

Representation of Yoruba Ontological Thought through Creative Use of Language in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku*

Matthew Kayode Akano

Department of Language and Communication, The Polytechnic, Ibadan

Abstract

Ahmed Yerima is one of Nigeria's prolific playwrights whose dramatic texts have been reflecting a creative use of language in his plays on history and sociology of human relationship. One of the plays in this category is *Abobaku*. Using the qualitative approach of textual reading with analysis and literature review, this paper explores how Yerima has used language to present Yoruba ontological thought on living and life after death as well as love and death. With Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, this paper critiques how the playwright has imbued reality in how language is creatively used to express Yoruba ontological thought in the play. Among the findings in the play are that death and destiny are inevitable no matter how hard humans try to avert them. Through the use of language in the play, the playwright gradually builds and sustains the tension in the play before the final resolution. Language, therefore, plays significant role in literary creativity for the expression of the meaning and message of literary texts.

Keywords: Ahmed Yerima's plays, Yoruba ontological thought, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse

Introduction

Indigenous Yoruba people are found in south west Nigeria located in Oyo, Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, Osun and Lagos States as well as parts of Kwara state. These Yoruba people often display also similar cultural identity as found in their tradition, custom, belief system and festival observances. Thus, their culture, a total way of life, has different denominators such as language, literature and tradition to showcase their identity different from other ethnic tribes such as Igbo and Hausa. Despite the intangibility of language as a denominator of culture, it has been fundamental in the expression and appraisal of culture. The seminal intervention of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is an intricate value for evaluating human identity within a specific socio-cultural context ushers in insightful discourses on the connection between language and culture. Since this intervention, scholars (Bamgbose, 1991; Salzmann, 1993; Kramsch, 1998; Duranti, 1997) have been analyzing the connection between language and culture using demographic parameters such as age, gender, race, class and ethnicity. Few of these scholars (Duranti, 1997; Llic, 2004) carry out linguistic taxonomy to properly place language and culture in a specific sub-field of linguistic studies. In their taxonomy, language and culture is placed under anthropological linguistics and ethno-linguistics. In the view of Llic (2004: 3) in consistence with Hec's (1979) position, anthropological linguistics "studies language variations and use in relations to the cultural patterns and beliefs and relies heavily on theories, methods and findings of anthropology". Ethno-linguistics, on the other hand, evaluates the influence of

ethnicity on people's language pattern and behavior. A critical evaluation of the semantics of anthropological linguistics and ethno-linguistics reveals a convergence in the functionality of language to determine people's identity. Also, the semantic interpretations of the two linguistic sub-fields reveal that culture is expressive through verbal and/or non-verbal means of communication with a view to transmit norms and values of a culture from one generation to another. To this end, literature (in any of its genres of poetry, drama or prose) has been one of the important non-verbal means of transmitting culture from one generation to another.

Significantly, dramas (plays) have been playing crucial roles in the transmission of culture from one generation to another owing to the deployment of visual, auditory and tactile aesthetics in the course of performance. Thus, the present article does not make a case for closet drama (a dramatic text which has no realistic attribute of performance on stage). Rather, a case is made for a performable drama text with the possibilities of costumes and props. This argument, perhaps, explains why most playwrights have been making plays that can be adapted to a performance stage for a naturalistic representation of culture and people's ontological thought.

In Nigeria, Ahmed Yerima is one of the prominent playwrights whose plays express the ontological thoughts and the overall identity of the ethnic group that informs the writing of the play. On this, Adeoti (2021) avers that the brilliance of Ahmed Yerima's plays is often displayed in the way he handles history and culture most especially in his historical plays. The cultures of different types (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) have been displayed in Yerima's major plays such as *Aetu*, *Queen Amina*, *Hendu*, *The Trial of King Jaja of Opobo*, *Orisa Ibeji* and *Abobaku*. These plays often [c] overtly displays the people's ontological thoughts about their respective belief systems. He (Yerima) records success in the representation of people's culture in these plays through creative use of language in characterization and advancement of plot. Yerima's use of language in his plays is consistent with Wiredu's (1991:10) on the aesthetic and communicative roles of language most especially in the expression and propagation of culture. In his submission, Wiredu avers thus:

Literature may be written to express personal experience or emotions, explain a concept, or simply to educate readers. These are some of the social functions of literature. But a play is art. Therefore, it is structured in such a way as to produce aesthetic response in the reader or audience. The important thing about language is its communicability. Any proposition is aimed at a specific end. This end is achieved only when the listener or reader understands the proposition. Thus, communication breaks down if a piece of dramatic work does not easily yield itself to comprehension. It becomes frustrating, indeed.

Wiredu's view also underlines the systemic interactions between language and literature as expression of culture.

Following the background on language and literature as well as the relationship between language and culture, the present article critiques how Yerima uses language

to represent Yoruba ontological thoughts. It pays attention to the dialogue with a view to critiquing language aesthetics and other figures of language that are used in the cultural expressions. In light of this, focus is on the use of proverbs, local idioms, cultural metaphors, symbols and imageries to present ontological thoughts on death and living, life after death as well as tragedy of love. Also, the article pays attention to the use of props and deployment of semiotics in the presentation of Yoruba ontological thoughts in the play.

Language and the Expression of Tradition

Language is a cultural tool for the expression of ideology in life and art. Human thought formation and expression is enabled with the use of language that could be decoded for communicative and aesthetic purposes. Similarly, language is very essential in literary communication of any genre. Since humans are symbol-making animals, the significance of language in the construction of [cultural] ideology cannot be ignored. This is because humans “will always seek in some way to persuade themselves (and others) that their symbology is the last, best hope of mankind” (Bercovitch, 1986:636). This persuasive trope of symbology in general and literary communications underlines the significance of dyadic semantic transaction between the writer and the audience. Similarly, literary writers (in this instance, playwrights) deploy diverse linguistic and rhetorical tropes to transact meaning and ideology in their respective texts. The essence of this is to ensure semantic dynamism with the use of familiar cultural and social metaphors, idiomatic expressions, vocabularies and syntactic patterns with linguistic transparency devoid of any form of ambiguity.

This semantic dynamism usually aids lucid representations of ideology and ontological thought process of people thereby establishing a differentiation between language and writing as well as between the objectification and representation of fictional characters found in literary texts. This position is premised on the idea that writers’ disciplined minds should demonstrate “how impossible it is to draw a clear-cut line between reality and representation; this in turn, will involve a sustained and rigorous attention to the ways in which certain notions of ‘language’ or ‘text’ have been taken for granted” (Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra, 2005:30).

In line with Bercovitch’s submission on symbology, Yerima presents Yoruba cultural ideology through the symbology of proverbs and series of local idioms. In the instance of the play, *Abobaku*, Yerima deploys Yoruba language aesthetics to present the people’s cultural identity and immanent ontological thoughts on living, death and life after death. From the opening of the play, especially during the installation of Ajibade as the Abobaku of Adeoti village. In the Yoruba cultural episteme, it was a tradition that someone must accompany the king to the world of the dead. This person always held the office of Abobaku (someone who dies with the king). This death must be voluntary as the office holder willfully surrenders himself for the ritual death. Through the creative use of language, Yerima establishes this Yoruba ontological thought and belief system. The following excerpt reveals thus:

ABORE: The moment we have been waiting for arrives in the presence of the three gods – Ogun, Osun and Esu – of Adeoti village. This is the tradition we inherited from our fathers of Oyo. In the name of Alaafin Oyo, *omo iku*, *omo ofo*, *omo aruniii*, *kabiyesi*, *iku babayeye*, we enthrone the new Abobaku who will escort our new *oba* to the land of our ancestors as it is with our sacred culture and tradition. May the ancestors be with us. (Abobaku, 8)

The excerpt is a reflection of Yoruba ontological thought in the life after death. With careful lexical choices and syntactic structures such as “the tradition we inherited”, “... the new Abobaku who will escort our new oba...” as well as “... our sacred culture and tradition”. These expressions reveal linguistic parameters deployed by the playwright to showcase Yoruba belief system in life after death. The language use in the play also reveals that there are certain traditions and rites to be followed while installing an Abobaku as found in Abore’s statement that “the moment we have been waiting for arrives in the presence of the three gods – Ogun, Osun and Esu – of Adeoti village”. Abore’s dialogue shows that there are certain sacred and/or secular activities that could be observed before a new Abobaku would be installed. The use of “moment” in the dialogue also shows that long search has come to an end. The deduction from the dialogue also reveals that the tradition of Yoruba kingship in the past was only complete with the installation of Abobaku whose traditional role was to serve the king alive and in death. With the creative use of language, Yerima expresses Yoruba ontological thoughts in kingship, royalty and noble living within the context of indigenous economic determinism. On this, Adeoti (2021:21) avers thus:

As an affirmation of people’s belief in life after death, when a king dies, some loyal aides, wives, courtiers and chiefs are expected to “die” and accompany the king on the journey to the land of the ancestors, where the march of life is expected to continue in the ethereal realm. The king is expected to continue to maintain the magnificence of royal life in the other world. The transition rites for the king are, therefore, not complete without the passage of these aides, especially the person designated as “Olokun-Esin” or “Abobaku”.

The linguistic apparatus deployed by Yerima shows his understanding of Yoruba Abobaku tradition. The linguistic choices and syntactic patterns used are very apt in the description of this tradition to the extent that a non-Yoruba reader/audience understands the immanent cultural practice of Abobaku in the traditional Yoruba society. Abore’s choice of use of language also reveals the playwright’s creativity to foreground the characterization of Ajibade (Abobaku) and how this contributes to the advancement of the play’s plot and resolution of conflicts. Similarly, Yerima’s use of language is consistent with Lee’s (1960: 140) view that “... a member of a given society - who, of course, codifies experienced reality through the use of the specific language and other patterned behaviour characteristic of his culture - can actually grasp reality

only as it is presented to him in his code". Yerima, therefore, uses language to weave the play's plot and to create characters that are plausible to people's cultural knowledge. The use of appellation, *omo iku*, *omo ofo* and *omo arun* to describe Alaafin Oyo is the playwright's attempt to codify the power of the Imperial Majesty Alaafin of Oyo to a non-Yoruba reader/audience. The playwright does not intentionally give the transliteration of the expressions, perhaps, to establish linguistic purity of Yoruba ontological thoughts. The simple transliteration of the expressions *omo iku*, *omo ofo* and *omo arun* are "the child of death", "the child of loss" and "the child of sickness" respectively. What this suggests is the myth of invincibility of Alaafin of Oyo to reign supreme over his subjects. Besides, he is seen as the second-in-command to gods. The supremacy of Alaafin is also seen in the Yoruba ontological thoughts that see him as *anikulapo* (someone who has death in his pouch). Oyo Yoruba people believe that Alaafin has the control over death.

To Yoruba reader/audience, the expressions are self-referential to the royal identity of Alaafin in consistence with Hawkes' (2004: 25) description of linguistic signification that it is "a structured and structuring system of signs, whose mode is symbolic, self-regulating and self-sufficient, requiring no reference to a 'reality' or 'nature' beyond itself to justify or validate its procedures". A non-Yoruba reader/audience, therefore, needs contextualization to understand the plot and the overall subject matter of the play. For instance, different lexicons such as *baba kekere* (small father) and *olokunola* (the owner of the rope of wealth) are used to express the lofty height that Ajibade has attained especially when the king still lives. The playwright makes use of Yoruba indigenous language with a view to retaining the linguistic ecology of the source culture which provides materials for the play. The transcended signification of *baba kekere* suggests the lieutenant to the king to the extent that he enjoys all the privileges that the king enjoys while alive. The instance of this privilege is found in the play when Ajibade begins to have sexual affair with Olori Agba (the most senior queen) when King Karounwi becomes bedridden. A close reading of the play within the context is revealing of the connotative meanings of some of the lexicons and syntactic patterns without losing the semantic orientation of the play.

Akwamya (2007:32) describes the semantic connotations in the literary texts through "inter-lexical relations" – the term he used to aver that "under the explanation of meaning by concepts, it is obvious that the single concept abstracted from the representations of several objects of experience associates together the important features of these distinct objects". Thus, *baba kekere* and *olokunola* have associative meaning of power, authority and affluence if interpreted within the Yoruba cultural matrix which informs the lexical choices. This interpretative approach to the lexicons and linguistic performance in the play detaches it from the monotony of representation and practical criticism. Additionally, lexicons are reflexive and at the same time revealing of the hegemony that Ajibade (Abobaku) enjoys while the king lives. Akwanya's view on semantic connotation of concepts in social and cultural interactions is further buttressed in Abore's question. During the rites of office, Abore asked Ajibade thus: "Do you give yourself voluntarily to this cause of honour and of glory?"

(*Abobaku*, 8). The question is an exposition of self-will, as one of the parameters for the selection and installation of Abobaku in Yoruba cultural episteme. It is a self-will towards the ambivalence of life and death.

As language is used by the playwright to express the loftiness of Abobaku's office, it is also used to express the precarious situation of the office. Through carefully selected lexicons and local idioms, the playwright forebodes the dangerous path that Ajibade is about to walk. At the conclusion of the installation as Abobaku, Ilari attempts to raise the consciousness of Abobaku as shown in the following excerpt:

And remember, Ajibade
That this is a serious game of death,
And not play. (*Abobaku*, 11)

The deduction from Ilari's statement registers the tragic tone of the play. It attempts to remind Ajibade (*Abobaku*) the ambivalence of his duty as Abobaku. The playwright's use of antithesis in the expression "a serious game of death/and not play" is to further establish the myth surrounding the office of Abobaku. Ilari's statement also aligns with Levi-Strauss's (1972:210) description of myth in the context of language use and collective consciousness of the people. While commenting on the semantic orientation of myth within the people's cultural orientation, Levi-Strauss avers that:

- i. The 'meaning' of mythology cannot reside in the isolated elements which constitute the myth, but must inhere in the way in which those elements are combined, and must take account of the potential for transformation that such a combination involves.
- ii. Language in myth exhibits specific properties, above the ordinary linguistic level.

The expression of myth relies much on the use of metaphors and symbols in verbal and non-verbal interactions. At a transcended cultural context, the expression "a serious game of death/and not a play" has a semantic similitude with a popular Yoruba dictum that *atari Ajanaku ki i se eru omode* (the head of an elephant is not a load that a small child can carry). This Yoruba dictum is often used when someone needs to be given a piece of advice to be critical of decision-making in a precarious situation. Although Ilari's warning is almost belated coming after all the rites of office, it is an attempt to re-orientate Ajibade on the seriousness of the task ahead of him. As a game of death, Ajibade gambles with his life because his life is no more his. As later found out in the play, King Karunwi becomes bedridden about two years after the installation of Ajibade as Abore. This situation sets the tragic tone of the play.

Language and the Expression of Gender Identity

The playwright uses language to raise gender consciousness within Yoruba cultural context. Different Yoruba proverbs and dictums are used in the play to express the liminality of ritual framing which secludes women's involvement. In Yoruba cultural

episteme, the office of Abobaku is preserve for men. This makes it a cultural aberration when Faramola insists that she wants to replace her husband, Ajibade, in the ritual death. In an encounter between Abore and Otun, they discuss the sacrilege committed by Faramola when the latter dressed in Abobaku's ritual attire. The following excerpt from the play reveals thus:

ABORE: The real taboo was meeting Baba Kekere's wife, Faramola, dressed in the sacred death robes of the Abobaku, *irukere* and all.

OTUN: What game did she think she was playing? What did you do to her?

ABORE: Calmly, respecting her madness from a safe distance, we took her into the palace prison to rest. She said she was pregnant with the male child of Abobaku.

OTUN: Is it acceptable?

ABORE: Um?

OTUN: Can we use her, Abore?

ABORE: It depends. We shall ask Ogun. If Ogun accepts, it will save us a lot of headache. And besides, since she carries the child of Baba Kekere, it should be acceptable. But everything has to be done hush, hush ... before the whole world catches wind of it. (*Abobaku*, 47 – 48).

The linguistic tropes and rhetorical devices used in the dialogue between Abore and Otun are reflections of Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson's (2008) submission on multifunctionality and ambivalence of language to create power-based conflict between patriarchal hegemony and feminine suppression as found in "double voiced" expressions which are "both competitive and co-operative simultaneously" (Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson, 2008:138). Abore's use of "the real taboo" hypes Faramola's action of wearing the ritual attire of Abobaku. This is an example of double voice expression which aims to castigate Faramola's feminine gender. What Abore's statement presupposes is that Abobaku's escape from Adeoti village when he is expected to perform his cultural role is not a taboo at all. Similarly, the conspiracy of Ilari against the land for aiding Abobaku's escape is not a taboo at all. What is at play in Abore's statement is gender prejudice against the person of Faramola. Additionally, Otun's reaction and statement further uphold patriarchal sentiments against active involvement of women in ritual process. Otun sees Faramola's action as a sort of madness which is not expected of any sane woman. Otun's statement also reveals the patriarchal sentiment against any daring woman who crosses the limitations of gender profiling imposed by patriarchal socialization creeds through language and belief system. Expectedly, like other women in a strict patriarchal society, Faramola is not

expected to question the tradition because “gender ideology in many cultures gives males the license to argue in direct, demanding, and confrontative ways, with unmitigated rivalry” (Sheldon, 1997: 221). The only quick intervention that Otun, a representative of the patriarchy, is to put Faramola in the palace prison. This is also a way of maligning Faramola’s gender and personhood. Similarly, it is the patriarchal scheming to stop Faramola’s self-will towards the redemptive mission to save the land from imminent chaos. By putting her in the palace prison, the patriarchy presents her as the scape-goat for all the crimes committed by the men in her life – her father and her husband.

The use of language to create power-based conflict in the play is also seen in the attempt of the patriarchy to reject the mother (Faramola) for the ritual death but accept the unborn baby for the purpose. Abore’s lexical choices and syntactic patterns reveal the subjectivity of the decision to seclude Faramola from the whole ritual process. Otun says “it depends” – an expression which connotes indecisiveness on his part except Ogun makes a pronouncement. In the same dialogue, Otun does not way for the pronouncement of Ogun before making judgement of using the unborn child as the replacement of the father, Abobaku. The choice of Faramola was not made by Otun because the former (Faramola) is seen as “outsider within” – a term used by Walsh (2001:18) to explain the exclusionary strategies deployed by men to marginalize women in social structures. Linguistically, Abore and Otun create a gender space within which Faramola is expected to operate. It is, therefore, an aberration for her to be daring by garbing herself “in the sacred death robes of the Abobaku, *irukere* and all”. Otun does not read through Faramola’s intention and this makes him think that she is playing with death. In reality, Faramola challenges death because she knows the implication of her action. Otun’s dialogue further reveals the conspiracy of the patriarchy to undermine women as found in his use of the expression “but everything has to be done hush, hush ...” The simple connotation of “hush hush” is the secrecy of action. There is ambiguity in Otun’s statement because one does not understand what he intends to make secret – Faramola’s scape-goatism of Abobaku’s escapism. Thus, Otun’s expression aligns with Ehrlich’s (2001) conceptualization of “the grammar of non-agency” – a form of language use that does not make specific reference to individual actor or particular situation in a discourse. The audience is left with this ambiguity till the climax and anti-climax of the play when conflicts are resolved.

Conclusion

This article has explored how language is used to explore Yoruba ontological thoughts in Ahmed Yerima’s *Abobaku*. The use of language is considered from the lexical choices to syntactic patterns to explore Yoruba belief systems in life, death and life after death. The article also considers how language is used to advance the plot of the play and to create characterization especially in the cultural roles of Abobaku. Similarly, the article explores how language is used to express Yoruba ontological thoughts on gender relations between men and women in the society. Language is a cultural tool which is often deployed to express different categories of ideologies as shown in the play.

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