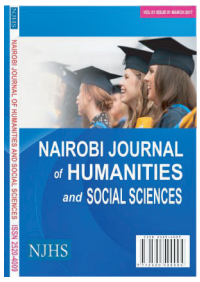

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FACET AND IMPORTS OF ORATURE IN FRANCIS IMBUGA'S DRAMA: A STUDY OF *AMINATA, THE BURNING OF RAGS AND THE RETURN OF MGOFU*

Moses Atwoli
Department of Literature and Language Education
Masinde Muliro University

John Mugubi
Department of Film and Theatre Studies
Kenyatta University

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to interrogate the link between orature and contemporary African drama. It seeks to demonstrate that orature is still relevant and able to adapt to forms of contemporary verbal expression, particularly African drama. The paper investigates how, why and with what effect aspects of orature have been incorporated in drama. Francis Imbuga's Three (3) plays: *Aminata (º544), The Burning of Rags (º545)* and *The Return of Mgofu (2011)* have been studied in this regard. Orature texts have been identified and discussed in terms of context, technique and significance. Ways in which these orature forms adapt to new modes of thought through contemporary African drama have been examined. This study was necessitated by the need to investigate and validate the assumption that Imbuga's drama borrows from certain genres of orature. The Stylistics approach obtaining from the Formalism theory guides this study.

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SUMMARIES OF THE SELECTED TEXTS

Aminata (1988) is an acknowledgement by the writer that society must accept change because nobody can bar it from happening. This is captured in the late Pastor Ngoya's words in the epigraph. He says:

> The time-tested ways of our people are
> best yet oh, God, Lord, make us wise,
> that we may accept change. (v)

In those words, Imbuga concedes that change must occur but it should not lead to the death of positive aspects of the traditional African cultural practices. The need to accommodate change but preserve "the time-tested ways of our people" is further brought out in the words that Jumba utters at the end of the play. He says, "it is not yet too late to learn, yet what have we done?" (76) These words are a reaction to the failed handing over of Pastor Ngoya's gift of a three acre piece of land to Aminata. When it is just about to happen, Agege breaks in with the news that Ababio had committed suicide. This leads to the falling and breaking of the soil container that Mbaluto intended to hand over to Aminata.

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (1989), the writer addresses the issue of cultural rebellion. The play revolves around Denis' failure to initiate his son, Yona, into manhood as demanded by tradition. Denis, who ironically is a professor in cultural studies, adamantly refuses to take heed of his father's pleas. He submits that when he feels it is necessary that Yona should be circumcised, he will take him to hospital (10). Eventually, due to Denis' unrelenting stand, Agala's poor health deteriorates and results into his sudden death.

The Return of Mgofu (6455) is set in Mndika, an imaginary African nation, which has undergone difficult moments. The violence that rocks it leads to displacements and deaths. Kadesa refers to the turmoil as "madness" and its perpetrators as "ogres" that "behaved like deranged animals killing one another like ruthless brutes" (12). The writer prescribes patriotism, forgiveness and reconciliation as the elements that would deliver full recovery.

ARTISTIC NUANCES OF ORATURE TEXTS IN THE SELECTED TEXTS

Oral Narratives

In this paper, our understanding of an oral narrative is anchored on Okumba Miruka's (1994) definition:

> A narrative is basically a prose account of people, events, places, that may be factual or fictional. The accounts are principally handed down from person to person and generation to generation through word of mouth. The terms "tale" and "folktale" have been used to denote the same concept (134).

"Oral narrative" in this study encompasses the narrative tradition from a wider perspective. As a result, in this part, we discuss texts arising from the narrative accounts of events which happened in the distant past. These texts relate myth,

etiological, legend, ogre, trickster, dilemma and fables.

In *Aminata* (1988), Mama Rosina alludes to the fable of the indecisive and greedy hyena. In Part One Scene One while addressing Nuhu about his double life, she retorts:

Stop it! (*pause*) Which of your two feet is stronger? The one that goes to church or the one that dances with Membe's elders of the stool? (2)

The image of the hyena allows the writer the opportunity to foreground the religious hypocrisy that has taken root in the contemporary society. It is almost impossible to draw a line between those who are true Christians and those who are imposters. Most of those who practise Christianity can still be seen dabbling in the same things that their faith condemns.

When Jumba depicts women as lacking in intellectual capacity to take part in the activities that the society has set aside for men, Mama Rosina says: "The tortoise may be slow, but he seldom falls." (3). Her words constitute a proverb but the image of the tortoise in the expression is drawn from a folktale. In their discussion of the use of animal characters in African fables, Nandwa and Bukenya (1983) observe: "Tortoise is depicted as wiser than Hare. He comes out as the wisest of them all." (52). In Mama Rosina, Imbuga speaks to contemporary menfolk who may be still trapped in the old misconception that believes nothing good can come from a woman. By using the image of the tortoise, he communicates to such men the fact that given the opportunity women have what it takes to make better decisions.

Jumba is referred to as a fox on two occasions. At first, Aminata refers to him as such when she is explaining to Mulemi the reason behind the hurried cementing of Pastor Ngoya's grave (1988:36). In the second case, Mama Rosina refers to Jumba as a fox (64) when he offers to step aside as the headman in order to pave way for her to take over. Nandwa and Bukenya (1983) observe that "Fox is depicted as greedy and stupid especially when he appears in the same story as Hare" (52). That is the feeling that Aminata has for Jumba when she refers to him as a fox. On the other hand, Mama Rosina's reference portrays him as a cunning character.

In the "Battle of Wits", the writer infuses the trickster mode in the play. When he offers to resign, Jumba makes himself vulnerable. The elders even rebuke him for imagining that he can do that. When he suggests that Mama Rosina should succeed him, he portrays himself as a progressive character out to embrace change. Oblivious to the elders is the fact that he is setting a trap for them. Jumba is retaliating against the elders because they are supporting Aminata. When the elders appear unhappy with a woman at the helm, he exposes their hypocrisy. Indeed, he equates himself to a wily spider when he says:

> ... The cobweb shakes, the fly is caught and the patient spider will have his meal (Imbuga, 1988:63).

What transpires in this part of the play is in line with Akivaga and Odaga's (1982) description of trickster narratives:

> They primarily involve one character feigning friendship for another or others with the intention of exploiting this friendship for his selfish gain

(39).

Jumba, in ***Aminata*** (1988) hints to Mama Rosina the reason that informs his decision to cede the stool of rule to her by saying: "... you know it is not without reason that the bat prefers his upside down posture" (64). The metaphor of the bat is drawn from an aetiological tale: a tale that explains why something is the way it is.

Finally, ***Aminata's*** (1988) ending is typical of dilemma narratives. On features of oral narratives, Akivaga and Odaga (1982) note:

> Their main feature is that they present the audience with two or more choices which have to be made although none of these choices is easy to make. Sometimes, the situation requires passing judgement on ethical moral or even legal grounds. The narrator in most of these stories ends by posing a question to be debated by the listeners (55).

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (1989), when Denis finally arrives home from the city, everyone is very happy that he is back. In the celebratory mood, Babu says:

> Now you see, the city has vomited you back to us. You know, I always say that he who was born in a banana plantation will always come back home (35)

By alleging that the city has vomited Denis, he implies that the city had at first swallowed him whole. That is an attribute of the ogre. According to Nandwa and Bukenya (1983):

> ... Ogres are ubiquitous and malicious. People are afraid of them. They kill and eat people. They swallow them whole (55).

Akivaga and Odaga (1982) describe them as evil and ferocious beings that are a creation of human imagination and fantasy. Therefore, equating the city to an ogre brings out a people that have feelings of hatred and fear for the city. Just like an ogre, if the city swallows an individual, irrespective of his academic credentials, it turns him into a zombie.

In *The Return of Mgofu* (2011), Thoriwa laments that she has grown tired from pushing Thori in the wheelchair, Thori suggests that they need a break because, "The rabbit saved her life by resting under the paw paw tree" (2). This expression summarises an episode from an oral narrative. It invokes the need for human beings to be rational, considerate and loving to each other. This is because Thori empathizes with Thoriwa when she says that she is 'dog tired' (1).

The second Mgofu is born, grows up and gains acceptance in Nderema. His parents had walked out of Mndika when war broke out. He finds home in Nderema and her people treat him as one of them. This good relationship between Mgofu and the people of Nderema is captured in Thori's words: "It is the goat who bleated twice to say he had found a new home and the dog barked at him." (27). These words describe an episode from a fable. They express the need to accept people who escape from their countries due to instability and insecuri-

ty. If this happens then the refugees, as in Mgofu's case, may turn out to be an asset to their hosts.

Thori and Thoriwa use the mythical mode to recount the origin of the instability and animosity in Nderema:

> **Thoriwa:** Thori and I served in the local shrine then. We had no children of our own. We were good keepers of other people's children at the shrine though. Oh! How the children loved the stories we told them.
> **Thori:** They loved the games too, don't forget that.
> **Thoriwa:** We lived happily in the ridges until that night (*looking downcast*). A deranged man or woman set a neighbour's houses on fire. No one bothered to know who had done it and why. No one... many houses were burnt to ashes that night. Children, mothers, fathers... everyone ran northwards... others eastwards, while the majority simply ran around in circles. Where were they to run to? (5-6).

The above exchange brings to surface some timeless virtues of love and unity which, if adopted by the contemporary society, would give it a sense of community and togetherness. The writer suggests that many people continue to suffer because of impunity and evil people thrive because no one questions what they do.

Proverbs

Ruth Finnegan (1970) concedes that the exact definition of 'Proverb' is no easy matter. She, however, notes that there are some general arguments as to what constitutes a proverb (393). A variety of definitions have been offered by different scholars. Samples include:

"A proverb is a short familiar sentence expressing a supposed truth or moral lesson; a byword; a saying that requires explanation" (Chambers Twentieth Dictionary).

A proverb is "a short saying of wisdom in general usage" (Akivaga and Odaga, 1982).

"A proverb is a short pithy statement containing folk wisdom" (Nandwa and Bukenya, 1983).

A proverb is "a terse, compact, pithy statement of popular wisdom accepted as an expression of truth" (Sunkuli and Miruka, 1999).

From the definitions, features of proverbs include terseness, pithiness, fixity and statement of folk wisdom, truth or meaning.

For this study, we adopted Okumba Miruka's (1999) definition which is relatively moderate and summative: "A proverb is a brief statement full of hidden meaning, accepted and used by a community as an expression of truth or wisdom" (88).

On the use of proverbs in Imbuga's drama, John Ruganda (1992) notes:

> The literal meaning of most proverbs in Imbuga's drama is easily accessible even to a casual spectator; not so their symbolic meaning. Because of their metaphorical base, proverbs are able to evoke a spiral of connotations whose meaning often eludes and tantalizes a spectator who is alien to their cultural codes. For the same reason, they are amenable to several

> interpretations and therefore are evasive to vindicative polity. (37)

Proverbs, therefore, are subject to a multiple of interpretations. People decode them in ways that may not be in the user's or writer's interest. Consequently, they allow one the opportunity to address sensitive issues without the fear of victimization. Nevertheless, they are closely interwoven with other aspects of linguistic and literary behaviour.

Generally, society attributes the use of proverbs to wisdom as shown in several works of Imbuga such as the ones under this study. Indeed, in these works, proverbs are used by men and women of advanced age like Jumba and Mama Rosina in ***Aminata***; Agala and Babu in ***The Burning of Rags***; and Thori and Thoriwa in ***The Return of Mgofu.***

In ***Aminata*** (1988), Mama Rosina says, "... the sweetness of sugar is not in its colour" (2). This proverb is meant to justify the fact that Pastor Ngoya may have been a Membe, but he was no ordinary Membe. He was, actually, a pastor of the church. In her opinion, he is supposed to be treated with the respect that befits a man of his stature. This proverb raises the question of appearance vis-à-vis reality.

To support the fact that motherhood should not be pegged on the presence of children, Nuhu tells Mama Rosina: "A mouth may lack teeth, but it is still a mouth" (2). This communicates the fact that the society should not use the circumstances in which people find themselves to judge them. In other words, a person may find himself/herself in unfortunate circumstances due to happenings that are beyond his/her control.

In the play, Mama Rosina would like Jumba to go slow. She expects him to be a good listener and a cautious speaker. She sums up her piece of advice in the proverb "A wiseman fills his ears before he empties his mouth" (3). This proverb upholds the virtue of being cautious. Yet, Jumba is chauvinistic in his attitude towards Mama Rosina and other women in general. To him, no good suggestion can emanate from a woman. He says:

> Mama Rosina, I will have you understand that there is more to this grave-dressing than is fit for women's ears. (3)

Mama Rosina's reponse to Jumba's allegation is in the proverb, "The tortoise may be slow, but he seldom falls" (3). Through the proverb, Mama Rosina elevates women. She equates them to the 'wise' tortoise. In her opinion, male chauvinists of Jumba's ilk may view women as intellectually weak, but women always get it right in their judgement. This, therefore, implies that they should be listened to whenever they have something to offer.

Mama Rosina chides men who take pride in their manhood yet they do not play their role properly. She sums it in the proverb, "He that would bury his dead provides a coffin" (5). Some men in the story do not weigh upto their status. Jumba and Ababio, for instance, fail to provide the coffin in which to bury Pastor Ngoya. It takes Aminata, a woman, to do it. In the same vein, Ababio fails in his duties as a husband and a father. It is Aminata who supports his family.

In the "Battle of Wits", Jumba boasts that "It is not without a reason that the bat prefers his upside down posture" (64). This is a proverb that hints at the fact

that by suggesting that Mama Rosina should be an elder of Membe, he was setting a trap for the elders. It therefore, brings him out as a pseudo reformist who, ironically, is bent on blocking the change he purports to effect.

When Kezia visits Mulemi, she is dismayed at the fact that Aminata is fighting to inherit a section of her father's piece of land. She uses the expression "truth does not sleep on the way" (3) to show that the reality about cultural expectations will eventually come out. The truth that Kezia upholds is that women can never be equal to men and as such should lay no claim to what tradition has reserved for men. This expression brings out the womenfolk as a lot that is waging war against itself.

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (1989), good neighbourliness is encouraged. Agala says: "do not talk ill of your neighbour, he may be under your seat" (12). This shows the need to maintain good relationship among members of any society. In response, Babu says: "the nose that sits above the dry throat does not let a smell pass" (12). This emphasizes the need for people to co-exist. The two proverbs elevate the traditional African way of life which was communal in nature. For instance, children belonged to the entire society and giving assistance was to be done indiscriminately. Babu does not find difficulty in asking for assistance from Denis because the latter views assisting other people as something normal. This is captured in the exchange below:

> **Babu:** Oh it is good to hear that you have remembered us. We shall see. As for me, all I ask for is another shirt to relieve this one the boredom of covering me every day. (*Laughs*) Agala, you speak for yourself. The Whiteman said the early bird catches the worm. And I say, the white man was right. Don't get too worried, my son. We old men are always a bother. I just say these things.
> **Denis:** But you are absolutely right. I mean, who says old men are a mere bother? As far as I am concerned, old men are our gourds of wisdom (35-36).

Though he is against some cultural aspects, Denis sees helping old people, who may not necessarily be one's parents, as a normal practice. He has no problem with buying a shirt for Babu. In fact, he acknowledges the need to honour them.

Also, in the conversation above, Babu borrows a proverb from the west: "The early bird catches the worm." In the context of the play, he uses it to argue for the fact that Denis should give his request for a shirt the highest priority. At the symbolic level, when Babu incorporates the proverb in his speech, he illustrates that not all from the West is bad. We can borrow from them what is good and fashion it to suit our needs.

When Denis shows up in the village, a celebratory mood engulfs his home. Babu captures his feelings in a proverb: "he who was born in a banana plantation will always come back." (35). This implies that it is not possible to shake off one's roots. Denis is a highly educated university professor residing in the city and has a very busy schedule. However, when circumstances appear to force him to go back to the village, he obeys.

In ***The Return of Mgofu*** (2011), the use of proverbs is very extensive. In the first scene of Act One, Thori and Thoriwa have been taking turns to push each

other in a wheel chair. When it is Thori's turn to push, he does it for a moment then laments that he is "dog-tired" (1). In response, Thoriwa does not appear to buy the idea that Thori is tired. She reminds him that he had not even pushed him half the distance that she herself had done. In response, Thori retorts: "The rabbit saved her life by resting under the paw paw tree" (2). This is a proverb that cautions one against over-doing some things. Slowing down on certain things in life can make one avoid making fatal mistakes.

While recounting the circumstances that led to the mayhem that occurred in Mndika, Thoriwa observes: "The soiled water can still be distilled to freshness" (19). This is a suggestion that no unfortunate condition is permanent. Mndika may have been turbulent but that does not mean all is lost. If its people unite and forgive each other, chances are that everything will go back to normal.

Mude summarises Mwami Rocho's wisdom with the proverb: "when the wise close their eyes, they open their ears." (13). This occurs after telling Kadesa that rumours had spread that people trained under her watch were causing trouble in Mndika. In the proverb, he insinuates that Mwami Rocho is a good leader. He is not jolted into action by listening to rumours, but rather he takes time to corroborate evidence before taking action.

To extol Mude's virtues, Kadesa uses two proverbs, "Burn not your house to frighten the mouse away!" and "It is a foolish bird that soils its own nest" (14). In the former, she is cautioning Bizia against harming Mude, who means well for the people of Nderema. Killing him would be tantamount to destroying his good intentions. In her opinion, Mude is harmless. The latter implies that any harm caused to Mude by Bizia would be an abuse of hospitality.

When Adonija talks to Kadesa and Mude, he gives unintelligible answers to their questions. Kadesa dismisses him as someone who does not know what he is talking about. However, Mude advises her to give Adonija time to recollect himself. He uses the proverb: "Don't throw the old bucket away before you know where else you can store your water" (18) to advise Kadesa against writing Adonija off. Also, when rumours of an outbreak of chaos in Mndika reach Nderema and the boarder separating the two countries is sealed. Mude says:

> Should they try to force their way in, they will have only themselves to blame. Dogs will always sniff the stranger in a crowd. (19)

The expression "Dogs will always sniff the stranger in a crowd" is a proverb used in reference to the fact it will be impossible for intruders from Mndika to hide in Nderema because soldiers are extra-vigilant. While commenting on the effect that the chaos in Mndika might have on Nderema, Mude uses the proverb "... the neighbour's snakebite does not stop you from dancing your moon dance." (19). The implication of this proverb is that, the instability in that country should not in any way make things in Nderema to stop running as usual. Matia argues that the Mndika refugees who had settled in Nderema had contributed substantially to its development and therefore more should be allowed in. However, Mude would hear nothing of it. He says that they had had enough of Mndika refugees and sums up his argument with the proverb "No basket carries all goods from a sack" (20). This expression is used to reinforce Mude's stand that Nderema should not allow refugees from Mndika into their territory.

When it is announced that Nora has delivered a baby who is Mgofu Ngoda's reincarnation, Adonija reaffirms it:

> You don't seem to have graduated yet, and you might never. (*Turning to the Rest*) Mgofu Ngoda died. He died in my arm, but the old python renews itself with horns and thistles. Mgofu has just come back to us. (26).

The expression "The old python renews itself with horns and thistles" emphasizes the fact that the baby is the old Mgofu Ngoda reborn.

Just before his exit at the end of Act One, Scene One, Mude cautions Kadesa to be wary of the 'mad' Adonija: "Better a fool than a knave" (26). It is apparent from Mude's words that he doubts the way Adonija presents himself. He feels that Adonija is upto something evil. He even at some point asks Kadesa:

> "How mad is this madman of yours?" (24)

Thori praises Mwami Mhando's leadership style. In his opinion, Mhando governs well because he has the experience. This experience has taught him to consult, discuss and reach a consensus with his council of elders. Thori attributes Mhando's leadership to "experience that trains the squirrel to know where the grains can be scooped." (29)

Furthermore, when Thori and his wife Thoriwa feel they are through with their mission: delivering a message from the ancestors that neighbours must stump out resentment, kill the blame-game and seek reconciliation in order to make history not to repeat itself, they propose to return where they had come from. Before their departure, Thori uses a proverb to caution the sons and daughters of Mndika: "He who does not listen well is doomed to say, I wish I knew" (29). The expression reinforces the fact that, if history is allowed to repeat itself, the people of Mndika will regret the consequences.

Mwami Mhando calls members of his inner circle: Mtange, Mdanya and Mnavi to a meeting and offers them "bites and drinks" (40). He justifies his offer using the proverb: "Words spoken on a dry throat do not roll off the tongue" (40). This acts as a polite invitation to the members of the inner circle to deliberate on matters of national importance as they eat and drink. In their talk, Mhando traces the origin of the tribulations of the people of Mndika. He blames everything on their ancestors who could no "longer talk to one another." Mtange observes that the ancestors used to say that "memory is the granary in which the wise store their widom" (45). This proverb summarises the need for Mndika people to learn from the bad experiences of the past in order to avoid a repeat of the chaotic situation that arose in their country.

Mhando sends Mtange and Mnavi to Nderema to try and convince Mgofu to return to Mndika. When the two emissaries meet him, they discuss diverse issues including the possibility of women being allowed to hold leadership positions in Mndika. It is also an idea that Mhando had already thought about. It is, however, pointed out that some leaders may resist that move. Mgofu observes that those who resist change can be found in all places but given time, they also become part of the change naturally. He summarises this with the proverb: "one who battles willingly with cold water doesn't feel the cold" (58).

Mgofu Ngoda, in the company of his daughter, Nora Ulivaho, pays a visit to the people of Mndika on Remembrance Day. He is the chief guest and all people present feel that it is a very big honour for him to have agreed to visit. When Mwami Mhando is requested to welcome Mgofu, he says:

> Thank you. Thank you very much. Those who have gone before us used to say, "If a child washes his hands clean, he may be allowed to eat with elders." Today, we the sons and daughters of Nderema have washed our hands, and that is why we are here about to eat with one of the greatest elders of this region. (66).

In the above speech, Mwami Mhando uses the proverb: "If a child washes his hands clean, he may be allowed to eat with elders." In this expression, Mwami Mhando brings out the collective pride Mndikan citizens gain from Mgofu's visit. The visit is seen as a recognition of the reforms that Mndika has undertaken under Mhando's leadership.

Oral Poetry

In this study, the term 'oral poetry' broadly encompasses song and recitation. Nandwa and Bukenya (1983) refer to them as metred forms or verse" (87). Many writers have tried to define oral poetry in a variety of ways. However, our working definition was drawn from Okumba Miruka (1994):

Oral poetry is the verbal expression of feelings, ideas and thoughts using versified language (88).

In the appreciation of oral poetry, some scholars do not draw a line between poetry and song. They depict the two as being the same. For purposes of clarity, it should be noted that song is a means of rendering a poem just as declaiming and reciting. On the difference between song and poetry, Miruka (1994) notes:

> Like verse, song may be devoid of poetry; it may not convey any feelings, thoughts or ideas and may be nothing but a set of sounds set to a tune. Song is not always poetry and poetry is not always song (88).

Apparently, the two are not the same. It is therefore imperative that we do not limit poetry to song.

It should also be noted that oral poetry pervades most aspects of African societies. Activities such as work, war, initiation, marriage, birth, child-naming, funeral, politics, courting among others are always accompanied by appropriate oral poetry and songs. This genre accords one the opportunity to learn, laugh, mourn, console, inspire and in some cases pass secret messages. In reference to songs, Akivaga and Odaga (1982) observe:

> The songs, like the stories and proverbs, are about people's condition of life, about their political, social and economic activities. They embody the history, philosophy, beliefs and wisdom of the people (69).

Literary researchers have put oral poetry in a variety of categories. The categorization is always pegged on theme, function, context of performance, the per-

former, structure of performance and style of delivery.

Francis Imbuga's drama as shown in the three selected plays has a symbiotic relationship with oral poetry. The plays give life to oral poetry while it in turn enhances their communicative value. In his comments on the importance of song and dance in drama, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981) elaborates this relationship:

> Song and dance as we have seen are central to nearly all the rituals celebrating rain, birth, the second birth, circumcision, marriage, funerals or to all ordinary ceremonies. Even daily speech among peasants is interspersed with song. It can be a line or two, a verse or a whole song. What is important is that song and dance are not just decorations; they are an integral part of that conversation, that drinking session, that ritual, that ceremony... the song arises from what has gone before and leads to what follows. The song and dance become a continuation of the conversation and of the action. (45)

Thus, we examined the use of oral poetry as both a textual and stylistic resource with regard to Imbuga's drama. This section discusses aspects of oral poetry that are used in the three selected plays.

In ***Aminata*** (1988), Francis Imbuga incorporates two hymns: 'We shall overcome' (19) and 'There is a green hill far away' (42). The two are introduced by Pastor Ngoya. Taban Lo Liyong (1972) observes that hymns, which are mainly Christian, are a modern day addition to African oral poetry (12).

The first hymn 'We shall overcome' is introduced at the point where Pastor Ngoya is serving women with chicken. Earlier, it has been a taboo for women to eat chicken. In the context of the play, the serving of the chicken is symbolic of changing from the traditional mindset that baselessly denies women their rights as human beings to a situation that treats them with dignity. The song serves as an encouragement to the women. It urges them not to relent in the fight for gender parity because at the very end, they shall overcome. Indeed, this song has its roots in the African-Americans' civil rights struggle (1955-1968) in the United States of America. It was picked up by black South Africans in their bid to end the apartheid system of rule.

The second hymn, 'There is a green hill far away' is meant to praise Aminata and paint her as a larger than life figure. Pastor Ngoya notes:

> You? No, it is not you to cry. Your brother Ababio can cry but not you. No, not my Aminata. You see, you are the green hill that was sang about long, long ago, you and your husband (*He bursts into song and is joined by Aminata in the emotional first verse of "There is a green hill far away.")*
>
> There is a green hill far away
> Without a city wall
> Where the dear Lord was crucified
> He died to save us all
>
> Oh dearly, dearly has he loved
> And we must love him too

And trust in His redeeming blood
And try his words to do (42).

In line with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's argument (1981:45), the above song is a continuation of the conversation and action in the play. Through it, Pastor Ngoya brings out Aminata and her husband as people who have, in an exceptional way, done the community a lot of good. They need no introduction just like the green hill that could be seen from afar.

The mock wedding song (Imbuga, 1988:20) brings out the need for men and women to co-exist in unity, just like the bride and groom are one. This is brought out through its performance. It is sung as women devour chicken. Agege begs for some from them and they gladly oblige. An indication that male or female, we need one another.

There is a praise song in the play. Akivaga and Odaga (1982) refer to this type of songs as "songs that praise and glorify people who have made some significant contribution in the society" (91). This song is in honour of Aminata:

Agege: Me, I want to go back to the dance field. Hee! Aminata they are singing and dancing with your name. (*He sings the new composition in praise of Aminata and dances.*)
Aminata, witu, tunakupenda
Aminataa, Aminata, nguyio
Aminata witu, unakaribishwa
Aminata, Aminata wuoyee (Imbuga, 1988:50)

A loose translation of the song is:
Aminata we love you!/ Aminata, Aminata, here comes!/ our Aminata we welcome you!/ Aminata hail Aminata!

The song is also a continuation of the conversation in the play. It brings out the strong love the people have for Aminata due to her benevolence. Among other things, she has started a water project for the people of Membe village and hired a choreographer for their dance troupe.

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (1989), two recitations, allegedly composed by Denis Agala, are incorporated by the writer. The first poem, 'Our Gourd of Wisdom' was written to eulogize Matilda. Bandi is making effort to memorize it because his teacher has instructed him to do so. As he struggles with the lines of the poem, Agala keeps on interrupting. As a result, we then end up with segments of what would have been one piece. A fully constituted version of the poem would read:

Our Gourd of Wisdom

We watched our eyes dry
As our gourd of wisdom was buried
Never again to be carried
Let her go she was unmarried

Fires die they are unfed
New children unmoved

Mother unknown
Let her go she belonged to the gone

She will tell tales but not here
She will tell tales only there
Where they know them and less care
Let her go she was too old

Evenings mourn their lost compassion
As strangers depart still dressed in cotton
Little do they know the...(7-8)

Bandi does not, unfortunately, complete the recitation of the poem because Agala strikes him on the buttocks. Even so, the writer communicates what he intends the reader to get. The poem has an ironical mood. The poet, in this case Denis Agala, describes Matilda fondly as "a gourd of wisdom". However, in the successive stanzas, he describes her in very demeaning terms and does not even express regret at her demise. He does not even want her to be referred to as his wife when he says "she was unmarried" and describes her as "too old" (Imbuga, 1989:7).

At a deeper level, the hatred that Denis habours for Matilda emanates from the conflict between tradition and modernity. Denis is a highly learned man who believes in changing from traditional African practices to the modern or western ways of doing things. He believes that such practices should be "buried" because they constitute unnecessary baggage. Those practices "belong to the gone" and are "too old". On the contrary, Matilda believes in them and supports their retention. "Our gourd of wisdom" is part of the play's discourse. It provides continuity in the drama because it links episodes.

We first encounter the second poem in Act One, Scene Six being recited by Bandi and in Act Two Scene Two being recited by Hilda. The title of the poem is 'From Home with Bananas.' The full text reads:

We left home with a bunch of bananas
And returned with her evil song
We left home with a pregnancy
And returned with a still-born

We left home and returned
With a dead song on our lips
Borrowed laughter from the past
For that was her song. (54)

The poem is an expression of high hopes that got broken along the way. The persona leaves home with high expectations which do not materialize. This is captured in lines 3 and 4 – we left home with a pregnancy/ And returned with a still born". The second stanza brings out a nostalgic mood, especially when laughter that characterizes the past is mentioned.

In conclusion, the oral poems within the plays, just like the songs within oral narratives, play both a thematic and stylistic role. They are used for episodic divi-

sion, thematic revelation, inter-character communication and aesthetic enhancement.

ORATURE TECHNIQUES

In this section, we identify some orature techniques that feature in the three texts and discuss them in terms of their effects. As already observed, the playwright incorporates texts from orature in his drama. Similarly, he borrows oral literature techniques and reappropriates them in the plays. Indeed, Ruth Finnegan (1970) emphasizes the strong bond that exists between the written and the oral forms of literature. She observes:

> It is already widely accepted that these two media can each draw on the products of the other, for orally transmitted forms have frequently been adopted or adapted in written literature, and oral literature too is prepared to draw on any source, including the written word. To this interplay, we can now add the fact that when looked at comparatively, the two forms oral and written, are not so mutually exclusive as is sometimes imagined (20).

The techniques that Imbuga borrows from orature include opening and closing formulas, call and response structure (antiphony), repetition and ideophones. These techniques enhance the communicative values of the plays because, among other things, they facilitate audience participation. It can, therefore, be argued that orature places some communicative and interactive aspects at the writer's disposal, which he uses to enrich his plays.

Opening and Closing Formulas

Ruth Finnegan (1970) captures the use of opening and closing formulas in orature:

> About opening and closing formulas we do know a great deal. In various forms these are common in all areas of Africa (though it is not always clear how far they are obligatory for all tellers rather than idiosyncratic to particular informants): they occur too frequently to need detailed references (379).

It is, therefore, imperative to note that opening and closing formulas are a common and important feature of orature. The two formulas perform several functions in any performance. The opening formula may be used to introduce the performer and to call the attention of particular or generalized audience to the performance. The formula may also give the purpose of the performance, or ask for permission from the audience for the performer to start the piece. On the importance of the opening formula, Okumba Miruka (1994) says:

> An opening formula has its aesthetic and stylistic functions. First of all, it is a verbal contract between the narrator and the audience- the former seeks the permission of the latter. The latter's assent launches the two into a business of narrating and listening. The formula also directs the

> attention of the audience to the narrator i.e. where the narration is rotational it identifies the next narrator. The narrator defines what he is going to do- tell a story and hence binds himself to the contract to do nothing else but that, until his time is over (154).

On the other hand, the closing formula is used to indicate the end of a performance. It may involve a question, challenge, maxim or proverb summarizing the performance. A brief exposition on the moral of the performance may also be given. The writer reappropriates the two aspects in the three selected plays. Our study examines how he uses them.

Aminata's (5322) opening does not directly draw from orature. However, its ending formula as already pointed out in the previous section is typical of dilemma narratives. Ending in the fashion of dilemma of narratives means that the audience is expected to provide a solution to the problems posed in the dilemma. The writer, through Jumba, poses a question to be debated by the audience: "It is not yet too late to learn, yet what have we done?" (76) This ending leaves the audience in dilemma: It is left to make the difficult choices of either embracing change or resisting it and suffering the consequences like Ababio. The audience is also left to question the importance of the change touted in the play.

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (5323), the writer incorporates both the opening and closing formulas. Imbuga, through Matilda, engages the audience in a chitchat. She says:

Not a single evil eye among you today, eeh. That is good for a change. And that is what always hope for. An audience that looks me up and says, 'hey, isn't she somebody's daughter?' (1)

This technique enables members of the audience to adjust their minds to the mood of the time and get ready for the performance that is expected.

At the end of the play, Matilda, who only appears at the start, reappears and again addresses the audience about the just ended performance:

> Oh, what a pleasant surprise! So you decided to stay? Me too. And I must say it was worth it while it lasted. You know, seeing those with worse problems than ours. And that is why I love theatre. Because it makes me experience horrible things, knowing well in reality, I am better off. However, the day that I will ever feel worse than any stage character, that day I will take a rope, look for a mango tree... (69).

Apart from indicating the end of the performance, Matilda's words provide the writer with the opportunity to give his view on the events narrated in the play.

The opening formula in ***The Return of Mgofu*** (2011) is very elaborate. At the beginning, Thori and Thoriwa address the audience. They give an account of life in Mndika before instability and what led to it. Before their exit, they inform the audience to prepare their minds for the expected story:

> **Thori:** (*Pointing at the audience*) Prepare yourselves to be transported to Kadesa's shrine, in the forest of ogres in the Northern part of Nderema. (*Pause*) The story of how Kadesa and several other people had been exiled from Mndika, their motherland, is well known across the ridges...

> **Thoriwa:** ... As your minds proceed to Nderema, Thori and I will move to the next market (9-10)

In this context, the opening formula serves two functions. Firstly, it is an invitation for the audience to the performance. Thori's words: "Prepare yourselves to be transported to Kadesa's shrine" are aimed at capturing the attention of the audience. Secondly, the writer uses this formula to give the purpose of the performance, which is: the story of how Kadesa and several other people had been exiled from Mndika.

The Return of Mgofu (2011) also ends with a clear formula. After the performance of the story, there is total silence and all characters freeze. Then Thori and Thoriwa reappear on stage to address the audience as they did at the beginning:

> **Thoriwa:** In this life we've shared, whether Mgofu Ngoda's return ended in death or whether it did not is not the matter. The matter is that the possibility was always there.
> **Thori:** So it cannot be that, that wheelchair we have been riding in was part of the original plan (71).

This closing formula is an espousal of the writer's view of the events that transpire in the performance.

Repetition

In traditional African literature, repetition occurs in a variety of forms. For example, one may have the same ideas, events or incidents recurring several times in the story in different words. Alternatively, words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs may be repeated in narratives or songs. Also, repetition may take the form of reduplication or what Miruka (1994) describes as: "the repetition of the same word or sound immediately after itself" (70). This stylistic device features prominently in the three plays and occurs in the already described forms.

In ***Aminata*** (1988) Pastor Ngoya says he concurs with Reverend Abu-Steiner that:

> ... every fourth child in a family should be seen as
> an extra mouth. A mouth to feed, a mouth to stop
> crying and a mouth to give medicine to. (18)

The same sentiments are shared by Mulemi in Part One, Scene Two (33). The recurrence of this opinion is meant to emphasize the fact that couples should bear a manageable number of children and thereby avoid "breeding brats" as Mulemi puts it.

In a flashback, Pastor Ngoya who has all along been bed-ridden walks to Aminata's room for a talk. She feels he is straining himself unnecessarily. However, her father retorts: "This is rest child, this is rest." (40) He repeats the same words in the talk that follows. "Rest" in this case denotes change. Similar sentiments are expressed by Agege. He says: You see, change is like rest. Different Agege is rest also!" (67) Agege, the master of odd jobs, experiences great relief when he is appointed "information officer of village" by Mama Rosina. Pastor Ngoya's and

Agege's views about their new circumstances enable the writer to bring about emphatically the fact that change is necessary and inevitable. By accepting it, people are likely to experience relative comfort.

Jumba, on several occasions, reminds people that it is never late to learn. For instance, he says: "I am not yet too old to learn" and "it is not yet too late to learn" (76). In these words, the writer reminds people the necessity to embrace change cautiously. They should learn from other people's experiences. Their contact with the white man's culture should not lead to the death of "time-tested" ways. Blind aping of the western ways may eventually result into blame game.

In ***The Burning of Rags*** (1989) instances of repetition are not many. However, two cases can be seen. In the first place, there is the reduplication of the ideophone "gubugubu", which, as already indicated creates the impression of stampeding animals. Secondly, when Denis resurfaces from the city, the reactions of Babu and Elima when they first encounter him are similar. Babu greets him:

		Translation
Babu:	Mirembe	Greetings
Denis:	Mirembe	Greetings
Babu:	Denis, Mirembe	Denis, Greetings
Denis:	Mirembe, Babu	Greetings, Babu

The same procedure is repeated by Elima (34). The repetition of this event stresses the excitement that is generated by Denis' visit.

The Return of Mgofu (6455) has several cases of repetition. For example, while recounting the story of Mgofu Ngoda and his expectant wife, Thoriwa says that their story has "been told and told again" (9). She adds that Nora "and her old husband walked and walked, until they reached the southern border of Mndika and Nderema." This kind of repetition is meant for purposes of emphasizing the fact that Mgofu Ngoda and his wife are legendary figures who had to endure a lot of suffering due to the "madness" that erupted in Mndika before they found refuge in Nderema.

When Mtange observes that Suguta was more developed than Mndika, Mdanya attributes it to the fact that they were given land, large factories, good roads, big jobs and all by the colonialists. However, in a rejoinder, Mtange tells him that "the colonialists left us many, many years ago." (43) In this case, the text challenges under-developed nations to set up proper strategies that would see them unlock development instead of coming up with unrealistic excuses to justify their poor conditions. Later, Mtange concedes repeatedly that the problem with Mndikans "is in their minds." (44)

Finally, when Mizra stands to address people during the Remembrance Day, she says:

> Thank you, thank you ladies and gentlemen...
> Thank you, thank you very much ladies and
> gentlemen... (62).

During the same event, when Nora stands to address the people, she tells them, "I greet you and greet you again." (16) All these recurrent expressions are made to bring out the celebratory mood that engulfs Mndika upon the return of Mgofu Ngoda.

Ideophones

According to Miruka (1994), an ideophone is a word that conveys its meaning through its sound (69). It may not be semantically meaningful but its sound represents the idea. It creates a mental picture that enables the listener to identify a feeling, a sound, colour or movement. Just like in many oral narratives, Imbuga's drama makes use of ideophones. For instance, in ***The Burning of Rags*** (5323) when Babu is narrating the story of the "sheep", he alleges that the animals were "rushing down the slope gubugubu, gubugubu, gubugubu, right into the sea" (14). The meaning implied in this expression is that of animals running in a stampede, probably, because they are frightened. Also, when Babu puts snuff in his nose, the writer observes that he sneezes loudly: "Exhhieeh!" This brings out more expressively the sound produced when one sneezes.

Antiphony

The antiphonal structure is another aspect of technique in orature that Imbuga reappropriates in his plays. Nketia, J.H. (1962) refers to it as the "call and response form" (29). In this mode of delivery, there exists a soloist who calls the tune and the rest chorus the response. In her comments on antiphony in songs, Finnegan (1970) observes:

> There is merely a repeated interchange between leader and group, the first singing his own phrase (A), the chorus coming in with theirs (B). (259)

In ***Aminata*** (1988), this call-response pattern occurs on two occasions. At first, it appears during the chicken eating ceremony organized by Pastor Ngoya. One of the women present breaks into a wedding song:

Soloist: Silili Waa!
Women: Aa Silili!
Soloist: Silili Waa!
Women: Aa Silili! Silili!
Soloist: Agege!
Women: Aa silili! Silili (20)

The second case occurs during "The handover" ceremony. When Nuhu, Abade, Mama Rosina and Aminata stand up to speak, they begin working up the crowd. To illustrate this, part of Mama Rosina's antiphonal address is captured below:

Rosina: Membe Yooo!
Crowd: Yooo!
Rosina: Membe Yooo!
Crowd: Yooo!
Rosina: Do you say I am the village head?

Crowd: Yaaa!
Rosina: And will you listen when I say I have words for your ears?
Crowd: Yaaa!
Rosina: Listen then, for I have words for your ears.
Membe yooo!
Crowd: Yooo!
Rosina: Membe yooo!
Crowd: Yooo! (74).

The same pattern is also witnessed in ***The Return of Mgofu*** (2011). During the "Remembrance Day" celebrations, Mhando and Nora use the call-response structure to electrify the crowd. Below is the interchange between Mhando and the crowd:

Translation
Mhando:Mndika juu! Mndika up!
Crowd: Juu! Up!
Mhando: Mndika ngiyo! Mndika is coming!
Crowd: Ngiyo! It is coming!
Mhando: Mndika ngago! Mndika it comes!
Crowd: Ngago! (65) It comes!

The use of antiphony in the two plays, just like in orature, is very significant. It enhances their performance by creating room for popular participation by all those who wish or are expected to join in.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Francis Imbuga's ***Aminata*** (1988), ***The Burning of Rags*** (5323) and ***The Return of Mgofu*** (6455) utilize aspects from orature for aesthetic purposes. Texts that relate to oral narratives, proverbs and oral poetry, which the writer incorporates, in the three plays have been identified and discussed. We have demonstrated that some aspects of oral narratives assist the writer to depict the realities associated with the traditional society's cultural beliefs, practices and customs. Contemporary African drama accords the playwright the vent through which he uses the oral narrative to pass to the current generation their cultural heritage. Also, the playwright uses imagery drawn from oral narratives to convey socio-economic phenomena in the contemporary society. The proverbs in the plays enable the playwright to teach, elaborate, caution, inform, summarize and express himself in clear terms. This is due to the fact that they are pithy and cogent. We have also noted that oral poetry enables the playwright to comment on the contemporary realities artistically. We have established that the techniques that Imbuga borrows from orature make the plays highly interactive and communicative. In particular, the opening and closing formulae keep the audience actively involved in the three selected plays.

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