THE BURDEN OF RETURN: "AKU RUO ỤLỌ" AND PERFORMATIVE SUCCESS IN IGBO LITERATURE

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Abstract
The rise in the number of Igbo people leaving the country in search of greener pasture abroad, popularly called "japa," has brought new pressure on those who travel out to return home with visible signs of success. This pressure connects to the old Igbo belief in "aku ruo ụlọ," which means that wealth gained outside must be brought and shown at home before it is recognized as true success. Many people who travel abroad now face the burden of proving their success to their families and communities, even when their real situation does not match what is expected of them. This paper looks at how this burden of return and the pressure to perform success are shown in Igbo literature, using *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana as the primary text. The paper is guided by postcolonial theory, which helps to explain the pressure of identity and belonging faced by people who leave home and are expected to return successful. The paper uses a qualitative method, through close reading of the selected text, to study how the theme of *aku ruo ụlọ* and performative success is represented in the text. The paper finds that characters in the text struggle between their real financial situation and the pressure to show off success for their community to accept them. It also finds that this pressure can lead to shame, dishonesty, depression, frustration or hardship for those who fail to meet up.

Keywords: Aku ruo ụlọ, performative success, Igbo literature, japa, return, wealth

Introduction

In Igbo culture, there is a popular belief called "aku ruo ụlọ," which simply means that wealth made outside the homeland should be repatriated home. This belief teaches that a person who leaves home to work or trade in another land has not truly succeeded until that wealth is brought back and shown to the family and community. It is not enough to be rich somewhere far away; the wealth must "reach home" through visible actions like building a house, taking a title, or supporting family members, before the person is seen as truly successful (Emenyonu, 2020). This idea has shaped how Igbo people measure success especially among people who travel abroad in search of a better life, a trend now popularly called "japa."

The "japa" trend has become one of the most talked-about issues in Nigeria today, and scholars are beginning to study it closely. Okunade and Awosusi (2023) explain that the mass movement of Nigerians abroad, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, has been driven by poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and the poor state of the economy. In the same way, Adeyanju, Alao, Opakunbi, and Ajibade (2024) describe japa as a survival strategy that young Nigerians use to escape hardship and find better opportunities outside the country. These studies show that the pressure to leave home is high, but less attention has been given to the socio-economic pressures faced by migrant returnees in their homelands due to family and communal expectations.

This theme is important to study in Igbo literature because it is not just a modern issue; it is a theme that has appeared in Igbo stories for a long time. From the earliest Igbo novel, *Omenuko*, written by Pita Nwana in 1933, the idea of leaving home, gathering wealth outside, and returning to prove oneself has already been part of Igbo storytelling (Nwana, 1933; Emenyonu, 2020). This shows that the burden of return is not new; it is a theme that has followed the Igbo person from the colonial period into the present "japa" era. However, not enough attention has been given to how this same theme, which existed many years ago, connects to what Igbo people abroad are facing today. Many people who travel out now carry a heavy pressure to show success back home, even when their real situation abroad is difficult, and this can lead to shame, dishonesty, or hardship when they cannot meet up with these expectations. This gap, between the old cultural belief and its presence in literature, is what this paper wants to look at closely.

The paper argues that the burden of "aku ruo ụlọ" and the pressure to perform success, as shown in the case study through the character of Omenuko, reflect the same struggles that many Igbo people face today when they leave home and are expected to return successful. The objectives of this paper are to examine how the theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" is presented in *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana; to discuss how the pressure to perform success affects the character of Omenuko in the story; and to connect these findings to the present-day pressure faced by Igbo people who travel abroad and are expected to return home with visible success. This paper focuses only on the novel *Omenuko*, written in the Igbo language by Pita Nwana. The paper pays close attention to the parts of the story that show Omenuko's departure from home, his struggle and success abroad, and his eventual return, using these events to narrate the burden of return and performative success amongst the Igbo in Nigeria.

Return and Migration in Igbo/African Literature

The idea of a person leaving home and later coming back has always been an important part of Igbo storytelling. This is not a new idea created by modern writers; it has been present from the very beginning of Igbo written literature. Ugochukwu (2015) carried out a study that compared two of the earliest and most important Igbo novels, *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. In this study, Ugochukwu (2015) explains that both novels deal with the theme of exile, which simply means being away from home for a long time, but the two novels show this theme in different ways. In *Omenuko*, the main character is forced to leave home because of a wrong he committed, but while away, he works hard, becomes wealthy, and later returns home to be accepted again by his people. Ugochukwu (2015) describes this as "the immigrant face of exile," meaning that it shows a person moving forward in life while away from home. On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's exile is shown as something painful. When he finally returns home, he finds that things have changed so much that he can no longer fit in, and this leads to his downfall. This comparison by Ugochukwu (2015) shows that from the very start of Igbo literature, the idea of leaving and returning has always been connected to how a person is judged, accepted, or rejected by their community.

Hodges (2011) also studied *Omenuko* and *Things Fall Apart* together and pointed out something very important. According to Hodges (2011), in the introduction to *Omenuko*, the author himself explains a strong Igbo belief: if a person goes to live in another town, that person will always be seen as a visitor there, no matter how long they stay or how well they do. This belief teaches that such a person must always remember that they will one day be expected to return to their home town, and that their people will be waiting to welcome them back when they do. Hodges (2011) explains that this belief is what shapes the pressure a person feels to succeed while away, because they know that home is always watching and waiting for their return. This idea matches closely with the belief behind "aku ruo ụlọ," which says that wealth gained outside must reach home before it is seen as real success.

These two studies, Ugochukwu (2015) and Hodges (2011), show that the connection between "leaving home" and "coming back with something to show" has always been at the centre of Igbo literary storytelling, long before the word "japa" was ever used.

Wealth, Success, and Identity in Igbo Culture

In Igbo culture, a person's wealth is not something that is kept quietly to oneself; it is something that is expected to be shown and shared with the community. This is one of the clearest ideas found in *Omenuko*. The title ‘Omenuko’ simply means "one who does great things even in times of scarcity or hardship" (Tekedia, 2026). Omenuko was a successful trader who fell into serious trouble, was forced into exile, and later became wealthy again in the land where he settled. However, his story does not end there. According to Tekedia (2026), Omenuko later uses his wealth to correct the wrongs of his past, returns home, and works hard to rebuild not just his money, but his good name and his place among his people. This shows an important lesson: in Igbo thinking, having money is not enough on its own. A person's success is only fully accepted when it is proven at home, through actions that the community can see and recognize. This is the whole idea behind "aku ruo ụlọ" that wealth is not just something you have, it is something you must bring home and display before it becomes real, respected success.

A similar pressure is shown in a later, more modern Igbo-related novel, *No Longer at Ease*, written by Chinua Achebe (1960), even though this particular novel was written in English rather than Igbo. Khan

(2020) explains that the main character, Obi Okonkwo, returns to Nigeria from his studies in England full of hope, pride, and big dreams for his future. However, Obi soon discovers that Nigeria is no longer exactly as he remembered it, and more importantly, his family and community expect him to support them financially and to show that his years abroad were worth it. Khan (2020) points out that Obi struggles greatly between staying true to his personal values and meeting these financial demands from home, and this struggle eventually leads him into taking bribes, something he had strongly promised himself he would never do. This example, though from a different novel, shows the same pressure this paper is concerned with: the pressure to "perform" success for people at home, even when a person's real situation does not match what is expected of them.

The studies discussed above show that scholars already understand that return, exile, and wealth are important and connected themes in Igbo literature. However, most of these studies, including Ugochukwu (2015) and Hodges (2011), mainly focus on comparing *Omenuko* with *Things Fall Apart* as a whole, or on exile as a general topic, rather than focusing specifically on the cultural belief of "aku ruo ụlọ" on its own. Very little academic work has closely studied this belief as a central idea driving the pressure of performative success in *Omenuko*. Even more importantly, almost no study has taken this old literary theme and clearly connected it to what is happening today, where many young Igbo people are travelling abroad under the "japa" trend and are facing the same pressure to prove themselves successful when they return or when they send things home (Okunade & Awosusi, 2023; Adeyanju et al., 2024). This is the research gap that informed this paper. It brings together an old Igbo literary theme and a present-day social reality, using close reading of *Omenuko* to show that the pressure to perform success is not new, but has simply changed its shape over time.

Theoretical Framework

This paper used postcolonial theory as its guiding framework. In simple terms, postcolonial theory studies how the experience of colonialism, and the years that came after it, has shaped the way people see themselves, especially people who move between two different worlds, whether they were forced to move or chose to move on their own (Khan, 2020). This theory pays close attention to feelings of identity confusion, the struggle to belong, and the pressure that comes from trying to satisfy two different expectations at once, one from the world a person has left, and one from the world they are returning to. This framework fits this paper well for a simple reason: both Omenuko and today's Igbo "japa" travelers experience the same kind of pull between two worlds. Just as Khan (2020) uses postcolonial theory to explain how Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* is caught between the person he became in England and the expectations waiting for him back home, this paper uses the same theory to explain how Omenuko is caught between the life he builds while in exile and the demands placed on him when he finally returns home. In both cases, the character is not simply free to be whoever they want to be; they must carry the weight of proving that their time away was worthwhile, mainly through visible wealth, actions, and recognition once they are back home. This is exactly the burden that this paper describes as "the burden of return."

Methodology

The qualitative research method was used for data gathering and analysis. The methodology is most suitable for the research due to the thematic thrust of the research. The paper was focused on investigating the theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success, as represented in the case study.
The paper uses textual analysis, as its main approach.
The primary source of data for this paper is the novel *Omenuko*, written by Pita Nwana in 1933. This novel was chosen because it is widely recognized as the first novel ever written in the Igbo language, and it is one of the earliest Igbo literary works to deal directly with the themes of leaving home, gaining wealth outside, and returning home to be accepted again by the community (Nwana, 1933; Emenyonu, 2020). Because the novel already centres on a character who is forced into exile, becomes successful outside his hometown, and later returns home carrying the weight of proving himself worthy of acceptance, it provides strong and suitable material for studying the theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success in Igbo literature. The novel's age and importance in Igbo literary history also make it a valuable text, since it allows this paper to trace how an old cultural belief, still very present today, has long been reflected in Igbo literature.

This paper adopted close reading as its analytical tool. Close reading means reading the text slowly and carefully, paying attention to specific scenes, actions, conversations, and details in the story that relate directly to the theme being studied, rather than simply summarizing the whole story on the surface. Through close reading, the paper picks out the parts of *Omenuko* that show the pressure of return, the display of wealth, and the character's struggle to be accepted by his community after his time away. Alongside close reading, the paper also used thematic analysis. Thematic analysis means identifying and grouping ideas in the text according to the themes they represent. In this paper, the main theme being traced throughout the novel is "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success, so all the moments in the story connected to wealth, return, community judgment, and pressure to prove oneself are gathered and studied together under this central theme. By combining close reading with thematic analysis, and by placing the findings within the postcolonial theoretical framework already discussed, this paper is able to give a clear, well-supported explanation of how *Omenuko* reflects the burden of return and performative success in Igbo literature, and how this connects to the present-day pressure faced by Igbo people under the "japa" trend.

Plot Summary of Omenuko

Omenuko tells the story of Igwegbe Odum, whose praise-name gives the novel its title, meaning roughly "one who provides in times of scarcity" or "one who does great things even in times of hardship". The story is based on a real historical figure from Arondizuogu. Igwegbe Odum starts out as a hardworking and respected trader in his community. However, after suffering a serious business loss, he makes a desperate and morally wrong decision: he sells some of the young people under his care into slavery in order to recover his losses. When this act is discovered, it is seen as a terrible offence against his community, and Omenụkọ is forced to flee into exile to escape punishment and shame.

While in exile, away from his hometown, Omenụkọ works hard and eventually becomes a wealthy and respected leader in the new community where he settles. However, he never fully escapes the guilt of what he did, and the story shows him slowly working toward correcting his wrongs, including using his new wealth to free those he once sold away, and performing acts and rites required to make peace with his community. In time, Omenụkọ is allowed to return home. His return is not simple or automatic; it was earned through wealth, restitution, humility, and visible proof that he has truly changed and succeeded. At the end of the story, he is accepted back into his community, eventually becoming a respected leader remembered for his good deeds. This story of departure, wrongdoing, exile, wealth-building, and a return that must be "proven" before it is accepted, is exactly why *Omenuko* is well suited for this paper's study of "aku ruo ụlọ" and the burden of performative success in Igbo literature.

Representation of 'Aku ruo ulo' in Omenuko

The theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" is present throughout *Omenuko*, even though the novel does not use this exact phrase. The whole shape of the story is built around this belief. Omenụkọ, the main character, starts out as a respected and hardworking trader in his community. His identity and value at home are, from the beginning, tied to his ability to succeed in trade and to bring benefit back to his people.

This connection between wealth and home becomes even clearer after Omenụkọ suffers a great loss. While transporting goods to a distant market, a bridge collapses, and his porters, along with his valuable goods, fall into the water. Thus in:

> "Mgbe ha dum guzoro n'elu ogwe mmiri, eriri dum nke e ji kee ya wee dobisie. Omenụkọ na ndị ibu ya na ndị ọzọ ahụ a na-ezi ịzụ ahịa wee daba na mmiri."
>
> **Translation**: "when they were on top of the bridge, the bridge rope cut. Omenụkọ and his apprentices and those who buy market for him fell into the sea/water."

This single event is important because it does not just take away his wealth; it threatens the very thing that gives him standing in his community. In Igbo society, as reflected in the novel, a man's worth is closely tied to what he can show and provide, so the sudden loss of goods is not just a financial problem but a threat to his identity and respect at home. To recover from this loss, Omenụkọ makes a desperate

decision: he sells the surviving porters into slavery in order to recoup some of his losses. Thus the following:

> "Omenụkọ wee resie ụmụ ntakịrị ahụ, ndị na-amụ ịzụ na ire ahịa, reekwa ụfọdụ n'ime ndị ibu ya, ndị bụ ụmụ okorobịa, reekwa out nwanna ya nwoke."
>
> **Translation**: "Omenụkọ sold those apprentices who were learning trading, and he also sold some of his load carrier who were young men, and he even sold his own brother."

This decision shows how strong the pressure to maintain wealth and status can be. Rather than return home poor and lose face, he takes a drastic and morally wrong action to protect his position. This moment in the story reveals the danger behind the "aku ruo ụlọ" belief: when wealth and its visible display become more important than doing what is right, people can be pushed into harmful choices. This single event sets the whole plot in motion and shows how deeply the pressure to maintain visible success is rooted in the character's decisions.

The Pressure/Burden of Return as Experienced by the Character

Once his wrongdoing is discovered, Omenụkọ's community sees his action as a serious moral offence, and he is forced to flee into exile. Thus in:

> "Ha wee bilie gawa obodo Ndị Mgbọrọgwụ, ma tutuu ha gafesịa obodo anyị, ọ dịghị nwoke ma ọ bụ nwanyị ọ bụla ha zuru n'ụzọ."
>
> **Translation**: "They got up and went to the town of Ndị Mgbọrọgwụ", and when they passed through Obodo Anyị, they did not meet any man or woman along the way."

From this point, the novel shifts into showing what it truly means to carry the burden of return. Igwegbe cannot simply disappear and start a new life elsewhere without consequence; the novel makes clear that his ties to home remain, and that home continues to wait, watch, and judge from a distance. While in exile, Omenụkọ works hard and becomes a wealthy and respected leader in the new community where he settles. Thus in:

> "Eze Mgbọrọgwụ wee mee Omenụkọ dị ka onye odozi okwu ya, n'ihi na Omenụkọ a abụghị mmadụ nta."
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> **Translation**: "The King of Ndị Mgbọrọgwụ then appointed Omenụkọ as his chief counselor, because Omenụkọ was not just anybody, he was an important big man."

On the surface, this looks like success. However, this success does not erase the burden he carries. His wealth abroad, no matter how great, is not treated by the story as complete or final; it remains unsettled until it is brought back and reconciled with his home. Thus:

> "Kama amatara m na m mejọrọ ndị ala m. Aga m achọ ụzọ m ga-esi gakwuru ha, ma madụ ma mmụọ."
>
> **Translation**: "But I know I have done wrong to my people. I will find a way to reach them, both people and spirit."

This reflects the Igbo belief that a person living outside their hometown will always be reminded that they are a guest there, and that they must eventually prepare for their return home, where their true worth will be judged. Omenụkọ's years of success abroad do not free him from this expectation; instead, they place a heavier burden on him, because now that he has wealth, he is expected to use it to make things right and prove that he deserves to be accepted back home.

This part of the story mirrors the modern pressure faced by many Igbo people today under the "japa" trend. Just as today's travelers feel they cannot return home without visible proof of success, no matter how difficult their situation abroad may truly be, Omenụkọ cannot simply return home quietly; his return must be earned and proven, or it risks being rejected.

How Performative Success is Portrayed

The novel does not allow Omenụkọ's return home to happen easily or automatically. Before he is accepted back into his community, he must take clear, visible steps to prove that he has changed and succeeded. Omenụkọ uses his wealth to buy back the freedom of the very people he had earlier sold into slavery, and he performs the necessary rites required to cleanse himself of his past wrongdoing before he is permitted to return home.

> “Onye isi ala wee sị Igwe, “Gee ntị ihe Ị ga-agwa Omenukọ. Sị ya weta otu oke ehi, akwa ọkụkọ asatọ, otu oke ọkụkọ na ji ukwu asatọ na ji nta asatọ.” … Ọ bụrụ na o mee ihe ndị a, obi ga-adị ụmụ madụ na ụmụ mmụọ ọcha n’ebe ọ nọ ma ọ bụrụ na ọ ga-ahụkwa onye eze mmụọ anya, dị ka ọ hụrụ m.”
>
> **Translation**: "The leader of the land then said to Igwe, 'Listen to the message you will give to Omenukọ. Tell him to bring one large cow, eight eggs, one big cock, eight big yams, and eight small yams.' ... If he brings these offerings, the people and the spirits will be pleased with him, and he will also see the Eze Mmụọ, just as he has seen me."
>
> “O ruo n’echi ya ọ chọrọkwa maị, buru ya gaa n’ụlọ onye eze mmụọ wee sị ya, “Biko lekwa ihe Omenụkọ sị ka m jụta.” … Onye Eze Mmụọ wee sị ya na ọ dị mma wee malite ịgụ ya sị, otu nne atụrụ, otu nnekwu ọkụkọ, otu oke ọkụkọ, na akwa asatọ na otu akwa ọbọcha; otu abọ ji na abọ ede, ogbe ọjị, ogbe ose ọjị, ọjị anọ, ọgụ nzu anọ, maị ike erughị ala, ite maị ngwọ, ite maị nkwụ. Ọ bụrụ na Omenụkọ emee ihe ndị a, ọ ga-adị mma.”
>
> **Translation**: "The next day, he gathered the maị, carried it, and went to the spirit king's house and said, 'Please, look at what Omenụkọ asked me to bring.' ... The spirit king said it was good, and he began to list them, saying: one nne atụrụ, one nnekwu ọkụkọ, one oke ọkụkọ, and akwa asatọ and one akwa ọbọcha; one abọ ji and one abọ ede, ogbe ọjị, ogbe ose ọjị, ọjị anọ, ọgụ nzu anọ, maị ike erughị ala, ite maị ngwọ, ite maị nkwụ. If Omenụkọ does these things, it will be well."

These actions are not private; they are public acts, meant to be seen and recognized by his community as proof that his wealth is real, that his character has changed, and that he now deserves acceptance. This shows performative success at work: it is not enough for Omenụkọ to feel that he has succeeded or changed; his community must see it demonstrated through concrete actions. His acceptance is not based on trust alone but on visible evidence, exactly like the pressure faced by "aku ruo ụlọ." At the end of the novel, Omenụkọ is fully accepted and even becomes a respected leader, remembered for his good deeds. His story, therefore, ends in success, but only after he pays the full price of performing that success publicly and repeatedly.

This pattern carries an important lesson and warning. Igwegbe's story shows that when success is measured mainly by what can be shown rather than by a person's true situation, people may be pushed toward shortcuts, wrongdoing, or extreme pressure in order to meet these expectations. His story began with a wrong decision made to protect his image, and even his eventual redemption depended heavily on public display rather than quiet personal change. This reflects a pattern that remains relevant today: when communities value visible success above honest struggle, they may unintentionally push their own people, whether traders in the past or "japa" travellers today, toward dishonesty, shame, or hardship in trying to meet up.

Findings/Discussion

The analysis of *Omenuko* in this paper reveals several important findings about the burden of "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success in Igbo literature.

Firstly, the analysis shows that success, in the world of *Omenuko*, is never treated as something private or personal; it is always something that must be shown, proven, and confirmed by the community. Omenuko's wealth, both before and after his exile, only truly matters when it is displayed and recognized at home. This supports the paper's central argument that "aku ruo ụlọ" is not simply a saying, but a real cultural expectation that shapes how a person's worth is measured, both in the world of the novel and in present-day Igbo society.

Secondly, the analysis shows that the pressure to maintain or prove success can push people into harmful decisions. Omenụkọ's decision to sell his porters into slavery, in order to protect his wealth and status after a sudden loss, demonstrates how far a person may go when their identity and acceptance at home depend on visible success. This finding matches the concern raised in this paper's abstract: that many Igbo people today, under pressure to prove success abroad through the "japa" trend, may also be pushed toward dishonesty, shame, frustration, or hardship when their real situation does not match what is expected of them.

Thirdly, the analysis shows that return itself is never simple or automatic; it must be earned. Igwegbe could not simply come back home once he became wealthy in exile. He had to take clear, public steps, such as freeing those he had wronged and performing required rites, before his community accepted him back. This finding strongly supports the paper's argument that the burden of return is a real and heavy weight carried by those who leave home, whether in the world of the novel or in today's migration reality. Just as Omenụkọ's community waited to judge him by what he could show, many families today wait to measure their returning relatives by visible signs of success, such as houses built, money sent, or gifts brought home, rather than by the true, and sometimes difficult, situation the person may be facing abroad. When these findings are placed within the wider Igbo cultural context, they reveal something important: the pressure behind "aku ruo ụlọ" is not a new problem created by modern migration; it is a long-standing cultural pattern that has simply taken a new form. In the past, this pressure shaped the fate of traders like Omenụkọ. Today, it shapes the experiences of Igbo people abroad, many of whom struggle silently, hiding their true hardship in order to protect the image expected of them by family and community back home. This connects clearly back to the paper's central thesis: the burden of "aku ruo ụlọ" and the pressure to perform success, as shown through Omenụkọ in *Omenuko*, reflect the same struggles many Igbo people face today when they leave home and are expected to return successful. The postcolonial theoretical framework used in this paper helps explain this pattern further, showing that this pressure is deeply tied to identity and belonging. A person caught between two worlds, the world they build while away and the world waiting for them at home, often feels they must constantly prove that they still belong, and that their time away was worthwhile.

The broader implication of this finding is significant. If success continues to be measured mainly by what can be seen and displayed, rather than by a person's real circumstances, then more people may continue to face silent pressure, shame, or even harmful decisions in trying to meet these expectations, just as Igwegbe once did. This raises an important question for both Igbo literature and Igbo society today: should success only be recognized when it is performed and displayed, or should there be room for communities to understand and accept their returnees, even when their journey has not been easy?

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine how the old Igbo belief in "aku ruo ụlọ," the idea that wealth gained outside must reach home before it is recognized as true success, is reflected in Igbo literature, and how this belief connects to the pressure many Igbo people face today under the "japa" trend. Using *Omenuko* by Pita Nwana as the primary text, the paper has shown that the burden of returning home successful is not a new struggle brought about by modern migration alone; it is a pattern that has long existed in Igbo culture and storytelling, simply taking new shape over time.

Through close reading of *Omenuko*, this paper found that success in the story is never treated as a private matter; it must be shown, displayed, and confirmed by the community before it is accepted as real. The paper also found that this pressure to prove success can push people into difficult and sometimes harmful decisions, as seen in Omenụkọ's choice to sell his porters into slavery in order to protect his wealth and status after a great loss. In addition, the paper found that return itself is never automatic or easy; it must be earned through visible actions, and a person's acceptance back home often depends more on what they can show than on their true situation. These findings support the paper's central argument that the burden faced by Omenụkọ in *Omenuko* mirrors the same pressure carried by many Igbo people today who travel abroad and are expected to return home with clear proof of success.
Guided by postcolonial theory, this paper has shown that this pressure is deeply connected to identity and belonging, as a person caught between two worlds often feels they must continuously prove that their time away was worthwhile. This paper contributes to Igbo literary studies by taking the theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" out of general discussions on exile and studying it directly, while also connecting this long-standing literary theme to a present-day social reality that affects many Igbo families. For future research, more studies could examine how this same theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success appears in other Igbo novels, both older and more recent, in order to see how the theme has changed or remained the same over time. Further research could also study real-life experiences of Igbo "japa" travellers directly, through interviews or personal accounts, to compare their lived experiences with how this pressure is portrayed in literature. Such studies would help build a fuller understanding of how this old cultural belief continues to shape the lives of Igbo people both at home and abroad.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

Firstly, more attention should be given to the theme of "aku ruo ụlọ" and performative success within Igbo literary studies. This paper has shown that this theme, though rooted in an old and foundational text like *Omenuko*, still carries strong relevance today. Scholars and researchers in Igbo literature should therefore study this theme more closely across other Igbo texts, both old and new, to build a fuller understanding of how it has developed over time.

Secondly, families and communities should be encouraged to place less pressure on returnees to prove their success only through visible display, such as money, houses, or material gifts. This paper has shown that when success is measured mainly by outward appearance, people may be pushed to shame, dishonesty, or hardship when their real situation does not match expectations. Communities should instead be more understanding and supportive of their members who return home, even when their journey has not been an easy or a wealthy one.

Thirdly, Igbo people living abroad should be encouraged to communicate more honestly with their families about their real situations, instead of feeling forced to hide their struggles in order to meet cultural expectations. Open communication can help reduce the emotional pressure that comes from trying to constantly "perform" success, and can help families offer real support rather than only expecting results.

Fourthly, educational and cultural institutions, including schools, churches, and community associations, should consider creating more awareness around the emotional and psychological effects of this pressure, especially among young people preparing to travel abroad. This can help prepare intending travellers for the realities they may face, and reduce the shock or shame that can come from unmet expectations.

Finally, future researchers should carry out further studies that combine literary analysis with real-life accounts from Igbo people who have travelled abroad, in order to compare how this theme is portrayed in literature with how it is actually experienced in real life today. Such studies would help both literary scholars and the wider Igbo community better understand and respond to this ongoing cultural pressure.

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