

THE NATURE AND TYPES OF ALLUSIONS IN WRITTEN IGBO POETRY

Chukwuebuka Uchenna, ORAEBUNAM

oraegbunamebuka@gmail.com

Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Allusion is one of the stylistic devices employed by modern Igbo poets to promote the aesthetic ambiance of their work. Despite its role in literature, it is also a device that is most neglected in terms of its study and forms. Previous studies on the language of Igbo poetry focused mainly on identifying stylistic devices employed by modern Igbo poets (Henceforth, MIP). There are yet to be studies dedicated to the study of the form of each of the stylistic devices used by Igbo writers to promote the appreciation of works of literature written in African languages. This paper, therefore, focuses on the description of the nature and forms of allusion in written Igbo literature using written Igbo poetry (Henceforth, WIP) as a case study. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of nine WIP that were studied and used for this study. A descriptive and qualitative research method was used for both the presentation and interpretation of data. The study finds that allusion in Igbo literature can either be overt or covert. Again, four types of allusion exist in WIP; historical, mythical, biblical, and literary. The historical allusion is often connected with issues relating to the Nigerian civil war, child trafficking, natural disasters, colonization of African countries, death, and politics; mythical allusion with issues relating to native crops, and fruits; biblical allusion with death, sin and destruction as a consequence of sin; literary allusion with a character in another text.

Key Words: Allusion, Igbo, written Igbo poetry

1.0 Introduction

The term 'Allusion' brews several connotations, since its meaning is sometimes limited to intertextuality alone (Irwin, 2001). The present study is not a treatise on the much-discussed subject of allusion itself, detailing its nature, nor is it focused on what should or should not constitute an allusion in a text. Instead, the study is descriptive, and targeted toward developing the much neglected so-called works of literature of African language expression. Any student of literature in Africa readily understands the nature of allusion or any other stylistic device in English literature. As much as this can be blamed on Western language imperialism in Africa. Not so much is known about what allusion looks like in works of literature written in most African languages.

The need to study the language of the African/Igbo poet (writer), who writes in his African language will provide a platform for a comparative study of language deviations that produce literary expressions in works of literature written in African languages.

The Igbo writer writes, not only for entertainment purposes alone but to also educate the reader, mirroring society and through their art, become a voice for many that cannot be heard. For reasons such as this, the Igbo writer (poet) employs allusion for reasons that shall be discussed in this study. Few scholars who have engaged Igbo texts in terms of language use have focused mainly on the content vis-a-vis thematic study of most Igbo texts, bringing to the fore, various interpretations of the Igbo literary engagements. However, studies on the form of WIP, in terms of stylistic implications of the writer's use of language in Igbo literature are still emerging. Up to this day, little or nothing is known about the nature of allusion in the Igbo literary scene. The only available information on allusion in Igbo literature, in which poetry is the main genre is Uzochukwu's peripheral mention of two types of allusion that exists in oral Igbo poetry in his *Traditional Funeral Poetry of the Igbo* (2001), which according to him are, mythical and historical allusion. The nature and types of allusion that exists in WIP are still unknown. To this end, the objective of this study, therefore, is to identify, describe and explain the nature and types of allusion that exists in the WIP scene, to contribute to the promotion of studies on African kinds of literature.

In line with the objective, the present study attempts to provide answers to the following questions. First, what is the nature of allusion in written Igbo literature? Secondly, what are the types of allusion that exist in WIP as a key genre of written Igbo literature? To answer these questions, we must then begin by examining the concept of allusion in written Igbo literature, to identify its types. To this end, a descriptive and qualitative research method for both the presentation and interpretation of data is employed in this study. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of nine written Igbo poems from six Igbo poetic texts. These poems were analysed and used as samples to instance in this study.

2.0 Conceptualizing Allusion in Written Igbo Literature

Allusion as a term is a broad concept that is sometimes referred to as intertextuality or Echo (Machacek, 2007, p. 522). Be it as it may, it is important to categorically state that allusion is only a part of intertextuality (Irwin, 2001, p. 295), not vice-versa. This justifies why Magedanz (2006, p. 161), citing Pucci (1998, p. 31), claims that allusion is simply language shared by two texts. But then this assumption cannot be taken to be the definition of allusion. Allusion can simply be defined on the surface as an indirect reference that calls for associations that transcend the common substitution of a referent (Irwin, 2001). This means that the allusion marker brings in additional information to the text wherewith it was utilised. Abrams and Harpham (2012) see allusion as a reference made in passing that does not have explicit identification to a place, event, a literary or historical person, or, even to another literary work. The keyword that underscores the meaning of allusion as seen from these definitions is 'reference'. This means that, for an expression or a word in a line to be considered an allusion, it must point or be a reference to an account, something, or, someone else outside the work of art. The idea of allusion is that it may not be the whole account of the referenced, but just a clue given that will take the mind of the reader to the earlier account and help the reader to understand the message encoded in the present text s/he is reading.

In written Igbo literature (WIL), allusion can be said to be an indirect reference in a work of art, to a place (for its historical antiquities), a person, an account, a character in another work of art or, a tale. The referenced here may be a historical person, place, or, event that readers are expected to know about, it may be a character in another text (in the case of literary allusion), or even a form of traditional literature. The allusion may be marked by either a word or a phrase. As regards WIP, which is our main focus in the present study, allusion can also be a word (noun) in a poetic line or a phrase (whole line). In essence, as stated by Perri (1978, p. 290), which is found to also be true of WIL, the marker in the alluding text should point to a referent, simply by echoing that referent in some way.

In WIL an allusion can either be overt (direct) or covert (indirect). When an allusion is said to be overt, it means that the allusion can easily be identified by the reader, but, when an allusion is considered to be covert, it means that it is not easily identified by the reader. It is also important to

note that for the allusion to be successful or rather, serve the intended purpose for its use by the author, meaning that it should be recognized by the reader (Perri, 1978) which is a clear case of all overt allusions. The allusion in other genres of WIL (novel and drama) can either be overt or covert. However, in WIP, allusions are overt. This is because of the lineation nature of poetry where words are economised. The MIP intends that the allusion be recognized by the reader, that way, the allusion can serve the intended purpose, which is either aesthetic or pragmatic. Also, the allusion markers usually reference the writer expects the reader to know to be able to make connections that transcend the general or surface meaning of the expression that hosts the allusive marker. Consider this instance of an overt allusion in Ofili's drama text, *Mkpuru Onye Kuru* (n.d., p. 55) where a character (Ogechi), in response to her daughter's denial of her pregnancy, says to her (example 1),

...*Ihe a i na-akọ bu akụkọ Mike Ejeagha* (You are telling Mike Ejeagha's stories)

This allusion presents a synergy between orality and textuality. But then, is it safe to leave the interpretation of this allusion to just a reference to Ejeagha? To understand the allusion here, there is a need to make necessary connections that will truly unravel the associations of meaning that the identified allusion introduces to this line. As earlier mentioned, allusion in Igbo sometimes must be pragmatically decoded before the full meaning of its import can be understood. A deeper look at Example 1, will reveal that the metaphoric undertone to the reference, represented by the allusive marker "Mike Ejeagha" (M.E.), transcends the image of M.E. as an individual to M.E. being a face that represents Igbo folk ballads. The covert allusion here also points to the fact that M.E.'s stories are mere folk narratives (though in songs) and as such should not be taken seriously, since one of the features of Igbo tales is their fictionalised nature. In the context wherewith the allusion is employed, it was used to mean that the character (Ogechi) thinks that whatever excuses the daughter is making for her unwanted pregnancy is false and should not be taken seriously.

The use of allusion in WIL and poetry to be precise always serves either aesthetic, pragmatic or, educative purposes. This is because it is always intended to provide further information needed to understand the context of its use. In our working example, for instance, the allusion marker

“Ejeagha” which is a representation of oral literature (a case of literary allusion) serves a pragmatic purpose. In WIP, allusion is used to add further meaning to a poem and it also plays similetic roles.

3.0 Forms of Allusion in Written Igbo Poetry

Four types of allusion feature in WIP, they are, historical, mythical, biblical, and literary of allusions. Three of these four types of allusion are common in WIP; historical, mythical biblical allusions, and literary allusions.

3.1 Historical Allusion (Nruṭuaka Keakukọala):

The Igbo historical allusion is a type of allusion that points back to an earlier event that has become a story in the public domain, intending to draw a metaphoric comparison or achieve a metaphoric effect. The historical allusion in WIP is often connected with issues relating to the Nigerian civil war, child trafficking, natural disasters, education in Nigeria and colonization of African countries, death, and politics. Consider an instance of historical allusion, one which is connected to war, in the poem “Onwụ” (Death) (Poem 1), by Tagbo Nzeako in *Akpa Uche* (1975, pp. 4-6), where the poet, in the seventh stanza, makes a historical allusion to the Nigerian civil war, when he says:

Onwụ, m gaghi echefu ihe ojoo i mere m	(Death, I will not forget the bad thing you did to me
Gbuo nwa nne m na enyi oma m	Killed my brother and good friend
<u>Onukwube na enyi m Akunna nwuru n'agha</u>	Onukwube and Akunna that died in war
Agaghi m echefu ha n'ụwa	I will never forget them in this world)
(Nzeako, 1975, p. 5)	

Indeed, the overt allusion employed in line 3 (poem 1) reminisces on the death of the poet's friend and brother who died as a result of the Nigerian civil war. The italicized allusion marker *agha* (war) in the third line alludes by extension, to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970. The allusive reference to *agha* points the reader's attention to the grave loss, felt by many Igbo families during the civil war. But then, how then can one be sure that the *agha* mentioned here refers to the Nigerian civil war as claimed? The answer is found at the time of the poem's publication. It shall be recalled that the Nigerian civil war has remained a gruesome thought among the Igbo who fought many intertribal wars before the advent of the civil war. Again, before the war, the Igbo

only had a few Christian hymns that serves religious edification purposes alone (Oraegbunam, 2021), the war provided the Igbo with experiences to write about, which not only contributed to the growth of the Igbo novel alone but birthed the written Igbo poetic experience. It was one of these repressed experiences of the poet during the war, which was brought to bear in the allusion. Since it is a historical experience the Igbo share in common, its use is intended to be observed by the reader, who upon seeing it, recalls the war experience in Igbo political history and by so doing, evokes an emotion of sorrow. The allusion which reinforces the tone of sorrow in the poem draws the reader to recall the tragedy that struck Igbo land when the war raged. To further explicate this concept of historical allusion in WIP, consider another instance in the second stanza of the poem “Igba Mkpu” (Rescue) (Poem 2), by Julie Onwuchekwa in *Akpaala Okwu* (1983, pp. 6-7). In the stanza, the poet makes a historical allusion to the natural disaster that occurred in Ibadan in 1978 and 1980, where the poet says in the second stanza:

Mkpu unu na-agbara	(The call you people responded
Umụ nne unu bi n'Ibadan;	Your brothers living in Ibadan;
<u>Bu ndi ideyi mere aru</u>	Those that flood dealt with
<u>N'ime afo 1978 na 1980</u>	In the year 1978 and 1980
Ziri na idi n'otu di.	Shows that there is unity.)
(Onwuchekwa, 1983, pp. 6-7)	

Here, the historical allusion is connected with flooding, as a natural disaster. The allusion makes a historical reference to the colossal disaster that was caused by flooding in 1978 and 1980 in Ibadan. Ecological scholars' report confirms that the Ibadan metropolis has a history of flooding which was first officially recorded in 1951. Babatunde, Owolabi, Olalekun, and, Bolanle (2012) report that more cases of flood in Ibadan were recorded in the 1960s, 1970s, and, 1980s and a majority of these floods incidents happened between August and September, which is the first peak of the rainfall and rainfall break. The heaviest flooding in Ibadan occurred in 1980 when the metropolis witnessed 274mm of rainfall in a single episode of rainfall (Babatunde et al, 2012; Ajayi, 2017). It is perhaps this account in Nigerian history that the poet (Onwuchekwa) who published the poem in 1983 alludes to in the above stanza (poem 2). Again, in Goddy Onyekaonwu's poem “Naijiria bu Enyimba” (Nigeria is a giant) (Poem 3) in *Uche bu Afa* (1989,

pp. 24-25), the poet employs a historical allusion that points to the colonial governance in African countries. In the third stanza of the poem, the poet puts it this way:

Naijiria bụ Enyimba	(Nigeria is a giant nation
Obodo achoghị mmegbu	A nation that needs no victimisation
Lee! Onwụ ụmụ akwukwọ	Behold the death of students
<u>Ndi uwe ojii gbagbusiri</u>	Shot dead by the police
<u>Na Soweto</u>	In Soweto
Na-agba ya anya mmiri	Makes her shed tears
N'ihia na a hūbeghị	For it has not been seen
Ihe dị otu a na ya.	Anything like this in it.)
(Onyekaonwu, 1989, p. 25)	

The allusion used here (poem 3) refers to the 1976 Soweto uprising in South Africa that saw the shooting and killing of many young black students by the Afrikaner police (Schick, 2001). The students who revolted against the cruel force of the Afrikaner police in Soweto were shot dead as they protested on the streets of a township in Soweto. It was a heinous crime against humanity, one that shook the whole world. It was based on projecting Nigeria as the giant of Africa that the point employs historical allusion to remind the reader of the nefarious activities of the colonial masters in the time past. The import of the allusion here evokes a feeling of hatred for the ruthless colonialists and pity for African nations for the suffering that they were subjected to in times past.

3.2 Mythical Allusion (Nrūtaka Kenkōmīrīkō)

In mythical allusion in WIP, poets employ words that point to the thoughts expressed in Igbo myths through which an extended interpretation is infused into the text. The mythical allusion in WIP is often connected with issues relating to native crops and fruits, such as yam and kola nut. Joseph C. Maduekwe for instance employs mythical allusion in the first stanza of his poem “Ji” (Yam) (Poem 4) where he writes:

Anyi putara uwa kwudo mkpuru ubi a chiri eze
Ee, nna anyi ha mgbe ochie koro akuko
Ji à putara mgbe ahihia mbu puuru anyi n'ala
Nwa n'ala ka o bù; O bughi ede, onye ala ozo.
Ufiojiokū jiri ya chere ndi ketara ibi n'ala a;
Mkpara iji chedo ndu ka chi kere ji kere

(Maduekwe, 1979, p. 20)

(We came to world and met this king of crops

Yes, our forefathers told tales
 This yam appeared when the first crop germinated for us
 He is the son of the soil; it is not cocoyam, someone from another land
 Ufiojioku presented it to those that chose to stay in this land
 The stick for life preservation, that is what the god that created yam created.)

There is a mythical allusion in every line in the above stanza. All the lines point to one thing, which is the cosmological worldview of the Igbo, which is rooted in Igbo creation myths. The mythical allusion in poem 4 reflects the Igbo belief that yam is a crop given to man by God, hence, its status as the king of crops among the Igbo. This is the thought the mythical allusion used in the above stanza projects. According to Igbo mythology, Eri's family, being the first family created by *Chukwu* (God), was given yam seed to grow, which eventually multiplied (Ohadike, 1996). In line 1 for instance, the poet alludes to the origin of the yam seed referring to it as the king of crops and the oldest crop in line 2, in which its story or tale has traversed generations. The direct allusion used in lines 3 to 5 refers the reader to the creation myths of the Igbo, which claim that yam was the first crop presented to man by *Chukwu* himself. Ufiojiokū/Ahịajokū/Njokū who is believed by the Igbo to be the god of yam mentioned in line 5, is one of the gods that serve the interest of *Chukwu*. Therefore, when the poet (Maduekwe) in his allusion in line 5, says *Ufiojiokū jiri ya chere ndi ketara ibi n'ala a* (Ufiojioku presented it to those that chose to stay in this land), he is still reinforcing the Igbo mythological belief that yam is the oldest crop given to man by *Chukwu* to survive as seen in line 6. Another instance of mythical allusion in *WIP* is seen in the first stanza of Tony Ubesie's poem "Oji" (Kola-nut) (Poem 5) in *Akpa Uche*, where the poet says,

Onye ji oji, ejighi ndu	(He that holds the kola-nut, is not holding life
Oji di iche, ndu di iche	Kola-nut is different, life is different
<u>Oji bu diokpara Amadi</u>	Kola-nut is the firstborn son of Amadi
Ndu bu Amadi n'onwe ya	Life is Amadi himself
Onye jere weputa oji	He that goes and brings out kola-nut
O hu ndu, o ga-ewetakwu	If he sees life, he will also bring)

(Ubesie, 1975, p. 40)

The mythical allusion here in line 3 is an overt allusion that refers to the Igbo belief in the kola-nut as no ordinary fruit, but a representative of the son of god, which explains the sacred status assigned to it in Igbo land. The allusion to Amadi as the father of the "Oji" in the above poem 5 is well explained in the oral repertoire of the Igbo and its tale varies from one Igbo society to another.

The allusive marker “Amadi” in poem 5 is a clipped form of the name “Amadiōha”, the god of thunder, hence, the poets claim that kola-nut is the son of Amadiōha. The use of this mythical allusion is to provide further justification for the high regard the Igbo has for the sacred fruit, kola-nut. It is a type of allusion that focuses on the native fruit of the Igbo.

3.3 Biblical Allusion (Nrụtuaka keakwukwọ nsọ)

In biblical allusion, a reference is made in passing, to a biblical character or city to achieve a metaphoric effect. Biblical allusion in WIP always serves a didactic purpose wherever it appears. The biblical allusion in WIP is often connected to death, sin, and destruction as a consequence of sin. Also, in the last line of his poem “Ugbọ” (poem 6), Chiji Akoma makes a biblical allusion when he says:

...Ma gị onye na-ebe akwa	(But you that is crying
Hichaa anya mmiri n'anya	Wipe your tears from your eyes
N'ihì na ugbọ nke buru	Because the vehicle that ferried
<u>Hananayas na-eche Safaira</u>	Ananias waits for Sapphira)
(Akoma, 1975, p. 49)	

The biblical allusion here, (poem 6), refers to a biblical couple that died as a punishment for lying to Peter, who was the leader of the early church, as documented in Acts of Apostles, chapter 5:1-11. The Bible records that Ananias came ahead of his wife, Sapphira, and lied to Peter. After telling the lie, he died on the spot and was removed before his wife came in. Not knowing what has happened to her husband, Sapphira also told the same lie as the husband and Peter told her that she will face the same fate as her late husband and she died immediately. This account was what the poet alluded to in the last line above while referring to death as a vehicle that ferried Ananias waiting to ferry Sapphira. The purpose of the allusive device used in poem 6 is to expand the thought in the poem, making the reader recollect this biblical account and connect it to the poem and by so doing have a full grasp of the death motif (ugbọ) which is the subject of the poem.

A similar biblical allusion that involved the same biblical characters (Ananias and Sapphira) was noticed in Jude Ezeuchegbu's poem “Eziokwu bụ Ndu” (Truth is Life) (Poem 7) in *Akonauche*, where the poet, in his second stanza, writes:

Eziokwu, ime mere Ananayas na Safira, (Truth, the labor Ananias and Sapphira went into

This biblical allusion here reflects the biblical account of creation as recorded in the book of Genesis chapter 3, verses 1-6. Here, the allusion serves an introductory function. It was used by the poet to historically set-induce the readers into understanding the background of the speaker or subject of discourse in the poem. The allusion takes the mind of the reader back to the biblical account of creation and the fall of man, which most Christians blame the first woman (Eve) for. The first allusion in line 1, poem 9 refers to the Christian account of the creation of man, and which the woman is said to be created from the rib of the man to help man (Genesis, 2, verses 21-22, NKJV). The second biblical allusion that is more apparent in lines 4-5 refers to the story where Eve (the wife of Adam), after eating the forbidden fruit, gave to the man (Adam) to eat, causing Adam to sin against God. After this act, both the man (Adam) and God blamed the woman for perpetuating the fall of man (Adam), by making the man sin against God. Since the poem is written through a female speaker, the woman in the poet's imagination tries to provide her reason for giving the man the fruit as recorded in the Bible.

Literary Allusion

Literary allusion is not popular in WIP, but sometimes it features. In this type of allusion, an indirect reference is made to another literary text, with the hope of achieving similetic effect.

Literary allusion features in the fourth line of poem 8 where the poet says:

Enyi m,	(My friend
Mana o tũrũ gĩ n'anya	But it surprised you
Na ndĩ ì kporo enyi	That those you call friends
<u>Ga-atũgharĩ, na-ewo gĩ opio n'ahũ ka Brutus</u>	Will turn around to leave holes on your body like Brutus
Na-ebo gĩ ebubo ugha ka ndĩ Farisii	Accusing you falsely like the Pharisees)
(Nwadike, in Nwadike (ed.), 2006, p. 246)	

The manner in which the allusive device was used in the above stanza shows that it also performs similetic functions. The literary allusion in line 4 as in “Ga-atũgharĩ, na-ewo gĩ opio n'ahũ ka Brutus” (Will turn around to leave holes on your body like Brutus) alludes to William Shakespeare's drama texts *Julius Caesar*. In the text *Julius Caesar*, the central character Caesar was betrayed by his closest and most trusted friend, Brutus, who joined the other senators in stabbing Ceaser. By alluding to this betrayal in this literary text (*Julius Caesar*), the allusion used

in the stanza, also performs similetic functions. The allusion marker “Brutus” here represents betrayal.

Conclusion

This study investigated the form of allusion in Igbo literature with a major focus on WIP. The study found that there are four types of allusion that exist in WIP parlance, they are, historical, mythical, biblical, and literary allusion. Each of these allusions serves either aesthetic, pragmatic or educative purposes.

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