



## LINGUISTIC CONCEPTUAL METAPHORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COMMUNICATION OF INCANTATIONS IN THE UTU FESTIVAL OF THE ALISOR-IKA PEOPLE OF DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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### **Abstract:**

Incantatory poetry features in many ancient and modern African festivals. Studies on the genre show that this genre of oral poetry is performed in the context of ritual and religious observances in festivals. The medium draws attention to the dualism that frames the outlook or worldview of worshippers and the general audience or spectators, namely, the mundane world of the living and that of spirit beings and ancestors. Incantatory performance is one of the means through which the relationship and interactions between the two realms of existence are expressed, reinforced, and transmitted. Incantations represent the verbal keys that communicate the deep, philosophical and esoteric messages. This paper attempts a linguistic, conceptual and metaphorical analysis of the images and meanings transmitted by the chief priest in the Utu Festival of the Alisor-Ika people of Delta State, South-South Nigeria. The approach adopted is an exegetical and expository one, with emphasis on the nature and mechanism of meaning transfer between two sets of active agents in the communication process: the cantor (chief priest) and the audience/spectators. The study reveals that in African festival events, there are special codes of communication that can be deciphered by applying the tools of linguistic, conceptual and metaphorical analysis. It is further shown that this ritualized form of language use constitutes a category of communication and cognition in which the chief priest is the main vessel of transmission and mediation.

**Keywords:** incantations, communication, conceptual metaphor, Alisor, Utu Festival

### **1. Introduction**

Communication underlines the use of language. That is to say if language does not communicate, little or nothing could be done with it. One of such definitions comes from Thomas Pyles. According to him, language is a systematized combinations of sounds which have meaning for all persons in a given community (Pyles 44). Also, Charles Barber says a

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human language is a signaling system which uses vocal sounds as materials (Barber 24). The two definitions of language above clearly highlight the fact that language exists for meaningful and signaling purposes which go a long way to underscore the fact that communication is the main thrust of language.

In any communication act, there are three factors mainly involved. These include the addresser, who is usually the speaker, the message which is the content of what is being said and the addressee who the message is meant for. If the message is well communicated, there would be an expected feedback on the part of the addresser or sender of the message. There must be a convergence of the three factors in order to make a good communication act. The convergence is felt more when there is a positive feedback. According to Manuel Bennie, 'it is easier to get an immediate feedback in spoken conversation' and incantations fall into that category. (11) In the context of this study, the sender here is the cantor while the message is the incantations which come in coded forms of language then the audience during the festival are the receivers of the message. To have a convergence of the three factors of sender, message and receiver, there must be a form of cooperation because according to Victor Longe and Ogo Ufuani (1996) "*people only share what they have in common which presupposes understanding and collaboration*".

Our intention in this present study is to highlight the language of incantations with emphasis on how the three factors stated above come to convergence during the Utu festival of the Alisor-Ika people of Delta State. Incantations come in most cases condensed language as they are rendered in poetic forms. To achieve the purpose of the communication, the cantor who supposedly communicates with the gods and translates same to man employs certain concepts in order to communicate to man in a language that is understandable. By using these concepts, the cantor is able to bridge the gap between the spirit world and that of man. It is our intention in this study to look at these concepts which the cantor deploys in the course of celebrating the Utu festival and how the concepts are interpreted by the audience for a complete communication process.

## **2. The Alisor People**

Alisor is one of the many federated communities in Agbor Kingdom but it differs from the other communities in Agbor Kingdom because the people do not speak the Ika language which is common to the other communities. The Alisor people speak the Oza language which is a hybrid of the Edo language and the Ika languages. This can be attributed to the fact that Alisor is a border town between the Ika kingdom and the Benin Kingdom. Alisor shares a common boundary with Oza-Nogogo, Abudu, and Ozanisi on the East and Alileha, Alizomor and Omumu on the West.

The leader of the Alisor people is the Esor of Alisor who is a ruler answerable to the Dein of Agbor Kingdom though exercising some form of autonomy in taking decisions that are minor especially the one involving everyday life and activities. Predominantly, the Alisor people are farmers who deal mostly on cash crops such as Yam, cassava, maize, and they are good tappers of palm wine which is a local alcoholic drink which they sell to people who come

the bigger cities of Agbor and Benin to buy. The agrarian nature of the community explains why most of the metaphors we employed for incantations are mostly of the agrarian register.

### 2.1 The Utu Festival

The Utu festival is an annual festival which is celebrated by the Alisor people to mark the beginning of the harvest season and the beginning of the new farming season. The festival affords the people the opportunity to say thank you to their gods and ancestors for the fruitful harvest and also thank them for giving them the strength to farm for the year ending.

The celebrations last for three days. On the first day, the representatives of the various families present cook yam and palm oil at the main village shrine at the market square and prayers are offered to the gods. It is the end of it that involves the cantor relating the mind of the gods as regards the sacrifices offered if it is acceptable or not. If it acceptable, the Chief Priest who is the cantor relates it to the people. The data for the study were got at this point. On the second day, women are asked to cook pounded yam with different local soups. They are all brought to the palace of Esor of where everyone participates in the eating. You do not eat the one from your house but that cooked in another family. This brings unity and oneness. On the third day, the celebrations climax with cultural dances and wrestling competition between the various families. On this day too, visitors are received, new clothes are worn and many especially the men get drunk because there is usually a lot of food and drink.

### 3. Review of Related Literature

Michtell Koiva (2012) does a study of incantations focusing on how it has over the years translated from mere acts of creativity amongst the Tartu people of Estonia to full traditional rites. According to him, *"incantations, one of the oldest folklore genres, have changed during their centuries-old traditions. And yet they have maintained their niche among the modern phenomena. A wonder that they did not vanish together with folk tales, runo songs and other archaic folk tradition"* (Koiva, 215).

Williams Duru (2016) studies the communicativeness of incantations in the traditional Igbo society. He observes that *"incantations are given force by oral tradition, a practice whereby the social, political, economic and cultural heritage of the people is communicated by word of mouth from one generation to another. It was the most predominant part of communication in many parts of Africa"* (Duru, 1). The study establishes that in incantation practices among the Igbo people, all words stand for something and are meaningful. Most of the cultural displays of the Igbo society employ incantations in communicating with spirits. While some aspects of the practice may appear fetish and obsolete, several others are purely traditional and, destroying it out-rightly amounts to throwing away a baby with the dirty water (Duru, 8). At the end, the study recommends that incantation which is a core aspect of the way of life of the Igbo people should not be extinguished, but preserved for the use of future generation.

Peter Omoko (2016) examines incantation as a core element of the dramatic and poetic contents of the *Idju Festival* of the Agbarha Ame People of Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. According to Omoko (2016), an aspect of the poetic content of *Idju festival* is the use of chants

and incantations during visual offerings by the *Ọsedjọ* (Chief Priest). Chant is a stylized form of speech or music which has many features of song. These acts of dance impersonation, chants and incantations are nothing but conscious art of worship without which there can be no performance for pleasure. So, Omoko (2016) places emphasis on the aesthetics nature of incantation as its sole aim is to create pleasure and satisfaction in the audience. This study proves that contrary to insinuation that incantations are directed by the spirit realm, Omoko (2016) sees the act of incantation as a conscious and deliberate act of worship to the gods but at the same time there is the need to entertain the audience which then drives the creativity in the cantor. This study corroborates the earlier study of Godin Darah (2014) on *Udje dance* performances as dramatic and aimed at entertaining the audience through epic actions mixed up in the dance. This goes a long way to show that most festivals and dance employ the dramatic aspects in order to thrill the audience. The Alisor incantations during the *Utu festival* is not different.

Oriloye (2012) studies the poetic nature of the incantations of the Yoruba people. The study recognizes the fact that 'the use of incantations to achieve particular results is not peculiar to creed, climate or colour. It is a universal Phenomenon. Since the exponents and practitioners of incantations are often held in contempt. Scholars tend to shy away from investigating it, though it is a rich genre of Yoruba Oral literature' (Oriloye 32). At the end of the study, Oriloye presents as part of the findings that most incantations are constructed on the results of observations, experiments and logical reasoning.

### 3.1 Conceptual Metaphor

Conceptual metaphor works in such a way that concepts which language users understand are used to relay or explain what they do not understand. That is like using the known to explain the unknown. This philosophical leaning was first explored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnsen then revised in Lakoff and Johnsen (2003). Over the years of using a language, language users have gathered certain level of experience. The Conceptual Metaphorical Theory accounts for how these experiences come to play in interpreting certain language constructions. The theory accounts for how language users understand their language and relate the experience they have on the language. Lakoff and Johnsen agree that conceptual metaphor explains the fact that in using language, users merely relate what they know or what is in their environment to explain other ideas or concepts that are not in their environment. This endows metaphor as with the basis for relating known concepts to illuminate unknown or not too familiar concepts (Idegbekwe, 2015, p. 44).

One striking example which Lakoff and Johnsen present is that of time as a concept in the European and American cultures. Time to the Europeans and Americans is a valuable entity that should not be taken for granted and this idea has led to different language constructions such as *time is money*, *time is a limited resource*, and *time is a valuable commodity*. (Lakoff and Johnsen, 2003, p. 9) There are indeed other cultures where the concept of time is looked at in terms of their economic value. In such a culture, the metaphor of time as used above becomes meaningless. So, one can say that metaphors are shaped by culture and

experience. So, the metaphor deployed by the Cantor in the Utu festival is highly determined by what is prevalent or part of the shared experience of the Alisor people using their language.

The conceptual metaphor theory is of the opinion that the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another. The most important claim which the conceptual metaphor makes is that the metaphor which uses one kind of thing to explain another is not just words or a language tool alone. Instead, it is part of the thought process of language which according to them is metaphorically defined and shaped or influenced by the cultural environment where the language exists (Lakoff and Johnsen 5).

### 3.2 Source and Nature of Data

The data for this study are from recordings which the researcher obtained as an observer in the 2017 edition of the Utu Festival of the Alisor people. The researcher recorded the prayers and speech of the Chief Priest who acts as the cantor and the intermediary between the spirit world and the members of the community. The prayers and utterances relevant to the study were sought out and translated into the English language. A total of Twenty (20) utterances were identified and translated for analysis as represented below:

### 3.3 Presentation of Data

**Table 1:** Showing the incantations in the Oza language and the English translation

	Oza Versions	English Versions
A	<i>We ne Okpagha ne do va.</i>	<i>You are the castor seed that remains intact after a fall.</i>
B	<i>Aga ukpo we gha tor ma.</i>	<i>Your throne shall last long for us.</i>
C	<i>Ma vba gwale ododo.</i>	<i>Your throne shall last long for us.</i>
D	<i>Gwurugwuru vwam mien vban.</i>	<i>We shall not be visited by the vulture.</i>
E	<i>Wa demuze vben egbon demuze.</i>	<i>You are standing strong like the lobelia tree.</i>
F	<i>Edion nikaro aghe ghe vwam, ma bun tun.</i>	<i>The ancestors are watching the spectacle.</i>
G	<i>Ede ne gbe ni imo ukpe.</i>	<i>The day is for the children of light.</i>
H	<i>Wa gbikhwen vbe atalakpa.</i>	<i>Dance around like the lion.</i>
I	<i>Egwi no mie Nomagbon vbam mie vwan.</i>	<i>The tortoise that tricked Nomagbon will not see us.</i>
J	<i>Ome egbe vben ote ha go.</i>	<i>I see palm frond everywhere in the land.</i>
K	<i>Wa gbe oghwie ye ote.</i>	<i>pour the white chalk on the floor.</i>
L	<i>Ebe ogbon vben ote ha go.</i>	<i>I see green leaves everywhere in the land.</i>
M	<i>Ma vban mie ukpon evie.</i>	<i>We would not wear black clothes.</i>
N	<i>Eghian ere ni imo mu.</i>	<i>Blood is not what children play with.</i>
O	<i>Ozuzu gha tu ma gbei.</i>	<i>If the owl cries, we would kill it.</i>

**Source:** the current study.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

A. *We ne Okpagha ne do va* (You are the castor seed that remains intact after a fall).

This line of incantation is a greeting to the King of the Alisor Kingdom who is also known as the Esor of Alisor. The incantation makes use of the castor oil seed and its features as metaphor for the king of the Alisor community. The castor seed is known for its hard and rugged nature, especially when it falls off the seed. In the incantation the king is hailed as the castor seed

because the king is strong and sturdy for his people and in relation to the difficult job of leadership. The cantor makes sense in this greeting or praise to the king because the concept of the castor seed which he uses is well known to the audience and the king. This validates the fact that in the use of conceptual metaphor, the users of the language resort to concepts and symbols that are familiar to the users. In most cases, the concepts and symbols are items that are available in the environment.

To show the importance of such a concept being employed in the community and how the people understand the concept, the castor tree is always planted in different locations of the community. Perhaps, this is done in order to constantly remind the people of their king and how strong and powerful he is.

*B. Aga ukpo we gha tor ma (Your throne shall last long for us)*

This incantation also refers to the king, but the English version does not adequately represent the true image that is painted with the concept in its metaphorical reference. The cantor prays for the king that his 'seat of power' would last long for the people to venerate forever. There is usually a seat in the palace where no other person sits at the palace because it is reserved for the king only. Whether the king is present or not, the subjects bow down to the seat as it is the symbol of the king's authority. It is only those who are aware of the background knowledge behind the concept who appreciate what the cantor says in this instance. Again, this validates the fact that conceptual metaphor is only deployed where there is a shared background knowledge of its use. If the Chief Priest employs strange objects and concepts such as snowing, mountain climbing, water or swimming in his incantations, there is no way the audience in the Alisor community would understand because these objects and concepts are not familiar to them as they are not common in their immediate environment.

*C. Ma vba gwale ododo (We do not want the red apple tree)*

The metaphor here centres on a forbidden red apple-like fruit in the community. Alisor folklore has it that long ago, the red apple-like fruit was not available. One day, they woke up to see the tree and the fruits at different locations of the community. Many saw it as something good because the fruit is very attractive; however, when they consulted the gods, they were told that the fruit represents immediate danger that cannot be averted immediately. And, indeed, after few days, the community was attacked by marauders from neighbouring kingdoms, leaving many dead and, at the end, the fruit and the tree disappeared. Since then, there is usually a prayer offered at the festival that says we do not want *ododo*. This story therefore becomes a concept that represents evil and bloodshed. In fact, the red colour of the fruit helps in illuminating this fact. As a member of the audience, one actually needs to be aware of the tale we just explained in order to fully appreciate the metaphor deployed by the cantor at that point.

*D. Gwurugwuru vwam mien vban (We shall not be visited by the vulture)*

The metaphor in focus here is the vulture and what it symbolizes. The vulture only visits to scavenge dead carcasses of animals including those of humans. So, it is not a positive image.

Here, the Chief Priest prays the vulture shall not visit the people. It is an allusion that one can take as a declaration from the spirit world. It means that death will not come to the people and their animals and even when these terrors come, there should be people available to bury the dead, unlike in war situations where dead bodies litter everywhere because no one would be alive or brave enough to bury the dead. This is where the vulture comes around. The image of the vulture invoked here does not mean the normal vulture as a bird, rather, it connotes danger and destruction.

E. *Wa demuze vben egbon demuze (You are standing strong like the lobelia tree)*

The lobelia tree is an ancestral plant revered among the Alisor people. The lobelia tree is known for its slim but strong nature. It does not easily die even when cut off. It usually spurts up over and over again. At the various religious temples in the community, the lobelia tree stands tall with the red and white clothes tied around it. In this extract, the cantor makes reference to the fact the children stand like the *egbon* tree. The children here refer to the elders mainly and the other indigenes of the kingdom. Everyone is a child to the gods whose words the Priest communicates during the incantations.

F. *Edion nikaro aghe ghe vwam, ma bun tun (The elders ahead of us are watching the spectacle)*

In this extract, there is a mention of 'the elders ahead of us;' meaning the ancestors. Among the Alisor people and in many African societies, ancestors are not seen as dead but alive as elders endowed with a supernatural for watching over the children they left behind, though without being seen. It is this concept that the Priest exploits in order to convey the message that the ancestors are satisfied with what the people have brought for sacrifice. The Priest addresses the ancestors in this manner because the gods, in their wisdom, cannot communicate in plain language to humans. Instead, they resort to metaphors and symbols which the people can understand, especially the elderly ones who form the immediate audience in the festival.

G. *Ede ne gbe ni imo ukpe (The day is for the children of light)*

The concept which stands as the tool for the metaphor here is the contrast between light and darkness. The Priest calls the Alisor people the children of light and it is well understood by them that light is a positive thing as against darkness. The children of light would rule both the day and night. The children of the dark are set for doom. On the other hand, it takes a clean heart to be seen as light. This means that the gods are not angry with the people as they have been found pure and 'holy.' This implies that the people will get all the blessings attached to the status of being 'a light.' If you go with the ordinary interpretation of the word 'light' without focusing on the shared background of illumination among the people, you cannot appreciate the creativity of the cantor.

H. *Wa gbikhwen vbe atalakpa (Dance around like the lion)*

In this extract, the well-known image of the African lion is used to describe the strength and agility of the Alisor people which is made manifest when they dance to the gods. The main

dance for *Utu festival* is called *isiekwere*, it is energetic and mimics the hunting pattern of the lion. On the other hand, the dance prepares the people for war. It is also well-known that the lion which is the king of the jungle never goes to a battle and returns as the victim. The lion comes back with its hunt. This image can also be seen in the Alisor people.

I. *Egwi no mie Nomagbon vbam mie vwan (The tortoise that tricked Nomagbon will not see us)*

This proverbial statement and the metaphor built around the popular folktale among the Alisor people of how the tortoise, the trickster, cunningly took all the wealth of Nomagbon, a rich but foolish man. It is told that Nomagbon for over ten consecutive years had the best of harvests in the community because the gods favoured him in those periods. A day came when the tortoise paid Nomagbon a visit and convinced him that the gods had sent him to collect all the golds and yams of Nomagbon in order to give him life everlasting. Nomagbon was a man who feared dying a lot and, as such, he easily accepted the offer. After giving out all his possession, he waited for days for the tortoise to return with the feedback of the gods, but the day never came. Nomagbon died few days after out of heart break. Since then, it has become a prayer and anecdote in Alisor for people not to experience the tragedy that afflicted Nomagbon. The cantor relies on this shared knowledge in the extract.

J. *Ome egbe vben ote ha go (I see palm frond everywhere in the land)*

The statement is a proclamation of what the Priest sees in the spirit world. He says he sees the fresh palm frond everywhere in the land. Immediately he utters this, the people shout and jump in jubilation. They do this because they know the significance of the oil palm tree to the community. The oil palm tree (*elais guinnensis*) is ubiquitous in the Southern region of Nigeria. Its wild groves are found in all farm lands and communities. The plant is strong, its leaves remain evergreen, and the fruits are useful for domestic and industrial purposes. The oil palm leaves are used for two main things: for decoration which signifies that celebrations are on the way for the people because one decorates when one is marking a feast. The other use is that of safety from thieves and marauders. Among the Alisor people, when you wish to protect any of your property or crops from thieves, you tie the palm branches around it as a symbol of protection. The Chief Priest extols the value of the palm frond to underscore spiritual insurance from the divinities.

K. *Wa gbe oghwie ye ote (Spray the white chalk on the floor)*

This symbol follows the earlier one in declaring celebrations for the kingdom. Here, the ornament of celebrations represented by the white chalk (Kaolin) is demanded by the Priest to be sprayed on the floor and the people do that in jubilation. When a child is born or during festivals, the white chalk is sprayed on the floor and on peoples' faces. In many religious ceremonies and occasions of victory and triumph, the chalk is daubed by people in jubilation. So, when the cantor says that this is what he sees spiritually in the kingdom, it indeed calls for jubilation. This jubilation is only possible if the people are able to interpret the concept metaphorically.

L. *Ebe ogbon vben ote ha go (I see green leaves everywhere in the land)*

This is a continuation of the spiritual realm revealed what he (cantor) sees, he says he sees the green leaves filling up the land. The concept of the green leaves symbolizes fertility, especially for an agrarian community like that of Alisor. It is good news for the people hence, they jubilate once more.

M. *Ma vban mie ukpon evie (We will not wear black clothes)*

In this extract, the Chief Priest applies the opposing colour of black and the concept of danger, sadness and loss which it represents is used to convey the message of the gods confirming their readiness to defend the people from every danger. It is also a prophecy for the new year as the *Utu Festival* serves two purposes- it is a celebration of the harvesting season and the beginning of the new one. The prayers are for the New Year, that the black cloth will not be seen at all. It could also mean that young ones will not be buried in the land as the black cloth is worn when a young person is lost; mourning widows wear the black cloth during the period of mourning. It is the wish of everyone for the very old to die while the young ones bury them. This whole idea is embedded in the metaphor of the black cloth as used by the cantor in the *Utu Festival*.

N. *Eghian ere ni imo mu (Blood is not what children play with)*

The concept of blood is deployed in the extract by the Priest to convey the message that blood shall not be shed by the children of the gods. Blood as a concept does not represent something good and the cantor says blood is not what children play with because it is a dangerous for them. We have said earlier that all the inhabitants of the Alisor Kingdom are seen as children in the eyes of the gods because they are all the subjects of the gods. The gods in their infinite wisdom know that blood would not be good for their children and, hence, there is an admonition from the cantor that the subjects should be careful so that they do not shed blood willingly. At this stage, it seems the gods are relating words of admonition to the people through metaphorical concepts, especially when you consider the next extract below.

O. *Ozuzu gha tu ma gbei (If the owl cries, we would kill it)*

In this last extract, the gods, through the Priest, advise the people to kill any witch when they see them in their midst. In this instance, the word *witches* is not mentioned but the audience can clearly relate with it because the bird owl, the referent is symbolic of the cry of the witches. The people are able to understand this because it is a folk belief in Alisor community that the owl represents witches. Witches should not be allowed to leave among the innocent and that is what the priest relates but not in plain words.

#### 4. Findings

From the analysis, the study has established the following as the findings:

- 1) For conceptual metaphor to be fully deployed for communication purposes, the object or concept used to relate a particular message must be familiar to the audience in order for them to relate with the message in terms of the meaning.

- 2) The shared background knowledge which cantors rely on is mostly part of the folklore of the people as most of them are told as stories from generation to generation through words of mouth.
- 3) The concepts employed as metaphors are ideas and objects that can be found in the immediate environment and they are mainly crops, animals, plant and colours which the people can interpret.
- 4) The use of concepts for metaphorical communication is convenient for the cantor because it enables him to create the super natural image of being a mediator between the gods and humans.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examines the language the Chief Priest employs during the *Utu festival* of the Alisor people of Ika South Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The language is interpreted looking at the conceptual metaphors used in incantations and prayers, praises, prophecies and admonitions. Fifteen of these lines of incantations are treated and the study discovers that for a conceptual metaphor to be fully deployed for communication purposes, the object or concept chosen to relate a particular message must be familiar to the audience in order for them to relate with the message in terms of the meaning.

The study further points to the need to undertake linguistic and literary analysis of coded communication in ritual and festival ceremonies to enhance the knowledge of beliefs and philosophical concepts embodied in them. It can be adduced from the evidence in the incantations that there are potentials for developing oral communication media by exploring festivals events which abound in all African countries. This approach is particularly important and urgent because the ever-increasing threats to traditions and indigenous culture in the face of modernization and globalization.

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