



FOOD AS DRAMA: THE DRAMATURGICAL FUNCTIONS AND ARTISTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF FOOD RITUALS IN WEST AFRICAN PLAYS

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Cite this article:

Evans Asante, Angelina Boakye (2026), Food as Drama: The Dramaturgical Functions and Artistic Interpretations of Food Rituals in West African Plays. International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics 9(1), 100-118. DOI: 10.52589/IJLLL-XDLZFF5G

Manuscript History

Received: 4 Jun 2026

Accepted: 5 Jul 2026

Published: 15 Jul 2026

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ABSTRACT: *Scholarship on food rituals in African drama has largely treated them as ethnographic markers of cultural identity rather than as structural elements of dramatic craft. This study examines how food rituals function as deliberate dramaturgical instruments in four selected West African plays: Yaw Asare's **Ananse in the Land of Idiots**, Ama Ata Aidoo's **The Dilemma of a Ghost**, Sam Ukala's **The Placenta of Death**, and Wole Soyinka's **Kongi's Harvest**. Drawing on Marvin Harris's cultural materialism and supplemented by Clifford Geertz's interpretive approach, the study employs qualitative textual analysis to identify and theorise four dramaturgical functions of food rituals across the selected texts. These are a catalytic function, in which ritual disruption or manipulation initiates the central dramatic conflict; a revelatory function, in which ritual behaviour exposes character psychology, social hierarchy, and moral disposition; a thematic-communicative function, in which food rituals carry and organise the plays' principal ideological concerns; and a preservatory-documentary function, in which the playwrights' faithful artistic interpretations constitute an act of cultural archiving. A cross-play typology is proposed to systematise these functions. The study concludes that food rituals in West African drama represent a distinctly African dramaturgical resource whose full analytical potential remains underexplored in theatre and performance scholarship and recommends their integration into African drama pedagogy, criticism, and practice.*

KEYWORDS: Food rituals, African drama, Dramaturgy, Cultural materialism, West African theatre.



INTRODUCTION

The relationship between food and performance has attracted sustained scholarly attention across multiple disciplines, from anthropology and religious studies to performance theory and cultural criticism. In many African societies, food is not merely nutritive but constitutes a complex communicative medium through which communities mark life transitions, mediate relationships between the living and ancestral beings, assert social status, and regulate communal behaviour (Mbiti, 1990; Harris, 1979; Geertz, 1973). Given this richness, it is perhaps surprising that the specific question of how food rituals function as dramaturgical devices within African playtexts, not what they represent culturally but what they do structurally and aesthetically, remains a conspicuously underdeveloped area of African theatre scholarship.

West African drama has produced a substantial body of plays in which food rituals occupy structurally significant positions. Yet scholarship has largely approached these rituals from a sociological or anthropological vantage point, treating them as cultural markers to be decoded rather than as dramaturgical instruments to be analysed. The four plays selected for this study, spanning the Asante, Fante, Edo, and Yoruba cultural traditions of West Africa, each deploy a specific food ritual not as decorative cultural texture but as a structural engine driving the dramatic action. Analysing how these rituals do their dramaturgical work advances both the theoretical understanding of West African drama and the practical vocabulary available to students, critics, and practitioners engaging with these texts.

The central argument of this study is that food rituals in West African drama perform four distinct but interrelated dramaturgical functions that have not previously been theorised as a coherent system. These are a catalytic function, by which ritual disruption or manipulation initiates and drives dramatic conflict; a revelatory function, by which characters' conduct in relation to ritual exposes their moral and psychological character; a thematic-communicative function, by which food rituals carry and organise the plays' principal ideological concerns; and a preservatory-documentary function, by which the playwrights' faithful artistic interpretations of specific rituals constitute a form of cultural archiving. These functions are identified and theorised through close textual analysis of four West African plays, drawing on cultural materialism and Geertz's interpretive approach as complementary theoretical frameworks. The concept of artistic interpretation, as used throughout this study, refers to the deliberate creative choices playwrights make in adapting, staging, and inflecting ritual material to serve dramatic ends, choices that are neither simply documentary nor purely fictive but that work precisely through their fidelity to actual practice.

Statement of the Problem

Existing scholarship on ritual in African drama occupies two dominant positions, neither of which addresses the dramaturgical functioning of food ritual in any systematic way. The first position, represented by scholars such as Bakare (2019) and Yirenkyi (2019), focuses on how ritual ceremonies underpin theatre's social function, emphasising community cohesion and cultural transmission. The second, represented by literary and dramaturgical analyses of canonical African playwrights including Soyinka, Aidoo, and Asare, concentrates on political allegory, the tradition-modernity binary, and post-colonial critique, treating ritual elements as a thematic backdrop rather than as a structural mechanism (Ilori, 2016; Rouabhia, 2022). What both positions consistently omit is a systematic account of the ways in which food rituals



generate plot, expose character, communicate theme, and constitute deliberate aesthetic choices within the fabric of specific dramatic texts.

This analytical omission carries real consequences for scholarship and pedagogy alike. Students and scholars encountering West African drama are typically equipped with cultural glossaries that explain the anthropological meaning of specific rituals within their originating societies but lack the dramaturgical vocabulary needed to account for what those rituals do within the plays. A dimension of craft that is central to the power of these texts thereby remains analytically invisible. The absence of a systematic, cross-play framework for the dramaturgical analysis of food ritual in West African drama is therefore a significant gap in African theatre studies, and it is this gap that the present study directly addresses.

Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

- i. To examine the dramaturgical functions of food rituals in selected West African plays.
- ii. To analyse how food rituals shape plot, characterisation, thematic development, and cultural preservation in the selected texts.
- iii. To develop a typology of the dramaturgical functions of food rituals in West African drama.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What dramaturgical functions do food rituals perform in the selected West African plays?
- ii. How do food rituals contribute to plot construction, characterisation, thematic development, and cultural preservation in the selected texts?
- iii. What contributions can a typology of food ritual functions make to the study, teaching, and practice of West African drama?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on food, ritual, and performance in African contexts has grown substantially, yet it has tended to separate questions of cultural meaning from questions of dramatic craft. Existing studies richly document the cosmological, social, and political significance of ritual food practices, while theatre scholarship has focused on African drama's ideological and post-colonial concerns rather than on the structural work that food rituals perform within specific playtexts. This review brings these strands into conversation by tracing how cultural, religious, and dramaturgical scholarship has treated food and ritual, and by identifying the persistent absence of a systematic account of food ritual as a dramaturgical device in West African drama.



Food, Ritual, and Cultural Identity in African Scholarship

The significance of food in African cultural life has generated a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship. Mbiti (1990) establishes that food in many African societies is inseparable from its cosmological and communal functions, serving as a medium of communication between the living and ancestral worlds, a marker of life-cycle transitions, and a material expression of social solidarity. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) extend this analysis to West African traditional religion, demonstrating how food offerings and ritual meals constitute central acts of spiritual communication and communal identity formation across the region's diverse cultural traditions.

More focused studies have elaborated the relationship between food ritual and social organisation in specific West African contexts. Allen (2015) demonstrates how food practices in the Yoruba context are implicated in the negotiation and performance of social identity, while Onipede (2017) provides a detailed account of the New Yam Festival as a multidimensional cultural event in which agricultural thanksgiving, ancestral propitiation, and the affirmation of political authority are simultaneously performed. Boateng & Agyeman (2018) document the Bragoro puberty ceremony among the Akan of Ghana, recording the specific foods, spatial arrangements, and performative sequences that constitute the rite. Baribiae (2018) analyses the role of taboo, sacrifice, and sacred substances in Edo traditional religion, providing the cultural-historical context within which food violations in Ukala's drama acquire their gravity. Ayonrinde et al. (2021) examine the symbolic significance of numerological precision in West African ritual practice, establishing why specific quantities of ritual items carry culturally determined weight. Collectively, this body of scholarship provides the cultural-material grounding from which the present study draws in analysing the plays.

Ritual and Performance in African Theatre Studies

Within African theatre scholarship, the treatment of ritual has been extensive but has not produced a systematic analysis of food ritual as a dramaturgical phenomenon. Bakare (2019) examines the relationship between Yoruba ritual tradition and theatrical practice, arguing that ritual ceremonies provide both the formal vocabulary and the social purpose of traditional Yoruba performance. Yirenkyi (2019) analyses ritual ceremony in the Ghanaian context, demonstrating its central functions in sustaining social cohesion and transmitting cultural values across generations. Both studies are productive in establishing the social dimensions of ritual in performance, but neither directs analytical attention to the structural operations of food ritual within written dramatic texts.

Chinyowa (2000) develops a more dramaturgically orientated contextual framework for understanding how rituals communicate social values within African performance contexts, providing a conceptual bridge between ritual studies and textual analysis. Bell (1992), in her theoretical account of ritual practice, offers tools for understanding ritual as structured, purposive action with social consequences that extend beyond its immediate performance, a perspective that informs the present study's analysis of how food ritual disruption generates consequences within a play's dramatic world. Dartey (2021) situates theatre within a broader framework of social transformation in the Ghanaian context, a perspective that illuminates how the social functions of ritual and the social functions of drama intersect in the selected plays.



Dramaturgical Analyses of the Selected Playwrights

The secondary literature on the four playwrights whose work this study analyses reflects the tendencies identified above. Williams (1977) offers an influential reading of Soyinka's deployment of ritual, grounding it in Yoruba cosmology and the mythic imagination, attending richly to symbolic meaning but less systematically to structural mechanism. Rouabhia (2022) analyses Aidoo's drama through a post-colonial lens, examining how cultural and ideological tensions are articulated across her plays. Asante and Oppong (2021) examine the trickster figure in Asare's work, reading Ananse as a vehicle of cultural critique operating within and against established social norms. Asante and Edu (2018) examine the transformation of Akan folktales into Anansegoro dramatic forms, providing useful context for understanding Asare's adaptation of traditional materials for contemporary theatre. Ukala's own theoretical writings on 'Folkism' (Ukala, 1993), an indigenous aesthetic principle deriving from the structural, linguistic, and performative conventions of African folktale, provide an authorial framework for interpreting his dramaturgy, a framework subsequently elaborated by Eregare (2017) in an analysis of the folk aesthetic underpinning Iredi War. Yet this scholarship, like that reviewed above for the other three playwrights, privileges questions of cultural authenticity and aesthetic identity over the systematic analysis of specific dramatic devices such as food ritual. Each of these studies illuminates important dimensions of the playwrights' artistic and ideological strategies, but none undertakes the systematic dramaturgical analysis of food ritual that the present study proposes.

Dramaturgical Theory and Textual Analysis

The dramaturgical dimensions of this study draw on an established tradition of playtext analysis. Baldick (2008) and Abrams and Harpham (2015) provide foundational accounts of the principles of character revelation and dramatic construction, establishing that character in drama is disclosed not through statement but through conduct under pressure. Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) account of narrative structure offers tools for analysing how dramatic causality is constructed and how events are connected within the temporal unfolding of a dramatic text. Beecher's (2007) theory of suspense and narrative tension provides a vocabulary for analysing how ritual anticipation and violation generate and sustain dramatic momentum. Freytag's (1863) classical account of plot structure remains a productive analytical grid for tracking how specific events, including food ritual episodes, function within the larger arc of dramatic action.

Cultural Materialism and Interpretive Anthropology in Existing Scholarship

The two theoretical traditions on which this study draws, Marvin Harris's cultural materialism and Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, have themselves generated substantial scholarly engagement, although neither has previously been applied to the dramaturgical analysis of West African playtexts. Harris (1979) argues that cultural practices, including ritual and religious behaviour, are best explained by reference to the material and infrastructural conditions of the societies that produce them rather than by reference to autonomous systems of belief or symbolic meaning. Applied specifically to questions of food, Harris's wider body of work demonstrates how apparently arbitrary or purely symbolic food practices, such as dietary taboos and preferences, rest on underlying material logics of production, nutrition, and resource management. This materialist orientation resonates with, even where it is not explicitly named by, the existing African cultural scholarship reviewed above. Mbiti's (1990) account of food as a medium linking the living and ancestral worlds and Awolalu and Dopamu's



(1979) analysis of food offerings in West African traditional religion both describe practices whose communicative and spiritual functions are inseparable from the material circumstances, harvests, livestock, and agricultural cycles, that make such offerings possible and meaningful. Similarly, Boateng and Agyeman's (2018) and Onipede's (2017) accounts of the Bragoro and New Yam festivals respectively document ritual practices whose social and cosmological significance is grounded in specific material resources and agricultural rhythms, an implicitly materialist observation that the present study renders explicit and systematic.

Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology, and specifically his method of thick description, addresses a complementary concern, namely how the layered and culturally specific meanings of symbolic action, including ritual, can be recovered through detailed, context sensitive description rather than through the imposition of external analytical categories. Geertz's own demonstration of this method, most famously in his analysis of the Balinese cockfight, treats ritualised cultural performance as a text to be read for the social meanings it encodes. Bell's (1992) account of ritual as structured, purposive action, reviewed above, is consonant with this interpretive tradition, offering a vocabulary for treating ritual as socially consequential symbolic performance. Existing African cultural and religious scholarship on food ritual, reviewed in section 2.1, has proceeded largely within this interpretive tradition, attending closely to the symbolic and cosmological meanings of specific practices. What existing scholarship has not undertaken, and what the present study proposes, is the deliberate combination of materialist and interpretive perspectives with dramaturgical analysis, so as to explain not only what food rituals mean within West African societies but how that meaning is structurally activated when the rituals are represented within dramatic texts. Section 2.7 sets out how these two theoretical traditions are operationalised for this purpose.

Gap in the Literature

The reviewed scholarship reveals a consistent and significant analytical gap. Cultural and religious studies have established the profound significance of food rituals in West African societies but have not translated this significance into the language of dramaturgical analysis. Theatre scholarship has engaged extensively with the social functions and symbolic meanings of ritual in African drama but has not developed a systematic framework for the analysis of food ritual as a structural device within specific playtexts. The available dramaturgical analyses of the four selected playwrights are richly illuminating but treat food ritual as cultural background rather than as a dramaturgical instrument in its own right. The present study addresses this gap directly, using qualitative textual analysis of four plays to develop a typology of the dramaturgical functions of food ritual that advances both the theoretical and the pedagogical dimensions of African drama studies. It is worth noting that this gap is not simply an omission but reflects an entrenched disciplinary division: anthropologists and cultural historians have owned the territory of ritual analysis, while literary and performance scholars have ceded that ground in favour of ideological and post-colonial readings. Williams (1977), for instance, offers one of the richest accounts of Soyinka's ritual imagination, yet his analysis remains absorbed in Yoruba cosmology rather than in the structural mechanics of how ritual generates dramatic action. Similarly, Rouabhia (2022), in an otherwise incisive post-colonial reading of Aidoo, passes over the Sprinkling of the Stools ceremony as a cultural signifier rather than a structural event. Chinyowa (2000), whose contextual framework comes closest to bridging the divide, develops tools for understanding how rituals communicate social values in performance but does not extend these to the dramaturgical functions of food ritual in written



drama. The present study attempts to cross this disciplinary boundary, bringing the analytical vocabulary of dramaturgy to bear on material that cultural scholars have mapped in considerable ethnographic depth. In doing so, it extends, rather than simply supplements, the existing literature: it reframes what previous scholarship has treated as cultural description as structural analysis.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study brings together materialist, interpretive, and dramaturgical perspectives to account for how food rituals operate within West African drama. It treats rituals not only as cultural symbols but also as structurally consequential actions shaped by specific material conditions and embodied in concrete theatrical form. By combining cultural materialism, Geertzian thick description, and classical dramaturgical theory, the framework provides an integrated vocabulary for analysing how food rituals generate plot, reveal character, organise thematic concerns, and function as acts of cultural archiving within the selected plays.

Cultural Materialism

This study employs cultural materialism, as formulated by Marvin Harris (1979), as its primary analytical lens. Cultural materialism contends that cultural practices, including rituals, are not autonomous symbolic systems but are shaped by the material and economic conditions of the societies in which they arise, including conditions of food production, resource access, social organisation, and labour. Applied to the analysis of West African drama, this framework insists that food rituals in the selected plays are not merely symbolic gestures but are tied to the material realities of Asante agriculture, Fante ancestral household structures, Edo kinship obligations, and Yoruba agricultural cycles. The dramaturgical weight of a food ritual in a play derives, in substantial part, from the material weight it carries in the social world from which the play draws its substance.

Cultural materialism is especially productive for this study because it accounts for why food ritual disruption can function as a dramatic catalyst of sufficient gravity to set an entire play in motion. When yam is the agricultural bedrock of a society, when palm oil and kola nut are the material currencies of kinship exchange, and when a puberty rite regulates communal reproduction, the violation of food ritual protocol is not a minor transgression but a threat to the material and social foundations of the community. This severity gives food ritual violation the dramaturgical leverage required to initiate and sustain dramatic action.

Clifford Geertz's Interpretive Approach

Harris's account of the material basis of ritual practice is productively supplemented by Geertz's (1973) concept of thick description, which attends to the layered symbolic meanings that cultural actors attach to their practices. While cultural materialism explains why specific food items such as yam, palm oil, and kola nut recur across ritual contexts as the staple agricultural products of West Africa, Geertz's framework illuminates why those same items carry meanings of fertility, ancestral continuity, and communal identity that extend far beyond their material properties. The study reads the plays through both registers simultaneously, attending to the material conditions that produce and sustain ritual and to the symbolic meanings through which



ritual is enacted and interpreted. This dual reading is necessary because the dramaturgical functions of food ritual in the plays operate at both levels.

Classical Dramaturgical Theory

Dramaturgically, the study draws on Freytag's (1863) classical account of plot structure as an analytical grid for tracking how food rituals function as plot drivers at identifiable structural moments. It draws on Baldick's (2008) and Abrams and Harpham's (2015) accounts of character development to analyse how ritual-orientated conduct reveals moral and psychological character without resort to direct exposition. Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) work on narrative causality informs the analysis of how food ritual disruption initiates and sustains causal chains of dramatic consequence, and Beecher's (2007) theory of suspense provides tools for understanding how ritual anticipation and violation generate dramatic tension. Together with the cultural materialist and Geertzian frameworks, these dramaturgical resources provide the analytical vocabulary through which the study examines the four plays.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing close textual analysis as its primary method. A qualitative approach is epistemologically appropriate because the study aims not to measure the frequency or distribution of food ritual references across a large corpus but to understand the structural and interpretive functions those rituals perform within specific dramatic texts. Close textual analysis is the method best suited to this aim, as it allows the analyst to attend to the precise language, dramatic context, and staging implications of each food ritual sequence and to trace the causal and symbolic connections between ritual and the broader dramatic action of which it forms a part (Abrams & Harpham, 2015; Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Selection of Texts

Four West African plays were purposively selected for analysis: Yaw Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* (2006), Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* (1997), and Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967). Purposive selection was appropriate because the study required plays in which a specific food ritual occupies a structurally significant position within the dramatic action and is represented with sufficient cultural and material detail to support both dramaturgical and cultural materialist analysis. The four plays collectively span the Asante, Fante, Edo, and Yoruba cultural traditions and represent a significant cross-section of West African theatrical expression from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Selection across four distinct cultural traditions was deliberate, ensuring that the typology of cultural material developed would reflect the breadth and diversity of West African dramaturgical practice rather than the conventions of any single tradition.



Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Data were collected through systematic close reading of the four playtexts, with particular attention to scenes in which food rituals are staged, invoked, disrupted, or contested. Each such scene was examined within three contextual frames: first, its cultural-material context, drawing on the secondary scholarship reviewed above to establish the social and material significance of the ritual in its originating society; second, its dramaturgical context, examining how the scene functions in relation to the play's plot structure, character development and thematic organisation; and third, its comparative context, examining how its function relates to the treatment of food ritual in the other three plays.

Analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, each play was analysed independently to identify the primary dramaturgical functions performed by its food ritual or rituals, applying the cultural materialist, Geertzian, and classical dramaturgical frameworks described above. In the second stage, the findings from the four individual analyses were compared and synthesised to identify patterns, distinctions, and relationships across the corpus. This comparative synthesis generated the cross-play typology of dramaturgical functions that constitutes the principal analytical contribution of the study. Throughout both stages, the analysis remained attentive to the possibility of multiple simultaneous functions and to culturally specific variations in how the same general function operates across different dramatic and cultural contexts. To illustrate the analytical process concretely, in examining Act One of Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, the unit of analysis was the scene of the Bragoro ritual food violation, spanning Ananse's arrival through the priestess's pronouncement of death. This scene was coded first for its cultural-material significance (drawing on Boateng and Agyeman, 2018, for the ethnographic grounding of the Bragoro ceremony), then for its structural position within Freytag's plot arc (as the inciting incident), then for what it reveals of the characters involved, and finally for how its specific material details correspond to documented practice. These four analytical lenses were applied iteratively across each scene in each play. The four dramaturgical categories did not emerge as a priori assumptions but were developed inductively from this cross-play analytical process, with the typology representing the patterns that emerged consistently across the corpus. Where a scene performed more than one function, both were recorded, and the relationship between them noted. This procedure ensured that the typology reflects the analytical evidence rather than a predetermined schema.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the four plays identified four distinct but interrelated dramaturgical functions performed by food rituals across the corpus. Each finding is presented and discussed in turn before the cross-play typology synthesises the results.

The Catalytic Function: Food Ritual as Plot Engine

The first and most structurally foundational finding is what this study terms the catalytic function of food ritual, by which ritual disruption or manipulation serves as the mechanism that initiates and sustains dramatic conflict. In two of the four plays, namely, Asare's *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* and Ukala's *The Placenta of Death*, the plot is set in motion not by a decision, a speech, or a character encounter but by a violation of food ritual protocol. In the other two



plays, the food ritual constitutes the primary contested site around which the central conflict crystallises.

In *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, Asare deploys the Bragoro puberty rite as his inciting incident with remarkable structural economy. The wandering trickster Ananse, arriving in the land of Dim-Nyim-Lira, desecrates the ritual food of the Bragoro ceremony, which consists of mashed yam in red oil with eggs prepared for the maidens' rite of passage. In the Asante cultural context that undergirds the play, the ritual food has been consecrated to the gods and placed at the crossroads to mark the final phase of the maidens' transition into womanhood. Its defilement threatens not merely a ceremony but the generational continuity of the entire community. Akpala declares that Ananse has "broken a crucial taboo... intercepted a very critical ritual process" (Asare, 2006, p. 7), and the Priestess demands that "this man... must die" (Asare, 2006, p. 12), establishing the dramatic stakes immediately.

What makes this deployment dramaturgically sophisticated is that Asare does not merely use the taboo as a pretext for introducing his protagonist. The entire logic of the Bragoro ritual, encompassing its sacredness, the severity of its violation, the requirement of royal adjudication, and the possibility of redemption through service, generates the subsequent narrative architecture. Ananse's offer to weave a cloth for the royal couple, King Dosey's corrupt acceptance, Akpala's bribery, and the eventual fall of Dim-Nyim-Lira all flow causally from the inciting food ritual violation. From a cultural materialist perspective, the ritual's authority derives not only from spiritual belief but also from its role in regulating communal reproduction, preparing young women for marriage and thus ensuring the biological and social continuity of the community. To violate it is to threaten the material as well as spiritual foundations of society, a severity that renders the consequent dramatic action credible rather than arbitrary.

Ukala's *The Placenta of Death* deploys food ritual as a catalyst in a different but equally structural way. The Edo custom requiring a new father to send gifts of ritual foodstuffs to his in-laws, specifically seven tubers of yam, seven kola nuts, a goat, and palm wine, is subverted when Ibo conspires with Izagodo to substitute a roasted vulture for the prescribed gifts. In Edo cultural practice, vulture meat carries profound taboo significance; vultures are associated with the completion of sacrificial processes, and their consumption is considered abominable (Baribiae, 2018). Ibo's substitution transforms a gift of abundance into a calculated insult of the gravest kind, and the chain of causation from this corruption is inexorable. Omon's family discovers the substitution. Omon plans revenge; she places a human placenta in the Oba's food, the community eats it unknowingly, and death sentences follow. The food ritual, corrupted at a single structural node, unleashes a cascade of tragic consequences, demonstrating that the Edo birth ritual is not a peripheral cultural ornament but the load-bearing structural element of the dramatic edifice.

In *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Kongi's Harvest*, the catalytic function operates through contestation rather than direct violation. Aidoo's play crystallises its central tradition-modernity conflict around the annual Sprinkling of the Stools, whose performance Ato's family insists upon and which Eulalie dismisses as "a blasted mess" (Aidoo, 1965, p. 41). This contested ritual site transforms a domestic disagreement into a clash of civilisations. In Soyinka's play, Kongi's demand that Oba Danlola present the New Yam to him rather than to the gods transforms an agricultural festival into a political ultimatum, making the ritual the hinge on



which the entire power struggle turns. The food ritual does not merely reflect the conflict in either play; it constitutes it.

These findings demonstrate that the catalytic function operates differently across the four plays but performs the same essential structural service in each: it creates the dramatic occasion, establishes the stakes, and initiates the causal chain from which the rest of the action follows. The cultural materialist framework illuminates why this function is available to these playwrights; the material weight of food ritual in West African societies gives its violation or contestation the dramaturgical gravity required to set an entire play in motion.

The Revelatory Function: Food Ritual as Ethical Mirror

The second finding concerns the revelatory function of food ritual (hereafter so referred to), by which characters' orientations toward ritual, whether they protect it, violate it, manipulate it, or perform it, consistently serve as the primary means through which the playwrights establish and develop the moral and psychological profiles of their characters. This function grounds character revelation in culturally specific and materially legible action rather than in soliloquy or psychological exposition, making it a distinctively dramatic mode of characterisation.

In *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, Asare constructs a tripartite revelation of institutional corruption through three characters' responses to the food ritual violation. King Dosey, who acknowledges the severity of Ananse's transgression and the Priestess's authority to demand execution, nevertheless, accept Ananse's offer and permit him to buy his freedom. The moment of capitulation, staged and transacted through a gift in relation to the violated ritual, reveals his character through action rather than confession. The Elder's silence in the face of Ananse's bribe exposes the corruption of advisory authority, and Akpala's negotiation for honey reveals the venal soul beneath his apparent loyalty. The food ritual violation creates a moral test, and each character's response to that test defines them.

Aidoo employs the revelatory function with particular psychological subtlety in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Eulalie's contemptuous dismissal of the Sprinkling of the Stools ceremony discloses, in a single gesture, the depth of the gulf between her American-formed sensibility and the world into which she has married, communicating her cultural alienation more economically and precisely than any direct statement could. Esi Kom's patient continuation of the ritual, her insistence on including Ato and Eulalie in the ceremony despite Eulalie's hostility, reveals the moral grace that will establish her as the play's ethical centre. Aidoo uses the food ritual as an ethical mirror: what each character sees in it reflects who they are.

Ukala's deployment of the revelatory function in *The Placenta of Death* is perhaps the most sustained of the four plays. Ibo's character is constructed almost entirely through her manipulation of the ritual gift-giving system. Her insistence on selecting the items for Omon's family was expressed in her question, "Are you putting my son and Omon's son on the same footing?" (Ukala, 1997, p. 33), reveals not only jealousy and class anxiety but also a calculating awareness of how material resources and social hierarchy intersect in Edo society. Osaze's acknowledgement of his poverty in the context of the birth ritual, captured in his lament that "my poverty couldn't salt soup to taste" (Ukala, 1997, p. 36), reveals both his dignity and his vulnerability within a system that ties social recognition to material capacity. In *Kongi's Harvest*, Kongi's desire not to abolish but to redirect the New Yam Festival reveals him as a post-colonial ruler who understands that controlling the ritual means controlling the



community's imagination of authority. Oba Danlola's refusal to present the yam after Kongi breaks his promise about the prisoners reveals in turn the integrity of a man who will not offer symbolic submission to a regime that has betrayed its moral contract.

The Thematic-Communicative Function: Food Ritual as Ideological Vehicle

The third finding concerns the thematic-communicative function of food ritual, by which the playwrights use ritual not merely to generate action or reveal character but to carry and organise the plays' central ideological and social concerns. In each case, the choice of which food ritual to deploy and how it is disrupted, contested, or preserved is precisely calibrated to the thematic argument the playwright is advancing about their society.

Asare's deployment of the Bragoro food ritual in *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* is primarily a vehicle for a critique of governance and the abuse of power. The Bragoro ceremony, understood through a cultural materialist lens, is a socially regulatory mechanism governing the transition of young women into adult reproductive roles, thereby sustaining the community's generational and biological continuity. Its protection is a matter of social governance, not merely spiritual piety. When King Dosey abdicates this governance function by accepting Ananse's bribe, Asare's thematic argument emerges with clarity: corruption in leadership dismantles the institutional structures, including ritual structures, through which society sustains itself. The fall of Dim-Nyim-Lira follows inevitably from this abdication.

Aidoo's deployment of the Sprinkling of the Stools in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* carries an equally insistent thematic payload about the cost of cultural dislocation. The ritual is the convergence point of the play's two governing preoccupations, the tradition-modernity conflict and the politics of procreation within the Fante family, and it communicates Aidoo's thematic concerns not through argument but through action. Within the play, the family's performance of the ritual petition for Eulalie's fertility on the day of the Sprinkling asserts that the material and the spiritual, the domestic and the ancestral, cannot be separated. Eulalie's dismissal is therefore not merely a cultural misunderstanding but a rejection of the ontological framework within which the Fante family understands itself.

Ukala's use of the birth ritual in *The Placenta of Death* is the most explicitly political deployment in the corpus. By making the Edo birth-gift ceremony the site of Ibo's class warfare against Omon, Ukala transforms a ritual of communal celebration into a map of social inequality. The seven tubers of yam and seven kola nuts are not merely gifts; they are public demonstrations of the father's capacity to provide and the new child's legitimate claim on community recognition. To substitute vulture meat for these prescribed items is to deny Omon's child symbolic as well as material belonging. Osaze's declaration that "some people came right into the middle of this world; others came perching on its edge" (Ukala, 1997, p. 41) is the thematic summation that the food ritual has been building towards.

Soyinka's deployment of the New Yam Festival in *Kongi's Harvest* is the most politically ambitious in the corpus. Kongi's attempt to appropriate the festival by having himself installed as the "Spirit of Harvest" (Soyinka, 1967, p. 20) in place of the traditional deities dramatises the specifically post-colonial phenomenon of the modern state's capture of cultural institutions. Kongi does not ban the festival; he instrumentalises it. Soyinka's critique is therefore more searching than a simple tradition-versus-modernity opposition: he is arguing that the post-colonial state's most insidious strategy is the co-optation of cultural forms, and the New Yam



Festival is his vehicle for dramatising this argument at the level of action rather than abstraction.

The Preservatory-Documentary Function: Food Ritual as Cultural Archiving

The fourth finding concerns what this study terms the preservatory-documentary function of food ritual, by which the playwrights' faithful artistic interpretation of specific rituals constitutes, in each case, a form of cultural archiving. The decision to represent a ritual with accuracy, selecting specific ingredients, quantities, spatial arrangements, and performative sequences that correspond to actual practice, is itself a dramaturgical choice with structural consequences. It is this choice that gives the food ritual its authority within the play and that enables it to perform its catalytic, revelatory, and thematic functions convincingly.

Asare's artistic interpretation of the Bragoro ceremony in *Ananse in the Land of Idiots* is notable for its specificity. The ritual food is not merely described as a ceremonial meal but itemised as mashed yam in red oil with eggs. Ananse's exclamation that it is "a real meal of mashed yam in red oil... And with eggs too!" (Asare, 2006, p. 6) functions simultaneously as character revelation of his irreverence and as cultural documentation. Asare further replicates the spatial logic of the Akan rite: the ritual food is placed at the crossroads, corresponding to the actual practice documented by Boateng and Agyeman (2018). From a cultural materialist perspective, the organic composition of the ritual food, yam as a staple crop, palm oil as a locally produced commodity, and eggs as readily available domestic produce reflect the agricultural realities of Akan society. These are not arbitrary sacred substances but ritual elevations of the community's primary material resources, and their specificity within the play gives the violation of the ritual its full dramatic weight.

Aidoo's artistic interpretation in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is equally meticulous. The ritual food for the Sprinkling of the Stools is specified as both white and oiled oto, the plain and the palm-oil-dressed versions of mashed yam, respectively, a precision corresponding to actual Fante practice. The stage direction replicates the spatial choreography of the actual ceremony, and the fact that the sprinkling of the stools continues to be practised in ways recognisably continuous with Aidoo's 1965 depiction testifies to the documentary accuracy of her artistic interpretation. Ukala's preservatory choices in *The Placenta of Death* are the most formally precise of the four plays. The Owodo's instructions to retrieve "seven fat nuts of kola, seven giant tubers of yam, a plump and virile he-goat... fill his largest pot with his best wine" (Ukala, 1997, p. 25) replicate both the specific items and the numerologically significant quantities of the Edo birth-gift tradition. As Ayonrinde et al. (2021) note, the number seven carries connotations of completeness and spiritual wholeness in many West African ritual contexts, a precision that gives its full structural weight to the subsequent corruption of the ritual through Ibo's substitution. Soyinka deploys a complementary strategy in *Kongi's Harvest*, preserving the structural logic of the New Yam Festival while inverting its political direction: the audience's recognition of the gap between the ritual's proper form and its corrupted deployment is the very condition that makes the satirical critique intelligible.

Cross-Play Typology and Discussion

The four findings are synthesised in Table 1, which presents a cross-play typology of the dramaturgical functions of food ritual across the corpus. Rows represent the four dramaturgical functions; columns represent the four plays analysed. Each cell identifies how that specific



function manifests in that specific play. As the discussion below demonstrates, individual food ritual sequences in each play perform multiple functions simultaneously, so the cells should be read as highlighting primary manifestations rather than as assertions of exclusivity.

Table 1: Typology of Dramaturgical Functions of Food Rituals in Selected West African Plays

Dramaturgical Function	Ananse in the Land of Idiots (Asare)	The Dilemma of a Ghost (Aidoo)	The Placenta of Death (Ukala)	Kongi's Harvest (Soyinka)
I. Catalytic / Plot-Inciting	Bragoro defilement is the inciting incident; all subsequent action flows from it	Childlessness triggers the Sprinkling ritual visit, which ignites marital and cultural conflict	Substitution of vulture for ritual gifts catalyses the placenta revenge plot	Kongi's demand to receive the New Yam drives the entire political conflict to its violent climax
II. Revelatory / Character-Establishing	King Dosey's greed and the Elder's corruption revealed through acceptance of Ananse's bribes	Eulalie's dismissal of the stool ritual reveals cultural alienation; Esi Kom's patience reveals maternal wisdom	Ibo's manipulation of ritual gifts reveals jealousy, class anxiety, and corrupt ambition	Kongi's insistence on the yam reveals autocratic narcissism; Danlola's refusal reveals moral integrity
III. Thematic / Communicative	Corruption, abuse of power, and the collapse of governance; the taboo as social regulator	Tradition-modernity conflict; diasporic identity; the spiritual cost of cultural dislocation	Poverty, class inequality, and social injustice as reflected in differential access to ritual	Post-colonial power struggle; the weaponisation of tradition by the modern state
IV. Preservatory / Documentary	Faithful replication of Bragoro ingredients (yam, red oil, egg) and ritual location (crossroads) preserves Akan puberty rite	Detailed staging of the Sprinkling of the Stools documents the ritual for generations who may not witness it	Precise numerological fidelity (seven tubers, seven kola) preserves the Edo post-birth ritual in dramatic form	Dramatisation of the New Yam sequence preserves the Yoruba harvest ritual framework



Several observations emerge from this typology that carry implications beyond the individual plays. First, the four functions are not mutually exclusive; in every play, individual food ritual sequences perform multiple functions simultaneously. In *Ananse in the Land of Idiots*, the Bragoro defilement is simultaneously catalytic, revelatory, thematic, and preservatory. This functional density is part of what makes food ritual such an efficient dramaturgical resource: a single ritual scene accomplishes the work that would otherwise require multiple scenes of exposition, confrontation, and reflection.

Second, the typology reveals a spectrum from structural to interpretive functions. Functions I and II, the catalytic and revelatory, are primarily structural, concerning how food ritual organises dramatic action and character revelation. Functions III and IV, the thematic-communicative and preservatory-documentary, are primarily interpretive, concerning the meanings the playwrights produce through their deployment of food ritual. The four plays demonstrate that food ritual is a dramaturgical resource operative at both levels simultaneously. A brief clarification about the status of the typology is warranted here. The four functions are best understood as analytic lenses through which a given ritual scene can be examined, rather than as empirically discrete categories that are mutually exclusive in practice. Any single scene may be examined through all four lenses simultaneously, and the most dramatically potent scenes in the corpus are those in which all four are operative at once. That said, the analysis also suggests a functional dependency: the preservatory-documentary function tends to be the condition of possibility for the other three. It is because the playwrights represent the rituals with cultural fidelity that their violation carries catalytic weight, that characters' responses to them register as morally revelatory, and that the thematic arguments built upon them are convincing. Cultural accuracy is, in this sense, the foundation on which the structural and communicative functions rest.

Third, the typology reframes a recurring debate in African literary criticism over whether playwrights' representations of cultural practice constitute authentic documentation or artistic licence (Mambrol, 2020; Nyamndi, 2006). Mambrol argues that the problem of classification in African literature is precisely the tension between cultural specificity and artistic transformation, while Nyamndi contends that the African play carries cultural imperatives that constrain the playwright's freedom of invention. The typology proposed here offers a way beyond this binary. The preservatory function shows that the playwrights analysed here are not choosing between accuracy and creativity but deploying accuracy as a creative strategy. Cultural fidelity and dramatic effectiveness are mutually reinforcing: the authenticity of the ritual representation is precisely what gives the catalytic, revelatory, and thematic functions their authority. Artistic interpretation, as the present study uses the term, refers to the playwright's deliberate shaping of ritual material to serve structural and ideological ends, a process that is neither straightforwardly documentary nor freely inventive but that works through selective fidelity. Soyinka preserves the form of the New Yam Festival precisely in order to dramatise its political inversion; Ukala replicates the numerological precision of Edo birth gifts precisely so that their corruption registers as catastrophic. In each case, the accuracy is the dramaturgical instrument.

Fourth, the typology illuminates what is distinctively African about these playwrights' dramaturgical choices. Western dramatic traditions from Aristotle onwards have theorised plot as driven by character and choice, character as revealed through action and speech, and theme as communicated through structure and symbol. The four plays here demonstrate an additional,



culturally specific mechanism: the food ritual as a site where community, ancestry, material life, and individual conduct converge, enabling it to serve all four dramaturgical functions simultaneously. This is a significant contribution to the theory of dramatic form.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the corpus of four plays, while purposively selected to represent distinct West African cultural traditions and to span different historical moments from the mid-twentieth century to the present, constitutes a limited sample. The typology proposed is necessarily provisional, and additional functions may emerge from analysis of a wider corpus. Second, the study focuses on written dramatic texts rather than on performance practice. The dramaturgical analysis is therefore literary rather than theatrical: it addresses what the playwrights inscribe in the text rather than how those inscriptions are realised and potentially transformed in specific productions. A performance-orientated extension of this study would constitute a valuable complementary inquiry. Third, the study focuses on four distinct cultural traditions within West Africa and does not claim applicability beyond this region without further testing. Researchers working on Central, East, or Southern African dramatic writing may find that the typology requires modification to account for different ritual ecologies and dramaturgical conventions. These limitations are offered not as qualifications that undermine the study's contribution, but as signposts for the future research that the findings make possible.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This study has examined food ritual as a dramaturgical instrument in four selected West African plays by Asare, Aidoo, Ukala, and Soyinka, employing cultural materialism, Geertz's interpretive approach, and classical dramaturgical theory as analytical frameworks. The findings demonstrate that food rituals in these plays are not ethnographic background but sophisticated structural devices. They catalyse dramatic conflict by creating the conditions for its initiation and sustaining its momentum. They reveal character through the moral tests and choices they generate, grounding psychological disclosure in culturally specific action. They communicate the plays' principal thematic concerns about corruption, cultural dislocation, economic inequality, and post-colonial power not through argument but through dramatic action. And they constitute acts of cultural preservation through the playwrights' commitment to the accurate representation of the rituals they deploy.

The cultural materialist framework demonstrates that the dramaturgical power of food ritual in these plays is inseparable from its material foundation. It is precisely because yam is the agricultural bedrock of West African society, because palm oil and kola nut are the material currencies of kinship exchange, and because birth, puberty, and harvest are the material rhythms of communal life, that the disruption or manipulation of food ritual can carry the dramatic weight these playwrights require. The symbolic meanings that Geertz's framework illuminates grow from this material ground and are put to work within dramatic structures of considerable sophistication.



The cross-play typology proposed here is necessarily provisional but not all-encompassing, reflecting the diversity of the four plays analysed and the four distinct cultural traditions they represent. Nevertheless, the study establishes that food ritual in West African drama constitutes a particularly significant and culturally distinctive dramaturgical resource, rooted in the material conditions of West African societies. While ritualised food practices appear in theatrical traditions across Asia, Latin American drama, and other indigenous performances, the argument advanced here is not one of exclusivity but of cultural specificity wherein, in West African dramatic writing, food ritual performs its dramaturgical functions with a density, authority, and structural integration that reflects the central place of these rituals in the material and communal life of the societies from which the plays draw their inspiration. To read these plays without critically attending to what their food rituals do structurally, characteristically, thematically, and culturally is to miss a dimension of their craft that is central to their power.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced.

First, university curricula in African drama and theatre studies should incorporate the dramaturgical analysis of food ritual as a core analytical category alongside existing approaches rooted in cultural, post-colonial, and ideological criticism. The typology developed in this study provides a starting framework for this integration. Students and scholars studying West African dramatic texts require more than a cultural glossary that explains the meanings of specific rituals within their original societies. They also need a dramaturgical vocabulary that can account for the structural and aesthetic functions these rituals perform within the plays themselves. Both forms of understanding are essential, and this study demonstrates how they can be effectively integrated to deepen the analysis of West African drama.

Second, future research should extend the typology proposed here to a wider corpus of West African dramatic texts. Productive play texts include Efua Sutherland's *Foriwa*, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo's *Song of a Goat*, and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, all of which engage food and ritual in ways that the typology may illuminate. Extension to other national and regional African theatrical traditions beyond the West African corpus would also be valuable in testing the typology's broader applicability and identifying the culturally specific variations within the general functions it proposes.

Third, the analytical framework should be extended beyond the literary playtext to examine how food ritual functions dramaturgically in West African performance traditions beyond written drama, including popular theatre, ritual performance, and Theatre for Development (TfD) practice. Food and communal meals are particularly recurrent in TfD interventions precisely because they are central to communal gathering and social bonding in many West African communities. Understanding their dramaturgical functions, rather than treating them merely as props or cultural decoration, should inform how TfD practitioners select, stage, and debrief these elements within community-based performance. The dramaturgical analysis of food ritual in African performance more broadly represents a productive and substantially underexplored area of scholarly inquiry, and the present study's findings suggest that a similar typological analysis would yield significant insights across these performance modes.



Lastly, African theatre directors and practitioners should engage more reflexively with the dramaturgical functions of food ritual in their production work. An awareness that food ritual sequences carry structural, revelatory, and thematic weight, and not merely cultural decoration, should inform directorial choices about staging, pacing, the physical handling of ritual objects and foods, and the spatial choreography of ritual sequences in performance. The findings of this study suggest that heightened attention to the dramaturgical potential of food ritual in West African plays can enrich the quality of both analysis and production, deepening the encounter between the plays and their audiences.

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