



**PROJECTING THE PLAYWRIGHT'S IDEOLOGICAL  
UNDERPINNINGS THROUGH PROVERBS: A STUDY OF  
SELECTED WORKS OF FEMI OSOFISAN AND SAM UKALA**

**Uwem Affiah<sup>1i</sup>,  
Offiong Ene Amaku<sup>2</sup>,  
David Ekanem Udoinwang<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of English &  
Literary Studies University of Calabar,  
Calabar, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Linguistics,  
Arthur Jarvis University,  
Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department of English,  
Akwa Ibom State University,  
Nigeria

**Abstract:**

Language forms an important part of African drama, for it reveals certain aspects of African cultural experiences that are couched in indigenous language resources. From creating sound effects, to poetic imagery or to emphasizing meaning and offering wisdom or even cuckolding, oral language resources have in no small measure enriched and reinforced the ideological contents of Osofisan's and Ukala's selected plays. As exponents of indigenous theatre, one finds that Osofisan and Ukala wrap up meaning in a plethora of folktales, riddles, proverbs, songs, and oral poetry, which beyond edutainment, stimulate deep thinking and offer their drama, a distinctive linguistic richness that reveals the defining characteristics of an ethno-drama theatre. Therefore, the paper utilizes the ethnodramatic approach to interrogate the application and stylistic merits of these language resources and their centrality to Osofisan's and Ukala's dramas. In so doing, the paper establishes the aesthetic impact language resources wield on the thematic presentations of these playwrights.

**Keywords:** ethno-dramatics, language resources, African drama

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [uwemaffiah@yahoo.com](mailto:uwemaffiah@yahoo.com), [offyene@gmail.com](mailto:offyene@gmail.com), [davudoinwang@gmail.com](mailto:davudoinwang@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

This study, "Projecting the Playwright's Ideological Underpinnings Through Language Resources: An Ethnodramatic Study of Selected Works of Femi Osofisan and Sam Ukala," interrogates the use of the indigenous language resource of proverbs in Osofisan's *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king* and Sam Ukala's *Iredi War*, *Akpakaland* and *Break a Boil*. The study applies the concept of Ethnodramatics, a concept in indigenous African drama coined and put forward by Uwem Affiah and Ndubuisi Osuagwu (2012), to examine the ideological underpinnings of the playwrights with regard to the use of the oral performative language resource of proverbs. Both Osofisan and Ukala belong to the second generation of Nigerian playwrights whose ideological underpinnings are anchored on positive change through revolution. The playwrights' stamp of identity rests on these. The playwrights' creative ingenuity is accentuated by a rich harvest of this language resource.

It appears ethnodramatic patterns prominently manifest in the drama genre because the drama has the tendency to imitate the cultural realities of its audience liberally and copiously, forcing them to heights of ecstasy. In other words, ethnodramatic patterns inform the stylization of African drama along the lines of the continent's history, race, philosophy, and socio-political concerns. Therefore, more important than the pleasure and beauty that this resource provides are the ideological bearings which rigorously advance the African reality, identity, history, and culture which have been so denigrated by Western writers and scholars.

This is the basis upon which African literary drama refuses to be compartmentalized into a particular form of presentation. It decries Western hegemony by boldly asserting the African identity. It is for this reason that African literary drama uses local content and methods with the received Western principles of dramaturgy to create dramatic forms that are syncretic and inclusive.

The major aim of this study is to identify how the use of proverbs helps to give the texts their roots; that is domesticate drama as an art form. This would mean that the study:

- 1) will interpret these proverbs, show their cultural significance, and contribution to the overall thematic development of the plays.
- 2) will establish that the use of proverbs is an identity marker used to decry Western hegemony.
- 3) will show that these proverbs provide a rich stylistic repertoire to Nigerian literary drama and serve as a framework for the projection of African socio-political, religious, and historical sensibilities of contemporary times.
- 4) will show how these playwrights use this oral narrative performative language resource to call for revolutionary change.

## 2. An Overview of African Literary Drama and the Use of Oral Performative Content and Techniques

The quest for a positive self-image and a national culture has led to a mass retrieval and representation of indigenous forms and techniques in literary dramaturgy. As Affiah opines, it is important to note that literature, more than any other discipline, echoes and promotes a people's culture and traditions (52). Even a cursory reading of African literary drama texts shows a preponderance of the indigenous feature of rituals, myths, folklore, drum poetics, music, songs, dance, mime, gestures, symbolisms, etc. Many dramatists embellish their drama with indigenous oral performative forms and techniques as a way of perpetrating themes of unity and nationhood. Ruth Finnegan (1970) captures this in sufficient detail in her book, *Oral Literature in Africa*. It looks as if this is a given for as Adelugba et al opine, African literary drama "*evolved from the people's tradition, and has been recreated, transposed, and crystallized on the contemporary stage*" (143).

In "Traditional African Drama: The Dynamics of Total Integration," Ebele Eko stresses that oral forms are the strategic bedrock of literary drama. She goes on to assert that oral forms and techniques project a "*black aesthetics that exudes the spirit of African world-view*" (332). She suggests that more effort be put into the incorporation of more practical and vibrant oral forms and techniques into African literary drama as detailed in her exploration of these forms and techniques in Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*. In addition to the techniques and forms identified by Elko, Affiah avers that traditional drama is rich in subtle implications, understatements, imageries, histrionics, and symbolisms (19). Without a doubt, if harnessed, these will go a long way in enriching the aesthetics of literary drama.

In her study of Wole Soyinka, as reflected in her *Long Drums and Canons*, Margaret Lawrence submits that "*Soyinka enriches and gives dramatic emphasis to modern themes by drawing upon the religion, the mythology and the poetry of the African past. Yoruba gods inhabit his plays, and he uses the Yoruba drums, including the talking drums, as they have been used for centuries, to heighten and define rituals*" (12). It seems apparent that Soyinka's plays, like those of his contemporaries – Ola Rotimi and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo – owe much to indigenous sources in content and techniques.

This recourse to cultural revival appears to stem from the fact that Africa and Africans have for long been misunderstood. Many consider them primitive, unsophisticated, and incapable of conceiving finesse in literature. This discourse formed the basis of Femi Osofisan's inaugural lecture entitled, "Playing Dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of Terror in a Post-Colonial State". As quoted by Bhadmus, Osofisan asserts that the pioneer dramatists "*sought to demonstrate, first, that our claim to an authentic, autotelic civilization was not fraudulent or exotic; and secondly, that these stories and dramas were sites of heroic resistance, of a struggle against the monologic of colonial texts of colonial conquest*" (236).

In "Domestication Process in African Literary Drama", Afam Ebeogu presents ethno-aesthetics as a 'domestication process' in which "*the totality of the African universe*

is expressed" (9). He asserts that the domestication process finds form via adaptation, oral tradition, language, mythic imperatives, folk narratives, etc., as projected in African literary drama. Looking at some African playwrights, Ebeogu sets out to identify the manner in which Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King Horseman*, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, *Kurunmi* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* have been domesticated. He discusses the role of language, myths, adaptation, and history as domestication strategies adopted by these playwrights and which invariably provide "those patterns of creative configurations which African playwrights have used to make African plays unique, both as literature and as theatre" (16).

Biodun Jeyifo does a comparative study of playwrights from all the regions of Africa with regard to their application of oral performative forms and techniques in the dramatic tools of plot, character, and action. He concludes that West African playwrights "are more enamoured of the mythological, symbolist supernatural framework" (60) when compared with others.

In the essay, "From Orality to Print: An Oraliterary Examination of Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun*," Uwem Affiah and Ndubuisi Osuagwu, assert that the African oral performance remains a veritable source of material for African literary drama. They suggest that literary drama can adapt and exploit the contents and techniques of oral performance for its benefit. They go on to show how the two playwrights achieve these in the selected plays (11-16). Affiah and Osuagwu, in the same essay, conclude that "quite a generous amount of modern African drama is the secularization of traditional African ritual and festivals and oral narratives" (15).

In his study of playwrights who are concerned with promoting African culture, Luke Eyoh's "Oral Tradition as a Paradigm for Message Decodification: A Study of J. P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat*" asserts that the play is enriched by a massive injection of his native oral performative forms and techniques. Eyoh goes on to recognize, identify and categorize these forms and techniques as fables, icons, proverbs, and symbols which are relevant in the artistic formation of the play and in the decoding of African philosophy and thought system in order to generate meaning. He concludes that "knowledge of oral tradition elements enhances rewarding reading/watching or teaching of the play" (15).

Brian Crow and Chris Banfield in their book, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* opine that this reversion to native traditions of performance generally "constitutes one of the main artistic means of cultural recuperation" (13). This position conforms with that of Elleke Boehmer who reveals that the entire nativist activity of recollecting or as Achebe puts it ritual and 'atonement' via fiction was a sort of antidote to the disturbing critiques of the Europeans (186). Hence, the continuous preoccupation with recovering the African past is, as Chinweizu et al put it, to examine and foreground the colonial antecedents of Africa (90).

It has to be pointed out that the pursuit of an African aesthetics has gone past mere cultural revivalism and reclamation, and has acquired contemporary relevance in the face of poor governance in Africa. A crop of playwrights, well known for their Marxist slant have emerged. For these playwrights, the pursuit of an African aesthetics is the

ideological underpinning for critiquing incompetent leaders and questioning the polarity between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Thus, while discussing major radical playwrights, Saint Gbilekaa readily admits that *"indigenous theatrical devices have been judiciously used in the campaign and quest for a just and equitable society"* (197). Identifying Femi Osofisan as a radical, Gbilekaa attributes the successes of Osofisan's plays to his incorporation of the folktale techniques of history, myth, songs, music, dance, etc.

In the same vein, in discussing Rotimi's dramaturgy, Gbilekaa asserts that Rotimi's *"theatre is indigenous as he borrows a lot from Yoruba cultural indices"* (192). Gbilekaa states that this can be vividly seen in both diction and linguistic register as demonstrated in *The gods are Not to Blame*, *Kurunmi* and *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, but in *If* and *Hopes of the Living Dead*, Gbilekaa states that Rotimi explores the use of pidgin and multilingual experiments as well as music to *"enhance the mood and theme of struggle for political liberation"* (195).

Female playwrights have also been known to recruit indigenous content and techniques into their dramaturgy. Examples are Ama Ata Aidoo in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Efua T. Sutherland in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, and Tess Onwueme in *The Reign of Wazobia*, *The Broken Calabash*, *The Desert Encroaches* and *Tell it to Women*. In "Oral Structural Models in Tess Onwueme's Dramaturgy" Iniobong Uko asserts that those oral performative content and techniques recapture the social and moral values of African people and have helped Onwueme project *"an authentic African identity"* (96).

The oral performative content and techniques which Uko identifies in Tess Onwueme's plays are: rituals, libation acts, drum poetics, songs, proverbs, transliteration, local imagery, metaphors, and symbolisms.

Gbilekaa concludes that the radical playwrights' use of oral performative content and techniques does not only heighten audiences' understanding of their themes but propel them to revolt in order to transform and reorder society.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

For want of space, but for the benefit of readers and future researchers, we will offer a few words on the theoretical framework for this study. The assertions and comments in the preceding sections and the stated objectives of this study recommend two theories to us, viz; Postcolonialism and the Marxist theory.

Postcolonialism is a discursive framework geared towards the historical, literary, and cultural experiences of a once-colonized people. It is a constructive socio-cultural discourse that offers these people the intellectual space to assert and re-establish their identities. In relation to drama Olaniyan gives us greater insight when he writes that:

*"...the art theatre is the main tradition that most directly and persistently confronts the issue of colonial cultural deracination of African societies and the need for rigorous African cultural self-reclamation. It has performed that task by plumbing the depths of indigenous African performance traditions and both critically and creatively anchoring itself simultaneously in autochthonous forms as well as those borrowed from Europe."* (361)

Thus, we agree with Izuu Nwankwo when he asserts that in terms of the major objectives:

*"...postcolonial texts invariably seek to re-align the psyche of the colonized society in such a way that pre-existing mentality of the superior colonial aesthetics and values is replaced with a passion for indigenous aesthetics."* (61)

The major dimensions of postcolonialism that influence our analysis of texts here are Hybridity, Indigenization, and Neo-Colonialism. Neo-colonialism because the struggle to assert the African identity is an on-going experience; Hybridity and Indigenization because African literary drama is a fusion of indigenous African aesthetics and the received discursive principles of the West.

As much as our analyses of the texts delve into the socio-economic conflicts raised in the plays and show the playwrights' desire to cause positive change through revolution, we will rely on Marxism to account for this phenomenon.

In their essay, "Foregrounding Aspects of Esiaba Irobi's Dramatic Techniques in Three Selected Plays," Uwem Affiah and Chidimma Elekwachi, aver that "*Marxist criticism aims at revealing ideological issues, focus on class conflict and urge a correction or an end to social injustice*" (185). They continue, "*Marxist criticism pays attention more to the content and themes of a literary work than to its form*" (185). This explains the need for combining Postcolonialism with Marxism in this study. The theory typifies class constructs and revolutionary paths that challenge the dominant or elite class in power. The major aim of Marxist literary criticism is to bring to bear a classless society where equality, fairness, freedom, and fraternity exist.

It is often said that literature is a mirror held up for society to see its own reflection and effect change. Literature is a conscientizing and sensitizing tool. Effecting change is often the responsibility of those who will benefit from the change. In their essay: "Portrayal and Manifestations of Social Injustice in Selected Plays of Esiaba Irobi," Uwem Affiah and Chidimma Elekwachi state that: "*the Marxist believes that man should not resign to fate and accept oppression, subjugation, and exploitation as his lot. Man is urged to realize that the ability to free himself from the strangle hold of the oppressor rests on him*" (12). They go on to state that, "*Marxist theory frowns at the lackadaisical attitude of oppressed people and empowers them to rise and speak up for themselves*" (12). This mindset will account for a lot of the happenings in the selected plays and will now form the plank for conscientizing, sensitizing, and inspiring readers and audiences.

#### **4. Use of Proverbisation and Counter-Proverbisation**

Proverbisation interrogates the manner in which proverbs and proverbial expressions have been put to use in the texts. As a folk resource, proverbs are aesthetically appealing linguistic structures that are infused with philosophical truths. Eyoh argues that "*a proverb is complete literature*" for "*it expresses wit, a philosophy, a vision, wisdom, and beauty*

*which results from its sense, its shortness, and the literary devices with which it is embellished"* (44).

Taking this definition further is Mieder Wolfgang's view that:

*"A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation."* (24)

As such, proverbs are concise words of wisdom that reflect the realities of a community and life as a whole. They usually admonish, warn or caution the listener and most often than not are connotative. Like poetry, its language is subtle and indirect yet embedded in deep truths and wisdom. Proverbs are a true reflection of Africa's literary culture. Although they have no specific or set occasion or time when they are spoken, proverbs when infused in everyday speech, embellish language. Because they are wise sayings, they are predominantly used by elders albeit not an exclusive preserve of theirs. Stylistically, proverbs incorporate metaphors, ideophones, ironies, similes, allusions, symbols, satires, hyperboles, puns, etc. Thematically, they can be humorous or abusive, arrogant or sympathetic but extremely factual in outlook. Its vivid message of caution and precaution can never be missed. In the selected plays of Osofisan and Ukala, as with many African plays, proverbs are the core ingredients of dramatic dialogues. The aesthetic effects and ideological underpinnings of some of these proverbs have been amply elucidated below.

In discussing Proverbisation, we concurrently engage the aspect of Counter-Proverbisation - which is a form of riposte to a previous proverb with another proverb. Counter-Proverbisation can also function as an artistic means through which playwrights modify and deepen proverbial expressions by altering or countering the sense established in the initial proverb with a newly created one.

In *Iredi War*, we espy instances where proverbisation and counter-proverbisation play out. It generally occurs frequently at scenes of conflict in the play. Take for instance, when the Strangers appear in Igboba's court with a message for the king, one of the strangers quips:

Stranger I: *"...the message does not kill the messenger"* (*Iredi War* 66).

And Ebie counters:

Ebie: *"It depends on the message and the tact of the messenger."* (*Iredi War* 66).

Notice also how counter-proverbisation plays out in the dialogue between Uwa and Nkanka in *Break a Boil*:

Uwa: "... *The mouth that speaks everything it sees doesn't see much before it is shut permanently by maggots.*"

Nkanka: "*So, the mouth that wishes to live long must speak what it does not see?*"  
(*Break a Boil* 87).

In effect, two sides of an argument have been presented in the above-mentioned proverbs. Clearly, the opposition and contrast element lends the dialogue its artistic appeal and further builds up the tension between the opposing parties. In any case, Osofisan also does this in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, to highlight the ensuing conflicts between the older and younger generations. Notice how Akanbi counters Adigun's proverbs with his:

Adigun:        "*What! Since when  
Was it the custom, for the tail  
To teach the head?*"

Akanbi:        "*Whenever the head  
Lost itself in a calabash!*"

Adigun:        "*Does a child instruct  
His father on how to wield the cutlass?*"

Akanbi:        "*No, But the child can still tell  
When the cutlass is not in demand.*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 156).

Also, notice how Olabisi also counters Titi's proverbs with hers:

Titi:            "*A leopard's son, my daughter, will also have spots –*"

Olabisi:        "*As a fine dancer, mother, can spring  
from a hunchback!*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 152).

Invariably, these proverbs laced with physical actions have been used to counter set beliefs and ideologies that have held them captive. Through their judicious and apt use of proverbs, Akanbi and Olabisi are able to make their points crystal clear and are subsequently freed from their ugly situation.

Still, in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, we notice how proverbs help in concretizing characters' viewpoints. Notice how Baba Soye uses the following proverb to caution Olabisi against marrying Akanbi: "*A crocodile even in the robes of a prince, still has its teeth*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 145). This proverb is couched in colourful metaphors, where 'crocodile,' a dangerous and slippery reptile refers to Akanbi whom Baba Soye believes



to be just as evil as his uncle. Through another proverb, Baba Soye reveals to the audience, Titi's overtly protective nature and concern over Olabisi's choice. He reasons: "*A hen must know where her chicks can peck*" (138).

Even so, it is through the use of proverbs that he convinces Olabisi of the need to listen to his folktale, he begins; "*...hot yam, my daughter, must be eaten hot, or it turns to stone*" (139). Undoubtedly, the urgency of the situation is being captured in the proverb. The proverb evokes mental images as it is arranged in such a way that it appeals to the sensory organs of taste, sight, and touch. A similar proverb is also espied in *Iredi War*. It goes: "*Water yam is eaten in haste*" (29), which again suggests prompt action or urgency. Noah Dzobo reminds us that proverbs "*are symbolic and pictorial way of presenting truths*" (xxi), in other words, proverbs relay life experiences in a memorable and colourful manner. Thus, thriving on the literary device of synecdoche, the following proverb, "*an envious mouth grumbles when a luckier mouth eats*" (*Break a Boil* 73) adds a colourful imagery to the statement. "Mouth" in the proverb becomes a synecdoche for man, just as "grey hair" becomes a synecdoche for the elderly in the proverb: "*grey hair... is the sign of age*" (*Once Upon Four Robbers* 31).

Essentially, proverbs help advance the ideologies of the plays. Witness how a singular proverb captures the central theme of exploitation and revolt in *Akpakaland*: "*When rubbish is too much in the soup, the blind one notices it*" (14). This proverb, no doubt reveals the elastic limit of perseverance on the part of the masses. This hyperbolic statement makes their plight palpable to us and even to a blind man. Through exaggeration, we can envision how grave the plight of these characters is and are able to sympathize with them.

Even so, the use of proverbs by the playwrights also aids in characterization. King Gidi is obviously a vacuous leader, and this terse proverb could not have captured it better: "*Not every shell contains a kernel*" (*Break a Boil* 70). Some proverbs are couched in the style of rhetorical questions which probe the depth of human thought or maybe expressive of moral conduct. Both playwrights resort a lot to rhetorical questioning in their plays. Examples of proverbs with this literary device are shown below:

*"How can one make white the black nose of the dog?" (Iredi War 16).*

*"What can fire do to the feet of an iron pot?" (Iredi War 87).*

*"Is the finger nail scared of scabies?" (Iredi War 71).*

These proverbs have been used by some of the African characters in the play. They are stylistically couched in symbols and colourful imagery and their evaluative meanings indicate a people's resoluteness in fighting off the colonials. An analysis of the aforementioned four proverbs reveals their symbolic connotations. In the first proverb, "black nose" implies Africans as uncultured people in need of Western refinement. The second proverb has two symbols: while "fire" represents the oppressive colonials, the

“iron pot,” on the other hand, points at the Africans who are dauntless in the face of warfare.

Some other proverbs that are framed as rhetorical questions are seen in Osofisan's *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king*. Example: “if the witch cried last night, and a child is found dead this morning, shall we still search blindly for the course of the death?” (73) In the play, this proverb is used to teach against delay and encourages quick action. It has some superstitious undertones attached to it, nonetheless, it establishes a religious belief that is widely upheld in Yoruba communities. Another rhetorical proverb goes: “the crocodile may leave its mouth open, but which animal will walk into it to have a nap?” (17). This proverb certainly has been derived from close observation of the behavioural pattern of the reptile in its natural environment. The proverb's message is stark and in the context of the play, it extols the greatness of Shango. It portrays him as an indefatigable warrior-king. A similar proverb, that connotes this daring attitude can be found in *Iredi War*: “...the dumbness of the duck fills the hawk with fright” (76). It is used as a praise epithet in Dibia's incantations to the gods.

*Break a Boil* also presents us with a similar theme. It goes thus: “The war of stones never kills a pear tree” (*Break a Boil* 111). In the play, Nneka uses this proverb to encourage Eririnma to take up the heroic challenge. Eririnma is the war minister of Gidiland, and this charge spurs him on by reminding him of his greatness. Eririnma can be likened to a pear tree – solid, unmovable and gigantic. Clearly, these symbolic referents in the aforementioned proverbs point to the attributes of greatness and awesomeness. The theme of greatness is a sub-theme in these plays. In Africa, both flora and fauna within the local environment are often times woven into a proverb's content in order to express certain concepts or to represent human actions. To illustrate this, we refer to the following proverbs used in Ukala's *Break a Boil* and *Iredi War* respectively: “Who will honour the cockroach that goes to report the hen to the cock?” (*Break a Boil* 83) and “The little bird dancing by the roadside has drummers underground” (*Iredi War* 34). The first proverb expresses the idea of disbelief and mortal danger particularly when one is faced with a dilemma. In the play, Eririnma is put in a tight corner - to reveal the secret or to remain silent before the king. The second proverb expresses the idea of audacity and contempt of a subordinate before authority. This situation occurs particularly when the subordinate is being backed up by a higher or more superior power. In *Iredi War*, Lawani, the sergeant refuses to prostrate before the king because his actions are backed by the British troops. Thus, the elderly Nwobi captures this effrontery via proverb use. Interestingly, to foreground this contempt of authority, Nwobi repeats the proverb:

Nwobi: “My brother, the little dancing bird has drummers underground.” (*Iredi War* 34).

Still, on proverbs that incorporate animal figures, we have yet another example demonstrated in *Many Colours Make the Thunder-king*. It is derived from the observatory patterns of rodents. It goes: “...A forest rat, ...does not just run into the open in the afternoon, unless something is chasing it” (36). The major message of this proverb within the context

of the play is that of danger. The wary Alagemo, suspecting foul play uses this proverb to turn down Gbonka's offer of forced retirement. Gbonka's intention portends danger for both Shango and Alagemo, so smelling danger like the forest rat, Alagemo takes to his heels.

Like Alagemo, Aafa in *Once Upon Four Robbers* likens himself to a bat as demonstrated in the following proverb uttered by him: "*the bat has no eyes, but it roams with ease in the dark*" (*Once Upon Four Robbers* 29). He utters this proverb when the robbers try to pounce on him. Thus, the proverb conveys a message of alertness despite his senescence. The blind "bat" symbolizes Aafa, whose vision may be blurry with old age. Still expressing the theme of watchfulness or alertness, is the following proverb in *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*; "*When the man in front falls into a ditch those walking behind have to tread with care*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 129). Evidently, this proverb draws its inspiration from human situations and admonishes its listeners to take heed, by learning from other people's mistakes.

Humour, similes, personification, paradox, hyperboles, and metaphors have also been artistically deployed in some proverbs. The humour in the following proverb from *Iredi War* lies in its portrayal of a publicly offensive action: "*...the fart that would disgrace a man doesn't come through the middle of his anus; it escapes through the side*" (29). Obviously, the effect of humour in this proverb adds to its entertainment value. An example of a personified proverb can be seen in *Once Upon Four Robbers*. Hear Alhaja threaten Aafa via proverbisation:

Alhaja: "*...A pebble sits light in a catapult, but it still squashes the lizard.*" (*Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* 30).

The inanimate object, 'pebble' has been given animate attributes of sitting and squashing. The pebble, no doubt is a small insignificant object, but when wielded expertly in a catapult can bring down the biggest of lizards. Thus, Alhaja likens herself to this tiny pebble that can wreak major damage.

Paradoxical proverbs are statements of truth but contain two opposite ideas. Thus, two courses of contradictory action or ideas are usually presented. Here are a few as exculpated from the texts: "*Our future is in our past*" (*Iredi War* 88).

*"A man begets a child, and later the child becomes the father of his father."* (*Many Colours Make the Thunder-king* 16)

*"The dog of a king is a king"* (*Break a Boil* 103).

*"The child that swears to starve its mother of sleep, will all night, slumber in wakefulness"* (*Akpakaland* 23).

As much as some of these proverbs are metaphors, there are also proverbs that are embellished with similes. For example: *"A woman without a child is like a passing stranger in the home"* (*Many Colours Make the Thunder-king*47).

*"...the owl looks very much like the lizard"* (*Akpakaland* 22).

*"The mouth of the old woman looks as if it never sucked breast."* (*Break a Boil* 111).

*"...we are like the hoe, after it has dug the yam holes for the farmer, its head is knocked against a stump"* (*Break a Boil* 83).

Evidently, the literary device of simile embedded in these proverbs aids stylistic appreciation. In general, proverbs stimulate and deepen our cognitive ability. Irele, therefore submits that the proverb *"represents a compaction of reflected experience and functions as a kind of minimalism of thought"* (80). The exciting manner in which these proverbs have been incorporated into the texts, no doubt lends Ukala and Osofisan's language an authentic indigenous appeal. Its rootedness in this artistic resource is an attempt at domesticating the dramatic genre to suit its purpose.

In recapitulation, proverbs as a poetic genre of African oral literature are literary warehouses of a people's philosophies, moral values, and ideologies crafted in their very own language (or transliterated), which have spanned several generations via word of mouth. As has been demonstrated, the proverbs are not merely ornamental; they serve utilitarian functions as with any other oral genre.

From the foregoing, this discussion of the various techniques and literary devices of proverbs has helped in the satisfactory elucidation of the Ethnodramatic experiences of the plays.

## 5. Conclusion

This essay has tried to identify and examine the proverbs deployed in the selected texts of Osofisan and Ukala. It analyses the manner in which the playwrights utilize proverbs and how it projects their ideological underpinnings. The stylistic qualities of this oral art form like ideophones, neologisms, repetitions, local metaphors, similes, paradox, call-response, etc., were also discussed as artistic resources that aid in the domestication and adornment of Nigerian literary drama.

In sum, this language resource serves a peculiar role of giving a distinctive linguistic entity to the plays and beyond that, offering a voice to African cultural assertion amidst the delightfulness it offers.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### About the Authors

**Uwem Affiah, PhD**, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria. His research is mostly in African Drama and African Oral Literature. He is on Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia and Orcid. His Orcid number is: [orcid.org/0000-0002-5825-1473](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5825-1473)

**Offiong Amaku, M.A.**, is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Linguistics, Arthur Jarvis University, Cross River State, Nigeria. Her research interest is in African Drama. She can be found on ResearchGate, Academia, Google Scholar and Orcid. Her Orcid number is: [orcid.org/0000-0003-1970-8060](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1970-8060).

**David Udoinwang, PhD**, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. He is concerned with research in Ecocriticism and Autobiographical Studies. He can be found on Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia and Orcid. His Orcid number is: [orcid.org/0000-0002-7384-6782](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7384-6782)

### Works Cited

- Adelugba, Dapo, Olu Obafemi and Sola Adeyemi. "Anglophone West Africa: Nigeria." *History of Theatre in Africa*. Ed. Banham Martin. Oxford: Cambridge UP, 2004. 138-158. Print.
- Affiah, Uwem and Ndubisi Osuagwu. "Ethnodramatic: Towards a Theory for Indigenous African Drama." [www.isorjournals.org](http://www.isorjournals.org).5.2 (2012): 6-10. Retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018.
- Bhadmus, Muhammed. "The Popular Theatre and Radical Aesthetics of Femi Osofisan." *The Postcolonial Lamp: Essays in Honour of Dan Izevbaye*. Eds. Aderemi Raji-Oyelade and Oyeniyi Okunoye. Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2008. 231-49. Print.
- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- Chinweizu, Jemie Onwuchekwa, and Ihchukwu Madubuike. *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*. Enugu: Forth Dimension, 1980. Print.
- Clark, J.P. *Song of a Goat*. Ibadan: Mbari, 1961. Print.
- Crow, Brian and Chris Banfield. *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre*. London: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Dzobo, Noah. *African Proverbs: The Moral Value of Ewe Proverbs*. Accra: Woeli Publishing, 2006. Print.
- Ebeogu, Afam. "Domestication Processes in African Literary Drama." *Trends in African Drama & Theatre*. Ed. Uzoma Nwokochah. Owerri: Crystal Publication, 2000. 1-19. Print.
- Eko, Ebele. "Traditional African Drama: The Dynamics of Total Integration" *Literature and Black Aesthetics*. Ed. Ernest Emeyonu. Ibadan: Heinemann, 1990: 328 – 36. Print.
- Eyoh, Luke. "Oral Tradition as a Paradigm for message Decodification: A Study of J. P Clark Bekeremo's *Song of a Goat*." *Trends in African Drama & Theatre*. Ed. Uzoma Nwokocha. Imo: Crystal, 2000. 138-151. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980. Print.

- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970. Web.
- Gbilekaa, Saint. *Radical Theatre in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications, 1997. Print.
- Jeyifo, Biodun. "Literary Drama and the Search for a Popular Theatre in Nigeria." *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine Publication, 1981. 411-24. Print.
- . *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. London: New Beacon, 1985. Print.
- Laurence, Margaret. *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952 – 1966*. London.: Macmillan, 1968. Print.
- Nwabueze, Emeka. *Research Methods: An Integrated Approach*. Enugu: ABIC, 2009, Print.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Festivals, Ritual and Drama in Africa." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010. 353-63. Print.
- Osofisan, Femi. *Playing Dangerously: Drama at the Frontiers of Terror in a Post-Colonial State*. Ibadan UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Major Plays – 1*. Ibadan: Opon Ifa Readers, 2003. Print.
- . *Morountodun and Other Plays*. Essex: Longman, 1982. Print.
- . "Ritual and the Revolutionary Ethos: The Humanistic Dilemma in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre." *The Nostalgic Drum*. Trenton: Africa World, 2001. 91 – 103. Print.
- . *Morountodun and Other Plays*. Ibadan: Longman, 1982. Print.
- . *The Nostalgic Drum*. Trenton: Africa World, 2001. Print.
- Rotimi, Ola. *Kunrunmi*. Ibadan: UP, 1971. Print. ----. *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*.
- Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman*. London: Methuen, 1975. Print.
- . "The Fourth Stage: Ogun/Origin of Yoruba Tragedy." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* . Eds. T. Olaniyan and A. Quayson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010. 366-74. Print.
- Ukala, Sam. *Iredi War*. Ibadan: Kraft, 2014. Print. ----. *Akpakaland and Other Plays*. Ibadan: Kraft, 2014. Print.
- . "Politics of Aesthetics." *African Theatre, Playwrights and Politics*. Eds. Martin Banham, James Gibbs, Femi Osofisan. Oxford: James Currey, 2001: 29-41. Print.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Homecoming*. London: Heinemann, 1972. Print.
- Wolfgang, Meider. *Proverbs: A Handbook*. Greenwood Press, 2004. E-book.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Literary Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).