

Language as a means of cultural inclusion in Chukwuemeka Ike's *Toads for Supper*

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Abstract

For what its worth, man, especially the Igbo man dwells in constant union with his environment. This union evokes the supernatural. It creates a perception or pattern of reasoning. This perception is embedded in language and if altered poses a threat to the communal existence of man. Language on its own has always been man's tool for realignment to a natural world order to better understand the cosmos. The absence of this alignment reminds one of a people whose ways are fast receding and whose center obviously cannot hold. According to the United Nations' Institute for Environment and Human Security, "A language is not simply a means of communication, it is part of the bedrock of one's cultural identity. Language helps people build a stronger sense of belonging to their culture, boosting their mental health and overall social cohesion." The Objective therefore is to investigate the changing lives of the African society, especially the early African/Igbo man in a world that lacks inclusion. In our present clime, there are obvious and severe struggles for identity and equity despite how liberal our world has become. Which means the 'inclusion fight' is not exactly water under the bridge. Therefore one could only imagine what it was like in the early times. The aim is to understand how races came in contact with this virus that seems to be rampaging through and through, and continue to push for a more inclusive world, through the means of language. The African novel has always been a representation of time and space, mirroring a people's background, culture and heritage through speaking their thoughts and actions, which are all parts of a people's heritage. Hence, serves as a method of x-raying the times in question, of reliving the past, in order to acquire a deep understanding of that time and then place it side by side with the present texts and times. The method here is a critical review of issues that bother on inclusion. This paper recommends that language is a visible means of cultural inclusion, power tussle and absolute control, also its distortion could result in a downfall of both their physical and spiritual worlds, which is an utter lack of cohesion.

Keyword: language, culture, inclusion, exclusion, identity, struggle

Introduction

The phrase, 'language is culture and culture is language' always come into play whenever language and culture are discussed. This is because the two have a homologous yet complex relationship. Language and culture developed together and influenced each other as they evolved. According to Chinua Achebe in the lecture *What has literature got do with it*, "we might say a nation becomes what it honours; and how it does it, is a paradigm of its national style" (247), In that light Chukwuemeka Ike deals with these specifics of human relationships, he deals with language as a cultural identity which is fast receding as a result of the imperial rule. It is creating a new strata and including those who decide to move with the tides, killing the belief system of a once coherent nation and magnifying what seems like chaos. The structure of the language determines the way we use

Language, cultural values determine language usage and this means an inseparable bond between the two. To bind a culture, start by destroying their language. The culture of a people finds reflection in

the language they employ: because they value certain things and do them in a certain way, therefore, they come to use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do.

Language

The United Nations' Institute for Environment and Human Security in their campaign focused on "Leaving no one behind" asserts that

Languages are libraries of information, because languages, especially indigenous languages, often evolved with their environment, meaning they often have words and concepts adapted for their area. Such languages can contain knowledge about traditional medicines, natural early warning signs of disaster, and cultivation of the land. Each language provides a unique perspective on ways to see and interact with the world, so losing even one language reduces the knowledge we have available. Protecting linguistic diversity allows us to keep that knowledge alive and strengthens our adaptive capacity as a species.

This simply means that the role of language in expressing culture cannot be over emphasized, as strengthening a language strengthens a society. It is a system for the expression of thoughts, feelings, culture, and the general totality of a people existence, through the use of spoken sounds or conventional symbols. It is both material and abstract culture. Therefore Ike's play on intertextual influences to explain the differences in the tradition and culture of the Igbo and the Yoruba as a way of resolving the difficulty posed by ethnic differences in the relationship between Aduke and Amadi and portraying the barrier language disentanglement brings.

The setting for the novel *Toads for Supper* is a Nigerian University Campus. As expected of such a community, one of the outstanding things to observe in the novel is Ike's handling of the typical linguistic habit of undergraduates in Nigerian Universities. The habit of moving from one Standard English to peer group slang, to pidgin English and frequently code switching into Yoruba or Igbo (the two major languages of the university).

Culture

Culture on its own is an umbrella term, an all encompassing term, which explains the heritage and language of a people. Malinowski Stern views culture through a somewhat more interactive design, "stating that it is a response to need, and believes that what constitutes a culture is its response to three sets of needs: the basic needs of the individual, the instrumental needs of the society, and the symbolic and integrative needs of both the individual and the society. In *Toads for Supper* Ike explores the intricacies of cultural sensitivity. What Fursca Laura and Szaszko Rita describe as "students' cultural awareness". A term used as a synonym for *sensitivity* in the present context of their article titled *The Importance of Raising the Intercultural Sensitivity of University Students*. In this article, Fursca and Szaszko carried out a project and during the course of this project, "students discussed topics referring to cultures, languages, and pedagogical issues by means of two cases studies focusing on cultural differences. The study revealed that communication with peers who come from different cultural backgrounds contributes to changes in attitudes and strategies used to address different viewpoints. In short, this type of dialogue enhances cultural awareness." This could explain the some worth tense atmosphere in *Toads for Supper*. Furthermore, "students gained knowledge about both the target as well as the native culture, and their discussion, argumentation, negotiation with peers and reflections upon their own culture supported the process of active knowledge construction through communication" (16). Again, in *Toads for Supper*, this reflections and knowledge may not have been on a deeper level as we see in the setting of the novel. We are looking at a people struggling at every stage, trying to articulate their next move in a world ruled by imperialism. Everything this new mission preaches runs parallel to the *Ezinkwo* community methods of inclusion and exclusion. No wonder the popular axiom, *if you want to destroy a people, start with their language*.

Language as Cultural Inclusion in *Toads for Supper*

Inclusion is a very popular word in our present society. It is considered as a human right and advocates for equal right to resources. It has an aim which is to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, etc. Culture on the other hand is not just identity, it is a defining feature of a person's identity, contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify with. A person's understanding of their identity develops from birth and is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent at home and in the surrounding community. This identity drives a sense of inclusion, which in our present clime, has a more radical undertone but as it relates to *Toads for Supper* by Chukwuemeka Ike, it looks at the segregation and the class struggle instituted by a clash of culture and race and an insatiable desire to dominate. As Ugbabe (2001) would note, "Ike attacks the intellectuals' inability to rise above tribalism, their lack of initiative and sense of direction in tackling social problems, the illusion of western education and their inefficiency" (11). This points to the fact that only a selected few were considered worthy of being regarded as the important members of society. According to Wilson (2023) "your cultural identity is a critical piece of your personal identity (and worldview) that develops as you absorb, interpret, and adopt (or reject) the beliefs, values, behaviors, and norms of the communities in your life." It is based on what is obtainable in a given locale or what one is exposed to, and unhealthy interference with this might result to what Wilson describes as prejudging people as "friend or foe," the latter of which can trigger a "fight or flight" response and cripple our ability to have meaningful, healthy, and productive interactions. Ugbabe further notes that "Ike excels in the use of African imagery to depict authentic African environment and background". Simile more than any other stylistic device is employed by the author to create a lasting picture in the mind of the reader. For example, *Chima* who wanted to ask *Aduke* for a dance, reads rebuff from her countenance and immediately, "changed direction like a millipede when its feelers encounter on obstacle". The common view that children are generally stubborn is expressed thus "but talking to them is like talking to a blacksmith at work". These are examples of language in action but are not necessarily making anyone feel left out but these images help the author create an authentic African background in which the story is set. Wilson again, asserts that "a popular myth" amongst humans since time immemorial has always been a belief that "some persons do not have a cultural identity." Hence, a need to push another identity down their throats. So Ike's use of African imagery and "the aptness of the similes and the sharpness of description are commendable" (14), because they show an existing cultural pattern. Ike renders a perfect synchronization of the elements of nature, power and human activities.

Culture is the sum-total of a people's way of life, it discusses both their physical and spiritual ecology and how a tilt in either could affect balance, bearing in mind that symbolism and totems make the world of the average Igbo man come alive, detailing a symbiotic relationship in all stages of existence. The Igbo's own an idiom "nku di na mba, na eyelu mba nri" which could be loosely translated as "what is available in a place is what meets the needs of a given society". This means that culture which is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, and encompasses language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts as curated by them through what they are given, is part of the natural habitat of a people. Hence, the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition goes a step further, defining culture as "shared patterns of behaviours and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, culture can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group." This is why the imperialistic interference in the *Ezinkwo* clime causes an imbalance as even the natives of the community stand against what used to be law and order and consider those who still keep to these old ways as barbaric. For instance, *Mazi Chukwuka Onuzulike* who is a member of the hallowed masquerade cult suddenly sees it as fetish and brags that none of his sons would be part of it. Meanwhile *Amadi* his son sends five shillings through the post agent so he could be initiated into the cult. There is obviously a class struggle and almost everyone wants to fit in with the ways of the whiteman. Even *Ezinkwo* community had to come up with a union that ensures its sons are well equipped with the traditions of the white people. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another,"(51). *Ezinkwo* community ab initio did not in anyway lack this collective programming but currently seem to be incoherently dancing to a new and forceful "programming of the mind." The struggle to fit in, to be included, is so real that it drives *Amadi* almost to a point of no return.

A particular language points to the culture of a particular social group. Learning a language, therefore, is not only learning the alphabet, the meaning, the grammar rules and the arrangement of words, but it is also learning the behaviour of the society and its cultural customs. Thus; language teaching should always contain some explicit reference to the culture, the whole from which the particular language is extracted. In Igbo land, it was believed that no man could take laws into his hand, proper consultation must be made through the elders, the priest and the gods of the land/community. Enekwe observes that “sociopolitical control through religion and ritualization is typified in Igbo land by the Nri kingship system.... Nri hegemony”(12), was based on the premise that through the instrument of religious beliefs, human beings were disciplined into obeying a higher supernatural authority. But in the bid to show power, a certain “lean white missionary” had a reputation for destroying the most dreaded shrine. Shrines that once served as sanctuaries to a dying community. Crippling an entire system, an entire practice, instilling fear and death in a whole community. Guessabi continues thus, “Language communicates through culture and culture also communicates through language: Michael Silverstein proposed that the communicative force of culture works not only in representing aspects of reality, but also in connecting one context with another. That is, communication is not only the use of symbols that “stand for” beliefs, feelings, identities, or events, it is also a way of bringing beliefs, feelings, and identities into the present context and that is why *Mazi Chukwuka Onuzulike* would take his son to grounds were this missionary would be a special guest and fraternize with him but would not let anyone in his family attend the burial of *Nwankwo Nwavor*, who had refused to be converted and had died a heathen. *Nwankwo* refused to convert because he felt he was not wealthy enough to be a Christian. “He knew if he became a Christian, he would be called to pay all the innumerable church dues and levies. The mission fund at *Ezinkwo* at that time was known as the bag that was open at both ends; no matter how many dues and levies were paid there was always an appeal to members for more money” (59). Hence the Christian language of “ceaseless giving” excluded *Nwankwo*, a full-fledged native of *Ezinkwo*.

If culture is a product of human interaction, cultural manifestations are acts of communication that are assumed by particular speech communities. The novel opens with an Igbo word ‘*Akwasa*’ (9) uttered by *Chima*. It is a typical teenage expression in the language denoting approval or admiration. From this Igbo word, *Chima* code switches to English with a jocular peer-group slang “she certainly belongs!” – implying that the woman who just caught their fancy is of a higher grade or of an acceptable standard. Clearly they live in a world that has its own definition of acceptable standard as *Chima*’s appreciation of the damsel turns to utter disgust as he learns her tribe. So also does *Amadi*’s standard of what a wife should be changes as soon as he leaves for the university. He insists that *Nwakaego*, his betroth should be sent to at least a secondary modern school, where after 2 years, she would proceed to a four-year higher elementary teachers training college. According to Day Translations, “values, basic assumptions, behavioral conventions, beliefs, and attitudes shared by an ethnic group make up what we call culture. This set of attributes influences the behavior of the individual members of the group and their interpretations of the meanings of the behavior displayed by each member.” Back at home in *Ezinkwo*, *Amadi* is betrothed to *Nwakaego Ikwuaju* who is termed “beautiful and unspoilt” but here in the university, he is falling for miss *Aduke Olowu*, a Yoruba woman, something that according to *Chima* should not happen, inter-tribal marriage/affair. His behavioral convention is obviously undergoing a rapid morbid change and he seems to have absolutely no control over it. *Chima* makes a frantic effort to get him back on a “supposed track” based on the standards of the present tribal situation and supremacy.

Is that the girl who, I hear, is giving you sleepless night? My friend this is the university of Southern Nigeria and you are a freshman. Like a chicken transported to a strange environment, you should stand on one leg till you are sure of your ground.... Let me cut the matter neatly like a scarf. That girl is Yoruba, you are Ibo. The twain cannot meet (9).

Chima unequivocally tells us that “the twain cannot meet”. Twain is an ancient or archaic word for ‘two’. His choice of ‘twain’ instead of ‘two’ underscores *Chima*’s pessimistic feelings and indicates

that tribal prejudices amongst ethnic nationalities still prevail even in a university setting. It is through language that we express the attributes of culture, we also use language to point out unique objects in our cultures. *Chima* obviously lives in a world that is lacking in cultural competence which according to Researchguide.com refers to,

The process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

A couple of minutes before, *Chima* had used various school boy expressions of affection to describe *Aduke*. Now he resorts to the use of unfriendly and negative words against the same object of admiration. *Aduke's* inclusion and appreciation only come from a point of cultural and ethnic orientation. A clear cut example of what Fisher-Borne, Cain and Martin describe as lack of 'cultural humility' in their own words, "to practice cultural humility is to maintain a willingness to suspend what you know, or what you think you know, about a person based on generalizations about their culture. Rather, what you learn about their' culture stems from being open to what they themselves have determined is their personal expression of their heritage and culture." What the authors call "their personal culture." This is in contrast with 'cultural competence' which they describe as theory while 'cultural humility' is practice.

According to Mathrani and Ibrahim, "cultural inclusion has three dimensions: representation, participation, and access. Representation is defined as a culture being represented in mainstream culture. Allowing an individual or group to be involved in the cultural processes represents participation. Appreciating and enjoying the cultural processes is defined as access. Inclusion is not an absolute or abstract quality. Thus, the measurement of cultural inclusion can only be conducted through specific cultural relationships that are tailored differently to each culture." (2). This could explain Ike's use of Igbo words to illustrate the authority of a fast fading society is aptly captured in the description of certain aspects of the novel. In these descriptions, he preserves their cultural identity, showcases their aesthetics and celebrates their heritage. Examples includes: the village stream he refers to as *Ike kute*, as only the strong could return with water from the stream because of its steep roads. A brightly coloured check cloth, known at Ezinkwo as *fioji* with yellow and red as its dominant colours. As well as *afe itepu* which *Amadi's* mother put on before going out to welcome her son (36). These are few of the cultural means of inclusion left in *Ezinkwo* community. Ike applies the three dimensions, as he not only describes each of the above mentioned peculiar feature of the community but how each one serves a timeless purpose and impacts tremendously in the lives of the locales.

Mathrani and Ibrahim continue thus, "appropriate, which comes from appropriation, is defined as the process of possession, making the belonging of a group or individual the property of another group or individual. In terms of cultural appropriation, it is when a group takes or borrows cultural strategies from a cultural background that is not their own and uses them without giving credit or recognition to the original culture. Cultural appropriation can lead to distortion of meaning and cultural practices of the original group. It is seen as disrespectful and disadvantages minority groups." (3). The language (diction, culture and orientation) change which *Ezinkwo* community is going through are all part of what the Ezinkwo union are gladly throwing in their hard-earned resources to achieve for their children. This does not stop the likes of Professor Geoffrey who is referred to as a negrophobist and apparently does not believe anyone of African descent can study the English language (17). There is a serious distortion in the *Ezinkwo* dynasty, their ways of life have been seriously tampered with and they have been reduced to the minority. Their beliefs and practices disjointed, yet a certain professor deems them not worthy enough to even get a degree in the same language that is fighting tooth and nail to overshadow their native language. The impact of the cultural appropriation is felt in every facet of their lives as everything else seems to be losing its original value. They lack the pride and uniqueness they once had in their original state. They are forcibly changing and struggling to identify what constitutes pride and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

One may sum up the discussion in this research by reiterating that the traditional Igbo philosophy on life and their attitude to life were highly well integrated based upon the maintenance of balance and avoidance of extremes. The stylistic analysis of Ike's novel *Toads for Supper* reveals the artistic effect created by the language. The author uses simple clear language to highlight some of the most important and prominent culture and traditions of Nigerian society. Clearly he shows that two much gravitation towards a point would sink the ship. Onoge notes; "the African writer has already surpassed the majority of his class colleagues in telling us where we come from and where we are at present. If he is to complete the task by telling us where we are going, he must be prepared to commit class suicide (22). *Amadi's* inherent destruction in the novel is Ike's own way of doing this. What this paper has presented is a world of worlds, driven into chaos and identity tussle as a result of a need to create a new social era, to own and to dictate. This paper again, reminds a nation of the dangers of cultural inclusion when it is denied. As globalization takes hold in the 21st century monoculturalism is gradually becoming a thing of the past, there are still struggles with inclusion, but races are not as blind sighted as they used to be and there are a lot more channels for speaking up. Every born human is the subject of inclusion with the need for social realization, anything contrary results to extermination. Obviously, this stage of 'inclusion problem' as presented by the author comes with the colonial and the postcolonial period of the society's development, when not only many countries and races are fighting for and are declaring their independence, but where citizens require equal treatment for their traditions and needs, this is why, in our present world the United Nations is developing, boosting the "viral" of inclusive practices and it is spreading all over the world.

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