PREFACE

In writing this book in English I am conscious of the problems of cultural translation that beset my every move. One person's mental map of another culture is necessarily idiosyncratic and, since many readers of this book will not be familiar with the Hausa language, to a great extent I am clearly asking them to take my word for it. Nevertheless, while the emphases and preoccupations may be mine, I hope it will become clear, through extensive citation of the wide-ranging and substantial work by my Hausa-speaking colleagues, that the picture, even if not the shading, is one shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by a considerable body of scholars in Nigeria and abroad.

So why am I writing this book? Apart from the exigencies of my position on the treadmill of late twentieth-century industrial academe, I have three prime motivations. The first is to bring together disparate pieces of teaching, writing and understanding that I have deployed over some years in teaching Hausa literature. During that time I have tried to bring out the features of the various literary genres of Hausa and to describe and analyse the relationships between oral and written forms, the effects of the colonial and post-colonial experience, continuities and disjunctures as literary genres have developed over time, and the relationships between literary forms and the intellectual and political texture of Hausa society.

My second motivation arises from a sense that a debate is taking place about post-colonial literature and society in Africa in which writing in English about writing in English or French is pursued without any acknowledgement that a whole other world of debate has been going on vigorously and at length in African languages. Since it is not in English it cannot be listened to by critics, writers and commentators who do not themselves know those languages. Yet writing in African languages is a potent political totem in that first debate, whether it is Ngugi promoting writing in Gikuyu (Ngugi wa Thiongo 1986), or Chinweizu and Madubuike (1985) attacking what they see as obscurantism in Nigerian writers writing in English. In their seminal book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin propose the term 'post-colonial literatures' because 'it points the way towards a possible study of the effects of colonialism in and between writing in English and writing in indigenous languages' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and

Tiffin 1989: 24) . Yet, when they consider such indigenous languages, it is in terms of arguments about such matters as whether it is better or worse to gloss non-English terms when writers are seeking to appropriate metropolitan English to their own purposes (1989: Ch. 2). It is as if all post-colonial discourse is focused in one way or another on what to do about English. There is a complete absence of any recognition that there is a long-standing debate to which English as a language and English as a variety of cultural traditions is pretty nearly irrelevant. Turning to African languages is seen as representing a false attempt to rediscover an unattainable pre-colonial purity that ignores the reality of the colonial experience (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 195) . Yet, in fact, the idea of an 'authentic' indigenous tradition and the nature of the colonial experience are small parts of a debate about society that has long been going on in a language such as Hausa, not as a peripheral satellite world struggling to find itself in relationship to English and European culture, but as a vigorous arena in its own right relating to its own cosmopolitan traditions of cultural thought. The adaptive, changing nature of culture in which orthodox and heterodox tendencies tend to stake out their claims to space does not necessarily mean, as is claimed by Ashcroft et al., that the focus is for or against metropolitan culture:

> Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the 'grafted' European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction *only occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic systems and 'peripheral' subversions of them.* It is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise. (1989: 195–6; emphasis added)

Aspects of recent post-colonial theory have been trenchantly and perceptively discussed in a recent article by Karin Barber (1995) to which the reader should refer. My intention here, then, is to provide the English-language reader with some idea of the debates and representations of society to be found in Hausa literature, some sense of the forms and traditions which people deploy, some feel for the cultural architecture, the 'dynamic interactions' and the 'hegemonic systems and "peripheral" subversions' that operate within the Hausa cultural world. The problems of cultural translation to which I referred at the beginning start with this intention. The most immediate and practical problem is rendering 'texts' in English. To what extent will you, the reader, expect or want explanation and background? How free or close should the translation be in relation to the original? Is it doing a disservice to the original only to provide extracts or summaries?

These are constant questions with no lasting right answers. In order to cover a wide range of material and issues and yet produce a manageable text, I have opted for a minimum of textual annotation, and a translation style which I hope will be readable – avoiding quaintness or stiltedness – while adhering reasonably closely to the original. I have used both extracts and complete texts depending upon whether the accent is primarily upon content or upon overall style in addition to content. I have been faced with a particularly knotty problem in relation to prose texts. It is not feasible to present whole translations and yet, in view of the fact that many of the stories are completely unknown to people who do not know Hausa, it has seemed to me to be important to provide the reader with some sense of what these stories are about. I have therefore provided summaries of some novels and novellas and illustrative extracts. Constraints upon space have precluded the addition of an appendix containing summaries of a broader range of prose texts.

An even more serious problem of cultural translation relates to the insertion of this material into the world of English-language cultural presuppositions. Time and again in teaching I have encountered, for example, expectations of what the terms 'poetry', 'song' and 'novel' *should* mean but which, even after redefinition on the basis of Hausa understandings of what the terms signify, provoke a bewilderment when faced with an event, a text, with which students are not familiar. The most recurrent of such impasses occurs when a student is faced with the didacticism so integral to modern poetry. Likes and dislikes are built upon a notion of poetry as directed towards aesthetic pleasure conveying 'heightened forms of perception, experience, meaning, or consciousness in heightened language' (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 938); didacticism (a much older end within the European tradition) is reacted to with discomfort. Poetry-writing in Hausa is going in many different directions currently and Hausa reactions differ according to the cultural conventions that are seen to be adhered to or contravened. I have tried in this book to explain how such cultural forms are grounded in a matrix of expectations in the hope that the reader will be able to understand something of the cultural context and thereby have something with which to fend off his or her own prejudiced reactions. Having made a plea for understanding these forms on their own terms, it is, however, clear that this book cannot but be a bundle of my own presuppositions, constructs and partial understandings. I can only hope that they will be reasonably obvious for the reader to unpick.

My third motivation is a more personal one. In Ziguinchor, in the Casamance region of Senegal, in late 1967, Xavier Badji and Justin Boissy first introduced me to the pleasure of Diola song, round the fire, with roasted oysters, under the stars. Three years later in Kano, Nigeria, Omar Hassan, Dije his wife, their friends and children showed me the hospitality that had me hooked on Hausa. Tilling the soil that year as the rains began, a group of

friends were chanting under their breath as they worked. I asked what it was they were 'singing'. It was my first introduction to the poetry of Sa'adu Zungur, and the beginnings of the interest that has finally seen interim fruition in this volume. To them I offer back this book as my song.

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