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Tony Harrison in Nigeria: Teacher, Translator and Dramatist¹

Rachel Bower

Tony Harrison, famously born and bred in Leeds, began a position as a young Lecturer at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Northern Nigeria in 1962. Harrison worked at Ahmadu Bello for four years, during which time he was deeply involved with questions of writing, teaching and examining English literature and language in the newly Independent Nigeria. During these years, Harrison acted as Head of English, created and examined courses on English and African Literature and influenced West African policies on the teaching of English and African literature and language, partly through attending conferences organised by the West African Languages Congress and the Association for African Literature in English.² Harrison also produced his first play in this period: the adaptation, with his friend the Irish poet James Simmons, of Aristophanes' Greek Comedy, the *Lysistrata* (Aikin Mata, dedicated to Wole Soyinka), performed for two nights at Ahmadu Bello in March 1965 to capacity audiences.³ The play was published the following year by Oxford University Press, Ibadan Branch, although it was never published outside Nigeria, and is now out of print. The sales of Aikin Mata were always modest and it has received little critical attention.⁴

¹ This work was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. I am grateful to Jacob Blakesley and John Whale for their advice with this essay.

² Papers from these 1963 Conferences in Freetown, for instance, are held in the extensive Tony Harrison Archive in Special Collections at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds (MS 20c HARRISON). I am grateful to Tony Harrison for generously allowing me to cite archival materials and to Sarah Prescott for patiently helping me to find my way in the archive. Much of the material relating to Nigeria in the Harrison Archive was uncatalogued at the time of my research. Where an item is uncatalogued I provide the name and date of the file where possible. All catalogued references are provided in full.

³ Harrison, Tony and James Simmons. *Aikin Mata*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. The published "Foreword" to the play suggests that it was performed in 1964, but archival materials, including the rehearsal schedule in the Archive, suggest that the two performances took place on Wednesday 24 March 1965 and Thursday 25 March 1965 (MS20c HARRISON Aikin Mata).

⁴ There are several royalty statements in the Harrison Archive which list sales, all of which are under 200 copies per annum (see letters from Oxford University Press on 21 April 1969 and 17 May 1971, Uncatalogued File: Aikin Mata). The "Foreword" to *Aikin Mata* is the only readily available piece from the original publication, re-printed in Neil Astley's edited collection on Tony Harrison (Bloodaxe, 1991) and more recently in Harrison's *The Inky Digit of Defiance* (2017).

The thick files of letters, cuttings and notebooks from these years, now held in Special Collections at the University of Leeds, reflect Harrison's keen interest in the languages and traditions of Northern Nigeria, which included Hausa, Yorùbá, Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, Igala and Igbirra, mask traditions, Yorùbá talking drums, bow songs and European sermons, among others. Harrison was fascinated with questions of spoken language and collected widely to prepare for his teaching, including lists of onomatopoeic words in West African languages and piles of English-language cuttings from newspapers and magazines, particularly from advertisements.⁵ The notebooks also show that some of Harrison's earliest experiments with Northern Englishes and Leeds' dialects, and with the stress patterns of swearing and slang, were also carried out at Ahmadu Bello during these years.⁶

This article examines Harrison's early work in Nigeria, focusing on the performance and publication of *Aikin Mata*. I argue that the play is crucial for our understanding of the poetic and dramatic techniques of Harrison's later work. Three strands emerge in Harrison's early work which, I hope to suggest, become cornerstones in his wider oeuvre: the celebration of idiom, non-standard, local and spoken forms of language; the commitment to inter-linguistic and cross-cultural translation and collaboration; and the developing of theatrical works for a specific time and place, for once-only performances. These strands are intricately linked, and remain connected to issues more familiar to scholars of Harrison's work, including his preoccupation with the politics of language and class. Harrison's work in Nigeria, however, shifts our focus away from the tension between Harrison's working-class background and Grammar School education, and towards the importance of the rich multilingual setting of newly independent Nigeria for Harrison's practice as a poet, particularly in the theatre. This not only requires us to reposition Harrison's work in an international context, but also gives

⁵ Uncatalogued File (1964). This file contains invaluable information about Harrison's time in Nigeria, including: A.H.M. Kirk-Greene's paper from the Fifth West African Languages Congress, "The Vocabulary and Determinants of Schoolboy Slang in Northern Nigeria"; a copy of *Zazzau* (A Literary Magazine of the Students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria); copies of *The Phelps-Stokes Reports* and *the Teaching of English* by Frank Cawson, 10 March 1966; a collection of advertisements, cuttings, flyers and posters for local events and businesses in Zaria, including 'Magic', 'Cadburys' and 'the Steel Man'; a collection of newspaper cuttings and photographs for demonstrating English syntax and vocabulary (1962-1966); the Resolutions and Recommendations of the Conference on the English Language Literature of Africa and the University Curriculum, Freetown, 1963.

⁶ MS 20c HARRISON/01: Nigerian Materials

us an insight into the complex multilingual and cross-cultural complexities of Northern Nigeria in the early 1960s.

Hausa

One of most striking things about *Aikin Mata* is its use of West African languages, including Hausa and what initially appears to be a form of Nigerian Pidgin. We shall look closer at this language shortly. In the play, Magajiya (*Lysistrata*) assembles women from all over Nigeria and convinces them to swear that they will withhold sex from their husbands until the men agree to a treaty of peace. Magajiya declares that:

Yes, everything depends on us.

And if the girls of every tribe will do the same –

Yoruba girls and Ibo girls, Fulani girls

And Hausa girls, sabon-gari, Calabari,

Bini girls, Tiv, Idoma, Nupe girls,

Ijaw and Igala girls, Igbirra girls

Angas girls and Gwarri girls – Together

We can give disturbed Nigeria peace.⁷

This speech, with its insistent rhythm, not only highlights the plurality of the society in which the play was translated, but also reflects Harrison and Simmons' desire to capture this in their adaptation. *Aikin Mata* is highly satirical, and in the foreword to the published book Harrison and Simmons describe how they drew on the 'particular brand of satire of different ethnic groups in the Oshogbo Agbegijo with its Gambari (Hausa man), Tapa (Nupe man), and Oimbo (Europeans), and in the popular Yoruba travelling theatres like the Afolayan Ogunsola Theatre', which, they suggest, 'seemed particularly suited to the *Lysistrata*'.⁸ This is not to suggest that the play was not serious in its intentions: on the contrary, the use of 'inter-tribal parody' and 'tribal rivalries' for comedic effect all contribute towards what Harrison and Simmons described as 'a plea for mutual good will'.⁹ Harrison was to write another version of the *Lysistrata* twenty years later: *The Common Chorus* (1988), set in Greenham at the

⁷ *Aikin Mata*, 16-17.

⁸ Harrison, Tony and James Simmons. "Foreword" *Aikin Mata*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 1966: 10.

⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

Women's Peace Camp. In the introduction to this later play, Harrison described how Aikin Mata 'was responsive to the tensions that later erupted into a devastating civil war' in Nigeria.¹⁰ The importance of using everyday language to satirise division in such a context should not be underestimated.

Hausa is not only used for satirical effect in Aikin Mata, but also appears to be linked to Harrison's interest in everyday, spoken and local forms of language. The play opens with Magajiya's Hausa exclamation, '*Kai!*' (15), followed by a Hausa greeting to Halimatu, 'Ina kwana, friend' (15) and Halimatu's response, 'Lafiya lau, Magajiya' ("Aikin" 15). The title itself is Hausa for "Women's Work" and Hausa words are scattered throughout the play. The two pages of notes at the back of the published book function as a glossary, translating the greetings and other Hausa lexicon in the script (79-80). Harrison's reclamation of everyday language and spoken dialects has, today, become one of the most celebrated characteristics of his poetry. This early experiment with using West African words and phrases in the translation of the ancient Greek shows that it was not solely the Northern English dialect that fuelled his enthusiasm for language. The setting into which Harrison and Simmons adapted the *Lysistrata* was an extraordinary one. For Harrison, this turned out to be an experience in which he found, in his own words, 'the drama of my own education dramatically posed in black and white'.¹¹ In the early 1960s, African opposition to European occupation was widespread, and there was fierce debate about how to decolonise the writing and teaching of English. In such a context, the question of language became particularly fraught, particularly in thinking about how Nigerian writers might craft a properly decolonized English in which experiences of ordinary people might be adequately expressed.

Ahmadu Bello was set up after independence, partly as a result of the Ashby Commission Report (1959) which recommended the establishment of a University at Zaria, rather than Kano.¹² The early 1960s saw significant changes in Nigeria's systems of education: before 1960, Nigeria had only one university, University College Ibadan, administered by the University of London. Although universities across Nigeria saw a rapid expansion in student

¹⁰ Harrison, Tony. "Introduction: Hecuba to Us" *The Common Chorus*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992: xii.

¹¹ Haffenden, John: "Interview with Tony Harrison" in Neil Astley ed. *Tony Harrison: Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991: 236.

¹² Ahmadu Bello University, "About ABU". <<https://abu.edu.ng/about.html>>. 3 October 2016.

numbers, buildings, libraries and capacity after Independence, this was still dominated, in many respects, by the former colonial power. Not only were teachers formally (and informally) recruited from Britain, but the examinations, teaching methods and curricula often continued to be set by British institutions. Harrison's detailed correspondence with James Beale from this time reflects some of the bizarre consequences of this situation. Beale attended the Third West African Languages Congress in March 1963 with Harrison in Freetown.¹³ Formerly in the Department of English at Ahmadu Bello and newly based at the Punjab Institute of English, Beale exchanged long letters with Harrison about the parallels he saw in India where even students of Medicine and Engineering had to take compulsory English classes which were mostly about the history of English Literature, largely dominated by authors like Browning and Milton.¹⁴

The examination papers which Harrison kept from his time at Ahmadu Bello reflect a similar situation to that described by Beale, with syllabi dominated by the canonical texts of English and European Literature and the Classics.¹⁵ One of the Poetry and Prose exams at Ahmadu Bello, for instance, asked students to respond to a poem by D.H. Lawrence and to compare descriptions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (May 1965). In the same year, the Drama (Tragedy) paper included questions on Shakespearean drama, Aeschylus's tragedy, *The Oresteian Trilogy*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides's *Hippolytus* (June 1965), and the following year, the English Poetry paper included questions on Homer, Dante, Milton, Goethe, Yeats and Eliot (May 1966). Harrison has also since described, with characteristic frankness, the 'almost surrealistic perversity about O'Level questions, which were set by a board in England for African students' and resulted in 'people coming from illiterate backgrounds and reading about Wordsworth's daffodils because it was set in their exam papers, when they didn't know what a fucking daffodil was'.¹⁶ This comment provides the broader context in which we should read Aikin Mata, and which should surely also influence our understanding of Harrison's later work, including his first collection, *The Loiners*, which contains "The White Queen", the "Heart of Darkness" and "The Songs of the PWD Man"¹⁷,

¹³ See list of international participants, Third West African Languages Congress, Freetown 1963 (Uncatalogued, 1963).

¹⁴ James Beale to Tony Harrison, 6/11/1963, Uncatalogued.

¹⁵ Uncatalogued Examination Papers, 1963-1966. (Green Foolscap File: Teaching materials in Nigeria 1963- 1966).

¹⁶ Haffenden with Harrison, 236

¹⁷ Harrison, Tony. *The Loiners*, London: London Magazine, 1970.

and his most famous collection, *The School of Eloquence*, which begins, in Harrison's words, 'with a poem to Africans'.¹⁸

Harrison's scathing comment about the daffodils prompts broader questions about what it means to teach, examine and write everyday and local forms of language in a postcolonial context dominated by canonical British literature and colonial institutions. More specifically, for Harrison and Simmons, the question becomes that of how two young poets from the British Isles can adapt an ancient Greek play for the specific audience at a new university in Zaria at this time. This question is only complicated further by Harrison's well-documented experiences as a scholarship boy in the late 1940s and early fifties, where he experienced, first hand, the way in which prejudice is intimately bound up with the policing of language.

As critics have often noted, working-class children were 'found badly wanting' when judged on their pronunciation and grammar of 'Standard English' and 'Received Pronunciation'. For Harrison, the prejudice against non-standard forms of English was structured by class, but in Nigeria he began to see similarities with the colonial and racial prejudice he saw before him. There was something, then, in the experience of moving to Nigeria that was, for Harrison, a process of identifying equivalences between different forms of oppression. Colin Nicholson eloquently describes how the young 'Harrison took with him to Nigeria a diploma in linguistics and particular senses of how canonical texts and their associated pedagogies mediate ideological supremacy by promoting preferred perceptions of social place'.¹⁹ At the same time, for Harrison, the very act of translating an ancient play for the modern setting was itself bound up with the search for equivalences, in order to make a work true to the original as well as the modern setting. In 2007, Harrison explained this process of translation as precisely one that 'trains the mind in searching for equivalents, attempting to stay open to all local impressions but having to remain within the confines of an original drama. A combination of fixed form and fleeting content'.²⁰ This is not to suggest that ancient forms can simply be populated with local content, but rather that the identification of equivalences between traditions in different times and places enables the writer to create works that endure across time and place, whilst also speaking powerfully to their specific moment of

¹⁸ Haffenden with Harrison, 236.

¹⁹ Nicholson, Colin. "Reciprocal Recognitions" *Race and Class*. 51.4 (2010): 63.

²⁰ Harrison, Tony. "Introduction: Flicks and This Fleeting Life." *Collected Film Poetry*. London: Faber, 2007: xi.

production. The process of creating *Aikin Mata* was, therefore, arguably very influential on Harrison's later work in the theatre, in which he is strongly committed to the once-only performance of a piece, uniquely designed for a specific cast, audience and performance. Harrison himself told me that *Aikin Mata* was formative for his work²¹, and since then he has, in his own words, 'deliberately embraced the ancient ephemerality of the one performance of a theatre piece, as with *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* in the stadium of Delphi or *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* in the Roman amphitheatre of Petronell-Cartuntum' and forbidden filming of these plays.²²

The use of Hausa in the play contributes towards the sense of it being firmly situated in its modern context. Nevertheless, it should perhaps not go without saying that we should be cautious about accepting a sprinkling of foreign words as an adequate representation of the multilingualism and diversity in Nigeria at this time, particularly given Harrison's position as a white, Classically-educated English man. As Nicholas Faraclas observes in his book on Nigerian Pidgin, there are approximately 400 languages in Nigeria and 'bilingualism and multilingualism have always been the norm rather than the exception' in most parts of the country.²³ Having said this, there are several reasons to believe that Harrison's attempt to adapt *The Lysistrata* involved a sustained effort to capture the rich linguistic setting in which it was cast and performed. Although it is true that (with the exception of the use of 'pidgin') the language of *Aikin Mata* largely remains governed by the syntax of standard forms of English, the Hausa in the play seems designed to speak something true of the multilingualism of Zaria and the everyday languages that were used locally. Looking more closely at *Aikin Mata*, we begin to see that the Hausa words are not selected at random, but that most come from everyday greetings, exclamations of impatience or words relating to food, instruments or sex: the vocabulary of social interactions. To cite a few examples, the phrases '*ba Kome*' [Hausa, 'Don't worry/ never mind', 80n8], '*rank ya dade*' [Hausa, greeting to social superiors, 79n5] and '*hubba*' [Hausa, explanation of disapproval or disgust, 80n13] are all included in the play. The script of *Aikin Mata* also incorporates various Nigerian words for food and instruments, including '*garvi*' [Hausa, flour, 80n11] and '*fufu*' [Yoruba, ground cassava, 80n13].

²¹ Harrison, Tony. "In Conversation with Rachel Bower" Newcastle, 30 October 2015.

²² Harrison, Tony. "Introduction: Flicks and This Fleeting Life." *Collected Film Poetry*. London: Faber, 2007: ix.

²³ Faraclas, Nicholas G. *Nigerian Pidgin*. 1996. Routledge: London and New York, 2013: 3.

There are, of course, likely to be practical reasons for the inclusion of popular words and phrases. As a learner of Hausa and newcomer to Nigeria, this vocabulary would probably have been more familiar to Harrison, as well as to the other non-Hausa speakers in the audience. Nevertheless, given the wider context in which Harrison and Simmons were working, dominated by an imposed British canon and the major undervaluing of West African languages in the academy, it seems significant that they selected frequently used words from the language of everyday speech in *Zaria*, rather than prioritising formal or standardised forms of language. There are other reasons, however, to believe that the decision to include popular and idiomatic forms of language in the play was not incidental, but was, on the contrary, well researched and thought-through. One of the Hausa words used in the play is ‘burukutu’ (20), which refers to ‘a locally brewed beer’ (79n3). This word is also mentioned in Anthony H.M. Kirk-Greene’s paper on “Schoolboy Slang in Northern Nigeria” from the Fifth West African Languages Congress, a copy of which Harrison kept.²⁴ Kirk-Greene, a sociolinguist who was then Head of the Department of Languages at Ahmadu Bello, wrote several works on Nigerian languages, including *Hausa: Beginning Fluency* (1962), also kept by Harrison.²⁵

Harrison and Kirk-Greene were at several conferences together, and Kirk-Greene wrote Harrison a short note after the production of *Aikin Mata*, in which he offered his ‘sincerest congratulations on the vitality and colourfulness of your production’, praising it for its ‘sheer vividness of Nigerian drama’.²⁶ Kirk-Greene’s paper on “Nigerian Schoolboy Slang” argues that the education system in Nigeria is central to its ‘polyglot situation’, where ‘even in the relatively-local secondary schools like the Native Authority Provincial ones there can exist a major linguistic mélange where [...] boys may come from over a dozen tribes, each having their own mother-tongue, all speaking English, and most of them having a good command of the lingua franca, Hausa or Fulfulde or Yoruba’.²⁷ This not only usefully reflects the richness and diversity of the linguistic context in Nigeria, but also demonstrates the fluid nature of languages in such a context, and the importance of local, everyday forms of language in a context dominated by imposed colonial standards. Kirk-Greene’s observations about the

²⁴ Uncatalogued File: Use of English (Nigeria).

²⁵ Uncatalogued File: African Languages, c.1964.

²⁶ Anthony Kirk-Greene to Tony Harrison, 26/03/65 (MS 20c HARRISON/05/AHB).

²⁷ Uncatalogued File, 1964. Kirk-Greene, Anthony, 5. Original emphasis.

‘greatest concentration of slang words’ being found in speech relating to areas like ‘school food, school discipline’, ‘dress and mannerisms’ and ‘the opposite sex’ are particularly interesting in thinking about Harrison and Simmons’ selection of Hausa words from these categories in the play. The use of Hausa in the play reflects a shared interest, with Kirk-Greene, in the popular uses of language in Northern Nigeria, including neologisms, idiom and slang.

The use of Hausa in *Aikin Mata* appears to be not only used to create verisimilitude, but also seems to reflect, on a number of levels, a commitment to local, idiomatic and everyday uses of language: a commitment which takes on a new force in a situation in which curricula, examinations, drama, publishing remain dominated by colonial institutions. This also reflects Harrison’s belief in the importance of languages, not only as means of communication, but as cultural and historical repositories. This approach to language is captured in the reference to Kirk-Greene’s article on “Neologisms in Hausa” in the foreword to *Aikin Mata*, in defence of one of the play’s most controversial scenes. Although the Archive contains letters which congratulate Harrison on the performance of *Aikin Mata*, there are also those that express opposition to the performance of such a bawdy play,²⁸ and Harrison and Simmons report that ‘a number of European members of the University’ made objections while the play was being auditioned and rehearsed.²⁹ There were particular objections to the scene in which Muslim women solemnly take an oath over a huge calabash of wine and swear:

‘never to have sex again
Until Nigeria has peace, and men
Lay down their arms, and only then’ (25)

Magajiya calls the women to take this oath, and repeat the lines after her. The scene is written in couplets, unlike much of the play which is written in blank verse, and this heightens the drama and escalating sense of enthusiasm as the scene progresses. The drama and ludicrous nature of the scene is also intensified by the predictable beat and regular rhymes:

²⁸ See, for example, A.J. Creedy’s letter to Mr Balogun, President of the Fellowship of Christian Students at Ahmadu Bello about their letter of protest about the play, 18 May 1965 (MS 20c HARRISON *Aikin Mata*).

²⁹ “Foreword” *Aikin Mata*, 11.

MAGAJIYA: 'I SWEAR I'LL ALWAYS SLEEP ALONE.

ALL: I swear I'll always sleep alone.

[A groan from Halimatu who is once more silenced by Magajiya]

MAGAJIYA: AND LET THE MEN DANCE BONE TO BONE.

ALL: And let the men dance bone to bone.

MAGAJIYA: AND NEVER LIFT MY SANDALS TO THE ROOF.

ALL: And never lift my sandals to the roof.

MAGAJIYA: BUT BE AS COLD AS ICE AND NEVER MOVE.

ALL: But be as cold as ice and never move.³⁰

The women then scramble over the wine, all shouting 'Hey, save some for me. My turn. My turn', before they are interrupted by 'loud cries and shrieks from behind the Palace walls. They all fall silent' (26). It is not difficult to see why this scene was controversial. Despite the 'solemnity' with which the women are directed to take their oaths, and the ritual and sacrifice invoked in the ceremony, the scene is highly raucous and comic. The scene combines the sacred and profane to achieve its comic effect, and the pace and repetition heightens this. This relates directly to the traditions of the Greek original as well as the modern setting. In January 1966 Harrison wrote a long letter to T.T. Solaru, the Manager of Oxford University Press in Ibadan, defending this scene.³¹ Much of Harrison's letter is reproduced, verbatim, in the foreword to the published play, including the claim that 'Masquerades like the Yoruba Egungun of Oshogbo with their dual sacred and profane functions as ancestor spirits and as comic entertainers seem closer to Greek Comedy than anything one has in modern Europe.'³² The letter not only highlights the ways in which the traditions of the Greek original and of Nigerian theatre justify a scene which would otherwise be unacceptable, but also defends the scene on the basis of the evidence contained within the Hausa language itself.

In the letter, Harrison argues that 'jokes about Moslems drinking are frequent in Hausa and several neologisms among 'initiates' like jajaye biyu and Krolar Kaduna, referring to the lacing of soft drinks with something more intoxicating, have found their way into the language'.³³ In other words, Harrison suggests that there is something in the language that

³⁰ Aikin Mata, 26. Original emphasis.

³¹ Tony Harrison to T.T. Solaru, 1 January 1966 (Uncatalogued).

³² "Foreword" Aikin Mata 9-10.

³³ Harrison to Solaru, 1 January 1966 (Uncatalogued). Also see "Foreword", Aikin Mata, 12.

makes the oath scene acceptable. This is, perhaps, a risky business. And yet, this argument is anchored in the attempt to capture the spirit of the scene by researching and identifying cultural and linguistic equivalences in the modern setting. This makes sense of Harrison's argument, in the same letter to OUP, that the adaptation hopes not to be 'merely a language text book, but a serious attempt to interpret Greek Comedy to Nigeria, by demonstrating the similar underlying dramatic conventions and the validity of the play's 'message' to our own times after over 2000 years.'³⁴ The adaptation, in other words, is not only a linguistic exercise, but an attempt to make the play speak something true to its new audience, and in its new context. This is central not only to our understanding of the play, but to Harrison's subsequent practices of translation, in which he pursues both the 'fixed form' and 'fleeting content.' The oath scene and the use of Hausa, therefore speak not only to Harrison's interest in popular forms of speech or even to the multilingualism of this newly postcolonial context but also to the search for equivalences, across times and place. We might begin to understand this as something like a humanist belief in the shared aspects of different languages, cultures and histories, captured within the material and performance of the play itself.

Nigerian Pidgin

Several characters, including Iyabo, the Messenger and the Southern Ambassadors, appear to use English-lexifier pidgins in the play, in contrast to other characters who use standard forms of English, sprinkled with Hausa lexicon. What should we make of the attempt to use 'pidgin' in the play? Harrison and Simmons suggest that the 'ready-made distinction between 'Standard' English and Pidgin English' in Nigeria provides the opportunity to 'emphasize the spirit of inter-tribal parody as a basic ingredient of the comedy of the adaptation'.³⁵ Harrison defended the use of 'Pidgin English' for the Southern characters in his letters to OUP, referencing the 'basic linguistic division in the Greek original of Attic Greek and Doric Greek', which is represented in other translations of the *Lysistrata* through the 'Scots dialect' or the 'speech of the American 'Deep South''.³⁶

The question of what to make of the so-called 'Pidgin English' in the play is, however, a difficult one, not least because of the debates about how to classify the English-lexifier

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Foreword" Aikin Mata, 10.

³⁶ Harrison to Solaru, 1 January 1966 (Uncatalogued). The term 'Pidgin English' is used in this correspondence and is also the term used in the foreword to Aikin Mata.

Nigerian Pidgin, now spoken as a first language by over a million people in Nigeria, and by over 40 million people as a second language.³⁷ There has been much discussion about whether Nigerian Pidgin can be accurately be described as a ‘pidgin’ language at all, since it has become a creole for the many people who speak it as a first language across Nigeria. The Naijá Languėj Akademi was established in 2009 to recognise the ‘distinct identity’ of this language ‘in its own right’³⁸: a language which has ‘received little recognition from those responsible for language policy in Nigeria’, where, as Faraclas suggests, official attitudes ‘remain negative, perpetuating erroneous notions inherited from the colonial period that Nigerian Pidgin is some form of ‘broken English’.³⁹

In the first comprehensive grammar of Nigerian Pidgin, Faraclas helpfully divides Nigerian Pidgin into three sets of social lets: ‘acrolectal (decreolized) varieties which show significant influence from Nigerian Standard English, basilectal (pidginized or repidginized) varieties which show significant influence from other Nigerian languages, and mesolectal (creolized) varieties which typify the speech of those who use Nigerian Pidgin in most of their daily interactions or who have learned Nigerian Pidgin as a first language.’⁴⁰ He also describes how Nigeria, with its history of ethnic and linguistic tolerance, has a long history of pidginized languages, including pidginized forms of Hausa and Igbo⁴¹, and some of Iyabo’s lines reflect these historical lexical and syntactic characteristics. One of her early lines in the play, for example, reads:

‘Ah de fit move my body any way ah like, and ah sabi dance with my legs so tay, ah de fit take my heel touch my bottom.’ (19-20)

Here, Iyabo uses words like ‘fit’ (ability to) and ‘sabi’ (know) which is a Portuguese-derived item, reflecting the historical development of Nigerian Pidgin. As Faraclas suggests, since ‘the Portuguese arrived first, a few Portuguese-derived items such as *sábi* ‘know’ and *píkîn* ‘child’ would have been initially adopted, but as the British consolidated power over Nigeria,

³⁷ Faraclas, Nicholas G., 1.

³⁸ Ofulue, Christine I. & David O. Esizimotor. “Guide to Standard Naijá Orthography.” IFRA Nigeria, 2009.

³⁹ Faraclas, Nicholas G., 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 3.

more and more English words would have been integrated into the language'.⁴² This provides us with a practical example of the way that languages reflect the history of their development, reminding us of Harrison's justification of the oath scene by referencing Hausa phrases.

Nevertheless, there is clearly no simple way to analyse the use of Nigerian Pidgin in a script, particularly given the long academic neglect of the language and the fact that there have been many different orthographies in the long and varied history of Nigerian Pidgin, 'without a single acceptable way of writing the language' until the Naijá Languėj Akademi developed a reference guide in 2009.⁴³ I am not suggesting that we should be asking whether the 'pidgin' in *Aikin Mata* reflects an actually existing Nigerian Pidgin lect at this time. But it is surely also the case that we should not abandon this task because of the difficulties it presents. We must ask, for example, whether this play perpetuates stereotypes by presenting pidgin as a form of 'broken English' or whether there is a sustained effort to represent Nigerian Pidgin in a way that allows for its distinct history as a language in its own right. This question allows us not only to learn about Harrison's processes of research, editing and writing for the theatre, but also potentially offers useful information about the Nigerian literary and linguistic fields at this time.

In attempting to respond to these challenging questions, we are fortunate to have access to a helpful source of information in the form of the rehearsal scripts and schedule in the Harrison Archive which allow us to see the way that the 'pidgin' lines developed in the play.⁴⁴

Harrison's well-used rehearsal script, typed and heavily annotated with his notes, sketches and corrections, provides a unique insight into the linguistic and dramatic decisions Harrison made in the production of the play, including the editing of the 'pidgin' lines as the play was rehearsed.⁴⁵ There are extensive notes on the script, indicating the use of drums, lights, smoke and props as well as additional stage directions and notes about which words and lines should be stressed in performance. The script shows that the 'pidgin' lines were edited as the play was rehearsed, and there are isolated lexical changes throughout. The word 'husband', for

⁴² *Ibid*, 3.

⁴³ Ofulue, Christine I. & David O. Esizimotor.

⁴⁴ MS 20c HARRISON/*Aikin Mata*.

⁴⁵ The rehearsal script is annotated in Harrison's handwriting and the letters to OUP are also in Harrison's hand, and therefore I refer to these changes as 'Harrison's', although in reality the entire play was a collaboration with Simmons, and it is not possible to tell which parts are Harrison's and which Simmons'.

example, is crossed out in ink and replaced with ‘man’, whilst ‘wen’ is mostly replaced by ‘wey’. The most significant changes to the ‘pidgin’ language in the play appear to be made to ‘Lampito’s lines. Even Lampito’s name is crossed-out in the script, and she becomes ‘Iyabo’ over the course of the rehearsals. The Greek names of all of the characters are similarly replaced: Lysistrata becomes ‘Magajiya’; Calonice becomes ‘Halimatu’; Myrrhina becomes ‘Mariya’. In the original, Lampito is a Spartan and uses Doric Greek. Harrison and Simmons describes how the Athenians never tired of mocking Doric Greek ‘as a sub-standard form of their own ‘received pronunciation’⁴⁶, reminding us of the complex layers of prejudice against the non-standard forms of language addressed in this play: Doric Greek, Northern English and Nigerian Pidgin.

Harrison and Simmons argue that Aikin Mata does not accept the supposed inferiority of ‘pidgin English’ in order to insult southern Nigerians, but instead aims to exploit the ‘misguided and ill-placed sense of educational superiority over the South’ found ‘among some Northerners’, to comic effect. Harrison stressed that the ‘audiences who saw the play reacted very well indeed to the Pidgin sections’ because it is ‘an excellent medium for comedy’ in his letters to OUP, highlighting the role of the language in the context of the aesthetic work as a whole.⁴⁷ The development of the ‘pidgin’ lines in the script appears to reflect a careful process of redrafting which attempts to capture the way that Nigerian Pidgin was spoken in Northern Nigeria, rather than to propagate stereotypes. We need to look closer at Iyabo’s lines to see how these changes work. One of Iyabo’s lines is presented below in its various stages of production so that the changes can be seen. The first presents the typed script, before Harrison’s handwritten annotations; the second the edited script (with Harrison’s additions in italics); and the third is quoted from the published text of Aikin Mata.

(i) LAMPITO: ‘My husband no de kuku stay for house. As soon as he come home, he go carry de tings, wen he take go fight, come back again’⁴⁸

⁴⁶ “Foreword” Aikin Mata, 10.

⁴⁷ Harrison to Solaru, 1 January 1966 (Uncatalogued).

⁴⁸ The page numbers refer to the rehearsal script in the Tony Harrison Archive, Leeds, p.5, original emphasis (MS 20c HARRISON/Aikin Mata)

(ii) LAMPITO: ‘My husband man no de kuku stay for house. As soon as ~~he~~ ‘e come home, ‘e he go carry de tings, ~~wen wen~~ wey h ‘e take go fight, come back again.’⁴⁹

(iii) ‘IYABO: My man no de kuku stay for house. As soon as ‘e come home ‘e go carry de tings, wey ‘e take go fight, come go back again’⁵⁰

The revised line contains several characteristics that are typical of Nigerian Pidgin. Although the replacement of the word ‘husband’ for ‘man’ does not change the syntax, it is more typical of Nigerian Pidgin, and the negative marker ‘no’ between the subject noun and the verb phrase is typical of negative sentence construction in Nigerian Pidgin.⁵¹ ‘Wey’ is added throughout in the revisions, and this appears to create a more accurate phonetic representation of the language where it is added. The changes between the lines might initially seem slight. These seemingly small edits, however, accumulate over the course of the rehearsal script and most make it into the published version of the text. Many of the fairly minor lexical changes often also have the more substantial effect of changing the tone or syntax of entire lines. In the above example, when ‘wen’ becomes ‘wey’, and ‘he’ and ‘we’ become ‘‘e’, the sound and syntax of the line are altered. The published version of the last clause does not only sound different, but is also syntactically different to the first draft (i). The first sounds like an awkward approximation of what Nigerian Pidgin might sound like, whereas the latter appears to have been adapted to represent the way the line sounds when it is read out loud (probably by an actor in rehearsal). The tense of the line is also changed through the addition of the stative verb ‘go’. There are other examples of this in the script, including Iyabo’s line on the following page: ‘if we want make dis war stop, na de only ting we fit go do be dat’⁵² which did not have ‘go’ in the earlier typed version of the script.⁵³

Even given the difficulties of analyzing a written form of Nigerian Pidgin, it seems highly likely that these changes reflect a serious attempt to accurately capture the lexicon, sound and syntax of pidginised forms of English that Harrison and Simmons encountered in rehearsals. The note on the translation in the published text directly acknowledges the help of ‘Miss

⁴⁹ Rehearsal Script, 5. My italics, to reflect Harrison’s annotations in ink.

⁵⁰ Aikin Mata, 20. Original emphasis.

⁵¹ Faraclas, 89-93.

⁵² Aikin Mata, 21, my emphasis.

⁵³ Rehearsal Script, 6 (MS 20c HARRISON/Aikin Mata)

Dorothy Mama' who acted as an 'informant' for 'some of the sections in Pidgin English'.⁵⁴ Further examples from the text seem to support the claim that Harrison and Simmons appear to develop the 'pidgin' lines so that they reflect more of the characteristics of Nigerian Pidgin. The editing process above, for example, can also be seen in the following line in the rehearsal text:

LAMPITO: Dat oat fine. Ah like am.⁵⁵

LAMPITO IYABO: 'Dat oat fine. gon. Ah like am. boh.'⁵⁶

In this instance, the words 'gon' and 'boh' are added at the end of Iyabo's short sentences. Such words tend to function as topicalisation or emphasis markers in Nigerian Pidgin, and other words that commonly carry out this function include 'ba', 'kwanu' and 'sef', which usually follow the noun or noun phrase.⁵⁷ In the rehearsal script, markers like this are added at the end of sentences throughout, as seen in, 'Errrr! I see say you mean business gon.'⁵⁸ 'Nà', a 'focus introducer' which precedes the head noun in Nigerian Pidgin, is also added throughout to add emphasis. This is added, for example, to one of Iyabo's first lines during the rehearsal period:

'LAMPITO: One woman does come from Iboland, make we talk about dis matta'⁵⁹

'LAMPITO: Na one woman ~~does~~ wey come from Iboland, ~~make we~~ for talk about dis matta.'⁶⁰

'IYABO: Na one woman wey come from Iboland for talk about dis matta.'⁶¹

⁵⁴ "Note on Translation" *Aikin Mata*, 7.

⁵⁵ Rehearsal Script, 8 (MS 20c HARRISON/Aikin Mata)

⁵⁶ Rehearsal Script 8. My emphasis to represent Harrison's annotations. The equivalent line can be found on p24 of *Aikin Mata*.

⁵⁷ Faraclas, 72.

⁵⁸ Rehearsal Script, 7. My emphasis to reflect Harrison's annotations, which are preserved in the published book (23).

⁵⁹ Rehearsal Script, 4 (MS 20c HARRISON/Aikin Mata)

⁶⁰ My emphasis to reflect Harrison's annotations (MS 20c HARRISON/Aikin Mata).

⁶¹ *Aikin Mata*, 19.

Speakers of Nigerian Pidgin in the audience would be familiar with the emphasis added to lines like this. Indeed, the development of pidgin in the performed play seems to have been designed specifically for Nigerian audiences. There are clues about this in Harrison's letter to Barry Gregory at OUP, Ibadan, in which he explains his decision, with Simmons, that 'paraphrases of the Pidgin English are unnecessary'.⁶² Harrison writes that, all 'Nigerians will understand it and English-speakers, in my experience, have no difficulty with Pidgin in written form, although they find spoken Pidgin more difficult'.⁶³ It is unlikely, then, that the performance would be understood, in its entirety, by English-speakers, but this did not seem to matter to Harrison. The editing of the script in rehearsals, then, is not intended to make the play more palatable to the Europeans in the audience, but to create a more plausible representation of the languages it contains.

Whilst we cannot say decisively whether the rehearsal edits correctly represent a specific lect of Nigerian Pidgin spoken in Zaria in the 1960s, it remains possible to judge whether there has been a sustained effort to present a language that would be plausible to the audience in Zaria at this time. The question, then, becomes that of whether the play engages with the syntactical and lexical characteristics of Nigerian Pidgin, understood in its broadest sense, in translating the Greek original for this specific cast and audience at Ahmadu Bello. The annotations and changes in the rehearsal script, together with Harrison's detailed discussion of language in his letters, appear to suggest that the play did hope to seriously engage with this task, rather than mocking Nigerian Pidgin or reproducing the stereotypes which continue to surround the language today. If we push this claim further, it perhaps becomes possible to claim that the material of the play captures something of the plurality of its linguistic context and therefore represents a serious effort to speak something true to its Nigerian audience.

We must remember that *Aikin Mata* was created for specific actors for two performances only. Harrison even kept a record of how many tickets were sold and where, and this offers specific information about the audience for whom the play was produced.⁶⁴ The development of the 'pidgin' lines in the play not only show how he edited the script for this specific cast and audience, but also reflect his method of writing and drafting until the moment of production, rather than providing actors with a finished script from which to rehearse. This

⁶² Harrison to Barry Gregory, OUP Ibadan. 4 April 1966. Uncatalogued.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Uncatalogued File: *Aikin Mata*.

continues to be true today, and remains important in understanding Harrison's work in the theatre. It also matters to our understanding of the *Aikin Mata*, because such a play could only hope to succeed if it connected with its target audience. This audience would have been familiar with traditions of Nigerian theatre, in which the suspension of disbelief worked quite differently from typical performances of English-language drama. Yoruba traditions and traditional storytelling had a powerful influence on twentieth century trends in Nigerian theatre, and audience members were often required to participate by responding to the story or repeating sections. Harrison himself told me how Europeans often critiqued Nigerian audiences for interjecting and interacting with performances, and explained that he wanted to instead produce a play that engaged with this context.⁶⁵ The effects of this are twofold. In the foreword, Harrison explains that adapting the play 'into Nigerian terms' would 'not only draw fully upon the various acting, dancing and musical talents we had available' but also 'by restoring music and dance to an integral place in a production of a Greek Comedy, the play itself could be performed in a manner nearer to the Greek than the kind of productions one has in European theatre and on radio with effete angelic choral speaking and emasculated dancing'. It is important to think about the different aspects of the play in this context. From the use of language right through to the drumming, music and casting, it seems that the play evolves in response to various traditions of Nigerian theatre. As Harrison and Simmons point out, the 'music and dance was evolved from various traditional dances and an inter-tribal variety of instruments were used, just as Attic and Doric modes were mingled in Greek Comedy.'⁶⁶ This is perhaps best seen through Harrison's relationship with Soyinka, leading playwright and a friend of Harrison's since his time in Leeds where they performed together in popular revues and musicals.

Performance

Aikin Mata was written for a group of students who won a prize the previous year for their production of Soyinka's widely-celebrated play *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963). We cannot conclude our discussion of *Aikin Mata* and Harrison's early work without briefly acknowledging its debt to twentieth-century traditions of Nigerian theatre, and also the extraordinary cultural context of the 1960s in Nigeria. Rex Collings, who published Harrison's early work and campaigned to get Soyinka out of prison in Nigeria, described the

⁶⁵ Harrison, Tony. "In Conversation with Rachel Bower" Newcastle, 30 October 2015.

⁶⁶ "Foreword" *Aikin Mata*, 10.

group of writers and artists emerging in the first half of this century as a group with ‘the same kind of promise and the same explosive quality that distinguished the work of the early Elizabethans’.⁶⁷ According to Collings, the ‘literary nucleus of this group’ was ‘Soyinka, Achebe, Clark, Okara, Okigbo’: names which will be familiar to any reader of Nigerian literature.⁶⁸ There are links between all of these Nigerian writers and British writers who had studied or taught in Leeds during this period. There is much more work to be done if we are to fully understand these relationships, and this forms part of the broader context for the specific relationships between a play like *Aikin Mata* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, for example, or between, say, the poetry of Christopher Okigbo and Geoffrey Hill’s *Psalms* from this period, written after his time in Nigeria.

For now, we must settle for looking closer at the relationship between *Aikin Mata* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, set in the Yoruba village of Ilunjinle. Soyinka’s play is also a comedy, pursuing similar themes to *Aikin Mata*, particularly in relation to the position of women in society and the role of sex in social power relations. The similarities can be seen from the opening scenes. Both sets are dominated by symbolic trees: Soyinka’s by the ‘immense *‘odan*’ tree’ in the village centre,⁶⁹ and Harrison’s by ‘two giant baobabs’ on either side of the palace, which are the resting places of the two Choruses ‘when not engaged in action’ (15). Both begin in the morning with a beautiful young woman walking on the stage to strong beats. Drums are central to both plays, and both close with festive scenes, in which the music, drums and lights contribute to the atmosphere. Throughout both plays there is dancing, chanting and drumming, and both contain wild scenes of women dancing, yelling and singing. Many of the symbols used in *The Lion and the Jewel* also appear in *Aikin Mata*: the calabash bowl, the drums, women’s work of pounding yam, all of which are included on Harrison’s handwritten list of ‘properties’ needed for the play, scribbled in blue biro on the front of the rehearsal script of *Aikin Mata*.⁷⁰

This is not merely to list the similarities between isolated components of *Aikin Mata* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, but more broadly to observe the strong relation between the former,

⁶⁷ Collings, Rex “À Propos” *African Arts*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring, 1969), 82. Many archival documents relating to Collings can also be found in Special Collections at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 82.

⁶⁹ Soyinka, Wole. *The Lion and the Jewel*. 1962. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

⁷⁰ Rehearsal Script (MS 20c HARRISON/*Aikin Mata*).

translated and produced by two young men from the British Isles, and the latter, highly influenced by West African theatrical traditions. It is in the performance that we see how thoroughly Aikin Mata was influenced by Nigerian cultural and literary traditions, which in turn, requires us to reflect upon how far this has since influenced Harrison's practice in the theatre, where dancing, masks, costume and stagecraft have become central to his work. Harrison has written for specific audiences ever since, and usually re-drafts scripts until the moment of the performance. The most extreme example is perhaps *Poetry or Bust* (1993), researched, written and staged in two months after Jonathan Silver, the owner of Salt's Mill, asked Harrison to write a play for the new David Hockney exhibition. The 'Preface' and 'Addendum' to the play were typed two days before the play was staged. Harrison has also long shaped lines for specific voices and actors, most famously for Barrie Rutter in their extended collaboration. It is in his early work in Nigeria, however, that we can see that Harrison's skill for writing poetry for specific actors, dialects and languages was not acquired in later life, but was a foundational part of his practice from the outset.

At the beginning of this article I suggested that three strands emerge in Harrison's early work and subsequently underpin much of his later poetry: the celebration of local and spoken forms of language, a commitment to cross-cultural collaboration and a belief in developing once-only pieces for the theatre. All of these strands are developed in *Aikin Mata* as Harrison and Simmons translate, edit and produce the play for performance and publication. The extent to which Harrison's works have been crafted for specific times and places has never been fully investigated. On Wednesday 24 March 1965, *Aikin Mata* opened at Ahmadu Bello with Magajiya pacing a stage with the Nigerian national anthem playing and gun shots, shouts and drums sounding over a projected film of charging horsemen.⁷¹ This article has shown how far Harrison and Simmons' adaptation of the *Lysistrata* was shaped by the languages and cultural traditions surrounding them in Zaria in the early 1960s and Harrison clearly edited the script for this specific cast and audience. The inclusion of Hausa, the development of 'pidgin' and the stage directions, music, props and drumming reflect a sustained effort to adapt the Greek original into a play that could speak something true in Zaria in 1965. We have therefore not only glimpsed the rich cross-cultural, multilingual context of Nigeria in this period, but also

⁷¹ Information from handwritten plan on Rehearsal Script, p1. This was also confirmed in conversation with Tony Harrison, 30 October 2015.

seen Harrison and Simmons' determination to engage with Nigerian cultural traditions in a context thoroughly dominated by English institutions, curricula and examinations.

The political implications of taking seriously the extraordinary linguistic and cultural complexity of Nigeria at such a moment should not be overlooked. This was a time of excitement and cross-cultural collaboration. It was also a time of acute political tension and division, which was to erupt in a devastating three-year civil war. Given the brutality of this war and of recent violence in Northern Nigeria, it is perhaps more important than ever to acknowledge the tangled linguistic and cultural histories glimpsed in the production of *Aikin Mata*. At the African Studies Association Conference in 2016, several papers reported how two million people have been forced to leave their homes in Nigeria in recent years and have now become internally displaced people (IDPs), many of whom now live in refugee camps in the Chad Basin. At this Conference, Ini Dele-Adedeji suggested that these camps are increasingly split along religious (Christian-Muslim) lines, and described how people who were previously friends and neighbours have begun to hold each other responsible for the Boko Haram sect's successful attacks in the north.⁷² In this partitioned context, it becomes ever more urgent to acknowledge the tangled histories and messy everyday processes through which stories are shared, languages blended and slang developed. It is clear that it is only through sustained research into the work of Nigerian writers and artists that we can begin to understand the complexities of the Nigerian cultural field at this time. Nevertheless, *Aikin Mata* offers a starting point, not only into the benefits of situating Harrison's work in its international context, but also into Nigeria's long history of tangled, multilingual and cross-cultural collaboration.

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