

DECODING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH CHARACTER NAMING IN ZULU SOFOLA'S OLD WINES ARE TASTY

EGBUCHIEM, LIZZY-JANE ONYEBUCHUKWU

Department of English and Literary Studies,
Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba Nigeria.

Email:egbuchiemplizzyjane010@gmail.com/Tel:+2348160583673

Abstract

This study argues that character naming in Zulu Sofola's Old Wines Are Tasty serves as a powerful tool for negotiating cultural identity, revealing the tensions between tradition and modernity in Nigerian society. By examining the interplay between language, culture, and identity, this research demonstrates how Sofola strategically uses character naming to negotiate, reinforce, and subvert cultural norms and beliefs within the Anioma cultural context. Through close textual analysis of the play's characters and their actions, this study highlights how Sofola's naming strategies reflect the complexities of Nigerian cultural identity in a postcolonial landscape where traditional values intersect with modern influences. Employing Mieke Bal's classical theory of proper names and literary semiotics, the analysis reveals how names such as Okebuno ("a man is the home"), Dumkwu ("help me in talking"), and Anyasi ("evening time") function not merely as labels but as cultural signifiers that encode character traits, foreshadow narrative developments, and embody thematic concerns. The findings demonstrate that Sofola's characters live out the meanings embedded in their names, validating the Anioma proverb "afa onye na edu e" (a person's name leads them). This study contributes to broader discussions on cultural representation, identity formation, and the role of onomastics in African literature, offering insights into how literary naming practices serve as vehicles for cultural preservation and social commentary in postcolonial Nigerian theatre.

Keywords: African Literature, Semiotics, Character Naming, Anioma Culture, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Character naming is a deliberate literary device that offers a window into an author's social and cultural context. In African literature, character names often reflect the author's own social and cultural identity, shaped by personal experiences that inform their values, biases, and perspectives. These names express the philosophies, ethos, values, ideology, culture, and attitudes of different communities (Wamitila 35).

This study examines the significance of character naming in Zulu Sofola's *Old Wines are Tasty* in order to explore how names reflect the author's social and cultural context and reveal character traits and roles. In Anioma culture, Delta State, the significance of names is encapsulated in the local proverb "afa onye ne edu e," meaning "a man's name leads him through," highlighting the importance of thoughtful and meaningful name-giving.

Zulu Sofola was a Nigerian playwright and dramatist, born on June 22, 1935, in Delta State, Nigeria. She is known for affirming African values and spirituality in her works, often exploring the fusion and tension between traditional way of life in a typical Anioma society and modern ways. She is an individualistic writer with great support for an enlightened traditional society. She was a university lecturer who rose to become the first female Professor of Theater Arts in Nigeria and in Africa.

Statement of Problem

Despite the growing interest in African literature and cultural studies, the pivotal role of character naming in Zulu Sofola's *Old Wines are Tasty* as a mediator of cultural identity remains under-explored. This oversight underscores the need for a closer look at how character names in this important work reflect and shape cultural identity.

Significance of the study

Specifically, this research aims to investigate how character naming in *Old Wines are Tasty* navigates the complexities of post-colonial Nigeria, where traditional and modern cultural values intersect and often conflict.

This study fulfills a critical archival function by systematically documenting the Anioma cultural practice of *Idegbe* and its accompanying naming conventions within an academic framework. In an era of rapid globalization, urbanization, and cultural transformation, such documentation serves not merely as historical record but as active cultural preservation,

ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems remain accessible to future generations. The research demonstrates that Anioma naming practices embody sophisticated philosophical systems—particularly the proverb "afa onye na edu e" (a person's name leads them)—thereby creating permanent scholarly records of epistemologies that might otherwise be lost to modernization. For younger generations increasingly disconnected from traditional practices, this work provides intellectual infrastructure that validates and transmits African knowledge systems, contributing to what Ngugi wa Thiong'o terms the project of "decolonizing the mind."

Within postcolonial theoretical frameworks, this scholarship directly confronts the epistemic violence that has historically positioned African cultures as ontologically inferior to Western traditions. By demonstrating the intellectual sophistication embedded in Anioma cultural practices through rigorous academic analysis, the research contests deficit narratives and provides symbolic capital that reinforces cultural citizenship for marginalized communities. This function proves particularly significant for Anioma populations and diaspora communities navigating hybrid identities and seeking meaningful connections to ancestral practices. The study offers frameworks for understanding cultural inheritance beyond essentialist models, acknowledging the dynamic negotiation between tradition and modernity while affirming that African epistemologies possess equal validity and complexity to Western knowledge systems.

The tension between Okebuno's cultural alienation and his heritage, as analyzed in this study, mirrors broader sociological phenomena affecting contemporary African societies facing rural-urban migration, identity crises among educated Africans, and intergenerational cultural disconnection. This research provides analytical frameworks with practical applications for educational policy, cultural programming, and community development initiatives aimed at maintaining social cohesion amid rapid cultural change. By offering conceptual vocabularies for discussing heritage preservation versus cultural evolution, the study informs policy discussions while providing theoretical resources for understanding the psychological and social consequences of cultural dislocation. These insights possess relevance not only for Nigerian contexts but for any society grappling with the complexities of cultural transmission in an increasingly globalized world.

This work models culturally grounded literary criticism by centering Anioma epistemology alongside established literary theory, demonstrating productive theoretical syncretism that Kwame Anthony Appiah terms "rooted cosmopolitanism." By showing how indigenous proverbs and cultural concepts can function as primary analytical tools rather than mere anthropological context, the research challenges methodological frameworks that position African literature as requiring exclusively Western theoretical lenses. This approach possesses significant pedagogical implications for how African literature should be taught, analyzed, and theorized within both African and international academic contexts, contributing to broader decolonial projects aimed at restructuring global knowledge production hierarchies and expanding onomastic theory beyond predominantly Eurocentric frameworks.

Background of the Play

Having established the importance of character naming in African literature, we can now examine how this manifests specifically in Sofola's work through an overview of the play's context.

The play, *Old Wines Are Tasty*, published in 1979, is a thought-provoking work that explores the complexities of Nigerian culture and identity. Set against the background of traditional and modern values, it delves into themes of tradition, modernity, and cultural dislocation.

The plot revolves around Okebuno, a young man born through the traditional surrogacy practice of "Idegbe"...a cultural practice that allows a daughter to remain unmarried and bear children for her father, often due to the father's inability to have especially, male child. Okebuno's birth is a result of this practice, with his mother Anyasi bearing him for her father in accordance with cultural norms. Months after Okebuno's birth, one of Anyasi's father's wives, got pregnant and delivered for her husband, a son. There is a twist in Okebuno's case as the man that eventually married his mother, adopted him and christened him. Understanding the play's context is crucial for analyzing the cultural significance of names in *Old Wines are Tasty*.

Cultural Significance of Names

In Nigerian culture, specifically Anioma culture, names hold significant importance and are often given based on their meanings, which can reflect the circumstances of a child's birth, the family's history, or their aspirations for the child. This cultural practice is evident in the play, where character names are used to convey meaning and significance. The name Okebuno which literally

means *a man is the house*, for example, is a reflection of his birth circumstances, highlighting the cultural significance of names in Nigerian society.

The play is an exploration of the friction between tradition and modernity, as Okebuno navigates his identity and cultural heritage. The "*Idegbe*" practice serves as a symbol of traditional cultural values, while Okebuno's actions and decisions reflect the challenges of modernity. Through the characters and their experiences, the play dwells on the complexities of Nigerian culture and identity, highlighting the importance of understanding and respecting cultural heritage. In the play, characters act and live the meaning of their names to validate the Anioma world view that "*afa onye na edu e*". They are meant to guide the ideological and philosophical stance of the bearer.

The play, *Old Wines Are Tasty* provides a unique perspective on Nigerian culture and identity, offering insights into the country's rich cultural heritage. The play's exploration of traditional practices, cultural values, and identity makes it a significant work in Nigerian literature, highlighting the importance of cultural context in shaping individual and collective experiences.

***Idegbe* - Traditional Surrogacy Among the Aniomas: An Overview**

Central to understanding the character dynamics in *Old Wines Are Tasty* is the cultural practice of *Idegbe*, which provides the fundamental conflict in the narrative and shapes the protagonist's identity crisis.

Surrogacy is a form of assisted reproductive mechanism and practice supported by science, technology, morality, legality, and culture. In Igbo culture, surrogacy has various dimensions which each is geared towards helping an individual meet the need of child bearing and to validate the high premium the culture places on procreation and children, especially, the male child.

Among the various challenges facing Nigerian marriages, childlessness ranks as the most critical concern in Anioma land, where surrogacy serves as a remedial practice. This has been in existence before the introduction of assisted reproductive technology and IVF. In this stance, the husband of the infertile woman would have access to another woman and after the birth of the child, it is handed over to them. Among the Anioma, this assisted birth takes various forms:

- A married childless woman purportedly marries another woman for her husband to bear children for her. The children are hers because she paid the bride price.

- A married childless woman, who is still in a subsisting marriage, marries for herself another woman to have children who becomes her heir in future.
- The relations of a man who had died without a child, marries a young lady to bear children for the deceased man posthumously. The lady is informed from the beginning that she is marrying a dead man or a non-living man. If she agrees, she is free to sleep with any man of her choice to have children for the dead man.
- The family of a deceased woman that was cohabiting with a man before her death, compels the man to marry her corpse before burial.
- A childless single woman marries another woman on her own and any child gotten from this marriage bears her father's name. This child will be hers and would bear the same surname with her.
- Among communities in Aniocha, like Ezi, Olona, the birthplace of the playwright Zulu Sofola, a single girl is allowed to bear children for the father and in most cases, male children for the father. The members of the community accept these children who are in most cases easily identified by the name they bear like, Okebuno (a male is the house), Nwabuife (a child is something), Nwabunor (a child makes a home), or Nwauno (a child born at home), etc. The challenges faced by the infertile couple determines the name they would give to their child when he/she is born. For instance, if the challenge is not having a male child, Okebuno stands out, if it is the absence of a child, Nwabunor, comes handy.

It is worthy to note that a typical Anioma community is patrilineal in nature since the inheritance and properties is passed on from parents to male children. In the absence of a male child, these properties are lost to relatives or strangers. The cultural practice of "Idegbe" provides a rich context for the application of literary semiotics and Bal's classical or sense theory of proper names.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on theoretical insights from literary semiotics and Bal's classical or sense theory of proper names. According to Bal's theory, an individual's name describes what it names or refers to and fulfills varying purposes depending on what the name giver wants to either uphold or reject (73). In contrast to referential theories that view names as mere arbitrary labels functioning solely for identification purposes—what John Stuart Mill termed purely "denotative" function (33)—Bal's theory posits that names convey meaningful significance that shapes a character's role and presence within the narrative. This perspective aligns with Mill's notion of "connotative" meaning,

wherein names not only identify but also describe and prescribe character essence. Expanding on this concept, names can be seen as indicators of character traits, actions, or experiences, subtly hinting at the narrative paths their bearers will traverse.

The application of this theory to the analysis of names in the play can provide valuable insights into the characters and their roles. For instance, the name Okebuno reflects cultural identity and role in the play, emphasizing the importance of being rooted in tradition and culture. However, Okebuno's character is portrayed as disconnected from his cultural heritage to highlight the tension between tradition and modernity. Also, the name Anyasi can be analysed in the context of her character and her relationship with Okebuno, reflecting the consequences of her actions in the past and the cultural significance of traditional practices. By examining the cultural significance of proper names in the play, we can have a deeper understanding of the author's social and cultural environment and how it relates to the themes of the play. The analysis of names in the play highlights the importance of cultural context and the role of tradition in shaping individual and collective experiences.

Review of Related Literature

The importance of names in African worldview and literature is a complex and multifaceted topic that has been explored by various scholars. In African cosmology, names are not randomly assigned to individuals; they are given for specific reasons. The environment in which a person is born, the historical context at the time of birth, and consultations with family members and community leaders are all considered when choosing a name. This emphasis on names reflects the importance of identity and cultural heritage in African societies.

Studies have employed onomastic analysis to examine the linguistic choices authors make when naming characters in African literature. These investigations recognize that in African literary traditions, character names are rarely arbitrary selections; instead, they represent carefully considered linguistic and cultural choices that encode meaning at multiple levels. Scholars utilizing onomastic approaches analyze how authors draw from indigenous naming conventions, linguistic resources, cultural proverbs, and historical contexts to create names that reveal character traits, foreshadow narrative developments, and articulate thematic concerns. This analytical framework proves particularly valuable for understanding African literature, where naming traditions are

deeply embedded in cultural epistemologies and where, as the Anioma proverb suggests, "afa onye ne edu e"—a person's name leads them through life.

Similarly, Olamide's (2013) study examines the semantic implications of authorial name choices in Wole Soyinka's works, providing valuable insights into how one of Africa's most celebrated writers utilizes onomastic resources as a literary device. Employing semantic analysis, Olamide investigates how Soyinka's character names function as signifiers that encode cultural meanings and philosophical positions. He opines that the ideas, worldviews, and philosophical orientations that names generate and communicate have significant onomastic implications for understanding both character construction and authorial intent. Olamide's analysis demonstrates that Soyinka, working within the Yoruba cultural framework where names are imbued with spiritual and prophetic significance, deliberately selects names that resonate with deeper symbolic meanings (42). These naming choices, Olamide argues, are not incidental but rather constitute integral components of Soyinka's artistic vision, serving to reinforce thematic concerns and guide audience interpretation of character motivations and narrative trajectories.

The socio-cultural context in which authors write plays a significant role in shaping their naming choices. When there's a disconnect between the person bearing the name and the author's ideological stance, it can lead to limitations. This highlights the importance of considering the socio-cultural context in which authors write and how this influences their naming choices.

To buttress this, Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays in the study titled *The Language of Names* (16) explain that our daily activities and speeches are guides to the names we bear. Names, whether full name, first name or both, have a link with our family and extended kinship ties and family history.

Existing research has provided valuable insights, but there are still limitations that need to be addressed. For instance, many studies have been on onomastic analysis while neglecting the socio-cultural context in which authors write. Furthermore, the reliance on limited sample sizes and the influence of researchers' own cultural backgrounds on their interpretations of data are potential limitations that need to be considered. Building on existing research, this study examines how character names function as cultural signifiers in *Old Wines are Tasty*.

Names as Signifiers in Zulu Sofola's *Old Wines Are Tasty*

Building on these theoretical foundations and previous research, we can now analyse how specific character names in *Old Wines Are Tasty* function as cultural signifier that reflects both traditional values and the author's sociocultural perspective.

Okebuno Mukulo: A Disconnect between Name and Character

"Okebuno Mukulo", the protagonist, bears a name that paradigmatically signifies "a man is the home" and "it is my turn." However, his actions and behavior starkly juxtapose the expectations associated with his appellation. His evident ignorance of his cultural heritage and history is a striking irony, given the profound significance of names in African cultural contexts.

Okebuno's disconnection from his roots is poignantly underscored through various interactions with other characters. Dumkwu's description of Okebuno as a "community son" subtly implies his detachment from his cultural lineage (p. 9). Modi's inquiry into Okebuno's understanding of their customs emphasizes the paramount importance of cultural knowledge and heritage (p. 12). The Odogwu's scathing dismissal of Okebuno as a representative, labeling him a "bastard, a small boy, a nobody" (p. 15), further highlights his cultural ineptness.

The play explores how important names are in African culture, as an individual's appellation is believed to reveal their character and personality. Okebuno's inability to measure up with the expectations associated with his name highlights his disconnection from his cultural heritage. His mother, Anyasi, validates this notion when she states, 'A man's name speaks volumes about him' (p. 43). This cultural disconnect becomes the central conflict in *Old Wines Are Tasty* as Okebuno struggles with his identity. Okebuno Mukulo's character serves as a scathing commentary on the importance of cultural knowledge and the significance of names in African culture.

The dichotomy between Okebuno's name and his actions serves as a poignant commentary on the tension between tradition and modernity, as well as the importance of cultural identity, touching strongly on the theme of cultural roots and the consequences of neglecting one's heritage. Ultimately, the play highlights the imperative of cultural awareness and the need for individuals to appreciate their heritage in order to navigate the complexities of their identity.

In Africa, names are not just tags placed on commodities, they carry significant meaning and weight. Okebuno's name, which literally means "a man is the home" and "it is my turn," reflects the cultural worldview that embodies

the philosophical stance of his community. However, Okebuno's actions starkly contrast with the expectations associated with his name. His ignorance of his cultural heritage and his inability to connect with his community's traditions highlight the tension between tradition and modernity.

The climax of Okebuno's disconnect from his cultural heritage is evident when he threatens to hurt his mother if she doesn't reveal his biological father's identity (p. 55). His mother's response validates the importance placed on family names and highlights Okebuno's naivety. Anyasi's words, "I gave birth to you as God said life should be made, but I was not the cause of the system that brought you into this world" (p. 55), underscore the complexities of cultural identity and the importance of understanding one's heritage. If Anyasi had not birthed a male child for the father, the lineage of the father would not continue, as a female child would marry out and bear her husband's family name. According to Akuagwu:

And he won't humble himself and learn. Those boys know that one who calls an Idegbe child a bastard is made to pay the worst fine in the land because it's a crime; but they threw it into his face with impunity because they know how the elders feel about him... (P. 56)

Okebuno's mother's pitiable reply also validates the fact that culture is supreme. She laments that all she did was required of her by the culture. In her words, "...but only God knows that I did what the land expects of a good daughter whose father could not have son" (P. 56)

The play emphasizes the importance of cultural identity and the consequences of neglecting one's heritage. Adequate knowledge of one's culture informs not only the behavior of an individual but also their character. They would not want to do things that contradict the cultural beliefs and worldview of their people. Okebuno's character serves as a commentary on the importance of staying connected to one's cultural roots and the potential consequences of abandoning them. Ndudi Ndudi, Okebuno's wife, is a symbolic character representing the consequences of one's actions and the importance of accountability. Her name, "once there is life," metaphorically signifies that time will reveal and either heal or aggravate past mistakes.

The names in the play are metaphorically significant, foreshadowing the consequences of characters' actions. For instance, Anyasi's name, 'evening time,' symbolizes the consequences of her involvement in surrogacy at a young age. Anyasi's words, "there is nothing as respect for people...the tail of the dog

is still where it is" (p. 7), serve as a poignant critique of Okebuno's behavior and the societal expectations placed upon him.

Okolo: The Catalyst of Conflict

Okolo, the antagonist, plays an important role in the play, catalyzing the events that ultimately lead to Okebuno's demise. The name "Okolo" signifies a young man who is outstanding and knowledgeable of the culture, highlighting the irony of his role in exposing Okebuno's cultural ignorance. Through Okolo's words, the traditional surrogacy practice of "Idegbe" that produced Okebuno is revealed, further emphasizing Okebuno's disconnect from his cultural heritage. Okebuno's character serves as a commentary on the importance of staying connected to one's cultural roots. His ignorance of simple cultural practices, such as arranging chairs for elders and chiefs, highlights the potential consequences of abandoning one's heritage. Okolo's cohort, Enuma, whose name means "The universe knows," contributes to the exposure of Okebuno's ignorance, underscoring the significance of cultural knowledge and understanding.

Okolo and Enuma's actions serve as a commentary on the importance of cultural awareness and the consequences of neglecting one's heritage. These characters highlight the tension between traditional way of life and modernity, as well as the importance of understanding and respecting one's cultural roots. Dumkwu, the Talker

Another character worthy of mention is Dumkwu, which literally means "help me in talking." She is introduced in the Act One of the plays, immediately after Anyasi's complaint of Okebuno's unavailability at home to be greeted by the villagers who came to welcome him. She is called the mother of wisdom (p. 8). She validates her name immediately when Ndudi, Okebuno's wife, greets her. In reply to her greeting, she says "Ada Oma, the wife whose entry into the house of Mukolu heralded abundance and fame, Welcome." Those words ordinarily would be enough for an answer to a greeting, but she continues and, living up to the name she bears, she faces Anyasi:

It is difficult nowadays to find wives with good heads. Young girls of today start their witchcraft in their mother's wombs. They catch their husbands with medicine, wash good luck and good sense off their husband's head so that they easily invite him to behold them and their lovers do the evil work in the broad daylight. Anyasi, a man who gets a good wife today must give his gods a cow. What one sees nowadays is enough to blind a blindman. (P.8)

This extended monologue exemplifies how Sofola uses character speech to validate the cultural significance embedded in names. Dumkwu's response, which transforms a simple greeting into a lengthy discourse on contemporary morality, perfectly embodies the essence of her name—"help me in talking." Her inability to offer a brief reply demonstrates that she is compelled by her very nature to elaborate, comment, and moralize, thereby fulfilling the prophetic function of her name.

Sofola's naming choice reflects the Anioma cultural understanding that names are not merely labels but prescriptive forces that shape behavior and social roles. Dumkwu's references to witchcraft, spiritual medicine, and the traditional practice of offering "his gods a cow" for a virtuous wife reveal deeply embedded cultural anxieties about female power, marital fidelity, and the perceived erosion of traditional values in modern times. Her hyperbolic assertion that contemporary moral decay is "enough to blind a blindman" underscores the play's central tension between traditional values (old wines) and modernity.

Through Dumkwu, Sofola creates a character who serves as both cultural commentator and comic relief, demonstrating how names in Anioma culture function as behavioral blueprints. Dumkwu doesn't simply talk excessively; she fulfills a communal role as keeper of traditional wisdom and moral arbiter, validating once again the proverb that "afa onye na edu e"—a person's name indeed leads them through life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, names and their significance in African culture and literature are a complex and multifaceted topic. By examining the socio-cultural context in which authors write and how this influences their naming choices, this study has provided a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between authors' socio-cultural contexts and character naming in African literature.

This analysis of character naming in Zulu Sofola's *Old Wines Are Tasty* reveals the profound interconnection between names and cultural identity in African literature. As demonstrated through the examination of characters like Okebuno, Anyasi, and Dumkwu, names serve not merely as labels but as complex signifier that encode cultural expectations, personal histories, and social roles.

The stark disconnects between Okebuno's name which signifies his role as the male heir and foundation of his household and his actions highlights Sofola's critique of cultural alienation in post-colonial Nigeria. This disconnect exemplifies Bal's theory that names function beyond mere identification to embody character traits and thematic concerns. Through this naming strategy, Sofola emphasizes the consequences of abandoning cultural heritage in favor of modern values detached from traditional wisdom.

This research contributes to the growing scholarship on onomastics in African literature by demonstrating how character naming reflects not only literary aesthetics but also serves as a vehicle for cultural preservation and social commentary. Future studies might explore how other Nigerian playwrights employ similar naming strategies or how these patterns evolve across different generations of African writers responding to changing sociocultural contexts.

Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 1985.
- Collins, P. H. "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2001, pp. 9-17.
- Ennin, Theresah Patrine, and Nancy Boahemaa Nkansah. "A Literary Anthroponomastics of Three Selected African Novels: A Cross-Cultural Perspective." *International Journal of Society, Culture, and Language*, 2016, www.ijscsl.com/article_17784_3475e7cbec2e89e011eb77526efeb740.pdf. Accessed 23 Feb. 2025.
- Kaplan, Justin, and Anne Bernays. *The Language of Names*. Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*. John W. Parker, 1843.
- Oha, Obododimma. "Praise Names and Power Deconstruction in Contemporary Igbo Chiefship." *Culture, Language and Representation*, vol. 7, 2009, pp. 101-116.
- Olamide, A. E. "Semantic Implications of Author's Names in Creativity: A Study of Wole Soyinka's Selected Works." *Language in India*, 2013, pp. 714-735.

Sofola, Zulu. *Old Wines Are Tasty*. Oxford University Press, 1979.

Wamitila, Kyallo Wadi. "What is a Name: Towards Literary Onomastics in Kiswahili Literature." *Swahili Forum*, vol. 60, 1999, pp. 33-45.