Deployment of Rhetorical and Literary Tropes in Ewa-ọma Festival Performances of Nkporo, South-East Nigeria

Anya Ude Egwu¹, Ebuka Elias Igwebuike²,³, and Chinasa Abonyi¹

Abstract
African traditional drama has been researched from several perspectives. But there are hardly studies fully focusing on the deployment of language to achieve performance goals in particular performances. This failure may have roots in the widely held assumption that verbal language (dialogue) is not a serious element of African traditional drama. Studying language in particular performances will show that there are instances of full and effective deployment of verbal communication in the African traditional drama. This article, therefore, studies language in ewa-ọma performances. Using basic literary appreciation and critical analysis methods, with a new historicist bias, the literary and rhetorical components of language are identified and analyzed according to their space-time relevance in two performances, to demonstrate the manner of realization of dialogue and (inter)weaving of literary and rhetorical strategies. Literary tropes and rhetorical devices are effectively deployed in well-developed dialogues to achieve a satirical goal in the performances.

Keywords
African traditional drama, Ewa-ọma performance, literary/rhetorical devices, Nkporo

Introduction
Ewa-ọma festival is an annual satirical event among the Nkporo, Edda, and Afikpo communities of South-East Nigeria. The festival is an intersex war of recrimination in which the foibles of social deviants are openly ridiculed in staged performances (Egwu, 2011, 2016). Ewa-ọma is ‘. . . when men and women use songs and drama to expose and ridicule one another’s wrongdoing. The women will stage drama about the wrongdoing of notable men and compose songs for them, while the girls will do likewise against their male counterparts’ (Agbaeze, 2002, p. 15). In this article, two ewa-ọma performances from the Nkporo version of the festival are studied. The aim is to demonstrate how verbal language (dialogue) is in full realization and how literary and rhetorical tropes interweave and are deployed to achieve the satirical goal of the performances in the Nkporo milieu. Doing this naturally leads to another aim: clarifying that there are indigenous African festival performances where language/speech is originally in full and effective deployment. The word “originally” as used here suggests that the realization of ewa-ọma performances is wholly indigenous and not a result of copying from any external dramatic tradition. The explanation for this is simply that drama, whether traditional African, Euro-American, or Asian, tells stories in many different ways, one of these being the re-enactment of experience by performers who are involved in role-playing. This could but not necessarily entail the use of dialogue, verbal and/or non-verbal. It bears clarifying also that while we are away of the specific and general differences between theater, drama, play, and performance (Egwu, 2021, dwells on this), as has been made clear in scholarship, for example, in performance studies (PS), this article limits itself to the restricted understanding of all four terms as behaviors involving people or things in a role-playing business in a chosen location with audience participation. In this basic sense, oral performances are drama, theater, play, or performance. Thus, the four terms are used interchangeably here. The terms, African traditional drama and African festival performances are also used interchangeably on the same consideration.

Method of the Enquiry
The qualitative analysis approach is used to study two ewa-ọma performances randomly selected from a pool of field

¹University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria
²Christian-Albrecht University of Kiel, Germany
³Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ikwo, Nigeria

Corresponding Author:
Ebuka Elias Igwebuike, International Political Sociology, Christian-Albrecht University of Kiel, Wilhelm-Seelig-Platz 2, 24118 Kiel, Germany.
Emails: igwebuike@ips.uni-kiel.de; ebukaigwebuike@yahoo.com
collections between 2000 and 2002 by the authors. The performances were collected using the ethnographic method: the participant observation method and video-recorded for effective storage and retrieval. The performances were transcribed and scripted in the source language (SL); that is, the Nkporo dialect of Igbo and translated into English for the purpose of analysis. Thus, the Igbo version seen in this article is in the Nkporo dialect. The two performances are “Lazarus Mba” and “Iko Emeri.” It is worth noting that the title of an ewa-Ọma enactment is usually derived either from the theme or the name of the main character of the particular performances. The latter is the case with the titles of the two performances used here.

Basic literary appreciation and critical analysis methods are used to identify and analyze literary and rhetorical components of language with the aim to demonstrating the manner of realization of dialogue and (inter)weaving of literary and rhetorical strategies to achieve the satirical goal of the performances in the Nkporo society of their time of creation. Because of its context-oriented idiom, new historicism is appealed to in the analysis. Its leading proponent, Stephen Greenblatt, conceives of the work of art as a “product of negotiation between a creator or class of creators equipped with a complex communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (quoted in Bertens, 2008, p. 140). And, as Bertens (2008, p. 140) eluciates, “The literary text, then, is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social, and economic dispensation” which “far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation . . . is directly involved in history.” The literary text is “a time- and place-bound verbal construction that is always in one way or another political” (Bertens, 2008, p. 140). Following this performance context-friendly theoretic outlook, we analyze our sample performances here as space-time sensitive categories which are in symbiotic relationship with their society and closely projecting her social-cultural ethos.

What Is Known in the Field
On the Dramatic Status of the African Festival Performance

The argument over the dramatic status of African festival performances rife among leading African (oral) literature scholars in the 1970s to 1980s is yet to be settled as scholars in our time continue to draw attention to it in different ways and rightly noting that more research is needed in this field. For example, in his “Recurrent Issues in the Theory and Criticism of African Traditional Drama,” Nwaozuzu (2019) compares the current direction of research in African festival drama and those of South-East Asia and Latin America and laments that while scholars of the latter climes are doing so much in terms of research on their indigenous performance genre, such “is not the case of traditional African drama” where

Apart from the early theoretical work done in the 80’s, nothing much has been done to research and redefine this genre of performance in order to reposition it for the new millennium. Scholars have continued to write on Sanskrit, the Kabuki, Noh theatres in international circles and little on traditional African performance forms. (p. 18)

In an effort to rethink theorizing in African indigenous festival performance, Omigbule (2017) questions the logic of referring to African indigenous ritual categories as drama. He asks if we are “to accept with sufficient conviction that African indigenous ritual performances are a pure drama and their essence is the same as that of conventional drama inherited from the Western culture?” (Omigbule, 2017, p. 77). He argues that it is the postcolonial condition of the African that leads to tagging African rituals as drama by some African scholars who seem to be caught in the web of haptic postulations which do not see anything good in Africa and her cultural products except that which has come from the West. Omigbule (2017) goes on to propose that the “drama” in African indigenous ritual drama or African indigenous festival drama or African ritual drama be replaced with “performance” so that we can have African indigenous ritual performance or African indigenous festival performance or African ritual performance. His contention is that the term “drama” reduces the African ritual to a mere object of entertainment, and, among other things, “aids misplacement of essence/meaning with regard to the discourse of African indigenous rituals” (Omigbule, 2017, p. 77). This is, again, a position re-enforcing the evolutionist view that African ritual performances are not to be regarded as drama in the true sense of the term.

Argument in African indigenous drama in the 1970s and 1980s had been believed to be between the evolutionist and the relativist schools. The former, represented by Finnegan (1970), Echeruo (1981), Uka (1974), and others, had contended that African indigenous performances were not drama in the Western understanding of drama. On the other hand, the relativist scholars such as Enekwe (1981), and Ogunba (1971) argued in favor of a profuse presence of drama in all African indigenous communities.

Egwu (2010, 2011) suggests that the argument on the dramatic status of African festival performances has actually been between five orientations: the already known evolutionist and relativist tendencies and his identified three additional tendencies, namely, the isolationist, the oscillationist, and the contradictionist. In particular, Egwu (2011) considers the isolationist group as comprising scholars who avoid the all-exclusive and the all-inclusive postures of the evolutionist and relativist schools, respectively. That is to say, the isolationist scholars avoid the evolutionist critic’s error of nonacceptance of any African indigenous performances as drama and the relativist critic’s error, on the other hand, of accepting all African indigenous performances as drama. The isolationists use defined paradigms to map some African indigenous performances as drama and others as not. They
see imitation/role-playing as the basic element of drama and rightly argue that any ritual or festival performance with discernible presence of this element can be regarded as drama while performances without its presence cannot be so regarded. The scholars identified here are Soyinka (1976, 1982, 1988, 1997), Rotimi (1981), Ogundeji (1981), Adedeji (1969, 1978, 1981), and Egwu (2010, 2011).

We definitely have not heard the last concerning African traditional drama. What is certain, though, is that “Long before cultural contact with Europe, Black Africa had its very own personal forms of dramatic expression” (Diakhaté & Eyoh, 2017, p. 1). What scholars will continue to do is what Affiah and Osuagwu (2012, p. 6) advise:

We have to continue to invest time and energy conceptualizing and “operationalizing” indigenous African drama. We have to continue to identify, crystallize and reiterate the defining characteristics of indigenous African drama until we are able to inculcate them into literary scholars and critics as the bases for the analyses, understanding and appreciation of indigenous African drama.

**Argument on the Status of Dialogue/Speech in the African Festival Performance**

It is held in scholarship, particularly among the evolutionist scholars like Amankolor (1981), Horn (1981), and Uka (1974), that dialogue/speech is absent or undeveloped where they feature in African traditional or ritual performances. This view is also well-articulated in Finnegan (1970, 2012) who apparently influences the views of the evolutionist critics. By saying that language/speech is absent or undeveloped in African festival performances or traditional drama, the scholars mean that in these festivals there is the absence of well-realized dialogue between several characters as it is known to occur in Western drama. This assumption is implicit in the works of the relativist scholars like Enekwe (1981), Ogundeji (1992, 2000, 2003, 2005), and in Gbenoba (2006) who admit that the dialogue/speech element is absent or undeveloped in African festival performances but argue that the element is not necessary in its realization. This relativist version of the assumption is also apparent in Affiah and Osuagwu (2012):

Indigenous African drama always bears in mind, primarily the particular audience which it seeks to address. Once it fails to do this, the result will be a hocus pocus of a performance desperately and miserably struggling to gain universality but ending up without being seriously meaningful to any audience. Perhaps this explains why *indigenous African drama has no need for copious dialogue and explanations* which will not only destroy the artistic qualities but also make them boring, because its particular audiences have no need for all that description of their own culture. *Mime ensures imitation and fills some of the gaps left by the absence of dialogue and sometimes performs the function of soliloquy* (p. 8, emphasis added).

It may be pertinent to observe here that the occurrence of dialogue or language in African traditional drama does not in any way reduce their artistic quality or make them boring as Affiah and Osuagwu (2012) suggest, but it, rather, enhances the artistic quality and the pleasure drivable in the performances by the audience as words are contrived to hurt and/or create laughable characters and incidents to the full satisfaction of the audience who at such instances normally rewards the performers with ovation as is usually the case during *ewa-oma* performer–audience encounters. This scenario also plays out during the staging of the Udje of the Urhobo of Nigeria, as illustrated by Darah (2005).

The evolutionist scholar insists that for lacking in dialogue/speech or not having it in a developed form the African indigenous performance cannot be called drama; his relativist counterpart argues that those performances are drama even without them showing a presence of dialogue/speech or having the same in undeveloped form. Thus, although the evolutionists and the relativists disagree in many respects, they agree in the assumption that dialogue/speech does not usually occur or is undeveloped when it occurs in the African indigenous drama or performance.

The no-dialogue or undeveloped dialogue assumption in African traditional drama may be true for the ritual and the ritualized performances which are cultic in nature and thus requiring some ambience of secrecy among initiates and members of the cults who sustain those performances. But the case is different with those identified by Ogunba (1971) and Ogundeji (2000, 2003, 2005) as secular and deritualized performances or, as Diakhaté and Eyoh (2017) call them, the secular comic performances. These performances have little or no cultic/ritual attachment. They are open theaters in the sense that they allow for participation by all willing members of the society no matter their gender, class, or age as performers and/or audience. These secular and deritualized performances are mostly satirical and mostly also concerned with thematic and incidental realities of the day about individuals and social institutions (Diakhaté & Eyoh 2017; Egwu, 2011). *Ewa-oma* performances belong here. Indeed, Diakhaté and Eyoh (2017) recognize the presence of verbal parody/dialogue which they observe to exist in equal measure with the other elements of theater in the African festival performance, particularly, in the secular comic type.

**Deployment of Language in Drama**

The study of language in drama/theater can be approached from different perspectives. For example, it could be considered more broadly along the all-encompassing semiotic discourse where every aspect of the action of a play including prop, costume, lighting, and so on, is viewed as a unit of language which contributes to a drama/theater text’s meaning and purpose (Barba, 1991; Boroch, 2015;
Dealing With the Data

Dialogue in Ewa-ọma Festival Performances

Dialogue in ewa-ọma performances deploys various ornamental linguistic tropes to realize its devaluation goal as a satire. However, embellishment of language in ewa-ọma seems to be more pronounced in the accompanying songs. The dialogues themselves show a predominance of the nuances of conversational language. The employment of the cadences of normal, day-to-day, language in the ewa-ọma performances is understandable when considered that the compositions of the audience and its performance troupes cut across all sexes and age groups in the community. It is desirable and expected, therefore, that the language is conversational as it reflects and appeals to such mixed audience and cast. Indeed, dialogue in ewa-ọma resonates with Świontek’s observation on theatrical dialogue, as explicated by Stephenson (2006):

In ordinary conversation, someone speaks to another. Likewise, in the world of a play, characters adopt the stance of ordinary conversation and speak to each other in imitation of actual-world dialogue. Their speech contains the signs of the dramatic situation, indicating the relation of the characters to each other, their attitudes, their conflicts and alliances, and also their relation to the fictional world they inhabit. (p. 117)

Fictional dialogue has actually been observed to thrive in daily conversational style (Nykänen & Koivisto, 2016). This is not to suggest, however, that there is a total absence of literary tropes as language components in the ewa-ọma performances dialogues. The tropes are there because the drama text is a portrait of the life of a society that contains dialogues of characters which have been manipulated to have literary value (Wahono et al., 2018). It would be added that in the dialect of its performance, the ewa-ọma dialogues themselves thrive in literary expression. But in the course of translation, they seem to lose such linguistic ornamentation a good deal. The mostly affected are expressions of pun in the source dialect which usually disappear during translation into English.

The conflict in this play is mainly between the protagonist, Lazarus Mba, and his wife, Ebere. The conflict is rooted in suspicion and jealousy. Lazarus is a suspicious and jealous husband. His community has just hired some men from a neighboring community to help in guarding the community. The visitors are accommodated in a man’s house, by name Onuaha Okafor. Lazarus visits Onuaha’s house for the purpose of welcoming the visitors. In the course of introductions by the parties present, Lazarus understands that one of the visitors is a distant relation of his wife. He acquaints the visitor with this discovery. The visitor is excited about this disclosure and wishes to meet the said relation of his. Lazarus intimates the wife on the visitor’s presence and encourages her to meet and greet him. The wife oblige. But no sooner does the wife meet the visitor for such acquaintance than Lazarus begins to suspect that the meeting is for something other than mere acquaintance. He begins to allege that the visitor and his colleagues are having an affair with his wife. This is the genesis of the conflict in the performance as seen in the following dialogue:

LAZARUS (Ya jekwuiyi mie ya mgbe mie ya hapuru onye obianyi) Ọụ... nwanne m, ọ siiri go me aghị?
MIE YA Onwoghi ihe ọ siiri mọ mee, nwanne m. M biakwarahu keleụ ya dika nwanne m siesibia.
LAZARUS: You are dying; just for vagina. Yet they are savoring Ebere. Is this not my vagina? Is this not that my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it. What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it.

LAZARUS: So, they have savored these big thighs?

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it.

LAZARUS: So, they have savored these big thighs?

WIFE: Nobody savored me.

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it.

LAZARUS: So, they have savored these big thighs?

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it.

LAZARUS: So, they have savored these big thighs?

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?

WIFE: Stop saying that, my brother, lest ears hear it.

LAZARUS: So, they have savored these big thighs?

ONYE EGBATAOBI: Letunu, ị na-ahụ maka igbu.

ONYE EZE: Okocha (Eze lọtụ Lazarus osisi nkenta), nda na-ahụ maka igbu a.

LAZARUS: (Goes to meet wife as she leaves the visitor) O bụ . . ., my sister, what did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. I only came to greet him . . . as my relation visiting.

LAZARUS: What exactly did he say you should do?

WIFE: He didn't say I should do anything, my brother. What exactly do you think he said I should do?

LAZARUS: Is this not that my vagina? (Points to wife's organ) Is this not my vagina?
Onuaha’s place to see when they will start sleeping with Ebere. I had, myself, to keep vigil there with him; hid somewhere, peeping, expecting to see something. But we didn’t see anything. Yet, Lazarus insists that the men are sleeping with his wife, Ebere. I have begged Lazarus to let us go because it is our turn to keep watch today, with B. Eme, we pleaded with him; but he would not listen.

Lazarus (Now in the chief’s house) Hei, my vagina. This is my vagina; my own very vagina. So it’s because of Ebere that Onuaha Okafọ went to bring those Edda men. They have savored those big thighs. They have savored those big thighs, my very big thighs.

Chief Lazarus Mba, Lazarus Mba, you and this vagina again.

Lazarus Chief, wait. Is it not money that it will cost? Nobody will sleep this night. Onuaha Okafọ has savored my vagina, together with the Edda men he brought.

Chief Lazarus (whips him gently but continuously with a cane) How do you want me to approach your case? How? Just how do you want me to handle your case? Is it only Ebere that has a vagina? Is it only Ebere’s vagina that is there, eeh? Just how do you want me to handle this matter? Have I not done well in being this chief that I am? Do you want to kill me? Do you want to kill me?

Chief’s part in the dialogue does not only make a point for the collaborative feature of dialogue evident in the play, but also gives further insights into the character of Lazarus. Lazarus is herein portrayed as a perennially jealous, vagina-obsessed man. Chief remarks: “Lazarus Mba, Lazarus Mba, you and this vagina again.” This would indicate that this is not the first of such case involving Lazarus and his wife. This is also the reason why the chief wonders whether it is only Ebere that has a vagina. Several tropes serve to project the artistic vision of the performers more vividly in this play. Some of them will be immediately considered.

Linguistic Embellishment in the Performance

Perhaps the predominant language device in the performance is repetition. Vagina and the men savoring Ebere are repeated more frequently than any other word. Ebere’s big thighs are also frequently mentioned. These enjoy such frequent repetition because they are all the reason for the conflict in the play. It is just convenient, therefore, that the performers draw attention to them. It should be noted also that Ebere’s thighs are used iconically here for her vagina. Thus, the attention is the organ. In several instances, the repetition of the vagina or the (big) thighs is done in a rhetorical question. This is done not only to emphasize this object of obsession, but also to stress the ownership of it: “Is this not the vagina of mine?,” “Is this not my very vagina?” or “Are not these the big thighs of mine?” is repeated several times. Lazarus is obsessed with his wife’s vagina. By his repetition of that question he seeks a reassurance of his sole possession/ownership of it. This is exactly what makes him laughable.

Jealousy burns within Lazarus. This is the point that the repetition of “They have savored Ebere” or “They have savored those thighs” serves to emphasize. “They” here is the unbearable outsider, the intruder who threatens Lazarus’ sole possession of the wife’s vagina, and by implication, the wife. His aggression is therefore not only toward the wife, but also toward this imagined intruder.

Again, the repetition of “vagina” and how other men are being ravished with it serves the performers’ devaluation purpose. It is to draw the attention of the audience to the awkwardness of the situation and therefore devalue the butt. The performers consider it awkward for a man to become so hysterical about mere vagina, particularly when there is no proof of infidelity by the woman being so vehemently accused. A neighbor makes this remark to him as he collapses and passes out: “See, you are dying; just for vagina. Yet nobody savored your wife.” Thus, repetition in this instance becomes a linguistic weapon of ridicule. It is, indeed, the awkwardness of the situation that is being ridiculed by the performers. One way this has been done is to exaggerate the incident or create a disproportion. The focus of ridicule here is the inappropriateness of Lazarus’ possessiveness of the wife’s vagina. His hysteria over this is then blown out of proportion and therefore ridiculed through repetition.

Again, when the chief repeats the butt’s name in “Okocha Mba, Okocha Mba (Okocha Mba is the same person as Lazarus Mba), you and this vagina again,” he uses repetition, first, as an imitative tool. The repetition of the name echoes the repetition of the incident. By so doing, the chief is reminding Lazarus of the community’s age-old adage: “The first arrow, straight into the wooden seat; the second arrow, straight into the wooden seat. You, wooden seat, was it because of you that the arrow was fashioned?” This way also, Lazarus’ mind is cast back to the fact that this is not the first time he will be caught in conflict with the wife over her (“his”) vagina. This is drawn home by the word “again” that ends the statement. Therefore, in addition to serving an imitative function, the repetition of the name is also for the purpose of retrospection.

Chief’s comment just referred to equally serves a purpose in the performance far more important than has already been shown. The comment seems to bring the enactment to what Waith (1967, pp. 3–4) calls a dramatic moment. A dramatic moment is a moment of special significance in the play; the moment that reaches and influences the core of the play’s concern in a significant way. As Waith (1967, p. 4) explains, “... the dramatic moment is a means by which the dramatist may introduce intimations of both past and future into the continual present of his play and in this way offer the spectator a glimpse of the total design.” He earlier on compares
dramatic moment in a play to what is called the dramatic moment in actual life and shows that the latter ‘... are the moments in which more is at stake than is immediately apparent—the exchange of remarks echoes for anyone who knows the speakers some crucial incidents in their past, a quarrel or a love affair: the comment which unexpectedly explains a person’s past behavior ...’ (Waith 1967, p. 3)

In “Lazarụs Mba,” the chief’s remark establishes Lazarus’ past behavior. He is notorious in wife’s vagina obsession. The word “again” is the vehicle for this intimation. This moment is crucial in the performance because it is the moment that defines it: its origin, and purpose. The performance has its root and flourishes in the fact of Lazarus’ established vagina obsession. The purpose of the enactment is to make this obsession a material for entertainment through ridicule and by so doing, check it. It is the chief’s comment, couched in repetition (as the word “again” itself signifies repetition), that draws attention to it and reveals this in the play. Thus, repetition and rhetorical question as literary tropes are not items of chance occurrence here but instances of a deliberate artistic deployment of language to create and ridicule a satirical butt.

The play employs a diminution strategy to trivialize the vagina, the object of Lazarus’ obsession. His neighbor says to him, “See, you are dying; just for vagina ...” The word “just” serves this purpose. By trivializing this object of Lazarus’ obsession, the dramatists achieve another objective in the opposite direction, namely, the magnification of Lazarus’ queerness. As mentioned earlier, repetition is used to blow Lazarus’ obsession out of proportion. What we have here, then, is the interplay of the twin satirical linguistic weapons of exaggeration/magnification and diminution/reduction. These weapons are duly deployed to devalue and ridicule Lazarus and thereby challenge him to amending his way.

Certainly images are used in very evocative and symbolic ways in the play. The first one is found in the play’s opening song:

Ma anyị afughụ Okafọ
Ewu
Ma anyị afughụ Okafọ
Ewu
Ma anyị afughụ Okafọ
Ewu
If we don’t see Okafọ
A life goat
If we don’t see Okafọ
A life goat

The image of a life goat here is contextually symbolic. In Nkporo community, people are fined with a life goat if they are found in wrongdoing, depending, however, on the magnitude of the wrongdoing. The image both foreshadows and symbolizes the fine of 10,000 naira that Lazarus has to pay for the placation of the men whom he wrongly accuses of having an affair with his wife. Its occurrence in the opening song betokens the fact that some form of fine is going to be paid in the action of the play.

Similarly, the play opens with the performers miming a moving vehicle, but more pronouncedly, its sound: “Pi pipipipipi, viiiiiiii ...” This image of a vehicle evokes a sense of journey and symbolizes the presence of visitors in the play. The importance of this “idiophonic” expression in the plot of the play is that it is the arrival of the visitors at the village that makes the play possible as that is what opens the way for Lazarus to reveal his character. This shows the play to be a well contrived one.

The images of the woman’s and man’s organs are vivid in the play. While that of the woman is mainly seen in the dialogue, that of the man features in the greetings that punctuate the action of the play and in the songs that end it. The function of this synecdochically deployment of language is to remind the audience that the festival is a satirical war between the sexes, represented by those parts of the body that “gen-rise” them. This way, the play is taken beyond the concern of a particular individual, Lazarus, to the general concern with the men folk. It becomes clear here that it is not just Lazarus that is being ridiculed but the men folk. This is more vivid in the songs that end the play.

In one of the songs, the man’s organ is compared to the growing yam tuber. In Nkporo, a particular genre of yam called akụrụ is not harvested whole. It is usually cut so that the head part may remain with the stem and continues to grow. But this time, it does not grow straight downward any more but develop several downward projecting parts round the place it was severed. This remaining part of the yam is harvested later and is usually stored for replanting in the next planting season. The male organ is held by the women to resemble the akụrụ yam tuber. The akụrụ is long and pointed like the said organ. In the song, the women say that the male organ could grow similar projecting parts like the akụrụ had it been cut like it:

M’emere utu nkpoke ọbụ ọgbà ekwu
Ụyọghịri
Had the penis been cut it would grow projecting parts
Ụyọghịri
The whole essence of this image is to make the male organ an object of ridicule in the spirit of intersex verbal/satirical warfare.

Another of the songs compares the penis to the trapped rabbit:

Kala kala utu

Utu ma nụ onya kpọ ọ bụ ewi

Can you see penis?

Penis got trapped as though it were a rabbit.

This is a satire on the male organ’s fate during sexual intercourse. It is mirrored to be entrapped as the rabbit is caught in a trap. The vagina, and by extension the woman it symbolizes, is a trap. The male organ, and by extension the man it symbolizes, is a captive. Man is here, therefore, portrayed as being entrapped by the woman through the deployment of imagery and comparison. Thus, man is a captive and therefore not as strong or as free as he thinks he is. And, indeed, Lazarus exemplifies this captivity in the play. He is obsessed and therefore entrapped by the wife’s vagina. That is the reason he can die because of it. His passing out amounts to dying and at the symbolic level reinforces the women’s position. Just as the trap is the hunter’s weapon of death, the vagina is the woman’s power which can kill its captive, hence Lazarus’ passing out. This brings the play to the sphere of power relations, the politics of gender; re-enforcing, therefore, the new historicist’s postulation that the literary work reflects the political undercurrents of its society; and that it is always in one way or another political.

A linguistic nuance in the play that will need to be commented on also is what we may call idiophone, defined by Okpewho (1992) as idea-in-sound. This is most similar to what the West refers to as onomatopoeia. Critics identify two types of idiophone, namely, onomatopoeic and phonaesthetic idiophone (Fasan, 2009). Both convey sense impression of sort but differ in the sense that while onomatopoeic idiophone imitates concrete sound, phonaesthetic idiophone relates to sound impression as they capture “such aspects of things or situations as manner, colour, smell and posture, etc.” (Fasan, 2009, p. 139). The latter type of idiophone regularly occurs in ewa-oma performances.

In the Nkporo dialect, the words we have translated as “savor” and “ravish” are “purapura” and “khikhe.” The first word evokes the feeling of extreme enjoyment or pleasure and connotes that. It is used in association with what is big and succulent. The second word is of similar evocation and semantic import. The two can therefore be used synonymously. Thus, to “purapura” or “khikhe” is to enjoy something big and succulent. It is like when a person enjoys a well ripe, big, and therefore succulent fruit. It gives a sound similar to those words. In the play, the words are deliberately deployed by Lazarus to connote the kind of pleasure a sexual encounter with his, expectedly, big wife would give. “Khikhe” has another meaning in addition: It suggests picking, luckily, something opulent. In this sense also, it evokes the feeling of great pleasure. In the play, therefore, Lazarus can be heard saying, “Wa epurapurala Ebere. Wa ekhikherila Ebere” (They have “purapura” Ebere. They have “khikhe” Ebere).

Greenblatt’s new historicist theoretic which views the work of art as reflecting and being influenced by “a complex communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (quoted in Bertens, 2008, p. 140) finds expression in the dialogue involving Lazarus and his wife above. It is observed there that Lazarus addresses his wife as “my sister” in the similar way the wife addresses him as “my brother.” This is a reflection of a subsisting cultural practice/convention relating to marriage in Nkporo. Nkporo practices a matrilineal kinship system. Marriage contract between people closely related maternally is a taboo; but marriages could be contracted between paternal cousins, particularly, if the mother of one of the cousins hails from a community other than Nkporo. However, the partners do have the consciousness that they are relatives and thus could address each other as brother and sister. This is the cultural milieu that is being re-enacted when Lazarus calls the wife “my sister” and the wife calls him “my brother.” When a partner in this kind of marriage calls the spouse “my brother” or “my sister” they are reminding the other of this other side of their relationship. We will now turn to the next play.

“Iko Emeri” (Sample 2)

The play revolves around two major characters, Iko Emeri and her brother, Sam Ebi. Sam Ebi is a young man who cannot find his feet abroad and therefore decides to return and settle down at home. He has no employment and has to depend on his sister for feeding. His sister, Iko, who is the butt of the play, grudgingly gives him food. Her displeasure with him has its roots in the fact that when Sam lived abroad, according to Iko, he never showed any care either to her or to her children. She is therefore sad that she is saddled with the responsibility of feeding him. As time passes, Sam becomes sick, in addition. Iko has to stay at home to, supposedly, take care of him. But this becomes unbearable for her because it paralyses her farming activities and other businesses. She, therefore, plots to end this fettering situation by strangulating her sick brother. It is this wicked act that disposes Iko to being a butt. Thus, the theme of the play is cruelty: Iko is a cruel sister.

Language is deployed to paint this picture of Iko. The first language device that draws attention is hyperbole. Iko exaggerates and tells lots of lies in the attempt to present herself as a caring sister as seen in the dialogue below:
Events in the play certainly point in the opposite direction of Iko’s claims. In fact, when Sam pleads to be taken somewhere for medical attention, she vehemently abuses him: “May God consume you with fire. Who is taking you somewhere? Is it the money that you have provided that will be used to take you somewhere? Don’t you know that it is better for you to be dead? If you don’t want to die, stay then. Who is taking you somewhere? Who will take you somewhere?”

It is not surprising that she does not plan to take her brother anywhere for medical care. For, if it is difficult for her to give him food to eat, how more difficult will it not be for her to seek medical attention for him? Yet she tells a neighbor, “I tell you, there is no place I have not gone to because of him.” Elsewhere, she tells the same neighbor, “The most worrisome thing about it is that I find myself torn between who is taking you somewhere? The most worrisome thing about it is that I find myself torn here and there. All the associations in this Elughu, I have taken loans from them.” This is a lie, a hyperbolic statement. Iko uses hyperbole, therefore, for a propaganda end: to present herself as a caring sister to her neighbors and so escape the displeasure of relations. The consequence may be that one’s relations may not be willing to make one’s stay at home enjoyable by making sure that there is enough food for them during their stay. This is because people visiting home usually rely on people settled at home to supply them with enough food such as cassava product—“garri”—yam, and others. Unmarried men, particularly, rely completely on relations at home for feeding during such visits. One’s performance upon arrival at home will also determine how willing relations will be in giving raw foods and their quantities to him or her when they are about returning to their base abroad. This age-old tradition in Nkporo has come to establish obughu (crayfish), azu (fish), and mnu (salt) as metaphors for generosity and reciprocity. He or she who distributes them in abundance to relations and neighbors is seen to be generous and is usually reciprocated with feeding assurances. The tradition was much stronger long ago when those items were scarce commodities. The custom survives to a lesser degree. Another thing that makes those items treasured commodities is that during festive periods when people visit home en masse, much cooking is done, as there are so many people to feed. Any family that does not have enough of them may sooner than later experience a painful embarrassment. The deployment of these metaphors helps to situate the play in a specific culture and time (history) and thus reinforce new historicism’s claims.
Chalk, like the other items, is not only a metaphorizing vehicle in the direction spoken of earlier, but also of family bonding. Chalk is symbolic of and a metaphor for education. In a communal setting like Nkporo, people look up to their relations residing in the city, who are usually believed to be better in economic terms than those settled at home, to support them in their children’s education or even take up completely the responsibility of the education of those children. Family ties are strengthened when this expectation is met. But when it is failed, there is usually strained relationship. It is therefore understandable why Iko is not well disposed to his brother; why she seems not obliged to take care of him. Her comments show that her brother failed in all these expectations while he lived abroad:

SAM Biko, nịtụ m erimeri ta m rie.
IKO Sa mgbę j nara-kpụ ụzu, m raruọ obụghu ghi, ta ọ bụ auzu ghi bụ ife m raruț?
SAM Biko nịtụ m nwankenta ta m rie.
IKO J buru onwo ghi busara m; j nọtụlara ọ ndụ ghi zụyițụ umurîma m chọk? Ta ọ bụ nwẹnị ụrụ ife j zụyițụ wa?
Ị naghi ra aqbagbata Port-Harcourt yara Onitsha . . . ?
Orula ugbua m buru ada nne ghi? Gworo je rie, rigbuo onwoghi. Je rie nwụara onwoghi.
SAM Kindly give me some food to eat.
IKO All the while you were abroad, did I taste your cray-fish? Or was it your fish that I tasted?
SAM Please just give me a little one to eat.
IKO You carry yourself to me; did you ever in your life buy chalk for my children? Nor was it clothing that you bought for them? Were you not jumping around all over Port Harcourt and Onitsha . . . ? Is it now that I have suddenly become your mother’s first daughter? Take and go and eat, and eat yourself to death. Go and eat and die to yourself.

Thus, Iko is reacting to the past because his brother failed when, she believes, he had the opportunity to strengthen the bond between them. Her rhetorical questions above are meant to achieve the effect of devaluing Iko Emeri. The greatest of all traders
The greatest of all traders is dead.
You traded till death.
The man of fashion;
You were used to load me with such big fishes.
The bag of salt you gave me is still at home;
It is yet to be opened.
The man who was famous for trading.

This eulogy projects the exact opposite of what the dead man was and did while alive. This adds to the humor of the moment. But at a wider level, it reinforces the maxim among the Igbo, and perhaps other peoples, that a negative thing is never said about a dead person. The humor which this irony is set to add to the play is anchored in part on exaggeration. The whole eulogy is couched in this trope. Iko calls his dead brother “The greatest of all traders,” and says that he traded till death. It is greatly amusing when one knows, as the audience does, that this is not true but actually the exact opposite of the character being spoken about. More than this, the irony here further devalues the butt, Iko, from whom it is coming, as the audience already knows her as a liar and murderer of her brother. Thus, her pretense here provokes anger against her in the audience. The dramatists therefore effectively deploy irony and exaggeration to achieve the desired effect of devaluing Iko Emeri.

Conclusion

The article has analyzed the language of ẹwa-ọma performances of Nkporo, South-East Nigeria and brought out its literary and rhetorical qualities. The literary tropes and rhetorical devices identified in the performances are repetition, rhetorical questions, exaggeration, metaphor, synecdoche, simile, personification, apostrophe, comparison, irony, diminution, propaganda, and idiophone, among others. These linguistic strategies are shown to be well deployed in the dialogues and songs to construct and vividly present the ẹwa-ọma buttas as laughable social elements with the aim to both entertain the audiences and to move the social misfits themselves to emending their character. The language of the performances is in the conversational nuance that drama, particularly satirical drama, is often associated with.

This study leads us to agree with Diakhaté and Eyoh (2017) that dialogue futures in equal measure with other theatrical elements in African indigenous performances. Aduku (2018) may, after all, be right in his assumption that contemporary Nigerian video-film derives its dialogue praxis from traditional African drama.
As calls are continually being made to scholars to develop home grown theoretic paradigms that would be applied to more fruitfully and meaningfully engage African indigenous performances, we consider it important also for scholars to show what we have as it actually exists even if doing so involves a utilization of received knowledge. What is important is to tell our story as it is. This is what this study has done. In ọwa-ọmọ performances, literary and rhetorical devices are in full deployment in well-developed dialogues. Yet, this theatrical/dramatic tradition is wholly indigenous in conception and realization. There is no doubt that there are several of similar performances across the continent of Africa. A most similar one is the Udje theater of the Urhobo (see Darah, 2005). What is obvious, then, is that African indigenous festival continues to cry for more research attention, particularly, the comic secular ones, as Diakhâte and Eyoh (2017) identify this type.

Acknowledgments
The authors thank the peer reviewers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

ORCID iD
Ebuka Elias Igwebuike https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3764-1333

References
Adedeji, J. (1969). The alarinjo theatre: The study of Yoruba theatrical art from its earliest beginning to the present times [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Ibadan.
Adedeji, J. (1978). The theatre in an African university: Appearance and reality. Ibadan University Press.
Adedeji, J. (1981). Alarinjo: The traditional Yoruba travelling theatre. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book (pp. 221–247). Nigeria Magazine.
Aduku, A. I. (2018). Elements of traditional African drama in contemporary Nigerian video-film. The Performer: Ilorin Journal of the Performing Arts, 9, 1–5.
Affiah, U., & Osuagwu, N. (2012). Ethnodramatics: Towards a theory for indigenous African drama. IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 3(2), 6–10.
Agbaeze, U. O. (2002). Our heritage a reflection of Nkporo culture. CAIT Investment.
Agoro, S. (2001). Theatre and drama in education. Caltop Publications.
Amankolor, J. (1981). Ekpe festival as religious ritual and dance drama. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book (pp. 113–129). Nigeria Magazine.
Barba, E. (1991). Actions at work. In E. Barba & N. Savarese (Eds.), A dictionary of theatre anthropology the secret art of the performer (pp. 68–72). Routledge.
Bertens, H. (2008). Literary theories: The basics (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Boroch, R. (2015). Dialogic—On the dialogue structure—An introductory revision of Eugeniusz Czajlewicz Proposal. Linguistics and Literature Studies, 3(1), 31–33. https://doi.org/10.13189/lls.2015.030105
Darah, G. (2005). Battles of songs: Udje tradition of the Urhobo. Malthouse Press.
Diakhâte, O., & Eyoh, H. (2017). The roots of African theatre ritual and orality in the pre-colonial period. The IATC Journal/Revue de l’act, 15, 1–10.
Echeruo, M. (1981). The dramatic limits of Igbo ritual. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book (pp. 136–184). Nigeria Magazine.
Egwu, A. (2010). Trends in indigenous African drama scholarship. Journal of Cultural Studies, 8(3), 357–389.
Egwu, A. (2011). A genre analysis of Ewa-ọmọ festival performances of Nkporo, Southeastern Nigeria [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Ibadan.
Egwu, A. (2016). Towards a type classification of Ewa-ọmọ festival performances of Nkporo, Southeastern Nigeria. Lagos Notes and Records, 22, 99–122.
Egwu, A. (2021). Concept and components of performance. In A. Akinyemi & T. Falola (Eds.), The Palgrave handbook of African oral tradition and folklore (pp. 51–68). Palgrave Macmillan.
Enekwe, O. (1981). Myth, ritual and drama in Igboland. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria: A critical source book (pp. 149–193). Nigeria Magazine.
Fasan, R. (2009). Transitional ceremonial song performance of the Ondo, Ikale, Oyo and Ijebu [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Ibadan.
Finnegan, R. (1970). Oral literature in Africa. Oxford University Press.
Finnegan, R. (2012). Oral literature in Africa. Open Book Publishers.
Gbenoba, F. (2006). Cotextuality in ritual performances of Osiezi festival in Agbor, Nigeria (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Ibadan.
Gossman, L. (1976). The signs of the theatre. Theatre Research International New Series, 2(1), 1–15.
Horn, A. (1981). Ritual drama and the theatrical: The case of Bori spirit mediumship. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book (pp. 181–202). Nigeria Magazine.
Nwaozuzu, U. (2019). Recurrent issues in the theory and criticism of African traditional drama. In T. J. Iorapuu & F. O. Idoko (Eds.), Nigeria’s theatre and drama: Audiences, communities and constituencies a festschrift in honour of professor John Sani Ilah (pp. 17–32). Jos University Press.
Nykänen, E., & Koivisto, A. (2016). Introduction: Approaches to fictional dialogue. Literary Linguistics International Journal, 3(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.15462/jill.v5i2.56
Ogunbiyi, O. (1971). Studying African traditional literature. Black Orpheus, 27, 42–50.
Ogunbiyi, Y. (1981). Nigerian theatre and drama. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book (pp. 3–53). Nigeria Magazine.
Ogundeji, P. (1988). *A semiotic study of Duro Ladipo’s mythico-historical plays* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Ibadan.

Ogundeji, P. (1992). *Yoruba drama 1*. Centre for External Studies, University of Ibadan.

Ogundeji, P. (2000). *ISESE monograph series. Ritual as theatre, theatre as ritual: The Nigerian example* (A. Ogundeji & A. O. Dasylva, Eds.) (Vol. 2, No. 1). Ibadan Cultural Studies Group.

Ogundeji, P. (2003). Forms of “traditional” theatre practice in Nigeria. In A. Dasylva (Ed.), *Dapo Adelugba on theatre practice in Nigeria* (pp. 3–33). Ibadan Cultural Studies Group.

Ogundeji, P. (2005). Functions and forms of “traditional” theatre practice in Nigeria. In S. A. Ajayi (Ed.), *African culture and civilization* (pp. 211–245). Atlantis Books.

Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature background, character, and continuity*. Indiana University Press.

Omigbule, M. (2017). Rethinking African indigenous ritual festivals, interrogating the concept of African ritual drama. *African Studies Quarterly, 17*(3), 71–88.

Rotimi, O. (1981). The drama in African ritual display. In Y. Ogunbiyi (Ed.), *Drama and theatre in Nigeria a critical source book* (pp. 77–80). Nigeria Magazine.

Soyinka, W. (1976). *Myth, literature and the African world*. Cambridge University Press.

Soyinka, W. (1982). Theatre in African traditional culture: Survival patterns. In R. Olaniyan (Ed.), *African history and culture* (pp. 237–249). Longman Nigeria.

Soyinka, W. (1988). *Art, dialogue & outrage*. New Horn Press.

Soyinka, W. (1997). African theatre: From Ali Baba to Wazo Albert. In D. Robin (Ed.), *The world encyclopedia of contemporary theatre* (Vol. 3, pp. 11–13). Routledge.

Stephenson, J. (2006). Meta-enunciative properties of dramatic dialogue: A new view of metatheatre and the work of Sławomir Świntek. *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, 21*(1), 115–128.

The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. (2012). Dialogue. (4th Edn, pp. 357–358). Princeton University Press.

Uka, K. (1974). Drama in Nigerian Society. *The Muse, 5*, 11, 13–15, 36–38.

Wahono, R., Nuryatin, A., & Mulyani, M. (2018). Dialogue model, conflict, and context in drama text works by Arifin C. Noer. *Asian Social Science, 14*(5), 126–136.

Waith, E. (1967). *The dramatic moment*. Prentice Hall.