

Ethnic Identity through Character Construction: Examining Semantic Essence of Yoruba Names in Femi Adebayo's *Jagun Jagun* and Bode Sowande's *Arede Owo*

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Abstract:

This study looks into the significance of thematic nomenclature in character construction within the rich cultural lineage of the Yoruba tradition, as depicted in the film "Jagunjagun" by Femi Adebayo and the stage play "Arede owo" by Bode Sowande. Through meticulous linguistic analysis of character names, this research uncovers the layers of meaning interwoven into each name, serving as a reflection of socio-cultural themes and enhancing narrative complexity. In "Jagunjagun", names such as Gbogunmi and Ogundiji resonate with the spirit of war, while in "Arede owo", characters like Ajeigbe and Surulere encapsulate themes of wealth, friendship, and misery. The comic relevance in *Arede Owo* begins from the choice of names given to character and the theme of war reflect in almost every characters names in the movie *Jagun Jagun*. Having experienced both the stage play and the film, our methodology involved immersing ourselves in the linguistic mosaic of these works, allowing us to discern the transformative power of language in shaping narrative identity and imbuing characters with authenticity and resonance. It is evident that in Yoruba culture, as in many other cultures, names are imbued with profound meaning, often serving as signifiers of individual identity and societal values. The observation that plays and films with meaningful character names tend to captivate audiences and draw crowds to cinemas and theatres reveals the enduring fascination with the exploration of linguistic symbolism in storytelling. Indeed, the resonance of these works lies not only in their narrative arcs but also in the symbolic weight carried by the characters' names. As such, this study sheds light on the interplay between language, culture, and storytelling.

Keywords:

Thematic, Character, Socio-cultural, Cinema, nomenclature, language

I. Introduction

Among the Yoruba people, names are never arbitrary; they are cultural texts encoded with meanings that transcend mere identification. A Yoruba proverb states, "*Ile laawo ka to so ọmọ l'oríko*," which translates to "The circumstances of the home and the situation of birth determine the name a child is given." This proverb illustrates the cultural conviction that names function as reflections of lived experiences, situational realities, and communal philosophies. A name, therefore, is not just a label but a narrative in itself—a carrier of history, values, cosmology, and identity. It can provide insights into the religion one practices, the deity one venerates, the lineage one descends from, or even the circumstances that accompanied one's birth. The Yoruba worldview underscores the idea that names serve as

condensed repositories of social knowledge.

Oladipupo defines a name as “an edifying emblem given to a child at birth by the parents, or brought from heaven by the child during that child’s birth” (66). This definition underscores the Yoruba belief that names are not merely chosen but divinely ordained, brought along from the metaphysical realm as part of a child’s destiny (*ayanmo*). This explains why symbolic objects are used during naming ceremonies, since naming is not only a linguistic act but a spiritual and communal one. Among the Yoruba, the *ìkòsèwéyà* (naming ceremony) involves elders, parents, and spiritual figures who ritually assign meaning through the utterance of names. Such rituals reinforce the cosmological idea that a name is a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms, situating the individual within a continuum of ancestral, communal, and divine influences.

Because of this spiritual and cultural significance, Yoruba names are layered with meanings that reflect identity and social belonging. For instance, birth circumstance names such as *Aina* (a child born with the umbilical cord around the neck), *Dada* (a child born with natural dreadlocks), or *Taiwo* and *Kehinde* (twins who carry specific metaphysical roles) reveal not only how an individual came into the world but also hint at the characteristics or destiny associated with that child. Similarly, religious names like *Sangodele* (the god Sango has come), *Ogunbanwo* (Ogun defends me), *Osunsanya* (Osun rewards me), and *Fayemi* (adorn me with honor) explicitly encode the individual’s spiritual affiliations. Even in contemporary Yoruba society, where Islam and Christianity have gained dominance, surnames and personal names still often reveal religious affiliations. One can tell whether a family has traditional religious roots, is Muslim, or is Christian simply by paying attention to their names.

This intrinsic quality of names—to convey deep symbolic meaning—has not remained confined to ritual or everyday life but has been extended to artistic and entertainment practices. In cinema and theatre, names are not just identifiers of characters; they serve as tools of narrative conveyance, offering audiences embedded cultural codes that enrich plot development and characterization. In this sense, Yoruba names function as linguistic devices that bridge culture and creativity, merging the everyday symbolic significance of names with the imaginative world of performance.

In cinematic and theatrical storytelling, the art of character construction extends beyond dialogue, gestures, and actions. Names, carefully chosen, become vessels of thematic and symbolic significance. They serve as indices that cue the audience into cultural references, moral dispositions, and the philosophical orientations of characters. Thus, names in Yoruba creative works are not arbitrary but intentional crafted to enrich narrative depth and to align the audience’s interpretative framework with the cultural subtext of the story.

This paper undertakes an exploration of the linguistic and cultural functions of names in two Yoruba creative works: the contemporary Nollywood epic film *Jagunjagun* (2023) and Bode Sowande’s Yoruba adaptation of Molière’s *The Miser*, titled *Aredeowo*. These two works, though differing in form film and stage play are united by the intentional deployment of Yoruba names to convey cultural identity, thematic depth, and character construction. Through close analysis of their character names, this study examines how Yoruba naming practices are transposed into modern creative production to shape narrative meaning.

The socio-cultural elements embedded in both *Jagunjagun* and *Aredeowo* reflect deliberate artistic choices. The use of Yoruba names is not incidental but strategic, serving to

communicate themes, values, and ideological positions. For instance, Bode Sowande, a seasoned playwright renowned for weaving Yoruba linguistic and cultural aesthetics into his works, demonstrates this intentionality in *Aredeowo*. Although the play is an adaptation of Molière's seventeenth-century French comedy, Sowande localizes it not only in setting and language but also in onomastics. He could have retained the French names of the characters or assigned random Yoruba labels, but instead, he harnessed the cultural weight of Yoruba names, thereby deepening the audience's engagement with the story and anchoring it in familiar cultural idioms. This intentional craftsmanship underscores the argument that Yoruba names are aesthetic resources in dramatic composition. Similarly, *Jagunjagun*, an epic Nollywood production, uses names not only as identifiers but as thematic markers that guide the audience's interpretation of the narrative. Names like *Gbogunmi* ("one who swallows war"), *Ogundiji* (linked to the god Ogun, representing war and iron), or *Gbotija* ("one who pays attention to the sound of war") are more than lexical constructions; they are narrative cues. They foreshadow the roles characters play, reveal aspects of their destiny, and embed the film within a continuum of Yoruba oral traditions where praise poetry (*oriki*), incantations, and proverbs heavily rely on the power of names. The choice to analyze both a film and a stage play demonstrates the cross-genre adaptability of Yoruba onomastics in creative production. While film allows names to resonate visually and sonically in a cinematic landscape, theatre offers a more immediate, performative engagement with names as dramatic signifiers. Together, these two forms illustrate the versatility of Yoruba names as cultural and artistic tools.

Scholars have emphasized that names function as socio-cultural expressions of identity. Abdulganiy et al. quote Yusuf, Olatunji, and Issah in noting that "names are not just abstract terms couched in indefiniteness, they are more than mere labels, but loaded with meaningful and symbolic connotations" (74). From the interactionist perspective, naming is a uniquely human practice, one that encodes meanings, values, and histories into linguistic form. Within Yoruba culture, this practice is heightened by the deep spiritual, historical, and social dimensions of naming. Thus, when Yoruba names are employed in film and theatre, they carry with them not only narrative function but also layers of cultural resonance.

Foregrounding the significance of names in *Jagunjagun* and *Aredeowo*, this study situates Yoruba onomastics within broader debates in cultural theory, theatre studies, and film analysis. It demonstrates how Yoruba names act as sites of cultural memory, embodying traditions that have survived colonial disruptions and continue to evolve in postcolonial artistic expressions. Moreover, this study underscores the importance of indigenous languages in creative production, showing how Yoruba names not only enrich characterization but also affirm cultural identity in an era of global cultural exchanges.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 *Jagunjagun* and the Linguistic Function of Names in Film Construction

At the heart of "Jagunjagun" lies the spirit of the warrior, encapsulated in the names of its key characters. The titular term, "Jagunjagun", translates to "warrior" and serves as a beacon illuminating the film's thematic landscape. It offers a glimpse into the visceral essence of war, setting the tone for the epic narrative that unfolds.

Looking deeper into the linguistic thread, we encounter characters like Gbogunmi, whose name in Yoruba translates to "swallow war". However, its nuanced meaning transcends literal interpretation, portraying a figure endowed with the innate ability to consume and

conquer adversity. Similarly, Iroyinogunkiitan symbolizes the indelible imprint of war on memory, echoing the sentiment that the echoes of battle never truly fade.

Central to the narrative is Ogundiji, whose very name signifies the transformative power of war, likening it to a tempestuous storm that reshapes both land and soul. Each character name serves as a prism refracting the multifaceted facets of conflict, enriching the viewer's understanding of the human experience within the crucible of war.

Moreover, Gbotija emerges as a central figure, his name embodying the essence of vigilance and strategic acumen. As someone who pays heed to the sounds of combat, she becomes instrumental in the unfolding drama, navigating the intricacies of conflict with precision and foresight. Together, these names form the backbone of character construction, infusing "Jagunjagun" with a sense of authenticity and resonance.

2.2 Names and Semanticity through the Stage lens in Aredeowo

In contrast to the cinematic canvas of "Jagunjagun", "Aredeowo" unfolds its narrative tapestry on the stage, drawing inspiration from Moliere's timeless classic, "The Miser". Yet, it embarks on a linguistic odyssey of its own, as character names become vessels of thematic revelation.

At the heart of the play lies Ajeigbe, a figure whose very name "wealth shouldn't waste" epitomizes the central motif of fiscal prudence and frugality. Gifted with a son named Owodunni, whose name evokes the seductive allure of wealth, Ajeigbe grapples with the perennial tension between opulence and austerity, laying bare the complexities of human desire and obligation.

In the orbit of Ajeigbe orbits a constellation of characters, each bearing names pregnant with meaning. Gbotie, aptly named "Listener" or "Solver", embodies the resourceful spirit of the Lagosian archetype, adept at leveraging social networks and interpersonal dynamics to navigate life's myriad challenges. Meanwhile, Animashaun emerges as a stark contrast, his name "a cheerful giver" serving as a testament to his altruistic nature, which stands in stark juxtaposition to Ajeigbe's parsimony.

Surulere, a character emblematic of Lagosian urban culture, encapsulates the ethos of patience and perseverance, as his name suggests. As a foil to Ajeigbe, he navigates the treacherous terrain of their relationship with stoic resolve, embodying the adage that patience indeed has its rewards.

2.3 The Yoruba Linguistic Mosaic in Stage and Screen Production Characterization Through Names

Through the prism of linguistic analysis, both "Jagunjagun" and "Aredeowo" emerge as exemplars of thematic nomenclature in character construction. Each name serves as a portal, offering insights into the rich tapestry of human experience and emotion.

In "Jagunjagun", the evocative names of its characters evoke the visceral realities of war, infusing the narrative with a sense of gravitas and authenticity. Meanwhile, "Aredeowo" weaves a web of linguistic intrigue, as characters grapple with the timeless dilemmas of wealth, friendship, and obligation.

Ultimately, these works stand as testaments to the power of language in shaping

narrative identity and imbuing characters with depth and resonance. As viewers and readers, we are invited to embark on a journey of discovery, where every name becomes a thread in the intricate tapestry of storytelling.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study employs cultural theory as its primary analytical framework in order to examine Yoruba naming practices, aesthetics, and proverbial expressions as they manifest in film and stage productions. Cultural theory, broadly conceived, focuses on how social practices, traditions, and symbolic forms shape and sustain cultural identities across time. In this research, it provides a robust lens through which Yoruba names embedded in narratives like *Jagunjagun* and *Aredeowo* can be interpreted as carriers of historical memory, spiritual significance, and aesthetic creativity.

At its core, cultural theory posits that culture is not an isolated category but a pervasive force that governs everyday practices, shaping both individual behavior and communal life. Smith explains that cultural theory is “inherently guided by culture, shaping everyday activities and experiences” (13). This understanding situates culture as a formative influence that conditions how people perceive themselves, their relationships, and the world they inhabit. Within Yoruba society, this translates into naming practices that preserve cultural values and encode cosmological beliefs. For example, names like *Olumaseun* (“God is worthy of thanks”) or *Sàngódélé* (“Sango has returned home”) are not just linguistic markers but reflections of cultural and spiritual orientations. Applying cultural theory, this study aims to achieve two key objectives: first, to unpack the cultural significance of Yoruba naming practices, and second, to explore how aesthetics whether through linguistic artistry, proverbial wisdom, or symbolic expression communicates philosophical and moral values within performance traditions. Yoruba culture is deeply invested in symbolic communication, and names serve as microcosms of broader cultural ideologies. Stuart Hall argues that culture is “a complex web of meanings and practices that shape individual and collective identities” (52). This notion is particularly useful when applied to Yoruba cultural practices, where names, proverbs, and aesthetics intersect to construct identities. For instance, in Yoruba plays, characters often embody not only individual personalities but also communal archetypes. Names in this context function as both identifiers and narrative tools. In Sowande’s *Aredeowo*, the miserly father’s name, *Ajéìgbé* (“wealth must not waste”), does not only describe his character but also reflects a communal cautionary tale about the dangers of greed and miserliness. Thus, names are saturated with cultural meanings that both shape and reflect identity.

Karin Barber adds to this understanding by showing how Yoruba cultural practices such as proverbial expressions and oral poetry serve as “repositories of moral lessons, cultural values, and historical narratives” (91). In the Yoruba worldview, the act of naming and the usage of proverbs are pedagogical—they instruct, admonish, and affirm cultural values. For example, a proverb like *Orúkọ rere sàṣà jù wúrà àtí fàdákà* (“a good name is better than gold or silver”) explicitly ties the concept of naming to moral reputation and ethical standing in society. Barber’s insights affirm that Yoruba naming practices and proverbial uses in performance are not ornamental but integral to how cultural memory and identity are communicated. Artistic expressions within Yoruba culture also align with Rowland Abiodun’s emphasis on the aesthetics of Yoruba art, which he argues “embody spiritual and philosophical concepts” (14). Just as Yoruba sculpture, textile patterns, or architectural motifs are infused with metaphysical meanings, so too are Yoruba names infused with layered significations. A name like *Gbógúnmi* (“swallow war”), used in *Jagunjagun*, functions both as an

aesthetic creation (drawing on the poetic compactness of Yoruba orature) and as a philosophical statement about resilience, courage, and destiny.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu further illuminates this analysis through his concept of habitus, which refers to the dispositions and perceptions shaped by cultural practices that structure everyday life (16). Yoruba naming practices exemplify habitus because they cultivate dispositions about identity, morality, and social belonging. A Yoruba child named *Ìyàntóyín* (“suffering is sweet”) may grow up internalizing resilience and endurance as virtues shaped by the cultural expectation embedded in the name. In theatrical or cinematic representations, such names immediately evoke shared cultural understandings, allowing audiences to anticipate character motivations and conflicts.

Yet cultural theory also emphasizes dynamism rather than rigidity. As Comaroff and Comaroff note, culture is not static but “constantly negotiated and redefined through social interactions and power dynamics” (38). This is evident in Yoruba society, where naming practices have adapted to reflect contemporary realities while retaining traditional foundations. With the spread of Christianity and Islam, names like *Abdulahman*, *Maryam*, or *Emmanuel* coexist with traditional Yoruba names, sometimes even blending into hybridized identities. In contemporary performance, these adaptations are mirrored as playwrights and filmmakers deliberately juxtapose traditional and modern names to reflect tensions between heritage and modernity.

In this sense, Yoruba names function as both anchors of tradition and sites of cultural negotiation. A name in *Aredeowo* or *Jagunjagun* is not only a linguistic expression but a cultural text that audiences decode based on their shared knowledge of Yoruba language and worldview. This underscores the value of cultural theory as a framework for analyzing how meaning is produced and circulated within performance.

Furthermore, cultural theory highlights the interplay between aesthetics and social structures. Names in Yoruba society are aesthetically constructed; they often carry rhythmic cadences, tonal beauty, and metaphorical depth. Yet they are also socially functional, serving as indicators of lineage, religious affiliation, and communal identity. Cultural theory, therefore, provides the tools to analyze Yoruba naming practices not only as linguistic artifacts but as dynamic cultural productions that bridge aesthetics, morality, and social identity.

Summarily, cultural theory offers a robust and multidimensional framework for understanding Yoruba naming practices and their representation in stage and screen productions. By situating names within the broader cultural matrix of proverbs, oral traditions, aesthetics, and spirituality, this framework reveals how names operate as symbolic systems that shape identities, transmit values, and negotiate modern realities. It also underscores that culture, as theorists emphasize, is a vibrant and evolving force, and Yoruba naming practices exemplify this dynamism. The Yoruba creative imagination, as seen in *Jagunjagun* and *Aredeowo*, demonstrates how indigenous linguistic resources continue to enrich performance traditions, affirm cultural identity, and engage audiences with narratives of enduring relevance.

III. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study point to the enduring significance of Yoruba names, language, and cultural expressions in enriching film and stage productions. To deepen the

implications of this research, a number of recommendations are made to guide future scholarship and practice in African media and performance.

3.1 Investigating the Impact of Yorùbá Language on Film Audiences and Cultural Identity

One key area for further research is the examination of how the Yoruba language influences audience reception and cultural identity in film and theatre. While Yoruba names and dialogues undoubtedly contribute to authenticity, little systematic research has been carried out on how audiences interpret, internalize, or resist such representations. For instance, questions remain regarding whether younger Yoruba audiences, many of whom are more fluent in English, experience films and plays in their indigenous language as affirming of their heritage or as alienating. Similarly, how do non-Yoruba audiences perceive Yoruba language films do they regard them as culturally enriching or as barriers to accessibility?

Exploring these questions would provide valuable insights into the cultural power of language in shaping self-perception and collective memory. It would also inform film producers on how to balance cultural specificity with wider market appeal. Given the increasing global reach of Nigerian cinema through platforms like Netflix and Prime Video, understanding the reception of Yoruba language and names among diasporic audiences is especially important.

3.2 Examining the Use of Indigenous Languages in Other African Film Industries

A comparative approach is also recommended in order to broaden the scope of this research beyond Yoruba culture. African film industries are linguistically diverse, with languages such as Swahili, Zulu, Hausa, Igbo, and Shona actively shaping local cinema. Investigating how filmmakers in these linguistic traditions deploy indigenous names and cultural expressions in their works would provide a pan-African perspective on the role of language in film.

For example, the South African film industry often incorporates Zulu and Xhosa names that carry cultural weight, while East African productions increasingly use Swahili as a unifying medium across Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Such studies would reveal both commonalities and differences in how African filmmakers use language to assert identity, critique colonial legacies, and negotiate modernity. They would also shed light on whether the Yoruba experience is unique or part of a broader continental pattern of linguistic reclamation in cinema.

3.3 Analyzing the Role of Language in Shaping Cultural Representation and Diversity in Nigerian Cinema

Another important area for exploration is how language functions as a determinant of cultural representation and diversity within Nigerian cinema itself. Nollywood, as one of the largest film industries in the world, is multilingual, producing films in English, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. However, English-language films often dominate international circulation, raising concerns about the marginalization of indigenous languages in the global market.

Future research should therefore examine how language choice affects the portrayal of cultural values, social dynamics, and historical narratives. For instance, Yoruba films often highlight communal values, ancestral reverence, and proverbial wisdom, whereas English-language Nollywood films may foreground urbanization, globalization, and class mobility. Understanding these distinctions would help scholars and practitioners appreciate the ways in

which linguistic diversity enriches Nigerian cinema. It would also highlight the need for deliberate policies and industry practices to promote indigenous languages as vehicles of cultural sustainability.

IV. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the significance of Yorùbá indigenous names in Yorùbá stage and film productions. The findings reveal that producers and writers consciously employ Yorùbá language in their work, leveraging its cultural significance and semantic depth to enrich characterization and storytelling. The benefits of this approach are multifaceted, including:

1. Enhanced cultural authenticity and representation.
2. Expanded audience base, drawing on the language's popularity and heritage.
3. Mutual reinforcement of Yorùbá language and film, promoting cultural preservation and propagation.

The relationship between Yorùbá language and Yorùbá films has evolved into a symbiotic partnership, where the language informs and enriches the narrative, while the films promote the language's visibility and relevance. This synergy underscores the importance of indigenous languages in shaping cultural identity and narrative expression.

The legacy of the Yorùbá Travelling Theatre Troupes has laid the groundwork for the contemporary use of Yorùbá language in film and theatre, demonstrating the language's enduring appeal and cultural significance. As Yorùbá language continues to play a vital role in shaping the narrative landscape of Nigerian cinema, this study highlights the need for further research into the intersections of language, culture, and identity in African film and theatre.

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