the French translation of Achebe’s first novel in 1966, France continued to play an important role in Nigeria's cultural field. The 1980s saw other translations of Anglophone writers such as Achebe, Ekwensi, Nwankwo, Nwapa, Okara, Osofisan, Soyinka and Tutuola, while more and more French and French-language manuals of African literature included Nigerian authors and critics (Ugochukwu, 2006). *Omenuko* being the ancestor of Igbo written literature and the result of the ground-breaking work of French linguists in Igboland, it is only right that it ended up being translated into French first. The early 1990s saw the commissioning of its first translation through the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) in Ibadan. In the wake of this, and in partnership with Nigeria, the French cultural services in Lagos, conscious of the need for lexicographic tools to support the budding translation of Nigerian literature, commissioned the production of bilingual dictionaries in the three main languages of the federation, which led to the publication of French-Hausa (2000), Igbo-French (2004) and Yoruba-French (2009) dictionaries by Karthala.

It had all begun with a private initiative, a translation of *Omenuko* submitted to the IFRA in Ibadan in the early 1990s and apparently emanating from a Nigerian academic. In response, the Institute first took time to find someone to evaluate this text. The quality of this translation having been considered as inadequate, the manuscript was abandoned – this first translation seems to be the one later published locally in Okigwe in 1995. Meanwhile, the IFRA got interested in the novel and commissioned a new translation, the publication of which unfortunately quickly faced difficulties related to copyright issues. Despite the support of several CNRS researchers, this translation thus remained in drawers for years before being unearthed and offered, in the 2000s, to several French and African publishers before its final publication by Karthala at the end of 2010.[11]

The publication of Nwana's novel in French was hindered by multiple obstacles. The first major obstacle was obviously the requirement to master the written form of both the source and the target language, which led the IFRA to reject the first translation of the work[12].

[8]The Igbo historian Afigbo studied the chieftaincy system of this period in his book *The Warrant Chiefs - Indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891-1929* (1972).

[9]This is due to the poor reading habits of most traditional Nigerians, who spend long hours occupied with basic chores.

[10]While Achebe's first novel emphasizes the encounter between traditional religion and Christianity, *Omenuko* offers a unique testimony to the trade and political relations between indigenous and colonial peoples in the early twentieth century.

[11]https://www.karthala.com/accueil/2374-4378-omenuko-ou-le-repentir-d-un-marchand-d-esclaves-9782811104535.html#/22-ebook-papier

[12]In Igboland, a large number of French speakers have learned the language from French-speaking neighbours and have only a vague knowledge of its written form. Until after the Biafran war, education was in the hands of the churches and in Igboland, Igbo was only taught in the first two years of primary schools. But most members of the Igbo-speaking population born in cities, elsewhere in Nigeria or in the diaspora, have had little opportunity to study their language in class and therefore struggle reading and writing it..

The lack of a bilingual Igbo-French dictionary, needed to support the translation work, constituted another huge obstacle–this first dictionary eventually came out in 2004 in Karthala. Additional obstacles were associated with copyright, difficulties of contact with the original publisher and the very real fears of the French publisher in the face of a work emanating from an Anglophone African country and therefore unlikely to interest the French-speaking public. Added to these was the necessity for the would-be translator to be conversant enough with the Igbo culture and the colonial history of the region.

The novel had already aroused interest and was made into a film in 1993, later uploaded on YouTube as a 6' 22" video clip entitled *Omenuko*, in the form of a sung tale accompanied by dances but now lost. Later, in 2008, Onyeka Onwenu, a Nigerian actor, screenwriter, singer, journalist and politician, assembled a team and tried to put *Omenuko* on screen. He then met a new and unexpected obstacle: that of the disagreement between Nwana's family and that of Chief Odum, who inspired the character of Omenuko. The Odum family demanded considerable rights in exchange for their agreement, and Onwenu abandoned his project (Njoku, 2011).

On June 18, 2011, a press article published in Vanguard *Nigeria* and written by the son of Pita Nwana, author of *Omenuko*, then revealed that the novel had already tempted translators earlier, but that the Longman publishing house in London, which owned the Igbo text, had so far refused to accept any English translation of it. That same year, Longman eventually granted the long-awaited permission, and Njoku appealed to potential translators. Nwana's novel was later successively translated into English by Pritchett (Ugochukwu, 2022) and by Emenyonu (2014).

Today, an old Igbo adaptation of the novel directed by Marcel Emecheta, produced by Geoffroy Ike and set in Arondizuogu in 1900, inspired by Nwana's novel and first presented on Nwaticha TV, has been retrieved and is available on YouTube in three episodes of some 33mn each, subtitled in English.[13]

POPULAR FRENCH AND LANGUAGE REGISTERS

Meanwhile, the need to translate Nigerian literatures into other languages had caught scholars' attention. Nigerian higher education, in rapid expansion with the creation of new universities, had seen the rapid development of translation courses, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, which encouraged doctoral students to translate texts from oral and written literature, as indicated, among other things, by the holding of conferences and related publications (Anyaehie, 2001). Nigeria being surrounded by Francophone countries, French was the obvious choice as the preferred target language, but Igbo translators still faced many difficulties, including a lack of mastery of the Igbo language, as most Nigerians had never learned the language at school, in an English-speaking country more concerned with the need to teach its official language. In addition, in school timetables, French often competed with other subjects. Those still interested in that language often worked alone, under difficult conditions, and produced manuscripts of poor quality. It should be remembered here that French has never been a second language for Nigerians, but the fourth, fifth, or even sixth language, only offered as an option in secondary school, after English, a second Nigerian language learned in class or in the market, in addition to Pidgin and/or another lingua franca in regions such as the delta or the Jos plateau, linguistic melting pots. It should also be remembered that the geographical position of Nigeria, an English-speaking country surrounded by French-speaking countries, encourages the use of popular French spoken in the markets and bus stations of Niger, Chad, Benin and Cameroon, especially among traders. This linguistic diversity, reported in journals such as *Le Français en Afrique*[14], dictionaries and lexicons (Blondé *et al*. 1979; Lafage, 2002) and online articles (Gbadamassi, 2010), does not make it easy to learn the language register required.

This multilingualism is a great asset, testifying to the vitality of relations between ethnic groups within the federation as well as to the need and desire to communicate without hindrance with the outside world. It nevertheless somewhat reduces the users' active lexicon and inevitably triggers a significant number of linguistic interferences which manifest themselves, among other things, in the simultaneous use of several languages in conversation. In addition, the act of translation or interpretation, experienced as a habit, is often no longer perceived as such and can lead the

[13]https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lcJiNGWml0; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMuX49KRPYI; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMuX49KRPYI.

[14]Journal of the UMR 7320 "Bases, corpus, language" of the CNRS/ILF. http://www.unice.fr/bcl/ofcaf/Presentation.html.

interpreter or translator to be satisfied with approximations. Some texts, hastily published by local publishers ignorant of foreign languages, poorly equipped to ensure the necessary proofreading of the manuscripts submitted to them, and in a hurry to get teaching material published, are far from meeting the required quality criteria. This is illustrated by the French translation of *Mbediogu* (1991), a collection of tortoise tales initially published in 1972, which can be considered as an enormous and commendable work enriched with a French-English lexicon and comprehension questions and intended for secondary and higher education programs. This text, generally well translated, is however marred by a lack of proofreading which ignored spelling mistakes and errors of tense and genre.

Writing about multilingualism and translation in Nigeria, Ibemesi (2012: 421) praised the work of Ikekeonwu, a Yoruba-born academic, Igbo linguist and translator of *Omenuko* into Yoruba, and noted that her personal background had placed her remarkably well to accomplish this feat. While the experience of multilingualism is common in Nigeria, it is rare to meet linguists able to combine multilingual learning with a university curriculum. At first glance, Igbo translators would seem to be in the best position to render the daily life of their culture. However, many diasporan Igbos, who grew or lived far away from 'home', know very little of ancestral traditions and rural life. This distance from the land, in addition to an insufficient mastery of both the source language and the target language in a country where neither had been widely offered as school subjects, probably explains why few Igbo have ventured into the field of translation, generally preferring to rewrite tales, which are easier to handle, directly in English.

VOCABULARY AND STRUCTURES

In his work on *The Theoretical Problems of Translation*, Mounin (1963: 51) already asked a few questions, including the following:

> Is it true that we see the world only through the distorting glasses of a particular language, so that the different images (of the same reality) that we obtain in each language are never exactly superimposed? Is it true, then, that when we speak of the world in two different languages, we are never quite speaking of the same world...?

The transition from Igbo to French presents major difficulties related to the structure of the language and vocabulary[15]. In Igbo, for example, the verb is all-powerful and commands the meaning of the sentence. As the French verb does not have the same functions, the translator will have to use adjectives or adverbs so as not to lose any of the original meaning (Okeke & Okeke, 2022). How, moreover, can we render in French a local reality that is very far from it? The traditional Igbo world, for example, knows no door or doorbell, but a doorstep where visitors clap their hands or raise their voice to attract attention. In addition, the language uses the same word to mean the door, the threshold, the passage and the path. Another tricky area concerns the translation of colours, since in Igbo, only black, white and purple have a particular word designating them, the rest being described by the names of substances of the same colour – blood for red, leaves for green, shades, and certain secondary colours such as orange being excluded (Ugochukwu, 2023). Anatomy itself is not perceived in the same way in the two languages, as highlighted in hospital conversations: a single word designates, in Igbo, the stomach and the lower abdomen, while for headaches or stomach aches, Igbo has a wealth of verbs unknown in French and describing exactly the type of pain felt (Cf. Nwosu, 2009). In another field, Igbo opposes the French dream of the "small home" [*le petit chez soi*] to that of the "storey-house" [*ulo enu*]: here we have two opposing ideals of life, which can easily be explained by a comparative study of housing, but certainly pose a problem for the translator.[16] What about personal and family names, which all have a meaning and are never given at random? Will it be necessary to translate them or resign ourselves to losing an element that is often crucial to the understanding of the story? Igbo also has "greeting names" such as "Ogbuehi" [Cattle killer], which have no equivalent in European languages.

Zoology, botany and crafts are other minefields which writers and translators have sought to circumvent in various ways. A language born of a rural society, Igbo language has, in the twentieth century, faced the same challenge recorded by French linguists from the Renaissance, with the Igbo Standardization Committee acting as the Pléiade. The work of this Committee has resulted in the production of bilingual lexicons which, when published locally and distributed to the various media, have made it possible to adapt

[15] Ibid., p.44. See also F. Ugochukwu (1992).
[16] Personal fieldwork, 1972-1996.

the language to contemporary needs, particularly in the legislative, judicial, technological and educational fields, while at the same time serving as a reference for radio and television news presenters. The impact of this work in the scientific fields - especially in medicine, mathematics and physics - has been remarkable and has proved the language's adaptability and competitiveness at the very moment when a political will was bringing it to the forefront.

In the field of literature, oral structures also complicate the translator's task. The translation of proverbs, a treasure trove of zoological and botanical knowledge, presents a challenge to those keen to convey not only the meaning but also the images, the rhythm and the puns of these sentences while keeping them concise. However, a small number of linguists have embarked on this arduous task, emboldened by the pioneering work of Ogbalu and Nwoga: Njoku's *Dictionary of Igbo names, culture and proverbs* presents, in its third part, 107 proverbs classified by theme, translated and explained in their context, and Penfield (1983) has devoted a book to the analysis of Igbo proverbs in context.

PUBLISHERS' FEARS

The language barrier separating the French-speaking world from its English counterpart has remained a huge obstacle to communication. Out of the more than two hundred Nigerian anglophone writers who published more than 550 novels, plays, collections of short stories and poems since the 1950s, only ten works were translated into French before 1980, a year that saw a widening of the field opened by translators. The 1980s saw additional translations, “those of works by Achebe, Ekwensi, Nwankwo, Nwapa, Okara, Osofisan, Soyinka and Tutuola, while more and more French and French-language textbooks of African literature discovered Nigerian authors and critics” (Ugochukwu, 2006). In addition, until 1990, between one and four of these works were translated, year in and year out, all written in English, most often with a huge delay in the publication of the original text: there is an eight-year gap between *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Le Monde s’effondre* (1966), fourteen years between *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Le Malaise* (1974), two of Achebe's novels, sixteen years between Ekwensi’s *Burning Grass* (1962) and *La Brousse ardente* (1978), twenty-two years between Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) and its French translation (1988). Soyinka himself was not spared since twenty-three years separated *The Road* (1965) and *La Route* (1988). This discrepancy is revealing, testifying both to the hesitations of publishers and to the lack of interest in Nigerian literary productions among the French public. The release of an author in translation is not always a guarantee of success, since it took Tutuola thirty-four years, after the French translation *L’ivrogne dans la brousse* (1953), to see the second of his works, *My life in the bush of ghosts* (1954) to come out in French as *Ma vie dans la brousse des fantômes* (1988). The translation of African languages obviously comes up against even greater reluctance.

The reluctance of the French publisher of *Omenuko* has been mentioned above. In an interview with Kalapi Sen at a conference held in Bayreuth in July 2016, Emenyonu, author of an English translation of the novel, explained the difficulties that any translator of works in African languages invariably encounters. He recounts translating *Omenuko* into English in 1972, adding that “his original publishers in England refused to allow the publication of the work in translation, arguing that publication in translation would affect the sales of the Igbo edition” (personal communication), which has never been proven – information corroborating that given by Njoku in 2011. He continues: “So I had to wait for the copyright to expire” (*Ibid*.). This wait, which lasted until 2014, could have been longer.

The potential audience for Igbo literary works is not in Europe but in Nigeria and neighboring countries, so writers and their families have adopted other methods of publishing their translations. The first and easiest, that of the translator of *Mbediogu* (1972/1991), was to go through the local printer/publisher who published the work in Igbo, without worrying about proofreading. It took nineteen years to be able to read these tales in French – which can be explained in this specific case by the fact that the Igbo text was on the school curriculum and that the need to offer it in French to students in the same schools had not arisen until then. Frances Pritchett (1922-2012), in the United States, avoided this obstacle by publishing her translation of *Omenuko* and those that followed online on her daughter's personal website at Columbia University[17]. Wishing to put into practice the language skills acquired in contact with the Igbo while contributing to the transmission of this culture that she appreciated, Pritchett turned to her daughter, a professor at the University of Urdu at Columbia, who created a website

[17] http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/igbo_index.html

dedicated to the Igbo language and literature for her. After her death, this virtual space was kept, to serve both as an online library and as a receptacle for the database accumulated over the years: learner's guide, reference bibliography, various speeches, proverbs and Igbo novels in translation. It already had an unsuspected impact, far beyond what we could have first imagined, and will certainly generate a warm community of users over the years.

The homepage, in English, gives the summary of the site and thus allows readers to get an idea of its ambitions: to serve as a portal to the language, culture and oral and written Igbo literature, and to support learners in their study of the language and the recognition of its dialects. The pages that follow are devoted to the study of proverbs and the translation of six Igbo novels and plays. A final section, added to the site by her daughter after Frances Pritchett's death in 2012, offers her drafts – precious drafts of translations of several other novels and a collection of poems, testifying to a growing mastery of the language and an unwavering enthusiasm that led Frances Pritchett to translate repeatedly until her death.

THE VALUE OF TEAMWORK

Frances Pritchett's translation work also illustrates the benefits of teamwork in this field. This American, who at the end of the 1970s had no reason to be interested in the Igbo language and culture, has made it her mission to bring this language and its literature out of their anonymity by translating them into English. In a document from the year 2000, entitled: "How I fell in love with the Igbo", she recounts how she first met the Igbo and their language. In 1976, she was tasked with referring new foreign students to host families, and teamed up with a Nigerian student, Richard Chime. She continues:

> I was horrified at my ignorance about Nigeria and Africa in general, and the fact that this young man, who had left a place considered by many Americans to be a backward jungle and traveled thousands of miles, spoke my language so well, made me ashamed. I've always loved languages but had never been in contact with languages other than European: listening to Richard and his roommate speak this strange-sounding language made me want to share their conversation. I told Richard that I wanted to learn Igbo and he recommended someone who could help me grasp the basics. I managed to gather a few grammar books and quickly embarked on an apprenticeship that still lasts. To know more about a language is also to get to know the culture that produced it: beliefs, traditions, habits and attitudes, daily life, reading about the environment, and ideas about marriage and children. I discovered that my Eurocentric upbringing had left me woefully ignorant about Africa, and I began to educate myself by reading African writers. *The World Collapses* by Chinua Achebe Influenced me a lot (2000)

Frances Pritchett always acknowledged her daughter's support for her study of Igbo. She also mentioned the valuable and indispensable collaboration of several people from different parts of the Igbo country: first of all, Cletus Onyeka, one of her first collaborators, with whom she studied the language in 1978-1979; it was thanks to him that she discovered *Ala Bingo* – that he himself had studied at Okongwu Memorial Secondary School in Nnewi, Anambra State, in 1974-75. He allowed her to photocopy his personal copy and helped her translate the novel. In 1979, at the University of Nsukka to participate in the SPILC symposium, she met Dr. Bertram Osuagwu, then a teacher in the Nigerian language department of the Alvan Ikoku Teacher Training Institute in Owerri, whom she would have the opportunity to see again in the United States. However, it was Joël Ikoku Nwamuo, a native of Ngwa (Abia State), who worked with her for the longest time (thirteen years). She later wrote, "None of the translations I have been able to do over the years could have been done without the help of the native Igbo speakers I recruited when they were students at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas."

The case of Frances Pritchett's latest translation, *Night Has Fallen in the Afternoon* [*Chi Ewere Ehihie Jie*], circa 1980, demonstrates once again how valuable the support of a team is. As the translator explains:

> This little story is full of so many obscure proverbs that I have often been tempted to abandon. However, it caught my interest because of the image it offers of rural life in the pre-colonial era. I had bought this

> book in November 1983 but was not able to start translating it until many years later. My first assistant was Tina Durunna, and the second Jennifer Ekeanyanwu: both gave generously of their skills and time while working and raising their young children. Needless to say, I am deeply grateful to them.

The downloading of the Igbo texts was made possible by the acquisition of these novels and plays, which in turn was facilitated by Pritchett's contacts in Nigeria. Details about the various authors would never have been possible without the collaboration between Pritchett and the many Nigerians around her.

FROM NWANA TO ACHEBE

Achebe, who was only aged three at the time of the publication of *Omenuko*, also drew his inspiration from traditional culture, and his first novel, *Le Monde s'effondre/Tout s'effondre*, translated for the first time into French in 1966, owes much to *Omenuko*. We find there the cult of the hero so evident in Nwana's novel, and the celebration of individual success considered as a collective feat (Ugochukwu 2006, 2011 and 2014).

The 2016 interview with Emenyonu highlights the enormous impact of the translation of works into African languages – in this case, in Igbo – in the dissemination and study of these literatures, which explain each other by opening to readers a universe that was previously little known. To the question: "Now that *Omenuko* is available in English, do you think it is appropriate to suggest reading this book before studying Achebe's *The World Is Falling Apart*, and why?", Emenyonu replied:

> Absolutely! The two novels are historically the first to describe, in a romanticized way, Igbo daily life, culture and worldview. Nwana did it, in Igbo, followed by Achebe in English. What is there in common between these two novels? Consider their portraits of the first white man – his attitude to indigenous culture, customs and the law. What do the two novels have in common in their depiction of community life, crime and punishment, and, yes, democracy and governance? What about the Igbo concept of heroism, success, family, kinship, patriarchy, femininity and about the great question of human rights? How do these two novels differ in [...] the way they resolve conflicts? *Omenuko* came out a quarter of a century before Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Has anything changed during this period? How and why? An attentive reader will understand much better the daily life, culture and way of life of the Igbo as described in *Things Fall Apart* by first reading *Omenuko*[18].

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