

Speaking in Tongues: A Sociolinguistic-Stylistic Explication of the Language Style of *Ese-Ifá*: The *Yorùbá Ifá* Literary Corpus

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“... The old and the habitual must be spoken of as if it were new
and unusual”

—Boris Thomashevsky (1917)

Introduction

The *Ifá* literary corpus (*Ese ̀Ifá*) is a specialized *Yorùbá* traditional oral poetic genre; religious in essence and cultic in practice. The religious or spiritual essence of *Ese-Ifá* (the *Ifá* Verses) lies in its association with the worship of *Ifá* or *Orùnmìlà*, the *Yorùbá* god of wisdom. *Ese-Ifá*, therefore, represents the voice of the wisdom deity through which the *Yorùbá* relate with the Almighty God.¹

In *Yorùbá* studies, *Ese-Ifá* has attracted a tremendous scholarly attention such that today, a vast literature on it exists. A mention of just a few of the scholars whose works have been deeply insightful in this regard is pertinent. They include, Bascom (1967), Abímbo ká (1976) and Olátúnjí (1984), among others. However, despite the vast literature on it, a study of *Ese-Ifá* can never be exhaustive because of its enigmatic nature. In this paper therefore, an attempt is made at a sociolinguistic-stylistic analysis of the language style of *Ese-Ifá*, with a view to identifying the various socio-linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical devices that make the language of *Ese-Ifá* likened to or described as *speaking in tongues*. It should also be possible, in the paper, to bring to the fore the stylistic and communicative essence of the *Ifá* language as a specialized language of religious/cultic and literary expressions within the *Yorùbá* socio-cultural and religious contexts. The paper is theoretically hinged on *defamiliarization*, one of the basic concepts crucial to the Formalist enterprise. However, because of the nature of *Ese-Ifá*, Formalism is complemented by socio-linguistic and stylistic methods.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Background to *Ese-Ifá*

In the *Yorùbá* traditional society, and even today among the adherents of *Ifá/Orùnmìlà* worship, it is customary to seek divine guidance from *Ifá*

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before embarking on any venture, be it a journey, business enterprise, law suit or marriage. This is done through the intervention of the *Ifá* priest known as *Babaláwo* (father-of-secrets) who, through the instrumentality of his divining chain, obtains information or divine directive from the spirit world for the guidance of his client. The information or divine directive is narrated in form of a story analogous to the problem for which the client is seeking a divine guidance or solution. Such problems are usually human problems like barrenness, illness, disease, poverty, threat of death, etc. Divine assistance may also be sought on one's heart desires such as prosperity, life longevity, triumph over enemies and breakthrough in business. In getting a divine solution, a client is often asked to offer a sacrifice to appease the gods or the evil forces that may be working against him. The story then rounds off with information as to whether or not the client is compliant, and the consequences of his obedience or disobedience as the case may be. The collection of such stories forms the basis of *Ifá* literary corpus (*ese-ifá*) the wisdom lore and a problem-solving instrument of the *Yorùbá* people and race.

The Art of *Speaking in Tongues*

In religious circles, it is believed that God speaks to man, and the conduit pipe 'He' uses is the priest who interprets what they call the 'silent voice of God or the oracle'. The voice is said to come often in hushed tones and strange voices. The strange voice, in any case, has to be interpreted or decoded by no less a personality than the priest himself for effective communication between god and man. Given the socio-cultural and religious contexts under which he operates, the *Ifá* priest is both a spiritualist as well as a literary artist. In other words, the *Ifá* priest, as a literary artist, is a poet, storyteller and an entertainer. This is more so when the language style employed in the narration of his divine story – message is considered. It is therefore, in recognition of this fact that the language style of *ese-ifá* is being described as cultic, strange and specialized, thus performing dual socio-linguistic functions as forms of religious/cultic and literary expressions. These linguistic peculiarities of the *Ifá* verses are what is herein in this paper described as *speaking in tongues*; (i.e. a language that is alien to the client).

Theoretical Approach

The major theoretical framework on which the paper hinges is Formalism. However, because of the limitations of the Formalist approach, especially

at the level of interpretation, and considering the socio-cultural and religious contexts of *ese-Ifá*, Formalism is complemented by socio-linguistic and stylistic methods. In other words, references are made to socio-cultural and religious information to elucidate interpretation.

The cultic nature of *ese-Ifá* probably explains the enigmatic nature of its language, and it is partly for this reason that it is being likened to the *language of the spirits* which nobody understands until it has been properly decoded. This aspect of language known as *glossolalia* is popular among the prophets and seers of the *Aládùúrà* and Celestial Churches.² The language of *ese-Ifá* is therefore, put in this category because it is largely foregrounded in **defamiliarization**³, a terminology which in the Formalists' theoretical framework means **making strange** or **making unfamiliar**. This meaning, according to Tomashevsky (1917), derives from the Formalists' belief that in literature:

... the old and the habitual must be spoken of as if it were new and unusual, one must speak of the ordinary as if it were unfamiliar. (p. 85)

For the Formalists, the whole essence of art is to impart sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The concept of **defamiliarization**, according to another Formalist, Viktor Shylovsky (1917), is premised on the Formalists' belief that:

... the technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception. (pp. 11-12)

With this background, the expression 'Speaking in tongues' does not connote bilingualism as used in Bámgbóşé (1992:1). Rather, in this paper, it relates to the outpouring (the language) of the *Ifá* priest who, under the ecstasy of performance, speaks a different kind of *Yorùbá* language that sounds almost unintelligible to his client/listener. Though the language spoken by the priest is *Yoruba*, because of its foregrounded nature, it becomes a *Yorùbá* of a different sort; strange, difficult and far removed from the language of everyday usage. Consequently, it is imperative for the priest to interpret or explain himself in order to be understood by the client/audience.

Analysis

Many scholars believe that a *differentia specifica* exists between the language of ordinary discourse commonly referred to as the *Standard*

Language (SL) and the language of literature, otherwise known as the *Literary Language* (LL). This view is corroborated by Jakobson (1980) who believes that literature, poetry especially, has its own language labelled as *grammar of poetry*. It is also noted by Jakobson that the language a poet uses is often deliberate and through conscious linguistic manipulations. Regardless of whether the linguistic effort of the priest is from a conscious or subconscious activity, one thing that is, perhaps, certain about the language style of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá*, taking into consideration the sociolinguistic functions of language, is that the *Ifá* priest performs a dual role; first as a priest–consultant and secondly, as a literary artist/entertainer. It is therefore, in his bid to perform these dual functions, that the *Yorùbá* language is defamiliarized through a deliberate employment of a vast range of devices and diverse linguistic techniques which include metaphors, cultic expressions, archaism, unusual vocabularies/lexical formations, euphemism, descriptive labels and idioms. These devices, through which defamiliarization is contrived are here now discussed with a view to highlighting their stylistic and communicative potentials within the *Yorùbá* socio-linguistic, cultural and religious contexts.

- (i) **Metaphor:** Metaphor is one of the linguistic devices through which the language of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* is defamiliarized. In metaphor, an object, action or situation is described in a terminology proper to another (Ọlábó Ọ̀ḡ: 1981:97; Ọlátúnjí, 1984:51). Fundamentally, the narrative in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* is a metaphor whose understanding requires some level of orientation in *Ifá* cosmology. For instance, in a particular narrative, all the actions and characteristics ascribed to the protagonist, whether human or non-human, are metaphors. The new client has to put himself in the position of the protagonist, and whatever is the lot of the protagonist also becomes his lot. It is in this perspective that *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* is significant, for example, in the excerpt below from Èjìogbè:

Ọ̀rẹ̀ ọ̀ gbẹ̀letá,
 Elèjì lo ẹ̀ gba
 A díá fún Ẹ̀sọ̀róyè
 Ọ̀mọ̀ Aṣaworoko
 Wo ẹ̀ ní kó rúbọ̀ nítorí ajé

 (Abímbolá 1968:17. lines 1–4)

Friendship does not bind three
 It only binds two
Ifá divination was performed for Ẹ̀sọ̀róyè

The offspring of those who practise Ifá divination and farming
He was asked to perform a sacrifice so that he might have money.

Here, the protagonist is *Şóoróye*, who sought a divine assistance of his priest because he lacked prosperity. The priest directed him to perform a sacrifice so that he could have money. For the above narrative to have any meaningful effect, the client has to put himself in the position of the protagonist (*Şóoróyè*) in the narrative. In other words, the client is *Şóoróyè*, the protagonist in the narrative that lacked money and who had to offer a sacrifice. If he therefore, follows the footsteps of *Şóoróyè* either in obedience or disobedience, whatever result that *Şóoróyè* got is what he is going to get. Without giving the story a metaphorical interpretation, the whole essence and meaning of the text/narrative is lost.

- (ii) **Cultic Expressions:** The *Ifá* priest belongs to a cult of priesthood. Hence, he is referred to as *Babaláwo* (father-of-Cult). Only trained or recognized individuals initiated into the *Ifá* cult become an *Ifá* priest. Because of the religious and cultic nature of the *Ifá* verse, specialized vocabularies and expressions that relate to its nature are used. Nominals, phrases and expressions such as the ones listed below are commonly used in *ese-ifá* narratives:

Examples of nominals that relate to cultism:

ẹbọ: sacrifice/sacrificial item
erù: an archaism for ‘sacrificial item’
ejeégùn: of efficacy of sacrifice or medicinal charm

Among the verbal elements/verb phrases relating to cultism commonly found in *Ifá verses* are:

rúbọ.: to offer sacrifice
kò rúbọ: did not offer sacrifice
díá fún ...or: *adíá fún...:* performed *Ifá* divination for ...
gbó rírú ẹbọ: heeded advice to offer sacrifice
gbó ẹrù heeded advice to offer sacrifice to *Èşù*
àtùkèşù: (devil)
san ejeégùn: made payment to the priest for efficacy of prescription and medicine.

Traugott and Pratt (1984:400) is a word, or an old form that survives from an earlier period of the language. In this example:

*A díá fún Orúnmilà
Níjò Olojò metá ó wo sílé baba
Ifá ò sì ní oókan aa yó há
(Abímbolá 1968:21, lines 7-11)*

Ifá divination was performed for the deity (Orúnmilà).
On the day three strangers
Paid a visit to the father's (*Ifá*) house
The deity did not have even a penny that he could spend.

the nominal *olójò* (underlined) is an archaism for 'visitor'. In *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-Ifá*, however, *olójò* is not just a visitor but a stranger, an unwanted guest that nobody ever prays to host. For the client to understand what the excerpt means, the priest has to interpret what *olójò metá* (three strange visitors) represent. Here in the passage/text, as in any other *Ifá* verse, the three strange visitors are usually *Ikú* (death), *àrùn* (disease) and *èsù* (the devil).

Also, in:

*Orúnmilà ló dí sàbíńí
Mo ló dí sàkòsì
(Abímbolá 1968: 21, lines 1-2)*

*Orúnmilà asks how is it.
And I replied, it is good*

sàbíńí and *sakosi* (underlined) are expressions that nobody really understands as nothing in their phonological or morphological shapes gives a clue about their meaning. However, within the context of usage and the glossary provided by the author of the collection, the two expressions are old forms or ways of exchanging compliments. These expressions therefore, have become specialized language, in question and answer form, in the *Ifá* corpus with the meaning: 'how is it? 'it is fine!'. In other words, expressions like *sàbíńí* and the response to it- *sàkòsì* could be likened to the modern day greeting form – *how are you?* Or *how is it?* with its corresponding response -*I am fine* or *it is fine*.

Expressions like the above (archaisms), new, strange and surprising can be regarded as alternative ways of expressing common pleasantries. Besides, the expressions though are somewhat different from common greeting forms that are too well known, they constitute a refreshing poetic diction with high emotional intensity.

(iv) **Unusual Lexical or Linguistic Formations:** Contrary to what we find in everyday language usage situations, the language of *ẹ̀sẹ-Ifá* is sometimes far removed from the language of everyday or ordinary discourse (SL). Hence, one finds expressions that deviate from normal lexical or linguistic patterns. These deviations are manifested in various forms, which include unusual deletion and assimilation of elements. Here are some examples:

- díá fún:* for *dífá fún* (performed divination for ...). Here, consonant [f] of the verb *dífá* is deleted or elided.
- dúó:* for *dúró* (stand/stop) – elision of consonant [r].
- Oòduà:* for *Odùduwà*, (the progenitor of the Yorùba race). Consonants [d] of the second syllable and [w] of the last syllable are deleted, with the vowels [o] and [u] of the first two syllables progressively assimilated.
- Ìlóbìnrin:* for *Ìlú Obìnrin* (city of women) a city predominantly inhabited by women, the vowel [u] of the second syllable of *Ìlú* (city) is elided, resulting in the contraction *Ìlóbìnrin*.
- Ìlágùtàn:* For *Ìlú àgùtàn* (city of the sheep). A city inhabited by sheep only. Vowel [u] of the second syllable of *Ìlú* (city) is elided, resulting in the contraction of the two words to one nominal.
- Opè*
pèkùtè
erékè: for *Opè pèkùtè orí òkè* (a tall palm tree on the hill top). Here, the low-mid tone on *Opè* (palm tree) is changed to (low-low), while vowel [e] of the noun *òkè* in the nominal phrase *orí òkè* (top of the hill) is regressively assimilated to form *eréke* (hill top).
- Igbóje:* for *Igbó meje* (seven forests). It is contrived from the elision of syllable ‘mé’ of *meje* (seven), resulting in the contraction *Igbóje*.

Èlujùje: for *èlujù méje* (seven forests). ‘Èlujù’ is an archaism for *Igbó* (forest). It is contrived from the elision of the syllable ‘mé’ of ‘*méje*’ (seven), thus resulting in the contraction form *èlujùje*

Another type of unusual lexical structure common in *ẹṣẹ-Ifá* is, making an intransitive use of a transitive verb. For instance, in the *Ifá* verse *Owónrín méji* below

Ìwo lo rín mi
Nì mo rín ó.
Eni ó rín ni là á rín
Èyàn tí ò rín ni
A à gbodo rín
Ẹrin di méji a dijà
A díá fún Èrìntúndé ...
(Abímbólá, 1976: 75)

One usually laughs (at) someone who laughs (at) one
If someone hasn’t laughed (at) one
One shouldn’t laugh (at) him
When two people laugh (at) each other
It may lead to a quarrel
Ifá divination was performed for Èrìntúndé ...

the verb *rín* (to laugh), is a transitive verb and obligatorily expected to take a noun object *erín* (laughter). But here in this excerpt, it is being used without the noun object. The full expression in standard language form is supposed to be:

Eni tí ó fi ni rín erín ni à à fi rín erín
Eeyan ti o fi ni rín erín
Aà gbodò fi rín erín
Bí èyàn méjì bá fi ara wọn rín erín
Ẹrin di méjì a dijà
Adiá fún Èrìntúndé
...

One usually laughs at someone who laughs at one
If someone hasn’t laughed at one
One shouldn’t laugh at him

When two people laugh at each other
 It may lead to a quarrel
 Ifá divination was performed for Èrintúndé...

All the above linguistic manipulations are deviant, and so, unusual and peculiar to poetry. The fact that they are strange makes the text difficult, not only in reading but also in understanding. However, such linguistic manipulations (deviations) perform stylistic functions despite their being inhibitive to communication. First, they make the language of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-Ifá* strange, thus contributing to its *defamiliarization*. Second, the various stylistically motivated deletions/elisions, tonal modifications, assimilations and contractions contribute to the poetic quality normally perceived in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-Ifá*. The contractions that result from elisions and deletions make the lines shorter. This is more so because the shorter the lines, the more poetic and aesthetic the expressions are wont to be. The tempo of the verses is equally correspondingly increased.

- (v) ***Euphemism and Euphemistic Expressions:*** Euphemism is an indirect way or roundabout method of saying something (Ọlátúnjí, 1984:57). The *Ifá* priests, in conformity with their professional calling, are discreet in their use of language. Hence, people refer to them as *bàbá aláṣìírí* (father; keeper of secrets). Like modern day medical practitioners who use medical and pharmaceutical jargons and terminologies that are unfamiliar to their patients, and which fall within the professional competence of only the nurses, pharmacists and allied paramedical staff to interpret, the priests also have their own language which can be interpreted or understood only by the initiated. For instance; when a client has performed the prescribed sacrifice and his problem is solved, he is happy and joyful. The happiness and joyful mood of the client is expressed euphemistically thus:

Ijó ní ñ jó
Ayọ̀ ñ yò

He starts dancing
 He starts rejoicing

Or: *Ó ñ yin àwon awo rè*
Àwọn awo rè náà ñ yínfa

He offers praises to his priest
While the priest offers praises to *Orúnmilà/Ifá*

Or: *Ó ya ẹnu kótó*
Orin awo ló bo sí i lenú
Ẹse tó nà, ijó fà á
He opens his mouth in songs
And begins to sing the praises of his priest
He stretches forth his legs and dance catches them

The above expressions are figurative; they illustrate the priest's euphemistic way of saying:

Inú re òùn
Ayọ re kún
He is happy
His joy is full

Or: *Ó n yín Ifá Orúnmilà (lógo)*
He offers praises/glory to *Orúnmilà/(Ifá)* for prayers answered.

Similarly, expression of happiness and joy sometimes takes the form of either of the following euphemistic expressions:

Agogo ní ìpóró

Àràn ní Ìkijà
Opá Kugúkugù lójúde Ìşerimogbe
Wọn sọ opá sáràn, ó mú tinú e jàde

Gong beating at *Ìpóró*
Beating of *Àràn* drums at *Ìkijà*
Lots of merriments at *Ìşerimogbe* compound

Drums-stick lands on the *Àràn* drum, thus bringing out beautiful music

In the Yorùbá society, different types of drum are used for different occasions. For instance, *bàtá* drum/music is for the *egúngún* masquerade and *Sàngó* worshippers, *dùndún* and *sekere* for the ancestral and *egúngún* worshippers, while *agogo* (the metal gong) and

àràn (a specially built drum) are for the O *òṣunmìlà* worshippers. The mention therefore, of such expressions as the *beating of agogo on the street of Ìpóró* and *àràn drum-set on the streets of Ìkijà*, coupled with the phonaesthetic expression - *oṣá kugúkugù lójúde Ìṣerimogbe* literally express a ceaseless beating of drums and dancing in the open court at Ìṣerimogbe. This is an euphemistic attestation to the fact that the client was successful in his undertakings; or that he has had a successful enterprise. The following euphemistic expressions are also common:

Èrò Ìpo

Èrò Oṣà

People traveling/going to *Ìpo*

People traveling/going to *Oṣà*

Or: *Èrò Òkun*

Èrò Oṣà

People traveling/going to the sea.

People traveling/going to the Lagoon

Expressions such as the above are ambiguous. *Èrò Ipo/Oṣà* could mean: 'people who live in *Ìpo/Oṣà* or, 'people who are making a trip to *Ìpo/Oṣà*. The same goes for *Èrò Òkun/Oṣà* which could translate as: people traveling on the sea/people going to the sea or, 'people traveling on the lagoon/people going to the lagoon'. *Ìpo* and *Oṣà* are traditional *Yorùbá* towns in Kwara State, Nigeria, just like *Ìpóró* and *Ìkijà* are Yoruba towns. The mention of these Yoruba towns in expressions such as the above is symbolic; an euphemistic way of saying: 'everybody' or 'everyone'.

- (vi) **Descriptive Labels:** Prescription of sacrifice is a very important aspect of *Ifá* divination. The client is required to offer sacrifice to appease the gods or to ward off evils. In prescribing items for sacrificial offering, the priest usually employs phrases in form of a formulaic pattern, so that in non-mistakable terms, the client knows exactly what the *Ifá* actually wants from him/her. Items of sacrifice are usually presented in formulaic expressions that follow this phrasal pattern:

Èku méjì Olùwéré

Èja méjì abìwẹgbàdà

Eínlá méjì tó fíwo sòsùkà
Ewúre méjì abàmú rẹ̀dẹ̀rẹ̀de

Two fast running rats
 Two fish that swim with grace
 Two agric-cows with heavy horns
 Two she-goats heavy with foetus

In *Ifá* divination, two (2) is a very significant number. Hence, all sacrificial items are to be offered in twos. Besides, *Ifá*'s choices of sacrificial items are often the best of the kind of items required. Hence, descriptive labels or nominalized labels are used in qualifying the sacrificial items. For example, the rat to be offered in sacrifice must be *olùwéré* i.e. agile and fast running (disease-free); the fish must be *abìwé-gbàdà* i.e. big or hefty fish that swim with grace; the *eínlá* cow must have gigantic horns (big), while the she-goat must have *àmú rẹ̀dẹ̀rẹ̀de* i.e. big foetus. The structure of the phrasal pattern in all cases is:

NP + Q

(Where the NP is: Noun + numeral Qualifier, and the Qualifier [Q] is: a derived noun/nominalization/a relative clause as in the case of *Eínlá méjì ...* where we have the relative clause - *tí ó ...* as qualifier. It has to be mentioned also that the *Ifá* priest (*Babaláwó*) is often rewarded or compensated for his services. His compensation sometimes comes in form of a monetary or material reward. The gift or the honorarium is usually qualified in order to show its worth. Here is an example of such an expression:

Òtítí baba ajé
Ọlọ̀gìnnìginnì aṣọ̀ Ìràdà
Akòòkótán, ohun ọ̀rọ̀ Ifẹ̀ ̀

Òtítí, father of money
 Beautiful apparels, dresses of the Ìràdà people
 Inexhaustible wealth as gifts from Ilé-Ifè

Here, the phonaesthetics- *Òtítí* and *Ọlọ̀gìnnìginnì*, and the nominalization – *àkòòkótán* are descriptive labels (i.e. qualifiers). Essentially, the language choice is figurative, an euphemistic way of saying that the priest received lots of expensive gifts.

(vii) **Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions:** Another important aspect of the language style of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ifá* is the use of idioms and idiomatic expressions. Idioms are irregular constructions or lexical collocations whose constituent elements do not contribute, in isolation, to their over-all semantic interpretation (Ọláteju, 2004b: 430-432; Ọlátejú, 2004a: 279; Owólabí, 1976:29)

Though idioms are a regular feature of our day-to-day language usage, they are, more prominent in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ifá* where they constitute a specialized and new mode of communication. In *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ifá*, idioms/idiomatic expressions are either in the form of a noun/nominal (derived from nominalization) or a verb phrase in form of a verb – nominal construction or collocation. Such collocations, having undergone a kind of semantic specialization, have become a special mode of expression in *ifá* religious and literary communications.

Idioms and idiomatic expressions such as the ones listed below, with their semantic interpretations, are quite common in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ifá*:

Idioms: (Nouns/Nominals)

1. *Ẹ̀leye*: one that possesses a bird, i.e a witch ‘*ajẹ̀’*’
2. *Ajogun*: one that wages war on a person, i.e. *the malevolent forces/destroyers* i.e. death, disease, loss, injury etc.
3. *Eníyán*: an evil person; phonologically deviant from the standard spelling-*ènìyàn* but with an euphemistic meaning of ‘death’

Idioms can also be in the form of a nominal collocation or a Noun Phrase e.g.

Àpá okun: Lit: distant part of the Atlantic Ocean, for ‘a distant journey’

Ìlàji osà: Lit: distant part/half of the lagoon, meaning half way into the lagoon for ‘distant journey’.

In the *Yorùbá* traditional society, the *Ifá* priest is known for traveling far and near in quest of a greener pasture. He travels to distant places to see his clients who may be kings and princesses in other lands to render his divinatory services to them. When the priest embarks on a

distant journey like this, a journey that often takes weeks or months to return, he is described as having traveled to *àpá òkun, ìlájì o sà* (that distant part of the Atlantic Ocean, half way into the lagoon), an euphemism for a long, distant journey.

Idiomatic Expressions:

Idiomatic expressions are full sentences with idiomatic meanings. For example, when things have turned upside down and are no longer what they ought to be, the following idiomatic expressions are usually employed in *ẹse-ifá* to express such a parlous state of affairs:

Aboyiún ò bímọ
Àgàn ò tọwọ̀sùn bàlà
Ọ̀kúnrùn ò dìde
Akéremọ̀dò wewù èje ̀
(Abimbólá 1968: 1-5)

The pregnant women cannot be delivered of babies
The barren have no babies to cream with calm-wood lotion
(*osu n*)
The sick cannot get cure
The small streams wear clothes of dry leaves

The imagery being painted by the totality of the above idiomatic expressions is that abnormality is the order of the day; things have gone awry, and are no longer the same again.

Divination involves prescription and offering of sacrifices. When the sacrifices offered are accepted and clients' problems are solved, the usual idiomatic expressions for communicating such information, in verb phrases, are:

Ẹ̀bó fín: meaning: sacrificial offering is accepted.
Ẹ̀bọ̀dà: meaning: sacrificial offering is well accepted

There are several other expressions, which have acquired meanings (idiomatic) other than what they are supposed to mean, ordinarily; like the following:

fomi ojú > (Lit: use tears to chant for children) i.e.
şògbéré crying/weeping for lack of children
omọ (barrenness).

ye ^{to}wòkàn > (Lit: examine one hand of divination) i.e. to
 ìbò wò use the ìbò system of divination for
 identifying the problem and solution of the
 client.⁵

One distinguishing factor between the idioms/idiomatic expressions characteristic of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* as highlighted above, and the ones we normally encounter in our day-to-day language usage is that idioms/idiomatic expressions in *ìfá* are cultic, thus requiring some cultural and religious information before they can be meaningfully interpreted; and this is what exactly the priest does in order to communicate effectively with the client, whereas, those found in ordinary language usage situations are devoid of cultic connotations but culturally dependent (Ọlátejú, 2004a: 283). As noted by Ọlátejú, idioms perform specific stylistic and communicative functions. Hence, they do not only contribute to the high degree of aesthetic flavour usually perceived in the language of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá*, they also perform entertaining functions and create an additional avenue for religious and literary expression. However, idiomatization imposes serious constraints on communication, and this is why in *ìfá*, it becomes imperative for the priest to take it upon himself to bail the client out of the communication doldrums through the process of glossolalia.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted a socio-stylistic examination of the language style of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá*, the *Yorùbá ìfá* divination poetry, using an eclectic approach. The paper is theoretically hinged on *defamiliarization*, a concept that is considered to be very crucial to the Formalists. This is however, complemented by socio-linguistic and stylistic methods.

The paper reveals that the language style of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* is foregrounded in *defamiliarization*, a device, which, in the Formalists' theoretical framework means *making strange*, or *making unfamiliar*. This meaning derives from the Formalists' belief that in literature, "the old and the habitual must be spoken of as if it were new, unusual and unfamiliar". The paper therefore, identifies the kind of language used in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* as a defamiliarized *Yorùbá* language. The stylistic and linguistic devices that promote *defamiliarization* in *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* as observed in the paper include: metaphor, use of descriptive labels, cultic expressions, archaism, euphemism, idiomatization and unusual lexical/linguistic formations.

All these make the language style of *ẹ̀ṣẹ̀-ìfá* cultic, difficult and enigmatic that it becomes incomprehensible to no one except the priest

himself. Like Fáléti observes in his poem titled- Oníbodè Lálúṣon (The gate keeper at Lálúṣon) that, “there is no one who perfectly understands the language of the drum like the drummer himself who is holding the drumstick in his hands”. In the same vein, only the priest understands the *ifá* language. It is therefore, for this reason that the language of *ese-ifá* is likened to *speaking in tongues*, an attribute that makes it compelling for the priest to interpret or decode his message for effective communication and mutual understanding between him and his client. The language of *ese-ifá* has reasons for being a specialized language. First, it is cultic because it is a language of religious expression, and second, it is aesthetically inclined (poetic) as a language of literary expression. And thirdly for a trado-medical practitioner. Consequently, the poetic quality of *ese-ifá* attests to the roles of the priest as a literary artist, entertainer and a medical practitioner.

Finally, the Ifá priest is a professional who helps his clients in solving not only spiritual problems, but also health-related problems as well. Like his modern medical counterparts in medical practice, drug procurement and prescription industries (the medical doctor and pharmacy), who employ medical jargons and terminologies in their medical prescriptions for patients, the *Ifá* priest in a similar fashion uses specialized and difficult language, here in this paper described as, or likened to ‘speaking in tongues’. The reason for this cannot be far-fetched any way. It is not only to enhance professionalism, personal dignity and respect, but also to maintain the sanctity and confidentiality of his practice and profession.

Notes

1. Abimbolá (1976: 3.).
2. Bámbóṣé (1992: 2.).
3. Fowler (1996:54-714).
4. See ‘Standard Language and Literary Language’ in Olátéjú (1998:135.).
5. There are two systems of divination, the use of divining chain and the use of the palm. This particular expression is about the use of the second system – the Ìbò system.

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