

## **The influence of culture on adaptation: A comparative study of William Shakespeare's Othello and Ahmed Yerima's Otaelo**

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### ***Abstract***

*It has been noticed that African dramatists enlarge as well as enrich their body of works through adaption. Culture which plays a key role in the adaptation process is sometimes not given considerable attention in related scholarly discourses. This work therefore investigated the influence of culture on adaptation using William Shakespeare's Othello and Ahmed Yerima's Otaelo as example. The study adopted the content analysis approach of the qualitative methodology. A comparative study of Othello and Otaelo was carried out in order to find out how culture influences the originality of an adapted work. Findings reveal that both the culture of the source material and that of the derivation influence adaptation. However, the originality of the new work is largely dependent on its successful transposition to a new cultural backdrop. This is exemplified in Ahmed Yerima's Otaelo which is situated within the Igbo culture. The study recommends appropriate application of the principles of adaptation as underscored in Linda Hutcheon's A Theory of Adaptation by indigenous adaptors in the process of indigenizing their works.*

**Keywords:** *Influence, Culture, Adaptation, Indigenization, Transposition, Mutation*

## **Introduction**

Adaptation, a term that was first used by biological scientists to mean the ability of organisms to survive adverse conditions in their habitat was appropriated into literary discourse to describe the survival of literary materials from one location or genre to another. Limin Luo and Wenjun Zhang explains that “biological adaptation refers to that organisms change themselves at morphological, physiological, behavioral and molecular level to better survive in a changing environment” (23). In the same vein, artists derive creative inspiration from existing source(s), be it myths, rituals, folktales, songs, histories, prevalent socio-political happenstances or even already written texts. Linda Hutcheon in reiterating T.S Eliot and Northrop Frye’s contention that creativity does not occur in a vacuum assert that “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (2).

The act and art of borrowing relevant materials from a particular source and using same to form a new work can be referred to as adaptation. Canice Nwosu and Dickson Uchegbu explain that “adaptation is the transformation of a work of art into another form or medium or translocation of literary materials” (33). Right from the classical Greek period, playwrights have been contributing in advancing the literary profession through this artistic process of borrowing and remaking. Notable among them is Sophocles, the first Greek tragedian, whose popular play, *Oedipus Rex* is an adaptation of a Greek Myth; “The riddle of the Sphinx” (Dlugauskas and Paulinkliene n.p). To prove that adaptation can stir a kind of a chain reaction in the literary sphere, Ola Rotimi, a well known first generation Nigerian playwright

appropriated Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* into African soil which culminated in the publishing of his *The gods Are not to Blame*. Furthermore, Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God*, owing perhaps to its high thematic quality and abundant cultural richness became a resource pool from where two of Nigeria's leading playwrights, Kalu Uka and Emeka Nwabueze drew materials from. Uka's *A Harvest for Ants* and Nwabueze's *When the Arrow Rebounds* are varied but successful transpositions of Achebe's prose to the drama genre. Robert Di Yanni affirms that "adaptation go beyond translations; they alter literary works by bringing them into a different medium" (792). The foregoing therefore reinforces the earlier stated stance about artists' liberty of drawing inspiration from the same source while altering the borrowed material to suit his artistic style and ideological stance. Apart from a writer's intrinsic creative skill, culture is an indispensable element that influences his work. This is premised on the thesis that art is a product of culture. Society does not exist in a vacuum. Certain laws, myth, traditions, history, belief system and so on are not only associated with it but also guide it. These elements are what make up culture. Edward Tylor defines culture as "the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, belief, art, custom, technology etc which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation" (qtd. in Udechukwu 368). Drama is a potent medium of transmitting culture from one generation to another.

Every work of art is a product of the artist's cultural environment. Samuel Chukwu-Okoronkwo and Joy Okoronkwo hold that art, society and culture enjoy a symbiotic tripartite relationship. According to them;

the rhythm between art and culture are basically explored not on a mere vacuum, but on the very canvas of society. The society is the pivot that oscillates and stabilizes the essence of art and culture. ... art basically embodies the people's as well as other variables that constitute significations of their society. ...The inseparable linkage that encapsulates art, society, and culture becomes even more manifest when the creative tendency of the people is considered not only as part of their composite way of life, but also symbolizes the essence of their existence. (57 – 58).

Adaptation is therefore a process as well as a product that recognizes that indispensability of culture during an artistic creation. Charles Nnolim while identifying a strong correlation between “art, the artist and his audience” argues that the quintessential artist ensures he produces works that are of benefit to his socio-cultural milieu (224 – 225). This is what commitment in creative writing presupposes. Emmanuel Obiechina terms this “cultural nationalism” (qtd. in Nnolim 225). Since, a committed writer is essentially a patriot according to Nnolim, such patriotic act is proven through the level of acculturation one infuses into one's work. Therefore, an adapted work, especially one transported into an entirely different geographical environment is meant to possess unique cultural relevance. It suffices to say then that the culture of a society determines its art and life. Alex Asigbo affirms that “adaptation which we see as a reworking of an original text to suit the conditions of a different social and

cultural climate is necessary and vital to the healthy growth of world literature and ... adaptations should not just be, but must be culturally, politically and socially relevant” (103).

This paper therefore investigates the influence of culture on adaptation in order to identify culture as the key element that breathes originality into an adapted work using Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Yerimah’s *Otaelo* as reference point.

### **A cultural reading of Linda Hutcheon’s *A theory of adaptation***

There are indications that adaptation is an important technique that accounts for the large body of literary works available today. This is because “adaptation is one of the oldest and most debated techniques of writing in the creative enterprise ... simply put, adaptation is broad and cuts across all facets life and arts” (Nwosu and Uchegbu 35). However, since its appropriation into literature to date, its scope has broadened significantly. Not only has the dimension in which the definition, history and objectives of adaptation is evaluated continued to widen, the structure, media, function, purpose, forms, principles and even problems of adaptation have continuously expanded in the light of various socio-cultural changes witnessed in the society. Hutcheon explains this in detail in her preface to the book, *A Theory of Adaptation*. According to her:

If you think adaptation can be understood by using novels and films alone, you’re wrong. The Victorians had a habit of adopting just about everything—and in just about every possible direction; the stories of poems, novels, plays, operas, paintings, songs, dances, and *tableaux vivants* were constantly being

adapted from one medium to another and back again. We post-moderns have clearly inherited this same habit, but we have even more new materials at our disposal- not only film, television, radio and the various electronic media, of course, but also theme parks, historical enactments, and virtual reality experiments. The result? Adaptation has run amok. (xi)

In propounding a theory upon which adaptation can be hinged therefore, Hutcheon identifies salient elements that provide enabling environment for the survival of adapted materials. According to her, although approaches and objectives of adaptation are essential in this creative transportation process, the quality of the adapted work largely depends on the ability of the adapter to give the new work a unique socio-cultural background. She further argues that despite the similarity that may exist between an original work and the derived text in relation to their thematic and stylistic contents, the “pedagogical impulse” in an adapter compels him to observe a paradigm shift in the aspect of culture (91 - 92). An adapter is therefore expected to be conversant with the culture of his target audience. In reworking an original piece, culture should form the basic raw material. By utilizing culture in the adaptation process, new life is breathed into the derived product. Hence Hutcheon in theorizing adaptation gives culture a significant position. She maintains that the socio-political relevance of both an original and the derived work is hidden within the cultural society of the audience because the impact of a work on an audience is weighed on its cultural significance. She further asserts that:

The context of reception, however, is just as important as the context of creation when it comes to adapting. Imagine an audience watching any of the new adaptations of *Othello* ... The fall of a hero, the theme of spousal abuse and the issue of racial difference would inevitably take on a different inflection and even force than Shakespeare could ever have imagined. (149)

Hutcheon's contention above is a valid reason adaptation cannot be deemed as inferior art. Every adapted work is expected to among other things fill a gap that may be present in the original version. Thus, an adapted work fulfills a peculiar purpose that may be either analogous or entirely different from the thematic vision of the original piece. Yerima's *Otaelo*, for instance, which is an adaptation of *Othello* is a rereading of Shakespeare's play from the socio-cultural point of view of the Igbos, a popular tribe in Nigeria. It is upon this premise that Lekan Balogun argues that "considering the placement, side by side, of *Othello* in the original text and *Otaelo* in the adaptation against the background of the established cultures of each individual text ... one would understand that the Shakespeare text has become a canvas on which to paint another experience, much more emotionally and psychologically debilitating in scope" (120 - 1).

There is something culturally unique about an adapted work and this is probably why Nwosu and Uchegbu insist that while adaptation as a broad term deals more with recreation of an original text to suit an entirely new cultural milieu, it encapsulates appropriation, a concept that explains the retention or "replication of what exists in another environment in another geographical

location” (33 – 4). Hutcheon acknowledges adaptation as a complex term in terms of defining and refers to it as a “double vision” name “because we use the same word for the process and the product” (15). This is perhaps the reason she regards “adapters (as) first interpreters and then creators” (8). The interpreter personality of an adapter is viewed from the perspective that he must first have an in-depth understanding of the original text he is to adapt before he can appropriate certain key elements in it into the derived work. On the other hand, the creator role of an adapter is based on his responsibility of creating a socio-cultural setting that is not only different from the original text but corresponds with the belief system, tradition and entire way of life of the people. It is this creative process that bestows originality on the adapted product while culture becomes the key element that influences such metamorphosis. The emphasis given to culture in adaptation is probably the reason Gbemisola Adeoti sees it as a cultural process. He defines adaptation as “the transportation of any work by another creative artist into a medium within a specific socio-historical or cultural context” (5).

Studies have further shown that culture exerts an antipodal influence on adaptation, what John Conteh-Morgan and Tejumola Olaniyan refer to as “inter-cultural negotiation” (qtd. in Adeoti 6). This implies that adaptation “simultaneously calls into being two different worlds: the world of the original and the world of its derivation, though both worlds often interact within the consciousness of the audience in a kind of complementarity” (Adeoti 5). It is this culture romance that helps in retaining the identity of the source text as well as imbuing freshness into the derived work which simply implies that there should be some elements of the old in the new. These elements which manifest in the title, story line, plot, characterization, as well as conflict serve

as identifiers of the importation of the original work into the derived text. Hutcheon calls this “transcultural adaptation” (145). She nonetheless goes further to argue that although there must be a manifestation of some basic characteristics of the source material in an adapted product, the derived work automatically transforms to an original text due to the manner an adapter gives it an entirely different cultural interpretation. She refers to this as “indigenization”. An anthropological term first used by “Susan Stanford Friedman to refer to this kind of intercultural encounter and accommodation” (151). Since an adapter exerts power over what is to be adapted as Hutcheon argues, indigenization involves forming a cultural setting different from that of the original (151). So that in transforming an earlier work into another context, peculiar aspects of the source text can be transplanted into the new culture. Hutcheon insists that the new culture in which a work is adapted into indigenizes it which invariably suggests that an adapter’s chosen cultural milieu exerts greater influence in adaptation because that is where it derives its originality from. To this end, “Yerima argues that the strength of an adaptation lies in the originality that the new playwright has brought to bear on the old text and the relevance of the adapted version to the new socio-cultural milieu” (qtd. in Adeoti 36). In sum, indigenization connotes a kind of rebirth, something akin to naturalization, which means admitting someone of foreign birth to full citizenship of a country. Through this process, an adapted work is adorned with a new cultural costume that qualifies it to become an indigene of the new environment it has been introduced into. This is the hallmark of adaptation.

### **Synopsis of William Shakespeare’s *Othello***

*Othello* is a tragedy about Othello, a Moor of Venice and warlord who showed great dedication to the service of his province. Othello's virtues move Desdemona, a lady of great beauty to fall in love with him. Drawn by her beauty and other positive qualities, Othello reciprocates Desdemona's love by proposing to her. Othello, a black is considered unsuitable for Desdemona by her father, Brabantio. Desdemona insists on marrying Othello against her father's wish which causes Brabantio to accuse Othello of bewitching his daughter upon hearing that the duo have wedded secretly. Being a war general, Othello is incidentally sent to Cyprus to defend it from impending invasion by the Turks. There, Iago, Othello's officer and secret enemy who has been nursing serious hatred against him tricks him into believing that Desdemona is having an affair with his lieutenant, Cassio. Iago's deception brews jealousy and anger in Othello causing him to kill his wife, Desdemona. On learning that Desdemona is innocent of the accusation preferred against her, Othello, out of shame and self disappointment kills himself as well.

### **Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's *Otaelo***

*Otaelo* is an Igbo tragedy which centres on love, jealousy, fame and communal coexistence. The play tells the story of Otaelo, a gallant son of Umuagu village who killed a wild beast that threatened the lives of the villagers. This heroic deed not only earned him the title Otaelo but also availed him the privilege of becoming the king's lieutenant. Otaelo is part of the warrior troupe that fought enemy villages in a just concluded war which Umuagu emerged victorious. Otaelo's exalted position however is diluted by his Osu; outcast identity, which makes it impossible for him to mingle with the freeborn in that village. Trouble brews

as Igwe Ochendu publicly asks Otaelo to make a wish for saving his life in the war front during the celebration of their victorious return. Otaelo requests Chinyere, Igwe Ochendu's daughter's hand in marriage. Igwe caught in a dilemma resolves to keep his promise which is deemed irrevocable, an action that pitches him against the gods of the land and the elders in council. On the other hand, Chinyere is excited to be Otaelo's wife having been in a secret love affair with the warrior. She and Nene, her grandmother, see the marriage as a strategic way of shirking the responsibility of serving Osimiri, the village river goddess, which the princess is to be apprenticed to. Agbo, the village war general who has been jealous of Igwe's preference of Otaelo over him plots Otaelo's downfall. He convinces his wife, Obiageli, Chinyere's friend to steal the princess' jigida, a gift of love given to her by Otaelo under the pretence that he wants to make a similar one for her. By getting hold of the jigida, he is able to convince Otaelo that his wife and Ichiagu, his sacked lieutenant, are in a secret affair. Overtaken by anger and jealousy, Otaelo kills, Ichiagu. Obiageli on discovering her husband's ploy, hastens to expose Agbo's malicious plot but the truth arrive rather too late as Otaelo murders his wife before Obiageli could intervene. Otaelo is shattered to learn the truth after his love's death. He revenges Chinyere's murder by stabbing both Agbo and himself to death.

### **A critique of the influence of culture in the adaptation of *Othello* to *Otaelo***

*Othello* is one of Shakespeare's plays with an eponymous title. The drama piece is titled after the tragic hero Othello, called the Moor of Venice, an experienced, intelligent and respectable General of the Venetian army. The socio-cultural implication of

Othello's position is that it is a reflection of his reputable class as only those deemed to be of noble quality are promoted into leadership positions in the European army as at the time Shakespeare wrote the play. But the Moorish identity given to Othello in the play title, stresses the trait that appears to weaken the other elevated qualities he possesses. The trade ties Europe had with Africa which culminated in colonization witnessed migration of Africans into Europe. Europe during Shakespeare's time referred to people from this area, especially the North Africans, as Moors ("*Othello* Cultural and Social Context" n.p). As much as the Moorish name seems not to appear clearly derogatory, a subtle display of racial discrimination however exists as in the case of Othello who in spite of his social status is regarded as socio-culturally unfit to marry Desdemona, a white European. Hence, Iago uses a derogatory tone to report the secret marriage that has taken place between Desdemona and Othello to Brabantio, Desdemona's father in the opening scene:

**Iago.** 'Zounds, sir, you're robb'd; for shame, put on your gown; Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul; Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe. (I.i 1171)

Roderigo is another English character in the play that despises Othello who by the reason of his race is neither qualified to court nor marry Desdemona. Having failed to win Desdemona's love he despises Othello and finds it difficult to consider him as rival on account of his race. Hence, he describes him as "the thick lips" who has the effrontery to contend a white woman with him. The news of Desdemona's marriage to the Moor without his father's knowledge or consent infuriates Brabantio. He accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter. He regards such inter-racial

matrimony as taboo and a breach of certain social codes in the Venetian culture.

**Brabantio.** O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter? Damn'd as thou art, thou hast enchanted her; or I'll refer me to all things of sense, if she in chains of magic were not bound, Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy, So opposite to marriage that she shunned the wealthy curled darlings of our nation, would ever have, to incur a general mock, run from her guardage to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou - (I. ii 1173)

Brabantio's statement above which is considered a form of cultural discrimination appears to have formed the inspirational praxis upon which Ahmed Yerima recreated the play to fit into the Igbo milieu. *Otaelo*, also titled eponymously is an adapted version of *Othello* which interrogates the conflict that exists within the Igbo culture often brought about by status discrimination. Yerima has slanted the title of his own version to first of all achieve a kind of a homophonic effect, hence making the both titles sound alike. The similitude in title is part of the success the work attained as an adaptation. However, being an Igbo word, it may not be difficult for an audience to identify the culture within which the play is set. Again, the meaning of the title contributes in projecting the personality of the tragic hero who is referred to as a "man who chews and swallows", throwing up a paradox of meaning in the end. His inability to "swallow" what he chewed forms the central conflict in the play. Yerima indigenizes Shakespeare's tragedy in this adaptation by using the English masterpiece to produce a play with an African identity. In doing this, he attempted to "translate his (Shakespeare's) works into our language, into our cultural reality, into our human, social,

and religious sensibility” (Yerima “Author’s Note” 6). He further explains:

I have used my license a lot in this play. I have selected the Igbo people, as my people, I have used their culture, as my culture here, I have used their gods and practice to understand the intrigues of the tragic preoccupation. The Osu caste system is the most painful practice among the Igbo people. It separates man from man. And the soul from existence. (“Author’s Note” 6).

Hence, like Shakespeare’s protagonist, Otaelo is alienated from the social and cultural essence of existence in his Umuagu community because he is an Osu; a belief system in Igbo culture that makes anyone who is either dedicated or offers him / herself to a god for protection to be regarded as an outcaste. Such person and family lineage is stigmatized forever. The weight and implication of the Osu caste system is given accentuation in the words of Dike who refers to the Osu caste with the neuter gender; “It” (qtd. in Balogun 16). This betrays the level of socio-cultural degradation and rejection the Osu class is made to suffer forever. Hence, Agbo, the village war general who is extremely jealous of Otaelo’s promotion by the Igwe despite being an Osu decries the impending violation of the ethos of the land:

An Osu is no man ... but food for the gods.  
Then why is the whole village caught up in this  
madness? Why? I am sure our ancestors cry,  
and mourn our neglect of their laws and  
practice ...

An Osu is worse than the lowest of animals.

... for he is sacrifice. (38)

With the Osu caste system in Igbo society, Yerima has been able to not only create a character akin to that of Othello but has deepened his tragic personality because unlike in the English context where the Moor still enjoys some level of dignity as a Commander of the Venetian army, Osu caste practice causes Otaelo to be regarded as a classless citizen who is lower than a even slaves. The duke's statement in *Othello* as he attempts to pacify Brabantio concerning Othello's alleged bewitchment of his daughter, when the matter is brought to his court contrasts with the dialogue that holds between Ebele and Odiike; the two palace slaves discussing Igwe's return from war in *Otaelo*:

***Othello*:**

**Duke of Venice.** And, noble signior,

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,

Your son-in-law is far more fair than black. (I. iii 1177)

***Otaelo*:**

EBELE: I never knew the gods will be with the Igwe.

ODIKE: Why?

EBELE: We (sic) committed an abomination by taking an Osu along with him ... He should have taken some slaves with him instead of an Osu.

ODIKE: The earth god, Ala, smiles on the Osu.

EBELE: Does he? A slave is still better than an Osu, a million times ... (14)

Scholars have however argued that the allusion made to black in *Othello* is merely symbolic. They hold that Shakespeare only used the colour to represent some negative characteristics like jealousy and sexual violence innate in Othello. Dympna Callagan and Andrew Carlson are some of those that belong to

this school of thought. Callagan insists that there is no justification to regard Othello as a black man since the character was played by Whites during Shakespeare's productions. He asserts that the real interpretation and aesthetics of a play are projected through its stage performance and since Shakespeare casted Whites as Othello during his theatre productions, there is no validation for linking the character with being black (qtd. in Carlson 2). Carlson further argues that "*Othello* was never about a real black man, but about a white man's idea of blackness" (2). Yerima appear to have taken this argument further by linking the belief of associating blackness to negativity or evil to African culture as well. Hence, Otaelo while informing Ebuka, the chief priest of Ala of his elevated status says: "through my bravery, I turn my black blood red" (34). From Otaelo's statement above, one can detect the playwright's subtly portrayal of black's degradation of the colour that represents it. Although the West is often criticized for being racially discriminatory, Yerima tends to be saying that there exists some form of mental prejudice against the colour that represents the African race by even Africans themselves.

Ahmed Yerima is one of Nigerian playwrights whose works are highly culture based. Hence, in adapting Shakespeare's masterpiece, Yerima has allowed culture to guide his creative muse. The conflict of the play revolves around the gods and the dangers associated with breaking their constituted order, wishes or sacred conventions. Africans believe in the existence of a pantheon of gods, each with special territories under its control. Within the Igbo cosmology, it is believed that various gods, spirits and deities operate in the celestial realms from where they control the cosmos. Yerima replicates these gods in the play by creating characters like Agbalamiri, priestess of Osimiri; goddess

of the river, Ikuku, priest of Amadioha; god of thunder and lightning and Ebuka, priest of Ala; the earth god. It is believed that anyone who contravenes any of their orders incur their wrath. Danger therefore looms right from the first scene as Chinyere and her grandmother, Nene, reject Osimiri's request for the princess to succeed Agbalamiri. The violation of the laws of the land by the Igwe, who not only took an Osu along with him to war but also consents to his request to marry his daughter, amplifies the conflict. The gods angered by the king's denigrating acts warn of the impending danger:

Ikuku: Igwe Ochendu Nwokirika.  
Do not attempt to feed the gods that you shame  
Amadioha weeps for you defile his land  
Your father weeps for you shame his throne  
You abuse the land with your ofor  
Your action to give a princess of Umuagu to an Osu,  
Will bring the downfall of your reign  
Beware, do not put a finger in the mouth of your maker,  
He will bite it off.  
Beware!

Otaelo is of the belief that it is his bravery that mutated his cultural status. Having cultivated a sense of independence, he spites Ala, his god of protection which he deems as capricious and inconsiderate since it does not want him to "aspire ... to become somebody else" other than an Osu (34). Otaelo regards Ala as a callous god for demanding his mother, a woman who ran to it for protection, as sacrifice, an irony of situation he finds difficult to fathom. He is filled with conceit, what Aristotle calls hubris as he recounts his several unprecedented achievements. Driven by pride and contempt, he blatantly insults as well as

elevates himself above the earth god. Otaelo's statement takes the conflict to a crescendo as Ebuka in warning him foreshadows the catastrophic implication of such unbridled arrogance:

Otaelo: Here I am, me, a mere mortal ... greater than the god, Ala.

Ebuka: Caution, my son. Or else you will slip lower than who or what you think you are.

Otaelo's prideful declaration thus sets the battle line between him and Ala. Hence, the central conflict in the play is pitched between humans and supernatural beings. Unlike in *Othello* where the story is given more of humanistic expression as the play can be interpreted as a drama of character and emotion, *Otaelo* has deep metaphysical connotation. Even though the both plays possess religious inclination as *Othello* is set in a Venetian Christian city, *Otaelo* is much more spiritualized as the dramatist appears to be interrogating the belief on supernatural forces as controllers of human essence and existence.

Culture also manifests in a creative process through characterization. In the recreation of *Othello*, Yerima not only creates stereotypes that possess similar characteristics with the original but also fashions new characters consistent with the cultural environment they are created into. For instance, Otaelo, Chinyere, Igwe Ochendu, Agbo, Obiageli and Ichiagu can be regarded as prototypes of Othello, Desdemona, Duke of Venice, Iago, Emilia and Cassio respectively. Other characters are created out of Yerimah's ingenuity. In exercising his poetic license, he has given the dramatis personae Igbo names. Names are significant means of identification. In African culture, it is believed that the name one bears is somewhat linked to one's destiny, attitude and characteristics. Dramatists of the African descent appear to agree with this belief as a number of them

characterize with names, a writing pattern Dan Uwandu terms “the naming system of characterization” (196). Through the naming system, the personality of a character is often foreshadowed. Uwandu identifies this as an important approach to playwriting and recognizes Emeka Nwabueze as one of the Nigerian dramatists who utilize this style. According to him, “the naming pattern of characterization as used by the playwright serves enough springboard for understanding the role played by each character” (196).

Apart from Otaelo, there are other characters that also bear significant names in the play. ‘Igwe Ochendu’ is one of such names. While “Igwe” literally means king, “Ochendu” implies “defender of life” thus it is unsurprising that the king is the commander-in-chief of the armed warriors in the play. The importance of the name, “Chinyere”, which means “God is the giver”, can be traced to the given circumstance which portrays her as the only child of the family. One can imagine the travail the king’s family must have undergone during years of childlessness and the constant supplication to the gods in search for one. The child must have been named “Chinyere” in appreciation to the gods for answering their prayers. It is however conflicting and ironical to refuse the gods the services of the same girl who they are accorded the recognition of being the provider. Uloma, Chinyere’s mother, however recognizes the supremacy of the will of the gods. The dialogue between Nene and Chinyere concerning her stand as regards Osimiri’s choice of her daughter as her priestess justifies this fact:

Nene: What did your mother say to all this?

Chinyere: Nothing, she said that it is the will of the goddess (11)

Important characters especially those regarded as mouthpieces of the gods equally bear names that represent their metaphysical office. Characters like Agbalamiri, Ikuku, Okaramuo are good examples. However, the name Ebuka does not properly project the position of the *dramatis persona* as the priest of Ani. Despite this loophole however, Yerima has through naming of characters exhibited an appreciable knowledge of Igbo culture and language.

Yerima has used idioms and proverbs to enrich the characters' dialogue in order to imbue the play with poetic tone similar to that of Shakespeare's. To show that there is a multicultural influence on Yerima's writings, some of the proverbs are drawn from Yoruba among other Nigerian languages (Adeoti 39). He has through a skillful combination of various figurative expressions achieved an elevated language that is even though African in context, similar to Shakespeare's ambiguous composition. Otaelo's soliloquy as he ponders on the turn of his luck is one of such examples:

The whirlwind of change sweeps through my  
life in great haste. Deep within me I feel calm  
... uneasy ... yet with traces of a stormy night.  
Recently, my blood boils more than usual. I  
must be careful. I must climb the soft steps of  
this new ladder with caution. Oh Ala, my god  
of protection where did I go wrong in this  
matter?

Yerima shows commendable poetic dexterity by combining prominent poetic devices like personification, metaphor, oxymoron, paradox, apostrophe and imagery in loading the speech with variety of meanings while retaining its African orientation. African traditional theatre is ensemble in form and

aesthetic in design. It is performative, celebratory and participatory. Cultural practices like festivals, masquerade performances and so on influence indigenous playwrights in their writings. They create spectacle and build aesthetics using these cultural elements. Yerima projects these Igbo cultural performances right from the beginning of the play. The stage direction that explains Umuagu's successful return from war exemplifies this: "Loud music as the warriors dance in, the Egwugwu also follow. The Igwe dances into a loud welcome of the villagers ... The warriors dance takes place amidst cheers and applause" (14).

The replacement of the handkerchief, Othello's gift of love to Desdemona with jigida, is another significant way Yerima indigenizes *Othello*. Yerima probably chose jigida as symbol of love in the play because of its cultural iconicity. Jigida is a set of waist beads worn by maidens as an adornment in the pre-colonial Igbo society. Otaelo's gift of the jigida to Chinyere therefore sets the stage for the conflict that culminated in the death of four persons. Through the use of such cultural code, Yerimah makes the conflict that revolves around it cultural in context.

Death, in Western culture, is regarded as a tragic end. This is exemplified through Lodovico's closing speech. As Othello dies after killing himself, Lodovico tells everyone to "look on the tragic loading of this bed". He orders Gratiano to take over Othello's house and seize all his possession as his death has ended everything that concerns him (V. ii 1209). But in the African cosmology, death is viewed from a wider perspective. What constitutes tragedy in African culture is not death per se but the inability to actualize the essence of existence, what Soyinka refers to as the "anguish of severance". The tragedy in Yerima's version of the play therefore lies in the inability of the hero,

Otaelo, to become “a man”, a freeborn, he so desires despite his efforts. But what he failed to achieve in life, he appears to have achieved through an inter-cosmic transition called, death. This is why Ebuka, in an apostrophic allusion to death says, “Oh death how you level the freeborn and the Osu. For as the same blood flows, in our veins, so do you take us on equal terms. Sleep good prince for maybe, your next coming might be better” (57). Through Ebuka’s dirge, Yerima has been able to establish three important beliefs concerning death and tragedy in African worldview. One is the belief on the existence of three worlds; the world of the living, the dead and the unborn. Secondly, that death serves as a bridge that connects the world of the living and the dead. And third is the belief on reincarnation; which means the rebirth of a soul in another body after death. Based on these preconditions, death is merely regarded as a “transitional gulf” through which the living journeys into the world of the dead. Emma Ebo and Canice Nwosu corroborate this argument by insisting that “death ... is one of the atomic molecules in the cyclic force of nature that guarantees continuity and oneness of the cosmic totality that bestride the African worldview” (200). To this end, Ebuka personifies death and refers to it as a resolver of the conflict that has existed between Otaelo and his environment. And unlike the physical world where discrimination is prevalent, the transitional passage defies class or status. Ebuka is further hopeful that Otaelo would be more successful in realizing his existential essence on his next return to the world of the living in completion of his cosmic cycle.

## **Conclusion**

It has been observed through this study that every successful adaptation involves mutation of the original work especially in

the area of culture. In other words, culture is a quintessential element that influences every creative process more so an adaptation. Culture contributes in making an adapted work as original as the source text. The dual-headed influence of culture on adaption as seen from the analysis of the plays is based on an adapter's role as an interpreter and creator. The culture of the source text influences an adapter as he interprets while the culture of the new environment influences him as he assumes the role of a creator. The culture of an adapter is however more prominent in adaptation.

From the foregoing, it can be said that adaptation is sine qua non in a creative process and African dramatists are in the forefront as far as utilizing this technique is concerned. Nwosu and Uchegbu affirm that "achievements of modern African dramatists are achievements in adaptation" (33). Ahmed Yerima is one of such dramatists who has made significant contributions by utilizing this borrowing process. Just as Nwosu and Uchegbu envisage that adaptation "will bring forth new masterpieces in the African region" (44), this researcher recommends that adapters, especially those of the younger generation, should acknowledge the role culture plays in adaption, more so in transcultural adaptation. Budding adapters should therefore learn to accord culture its place in adaptation. This will help to breathe originality into any derived work.

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