



## **A Thematic Analysis of the National Anthems of English West Africa**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates major themes espoused in the national anthems of English West Africa. Further, it seeks to find out how these themes are projected linguistically and literarily. Five English-speaking countries in West Africa, namely, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and The Gambia, were purposively sampled based on their colonial history, language, and geographical location for this paper. Findings show that the major themes espoused in these national anthems are the themes of unity, religion, freedom, and modesty. The themes are projected linguistically by conscious diction. Content lexical items – nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs – are preferred to non-content words in projecting these themes. Besides, literarily, these anthems employ figures of speech such as repetition, apostrophe, oxymoron, imagery, rhythm, and metaphor to convey the various themes. These findings confirm the popular view in the study of national anthems that national anthems of countries which share colonial history, language, and geographical location are similar in content and style.

**Keywords:** Thematic Analysis, National Anthems, English West Africa, Ghana, Themes

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## **Introduction**

A theme is generally defined as the lesson behind a subject matter. Abrams (1999) submits that “theme is sometimes used interchangeably with ‘motif,’ but the term is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader” (p.170). From Abrams (1999), we note that a theme is a “general concept or doctrine”; this means that the general side of a theme is that it should have a universal appeal. By use of a stronger word “doctrine”, Abrams (1999) suggests that themes are consciously projected and attention is drawn to them by the conscious use of language. Other words such as “faith”, “axiom”, “belief”, “creed”, and “instruction” overlap in meaning with “doctrine”. Inherent in all these words is the intention to pass on information to others given the urgency of a moment. Abrams (1999) further shows that themes are either “implicit” or “asserted”. They are implicit when stated indirectly but asserted when they are directly stated. And the thrust behind themes is to serve the purpose of persuasion, to carry a message across and move people to action. Subject matters of all kinds have themes behind them. These subject matters may be as varied as speeches, novels, poems, and national anthems. The focus of this paper is the subject matter of some national anthems.

National anthems have received some attention from discourse analysts over the years (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Brooke, 2007; Daly, Kellehear, & Glikzman, 1997; De Souza, 2006; Lauenstein, Murer, Boos, & Reicher, 2015; Lester & Gunn, 2011). National anthems are a people’s property as they espouse a people’s passion, a look at the past, and a projection of the future as they portray a people’s identity (Muller, 2001; Mutemererwa, Chamisa, & Chambwera, 2013). Just as individuals possess certain idiosyncrasies that mark them as unique and at the same time share many similarities, so do nations spell such dichotomies and semblances in many ways such as their way of life, culture, and world view. One particular way we can trace a nation’s culture and world view is through their anthems. The focus of this paper is to thematically analyse some major themes espoused in the national anthems of the five English-speaking West African countries, namely, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia; these anthems are sourced from Hang (2003) and crosschecked with Bristow and Reed (2006). The study also seeks to unearth the various linguistic and literary ways by which these themes are projected. The paper is divided into the following sections: Research Questions, Literature Review, Method, Discussions, and Conclusions.

## **Research Questions**

1. What major themes are there in the national anthems of English West Africa?
2. How are these themes projected linguistically and literarily?

## **Literature Review**

National anthems have received attention from scholars over the years. One such study is Cerulo (1993) where he focused on the significance of symbols and the

world system by zooming in on national anthems and flags. A major finding from Cerulo (1993) was that there is a link between a nation's world system position and the structure of its symbols. That conclusion reveals, first, that national anthems, just like other national symbols, are consciously conceived and they define the core values and convictions of a people. Second, that national anthems belong to a particular nation but are composed with a world-view as regards a nation's position in the world, be it political, economic, social, or otherwise.

Other scholars acknowledge that national anthems serve very similar functions of nations (Mead, 1980; Smith, 1975). The current study seeks to contest this popular view as regards themes in the national anthems of English West Africa. However, a body of literature attributed the similarity in national anthems to such things as colonial influence and geographic location (Crompton, 1990; Mead, 1980; Smith 1975). For Rahimipour (2018), colonial history definitely has an influence on both the colonised and the colonial power.

In the case of colonial influence, the national anthems under study all share the same line of colonialism – The Anglo-American colonial power. Ghana, Nigeria, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone are all former colonies of Britain. Liberia is a former colony of America.

Since this study's focus is to unearth the themes espoused in the anthems of these countries, findings would either confirm or reject the view drawn from literature that countries with similar histories have similar anthems with regard to content and style.

Moreover, all the countries whose anthems are considered for this study are in West-Africa, broadly speaking, the same geographical location. Interestingly, of all the countries of the national anthems under study, only Sierra Leone shares a border with Liberia. Two French-speaking countries, Togo, and Benin, are sandwiched between Ghana and Nigeria. The Gambia is in a French speaking country, Senegal. Would this slight variation in geographical locations affect the similarity or difference in the themes of the anthems of these countries?

It was also clear from literature that language is employed artistically in carrying out the messages espoused in national anthems (Cerulo, 1993). Since, national anthems serve as an identity symbol, language is used consciously in carrying the messages they espouse. In that regard, the present study seeks to also discover how themes are projected linguistically and literarily in the national anthems of English West Africa. The study, therefore, seeks to unearth how lexical items are used to portray themes as well as the literary devices employed in projecting these themes in the anthems of English West Africa.

## **Method**

The present paper is wholly qualitative as findings are not reduced to numerical bases. A purposive random sampling procedure was adopted in selecting the national anthems of former Anglo-American colonies in West Africa who share a common colonial history, language, and geographical location. These countries also gained their independence largely around the same time. The purpose was to unearth any similarities as regards themes that shared history could leave with these countries. Dominant themes and how they are projected linguistically and literarily were identified in these anthems and discussed, making the paper fully descriptive.

## **Discussions**

This section presents the discussion of findings of the present paper by answering the research questions. Major themes and how they are projected are identified and discussed one after the other.

## **Unity**

Unity is a major theme espoused in all the five national anthems under study. Some examples are as follows:

- A. Steadfast to build together  
A nation strong in unity – Ghana, second stanza
  
- B. One nation bound in freedom  
Peace and unity – Nigeria
  
- D. In union strong success is sure  
We cannot fail – Liberia
  
- E. Firmly united ever we stand ,  
Singing thy praise, O native land – Sierra Leone
  
- F. We strive and work and pray  
That all may live in unity – The Gambia.

In Example A, we see in Ghana's second stanza of her national anthem, "A nation strong in unity." The same theme of unity is captured in the examples of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. The examples by themselves, albeit not the only parts of the anthems that spell the theme of unity, are sufficient in answering the question of a major theme espoused in the anthems under discussion.

The next concern is to address the ways that this major theme of unity are projected in the anthems of these English-speaking countries of West Africa.

One outstanding way by which the theme of unity is projected in the anthems under study is by conscious diction. Words or groups of words are carefully chosen to spell the theme of unity in a way such as espoused in poetry where there is the economy of words with each word loaded with meaning. In this way, content words – nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs – are preferred to non-content words. For example, we note the concrete use of the words “unity”, “union”, and “united” in the anthems under consideration. The use of these synonymous words in themselves is espoused the straightforwardness with which these countries project the theme of unity in their anthems. While not mentioned directly in any of the anthems, there is clear evidence that the theme of unity as projected by these countries echoes the well-known cliché: “United we stand, divided we fall”. Sierra Leone’s “Firmly united ever we stand”, no doubt, points to this cliché. For The Gambia, the focus on unity is so important that it is placed as a target to achieve. In that light, The Gambia would “strive”, “work”, and “pray” with the purpose of living in unity. Liberia places unity as the foundation of success as do Ghana and Nigeria. One major way, therefore, by which the theme of unity is projected in the anthems under discussion is by the use of conscious content-word diction.

Another way that the theme of unity is projected in the anthems is by the employment of literary devices. These do not only give the anthems artistic beauty, but also bring the lyrics to life. A common figure of speech employed in these anthems is repetition. As pointed out by Amenorvi (2018), repetition can serve a dual purpose of serving as a memory aid and as a point of emphasis. By repetition, these two purposes are clearly spelt out to the people to whom these anthems are composed. For example, “All hail, Liberia, hail!” and “We will o’er all prevail” appear four and three times respectively in Liberia’s anthem. For emphasis and memory aid, it means Liberia should be placed first among all Liberians.

Repetition encompasses not only exact words but also ideas. In that light the theme of unity is projected by the repetition of not just words but the concept of unity. We note this type of repetition as “our nation”, “O compatriots”, “with heart and hand”, “singing thy praise”, and “Towards the common good”, from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone and The Gambia, respectively, all showing the repetition of the same idea of unity, serving as a major concern for these countries.

### **Religion**

Another major theme besides unity is the theme of religion. Religion has played major roles in the history of many countries. It is the same in the case of the English-speaking countries in West Africa. Let us look at some examples of the theme of faith in a deity (religion) as captured in the national anthems under study.

- G. God bless our homeland Ghana  
And make our nation great and strong. – Ghana

- H. O God of creation,  
Direct our noble course – Nigeria
- I. By God’s command  
A home of glorious liberty – Liberia
- J. We pray that no harm on thy children may fall.  
That blessing and peace may descend on us all. – Sierra Leone
- K. Keep us, great God of nations  
To the Gambia ever true. – Gambia

We see the theme of religion clearly spelt out in the examples above. For Ghana, the theme of faith in a deity (God) is captured in the very first metre of the first stanza of her anthem. So important is this theme that Ghana’s anthem is known and referred to among many Ghanaians by the first metre of the nation’s anthem – God bless our homeland Ghana. We also see the theme of religion clearly spelt in Nigeria’s anthem as shown in Example G. An appeal is made to God to direct the nation’s course. Liberia mentions “God’s command”; The Gambia refers to the “great God of nations” and Sierra Leone employs the words “pray” and “blessings”; all these directly or indirectly express the theme of religion. The conscious choice of the lexical items “God”, “pray”, and “blessing” clearly point to this theme.

Another notable way by which the theme of faith in a deity (religion) is projected is by the employment of the literary device of apostrophe, which Reboul (1989) explains as a figure that addresses someone else other than our true audiences. The significance of an apostrophe is that it brings into focus the importance of the one addressed outside an audience and unites the three – the addresser, the addressee, and the audience.

The first stanza of Ghana’s anthem, for example, is one illustration of an apostrophe. The whole first stanza is an address to God to “bless”, “make”, and “help” the nation. The dominant figure of apostrophe in the case of Ghana’s anthem no doubt reveals the role of religion in the life of Ghanaians.

The same figure of apostrophe is employed by Nigeria, Liberia, The Gambia, and, indirectly, by Sierra Leone. Liberia’s “By God’s command” reveals the employment of imagery to convey the theme of faith in a deity, religion. By use of “God’s command”, we see in our mental eyes an army whose commander is a deity, which is more powerful than humans. Perhaps, this is a biblical allusion to Psalm 110:3 which refers to the army of the Lord (NWT: 1984).

### **Freedom**

Among the major themes contained in the national anthems under discussion is, of course, the theme of freedom. Most of these anthems were composed during or immediately after gaining independence from colonialism. In that regard, the theme

of freedom permeates these anthems. The following are examples that speak the theme of freedom.

- L. Bold to defend forever  
The cause of freedom and of right – Ghana
- M. One nation bound in freedom – Nigeria
- N. We'll shout the freedom  
Of a race benighted – Liberia
- O. High we exalt thee, realm of the free – Sierra Leone
- P. Freedom and peace each day – The Gambia

The foregoing examples convey the theme of freedom by clear and unambiguous diction. We see the use of the word “freedom” employed in the anthems of Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia, and The Gambia; and Sierra Leone employs the phrase “the free”. The directness and brevity espoused in the presentation of the theme of freedom in these anthems reveal the very essence of their fight for independence – freedom first, and any other thing follows. There is no empirical evidence that these countries consulted one another in the preparation of their anthems. These items were singlehandedly written by individuals and as long as the words carry the mind of the nations, they were adopted and used by the whole country. And the theme of freedom permeates these items as these countries all once fought against colonialism and for freedom.

Now, let us discuss the literary ways by which this theme of freedom are projected in the national anthems in question.

In Example K, the employment of the device of apostrophe is still in place since the whole first stanza of Ghana’s anthem, as stated earlier, is an apostrophe, and addressed to a deity – God – to come to her rescue. In that line, God – a mighty force – is called upon to embolden Ghanaians to defend freedom forever. This is an issue of faith, a case of religion which is held in high esteem among the people of Ghana. “Freedom” has, therefore, become a religious pursuit which must be accomplished “forever”. The employment of the word “forever” also reveals the belief of the people of Ghana that God lives forever, and appealing to him would guarantee them an everlasting freedom. This employment of apostrophe has shown that Ghana, the first to attain independence south of the Sahara, highly values freedom as espoused in their anthem.

In Example L, Nigeria employs an oxymoron to project the theme of freedom in her anthem. Abrams (1999, p. 201) submits that “if the paradoxical utterance conjoins two terms that in ordinary usage are contraries, it is called an oxymoron”. From this definition, we see that an oxymoron is first of all a paradox, which is “a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes good sense.” We see the expression “bound in freedom” – an oxymoron – which is simple in appearance but loaded with

meaning. The expression “bound in freedom” projects a paradoxical sense forasmuch as being “bound” denotes the sense of captivity which is in direct contrast with “freedom”. By this oxymoron, Nigeria is saying that she prefers to be in colonialism to freedom – which is absolute freedom – to colonialism to Britain or any other colonial power. That is the power embedded in the oxymoron with which Nigeria projects the theme of freedom in her anthem.

### **Modesty**

A final major theme that permeates the anthems under discussion is the theme of modesty or humility. In the presentation of this theme, the countries acknowledge that they would not be able to carry on all alone without help. The following examples show the presentation of the theme of modesty in the anthems under consideration.

- Q. Fill our hearts with true humility  
And make us cherish fearless honesty. – Ghana
- R. Help our youth the truth to know  
In love and honesty to grow – Nigeria
- S. We’ll shout the freedom  
Of a race benighted – Liberia
- T. Knowledge and truth our forefathers spread  
Mighty the nations whom they led. – Sierra Leone
- U. Keep us, great God of nations  
To the Gambia ever true – The Gambia

In Example P, Ghana appeals to “God” to “fill our hearts with true humility”. Nigeria, in Example Q, also appeals to “God” to help her youth know the truth. In example R, Liberia refers to herself as “a race benighted”. Sierra Leone acknowledges the roles of their “forefathers” in their pursuit of freedom and The Gambia appeals to a deity to help them build their nation in Examples T and U, respectively. All these examples reveal the acknowledgement of one’s limitations and that one is humble enough to seek the help of others. Conscious diction once again plays a major role in projecting the theme of modesty. We note “true humility”, “keep us”, “forefathers”, and “help our youth” from the examples above. These phrases all point to another source of help, emphasizing the acknowledgement of these countries that they are not totally self-reliable. That is modesty carried on the shoulders of conscious diction.

As in the case of other themes in this paper, the theme of modesty is also projected via figurative language. In Example P, Ghana employs imagery where “our hearts” – the symbolism of the totality of a person – is reduced to a receptacle to be filled with “humility”. The employment of this imagery pictures a bucket or any receptacle filled to the brim. The conscious choice of the verb “fill” projects the



theme of humility as something really desired and must be received to the full. Ghana, therefore seeks, not to be “given”, but “filled”, not with mock humility, but with “true humility”.

In Example Q, Nigeria employs rhythm to project the theme of humility. The couplet ends with the words “know” and “grow”, a conscious choice rich in meaning. In the example, Nigeria prays to “know” truth and to “grow” in love and honesty. The words “know” and “grow”, a rhyming couplet, project the idea of balance. As rhythm appeals to the ear and spells sound balance, the significance of the rhythm here is that when God grants Nigeria the quality of truth, love, and honesty, the nation will be balanced and “grow”. Also in this rhyme we have an agricultural metaphor espoused in the word “grow”. In this regard, we see the figure of the “nursing” of the qualities mentioned above with the intention that they “grow” for the progress of the nation.

We note from Example S the employment of rhythm in the words “spread” and “led” by Sierra Leone. Like Nigeria, Sierra Leone projects the idea of a nation balanced in acknowledging the work of their past heroes and heroines and, at the same time, seeking to imitate their hard work for the good of the future. The Gambia, however, projects the theme of humility by the use of an apostrophe by appealing to “God” to “keep” the nation. The significance of this apostrophe projects the theme of humility in the light of the acknowledgement of one’s limitations which warrants a call to “God”, a more powerful force, for help.

### **Conclusions**

The present paper has identified themes of unity, religion, freedom, and modesty in the national anthems of English West Africa. These various themes are projected through conscious diction and some literary devices such as apostrophe, imagery, rhythm, and oxymoron. In all, we note the similarity espoused in the themes as well as how they are conveyed in the national anthems of the English-speaking countries of West Africa. The study also reveals that texts such as these under study can be analysed as literary pieces of work. The findings of the present study, therefore, confirm and support the popular view that anthems of countries sharing similar history, language, and geographical location are similar both in content and style.

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