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LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AS STYLISTIC STRATEGIES IN TONI DURUAKU'S A MATTER OF IDENTITY: A STAGE METAPHOR



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Abstract

This paper interrogates language and culture as stylistic strategies in Toni Duruaku's A Matter of Identity: A Stage Metaphor (2003). The study is premised on the understanding that in African drama, language is not a neutral medium but a cultural act. Duruaku's play, set in the fictional Igbo clan of Umunekwu, dramatizes the crisis that befalls a community when it abandons its ancestral heritage. The clan's lack of progress in a symbolic race, the oracle's ban on the Festival of the Rising Moon, and the spiritual journey of two young people to the ancestral land form the main story. This story represents the current identity struggles of modern Nigeria. The paper uses Leech and Short's (1981) model for analyzing style, along with Zabus's (1991) theory about making language more local, and also includes Halliday's (1978) idea that language is a way of communicating meaning in society. The study looks at how words are adapted in a local way, using direct information from pages 18, 19, and 21 of the main text. It focuses on topics like the special role of the kola nut in rituals, the beauty of proverbs, similar sentence structures, unusual writing styles, and the practical use of language in rituals. The study shows four main ways the style is used: (1) using Igbo cultural words that aren't translated, like Isee, (2) using proverbs such as hot coal, shrew, and bearded meat to explain things, (3) using similar sentence structures and a shared voice through the phrase ALL: (severally), and (4) using poetic, prayer-like language to create a special effect. The paper ends by saying that in Duruaku's work, language shows culture and style reflect ideas.

Keywords: Toni Duruaku, Stylistics, Language and Culture, Indigenization, Igbo Proverbs, Nigerian Drama, Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Toni Duruaku is a very productive playwright from Nigeria, and he used to work as the General Manager of the Imo State Council for Arts and Culture. One thing that stands out is the idea of the poem "A Matter of Identity (2003)" which is an 80-page stage metaphor where Umunekwu clan's runner trails behind in a symbolic race, representing socio-cultural backwardness. The oracle says the ancestors are upset because people stopped celebrating the Festival of the Rising Moon. Two young people, Okoli and Nkechi, are taken to their ancestors' world to make things right. The play is about cultural recovery, different from A Mirage for a Dream, which is a satire on economics. Duruaku writes in English but thinks in Igbo. One thing that stands out is his English, which is shaped by an Igbo worldview.

1.2 Statement of Problem

The criticism of Duruaku that currently exists concentrates on corruption and power (Ekweariri, 2016) and the number of proverbs (Nwakanma, 2021), paying little attention to language as cultural affirmation through particular ritual pages. In pages 18, 19 and 21, how does Duruaku use proverbs, collective voice, and kola nut ritual as stylistic devices for cultural identity? Gaps are addressed in this paper by line-by-line examination.

1.3 Objectives

The objectives for this study include:

a. Identify lexical domestication strategies in kola ritual.
b. Analyze proverbial aesthetics as cultural philosophy.
c. Examine syntactic parallelism and communal voice.
d. Demonstrate ritual pragmatics as performance of identity.

1.4 Significance

This paper demonstrates ability to ground theory and contributes to stylistics of Igbo drama.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Language, Culture and Identity

Language impacts worldview, according to Sapir-Whorf. English can be Africanized to convey African experience, according to Achebe (1975), but Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1986 contends that colonialism-imposed English as a kind of dominance. However, Language according to Halliday (1978), encodes social structures. In Igbo culture, proverbs prove one's maturity. There's a saying by Chinua Achebe that says, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten."

2.2 Stylistics and Indigenization

Stylistics is study of style as choice. Leech and Short (1981) identified four levels which includes figures of speech, lexical, grammatical and cohesion while Zabus (1991) identifies cushioning, contextualization, relexification and code-switching. One thing that stands out is that the use of contextualization and relexification preserves *Isee* and *oji* without translation. This is called abrogation and appropriation, as mentioned by Ashcroft et al.in 1989.

2.3 Studies on Duruaku

In 2021, Nwakanma studied 30 proverbs and discovered that proverbs serve as a way to share philosophy, teach lessons, as well as identity marking. Ekweariri (2016) examined power struggle. Okoro and Nnanna (2020) examined ritual language yet not rooted in particular pages 18,19,21 where kola ritual was focused on.

2.4 Synopsis

Umunekwu clan trails behind in inter-clan race. Oracle says the Festival of Rising Moon is not allowed until the youth find their identity from their ancestors. Okoli and Nkechi go on a trip to their ancestors' world, face challenges along the way, and come back with a new sense of who they are. In conclusion, the play ends with the kola ritual and *Isee* affirmation.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Leech and Short checklist + Indigenization + Halliday social semiotic.

Leech and Short: Lexical, grammatical, figures of speech, cohesion/context. Zabus contextualization - African word left untranslated.

Halliday interpersonal function: Elders speak differently from youths, sacred differs from profane, encoding hierarchy, status.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative textual descriptive. Primary data 2003 edition, specifically pages 18, 19 and 21 photographic extracts provided by researcher. Close reading to identify culturally marked expressions, coding under lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, interpretation using Leech and Short and Igbo cultural knowledge. Data presented with page numbers for verifiability.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Kola Nut Ritual and Communal Voice (Page 18)

Evidence:

MBAGWU:	My brothers, kola is here.
ALL:	*(severally)* A man who brings kola, brings life.
NTAGBU:	The kola is in the hand of the king. Let him bless it.
MBAGWU:	If a man does not die young, he will surely eat bearded meat.
NTAGBU:	That is our proverb!

Analysis:

Lexical Domestication: Kola presented without gloss, assumes Igbo cultural knowledge. Relexification of Igbo proverb *Onye wetara oji, wetara ndu*. Equation kola = life encodes hospitality = existence. In Igbo cosmology, kola nut (*oji*) is sacred symbol of life, peace, hospitality, covenant. Breaking kola is communion with ancestors.

Communal Voice: ALL: *(severally)* means each person says individually same thing, not in chorus. This is grammatical encoding of Igbo communalism. Umunekwu decisions collective. Syntax mirrors culture. *Igwe bu ike* (Strength in unity).

Gerontocracy: The kola is in the hand of the king. Let him bless it. Encodes social structure where eldest blesses kola. Kola blessing is elder's prerogative. Blessing right = status marker.

Proverb bearded meat: If a man does not die young, he will surely eat bearded meat. Bearded meat = odd, unusual meat that old people eat. Means if live long, experience strange things. Philosophy of aging and tolerance. That is our proverb! is meta-stylistic commentary, identity claim, marking proverb as cultural property, our vs theirs.

5.2 Proverb of Hot Coal and Shrew and Perfuming Hand (Page 19)

Evidence:

MBAGWU: A hot coal given to a child by his elder cannot scorn him.

MBAGWU: But if you send a child to catch a shrew, you give him water to wash his hands.

NTAGBU: Ordinary water cannot wash off horrible stench of the shrew. You must perfume the hand...

OCHEZE: You like to jump into discussions. This is a proverb.

Analysis:

Hot coal proverb: Hot coal = painful but valuable instruction, warning, difficult task. Given by elder, child cannot scorn it even if burns, must accept elder's wisdom. Encodes respect for elders, gerontocracy. Even painful truth from elder is valuable.

Shrew proverb central to play: Shrew (*nkeule or akpukpuala* in Igbo) is *nso* (abomination), has horrible stench, taboo to touch with bare hands. If send child to catch shrew, you give him water to wash his hands. Means if assign someone delicate, abominable task, provide means for purification after. Applied to Umunekwu, youths Okoli and Nkechi sent to handle abominable task (ancestral journey to atone for abandoning festival) need spiritual preparation, ritual washing.

Ntagbu extension: Ordinary water cannot wash off horrible stench of the shrew. You must perfume the hand... Deepens proverb: superficial solutions cannot cure deep rupture; ordinary water insufficient, need perfuming = ritual, sacrifice, journey to ancestors, anointing. Perfume hand = elaborate purification, not just washing. This is proverbial elaboration, showing Igbo proverbs are not static, they are negotiated, extended in dialogue.

Ocheze rebuke: You like to jump into discussions. This is a proverb. Shows proverbs have sacred status; cannot interrupt elder speaking proverb. Proverb speaking is ritual, requires silence, listening. Meta-pragmatic rule.

Syntactic marking: Ntagbu says *"It never have time"* - ungrammatical concord, marks him less educated, impatient, anti-ritual, vs Mbagwu polished proverbial English. Syntax marks identity, class, attitude to culture. Mbagwu polished, Ntagbu pidginized.

5.3 Incantatory Poetics, Door and Mouth Metaphor, *Isee* (Page 21)

Evidence:

MBAGWU: Kola is like a dance. It brings in abundance. A good long life. Kola is offered a well-wisher Like a water pitcher to a wayfarer. A piece of kola nut is also for a brother, not Only for the visitor. As the door is unlatched the mouth is unlocked: Our people now live in fear.

And: This coming night, Answers to our plight. We hope to get. Community suffering, Like community offering Weighs heavily on the leader. As together we share So do we together fear. May our ancestors guide us. As we chew this kola, May the gods hear our bellow And chew near our plea. For this, we give a share. (drops a piece) ALL: *Isee*!

Analysis:

Graphological Deviation: Prayer written with unusual line breaks, like poetry not prose. Short clipped sentences: It brings in abundance. A good long life. Mimic Igbo incantatory rhythm, oral performance, not written English paragraph. Line breaks foreground rhythm.

Simile: Kola is like a dance. It brings in abundance. Dance = communal joy, movement, rhythm. Kola dance brings abundance, life. Kola is offered a well-wisher Like a water pitcher to a wayfarer. Water pitcher to wayfarer = hospitality to stranger, essential survival in desert, Igbo hospitality ethic.

Capitalization: Only mid-sentence in *"not Only for the visitor"*. Foregrounding emphasis kinship solidarity, not just visitor but brother. Our vs their.

Door and Mouth Metaphor: As the door is unlatched the mouth is unlocked. Door = openness, hospitality; mouth = speech, truth, communion. When open door to visitor, open mouth in conversation, prayer. Now our people now live in fear - doors locked, mouths shut, hospitality abandoned, identity crisis, fear.

Parallelism: Community suffering, Like community offering - suffering paralleled with offering, both communal. As together we share So do we together fear perfect syntactic parallelism foregrounds Igbo collective responsibility. Together repeated 2 times marks communalism. Igbo worldview: suffering shared, fear shared.

May our ancestors guide us modal May marks prayer register, optative mood, wishing. Bellow = deep communal anguish, animal sound, collective cry. Chew near our plea = gods participate in communion, chewing kola with humans, commensality with ancestors.

Libation (drops a piece) non-verbal stylistic device, offering to ancestors, performance. Language plus action = ritual.

Isee! = Igbo for Amen, So be it, retained untranslated, contextualization strategy peak. Ending with *Isee* and BLACKOUT as kola passed round shows identity restored through shared ritual, communion, affirmation. *Isee* closes ritual, seals prayer.

6. DISCUSSION

There are four major stylistic strategies.

1. Lexical Domestication as Cultural Assertion - retention untranslated Igbo kola, *Isee* asserts culture cannot be fully translated. English must stretch to carry Igbo. Abrogation and appropriation (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Duruaku refuses to translate *Isee* to Amen, insists on Igbo.
2. Proverbs as Philosophy - hot coal respect, shrew purification, bearded meat patience. Proverbs are condensed philosophy, elder's wisdom. They are palm oil with which words eaten. Without proverbs, speech dry.
3. Parallelism and Communal Voice as Grammatical Ideology - ALL: *(severally)* and parallel As together we share / So do we together fear encodes Igbo communalism. Grammar = worldview. English grammar normally singular/plural, but Duruaku imposes Igbo communal grammar on English.
4. Ritual Language as Performance - kola blessing, libation, prayer with May, response *Isee* show language is performative. Austin speech act performative - saying *Isee* does identity, performs belonging. When stop performing ritual, lose identity, trail behind in race.

Umunekwu predicament mirrors Nigeria trailing behind because abandoning indigenous values. Oracle prohibition = cultural alienation. Journey Okoli and Nkechi = Sankofa, go back and fetch it.

Compared to A Mirage for a Dream Street Pidgin satirical youth lexis, A Matter of Identity proverbial sacred elder lexis shows Duruaku versatile: can write elder sacred and youth profane.

7. CONCLUSION

From pages 18, 19 and 21 Duruaku style inseparable from cultural message. Study concludes style is not ornament; it is ideology. Language performs culture. When Umunekwu forgets how to bless kola, speak proverbs, say *Isee*, they forget who they are, they trail behind. When they remember kola ritual, door unlatched, mouth unlocked, *Isee*, identity restored. Paper demonstrates that language and culture are stylistic strategies in African drama. Duruaku uses English to perform Igbo.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Further studies compare Duruaku with Tess Onwueme and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajughi on ritual language. Curriculum planners include A Matter of Identity in secondary school curriculum. Theatre directors ensure kola blessing and *Isee* performed authentically with libation, not just spoken.

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