

- Utoh, T. (2002). Dramatic parables imperatives for social change in Post-Colonial Nigeria: A critical analysis of contemporary plays. *Matatu: Journal of African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum*, 25(26), 273 – 281.
- World Health Organisation. (2016). *WHO guidelines on the management of health complications from female genital mutilation*. Retrieved from website [http:// www.who.int](http://www.who.int)
- Yerima, A. (2006). *Hard Ground*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited.

**DRAMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ANIMISM, CULTURE INDIGENEITY, AND
GLOBALIZATION IN SELECTED AHMED YERIMA’S RECENT PLAYS**

By

**Femi Adebayo Ph.D
Department of English,
Faculty of Humanities**

**Redeemer's University
Ede, Osun State**

Abstract

Animism is a cultural practice in the Nigerian society and it is a common motif in the Ahmed Yerima's trilogy, *Abobaku*, *Iyase* and *The Last Grain of Wheat*. It is curious that the playwright is giving significant attention to a traditional African practice such as animism in the age of European consciousness and globalization. The study is anchored on the George Herbert Meads Interactionist Theory which advocates inclusivity in both concepts and social behaviour. In the trilogy, Yerima maintains that the influence of deities on mortals in the African hermeneutical system needs to be modified. That the plays exhibit tragic incidents emanating from dogmatic faith in African gods and matrixes of Africa's backwardness echo the modernization intent of the African playwright. Literary writers on the African continent often disagree on the state of African culture in the contemporary world, the age of globalization which aspires to attain culture unification and makes all cultures accessible to different peoples across the world. Some African literary writers on culture are of the view that the status quo of cultural practices such as promotion of the influence of divinities on mortals should be maintained. However, others are of the view that many of the African cultural practices are too archaic for the fast-moving, rational, and globalising world. Ahmed Yerima in these three plays is of the latter view as the animist consciousness and adherence in the plays results in destructive and fatal consequences. This negative consequence of African animist cultural practice tends to make African culture unattractive for global presence, accessibility and global acculturation.

Key words: Animism, African Culture, Ahmed Yerima, African Literature, Globalisation

Introduction

The selected plays for this discourse, *Abobaku*, *Iyase*, and *The Last Grain of Wheat* are narrations of historical cultural practices and belief systems by the peoples of Nigeria (symbolically, Africa) particularly the Yoruba and the Edo peoples. The events in the plays are pathetic presentations of African cultural and animist system which the playwright as deduced advocates against and aims to reverse. This is evident in the playwright's position that such practices are archaic and, as such, out of tune with civilized cultural practices across the globe. The general practice across the world today is that cultural initiatives, products and practices are frantically externalized such that the cultural heritage of a people is made available to the rest of the world for possible inculcation by other peoples from different parts of the world. This practice is achieved through globalisation. However, Yerima's presentations of African animist obeisance and fetishistic piety in the plays leave much to be desired. This position is in accordance with the philosophy of the contemporary society where we see globalization bringing civilization to the nooks and crannies of the world whereby raising curiosity about African cultural practices in relation to the rest of the world. This is further expatiated in greater detail in the following subsection.

Literature Review

The cultural living of a society determines who the people are and what they do. Culture also goes a long way in assessing the progress or backwardness of the people of a society, especially in Africa. In addition to these, culture is constantly used in weighing the relevance of a society in the comity of nations in the modern times since the contemporary world is seen as a global village. This perspective on culture could be deduced from the divergent assertions that have been expressed on culture. To begin with, culture has been identified as a resource for productiveness particularly if cultural values such as language, religion and ethics are efficiently employed (Brijavac, 107). The idea of the resourcefulness of culture is further affirmed

in the position that cultural heritage constitutes an industry in the developing countries of the world as it plays a major role in administrative affairs in those regions of the world (Yerima, 76). This is particularly so because modern consciousness in Africa is a measure of culture, as observed in the declaration that the trajectory of modernity in Africa is determined by the cultural contact of Africa with Europe (Adodunrin, 59). The inter-fusion of African cultural values with foreign practices through the process of modernization has modified the contents and nature of African culture as there has been a change in African norms and values signifying African reflection of the huge shift in world pattern in the consumption of culture (Power and Scott, 1). This shift in the contents of African culture is as a result of foreign influences on African aboriginal cultural norms, values as well as practices. This is however necessary because science which the West is known for is crucial in the cultural production process. Without it, the Third World will continually be subjected to prolonged aid (Layiwola, 16). Liberalization is what has been identified as the benefits that African culture will gain if it is cleansed of its barbarity and open to the rest of the world (Yerima, 76).

One other crucial area of African culture is the existence of deities and the extraterrestrial influence that they exert on Africans. Though the existence of gods and their influence on mortals is a universal phenomenon as the gods and goddesses are ubiquitous (Yerima, 14), yet it is still considered valid that gods or deities are of peculiar significance in the lives of Africans. For example, Orunmila, a Yoruba god, exercises the capacity to guide the people through accurate futuristic divinations while Obatala, a Yoruba deity, is a divinity of craftsmanship (Ologundudu, 85). This aligns with the capability of Esu who is believed to be tricky in Yoruba pantheon and who exercises the power of:

.... bringing the blessings of the gods to humans. He exercises his will through powers of transformation by throwing dust and clapping his hands, pointing a staff, blinking or using medicines. With charms, he can induce sleep, break locks, or become invisible. He can transform into animals or wind or take the appearance of specific individuals. (Sellers and Tishken, 41)

This exaltation of Esu as above is in sync with the description of the god as a divine messenger and a powerful god in the Yoruba spiritual cosmos (Falola, 5). In the same vein, Isis, the Egyptian mother goddess, possesses the characteristics of watchfulness and care (Ndubokwu, 10/11). These extraterrestrial capabilities are similar to the capabilities of some South African deities such as Ngai and Mulungu, who have the cosmic influence of making mortals attain their goals in real life (Lujabe-Rankoe, 51).

On Globalisation, several views have been expressed on it especially as an irresistible phenomenon of the contemporary global society. In such views, attention has been placed on the definition, nature as well as function of globalization in relation to the present global interaction. Globalization has been viewed as:

... an intrinsically related series of economic phenomena. These include the liberalization and deregulation of markets, privatization of assets, retreat of state functions (particularly welfare ones), diffusion of technology, cross-national distribution of manufacturing production (foreign direct investment), and the integration of capital markets. In its narrowest formulation, the term refers to the worldwide spread of sales, production facilities, and manufacturing processes, all of which reconstitute the international division of labor (Reich, 10)

It could be deduced from Reich's assertion above that globalisation is about making a product of any type from a given corner of the world available in any corner of the world. This accounts for why it has been opined that there is an implicit perception that through globalisation everywhere in the world is becoming the same or alike though there is still a wide difference in the societies across the world (Mowforth and Munt,

45). Globalisation has been observed to be unrelenting in penetrating the different societies and cultures in the potential and unintended bid to change the global interaction as it has been said to be forceful, intensifying and indefatigable in its process and operation (Rigg, 11). This, perhaps, is why Soyinka (2) makes a frantic effort in rescuing the culture and social life of the Third World countries from the fangs of globalisation by advocating culture-preservation strategy in the individual Third World countries.

Deities and Mortals in *Abobaku*

In *Abobaku*, Ahmed Yerima ‘... one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary drama stage...’ (Adeoti, xi), tells the story of Ajibade who has voluntarily accepted to be the Abobaku (he who dies with the monarch), to Oba Karunwi. The implication of this is that Ajibade will also die (be killed) when the Oba (king) dies. The essence of the killing is that Ajibade will escort the dead Oba to the land of the ancestors of the people of Adeoti Village. However, Faramola’s love for Ajibade deriving from the great favour that the latter did the former (the latter’s wife) makes her feel a sense of doom over the impending tragedy to befall Ajibade, her husband. Faramola, therefore, prevails on Ilari (officer of the palace) who conspires to spirit Ajibade away to safety. Faramola encourages her husband to run to a far distance in order to be unreachable to the king and his emissaries. In no time, Otun declares that they cannot find Ajibade, the Abobaku. He also laments to Samu (a palace chief), declaring that the disappearance of Ajibade is rather mysterious. Ilari is implicated as Otun (a palace chief) tells Samu that Ilari helped Abobaku to escape to Gbalefefe, the village of cowards as Ifa reveals to palace chiefs, subsequently. In the meantime, Faramola, Abobaku’s wife is still at the shrine willing to die in place of her husband. However, Mama, Faramola’s mother, is terribly worried that her daughter is about to die. She, in company of Iyalode, traces Ajibade to Gbalefefe and both succeed in convincing the run-away Abobaku to return to Adeoti village. Ajibade agrees to return and arrives at the shrine a little after the ritual rites have started on Faramola; a little too late and both husband and wife are lost to the ritual rites. The disaster shakes Mama so much that she lampoons the whole *Abobaku* phenomenon and excoriates the people of Adeoti village on the cultural foolery and the attendant tragedy it engenders.

Events in this play are, in essence, predicated on an Yoruba (African) cultural belief system---the interference of gods and ancestors in mortal affairs and the influence these cosmic agents command. This is the recurring motif in all the plays. It, however, takes different forms in each of the plays. In *Abobaku*, the influence of the gods, as a reflection of a cultural norm among mortals in African communities, manifests in Abore’s declaration that he and other stakeholders are currently in the presence of Ogun, Osun as well as Esu – two gods and a goddess of Adeoti village. He reveals that the occasion is the enthronement of the new Abobaku, an individual ‘who will escort our new Oba to the land of our ancestors as it is with our sacred culture and tradition’ (8). We could see the influence of the gods and ancestors on the people of Adeoti village further when Abore prays for the protection of the ancestors, at the end of his speech. The writing of the plays is line with his fulfilment of the responsibilities the conscience places on the writer in society, and this is a corroboration of the assertion that ‘a playwright is supposed to be an observer of the society...’ (Yerima, 7). If a writer (playwright) is supposed to observe the society, then there must be a goal for doing this. In this context, Yerima’s goal for producing this play is to emphasise cultural belief systems depicted in the play. The deflation is effected in divergent ramifications.

It could be established from the circumstances unfolding in the play that the playwright is making case for the people of the contemporary time in Africa to detach themselves from the grip of the gods/goddesses and ancestors. It is seen in the play that the people (symbolic of Africans) are bent on preserving the ancestral creed and, so, live by the instructions of divinities. Yerima tends to reject this disposition, suggesting that such is not in tune with contemporary realities in the age of globalization and universalism. And as ‘an arbiter in every social space’ (Ofomine, 130), Yerima, by this, is negotiating a union between the cultural practices that have been observed in Africa, and the cultural practices from other climes, particularly in the Western world. The Abobaku syndrome is decried in the play *Abobaku*. To the playwright,

the situation whereby somebody would be nurtured in order to die along with a king is crude and to still uphold such a practice in the modern era is barbaric and backward. The commotion, the unrest and uncertainties that trail Ajibade's decision to die along with Oba Karunwi and the eventual disasters that befall Faramola (her death with the unborn baby) and Ajibade, being sacrificed to the gods and ancestors, are unfortunate. Yerima seems to suggest that this belief or practice is attributed to the pervading imbecility in the African consciousness. For example, Mama calls herself '...mother of fools... the mother of a damned breed...' (71). The foolishness derives from Ajibade's willingness to be subjected to untimely death. We hear Afore asking Ajibade if he gives himself voluntarily to the cause. The cause is killing someone in order to attend to the Oba in the Great Beyond. And Ajibade responds 'Yes, baba'. (8). Many issues arise from this practice and they tilt towards establishing the irrelevance of the cultural practice in the contemporary world. The first is the non-feasibility of the essence of the cultural practice. By the practice, the ostensible Yoruba assumption is that there is similarity between the Yoruba cosmos and the heavens. This assumption is erroneous. The deification of the Yoruba royalty is limited to the Yoruba world. The mundane trappings and acquisitions that make an individual a king do not raise him above another soul after death – all souls are equal.

From the religious point of view, the body (the mundane of the two parts of a human being) decays after death while the soul goes back to God. To this extent, the service of an attendant is irrelevant since such service tends the body and the worldly and not the soul that lives on. The playwright's aversion to the sustenance of the unwholesome practice thereby rooting for a revolt against such could be noted in the escape of Ajibade, the Baba Kekere, who is supposed to die with Oba Karunwi, and this escape is in conspiracy with Ilari, a member of the palace staff that oversees this cultural practice. According to Yerima, noted in the words of Faramola:

...The Ilari will take you out of the palace. From there run until your heart gives up and cries for life, because the edge of the sharp sword of Ogun chases you. Run until the dust of the sand peel off your pampered tender feet (32).

If the authorial conception is such that the Baba Kekere (Ajibade, the one to be sacrificed in order to attend on Oba Karunwi in heaven) should escape, especially being aided by Ilari, a member of the royal cult, then it could be suggested that there is conscientisation, and enlightenment among the people. This development confirms a rupture of the old cultural order and an assumptive collapse of a cultural phenomenon as a result of the folly, in perspective, inherent in the practice.

Excessive Spiritualization of gods and Monarchs in *Iyase*

The story in *Iyase* is a re-enactment of history. It is the narration about the eponymous character, Iyase. He is found deeply hurt and, in his anger, he murders his wife, Ivie for committing adultery with Edaiken, the royal heir. The atrocity is committed in Iyase's own house. Edaiken shows no remorse over the commission of the crime because customary assumption places him above other men in the community. Being a powerful man himself, Iyase has reported the case to his god, Ogun and has killed Ivie, his wife. However, Baba (an Ifa diviner from Ile-Ife) has told Iyase in the presence of Osodin that the gods have empowered Edaiken and no man can harm him no matter how grave his offence may be in the community. Iyase's anger exacerbates when Oba, the culprit's father, trivializes the crime as noted in the arrogance inherent in 'I have little time to banter. The ways of your world make no sense to me now'. (*Iyase* 32). Afterwards, Iyase reports the Oba to Ogun Yakoto saying '... the king tramples on my person'. (34). Soon Omo n' Oba (the king) dies and Iyase believes it is Ogun that has fought his cause. The relationship between Iyase and Edaiken, (who is about to be crowned), degenerates into confrontation. When Iyase's request for apology from Edaiken is rejected, Iyase attempts to avert the installation of Edaiken as king by reporting to Ogun. But Baba returns to warn Iyase emphasizing that the Omo n'Oba has been empowered by the Edo

gods and as such is superior to common men. Overtures are made by the Oba, Edaiken, but Iyase chooses the red flag through Ogun. At this juncture, Edigun visits the blind Omosefe (Iyase's mother) to remind her of the secret covenant which Omosefe has with a cult. This covenant takes the form that Omo n' Oba would grant her household the position of the Iyase. This costs husband's life and her sight. As a result, Omosefe objects to the current request by the witch cult; the conversation between Edigun and Omosefe ends in a deadlock. Therefore, Edaiken's soldiers are approaching Iyase's homestead and in the process of preventing her son, Iyase, Omosefe pierces the heart of Iyase by an act of error thinking it is one of the palace soldiers that has been killed.

The crux of this eponymous play in terms of cultural intent is the deification of the Oba (king) who should be seen and regarded as superior to other clan men – his subjects and the people. Therefore, the Oba and his family members are immune to punitive actions for their atrocities including encroaching on another man's property. To this end, when Edaiken sleeps with Ivie right in Iyase's bedroom, he feels no remorse because, as Baba reminds Iyase in a conversation, Edaiken has been shielded by the gods. By this, the traditional assumption is that the king is made to do whatever he likes with no repercussion. This is the central cultural concern in this eponymous dramatic piece.

Much of the repudiation over preservation of ancestral creed and the dictates of divinities manifests in *Iyase*. The play is Yerima's exposition of over-dependence of mortals on divinities in the Yoruba cultural milieu, and the need for a rejection of such in the age of globalization. The deification of the Royalty in this play is the root of the peril and tragedy of Iyase, the eponym. The extermination of both Iyase and Omosefe, his mother, in the play, is occasioned by excessive romance of mortals with extraterrestrial agents such that the divinities stipulate certain dictates of living for the mortal adherents. Based on the existing historical mores in the typical Yoruba cultural setting, Yerima creates the aura of a superior personage for the royal heir, Edaiken. As a result, he (Edaiken) feels no remorse or empathy when he defiles Iyase's matrimony by having canal knowledge of Ivie, Iyase's wife. This sense of superiority engulfs Edaiken because as Baba tells Iyase "...Edaiken's skin is coated by the shield of the gods... No man ... can harm him without great repercussion'. (23). However, the untouchable personality of the royalty in this instance has destructive implications: Iyase, appearing helpless, psychologically disturbed, and terribly angry, has to vent his pent-up anger on his wife, Ivie. That is, the inconsiderate shielding of the royal figure from answering for his atrocities prompts impunity and results in fatality--- the ruination of the family, sorrowing and wailing trail. Paradoxically, the guts and willpower to kill Ivie out of bitterness and venting are granted to Iyase by his demiurge, Ogun, as corroborated in the character's words thus:

...Ivie... she pushed me to the edge of my senses... I could not ... I did not think. I just had to inflict pain... I dismembered her flesh... Ogun seized my spirits, I became his willing weapon (7 – 9).

The playwright showcases this contradiction to bring to the fore the peril inherent in the obeisance of the dictates of the gods and ancestors by Africans. The tragedy of Ivie is Yerima's denouncement of cosmic interference in mortals' engagements in the contemporary existence in Africa. Perhaps the interference was appropriate during the earlier periods on the continent because 'divinities were commonplace among the traditional Yorubas' and 'different family and compounds worships different Orisas' {sic} (Ologundudu 2008:84). Yet, it is not all their stipulations and dictates that benefit their devotees as seen in the disaster of Iyase above.

That the dictates of the gods do not favour their devotees and the palpable tensions find justification in the predicament and untoward fate of women in the play. Ivie bears the fatal wrath of her husband who cannot dare the royal Edaiken because of the influence of the gods. This introduces gender oppression and feminist agenda to the obeisance of the decree of the gods among the Yoruba as represented in the play, *Iyase*.

This is noted in the conversation between Omosefe and Itohan when the latter draws the attention of the former to the injustice inherent in the Iyase-Ivie-Edaiken saga. In her words:

Is Ivie to bear the sharpness of Ogun's knife alone? Fair is fair. The slice must cut both ways... Because he is a spirit, son of a god. He strode majestically as our husband strangled his wife. His head titled in victory, and now we can only mention his name in whispers. (12-13).

From the foregoing, we find Yerima, through the character of Itohan, underscoring the gender imbalance that the traditional Yoruba society perpetrates. This, he condemns overtly and in strong terms. The filial disposition of the gods to the royal figure and the spiritualisation of the royal mortals make them act with impunity as the word 'majestically' suggests in the excerpt. And the awe accorded the royal mortals also makes them feel untouchable after all the people can only talk about their atrocities in whispers, not openly. These masculine tendencies do oppress women of African descent.

Though '... some African men make to counter... feminist discourses in Africa' (Ogundipe-Leslie, 547), yet Yerima is drawing attention to this so as to 'counter sexual biases' (Moh, 5) inherent in traditional Africa. If Ivie bears the sharpness of Ogun's knife and the divinities (including Ogun) do raise the status of the royal heir such that he goes scot-free having perpetrated certain atrocities, then this could be seen as gender bias even in the traditional African setting. The authorial repudiation of cosmic overbearing and interference in mortal affairs bringing forth such circumstances as objectification of the human life, over-spiritualisation of the royal figure as well as injustice to women speaks to Yerima's culture-purification agenda in the trilogy. Such purification is 'constant quest for ... innovation' (Juliu-Adeoye, 8) which Yerima aims to achieve through his leaning in the messages of the plays. To the playwright, these features of the African traditional system are discomfiting and incongruous with the pace of global enlightenment and tactful reasoning.

Implications of Ancestral Dictates in *The Last Grain of Wheat*

In *The Last Grain of Wheat*, Yerima narrates the story of Saliu from the lineage and household of Garuba. In the clime and in the Garuba clan, there is the phenomenon and title of the Eldest One marked by the wearing of a magical cloak. Yakubu, incumbent Eldest One, has just passed on and the ascension to the throne/position falls on Saliu. Therefore, Abba and Sani two eldest sons of Elder Yakubu have brought the cloak to Saliu. Abba Yakubu declares himself the first son of Yakubu and states that bringing the cloak to Saliu is his first sad task. Saliu takes the responsibility. However, Kabir and Nura contend with Saliu on the latter's installation as the Eldest One. Nura's opposition to Saliu's installation takes a violent turn when he goes to Saliu to claim the cloak. He declares to Saliu that the cloak is his. He forces consent from Saliu at gunpoint to agree that the position of the Eldest One belongs to him. Saliu is thus compelled to cede the right to his intimidator, Nura. After this molestation, Nura snatches the cloak. Tension mounts further when Nura with his men, attacks the Madaki of the mosque in the community. Yerima accounts that before the Eldest One is installed, the process requires that the wife of the Eldest-One-nominee would have a ritual wash, particularly while wearing the cloak of the Eldest One. This, Abukeli reminds Saliu that first of all, his wife must do what tradition requires her to do. She must have the ritual wash. The wife involved in this traditional spiritual wash, Filetu, is a devout Christian – a committed believer in the might and efficacy of the blood of Jesus. Filetu confirms this in her declaration '... the God I worship...' (*The Last Grain of Wheat*, 49). The tension created in the palpable conflict reaches climax when Abukeli capitalises on Filetu's 50 years of childlessness to mock her, insinuating Filetu's optionlessness in carrying out the wash rite. As an invincible faithful, Filetu (known as Sarah in her Church) prays fervently for the fruit of the womb in response to the Abukeli's mockery, and as an objection to the traditional spiritual bath. At this juncture, Iduma, a police chief, visits Saliu bringing the news that Nura is dead. Saliu blames the ancestors for the woes in the household of

Garuba. This, however, comes after Sister Angelina brings the news that Filetu (Sarah) is pregnant as a miracle by God. She does not have the spiritual wash at the stream.

The historical account in *The Last Grain of Wheat* concerns the cultural belief in the chieftaincy system as ancestors order, and the importance attached to it in an African clan. Importance is placed on the chieftaincy culture and rite in this play as hinted in the synopsis because it is the dictate of the gods. As a result of this, the cultural belief in the play is the intermingling of the influence of gods in mortal situations and how mortals strive to do the bidding of the gods. It is this that makes Saliu and Abba assert that all their actions shall belong to ancestors. Abba even shows the supremacy of the gods when he asks “Who are we to question the gods?” (17). Saliu also believes that the ancestors can guarantee the offspring of the lineage protection and that it is not God but gods that receive the souls of the dead. This is noted when he prays and asserts that ancestors do keep a watchful eye on the people and that the gods have the power to take humans in death. This cultural belief is so strong that commotion ensues as its fallout in the course of its obeisance. Nura contends with Saliu on the right to the position and Filetu, as Saliu’s wife, is expected to have a spiritual wash at a stream, yet Filetu is a devout Christian, hence the commotion that results. The cultural practice of obeying the dictates of gods and ancestors is central in *The Last Grain of Wheat*.

The complexities arising from the cultural act depicted above are the writer’s bid to portray the foolery inherent in such a traditional belief. To Yerima, the tragedies that trail the obeisance of the cultural practice are unwarranted and avoidable. The playwright tends to bemoan a situation where a young individual such as Nura would lose his life in the bid to occupy a position because the ancestors have decreed it. Yerima posits that the interference of the gods in mortal affairs in this situation is destructive. The tension between Nura and Saliu on the possession of the cloak of the Eldest One, the apprehension emanating from the relationship between Abukeli and Filetu because Abukeli wants the dictates of the ancestors to come to pass, as well as the eventual death of Nura confirm that the influence of the gods and the ancestors on the mortal adherents is indeed destructive. As a result of the catastrophe that has befallen the family of Gabba, Yerima suggests that the gods and the ancestors need be exterminated in the affairs of the descendants of a lineage. Or that the descendants should desist from complying with instructions of the cosmic agents particularly that such are claimed to have been handed down many centuries ago, a situation that makes the tie with the ancestors or gods to be outdated and brutish in the fast-moving enlightened world. The playwright moots that the involvement of a woman, Filetu, wife of Saliu, in the ritual for the ascension to the position of the Eldest One is gender assassination and such is not consistent with the civilisation consciousness of the modern world. Therefore, such an African culture should be de-emphasised. The degodification intent of the author is fortified by the victory of Christianity over animist tendencies as the play depicts. We see such victory in the triumph of Filetu, a staunch Christian who is barren, prays to God, and becomes pregnant. This is to the shame of individuals of the animist consciousness like Abukeli who believe that Filetu cannot get miracle in church but from the ancestors. This construction of the play plot thus attests to Yerima’s repudiation of the dictates of the gods and the denouncement of the culture that harbours them.

Heroic Revolt, Christian Consciousness and Deistic Supremacy as Dramatic Tools in the Trilogy

To achieve his objective in the plays and in order to make the three plays have the desired impact in the society, Yerima employs the innovative dramaturgical instruments of heroic revolt and deism and Christian consciousness. The former is dominant in *Iyase* while the latter is prevalent in *Abobaku* and *The Last Grain of Wheat*. Heroic revolt is a dramatic technique and style in the hands of Yerima in *Iyase*. If style is ‘how writers say whatever it is they say’. (Abrams, 312), it could be maintained that for Yerima, it is strategic that an implosion is created in the hero as a way of rupturing the relationship between him (Iyase, a mortal) and the gods. This is what makes Iyase murmurs so angrily thus:

What culture? The one which is beyond reproach for the royal blood?
No!... have the gods forgotten the choice between good and bad?

Am I to grovel in shame because the gods chose the Edaiken over me? If my wife was good enough to be defiled, why can't my pain be good enough to be avenged? (51)

The questions that Iyase asks in the foregoing mark a reorientation – a new consciousness which is why the culture which allows over-spiritualization of the royal figure and obtuse interference of the gods in mortal affairs could but be bemoaned. The infighting between the eminences – the physical eminence (Iyase) and the remote eminence (the gods) is an apt method through which Yerima reflects how biting his communicative urge is and this goes a long way in making his style accessible (Osundare,11). The cultural practice is therefore deconstructed.

Another means through which the playwright aspires to realise his cultural purification agenda is through Christianising the religio-cultural sensibilities in the African context. It needs be reestablished that the three plays are tragedies. We see the murder of Ivie and Iyase, we witness the offering of Ajibade and Faramola at the shrine in the palace; and the death of Nura in the trilogy all in the bid to fulfill certain cultural stipulations. Yerima tends to question why the cultures should endure which lead to horrendous killings. He then introduces Christian ideals in comparison with the fatalities of the plays as a way of effecting a new cultural redirection. He presents Christianity as refuge. This is why Faramola once seeks refuge in a church once. As Faramola tells Mama:

... I escaped from palace to go to the church once. That night, I climbed to the hilltop for prayers and blessings from the *woli*. After the prayers... I promised him that if he saved my husband, I would give my life his life and that of our unborn child to Jesus... I was still willing to find salvation in his church... (18)

The crux of this declaration by Faramola is Yerima's intention to gospelise that there is salvation in Christianity and this is intended to snigger and gloat over the failure of the divinities. It would be recalled that Faramola is seeking refuge in church because of the predicament of her husband, Ajibade. However, this is a problem that has been engendered by people's tenacious resolve to comply with the dictates of the gods and ancestors. This resonates and corroborates '... I no longer believe in the old ways... I will not serve the bloodline... the old ways hamper the lives of so many of our people' (Ali, 92). Ali's blood line is Yerima's obstinate interference of gods in mortal affairs in Africa.

In the same vein, still on Yerima's Christianisation agenda, there is a dominant corresponding instance in *The Last Grain of Wheat* where Filetu, wife of Saliu, is expected to have a bath in order to make the ritual of becoming the Eldest One of the family complete. However, Filetu is a devout Christian. The battle ensuing between Saliu (and the cult members especially Abukeli) and Filetu is symbolically the clash between the old order and civilisation. The battle is signified in Filetu words:

Church. I see our enemies are not asleep. We too cannot blink for a second. We need fasting and prayers. Our enemies prowl, we too must pray without ceasing... that is the message from God... I need a prayer partner for this war. (50)

The war that Filetu refers to here is actually won when we consider that when Abukeli jeers at Filetu because of the latter's barrenness (symbolic of the war), she goes to church to pray. And eventually, Angelina announces to Saliu 'She danced and sang praying for a baby miracle from God... Sarah... Filetu is pregnant. Six weeks. The good Lord has done it. Hallelujah!' (56). There tends not to be any other way through which the writer could have underscored the supremacy of Christianity over clannish/royal animism and fetishistic tendencies than Yerima's presentation of Filetu, a symbol of Christian civilization, as a conqueror --- a conqueror over Abukeli's blasphemy: 'Not even the Bishop... are clean' (31), and his derisive reference to

Filetu as a ‘toothless goddess’ (38). This situation is the writer’s process of globalising Christianity in a fetishistic African socio-cultural system, where ‘human beings cannot avoid the orisa...’ (Falola, 7). This is because the people are enmeshed in animist consciousness on the continent of Africa.

Conclusion

In these three plays, *Abobaku*, *Iyase* and *The Last Grain of Wheat*, Yerima vigorously suggests that currently there are many negative consequences of animist practices in Nigerian (African) culture or traditional religious practice. This is indicated in the destruction of the central characters in the plays such as the eponymous Iyase, himself. This suggests the lethal spiritualization of the Nigerian divinities. Additionally, that the playwright makes the fatal spiritualism a recurrent motif in the three plays in quick succession in an age of Westernism is suggestive of the writer’s repudiation of the current toxic spiritualism of African animism. This assertion becomes significantly tenable in view of the fact that the contemporary times are marked by technological innovations such as the Internet, social media, smart devices as well as Pentecostal Christian spiritualism, to mention but a few, all of which are symbols and agents of globalization and Western civilization. The question of globalization becomes germane because as the playwright is mooted the idea of selling African culture to the rest of the world through cultural globalization, this lofty desire is threatened by the obvious lethality of African metaphysics. The reverse consequences of African culture in this context threaten acceptability of African culture through its spiritualism or religion. The externalization of African cultural values as mooted by Yerima in these plays is in line with the hypothesis that the traffic of cultural globalization should also originate from the Third-World as against it ever originating from the West and the Far East (Soyinka, 4). However, globalizing the African culture in its current form may be a daunting task. This is because this will mean that the culture will have to compete with Western culture around the world as Western civilization has been widely accepted in most parts of the world. Yerima’s motive in employing the *Christianobalisation* as global creative tool to bemoan cultural fetish in the African milieu is to break the manacles of retardation inherent in old cultural order in Africa. The grounds on which he advances this is that the process of complying with the cultural dictates has left in its trail, and has resulted in, tragic consequences for the people of Africa. Therefore, the pathway to liberation from the bondage of this historical cultural attitude is a civilization alternative, that is, Christianity. Perhaps the playwright hinges his position on the declaration that ‘... Jesus declared Himself as the light of the world’ (Onwona, 33). The word ‘Jesus’ could be taken as signifying Christianity, while ‘light’ is taken as civilization. That is Christianity is civilization as the playwright explicitly points out in the trilogy.

Works Cited

- Abodunrin, Femi. 2014. ‘Indigenous Knowledge and Creativity: The Example of Yoruba Poetry’. *Hirenta Journal of the Humanities* Vol. 1 Number 1, pp 57-77. Print.
- Abrams, Meyer. 2005. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Boston: Thomsonwordsworth. Print.
- Adeoti, Gbemisola. 2007. ‘Preface’, Gbemisola Adeoti (ed): *Muse and Mimesis. Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, xi-xv. Print.
- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. 2010. *Nomad*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. Print.
- Brijavac, Bedrudim. 2012. ‘Postmodernism and Organizational Culture: The Japanese Experience’. *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* Nos 21&22. 104-113 2011-2012. Print.
- Falola, Toyin. 2013. ‘Èsù: The God without Boundaries’, Toyin Falola (ed): *Esu Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 3-37. Print.
- Julius-Adeoye, Jays ‘Rantimi .2013. *The Drama of Ahmed Yerima Studies in Nigerian Theatre*, Lagos: LUCAS. Print.

- Layiwola, Dele. 2010. *A Place Where Three Roads Meet: Literature, Culture and Society*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press. Print.
- Lujabe-Rankoe, Thandi. 2006. *A dream fulfilled*. Houston: Mutloats Arts Heritage Trust. Print
- Moh, Felicia. 2005. *Women in literature*, Port Harcourt: Amethyst & Colleagues Publishers. Print.
- Mowforth, Martin and Munt, Ian 2009. *Tourism and Sustainable Development, Globalization and New Tourism in the Third World*. New York: Routledge. Print
- Ndubokwu, C.O.G. 2002. *Egyptian cult of Isis: the mother goddess*. Ughelli: Oputoru books
- Ofomine, Inyang.2007. 'Sick Characters in Search of Healer: Amed Yerima's *The Angel* And the Search for Political Reforms in Nigeria', Uwemedimo Atakpo & Stephen E. Inegbe (eds.) : *Making Images, Re-making Life Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima*, Calabar: Modern Business Press, 125-138. Print.
- Ogundipe – Leslie Molar.2007. 'Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context', I. Olateju and A. Quayson (eds): *African literature an anthology of criticism and theory*, Malden: Blackwell. 2007, 542 – 550. Print.
- Ologundudu, Dayo. 2008. *The cradle of Yoruba culture*. Washington D.C.: US Library of Congress Tracking.
- Ologundudu, Dayo. 2008. *The Cradle of Yoruba Culture*, Washington D.C.: US Library of Congress Tracking. Print.
- Onwona, Samuel. 2005. *Overcoming Generational Curses*, Accra: Africa Christian Press. Print.
- Osundare, Niyi. 2008. *Style and Literary Communication in African Prose Fiction in English*, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd. Print.
- Power, Dominic and Scott, Allen. 2004. *Cultural Industries and the Production of Culture*. Abington: Routledge. Print
- Reich, Simon. *WHAT IS GLOBALIZATION? Four Possible Answers*. 1998. @ https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/261.pdf. Retrieved October 19, 2020. Web
- Rigg, Jonathan. 2007. *An Everyday Geography of the Global South*. New York: Routledge. Print
- Sellers, Allison and Tishken, Joel. 2013. 'The Place of Esu in the Yoruba Pantheon'. Toyin Falola (ed): *Esu Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 41-55. Print.
- Soyinka, Wole. 2019. Can't avoid globalization, can control it by preserving individual cultures. In The Indian EXPRESS. Available at: www.indianexpress.com/arti. (Accessed July 22 2019) Web
- Yerima, Ahmed. 2007. 'How I write: Things Soyinka Taught Me', UwemedimoAtakpo & Stephen E. Inegbe (eds.): *Making Images, Re-making Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima*, Calabar: Modern Business Press, 3 -9. Print.
- Yerima, Ahmed. 2015. *Abobaku*, Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd. Print.
- Yerima, Ahmed. 2016. *Iyase*, Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd. Print.
- Yerima, Ahmed. 2016. *The Last Grain of Wheat*, Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd. Print.
- Yerima, Ahmed. 215. *Culture, Drama and National Ethos*. Ibadan: Ebony Books & Creations, . Print.