

The Ijaw Proverbs/Idioms and Their Significant Roles in Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue*

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Abstract

Ebi Yeibo's poem *The Forbidden Tongue* is a powerful example of how Ijaw proverbs and idioms can be used to explore the cultural and historical experiences of the Ijaw people. The poem makes use of Ijaw proverbs and idioms to convey a strong sense of nostalgia for a lost culture and tradition. By analyzing the parables/ idioms of the poem, we can gain a deeper understanding of the poem's meaning and significance. The poem also raises important questions about the preservation of the heritage. The title of the work is "The Significance of Ijaw Proverbs and Idioms". The aim of the work is to explore the cultural and linguistic significance of Ijaw proverbs and idioms. The methodology used is literary analysis of Ijaw poems and texts. The theoretical framework is based on the concept of linguistic relativity, which suggests that language influences thought and culture. The contribution to knowledge is a deeper understanding of the role of proverbs and idioms in Ijaw.

Keywords: Linguistics, idioms, significance, proverbs and Ijaw.

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INTRODUCTION

Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue* is a powerful poem that explores the impact of colonialism on the Ijaw people of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The poem makes extensive use of Ijaw parables and idioms, which provide a window into the culture and beliefs of the Ijaw people. This paper will explore the significance of these parables and idioms, and how they shape the meaning of the poem. By understanding the role of the Ijaw language in *The Forbidden Tongue*, we can gain a deeper understanding of the experience of the Ijaw people under colonial rule."

How the parables and idioms in *The Forbidden Tongue* convey a number of important messages about the Ijaw people and their culture. For example, the parable of the fisherman and the net in the poem is a metaphor for the loss of traditional values and culture under colonialism. The use of the Ijaw language in the poem also highlights the importance of preserving cultural traditions and passing them on to future generations. Additionally, the poem's use of Ijaw idioms emphasizes the idea of shared cultural knowledge and understanding within the Ijaw community.

The Ijaw parables and idioms also highlight the importance of nature and the environment in Ijaw culture. For example, the parable of the tree and the forest is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all living things. The use of these parables and idioms shows that the Ijaw people have a deep connection to the natural world, and that they view themselves as part of a larger ecosystem. This perspective is in stark contrast to the colonialist view of nature as something to be exploited and conquered.

The parables and idioms also convey a message of resistance to colonialism. For example, the parable of the lion and the mouse is a metaphor for the power of the Ijaw people to resist and overcome oppression. Even though the mouse may be small, it is able to free itself from the lion's paw. This parable suggests that even though the Ijaw people may be small in number, they are still capable of resisting and overcoming the oppression of colonialism. The Ijaw language thus becomes a tool of resistance and empowerment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and discuss the significance of The Ijaw Proverbs/Idioms in

Ebi Yeibo's *The Forbidden Tongue*. This study brings to light the manner in which the Ijaw parables/idioms are used by poets aesthetically to treat the themes of marginalization, corruption, oppression, and poverty and the inefficiency of the government or the ruling class to provide basic amenities of the people of the Niger Delta region.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it provides a new perspective on the role of language in the process of decolonization and resistance. By analyzing the Ijaw language and culture through a postcolonial lens, this study can help to highlight the resilience and strength of the Ijaw people in the face of colonial oppression. Additionally, this study can help to increase awareness of the unique culture and heritage of the Ijaw people. Finally, this study can contribute to the field of postcolonial studies by providing a case study of a specific cultural group and their experiences with colonialism."

Scope of the Study

The Forbidden Tongue. This analysis will consider the role of the Ijaw language in the poem, as well as the cultural, historical, and political context in which the poem was written. Additionally, this study will consider how the Ijaw language and culture have been impacted by colonialism and how the poem reflects this impact."

Theoretical Framework

This study will use two theoretical frameworks: Leo Spitzer's Philological Circle and Geoffrey N. Leech's Style as Deviation. Spitzer's framework will be used to examine the cyclical nature of stylistic analysis and the connection between language and literature. Leech's framework will be used to examine how the author of *The Forbidden Tongue* deviates from traditional stylistic norms. By using these two frameworks, this study will explore the relationship between language and literature and the ways in which authors can deviate from stylistic norms to create unique and impactful works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ijaw language is spoken by the Ijaw people, who live in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Ijaw people have a rich and complex culture, and their language reflects this complexity. Ijaw proverbs and idioms are an important part of their culture, and they are used to convey values, beliefs, and cultural knowledge. This literature review will explore the ways in which Ijaw proverbs and idioms are used in the literature and folklore of the Ijaw people.

The Ijaw people have a rich oral tradition, and proverbs and idioms play an important role in this tradition. Proverbs are used to teach lessons, communicate cultural values, and provide guidance on

how to live a good life. Idioms are used to express complex ideas in a concise and memorable way. Both proverbs and idioms are used to convey the Ijaw worldview, which emphasizes the importance of community, nature, and respect for ancestors. This literature review will examine how these concepts are expressed through Ijaw proverbs and idioms, and how they reflect the unique culture of the Ijaw people.

"Ijaw proverbs are not only used as expressions of local wisdom but also as important mediums for communicating values, knowledge, and ideology" (Izibili, 2007)

The Ijaw worldview is expressed in their proverbs and idioms, which reflect a strong connection to the natural world, the importance of ancestors, and the centrality of community (Akagha, 2011).

Here's a new version of the abstract that focuses more specifically on Ebi Yeibo's "The Forbidden Tongue":

Data Analysis and Presentation

Ijaw Proverbs/Idioms

Proverbs are common sayings usually known by many people, stating something commonly experienced or giving advice. Proverbs are easily understood and their meanings are not clear except by special interpretation by those who use them regularly (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 1017).

Idioms are group of words in a fixed order that have particular meaning that are different from the meanings of the individual words (Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary 633).

The Ijaw language is full of proverbs and idioms. Proverbs and idioms are mostly used by elders who technically used words to share their experience, teach morals, and give advice. Poets also make use of words aesthetically and stylistically to express their feelings and ideas. Yeibo, who grew up in Ayamassa community in Ekeremor Local Government Area of Bayelsa State also infused most of the Ijaw proverbs and idioms in his collections to express his feeling and passed his message.

1. No Iguana wins an aquatic battle with the crocodile. (TFT 46)
2. Muddy waters do nothing to the eyes of an alligator. (TFT 62)
3. He who shakes a coconut shakes himself (TFT 48)
4. The wind may be wet and the wrestling woeful yet the procession remains (TFT 51)
5. No elephant hides in open grassland (TFT 69)
6. The cock belongs to a single soul yet its cadenced crow stirs the neighborhood (TFT 71)
7. The mullet becomes rich in old age (TFT 62)

8. When a hawk sweeps on chicks the mother goes wild (*TFT 28*)
9. When the hippopotamus targets the canoe it is the man (*TFT 29*)
10. The draughts player hears nothing like the iguana, deaf to thunder, (*TFT 32*)
11. The python has no hands suffocates hand-full preys (*TFT 32*)
12. When the canoe capsizes the cargo cannot be complete (*TFT 38*)
13. No fly escapes waiting spiders' webs (*TFT 45*)
14. No two rams drink water from one bucket (*TFT 46*)
15. No pole can compute the heart's depth (*TFT 48*)
16. We do not open crocodile's intestine in public (*TFT 62*)
17. The monkey clings not to a single tree (*TFT 63*)
18. A pressed soul chokes no waterside (*TFT 63*)
19. The hidden scrotum swells rapidly (*TFT 64*)

In excerpt 1, the reference to the iguana not winning a battle with the crocodile suggests that the people of the Niger Delta believe that the crude oil belongs to the, therefore, no greedy political leader can come and push them away and take full control of their inheritance. They must fight to win. The crocodile is the inhabitant of the aquatic environment, the iguana going to the aquatic environment is seen as an intruder. Same thing applies to the Niger Delta people. They are the rightful owners of the natural resources the nation feeds on, therefore, the government in all their attempts to take absolute control of the crude oil would not be possible. The iguana cannot win the crocodile in an aquatic battle, the government cannot win the Niger Delta people.

In the next example, the muddy waters represent the oppression on the Niger Delta people by the government; the alligator represents the oppressed Niger Delta people. Yeibo here again has used a typical aquatic animal to illustrate that the people of the Niger Delta cannot be oppressed beyond the level they are already oppressed. The agitators in the Niger Delta already feels they are suffering so they are not scared to fight because fighting the government cannot harm them more than they are harmed. It is clear message to the public that the Niger Delta people have been marginalized for long and the people are tired of being marginalized. Therefore, they are ready to fight for their right, and this fight, they are not scared because they are like the alligator that cannot be further harmed by muddy waters.

The excerpt with the coconut implies that the Federal Government and the political leaders are wasting their time by either threatening or proposing dialogue with the Niger Delta avengers. The poet believes that the avengers are indomitable. They will forever stand firm to their decisions and demands until the Federal Government does something reasonable to improve the standard of living if the people. The coconut represents the Niger Delta people that are unshakable.

The excerpt with the wind and wrestling has the implication that, the Niger Delta avengers may encounter some difficulties and problems in their fight against the Federal Government for their resource control but they are hopeful that despite the challenge, they would succeed. It is evident that most of the frontline agitators have lost their lives, some have been imprisoned, some have become handicapped while others have been threaten severally by the federal government, yet they would not stop to fight. They believes in fighting to win. Yeibo is also of the belief that they would surely win.

The next excerpt with elephant and grassland implies that the Niger Delta people are the owners of the natural resources that the nation gleefully feeds on, therefore they are not supposed to be underdeveloped. The area lacks infrastructural development and the people are not happy. Yeibo here is saying that, just as the elephant cannot hide in the open grassland, the Niger Delta people are too rich and blessed with natural resources to live poorly and be oppressed by the Federal Government.

The excerpt with the cock and its cadenced crow implies that the crude oil that the nation feed on belongs to the Niger Delta but the entire nation benefits from it. Yeibo again, is making an appeal that the Niger Delta area should be given the needed attention and be properly developed. His appeal is that even if the entire nation feeds on the crude oil, there are owners of this oil, just as the cock that crows to stir the neighborhood has an owner.

The excerpt with the mullet and old age gives hope to the Niger Delta people. Yeibo believes that even if the struggle for the resource control does not favour the Niger Delta people now, it would favor them in the future. Therefore, through his poetry he is giving the agitators courage to fight on. He believes in their succeeding the battles in time to come, even though it is tough for them now.

The next excerpt with the hawk and the chicks addresses the cause of the violent nature of the angry Niger Delta youths. It is a common belief that every occurrence has a cause. Today, people see the Niger Delta youths as violent people. Yeibo in his poetry is sending a message that the Niger Delta youths were not born violent and hostile. Their hostility has a cause, and the cause is the Federal Government's failure to develop the area after extracting the crude oil from the area. Yeibo's message here is that, just as the mother hen would go wild when the hawk sweeps on the chicks is the same way the Niger Delta youths got angry and became violent when the Federal Government extracted oil from the area and refused to develop the area.

The hippopotamus and the canoe excerpt implies that when the Federal Government extracts the crude oil from the Niger Delta area, it is inhabitants that

suffers. The water becomes polluted, and nobody could drink from it. The land also becomes polluted and infertile for planting and the air also becomes toxic for humans to breathe. Therefore, it is the human beings in the Niger Delta area that suffer from the extraction of crude oil and gas flaring. This is an appeal to the Federal Government that the people in the Niger Delta are suffering, and need urgent attention.

The draught player and the iguana excerpt addresses a scenario that the Federal Government remains adamant to the lamentations of the delta people despite their long time cries and appeals. The Niger Delta area has been marginalized for long and the people have been lamenting. In spite of their lamentations, Federal Government has not listened to them. Yeibo is now using a typical scenario about the draught player's attitude to pass his message. Draught players usually do not give attention to other important matters while they are playing draught, so it is a befitting adage employed by Yeibo to address the federal government's attitude towards the Niger Delta people.

The excerpt with the python and hand-full preys illustrates a scenario where a less powerful person defeats a more powerful person in a battle. The python which has no hands but suffocates a hand-full prey is an idiom employed by Yeibo to address the situation where the presumed small powerless Niger Delta give the entire nation problems that cannot be solved easily. The Niger Delta area is small but powerful enough with brave fighters to worry the Federal Government that refuse to develop the area.

The excerpt with the canoe and the cargo explains the fact that life is no more comfortable in the Niger Delta area due to gas flaring and other forms of pollution resulting from the extraction of crude oil by the federal government. The major occupations of the Niger Delta people are farming and fishing. The land was fertile and the rivers could bring forth good catches when fishermen went for fishing but the story is not the same today. According to the excerpt, the cargoes are not more complete because the canoe capsized. The meaning of the excerpt is that the federal governing has polluted the Niger Delta area, so the land no longer produces good crops and the rivers do not yield good catches. Another message got from the excerpts is that, before the federal government's coming to the Niger Delta area to pollute the environment, life was good and comfortable.

The excerpt with the fly and spider's webs illustrates the greedy nature of man, especially political leaders. Yeibo uses spider and its webs to address political leaders in Nigeria as they enrich themselves with money meant for infrastructural development in society and also award themselves the local content jobs that were supposed to be given to the people at the grassroots. Yeibo likened political leaders to spiders who

grab everything that comes their way without considering others.

The next excerpt with ram and bucket addresses a situation where it would be difficult for the Niger Delta people and the Niger Delta people and the Federal Government to live in harmony in society. The Federal Government is perpetually oppressing the Niger Delta people by taking their God-given inheritance forcefully. Therefore, the people are angry and cannot live in harmony with the federal government. Yeibo emphatically is saying that, just as no two rams can drink water from one bucket, the Niger Delta people and the Federal Government cannot live peacefully in the same society unless things are done the right way by the federal government.

The excerpt with the pole and the heart's depth addresses the anger and bitterness of heart in the Niger Delta people. The Federal Government of Nigeria has denied the Niger Delta people from enjoying their natural resources. Lives were supposed to be comfortable and the area was supposed to be beautiful. The comfortable life and the beautiful environment is now imaginary as the area is unconducive and the people live in poverty because of the Federal Government has taken full control of the natural resources of the area and refused to take care of the people. Therefore, Yeibo could not withhold his annoyance. Through poetry, he has expressed his anger and those of his people who he says could not be expressed fully. No pole can compute the heart's depth is an illustration to show that the Niger Delta people are angry at the Federal Government and words cannot express the degree of anger in them.

The excerpt with the crocodile's intestines is a well-known adage in the Ijaw land. It implies that we do not expose our confidential problems publicly. Here, Yeibo is trying to hold back some of his feelings. He does not want to say everything that is bothering him. Reason being that some of the things are better not said because if they are said, might trigger unsolvable problems. He is being diplomatic here by not saying everything in his heart not to cause further problems in the area. Yeibo, though angry, is an elite who knows that problems do not bring the desired peace so he is being mild in some of his expressions. The writer still has so many things to express that are bothering him, but he decided to conceal some of them because he feels they are top secrets which are not ideal to be discussed in public.

The excerpt with the monkey and the single tree expresses that fact political leaders in Nigeria are greedy. They want to rule perpetually in office and do not want to relinquish power. Besides not wanting to leave office, they also award every contract to themselves and leave the masses in abject poverty and hunger. They aspire in every election, always presenting themselves for one political office or the other. If they are not holding a

political office, they belong to a pressure group and lobby the people at the governmental structure for political appointment. Therefore, Yeibo says they are like monkeys that do not cling to a single tree.

The excerpt with the pressed soul and waterside implies that the Niger Delta agitators express their dissatisfaction without fear or favor and take drastic actions to stop the oppression on them by the federal government. The Niger Delta people are like pressed souls that do not know what is nice and favorable. Everybody knows that violence is not a good thing, but the Niger Delta people have chosen violence as a means to get what they want from the federal government. The people are pressed to the wall, so they use any means available to fight and get for themselves what they want, and the only option left is violence. Hence, the violence recorded by the Niger Delta people. The average Niger Delta man becomes violent today due to the oppression by the federal government.

The excerpt with the hidden scrotum is a common adage employed by the typical Ijaw man. It means that nobody should conceal his/her problems. If you hide your problems, they would only escalate into greater problems. Therefore, people are advised to share their problems. A problem shared is half-solved. Yeibo as an Ijaw man believes in sharing his problems. He supports the Ijaw man's struggle for resource control. He also believes the violent means employed by his people to control their resources is a way of sharing their problems with the public. Yeibo does not want his people's scrotums to swell rapidly, so he has joined in telling the public the problems of the Niger Delta through his poetry.

Summary

This research has shown that Ijaw proverbs and idioms play a significant role in preserving and promoting the Ijaw culture and language. They serve as a means of communicating cultural values and beliefs, and help to keep the Ijaw language alive. They also provide a unique insight into the Ijaw way of life. It is recommended that further research be conducted on the topic, to explore the evolution of Ijaw proverbs and idioms over time, and to examine their use in different contexts.

It is also recommended that future research consider the impact of technology and globalization on the use of Ijaw proverbs and idioms, and explore how they may be adapted to changing social and cultural contexts. Finally, it is recommended that efforts be made

to document and preserve Ijaw proverbs and idioms, to ensure that they are not lost to future generations.

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