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The drama of Ahmed Yerima : studies in Nigerian theatre

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Introduction to the Drama of Ahmed Parker Yerima

Introduction

In my exploration into the work of Ahmed Yerima, I will argue that he is a socio-political realist playwright, as evidenced by the socio-political realism that is visible in all of his dramatic representations. All of the text under study, validate Yerima's critical viewpoint of the prevailing government of the day. In representing a typical day in the life of his characters, Yerima creates a relevancy to modern Nigerian theatre and, indeed, African theatre and literature through his treatment of contemporary social, political, economic, cultural and religious issues. He is a playwright who is conscious of his immediate environment, and he reflects this in his drama. His drama is best described by the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer and playwright who states, "literature does not develop in a vacuum, it is given impetus, shape, and direction by social, political and economic forces in a particular society."¹

This study of Yerima's works in socio-political terms will investigate the sensitive relationship between writing and power in Nigeria: Yerima has held the position of Artistic Director, and Director-General of the National Troupe of Nigeria, and subsequently of the National Theatre of Nigeria since the period of military rule in 1991 up to the period of democracy before resigning in 2010, which raises questions on the space and limit of artistic expression to create independent and critical plays. During the military regime of Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, and General Sani Abacha (1985-1997), there was limited or no freedom of speech in Nigeria. It is also common knowledge in Nigeria that holders of a government's position cannot express personal opinions different from that of the government he or she is serving. Based on the Nigerian experience, one can wonder how independent playwrights are in their artistic expression? Is Yerima's drama conditioned by his position in the establishment of the government? What is the publishing and performance space available to dramatists in Nigeria under military and democratic government? These issues will be investigated throughout the thesis.

In order to explore and better understand Yerima's works, I selected fourteen out of his more than three dozens plays for critical examination. These plays include: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Bishop* and *The Soul*, and *The*

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics", in *Studies in African literature* (London: Heinemann, 1972), xv

Wives. The Mirror Cracks, The Lottery Ticket, Kaffir's Last Game, The Sisters, Mojagbe, and Little Drops. I will perform a textual analysis of Yerima's works, because it enables me to look at Yerima's viewpoint as championed in his drama, and not through the lense of a director's interpretation as we often see in performance analysis. The text is the direct product of the dramatist, while performance is a mediated product that the director and his or her actors have worked upon to convey their own interpretation of the text. Because different directors interpret a dramatic text differently just as different actors cannot play the same role the same way, I will rely on textual analysis of Yerima's texts instead of performances of his texts.

In my analysis, I will maintain the categorization of Nigerian dramatic landscape as used by most critics of its theatre, differentiating between playwrights of the first generation, the second generation and the third generation. The generational classification often used for these dramatists is based on ideological commitment and dramatic style.² According to Olu Obafemi, this classification runs as follows: James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, including Zulu Sofola belong to the first generation.³

The first generation playwrights are considered as cultural liberation proponents. They discuss nationalistic ideals, cultural re-affirmation and historical re-engineering in their dramas. The second generation⁴, regarded as radical dramatists or the radical school⁵, is represented in the forefront by Femi Osofisan. Other members of this generation include Bode Sowande, Bode

² It is important to note here that "generational classification" used for Nigerian dramatists does not strictly refer to "time", the age of the playwrights or the year(s) of publication. In this vein, I am not in agreement with Pius Adesanmi's position that "Third Generation" Nigerian writers can be referred to as writers born after 1960s. However, it must be stated that Adesanmi did not mention dramatists in his interview, but writers. See Adesanmi's comment at

http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/0607/adesanmi_interview.htm. Though I am using the term "generation" in demarcating dramatic writings from Nigeria, I am not unaware of the various debates on both the relevance and irrelevance of periodizing literature from Wellek and Warren to Rehder, Childs, and Armstrong or Frederic Jameson's "crisis" in periodization statement (Jameson qtd in Leonard Orr's "Modernism and the Issue of Periodization", in *Comparative Literature and Culture* Vol. 7, No. 1, (2005), 2. I maintained the classifications in order to draw attention to the way Nigerian literature is partitioned and discussed by its major critics.

³ Gbanou, K.S., "Anglophone African Theatre: Structure and Development", in Susan, Arndt & Katrin, Berndt, eds. *Words and Words: African Writing, Theatre and Society* (New Jersey and Eritrea: African World Press, 2007), 54

⁴ Yemi, Ogunbiyi, "Drama and Theatre in Nigeria", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A critical SourceBook* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 36

⁵ Chris, Dunton, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970* (London: Hans Zell, 1992), 123

Osanyin, Meki Nzewi, Kole Omotosho, Akin Isola and Tunde Fatunde.⁶ These dramatists, dissatisfied with the nationalistic, or what some critics refer to as cultural liberationist, drama of their predecessors turned to Marxism in their dramatic approach. The radical dramatists are committed to promoting, “revolutionary change by Nigerian peasants and workers”⁷ through their plays.

The third generation dramatists boast of Ahmed Yerima, Tess Onwueme and Stella Oyedepo as leaders of this generation. Others include Ben Tomolaju, Sam Ukala, Julie Okoh, Iyorwuese Hagher, Irene Salami, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Foluke Ogunleye, Alex Asigbo, Barclay Anyakoroma, Bunmi Julius-Adeoye, John Iwuh, and Toyin Abiodun. These dramatists are not interested in revolutionary aesthetics in their dramatic approach as were their predecessors. Even though they rejected Marxism, they still liked the Marxist’s dramatists craving for a just socio-political order in the Nigerian system by reflecting leadership crisis, military misadventure, national unity, political and ethnic rivalry, and state oppression of the people that plague the nation’s socio-culture and politics. Other issues that pervade their works include corruption and poverty, inadequate health care, environmental problems, and other socio-economic issues.

The themes of the drama of recent playwrights, rather than being shaped and sharpened by the ideology of their predecessors such as Soyinka, J.P. Clark or Osofisan, are the result of an individual search for a spiritual solution to the country’s socio-political problems and of self-survival in the midst of the nation’s numerous crises. The ideology of the Nigerian third generation dramatists is an expression of individual survivalism, placing emphasison the survival of an individual in a chaotic society as opposed to socialism which was characterized in the works of the earlier playwrights. Ones’ survival is self-dependent and not reliant on any governmental intervention.

The term “Individual survivalism” is used to define the strategy and subculture of individuals or groups anticipating and making preparations for future possible disruptions in local, regional, national, or international social and political order.⁸ The dramas that are constructed within the ideology of

⁶ Ademola, Dasyilva, *Dapo Adelugba on Theatre in Nigeria* (Interview) (Ibadan: Ibadan Cultural Studies Group University of Ibadan, 2003), 15

⁷ Chris, Dunton, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English Since 1970* (London: Hans Zell, 1992), 123

⁸ There has never been a reading of “individual survivalism” as an ideology in Nigerian literature, particularly drama. However, Adediran Ademiju-Bepo mentions survivalism as an ideology in the works of third generation dramatists in his article titled “Visual Literature and

individual survivalism create realistic characters that represent individuals within the playwright's current surroundings in their society.

In the words of Prakash Khuman, "Realism, [is] a style of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life."⁹ This does not mean that realism presents actual events of life as they occur but instead makes a representation of life by selecting some real life occurrence for inclusion in the text. Khuman further states that the term realism "refers, sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favor of soberly recognizing the actual problems of life."¹⁰ Since collective struggle for group emancipation has failed in Nigeria, individuals strive to conquer direct obstacles to a better life. The third generation playwrights scrutinize contemporary Nigerian reality and dare the characters to scale over obstacles to progress in whatever way they can. Ademiju-Bepo further highlights that to the Nigerian third generation playwrights, radical "ideologies have failed to awaken the desired consciousness in the people to confront their realities."¹¹ The third generation playwrights expect their reader-audience to have an ability to distinguish between the oppressive and dictatorial government of most of the leaders depicted in their plays. In this case, the reader-audience can relate these villainous characters to the political leaders in their own society. It is expected by the playwrights that these plays might help the reader-audience to come to terms with their everyday reality and also in the realization of their daily struggle for survival. A well-defined link between the earlier two generations of Nigerian dramatists and the present generation of which Ahmed Yerima and Tess Onwueme competently represent¹² exists in the line of these thematic preoccupations being treated in the dramas of the majority of the dramatists.

Nigerian drama has been explored and researched by virtually all the notable critics of African theatre. These include Anthony Graham-White and Alain Ricards 1976; Martin Banham and Clive Wake 1976; Abiola Irele and

Emergent Paradigms of Nigerian Home Movies and the Dialectics of Orientation", in *Nigerian Politic and Society*, Africa Update Vol. XIV, Issue 3 Summer (New Britain: 2007), (online)

⁹ Khuman, P., "Social Realism in Major Novels of Mulkraj Anand: A Study", a PhD Dissertation submitted to Saurashtra University, Rajkot, India, 2010, 78

¹⁰ Khuman, P., "Social Realism in Major Novels of Mulkraj Anand: A Study", a PhD Dissertation submitted to Saurashtra University, Rajkot, India, 2010, 79

¹¹ Ademiju-Bepo, Adediran, "Visual Literature and Emergent Paradigms of Nigerian Home Movies and the Dialectics of Orientation", in *Nigerian Politic and Society*, Africa Update Vol. XIV, Issue 3 Summer (New Britain: 2007)

¹² I mentioned these two playwrights because they are the most recognized and discussed of the third generation playwrights in Nigerian academic institutions.

Oyin Ogunba 1978; Eldred Jones 1978; Yemi Ogunbiyi 1981; David Kerr's 1985 and 1995; Dapo Adelugba 1990; Chris Dunton 1992; Muiyiwa Awodiya 1993 and 1996, Sandra L. Richard (1995). Others are Ademola Dasylva 1997 and 2003; Olu Obafemi 1997; Lanre Bamidele 2000; Karin Barber (1995, 1997 and 2000); Selom K. Gbanou 2007, etc. None of these critics mention Ahmed Yerima as neither a budding or emerging playwright. This is in contrast with the classification in Yemi Ogunbiyi's *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A critical Source Book* published in 1981¹³, which mentioned Ahmed Yerima as part of the second generation dramatists. Ogunbiyi not only saw the published texts of Yerima's earliest four plays *The Movement*, *Asylum*, *The Flood*, and *Statement from Prison* but also saw their performances at the University of Ife between 1977 and 1981. Though Yerima began is a second generation dramatist, I believe that he only fully matured as a third generation playwright. Conversely, some of the critics who failed to include Yerima as a dramatist, mentioned Tess Onwueme and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo who began writing only after Ahmed Yerima had staged and published some of his plays.

Background of the Study

The post-independent African state is one bedeviled by significant leadership-induced poverty, corruption, religious charlatanism, war and restiveness, an unstable political system, dictatorial governance, a lack of adequate basic amenities, as well as a myriad of other issues. Despite Nigeria's obvious wealth (from oil and other natural resources), it has undergone dramatic economic deterioration, especially under military rule, which has, for the most part, governed the country since its independence.¹⁴ Even before the military incursion into Nigerian politics in 1966, the country had been experiencing severe and devastating socio-economic, political and developmental crises, reasoning used by the military to force its way into power. Nigeria's developmental framework is laden with components such as consumerism, corruption, incessant military coups, failed socio-economic and political policies, and so on. According to Odebode, the "socio-economic climate in Nigeria within the past three or four decades has not promoted the kind of social and economic welfare that would insulate families from the vagaries of

¹³ Yerima's earliest plays were published in 1980 by Ogunbiyi Press, Ile-Ife under the title *Three Plays in Transition* (a collection of three plays; *Asylum*, *The Flood* and *The Movement*, published in Ile-Ife by Ogunbiyi Press)

¹⁴ Odebode, Sunbo, *Husbands are Crowns: Livelihood Pathways of Low-Income Urban Yoruba Women in Ibadan, Nigeria* (The Hague: ISS, 2004), 12

the market or help them to benefit from market development.”¹⁵ Odeboode concludes that, during the past 25 years, Nigeria has received more “than \$300 billion in oil revenues after deducting payments to the foreign companies.”¹⁶ Nigeria’s oil revenue between the years 2004 and 2007 amounted to \$112 billion, while for the single year 2008, the nation earned \$57 billion from oil and gas alone. The total oil revenues generated up to April 2008 was put at \$500 billion.¹⁷ Still, the country is marred in poverty to the extent of its being categorized among the world’s poorest nations. Over 70% of the nation’s population live below the poverty line due to inequitable distribution of the national resources, restricted access to social services such as education and public health care, lack of transparency in governance as well as corruption by the political class.

The political and socio-economic problems that plague Nigeria are what fuel the country’s literature. Virtually all notable Nigerian dramatists have addressed these problems in their various works. In most cases, issues are presented through satire, parody and as metaphor in historical plays. For examples Wole Soyinka’s *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), dissects the “festering social and political realities of Nigeria’s oil boom years.”¹⁸ Soyinka’s other works like *Kongi’s Harvest* (1964); *Play of Giants* (1984) and *King Baabu* (2000) satirize the ludicrous arrogance and inhuman nature present in most African dictatorial leaders. *Beatification of Area Boys* (1995) looks at the 1989 government demolition of houses in Maroko, Lagos and the displacement of its almost fifty thousand residents without recourse to resettlement or rehabilitation of the displaced. Nigerian social issues are also dealt with in *The Trial of Brother Jero* (1964), *Madmen and the Specialist* (1970) and *The Road*. Another playwright, Femi Osofisan, satirizes and lampoons the attitudes of the Nigerian leaders in plays like *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1982), *Who’s Afraid of Solarin* (1979), *Red is the Freedom Road* (1982), *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Aringindin and the Night Watchmen* (1992), *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage* (1986). With his plays, he calls on the masses to adopt a revolutionary approach in order to change the *status quo*. Ahmed Yerima’s *The Silent Gods*

¹⁵ Odeboode, Sunbo, *Husbands are Crowns: Livelihood Pathways of Low-Income Urban Yoruba Women in Ibadan, Nigeria* (The Hague: ISS, 2004), 12

¹⁶ Ian, Gary and Terry, L. Karl, *Bottom of the Barrel: Africa’s Oil Boom and the Poor* (Stanford: Catholic Relief Services, 2003), (online)

¹⁷ Kingsley, Omonobo and Chris, Ochayi, “EFCC Probes Past Govts on \$500bn Oil Revenue”, *Nigerian Vanguard* (Lagos: April 11, 2008) (online)

¹⁸ Joachim, Fiebach. “Brecht, Euripides, and Soyinka: Dionysus, Ogun and ‘Hand Grenades’”, in Arndt, Susan & Berndt, Katrin, eds. *Words and Worlds: African Writing, Theatre and Society* (New Jersey and Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2007), 283-293

(1996), *Kaffir's Last Game* (1998), *The Sisters* (2001) and, including his most recent work, *Little Drops* (2009), are serious attempts at condemning the preposterous stance of the government.

The Drama of Ahmed Yerima¹⁹

In chapter two to four, selected plays are presented and analyzed according to themes and stylistic features. In writing a critical analysis of the works of a single dramatist, there is bound to be an amount of subjectivity on the part of the writer based on perception. This is because, the more you read his works, the more you are drawn into his world, especially as I am interested in showing how his works challenge government positions. The fact that I decided to analyze Yerima's works from the purview of socio-political realism has the tendency of being interpreted as being subjective, in spite of this; I will like to state here that my position is based on my analysis of the works selected.

Ahmed Yerima leads other third generation dramatists in redefining the direction of contemporary Nigerian drama, which he is also treading with vigour. In his own words:

In some of my plays, sometimes I find out that I have to make a social comment. I look at contemporary Nigeria and I find that, for instance, the tragedy that exists is no longer that of Aristotle or even Soyinka. Theirs is the tragedy of destiny.... Break in social orders and ideological factors create tragedy these days.²⁰

This direction is mainly in the area of the dramatic ideology identified earlier as survivalism. The polity addressed in his plays covers both colonial and post-independent Nigeria with its unstable politics resulting from prolonged military rule and dictatorial democracy.²¹ Ahmed Yerima is a dramatist of socio-political realism who used the medium of drama to comment on the prevailing socio-economic and political situations in his own country of Nigeria and

¹⁹ Information on the life and career of Ahmed Yerima is provided in the appendix 2, pages 241-242 of this thesis.

²⁰ Yerima Ahmed, "How I Write: Things Soyinka Taught Me", in Inegbe, S.E., and Uwemedimo, Atakpo, (eds.), *Making Images, Re-Making Life: Arts and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 6

²¹ One aspect of democracy in Nigeria began in 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo, a former Military Head of State (1976-1979), became the first post military president since December 31, 1983, in the current government of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (2010-Present). Pronouncements are often made by the president without regarding the opinion of the Legislative Arm and the people of the country in general. This action has seen both the executive and Legislative Arms at loggerhead with one another. It has also lead to numerous protests by the people of Nigeria.

indeed, in Africa as a whole. Though neglected by many critics, including Ademola Dasyuva²² who can be regarded as his contemporary, Yerima distinguished himself by the seriousness attached to the issues raised in most of his plays. In some of the works, we see a true blend of poetry and the indigenous, artistic style of chants and proverbs; music and dance coalesce to give an African performative style. Some of his works blend myth, poetry and folklore to present a picture of traditional African elements. In many cases, elements drawn from contemporary African and world realities come together to carve a positive position for human society. The “nature and character of the Nigerian state, especially in terms of power access and accumulation of resources, are recurrent subjects in Yerima’s plays.”²³ According to Gbemisola Adeoti:

Yerima is one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary drama stage in the last decade of the twentieth century. Apart from being a playwright, he is an artistic director, a theatre manager, a teacher and a researcher [...] Yerima’s dramaturgy combines the practical orientation of a theatre practitioner with the aesthetic consciousness of a critic. He draws broadly from generic elements of tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy and satire; freely experimenting, in sometimes eclectic manner, with theatrical forms known in theatre history.²⁴

The above quotation serves as a spring-board for the study of this enigmatic African dramatist whose dramatic creativity is an amalgam of theatrical paradigms guided by his constant quest for experimentations and innovations. The critical work *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* by Gbemisola Adeoti, along with *Making Images, Re-making Life: Arts and Life in Ahmed Yerima*, edited by Uwemedimo Atakpo and Stephen E. Inegbe will be studied extensively in this research.

Yerima’s range of artistic influence is vast as he embraces the foreign and the local, ancient and contemporary materials. Foreign influence can be seen in his adaptations of classic works like William Shakespeare’s *Othello* as

²² Dasyuva, Ademola, *Studies in Drama* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 2004)

²³ Gbemisola, Adeoti, “An Exploratory Study of Yerima’s Drama”, in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 3

²⁴ Gbemisola, Adeoti, “An Exploratory Study of Yerima’s Drama”, in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 3

Otaelo, Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* as 'Sakapin Sarkin Wayo', and J.B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* with the same title. *An Inspector Calls* also served as influence for Yerima's *The Twist*.²⁵ His creative ouver is spiced-up by the contemporary politics in his home country of Nigeria and in continental Africa. The Nigeria Niger Delta militancy crisis serves as resources for *Hard Ground* and *Little Drops*. His sources include materials from myth and history, society, and governance. All of these plays encapsulate past events in Nigeria. His literary fecundity of more than thirty dramas can be analyzed under three groupings:

1. Historical realistplays
2. Religious realist plays
3. Socio-political realist plays

To borrow the statement of Mario Klarer, which I think aptly summarizes Yerima's historical plays:

These plays portray a[n] historical event or figure but, through the addition of contemporary references, transcend the historical dimension and make general statements about human weaknesses and virtues. In many cases, the author chooses a[n] historical pretext in order to comment on contemporary sociopolitical misery while minimizing the risk of censorship.²⁶

Yerima employs several genres from comedy and its variants to melodrama, tragic-comedy, and tragedy. His religious realist plays deal with "larger mysteries of life and death, flesh and spirit, essence and existence."²⁷ Some of Yerima's plays with "traditional"²⁸ contents like *Idemili*, *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees*, *The Sick People*, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Ameh Oboni the*

²⁵ This fact was revealed by Ahmed Yerima to me during an interview conducted on 20th November, 2009 after the premiere performance of *Little Drops* at the National Theatre, Lagos.

²⁶ Klarer, Mario, *An Introduction to Literary Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 42

²⁷ Bernth, Lindfors, *Early Nigerian Literature* (New York/London: Africana Publishing Company, 1982), 18

²⁸ I use the term with inverted commas because local religious beliefs are interpreted as "traditional". This is the perspective of those who assume Christian, Muslim, "scientific" approaches (and often one of these approaches is shared by the playwrights) and see such practices as being in perfect continuity with past beliefs and customs, what is often not the case, as what is interpreted as "traditional" could be "invented", re-used, adapted, adopted etc in time." See Hobsbawn, E.J., and Ranger, T.O., *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983)

Great, and *Mojagbe*, betray elements of myth and mystic belief, yet these elements are not enough to rank the works as mythological plays. Therefore, I have refrained from grouping his work as mythological plays, one reason being that most plays by African playwrights serve as interplay between that which is “traditional” and that which is contemporary in their society. So, it is not difficult to come across customs and belief systems predominant within the socio-cultural setting from which the plays emerged. This is the case in Femi Osofisan’s *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrel*, *No More the Wasted Breed*, J.P. Clarke’s *Song of a Goat* and *Ozzidi*, Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi* and *The Gods are not to Blame*, Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*, and so on. These plays are permeated with traditional African lore, performance resources, music, song, story-telling and audience-player rapport. These are “defining elements in the works of distinguished African playwrights.”²⁹

Historical Realist Plays

Plays considered as “historical realist” clearly document the relationship between powerful rulers of a Nigerian kingdom and their relationship with European colonialism. These plays portray an historical event or figure, and it appears that Yerima chooses the historical pretext in order to comment on contemporary sociopolitical misery in Nigeria and reduce the risk of censorship. Although, the intention of representing the Nigerian historical past on stage is an attempt to remind people of the past and to not forget it, the players of the events in history are also very important here. Yerima’s historical plays include *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great* (henceforth *Ameh Oboni*) and *Erelu Kuti*. In this study, I will be discussing the three earlier plays.

Though I stated earlier that Nigeria’s third generation dramatists, do not believe in nationalistic ethos like the generation before them, these three historical plays have a nationalist theme as evidenced by the subject matter of colonialism that connects them together. The colonial history of Nigeria served as dramatic material not only for Wole Soyinka, in *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ola Rotimi, in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and *Hopes of the Living Dead* but also for Ahmed Yerima in the three previously mentioned plays. For example, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, (henceforth *The Trials*) is a re-enactment of the historical events that lead to the British occupation of the old

²⁹ Gbemisola, Adeoti, “A Exploratory Study of Yerima’s Drama”, in Gbemisola, Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), xii

Benin Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century. It chronicles the deposing and exiling of the monarch to Calabar in 1897 after Vice-Consul Philip provoked a confrontation between the Benin Army and the British Army. Vice-Consul Philip decided to visit the Benin monarch to discuss trade relationships at a time when “tradition” neither permitted the Oba nor the kingdom to receive any visitors. This fact was communicated to the Vice-Consul. The Vice-Consul’s plans to undermine the law of the kingdom serve as the point of reference for every other action in the play. In the play, the event is a flashback account by Oba Ovonramwen as he narrates the story from his prison cell.

The historical play *Attahiru* chronicles the fate of Caliph Attahiru of Sokoto in the hands of the British colonialists in the early twentieth century. Lord Frederick Lugard deposed Attahiru I as ruler of the Caliphate in 1903 with military force, and the play re-creates the political situation within the Caliphate on the eve of the conquest. It re-enacts “the heroism of Attahiru I who, within his short reign of six months, left an indelible mark in the course of Islam by leading the Muslims’ resistance against British imperialism.”³⁰ This was also the trend in *Ameh Oboni*, as the British colonialists prey on the estrangement within the kingdom to advance their own course by forcing the monarch to commit suicide. In *Ameh Oboni*, Yerima re-visits colonialism and its effect on Igalaland of the Northern Region of Nigeria during the reign of Attah Ameh Oboni in 1956. The play is a reconstruction and re-evaluated version of a story that was initially portrayed from the colonialists’ perspective. In the play, the traditional ruler comes forth as a patriotic leader of his people, imbued with variable indices of greatness like rare courage, tremendous achievements, popularity and selflessness. In relation to this, “the colonial power as represented by J.D. Muffet, the District Officer of Kabba Province of the Northern Region is depicted in a manner that questions the soundness of his judgments.”³¹ Attah Ameh Oboni “asserts his heroic status by achieving immortality in the heart of his people in spite of the diverse machinations of the colonial powers to subvert and subjugate the traditional order in Igalaland that is symbolized in the Attah”³².

³⁰ Uwatt, Effiok, B. “Yerima’s Theatre and Nigerian History: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen and Attahiru*”, in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 127

³¹ Gbemisola, Adeoti, “A Exploratory Study of Yerima’s Drama”, in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 37

³² Egharevba, Chris, “Destiny of Sacrifice: Ahmed Yerima’s *Ameh Oboni the Great*”, in Inegbe, S.E., and Uwemedimo, Atakpo, (eds.), *Making Images, Re-Making Life: Arts and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 96

Three of these plays, *The Trials*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni*, which I will analyze in chapter two of this thesis, have a direct dealing with colonialism. *Erelu Kuti*, on the other hand, documents the schism that follows the trade of slaves and other commerce with the Europeans. *Erelu Kuti* depicts the history of Lagos between 1760 and 1805 during the reign of Oba Akinsemoyin and Oba Ologunkutere. The play focuses on the point in history when the heroine Erelu mounted the throne of Lagos as the regent of the territory as a result of the plotting by Lagos chiefs to dethrone the paramount ruler Oba Akinsemoyin. This period in history predates colonialism in Lagos but coincided with the contact between Lagos and European traders and explorers.

This play also depicts the balance of gender in an otherwise male dominated culture. Erelu Kuti is a princess that became the Queen of Lagos in the late eighteenth century. Though her reign was short lived, it was significant and important to the history of Lagos as her presence on the throne ended to the crisis between the palace chiefs and the king of Lagos. The story of Erelu as the queen of Lagos exhibits that women were given a primal place of authority within the traditional African society, which is in contrast to the erroneous belief that women were not regarded as important.

Religious Realist Plays

Yerima chooses religious and moral themes to covertly discuss socio-political issues in *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *Mirror Cracks*, *The Bishop* and *The Soul*, and *The Wives*. Christianity and African Traditional Beliefs (ATBs) are visibly pitched against one another in these plays to reinforce the fact that religion is a visible part of the lives of contemporary Nigerians. Though this conflict of religious faiths may not be what is intended in the plays, it propels the dialogue and writing of the plays. Even though these plays are categorized as religious realist, they also indicate some socio-political themes. For example, some of the characters in *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *Mirror Cracks*, *The Bishop*, and *The Wives* have a direct dealing with the government and with leading political figures. *The Mirror Cracks* and *The Twist*, published with four other plays in *The Angel and Other Plays*, discuss the subject of career, marriage and divorce, pain and death.

In spite of the highlighted theme, political discussions also find their way into the dialogue of the characters. For example, in *The Bishop*, while Bishop is battling within himself, he is also confronting the church hierarchy

and the government. The play focuses on the subjects of self-discovery and personal identity. Christianity and the African Traditional Beliefs (ATBs) are thrust together as the crux of the play. The protagonist, a Catholic bishop who was dedicated at birth to 'Esu', the Yoruba god of mischief, is tormented both physically and spiritually by his biological relatives who are in need of a new chief priest for their gods. He is also tormented by religious hypocrites within the Catholic faith to which he belongs. The play is a commentary on the state of religion in Nigeria.

Despite the fact that religion is the focal point of *The Bishop*, events within the Nigerian political landscape lend themselves as ready tools in the hands of those who use religion to foment anarchy in order to achieve a selfish end. In Nigeria, religion and politics go *pari passu*. As in the manner of Yerima's other plays, *The Bishop* systematically exposes the government's land grabbing attitude. The Bishop is arrested and remanded in a cell for confronting the messengers of the government who have come to pull down the Sunday school building that belonged to the church.

What Yerima did not highlight in this play, and in most of his other plays that I will analyze using "tradition" and indigenous faith, is that culture is not an aspect of a community life, but the whole of the community life is "culture". According to Stuart Hall, culture is the "relationships between elements in a whole way of life."³³ It may be difficult to contemplate the plays as only a conflict between new religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Though it is understandable that "no whole way of life is without its dimension of struggle and confrontation between opposed ways of life"³⁴, in this case we can ask: who is opposing who?

The humor in the works under analysis in this study emerges in the characters who attach themselves to vanity and selfish ego. *The Twist* and *The Mirror Cracks* are two plays set in the house of retired ambassadors and judges, a familiar setting in many of Yerima's plays.³⁵ He tends to portray that an insatiable pursuit of career of the two partners in marriage often leads to a dysfunctional home. These career chasers often sacrifice the normal development of their children on the altar of self-fulfillment.

Since the introduction of Christianity in Nigeria, there has been visible hostility between its adherents and the practitioners of ATBs. As contemporary

³³ Stuart, Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", in *Media, Culture & Society*. (SAGE, 1980), 60 <http://mcs.sagepub.com>

³⁴ Stuart, Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms", in *Media, Culture & Society*. (SAGE, 1980), 61

³⁵ *The Portraits* is a very good example of such plays.

Nigerian society is divided between those who practice Islam, ATBs and Christianity, Yerima looks at the hypocritical nature of many of the country's practitioners of the three religions. The insincere nature of the "supposed religious" Nigerians gives Yerima the background to allow the characters of these plays to be battling with internal conflict. In *The Bishop*, for example, the inner conflict of the Bishop is expressed by his abandonment of the religion of his ancestors for Christianity and the invitation by his paternal aunt, Iya Gana, to return to his cultural roots as the Priest of Esu. This is also reflected in *The Twist* with Rev. Noah who abandoned his "traditional" role as a devotee of Sango, the thunder god of Yoruba. This inner conflict is the driving force for Supo in *The Mirror Cracks* to become a monster while on a peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone. The same inner conflict is expressed by Supo's parents who, in the end, must accept the fact that the collapse of their marriage when he was only ten years old could be responsible for the monster that their son had become, though they earlier blame their son's state of mind on Esu. Supo, as a young boy, was a mass server in the Church where his godfather, who was also his uncle, was a Bishop and not an acolyte of Esu.

The pull of the ancestor's spirit worship in *Uncle Venyil* is too strong for Kaka's Christian mind and, in the end, she capitulates to the demands of her in-laws to play her part within the religious community of her in-laws when she was requested to cook for the spirit of her dead husband and the ancestors' masquerade.³⁶

Though *Uncle Venyil* extensively discusses the conflicts between Christianity and ATBs, it also describes the struggle by union leaders and pro-democratic elements in Nigeria during the military rule of both Generals Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and Sani Abacha (1993-1998). The struggle against dictatorship and other inhuman treatment meted on the Nigerian populace by the military leads to the incarceration of many trade unionists and political activists like Dr. Fredrick Faseun, whom the playwright said he had in mind while writing the play, Frank Kokori, Beko Ransome-Kuti and others. This period in Nigerian history is marked by the death of political prisoners like Chief MKO Abiola (1937-1998) and Alhaji Shehu Musa Yar'Adua (1943-1997) in prison. The struggle also claimed the life of Ken Saro Wiwa (Oct. 10, 1941-Nov. 10, 1995), Nigerian writer and environmental activist, who was executed alongside his other eight colleagues by the late dictator, General Sani

³⁶ Kaka had earlier refused to be part of such an act by regarding it as unchristian and evil.

Abacha.³⁷ Yerima employs a familiar traditional religious belief of African society to enact the story of struggle and incessant trial and imprisonment that await anyone who faces the government on a collision course. The play's description will suffice here: "My play inhabits and emerges from a society in a complex clash with its own psychoanalytical search for the meaning of self, while it also highlights the internal conflict in order to achieve obvious societal self-destruction."³⁸ Yerima writes further that the Nigerian society and his own personal life inspired the thematic thrust of the play as well as the meaning of "characters so innocent, so pure and yet so total in becoming victims of circumstances beyond them."³⁹ Among other things, *Uncle Venyil*, "treats the various levels of irony inherent in the three most vital spheres of human relationships and these are Love, Politics and Religion."⁴⁰

The Wives is a domestic dark comedy. Yerima craftily weaves the age-old societal moral issues of incest, rape, divorce and religious hypocrisy into the play. Issues of politics and spiritism are also evident. In agreement with Gbemisola Adeoti, "Besides contemporary politics, religion constantly engages the attention of Yerima. The challenges posed by foreign religions to indigenous ones, and vice versa, sometimes generate conflicts that are explored in his drama."⁴¹ Through abuses of both ATBs and Christian faiths or exploitation of social, economic and political institutions, religion is given prominent attention in *Uncle Venyil*, *The Bishop*, and the rest of the plays mentioned above. This is moreso as ATBs and Christianity strive for recognition in the life of the main characters.

Socio-Political Realist Plays

I have selected *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe*, and *Little Drops* as plays for discussion here because of their overt representation of contemporary Nigerian reality. In spite of this, most of Ahmed Yerima's plays can be discussed as socio-political realist because their thematic preoccupations are current issues within the society. Even when the

³⁷ In spite of the visible presence of socio-political theme in this play, I have decided to also analyze it under religious realism plays. This is because the discussion of religion is the focal point of the play.

³⁸ Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 43

³⁹ Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 43

⁴⁰ Justina, Nkanga, "Levels of Irony in Ahmed Yerima's *Uncle Venyil*", in Inegbe, S., Atakpo, U., eds, *Making Images, Re-Making Life: Arts and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 253

⁴¹ Gbemisola, Adeoti, "An Exploratory Study of Yerima's Drama", in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 25

play is not overtly speaking the language of politics, it is covertly aligning itself with the struggle of the generality of the people.⁴² This strand is noticeable even in the historical and the religious realism plays. As mentioned earlier, Yerima's drama often breaks through the wall of fiction and enters into contemporary Nigerian history. In this regard, Nigerians' everyday life, occupation, language, events, religion, social interaction and institutions, etc., become realistic narrative strategy in his drama as he destabilizes the boundaries between reality and fiction. He discusses actual events, people, professions and politics in *Kaffir's Last Game*. In *The Bishop* and *Uncle Venyil*, he merges profession, language, class structure, living customs and beliefs in the way they are perceived in Nigerian contemporary reality in fictionalized narratives. For Yerima, if General Sani Abacha exists as a military head of state in Nigeria, he must be represented as such in literature. He believes that literature should realistically represent what exists in the society even when there is going to be artistic embellishment.⁴³

One example is the realistic representation of contemporary societal events by literature forcing Ubong Nda to conclude that Yerima's *Kaffir's Last Game*, "is an artistic exercise in political note-sharing"⁴⁴ between two African nations. The play presents a paradoxical situation where South Africa, emerging from the stranglehold of apartheid, provides a more tolerable and economically rewarding centre for intellectuals to thrive. The land becomes a sort of Mecca to well-bred academics from Nigeria. The play highlights how Professor Omodele Omobusayo finds the nation of South Africa a haven both in educational facilitation and the remuneration of academics. The play is a two character play in the class of *Woza Albert* by Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, Barney Simon, and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. Just as these two plays reflect the reality of apartheid in South Africa, *Kaffir's* is an exposé of Nigeria's flawed electoral programme and of society under a strangulating military regime. In fact, the two mentioned plays *Woza Albert* and *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* influenced the writing of *Kaffir's*,

⁴² This statement is not contradicting my position that Ahmed Yerima's drama is not driven by revolutionary aesthetic as the plays make attempts at representing the condition of Nigerian people (both the ordinary citizens and the people in government). However, many of the plays discuss the suffering of the people, hypocrisy of organized institutions or the insensitivity of the ruling class.

⁴³ Gbemisola, Adeoti, "Interviews with Ahmed Yerima", in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 360

⁴⁴ Ndah, Ubong, "The Giant and the Rainbow: An Analytical Study of Ahmed Yerima's *Kaffir's Last Game*" in Inegbe, S., Atakpo, U., (eds.), *Making Images, Re-Making Life: Arts and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 139

which the playwright considered a vibrant, politically relevant play. Carefully examined in the play is the relationship of Nigerian and South African political systems.

Another politically relevant play is the *The Sisters*, described by the playwright as being “about battle with bitter truth and painful reality”⁴⁵, which unravels the vanity and deceit that characterize the lives of the high and mighty in society. The play also stresses the vagaries of political power and social status. The fact that the play deals with the life and sudden death of a president of an African nation is, in itself, political. The president has ruled for twenty years and is preparing for another term of five years. This is after he has already served four continuous terms of five years each in office. The play can be seen as an allegorical statement on the life of General Sani Abacha, Nigeria’s late head of state. Though, in reality, Abacha ruled for five years (August 1993-June 10, 1998) as a military head of state, he was preparing to transform himself into a civilian president before his untimely death. *The Sisters*, which discusses the sudden death of a long serving Nigerian president, presents a “tortuous movement of shocking revelations”⁴⁶ about the lives of the characters. The play reveals a shocking reality that the sisters are afraid to face. The exception is one person (Nana) who, from the beginning has willingly accepted all of life’s circumstances.

Mojagbe is another political assertive play which discusses the subject of tyranny. The fact that this play is purely a fabrication of Yerima’s imagination and not a realistic representation of any contemporary event gives me causes to discuss it as socio-political realism play. Allegorically, the play *Mojagbe* is set in a fictitious past of the Yoruba Oyo kingdom. The thrust of this play is power, especially leadership power as exemplified in contemporary Africa. Like in many of his other plays, Yerima employs Yoruba worldview and customary institutions to tell a story that is synonymous with contemporary Nigerian society and, indeed, Africa’s political landscape. This is because in many African countries, leadership is an instrument of oppression and individualistic hegemony. Ahmed Yerima, while responding to a question by Tony Okuyeme on *Mojagbe*, posits:

Many of our leaders refuse to learn from the past. My new work *Mojagbe*, based on the Oyo Empire, exploits the theme of excessive power. It shows how power corrupts man to the point that he confronts

⁴⁵ See the back of *The Sisters*

⁴⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Sisters* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2001), back page.

death and thinks he is beyond dying. I think that death is the only thing our leaders fear. I think that is why God put it there. The fear of death is the only reason man is slightly sane, knowing that the only thing greater than him is death.⁴⁷

In Africa, as in many other parts of the world “...the history of leadership often repeats itself and man’s inability to learn from it.”⁴⁸ Within the recent Nigerian past, *Mojagbe* can be suitably situated into the tyrannical leadership and sudden death of General Sani Abacha as well as the democratic rule of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007).

Yerima’s manner of representing characters and situations in *Hard Ground*, which won him both the 2006 NLNG⁴⁹ Prize for Literature and the Association of Nigerian Authors Best Prize for Drama, leans toward chastisement of the militants in Niger Delta crisis. This approach appears to be geared more to what government representatives or Nigeria’s Minister of Information would want to reveal to the people about the crisis occurring in the Niger Delta. In this very play, a change transpires in the characteristic manner of Yerima’s dramatic presentation even though the playwright indicates otherwise. To buttress this point is the fact that the play won two prestigious awards; it embarked on a nationwide tour of Nigeria at the expense of the Federal Government. The published text of the play was given freely to audiences. This was the first time such a gesture had happened in Nigeria.

In spite of this misgiving about *Hard Ground*, the other two plays by Yerima on the Niger Delta crisis, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*,⁵⁰ are important as studies of the Nigerian Niger Delta militancy struggle. *Little Drops* tells the evil of war and terrorism from the perspective of women. It is believed that when men start war and fuel it with their unreasonable ideologies, the losses are felt more by women. They are mothers and wives to the direct perpetrators and casualties of the war as well as being victims of rape themselves.

⁴⁷ See article titled “Fifty-two seasons of Yerima’s Squill” in *Nigerian Compass*, Lagos. Monday 25 May, 2009.

⁴⁸ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 2009, 6

⁴⁹ NLNG is an acronym for Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas. The organization instituted two prizes namely: Nigerian Prize for Science and Nigerian Prize for Literature in 2003. The Nigerian Prize for Literature rotates between the writers of Prose, Poetry, Drama, and Children literature every year.

⁵⁰ This play was in press at the time of my research, and I did not analyze it. Though I saw the manuscript of the play, I had already concluded my analysis before Yerima concluded work on “Ipomu.”

*The Ife Quartet*⁵¹, ('Asylum', 'The Flood', 'The Movement' and 'Statement from Prison') are four plays written in "theatre of absurd" style. This style is, in itself, political as, first, it is a reaction to the evil of World War II and, second, it is a radical dramatic style which views life from an angle that everything about human existence trounces human rationalization. *The Ife Quartet* plays are channels for Yerima to vent his opinion on the political situations that had occurred in Nigeria during the military government of 1975 to 1979.

⁵¹ I mentioned this collection in order to show that Yerima's treatment of socio-political issues in his plays is not new but something he experimented with even as an undergraduate student between 1977 and 1981. I am not going to analyze these plays in this research.

Chapter One

Nigerian Theatre: From ‘Masquerade Drama’ to Nigerian Video-Film

Indigenous Nigerian theatre developed from masquerade performances, as evidenced in African theatre history. I believed ritual is a very significant factor in masquerade theatre. Ritual in itself is, in most cases, associated with religious belief and performance. Early Nigerian theatre and indeed drama is not guided by the Aristotelian model as most others are. This is because “drama is far more complex and universal a phenomenon than Aristotle could ever have construed.”⁵² Within the traditionalist African context, it becomes difficult to distinguish drama from ritual because if the context of the performance is to be taken into cognizance “a ritual becomes entertainment once it is outside its original context or when the belief that sustains it has lost its potency.”⁵³ Drama evolved from ritual and, in some cases, it is also a part of the ritual enactment as there are situations where dramatic traditions have developed alongside rituals without any separation from their origins.

Theatre or drama, whichever term we choose to call it, has always existed in one form or another in Africa societies. They both have their foundations in “festivals and religious rituals.”⁵⁴ There is no doubt regarding the existence of a robust theatrical tradition in many African societies. Performance of this theatrical tradition, predating colonialism is often executed by actors who regal in masquerade costumes. Masquerade theatre in Nigeria predates colonialism. Until 1914, there was no Nigerian nation, although around 1900, virtually all the regions or ethnic nationalities of what later metamorphosed into Nigeria had come under British domination. Lagos, the Northern and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated and administered as one country, Nigeria, in 1914.⁵⁵

The theatre of these individual regions or ethnic nationalities consisted of a different formation before the advent of colonialism. With which of these

⁵² Ogunba, O., “Traditional African Festival Drama”, in Oyin, Ogunba and Abiola, Irele, (ed.), *Theatre in Africa* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1978), 3-26

⁵³ Enekwe, O., quoted by Yemi Ogunbiyi in his article “Nigerian Theatre and Drama,” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 5

⁵⁴ Garuba, A., “Introduction,” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), xi

⁵⁵ See Ekwueme, Alex, “The Constitution and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria- Challenges and Prospects”, a paper delivered at International Conference on Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects at Imperial College London, 25th June, 2005.

different theatres did the Nigerian theatre practice begin? In order to make an educated guess, one must examine the formation of the Nigerian state and the development of theatre in the different regions that later make up Nigeria. Lagos was the first part of Nigeria to come under colonial domination. Its ports were annexed in 1861 due to the restriction on trade in slaves by the British and the desire to stop the passage of slaves from the hinterland to pirate ships on the coast. The Oil River Protectorate, formed in 1891, which later became Southern Nigeria with its headquarters in Calabar, was formed for the purpose of controlling trade coming down the Niger River. Benin, Bida, and Ilorin were firmly under colonial control by 1897. The Northern part of the country had earlier come indirectly under British rule in 1886, but it was not until 1902 that the whole country came under the rule of colonialism when Lord Lugard became the governor with a determination to rule the whole of the Niger area.⁵⁶

Pre-colonial Theatre

Pre-colonial theatre refers to all theatre practices associated with indigenous pre-colonial polities in Nigeria before 1900. A reference to a vibrant theatrical tradition long before colonial rule is found in the writings of Olauda Equiano, one of the few black writers of the slave trade period who wrote in 1789 that: “We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets.”⁵⁷

The introduction of the masquerade is attributed to Sango, the Alaafin (paramount ruler) of Oyo who reigned sometime in the fourteenth century. He is thought to have introduced the phenomenon of the ancestor-worship initially called *baba* (father) and later as *egungun* (masquerade), which sometime in the 16th century evolved as court entertainment.⁵⁸ Sango set up masquerade to represent the spirit of his departed father, Oranyan. Joel A. Adedeji writes that, at a special ceremony, Sango “brought the reincarnated spirit of his father to the outskirts of Oyo, set up the ‘Bara’ (royal mausoleum) for his worship and placed ‘Iyamode’ (the old woman of the palace) in charge of the mystery. Her duty was to worship Oranyan’s spirit and to bring him out as a masquerade during an evocation ceremony.”⁵⁹ According to Ogunbiyi, “By the middle of

⁵⁶ Ahmed Yerima, author’s note to *Attahiru*. (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 1998), 6

⁵⁷ See Olauda Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olauda Equiano, or, Gustavus Vasa, The African; Written by Myself*, vol 1. (London: G. Vassa, 1789), 10

⁵⁸ See Adedeji, J.A., “Alarinjo: The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 221

⁵⁹ See Adedeji J.A., “The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre”, in *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4391149>. 11/12/2009. 08:41

the sixteenth century, the institution had become formalized into [a] festival”⁶⁰ where different groups presented performances to showcase their lineage’s history. Ogunbiyi notes that, “The refinement and perfection, ostensibly for purely entertainment purposes, marked, by 1700, the birth of professional Yoruba theatre.”⁶¹ Adedeji traced the development of the performances, thus:

The festival phase began when Ologbin Ologbojo, an official at court and a member of the egungun Society, inaugurated the festival... During the festival all ancestors or dead lineage-heads were evoked, and they appeared as eegu’nla (lineage-masquerades), allowed to visit the homestead and walk the streets of the community for a certain period in the form of a pageant. The pageant was marked by a procession to the king or natural ruler and a staged performance before him which took place at the ode (the open-space in front of the palace). The performance took the form of a ‘dance-drama’ with choral-chants provided by the omole (children of the compound) of each lineage-masquerade. After this formal salute and presentation to the ruler, each pageant receded to their different homes for feasting and merriment and later danced round the community and received gifts. The theatre phase emerged from the “All Souls” festivals. The development started when, at the instance of the alagbaa (the cultic head of the egungun Society), a special or command performance was called for the last day of the festival. This became a kind of ludus [sic].⁶²

He further states that:

The masquerades were expected to act plays in a form of competition. The contest was voluntary and merely intended to raise the voltage of the festival. Presents were given in appreciation of the performance of the best masquerade [...] The Ologbin lineage was remarkable for its ‘oje’ group of ballad-mongers who displayed acrobatic dancing and acted masques. The group was based at court. It was led by Olugb’ere ‘Agan as its masked-actor and acrobat and with the akunyungba (praise-

⁶⁰ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama,” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 6

⁶¹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama,” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 6

⁶² Adedeji, J.A., “The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre”, in *Cahiers d’Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276

singers at court) as his chorus. Ologbin Ologbojo was the animator and iyamode was the ballad instructor. The group was renowned for winning the contests of the annual festivals.⁶³

It is believed that Olugb'ere Agan established himself as leader of the first professional travelling troupe after his successes at different festivals. It must be noted that the troupe, whose performance began as court theatre, after attaining a level of professionalism, left the king's palaceto the patronage of important chiefs within and outside Oyo kingdom. This action leads to the formation of the Alarinjo (travelling or strolling) theatre. Several new troupes sprang up beyond the Ologbojo lineage, and these troupes were free to entertain any individual or group of people who invited them. Names of troupes like Eiyeba, Lebe, Aiyelabola and others emerged.⁶⁴ They participated in the annual egungun festivals as was their custom and, on non-festival days, were able to satisfy the people's desire for entertainment. Whether the occasion was a birth or a death, the troupes were invited to perform. Thus the period of intensive professionalism began. The tie between masquerade theatre and ritual was further widened by the rise of professionalism in the theatre. "Professionalism not only resulted in proliferation of troupes but encouraged competition which, in turn, improved the theatrical art."⁶⁵ The programme for every masquerade performance as noted by Adedeji, is like a variety show with items following a particular set order: the ijuba (entrance-song), the dance and the drama: spectacle, revue, the finale and recessional dance.⁶⁶ The ijuba is an opening glee at which point the troupe acknowledges the audience and assures them of a good play. Adedeji further describes the trend of the performance as follows:

The Dance is a sequence of ritual and secular dances interspersed with acrobatic display. While the Bata-orchestra plays, the actors chant the oriki of the particular deities whose dances are selected for each performance [...] The Drama of the spectacle-masques relate mainly to mythological and totemistic characters. Mythological characters include all the gods in Yoruba cosmology and local heroes like 'Ar'oni.

⁶³ Adedeji, J.A., "The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre", in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276

⁶⁴ Adedeji, J.A., "The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre" in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276

⁶⁵ Adedeji, J.A., "The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre" in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276

⁶⁶ Adedeji, J.A., "The Origin and Form of the Yoruba Masque Theatre" in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 261

Totemistic characters use animal ‘motifs’. The performances analyze the Yoruba society and reveal its vices, pests and morality. All the revue depends on audience-participation for their full effect. As the sketches are mainly improvisational, they are capable of infinite changes. The chants they incorporate are stereotypical and the songs are topical and familiar. The Finale, on the other hand is usually known as the recessional spectacle. The masquerade is taken into a recessional dance round the streets of the community as an important device for collecting money and gifts. Occasionally, for an interlude, a puppet-theatre forms an item of the programme.⁶⁷

Examples of this type of masquerade performance abound in other parts of Nigeria. Whether among the “Kalabaris, Yorubas, the Ibibios, the Opobos, the Ijaws or the Efiks, etc.,”⁶⁸ there exists the “inextricable link between masquerade and ritual play.”⁶⁹ One significant aspect of traditional performances in Nigeria is that there is no distinction between court theatre and masquerade theatre. The performers may have their faces covered in a mask to represent a particular stock character or have the whole body covered in masquerade costume.

In other parts of Nigeria, especially in the eastern area of the Ibos, the masquerade ritual drama is still prominent. The yearly New Yam festival is always a great opportunity for theatrical events to take place. Though arguments are rife as to the extent of dramatic content contained in these masquerade performances, the indisputable fact is that they are theatrical performances. According to MJC Echeruo, “there are certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena to be found in traditional festivals.”⁷⁰ Echeruo writes about the Mbom Ama festival of the people of southern Nigeria as containing:

...the entire mythology of the town: the ancestry of Ebu, of his consort, Lolo; the circumstances of their domestication in the town; the crises of the past; the circumstances surrounding their annual departure from the

⁶⁷ J.A. Adedeji in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, Vol. 12, No. 46, (1972), 254-276.

⁶⁸ Ogunbiyi, Yemi. “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 11-12

⁶⁹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi. “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 11-12

⁷⁰ MJC Echeruo quoted Ruth Finnegan in his article “The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual.” In Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed. *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 137

town; the reason for propitiatory and thanksgiving sacrifices. Each detail is a plot or the germ of drama; each is liable to a thousand varying interpretations and reinterpretations.⁷¹

This form was popular in the eastern and southern area of Nigeria. During the colonial period in Nigerian history when the Christian religion or Catholicism became dominant in the eastern part of the country, the Ibo's masquerade festivals were a consistent feature in spite of the fact that the Catholic churches in Iboland staged occasional drama of European form at schools at the end of the terms and during Christian celebrations. Some of the masquerade displayed by indigenous people highlighted the Christian feasts of Christmas and Easter⁷², and some masks were constructed to represent priests and colonial masters. The people of Southern Nigeria, who comprise of the Ijaw, Kalabari, Ikwerre, Efik, Anang, and the Ibibio, have vibrant masquerade performances and usually dramatize short and very simple mythological stories. Onuora Nzekwe posits that, before the change in theatrical performances brought about during colonialism, "the Kalabari recognized masquerading as ballet and drama. By the nineteenth century, some traditional performances had already reached the stage where rites addressed to the gods connected with them had become mere precautions against accident or bad weather marring the play."⁷³

Adedeji writes about a theatrical performance which the king of Oyo commands in the honour of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander in 1826 as follows:

To mark their seven week's stay in Old Oyo (Katunga), the capital of the Oyo (Yoruba) empire, the Alaafin (king) of Oyo, invited his guests to see a performance provided by one of the traveling theatre troupes which, at that time, was waiting on the king's pleasure. The time was Wednesday, February 22, 1826.⁷⁴

⁷¹ MJC Echeruo, "The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual" in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, 142

⁷² Onuora Nzekwu, "Masquerade", in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Edited by Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 135

⁷³ Onuora Nzekwu, "Masquerade", in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Edited by Yemi Ogunbiyi (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 134

⁷⁴ Adedeji, Joel, A., "Alarinjo: the Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981), 221

William H.G. Kingston writes that Hugh Clapperton and his party:

...were entertained here with a pantomime, the stage being the open ground before his majesty's residences, the characters appearing in masks. One of them presented an enormous snake, which crept out of a huge bag and followed the manager round the park while he defended himself with a sword. Out of another sack came a man covered apparently with white wax to look like a European, miserably thin and starved with cold. He went through the ceremony of taking snuff and rubbing his nose. When he walked, it was with an awkward gait, treading as the most tender-footed white man would do in walking with bare soles over rough ground.⁷⁵

Nigerians were already accustomed to the use of satire in the treatment of political and religious matters in their drama even before there were contacts with Europe's colonialism as evidenced in the above narrative. Performances reached the highest state of artistic richness and "excellence during festivals at which certain central myths and rituals were re-enacted by the people as a whole."⁷⁶ In the words of Ndukaku Amankulor, this provided opportunities for the treatment of purely social issues through the use of masked characters, puppets, and other techniques. According to Ndukaku Amankulor: "the use of masks for character representation had the effect of liberating the actor from psychological inhibitions and imbuing him at the same time with sacred essence that, by convention, enabled him to be unique and to project a role that nobody would dare challenge or contest."⁷⁷

As mentioned earlier, the travelling theatre troupe performed constantly to meet the taste of a wide public having ventured from the court as well as from religious festivals. They attained a level of professionalism in the art of performance which allowed them to move around to enact their performances freely without inhibition from the court. For instance, they could include satirical sketches about their earlier patrons in their performances. More often than not they lampooned their former masters for the amusement of

⁷⁵ William H. G. Kingston, *Great African Travellers, from Mungo Park to Livingstone and Stanley* (London: G. Routledge, 1874), 110

⁷⁶ Amankulor, Ndukaku, N, "English-Language Drama and Theatre" in Oyekan Owomoyela, (ed.), *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 140

⁷⁷ Amankulor, Ndukaku, N, "English-Language Drama and Theatre" in Oyekan Owomoyela, (ed.), *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 140

their new audiences. This was the trend of early masquerade performances until the advent of Christianity, which came concurrently with alongside the resettlement of the freed slaves who were the first people to embrace the Christian faith in Yorubaland. A vivid recount of the roles played by Christianity in changing the conventions of traditional theatre is noted by Ogunbiyi:

As early as 1839, the first batch of immigrants, freed slaves and their children, who had acquired some form of Western education, had started to arrive and readily provide a vigorous impetus to the realization of both the church and the British government. This set of immigrants, later to be joined by Brazilian emigrants, formed the very nucleus of a nascent Nigerian educated middle class. It is interesting to note that this class of Nigerians imported the Western and European forms of the concert and the drama which were to constitute the basic framework of early modern Nigerian drama.⁷⁸

The first missions were opened by the Church of England's Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Abeokuta in 1842,⁷⁹ later in Lagos and Ibadan. H.C. Metz notes that:

They were followed by other Protestant denominations from Britain, Canada, and the United States and, in the 1860s, by Roman Catholic religious orders. Protestant missionaries tended to divide the country into spheres of activity to avoid competition with each other, and Catholic missions similarly avoided duplication of effort among the several religious orders working there.⁸⁰

As a way of avoiding competition among the churches, Catholic missionaries were particularly active among the Igbo, the CMS among the Yoruba. In order to encourage indigenous participation:

⁷⁸ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 17

⁷⁹ See the Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, *History: Early Beginning*.

<http://www.anglican-nig.org/history.htm>. Saturday, 11/12/2009

⁸⁰ Metz, H.C., (ed.), *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991) <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/14.htm>

The CMS initially promoted Africans to responsible positions in the mission field, an outstanding example being the appointment of Samuel Ajayi Crowther as the first Anglican Bishop of the Niger. Crowther, a liberated Yoruba slave, had been educated in Sierra Leone and in Britain where he was ordained priest before returning to his homeland with the first group of missionaries sent there by the CMS. This was seen as part of a conscious “native church” policy pursued by the Anglicans and others to create indigenous ecclesiastical institutions that eventually would be independent of European tutelage.⁸¹

It is noted that efforts at anointing church priests from of indigenous Africans could not be supported by the European missionaries. “The effort failed in part, however, because some members of the church authorities came to think that religious discipline had grown too lax during Crowther’s episcopate. Due to the rise of prejudice, Crowther was [replaced] as Bishop [with] a British cleric.”⁸²

As European missionaries upheld colonial rule, with the foregone conclusion that indigenous Nigerians are not capable of teaching the Bible it also meant that they reinforced colonial policy. This action of European missionaries was viewed by the indigenous group as un-Christian. Therefore, “In reaction, some African Christian communities formed their own independent churches”⁸³ by breaking away from the mission churches. This would later contribute to the direction of theatre in Nigeria. Anderson points out that the independent churches “held services in Yoruba and introduced African music and chant.”⁸⁴

Around 1866, Lagos, which the British government had annexed in 1861, became the centre of the Yoruba state as well as the hub of theatrical activities. Influx of migrants into Lagos ostensibly increased the city’s need for recreation facilities. On 24th October, 1866, in response to these entertainment needs “Bishop Ajai Crowther, J.A. Otunba-Payne, Robert Campbell, Charles Foresythe, J.P.L Davis and a host of others”⁸⁵ formed the Academy to serve the

⁸¹ Church of Nigeria Anglican Communion, *History: Early Beginning*. <http://www.anglican-nig.org/history.htm>. Saturday, 11/12/2009

⁸² Metz, H.C., (ed.), *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991) <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/14.htm>

⁸³ Metz, H.C., (ed.), *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991) <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/14.htm>

⁸⁴ Anderson, A.H., *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 2001), 62

⁸⁵ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 17. I would like to reiterate that the bulk of the information on the history of theatre in Nigeria used in

purpose. Between 1866 and 1900, many social groups were founded and fashioned after the Academy.⁸⁶ For example, there was the Brazilian Dramatic Company, the Philharmonic, and the Lagos Grammar School Entertainment Society.⁸⁷ Later, other groups like the Ibadan Choral Society, the Breadfruit School Society, and the Melo-dramatic society were formed. Earlier, the church, especially the Roman Catholic church, faced with the difficulty of preaching to a predominantly indigenous community who understood only Yoruba, resorted to drama and music to communicate with the people. In the same vein, “The French Order of Catholic Priests (Societes des Mission Africaines) which arrived in Lagos in 1867 was compelled to rely on the power of theatre for a more effective communication.”⁸⁸ Ogunbiyi writes that “Among the most successful ones were the Philharmonic Society [...] the Lagos Grammar School Entertainment Society, the Rising Entertainment Society, and the Orphean Club.”⁸⁹ The establishment of schools by the Christian churches also served as a factor in these movements. St. Gregory’s School, which was founded in 1881, staged Moliere’s *He Would Be a Lord* in 1882.⁹⁰ As mentioned earlier, the schism “within the protestant churches in Lagos, [...] led to the establishment of several”⁹¹ African churches. Native Baptist Church was the first to pull out of Baptist Mission in 1888. The First African Church Mission (FACM) or United Native African (UNA) Church established in 1891 under the leadership of William Cole, was the first to carve a new identity for itself. This trend was followed by both Bethel African Church in 1901 under J.K. Coker and United Methodist African Church, Eleja in 1917. Both UNA and Bethel African Church left the Anglican body. This cessation of the churches must be understood within a specific context of cultural nationalist movements⁹² within African members of the churches who were the educated

this thesis is derived from Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981).

⁸⁶ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 17

⁸⁷ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

⁸⁸ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

⁸⁹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

⁹⁰ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

⁹¹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

⁹² Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 19

members of the Lagos society challenge European and American missionaries' failure to incorporate African culture into Christianity; non-acceptance of African leadership in the church hierarchy as well as their leadership role within the church.⁹³ According to Allan H. Anderson, author of what we can see as the definitive history on the reformation of the African Church in the 20th Century:

The split in the Baptist Church was precipitated by the dismissal in 1888 of Pastor Stone by a missionary, W.J. David, who said he was free to dismiss Stone as "any of his servants". Vincent and a senior colleague who supported Stone were then dismissed from the Baptist Academy. Most members of the Church seceded ...the Native Baptist Church (later the Ebenezer Baptist Church) was the result....In 1894, Vincent abandoned all western cultural baggage (including the wearing of western clothing) and he and his wife changed their names to Mojola and Adeotan Agbebi.⁹⁴

In 1914, the two Baptist churches came under African leadership and were later reunited under Mojola Agbebi as the president. The removal of Bishop Ajayi Crowther as the Bishop of West Africa by the Anglican Communion and other disaffection within the church led to the formation of the United Native African (UNA) Church. The cause of the disaffection is succinctly captured by Anderson:

In West Africa, there was also the particularly aggravating dimension of the perceived failure of first African Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther's Niger Mission. The result was that new, young white missionaries were virtually unanimous in their view that Africans were unfit for [c]hurch leadership. [...] In 1890, a "purge" involving unsubstantiated charges of "immorality" against almost all the African clergy and other workers in the Niger Mission took place. The action of young British missionaries Brook and Robinson in particular, forced Bishop Crowther to resign from the Finance Committee of which he was [c]hairman. The elderly Crowther, humiliated by these white

⁹³ Anderson, A.H., *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 2001), 61

⁹⁴ Anderson, A.H., *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 2001), 61

missionaries in their twenties, died a year later and he was replaced by a white [b]ishop.⁹⁵

The dismissal of James Johnson, an assistant bishop, with his belongings thrown out of the Vicarage while absent in 1901 by the same Anglican Communion which had humiliated Bishop Ajayi Crowther a decade earlier, led to the formation of the African Church (AC), Bethel, by his loyalists.⁹⁶ This trend of humiliating and excommunicating Africans from the missionaries' churches resurfaced within the Methodist Church in Lagos in 1917 when the white missionary chairman expelled sixty-five Church elders for being polygamists. According to Anderson:

Like the Anglicans, the European Methodist missionaries had lowered the status of their African ministers and had gradually removed African district superintendents. The expelled leaders set up a separate Methodist Church called the United African Methodist Church (Eleja), the only African Church to secede specifically on the issue of polygamy.⁹⁷

Apart from the splits within these churches resulting in the founding of independent African churches, it also afforded the members opportunity to freely blend Yoruba and European materials in entertainment. Most notable was their being accommodating to Yoruba culture and re-workings of traditional masquerade songs into church songs as a means of winning over converts from traditional religions. One very important aspect of Nigerian theatre in the second half of the Nineteenth Century is the staging of popular European plays by the students of the schools established by the missions.⁹⁸ The performances took place in the various school halls and during religious festivals like Christmas and Easter. Around 1894, Ake School of Entertainment

⁹⁵ Anderson, A.H., *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 2001), 60

⁹⁶ Metz, H.C., (ed.), *Nigeria: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1991) <http://countrystudies.us/nigeria/14.htm>

⁹⁷ Anderson, A.H., *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Eritrea: African World Press, Inc., 2001), 63

⁹⁸ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile" in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 18

was already staging Yoruba farces built around the concept of the revered Ogboni cult.⁹⁹

Nigerian Theatre during the Period of Colonialism

Nigeria became a British colony shortly after the 1885 Berlin conference, which concluded on the partitioning and sharing of Africa between the European powers and the ultimate defeat of Kano and Sokoto by the British West African Frontier Force around 1902 and 1903. Glover Hall, built through the efforts of some elite indigenous members of Lagos and a couple of Europeans in 1899¹⁰⁰ for performances and other social engagements served as a venue for indigenous performances without the prejudice of the church who would never allow the use of their school hall for cultural performances with exception of European shows.

By this time, the theatre triumphed within the breakaway African churches. A truly Nigerian drama in the class of the European's literary form came from the African churches in 1902.¹⁰¹ This was the performance of D.A. Oloyede's *King Elejigbo and Princess Abeje of Kontagora* "under the joint sponsorship of the Bethel African Church and St Jude's Church."¹⁰² The play was staged at the Bethel African Church school-room.¹⁰³ Ogunbiyi notes that, for a long time the play "became the prototype of most Yoruba drama being written in Lagos."¹⁰⁴ Aside from the fact that the churches were responsible for vibrant theatrical activities in the European mode, one significant reminder is that this period is considered a 'period of cultural renaissance and nationalism' awakening by both the Nigerian Christians and the educated elites. Until this moment, the Christian church frowned at the masquerade theatre as a pagan performance which the converted Africans must not participate in. The early churches also discouraged the wearing of indigenous costumes, the use of indigenous music and musical instruments in worship. The breakaway churches, however, utilized them. Theatre was developed around the events of

⁹⁹ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., "Nigeria", in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 146

¹⁰⁰ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., "Nigeria", in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2004), 145

¹⁰¹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi. "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile." In *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 19

¹⁰² Ogunbiyi, Yemi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile" in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 19

¹⁰³ Ogunbiyi, Yemi. "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile." In *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 19

¹⁰⁴ Ogunbiyi, Yemi. "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile." In *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 19

the Bible and morality plays of which the essence was to reveal how a Christian ought to live. The plays dwelled more on the importance of righteous living over a life full of superfluity which often led to destruction. A prominent aspect of the theatre of this period was the emphasis on music and dance to propel the mood and structure of the plays. The dialogues were sung with musical accompaniments. At this point some Nigerians such as A. B. David, E. A. Dawodu, Ajibola Layeni, A.A. Olufeye and G.T. Onimole¹⁰⁵ were already distinguishing themselves as actors and composers under the patronage of the church, performing “Native Air Opera”. Until 1945, when Hubert Ogunde, who had started his theatre career a year earlier, went professional, there was no full professional theatre group in Nigeria.¹⁰⁶ Ogunde, himself an officer in the Nigerian Police Force, began in one of the breakaway African churches, the Aladura Church at Ebute-Metta, Lagos.¹⁰⁷

Nigerian Popular Theatre

As mentioned earlier, the dawn of twentieth century Nigeria was characterized by two phenomena: colonization and cultural nationalism. The Yoruba people found it appalling that the missionaries mandated that Africans who converted to Christianity must wear Western dress and adopt European culture.¹⁰⁸ As a way of repudiating these phenomena, the Nigerian educated elites began to assume both political and cultural nationalistic stances. This development signalled the rebirth of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre in 1945, pioneered by Hubert Ogunde (1919-1990), a former school teacher, church organist and a member of the Nigerian Police Force. He is considered to be the father of modern Nigerian theatre. Apart from the travelling theatre of the Yoruba’s which thrived successfully under and beyond colonialism, there was the Igbo masked Colonial figures satirical drama. The plays mirrored the historical realities of the colonial period and also contributed to helping the rural Nigerians who lived in the Eastern part of the country to develop an outlet to

¹⁰⁵ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 22

¹⁰⁶ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 23

¹⁰⁷ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 22

¹⁰⁸ Ukpokodu, Peter, I., *Socio-Political Theater in Nigeria* (Mellen Research University Press: San Francisco 1992), 25, “To the missionaries, the adoption of European Culture was an outward sign of the inward transformation from ‘pagan’ to the Christian state. One of the missionaries Adolphus Mann, was reported to have been so indignant at the idea of renouncing European names for African names at baptism that he considered anyone who had such an idea and practiced it as “guilty of ‘Anglophobia’ and Anti-English ‘monomania.’”

extricate themselves from the cultural annihilation that the colonial government was subjecting them to. The people laughed at the European images represented in the drama featuring British colonial officers, police, missionaries and their families. Ndukaka Amankulor writes:

Colonial Europeans, men, women, and children, feature in the Ijele, Uzoiyi, Odo, Omabe, and Ikoro performances, to mention only a few in Igboland. In Ikoro the repertoire of European characters includes the King and Queen of England, the Governor General in Lagos, the Residents and District Commissioners in the provinces and districts, and the law enforcement officers. The performance takes the form of an official visit by the king and queen of England to their subjects at Ngwa in Igboland and the ceremonies and protocols performed to receive them, including the presentation of the welcome address and the response to it.¹⁰⁹

The European characters became a staple in indigenous theatres of colonial Nigeria as this was the only way that the people could have their own laughs at the colonialists.

The Yoruba Travelling Theatre

The Yoruba Travelling Theatre is a theatre conducted in the Yoruba language which originated from the society of masqueraders around the middle of the sixteenth century and succumbed to the inroads of Islam and Christianity during the nineteenth century. Out of the dying members of the old itinerant masquerade-performances and the traditional Yoruba's love for music, dance, and ritual, a new theatrical form emerged. The Yoruba Operatic Theatre developed from the "native dramas" and "cantatas" which enlivened the operation of the breakaway churches (the African churches and later the "Aladura" or Apostolic churches) in Lagos during the first decade of the twentieth century.

By the 1940s and 1950s, this theatre had developed into the popular theatre of Nigeria. The theatres performed "in school halls, town halls, and on improvised stages out of doors in many parts of the country."¹¹⁰ Karin Barber, who had first hand experience in this theatre form as a member of Oyin

¹⁰⁹ Amankulor, Ndukaku, J., "English-Language Drama and Theatre" in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, 142

¹¹⁰ Adedeji, J.A., "Oral Tradition and the Contemporary Theatre in Nigeria" in *Research in African Literature* (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 1971)

Adejobi Theatre Company while in Nigeria as a researcher, writes that the “Yoruba popular theatre was capable of attracting audiences from across the full socio-economic spectrum. They could fill university theaters as well as village halls”¹¹¹ Nigerian Popular theatre¹¹², or Yoruba Popular theatre, has been well treated by Oyin Ogunba,¹¹³ J.A. Adedeji, Martin Banham,¹¹⁴ Oyekan Owomoyela, Ebum Clark, Alain Ricard, Dapo Adelugba, and Olu Obafemi¹¹⁵, Karin Barber¹¹⁶, including Yemi Ogunbiyi. Nigerian ‘Popular Theatre’ contains the plays of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi, Moses Olaiya, Isola Ogunsola, Jimoh Aliu, Leke Ajao, Ojo Ladipo and other Yoruba operatic exponents. It is a variety of folk opera of the Yoruba people of south-western Nigeria that emerged in the early 1940s. “It combined a brilliant sense of mime, colourful costumes, traditional drumming, music, and folklore. Directed towards a local audience, it used Nigerian themes, ranging from modern-day satire to historical tragedy. Although the plays were performed entirely in the Yoruba language, they could be understood and appreciated by speakers of other languages with the aid of a translated synopsis.”¹¹⁷ Awam Amkpa believes that the “Yoruba Travelling Theatre’s use of indigenous themes and symbols within a framework of a multi-ethnic montage of Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa and others constructed by the English made it a celebrated populist dramaturgy Nigeria [as] ever experienced.”¹¹⁸ The practitioners’ indigenous themes and symbols were products of cross-cultural global and local contacts between the Yoruba and others with whom they crossed paths in the realms of trade, military engagement, and cultural engagement even before colonial presence. These theatre traditions “reflect and knit together a mosaic of cultures spawned by a long story of human movements, incursions, displacements, intermixtures or successions of peoples and of the impacts of these on the beliefs, attitudes and social organization of the people who today inhabit the

¹¹¹ Barber, Karin, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 204. It is noteworthy that out of all the critics who wrote on the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, Barber, a British Cultural Anthropologist, seems to be the only one who participated in it as an actor by being a member of Oyin Adejobi Theatre Company of which she has written extensively.

¹¹² Throughout this thesis I used the terms Nigeria Popular Theatre, Yoruba Popular Theatre and Yoruba Traveling Theatre interchangeably where necessary.

¹¹³ Ogunba, Oyin “Theatre in Africa” In *Presence Africaine*, vol. 3, no. 58, 2nd quarterly, 1966

¹¹⁴ Banham, Martin, and Clive, Wake. *African Theatre Today* (London, 1976)

¹¹⁵ Obafemi, Olu, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre* (Bayreuth, 1996)

¹¹⁶ Barber, Karin, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba popular life in theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000)

¹¹⁷ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/371338/Mbari-Mbayo-Club#ref=ref720157>
Tuesday 08/12/2009

¹¹⁸ Awam, Amkpa, *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (Routledge: New York, 2004), 77

great [...] area.”¹¹⁹ With the production of the folk operas *The Garden of Eden* and *The Throne of God*¹²⁰, Hubert Ogunde (1919-1990) began his theatre career in 1944. Due to the success of these productions and the reception given to them by the public, Ogunde resigned his position with the Police Force in 1945 and created a professional theatre company.¹²¹ That same year, he travelled with the company to different Yoruba communities where he staged his performances. According to Adedeji¹²², Ogunde was able to enrich the Alarinjo repertory system with modification and adaptations in the organization and presentation of the pieces:

In conformity with the practice of the traditional theatre as a lineage profession, Ogunde has worked his wife and children into his company in order to perpetuate it as a going family concern. To all intents and purposes, the popularity and success of the Ogunde Theatre is traceable to the extent of its leader’s glorification of the dynamics of the Alarinjo theatre.¹²³

Ogunde’s theatre, though it was in the form of opera at the beginning, it later adopted the concert party system. Ogunde’s theatre was inspired by the Alarinjo theatre, of which he related the nature and purpose of his theatre. Hubert Ogunde in an interview with Adedeji said: “I was playing drum with the masqueraders in my home town when I was young, and these Egungun people gave me the urge inside me to start a company of actors.”¹²⁴ This statement throws more light on the semblance and relationship between the old Alarinjo theatre and the new Ogunde theatre. This theatre was formed at a time that the spirit of nationalism was rife among Nigerians. It lent a supportive and critical voice to the aspirations of the educated elites who, at that time, were clamouring for independence from British imperialism. The theatre received a good reception by the Nigeria society of the time, especially for its criticism of the colonial government. According to Egun Clark, during the colonial period,

¹¹⁹ Awam, Amkpa, *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (Routledge: New York, 2004), 77

¹²⁰ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 23

¹²¹ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 23

¹²² Adedeji, J. A., “The traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre”, in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a critical source book*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 244

¹²³ Adedeji, J. A., “The traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre”, in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: a critical source book*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 245

¹²⁴ Adedeji, J.A., “The Traditional Yoruba Travelling Theatre”, in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 244

there was a “remarkable great interest in the existence and survival of the theatre as a channel for providing political as well as cultural education for the masses.”¹²⁵ In 1946, Ogunde presented *Hunger and Strike*, a dramatization of the 1945 general strike in Nigeria, and *Bread and Bullet* (1950) on the killing of the Enugu Iva valley coal miners who were shot and killed in 1949 for protesting wage payment. His other plays include *Darkness and Light* (1945), *Tiger’s Empire* (1946), *Herbert Macaulay* (1946), *Towards Liberty* (1947), and *Mr Devil’s Money* (1948). Peter Ukpokodu writes that between 1945 and 1950, “Ogunde wrote nineteen plays, of which thirteen are politically influenced.”¹²⁶ In this manner, he contributed to the nationalists discourse by writing and performing plays that called for the British imperialist to grant unconditional independence to Nigeria. In addition, most of his plays exposed the evils of colonial administration of Nigeria.¹²⁷ For being politically assertive in his plays, the colonial government censored and levied him different times. Amkpa writes that Major Anthony Syer applauded Ogunde’s theatre after seeing the rehearsal of *Mr Devil’s Money*, which was a satire on the colonial government, as follows:

Since my arrival in this country I have seen many plays and operas [...] but I had the greatest surprise of my life when I attended the rehearsal [...] written, composed and produced by Hubert Ogunde, [...] the theme is based on an old African story depicting the “here and after” of a man who signs (sic) a pact with an evil spirit in order to be wealthy. To see the cast rehearsing the Opera, dances, to hear the cheap native drums supplying the music with precision without any mechanical aid, the clapping of hands and high standards of discipline maintained throughout is to think one is back at London theatre. The singing is excellent. Dance formations, lighting and the stage settings are concrete proof that the African is no more behind as many people think.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Clark, E., *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of the Nigerian Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 79. Most of the information on Ogunde Theatre used in this research is from Eburn Clark, “Ogunde Theatre: The Rise of Contemporary Professional Theatre in Nigeria 1946-1972”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 295-320

¹²⁶ Ukpokodu, Peter, I., *Socio-Political Theater in Nigeria* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 29

¹²⁷ Ukpokodu, Peter, I., *Socio-Political Theater in Nigeria* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 29

¹²⁸ Quoted in Awam, Amkpa, *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (Routledge: New York, 2004),

Ogunde's drama was so popular in the 50's and 60's that he became a model for most of the travelling theatre troupes that later emerged. His theatre was active during and after Nigeria's independence from 1960 till 1970's when he ventured into the cinema. In 1964, after the production of *Yoruba Ronu*, the government of the western region banned Ogunde's Theatre from performing in the area where, hitherto, he was most popular.¹²⁹ The government criticized the play as follows: "It falsifies and distorts the whole history of the crisis that plunged Western Nigeria into a state of emergency. It stigmatizes leading public figures in Western Nigeria as traitors because they had the courage and conviction to stand against pride, arrogance and inordinate ambition of one man."¹³⁰ Meanwhile, the play commissioned by the same government who clamped down on it was only a clarion call to the Yoruba to think deeply about the on-going political situation. Ogunde responded to the government's accusation with another play, *Otito Koro* (Truth is Bitter). According to Colin Chamber: "One thing about Ogunde's theatre and the popular theatre as a whole is that [a] play is not only structurally and aesthetically influenced by the traditional [...] theatre, but also continue[s] the tradition of using theatre for social reflection and criticism."¹³¹

Kola Ogunmola (1925-1973), who began his professional theatre practice in 1948 with *Reign of the Mighty*¹³², is another influence on the success of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre. His plays are considered by critic like Ulli Beier as a refinement of the Alarinjo theatre by making it come "closer to literary drama."¹³³ He constructed his plays differently from Ogunde and Duro Ladipo by attempting to make the audience laugh without overtly criticising any human action. Though Ogunmola acknowledged the influence of Ogunde on his theatre, however, he refrained from overt political plays; rather, he concentrated on social satire.¹³⁴ His plays draw influences from both the Bible and Yoruba folk tales. His relationship with Ulli Beier and the Ibadan School of Drama probably influenced the reason why some of his plays were performed

¹²⁹ Martin, Banham, "Ibadan 1960", in Jane Plastow, (ed.), *Leeds African Studies Bulletin*, No. 69, December, 2007, 67

¹³⁰ See Anthony Graham-White, A., Ricard, A. "Between the Oral and the Written: Theatre in Ghana and Nigeria." In *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2., 229-238

¹³¹ Colin, Chamber, C., (ed.), *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 500

¹³² David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day* (London: James Currey, 1995), 95

¹³³ David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day* (London: James Currey, 1995), 95

¹³⁴ David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day* (London: James Currey, 1995), 95

in both Yoruba and English language. Some of his plays include *Ife Owo* (1950), *Eri Okan* or *Conscience* and *Omuti* an adaptation of Amos Tutuola's successful novel *The Palmwine Drinkard*. *Omuti* was created by Ogunmola with support from the University College Ibadan, School of Drama¹³⁵ where he took "up residency in 1962."¹³⁶ According to Ulli Beier, "Ogunmola cut out the music hall element of Ogunde's play, the horseplay, the sex appeal, the saxophones; and he tries to substitute these by serious acting. Beier was so impressed with Ogunmola's theatre that he glowingly praised it "as the purer traditionalism of performances and with sense of stylization."¹³⁷

Though Ogunmola acknowledged the influence of Ogunde on his theatre, however, he refrained from overt political plays; rather he concentrated on social satire and dramatization of literary works. The unparalleled tribute given to Ogunmola's theatre made it possible for the theatre group to spend almost two months at Eugene O'Neill Theatre in Connecticut. In 1971, Wole Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* was also rehearsed at the same venue.

Duro Ladipo (1931-1978)¹³⁸ is another exponent of this highly vibrant theatre, however, he began later than the two mentioned earlier. Duro Ladipo is a Nigerian dramatist whose innovative folk operas incorporating ritual poetry and traditional rhythms performed on indigenous instruments were based on Yoruba history. The source of his material is the Yoruba mythological world, Biblical stories and everyday subjects.¹³⁹ Ladipo became an exponent of the Sango myths most of his plays were a variation of the god's story. His *Oba Koso* (1963) remained one of the most popular of the plays of the period before the travelling theatre's transition to television and the cinema. The play was so successful with the mass audiences, academic communities and the government that it was taken on tour in the United States, London, Germany and some other European countries. For the success of *Oba Koso*, he was bestowed with the

¹³⁵ Ulli Beier, "E.K. Ogunmola: A Personal memoir", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 328

¹³⁶ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., and Adeyemi, S., "Nigeria" in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 149

¹³⁷ See Ulli Beier statement in David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre from Pre-colonial to the Present* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 1995), 95. For information about Kola Ogunmola, I relied extensively on Ulli Beier, "E.K. Ogunmola: A Personal memoir", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 321-331

¹³⁸ Yemi Ogunbiyi, "The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 334. On the theatre of Duro Ladipo, I relied extensively on Ogunbiyi's writing.

¹³⁹ See Yemi Ogunbiyi, "The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 342

national honour of Member of the Order of the Niger (MON) by the Nigerian government¹⁴⁰ the same year the play was produced. In the same period, he wrote *Oba Moro* (Ghost-Catcher King, 1961) his first opera and *Oba Waja* (The King is Dead, 1964) *Gbadegesin* and *Moremi*.¹⁴¹ In 1962, he founded the Mbari Mbayo Club, a performance venue and a training centre for the art in Osogbo. Ladipo, with the support of Ulli Beier contributed immensely to bringing the “myths of Sango and some other Yoruba deities to the international stage.”¹⁴² Ogunde, Ogunmola and Ladipo shared a common strand in their formation years. Prior to becoming theatre owners, the three theatre practitioners were educated and children of clergymen. The three theatre owners moved away from their various churches because of interest in indigenous African traditions, which the Christian faith was not yet ready to accommodate. The theatres of the trio were mutually reinforcing.

Moses Olaiya (1936-) also known by his stage name Baba Sala, is a comedian unlike the three practitioners of the Nigerian popular theatre earlier mentioned. In fact, he was the most famous comedian and one of the most highly regarded dramatists in Nigeria from the 1960s to the early 1990s. He is regarded as the father of Nigeria’s comedy, moving from the stage, which he joined in 1960, to the television and later to cinema and video film.¹⁴³ Olaiya gave rise to the “birth and proliferation of comic drama groups in Nigeria.”¹⁴⁴ While describing the theatrical style of Moses Olaiya and its emergence, L.O. Bamidele writes:

To arouse laughter and excite interest in the people he started with the idea of incongruity on the stage for comic effect. He started with the idea of mechanical encrustation upon the living; he started with a language of comedy that tends to the aesthetic of the jokes; he started what one might call being outlandish with pillow-stuffed belly and

¹⁴⁰ Ogunbiyi, “The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 345

¹⁴¹ For extensive lists of plays by Duro Ladipo, see Yemi Ogunbiyi, “The Popular Theatre: A Tribute to Duro Ladipo”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 333-353

¹⁴² Olorunfoba-Oju, Taiwo, “Irreducible Africanness and Nigerian Postcoloniality from Drama to Video” <http://www.nigerianbestforum.com/index.php?topic=19160.20;wap2> Friday 18/12/2009

¹⁴³ For adequate information on Moses Olaiya, see Jonathan, Haynes, *Structural Adjustments of Nigerian Comedy: Baba Sala* (Ann Harbor, Michigan: Mpublishing, University of Michigan Library, 1994). Online

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/passages/4761530.0008.010?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

¹⁴⁴ Bamidele, L.O., *Comedy: Essays and Studies* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2001), 53. This publication by L.O. Bamidele is the major material I used in writing about Moses Olaiya Theatre.

playful tricks; he started clownish display bordering on childish display of intrigues and jack-in-the-box pranks.¹⁴⁵

Moses Olaiya was not only famous as a performer on Nigerian stage and television. He also influenced many theatre practitioners from the mid 1960s to begin to do comedy performances. While Ogunde enjoyed the prestige of being the greatest of the Nigerian theatre practitioners due to his pioneering effort and the fact that he was visible for a longer period of time, “in terms of the mastery of the comic tastes of the audiences and of the theatrical skills suited to these, most Yoruba theatre goers would unequivocally swear by the name of Moses Olaiya.”¹⁴⁶ Bamidele argues that Moses Olaiya staged *Owo Lagba*, *Tokunbo*, *Emi Oga*, *Omo Oloku*, and so on, “with farcical finesse to the admiration of the leisure and fun loving audiences.”¹⁴⁷ Olaiya refrained from profane and vulgar language in his plays and Dapo Adelugba opines, “His speeches have vigour and vivacity whether he is using Yoruba language or the ungrammatical structure of the English language. They become more vibrant for explosive laugh in their ungrammatical state.”¹⁴⁸ Oyin Adejobi another popular practitioner of the period started his professional theatre in 1963 and produced notable plays in a career that spanned over four decades, transiting from the stage through television and film.¹⁴⁹ Popular among Adejobi’s plays is *Orogun Adedigba* which was serialized for television in the 1960’s and remained on air till the late 1980s. Other notable practitioners of the Yoruba travelling theatre that emerged in the early 1970s include Ojo Ladipo, Akin Ogungbe, and Jimoh Aliu, who’s *Arelu* was the most popular indigenous drama on the Nigerian television in the second half of the 1980’s. Also popular was the theatre of Ola Omonitan, Leke Ajao, Ade Afolayan, Isola Ogunsola, Lere Paimo,¹⁵⁰ Akeem Adepoju, and so on.

¹⁴⁵ Bamidele, L.O., *Comedy: Essays and Studies* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2001), 53

¹⁴⁶ Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 286

¹⁴⁷ Bamidele, L.O., *Comedy: Essays and Studies* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2001), 53

¹⁴⁸ Dapo Adelugba Professor of Theatre Arts, and one of the earliest critics of African Theatre, quoted in L.O. Bamidele’s *Comedy: Essays and Studies* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2001), 56

¹⁴⁹ Barber, Karin, *Yoruba Popular Theatre: Three Plays by the Oyin Adejobi Theatre* (New Jersey: African Studies Association, 1995)

¹⁵⁰ Oyin Adejobi’s theatre and Lere Paimo’s Eda theatre are well discussed by Karin Barber in *West African Popular Theatre*. Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard, (eds.), (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press/Oxford: James Currey, 1997), vii-xviii & 183-270

The theatre of Adunni Oluwole (1905-1957)¹⁵¹, though short-lived, was of immense interest due to the passion of the founder as well as for being the first woman to establish a professional theatre company in the country. Adunni Oluwole, who began her theatre in the church in 1950, used it as an instrument for socio-political change. She was vehemently against the granting of independence to Nigerians in 1956 pointing out that the politicians were simply pursuing their self-interest which bordered on how to despoil the nation with ease.¹⁵² Adunni Oluwole disbanded her troupe in 1954 to form a political party and died in 1957 shortly after returning from a political tour. The second woman who also conducted a professional travelling theatre is Funmilayo Ranko.¹⁵³ Biodun Jeyifo mentioned Funmilayo Ranko and Mojisola Martins as two women who had professional theatre troupes in 1980s.¹⁵⁴ Funmilayo Ranko's Theatre was based in Ilesa, while that of Mojisola Martins was in Lagos. The mass appeal of the popular theatre resulted in the adoption of some of the practitioners by the universities (Ibadan and Ife) in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Popular Theatre and the Advent of Television

The introduction of television into Nigeria in 1959 by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and the government of Western Region opened a new vista in the life of Yoruba popular theatre. The practitioners were availed the opportunity of reaching unto a wider spectrum of audience. It seemed the television station in Ibadan had the travelling theatre and the university in mind when it began operation as, in order to have programming, it quickly befriended the already vibrant theatre companies. For instance, Hubert Ogunde performed songs and dance in the small studio of the television station in Ibadan for at least half an hour every time he was invited. According to Segun Olusola "as early as 1960, Wole Soyinka was commissioned to write a play for television which was subsequently produced and broadcast ..."¹⁵⁵ Ogunde's theatre later took part in many drama productions for the television, a relationship which he would later sever in 1965 when the station's Director of Programmes could not grant a

¹⁵¹ For a detailed account of the political life of Adunni Oluwole, see Valentine U. James and James I. Etim, eds., *The Feminization of Development Processes in Africa: Current and Future Perspective* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 22

¹⁵² Ukpokodu, Peter, I., *Socio-Political Theater in Nigeria* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), 43

¹⁵³ David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day* (London: James Currey, 1995), 100

¹⁵⁴ Jeyifo, Biodun, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1984), 68

¹⁵⁵ Olusola, Segun "The Advent of Television Drama" in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 373

raise in artistes fees.¹⁵⁶ Duro Ladipo's theatre was among the first set of the Nigerian popular theatre to enjoy the privilege of play performances in the studio and he owed most of his popularity to the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) station. Television reduced the play that took several hours on stage to thirty minutes.¹⁵⁷ In Ibadan, Adebayo Faleti (1938-), a Yoruba novelist and dramatist produced a theatre series for television. He used plays drawn from the repertory of popular troupes. According to Olusola, Adebayo Faleti "finds a good production, and then worked with the troupe to adapt it."¹⁵⁸ Television producers were not contented in giving their audiences established troupes; they played a role in making some of the troupes successful. According to Graham-White and Alain Ricard, "The Duro Ladipo Theatre owes its popularity to two factors: the interest of the WNTV staff in Ibadan and the help of the Mbari Mbayo of Osogbo."¹⁵⁹ This role of the television is also proclaimed by Moses Olaiya in an interview "I was very popular and irresistible by television stations. I was on all over Lagos, Oyo State, Kwara, Ogun, Ondo and even in the north."¹⁶⁰

The transition to television by the various theatre troupes in Nigeria was facilitated by the introduction of this medium in all the three regions of the country in the first half of the 1960's. Troupes emerged from other parts of the country contributing to the entertainment programme on the television stations. This development reduced the itinerant nature of the established troupes to an extent and also created room for the development of new ones by further attracting public attention to theatre. According to Lanre Bamidele, "The television play [...], however, invited or enticed more audiences to the live performance of some plays."¹⁶¹ One can find examples in Jimoh Aliu's *Arelu* and Isola Ogunsola's *Efunsetan Aniwura*.¹⁶² Both were staged in 1987 at the cultural centre and Liberty stadium in Ibadan, Southwest Nigeria.

¹⁵⁶ Olusola, Segun "The Advent of Television Drama" in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 378

¹⁵⁷ Olusola, Segun "The Advent of Television Drama" in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 374

¹⁵⁸ Graham-White, Anthony and Alain, Ricard, "Between the Oral and the Written: Theatre in Ghana and Nigeria," in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2, May, 1976), 233

¹⁵⁹ Anthony Graham-White and Alain Ricard, "Between the Oral and the Written: Theatre in Ghana and Nigeria," in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 2, May, 1976, 234

¹⁶⁰ In an interview conducted by Yemisi Adeniran, in "Nollywood Exclusive", *Sun*, 14 Sep 2008: <http://www.modernghana.com/news2/2922/4/i-am-back-with-vengeance-baba-salaolaiya-adejumo-a.html>, 17/12/09

¹⁶¹ Bamidele, L.O., *Literature and Sociology* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2000), 49

¹⁶² David, Kerr, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial Times to the Present Day* (London: James Currey, 1995), 100. Kerr recorded that the audience of 14,000 crammed Liberty Stadium in Ibadan, Nigeria, to see *Efunsetan Aniwura*. Meanwhile, Yemi Ogunbiyi recorded that the

The theatre of Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya, and Oyin Adejobi occupied the airwaves in the 1960s and 1970s. They were joined by the Ojo Ladipo Awada Kerikeri Organization, Jimoh Aliu Theatre, Ade Afolayan Theatre, Jacob, Papilolo and Aderupoko Theatre, Ajileye Theatre and many others. Popular dramas like “The Village Headmaster”, “The New Masquerade”, “Sura the Tailor”, “Koko Close”, “Mirror in the Sun”, “Mind Benders”, “Samanja” and “Jagua” were produced in either standard English or Nigerian Pidgin English or a blend of both. The 1980s saw the movement of virtually all existing theatre troupes who could not afford film production, which was the vogue, onto television. Prior to 1980, only a few troupes and the artistes of the Nigerian popular theatre were well known, however, Biodun Jeyifo recorded the presence of one hundred and twenty troupes by 1984.¹⁶³ By the late 1980s, there existed nearly one hundred and fifty troupes existed in the movement with the numbers of plays in their repertoires numbering several thousands.¹⁶⁴ The different theatre groups organized themselves into a body known as Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP) under the leadership of Hubert Ogunde.

I witnessed this vibrant popular theatre at its peak and their eventual decline beginning in the early 1980s. Leke Ajao (Kokonsari) the actor-manager-director and owner of Konkosari Theatre Troupe, was my neighbour in Iwaya, Lagos, between 1979 and 1986. His group and other notable troupes usually performed every Friday and Saturday night, and I made it a point of duty to attend both their rehearsals and productions in the early 1980s. The Yoruba Traveling Theatre was the core of what eventually became the Nigerian video movement.

Movement from Stage to Cinema and Video Culture

The movement to cinema was a progression from the stage to television and was followed by a progression to the 35mm and 16mm cinema format. Though film was first used in both the Southern and Northern Protectorates in 1903 by the British colonialists, it was not until the 1970s that Nigerians made their first

performance of Akin Isola’s version of *Efunsetan Aniwura* at Olubadan Stadium opened to estimated crowd of 40,000 in 1981. See Ogunbiyi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 41

¹⁶³ Jeyifo, Biodun, *The Yoruba Popular Theatre of Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1984)

¹⁶⁴ Banham, Martin, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1216

feature film¹⁶⁵ with input and support from expert film-makers like Francis Oladele, Ola Balogun, and Bankole Bello who had studied abroad.

The 1970 film adaptation of Wole Soyinka's play *Kongi's Harvest* was the gate opener¹⁶⁶ for the business minded practitioners of the Nigerian popular theatre who could not see a corresponding balance between their acquired fame through the stage and television and their lack of wealth or material acquisition due to television stations not paying enough money to the owners of theatre groups or individual actors. For example, some actors claimed that they were given money that barely paid for their transportation from the station to their homes after the recording of an episode of drama.¹⁶⁷ After this first attempt by Francis Oladele's Calpenny production and Wole Soyinka, an inroad into an otherwise foreign venture was opened for the travelling theatre troupes' owners. By the middle of 1980's, there was an economic downturn in Nigeria due to many factors, one of which was the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)¹⁶⁸ of International Monetary Fund (IMF) introduced by General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) through the advice of the World Bank.

During the period when the Nigerian popular theatre was mainly devoted to live performances, troupes would travel from their various bases in the country to all corners of Nigeria, "as well as West African countries such as Ghana, Togo, and Benin."¹⁶⁹ In some cases, the troupes travelled as far as Sierra Leone, Cameroun and wherever there was a large concentration of Yoruba speaking people in Africa. This aided in the Yoruba Travelling Theatre becoming the most mobile theatre movement in African history.¹⁷⁰

Beginning in the 1970s, travelling theatres in Nigeria began to experience constraint in live performances and sought out to seek other options. The most attractive outlet to them was film. After *Kongi's Harvest*, Ola Balogun directed Duro Ladipo's *Ajani Ogun* as the first Yoruba language film

¹⁶⁵ Ukadike, N.F., *Black African Cinema* (California: University of California Press, 1994), 144

¹⁶⁶ Ukadike, N.F., *Black African Cinema* (California: University of California Press, 1994), 144

¹⁶⁷ As I witnessed also in the early 1990s, television actors in Nigeria were often not paid to appear in a drama after the producers had promised to pay them a particular amount per episode. Up to this moment there is no legislation in place to enforce television stations to pay actors any particular amount of money as appearance fees. Since the advent of video-film production television stations are no longer producing drama, they rely on independent producers for television contents including drama.

¹⁶⁸ Jonathan, Haynes, *Structural Adjustments of Nigerian Comedy: Baba Sala* (Ann Harbor, Michigan: Mpublishing, University of Michigan Library, 1994).

Online <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/passages/4761530.0008.010?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

¹⁶⁹ Banham, Martin, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1216

¹⁷⁰ Banham, Martin, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1216

and later followed with Ade Afolayan's *Ija Ominira* (The Fight of Freedom). After over three decades on the stage, Ogunde also began to look in that direction. This decade and the next produced Moses Olaiya's *Orun Mooru* (Heaven Has Heat) and *Are Agbaaye* (World President), *Mosebolutan*; Ogunde's *Aye* (The World) and *Jaiyesimi* (Let the World Rest). Ogunde actually produced the largest body of film made on either 35mm or 16mm in Nigeria to date with *Ayanmo* (Destiny), and *Aropin N'teniyen* (Human's Desire for Your End); he also appeared as Brimah in Bruce Beresford's *Mister Johnson* (1990). There were other films made by Nigerian filmmakers who did not belong to the travelling theatre industry, for example, Jab Adu made *Bisi the Daughter of the River*, while Eddie Ugboma produced and directed *Tori Ade*, *Omiran*, *The Rise and fall of Dr. Oyenusi*, *The Boy is Good* and *Death of the Black President*. By the turn of the 1980s, major travelling theatre owners had an imprint in the film industry that was to collapse by the middle of the decade.

The advancement in audio-visual technology in the late 1980's and the effect of the ill-advised SAP programme which had earlier caused film to be produced in reversed stock, paved the way for the production of video-films like *Ekun*, *Aje Ni Iyami*, and *Asewo T'ore Mecca*. After Moses Olaiya lost his fortune when his film *Are Agbaye*on mastered tape was stolen and released to the market by pirates before the official date set for its release, he made *Ore Adisa* and *Asale Gege* in video-film format for home viewing. According to Haynes, he also produced and directed for "video, *Agba Man* (1992) and *Return Match* (1993)."¹⁷¹ The Nigerian video-film was born through the efforts of the less affluent theatre practitioners who had fallen on hard times due to the economic downturn of the 1980s; they "resorted to using the cheaper medium of the video cassette to check the spiralling turn of theatre patronage in the cities."¹⁷²

Alade Muyideen Aromire (1961-2008), who became a theatre practitioner in the early 1980s, was the first to conceive the idea and actual recording of stage production with a Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) on VHS format for home viewing in 1984. He produced *Ekun* (1984) and screened it at some major and little cinemas in Lagos before making it available for home viewing. Due to the reception given to this new format by the Yoruba audience

¹⁷¹ Jonathan, Haynes, *Structural Adjustments of Nigerian Comedy: Baba Sala* (Ann Harbor, Michigan: Mpublishing, University of Michigan Library, 1994).

Online <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/passages/4761530.0008.010?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

¹⁷² Onookome, Okome, "Introducing the Special Issue on West African Cinema: Africa at the Movies", *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2007), 2.

<http://journals.sfu.ca/pocol/index.php/pct/article/viewFile/776/433>. 21/12/2009

in Lagos and Ibadan, the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners, who were at first sceptical, later began using the format to the detriment of the celluloid made film which had become too expensive to make. This incursion into video-film by the Yoruba Travelling Theatre practitioners would culminate in the disappearance of theatre groups that were numbered more than two hundred and thirty.¹⁷³ However, after this peak, stage performances and the cinema culture disappeared to make room for the new video-film format which characterized the whole of the 1990s and up to the present. In 1992, the Igbo community in Lagos joined the video-film industry which hitherto was the preserve of the Yorubas. The Igbo language video *Living in Bondage*¹⁷⁴ by Kenneth Nnebue which was well received, and it became a box office hit. The success of *Living in Bondage* prompted the interest of the Igbo electronic market traders in Idumota, Lagos Island, and Onitsha, Anambra State to rush into the industry expecting a quick return on their investment. Though their expectations were met, it created a proliferation of hurriedly made substandard video-films. The producers of television soap opera in English and Yoruba languages also rushed their recordings for home viewing into packaging as video film instead of selling them to Nigerian Television Authority. Despite the shortcomings in production, contemporary Nigerians have been eager to watch locally produced video-film. By the year 2000, the video-film industry had assumed a monumental presence that drew attention to itself from Western film critics. In 2005, the Nigerian video-film industry colloquially called Nollywood in some quarters, was regarded as the “third-largest motion picture industry in the world, producing at least two hundred movies every month.”¹⁷⁵

According to Melita Zajc, the Nigerian video-film industry “challenged the global systems of video production and distribution.”¹⁷⁶ Similar to its predecessor, the Nigerian popular theatre, the connective narrative strand of the battle between “good and evil” runs through the majority of the video-films produced. In spite of this stereotype in storyline, the Nigerian video-film popularity had attracted the attention of film festivals,¹⁷⁷ film critics and

¹⁷³ Amkpa, A., *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (Routledge: New York, 2004), 78

¹⁷⁴ There is also a version in English language. In fact, the video success is attributed to the English language version.

¹⁷⁵ Melita Zajc, “Nigerian Video Film Culture”, *Anthropological Notebooks* Vol. XV, No. 1 (Slovene, Anthropological Society, 2009), 68

¹⁷⁶ Melita Zajc, “Nigerian Video Film Culture”, *Anthropological Notebooks*, Vol. XV, No.1 (Slovene, Anthropological Society, 2009), 65

¹⁷⁷ Ebewo, Patrick J., “The Emerging Video Film Industry in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects” in *Journal of Film & Video*, 2007 (online)
<http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/25752157/The-Emerging-Video-Film-Industry-in-Nigeria-Challenges-and-Prospects>. Sunday 20/12/2009.

scholars in many parts of the world in less than twenty years. Hyginus Ekwuazi¹⁷⁸, Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome, Folake Ogunleye¹⁷⁹, Femi Shaka, Steve Ayorinde,¹⁸⁰ Julius-Adeoye, etc., have written extensively on the Nigerian video-film industry. Other critics include Melita Zajc, Manthia Diawara, Patrick Ebewo, and Pierre Barrot¹⁸¹.

Nigerian Literary Theatre

The distinctive factor between the Nigerian popular theatre and the literary theatre is that the former is formed as professional theatre with all emphasis placed on performances creation, while the latter created playwrights' whose interest is to create dramatic text that can be performed by independent groups. The interest of playwrights is dramatic creation, therefore, have not been able to create a successful professional company¹⁸² like that of Hubert Ogunde or Duro Ladipo; however, they often try to create semi-professional troupes either located within the academic environment or the non-academic society. The major difference between these two theatres is well captured in the words of Biodun Jeyifo:

The most obvious illustration of this divergence is the respective fates seemingly assigned by both critical posterity and contemporary wisdom to the text and the performance: the text will outlast the performance, and even at the very moment when the two share

¹⁷⁸ Hyginus Ekwuazi was the former Director-General of the Nigerian Film Corporation; a Professor at the University of Ibadan as well as one of the earliest Nigerian scholars to engage on the discourse of the Nigerian video-film at the dawn of the 1990 before Jonathan Haynes arrived Nigeria to research the subject. He authored *Film in Nigeria* 1987, "Towards the Decolonization of the African Film", in *African Media Review* Vol. 5, No. 2, 1991, "The Hausa Video film: the call of the muezzin", in *Film International* Vol. 5, No. 4, 2007. Onookome Okome was a student of Ekwuazi at the University of Ibadan. Before taking up a professorial position in the US, he co-authored with Jonathan Haynes *Cinema and Social Change in West Africa* (Ibadan: Caltop Publishing, 1995)

¹⁷⁹ Ogunleye, Foluke, (ed.), *African Video Film Today*, (2003), *Africa Through the Eye of the Video Camera*, (2008), and *Transformation and Advancement: The African Video Film*, (2009). She is the Initiator and Executive Director of the Ife International Film Festival.

¹⁸⁰ Ayorinde, Steve, "Representation of the Nigerian Video/DVD Industry in the News Media" *Dossier Africiné* N°3: Cinéma et télévision (en anglais), 2007, (online). <http://www.africine.org/?menu=art&no=7200>

¹⁸¹ Barrot, Pierre, *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008)

¹⁸² Nigerian playwrights like Wole Soyinka, JP Clark, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande and few others made attempts at creating theatre companies without success. Many of these playwrights, apart from Bode Sowande, who resigned his position at Ibadan to concentrate on Odu Themes, are university lecturers who have other commitments and were unable to focus on running a theatre group.

contemporaneous existence, the performance lasts for a few hours every night for a few weeks, while the text is virtually available all the time.¹⁸³

Literary drama was already taking root in Nigeria before the establishment of the University College Ibadan, an arm of the University of London, in 1948. The Oloyede's *King Elejigbo and Princess Abeje of Kontagora* was already being performed in 1902. The Onitsha market plays were also growing and texts and performances were produced from the 1940s to 1950s.¹⁸⁴ It is worthy to note that, unlike the Nigerian Popular Theatre that was indigenous language based, the literary theatre utilizes both English and Yoruba languages, as well as the subsequent culturally popular 'Pidgin' English.

The history of serious literary theatre in Nigeria began with James Ene Henshaw (1924-2007) who was the first recognized playwright in Nigeria. The emergence of Henshaw's *This is our Chance* which was performed in 1947 and published ten years later in 1957 clearly puts into perspective the 1956 date given by Dapo Adelugba, Olu Obafemi and Sola Adeyemi "as the year of the birth of Nigerian drama in English."¹⁸⁵ Among Henshaw's plays are *A Man of Character* (1957), *Jewel of the Shrine* (1957), *Companion for a Chief* (1964), *Children of the Goddess* (1964), *Magic in the Blood* (1964), *Medicine for Love* (1964), *Dinner for Promotion* (1967), *Enough is Enough* (1975), *Son to Mary Charles* and *Irish Sister of Charity* (1980). Henshaw's plays, though popular with school students, are considered too fashioned in the "European model without any modification."¹⁸⁶ He performed his first play, *This is Our Chance*, in Dublin in 1948.¹⁸⁷ In 1952, he won the first prize at All Nigerian Festival of the Arts with his one-act-play *Jewel of the Shrine*.¹⁸⁸ Henshaw's works were "mainly interested in social foibles and domestic conflict, often presenting

¹⁸³ Jeyifo, Biodun, "Literary Theatre and the Search for a Popular Theatre in Nigeria" in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 411

¹⁸⁴ Colin Chambers (ed.), *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 550

¹⁸⁵ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., "Nigeria" in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 151

¹⁸⁶ Colin, Chambers (ed.), *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 550

¹⁸⁷ Adedeji, J. A., "Wole Soyinka and the Growth of Drama", in Albert S. Gerard, (ed.), *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Volume 2, (Budapest: Akademiao, 1986), 718

¹⁸⁸ Adedeji, J. A., "Wole Soyinka and the Growth of Drama", in Albert S. Gerard, (ed.), *European Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Volume 2, (Budapest: Akademiao, 1986), 718

dramatic encounters between generations separated by opposed traditions, beliefs, and mores.”¹⁸⁹

Henshaw later wrote plays which attacked corruption in the country shortly following its independence. His plays were performed regularly in high “schools and by amateur theatre companies across Nigeria”¹⁹⁰ until recently when a preference for performing plays developed on the school syllabus. For example, the first play I directed as a student of theatre at the University of Ibadan is Henshaw’s *Dinner for Promotion*. Dapo Adelugba and Olu Obafemi posits: “Henshaw’s plays are populist and filled a lacuna, a paucity of drama texts in Nigerian schools, before the arrival of more profound and serious dramatic texts of Wole Soyinka, JP Clark, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola, playwrights who properly typify the first-generation Nigerian playwrights and dramatists of the English literary tradition.”¹⁹¹ Apart from the plays of Henshaw, Ogali Ogu Ogali wrote and staged *Veronica My Daughter* in 1957 in a “style chiefly influenced by classic literature, the Bible and Shakespeare.”¹⁹²

The Establishment of the Arts Theatre in Ibadan

The Ibadan Arts Theatre was built in 1955 for the purpose of holding concerts and film shows, but the arrival on campus of theatre enthusiasts among the teaching staff of the University College around this period helped to shape the new course of events. People like Martin Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy, especially, began an active program of theatrical production at the Arts theatre. Martin Banham and Geoffrey Axworthy were using the student group of the University College Ibadan Dramatic Society (UCIDS) and the staff group of the Arts Theatre Production Group (ATPG)¹⁹³ for production. In addition, they ran a series of theatre workshops for the departments of English and of Extra-Mural Studies, as well as the Institute of Education. These activities were so popular and so important that “the 1961 University Visitation Report

¹⁸⁹ See Simon Gikandi (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 308

¹⁹⁰ Simon Gikandi (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 308

¹⁹¹ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 151

¹⁹² Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 151

¹⁹³ See Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

recommended that theatre should be organized properly as an academic discipline.”¹⁹⁴

The Ibadan School of Drama, which was instituted in 1962¹⁹⁵ and, subsequently, metamorphosed into the present Department of Theatre Arts sometime in 1970, was initially the drama component of the literature programme of the Department of English.¹⁹⁶ Prior to the initiation of the school, both UCIDS and ATPG had begun creating an audience for literary drama within the university.¹⁹⁷ The group performed, under the direction of Axworthy and Banham, plays by several authours such as Bernard Shaw, Andre Obey, Shakespeare, Gogol, Ibsen, Pinero and many others.¹⁹⁸ By 1958, the groups presented Wole Soyinka’s *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*. This effort on the work of Soyinka and his subsequent arrival in Nigeria in 1960 marked the turning point for drama creation among the university students and members of the UCIDS. With formation of the Player of the Dawn in 1959¹⁹⁹ by the graduates of the university residing in Ibadan, the community became a haven of theatrical life.

The Ibadan Drama Groups

In 1962/63 when the Ibadan School of Drama commenced an academic programme, the UCIDS, ATPG, The Player of the Dawn, and Wole Soyinka’s the 1960 Masks were already visible. Though not a theatre troupe, the Mbari Centre was noted for making its facility available for the creation of creative and literary endeavours by enthusiasts. The 1960 Masks, established in the same year, produced the premiere production of some Wole Soyinka’s works, JP Clark’s *Song of a Goat* in 1964, as well as those of its other members.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁴ See the Department of Theatre Arts homepage on University of Ibadan website <http://www.ui.edu.ng/?q=node/934>, 23/12/2009

¹⁹⁵ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 151

¹⁹⁶ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

¹⁹⁷ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

¹⁹⁸ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152, Dele Layiwola mentioned Anouilh, Behan, Becket, Fry, Congreve, Dryden, Durrenmatt, Frisch, Jonson, Miller, Moliere, Mortimer, Pinter, Yeats, Webster and Wilder, see *African Theatre in Performance: a festschrift in honour of Martin Banham* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 2000), xiii

¹⁹⁹ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

²⁰⁰ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

Simultaneously, a “theatrical development in the eastern part of Nigeria was taking place at the same time, in particular the John Ekwere’s Ogui Players which later became the Eastern Nigerian Theatre Group.”²⁰¹ After Soyinka left University College Ibadan in 1964 for a teaching appointment at the University of Ife, founded in 1962, he established the “Orisun Theatre Company” through which he produced his own plays. According to Adelugba, Obafemi and Adeyemi, the first Nigerian theatre generation grew out of such literary culture of the period.²⁰²

The First Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

Between 1958 and 1965, a robust ferment of intellectual activities developed at the university and in the city of Ibadan, especially at the Mbari Centre, where the first serious and significant generation of literary dramatists, including Wole Soyinka and JP Clark, emerged.²⁰³ Soyinka had already written and staged some of his works in England before arriving in Nigeria in 1960. Other dramatists who also began writing around this time include Wale Ogunyemi, Sonny Oti, Zulu Sofola and Samson Amali.²⁰⁴ Ola Rotimi is also part of this generation, though he was studying at Yale University in the US at the point when this movement began.

Wole Soyinka (1934-), who was based in England, arrived in Ibadan and formed the 1960 Masks, drawing members from the Player of the Dawn.²⁰⁵ He considers the 1960 Masks a theatre laboratory that would develop into a permanent National Theatre of some sort because members were from different parts of Nigeria.²⁰⁶ The theatre served as a facility for promoting his research in African theatre forms and for the performance of his works and the works by other African writers. According to Biodun Jeyifo, “Soyinka’s work has already accumulated a vast and comprehensive list of critical studies with innumerable diverse approaches to which it would be hard to add something

²⁰¹ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

²⁰² Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

²⁰³ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, “Nigerian Popular Theatre: A Critical Profile” in Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*. (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 30

²⁰⁴ Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 153

²⁰⁵ See Adelugba, D., Obafemi, O., Adeyemi, S., “Nigeria” in Martin Banham, (ed.), *A History of Theatre in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152

²⁰⁶ Olusola, Segun, “The Advent of Television Drama”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 372

without a risk of tedious repetition.”²⁰⁷ As I agreed with Jeyifo, it is important to add that he has traversed the Nigerian, indeed the world, dramatic landscape for over half a century and, along the way, winning every laurel associated with literature including the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986. Soyinka is the first Nigerian and African multifaced literary figure that distinguished himself in all the genres of literature. He is a poet, novelist, critic, essayist, autobiographer, playwright and director. He is both a cultural and political activist. “From 1957 to 1959, he served as a script-reader, actor and director at the Royal Court Theatre in London and, while there, developed three experimental pieces with a company of actors he had brought together.”²⁰⁸ From his earliest plays (“The Invention” (1957, unpublished), *The Swamp Dwellers* (first staged in 1958, and published 1963), “The Root” (1959, unpublished) performed during the British Drama League in London, *The Trials of Brother Jero* (performed in 1960, and published 1963), *The Lion and the Jewel* (performed in 1959 at the Royal Court Theatre, and published 1963)²⁰⁹ to the present, he has established himself as Africa’s finest and most discussed playwright. His other works include *Jero’s Metamorphosis* (performed 1974, publ. 1973), *A Dance of the Forests* (performed 1960, publ.1963), *The Republican and the New Republican* (performed 1963), *Kongi’s Harvest* (performed 1965, publ. 1967), “Rites of the Harmattan Solstice” (performed 1966) and *Madmen and Specialists* (performed 1970, publ. 1971). He also wrote *The Strong Breed* (1963), *Before the Blackout* (performed 1965 publ. 1971), *The Road* (1965) and *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975). In “*The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), he has rewritten the *Bacchae* for the African stage and, in *Opera Wonyosi* (performed 1977, publ. 1981), bases himself on John Gay’s *Beggar’s Opera* and Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*.”²¹⁰ Others are “The Golden Accord” (performed 1979-80), “Priority Projects” (performed 1982), *A Play of Giants* (1984), *Requiem for a Futurologist* (performed 1983, publ. 1985), *Childe Internationale* (performed in 1964, publ. 1987), *From Zia with Love* (1992), *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (performed on BBC radio 1991, publ. 1992), *The Beatification of Area Boy* (performed 1995, publ. 1995), and *King Baabu* (2002).

²⁰⁷ See Femi Osofisan “Wole Soyinka and the Living Dramatist: A Playwright’s Encounter with the Drama of Wole Soyinka,” in Biodun Jeyifo, (ed.), *Perspectives on Wole Soyinka: Freedom and Complexity*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 174

²⁰⁸ See Wole Soyinka <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc53.html>, 29/12/2009.

²⁰⁹ See Bernth Lindfors, “The Early Writings of Wole Soyinka,” in James Gibbs, (ed.), *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington: The Three Continents Press, 1980), 19-44

²¹⁰ http://www.iti-worldwide.org/ambassador_soyinka.html, 28/12/2009

Beginning in the 1960s, rigorous expositions of Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre have been undertaken by Jones, Irele, Gibbs, Manduakor, Wright, Euba, Jeyifo, Obafemi, Owomoyela, and other recent doctoral theses. Critics have taken into consideration both his "metaphysical and materialist perspective in evolving a dramatic aesthetic."²¹¹ Some of his writings are based on the mythology of the Yoruba, with Ogun, the god of iron and war, as central influence. According to James Gibbs, "Soyinka treats mythology as the works of individuals which has been adopted by the community but which, nevertheless, remains susceptible to manipulations by individuals."²¹² Though myth enjoys a great presence in Soyinka's works, he, nevertheless, rearranged it in the plays to suit his purpose on the stage. Soyinka argues that to use myth on stage "...it is necessary for me to bend it to my own requirements. I don't believe in carbon-copies in any art form. You have to select what you want from traditional sources and distort it if necessary."²¹³ He went further in another circumstance to acknowledge the aesthetic medium of the "Yoruba tradition as the fount of his inspiration."²¹⁴

Soyinka's 1960 *Masks* was a training ground for theatre formation in Nigeria for many of Nigerian dramatists and actors of the period. Soyinka himself became a world famous African playwright in the English language, fusing the ritualistic exegesis of the Yoruba worldview with all that is good in the English world. Due to the fecundity and range of Soyinka's works, his dramatic outputs are divided into satirical comedy, serious philosophical plays and tragedy. Subjects and themes that encompass the existential man and his sociopolitical world are consistent features in his drama. Within the generality of the subject frame and themes of Soyinka's works are "being, salvation, betrayal, cultural survival, waste, corruption of power, destruction of the human potential and other topics."²¹⁵

Segun Olusola notes that Soyinka contributed to the development of television drama with his 1960 script *My Father's Burden* as well as to film

²¹¹ Obafemi, Olu, *Contemporary Nigerian theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series, 1996), 122

²¹² Gibbs, James, *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington: The Three Continents Press, 1980), 4

²¹³ Valerie, Wilmer, "Wole Soyinka Talks to Flamingo" *Flamingo*, Vol. 5, No. 6, 1966, 16

²¹⁴ Soyinka, Wole, "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetic of Pseudo-Tradition" *Transition*, Vol. 48, 1975, 44

²¹⁵ Euba, Femi, "Wole Soyinka", in Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, (eds.), *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 443

production in Nigeria.²¹⁶ According to Segun Olushola, “When, in 1960, Wole Soyinka returned to the country ready to launch [...] theatre groups, his colleagues in radio, television and the local amateur scenes rallied round him.”²¹⁷ He was commissioned to write a play for television which was subsequently produced and broadcast. This became “the first drama presentation on Nigeria Television broadcast in August 1960.”²¹⁸ Also the adaptation for the screen of his play *Kongi’s Harvest* in 1970 pioneered filmmaking in the country. He also wrote for the radio both in Nigeria and for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Between 1960 and 1978, Soyinka created three semi-professional theatre groups (Masks in 1960, Orisun Theater in 1964, and Guerrilla Theatre Unit of the University of Ife in 1978).

These theatres, created at different stages in Soyinka’s life, performed distinctive roles in his theatrical career. At Ife, where the Orisun Theatre was established by Wole Soyinka, he employed the willing practitioners of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, especially those without a ready troupe at the time. They later formed the bulk of the university’s own troupe. Wole Soyinka’s Orisun theatre “recruited the performers in an attempt to develop a hybrid programme based on a combination of traditional and literary theatre conventions.”²¹⁹ His Guerrilla Theatre “specialized in performing satirical revues to criticize and condemn the nefarious activities of the government of the day”²²⁰ in Nigeria, staging plays at open motor parks and market spaces without prior notice. Some of the notable plays of the Guerrilla Theatre phase are contained in his *Before the Blow Out* and *Eti ke Revolu Wetin*. On October 21st, 1994, Soyinka was “appointed United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Goodwill Ambassador for the Promotion of African culture, human rights, freedom of expression, media and

²¹⁶ Olusola, Segun, “The Advent of Television Drama”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 372

²¹⁷ Olusola, Segun, “The Advent of Television Drama”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 370-380

²¹⁸ Olusola, Segun, “The Advent of Television Drama”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 370-380

²¹⁹ Amkpa, A., *Theatre and Postcolonial Desires* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 78, see also James Gibbs, *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka* (Washington: The Three Continents Press Inc., 1980)

²²⁰ Musa, R.A., “The Drama and Theatre of Wole Soyinka”, in *An Encyclopaedia of The Arts*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2006, 216-229 (online)

<http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/unilorin/publications/rasheed/rasheed%20LASU%201.pdf>.

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communication.”²²¹ His works represent a definitive literary output among the first generation and subsequent generations afterward.

John Pepper Clark (1935-) is one of Soyinka’s contemporaries who also distinguished himself in the field of drama as well as in other genres of literature as a whole. He is an accomplished poet and playwright. He was a member of Soyinka’s 1960 Masks and the Mbari Centre and was also editor of the Black Orpheus-magazine which also published some of Soyinka’s early works. In 1981, he established the PEC Repertory Theatre as a professional theatre company in Lagos. Clark bases his drama on the culture of the Ijaw-people of Southern Nigeria, a culture with which he is very familiar. He frequently deals with the themes of “revenge, retributive justice and its excesses”,²²² adultery, protest, violence, corruption, cultural nationalism and colonialism through a complex of interweaving of indigenous African imagery and that of Western literary tradition. Arthur Smith notes that:

The traditional and the modern are almost always blended in Clark's plays in themes, attitudes and techniques as they are in some of Soyinka's early plays. His first two plays, *Song of a Goat* (performed in 1961) and *The Masquerade* (peformed in 1965), contain elements of classical Greek and Shakespearean drama, the poetic plays of T.S. Elliot and the folk literature of the Ijaw people.²²³

The Encyclopedia Britanica cites that Clark’s first three plays *Song of a Goat*, *The Raft* and *The Masquerade* “are tragedies in which individuals are unable to escape the doom brought about by an inexorable law of nature or society.”²²⁴ He wrote *Ozidi* (1966), a compilation or “stage version of an Ijaw traditional epic and ritual play, which in a native village would take seven days to perform.”²²⁵ Clark’s portrayal of his characters as being helpless in the hands of nature or supreme forces has critics classifying his tragedy not as an

²²¹ See http://wapedia.mobi/en/Wole_Soyinka?t=2, 30/12/2009

²²² Emevwo Biakolo, “J. P. Clark-Bekederemo”, in Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne, (eds.), *Postcolonial African Writer: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 105-110

²²³ Arthur Smith, “Blending the Traditional with the Modern in John Pepper Clark's Plays” <http://ezinearticles.com/?Blending-The-Traditional-With-The-Modern-In-John-Pepper-Clarks-Plays&id=990961>, Monday 04/01/2010

²²⁴ See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119951/John-Pepper-Clark>, 04/01/2010

²²⁵ See <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/119951/John-Pepper-Clark>, 04/01/2010

imitation or derivative of Greek classics but hugely indebted to it.²²⁶ He wrote and published *The Bikoroa Plays* (performed 1981, publ. 1985) which is a collection of three plays: *The Boat*, *The Return Home* and *Full Circle*. His other plays include the comedy *The Wife Revolts* (1984), *The Ozidi Saga* (1977) and *All for Oil* (2000).

Ola Rotimi (1938-2000) was still studying at University of Boston in the United State of America (USA) when Wole Soyinka began working with the 1960 Masks, but he returned to Nigeria before the end of the 1960s to assert his presence on the Nigeria literary theatre stage. Ola Rotimi often examined Nigeria's history and ethnic traditions in his works. According to Olu Obafemi, Rotimi "employs elements of traditional theatrical performances-language as in incantation, proverbs, an unabashed translation of stock Yoruba sayings, music, dance, songs, mime and acted narratives to achieve meaning and dramaturgy."²²⁷ His first plays, *To Stir the God of Iron* (performed 1963) and *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (performed 1966; published 1977) were staged while he was a student at the drama schools of Boston University and Yale, respectively.

Upon taking a position at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, he wrote his most famous play, *The Gods are not to Blame* (performed 1968, published 1971), an adaptation or recasting of Sophocles *Oedipus Rex*.²²⁸ He set up the Ori Olokun Theatre Company at Ife with the aim of using the company to create a truly authentic African theatre. He wanted a departure from imported European and colonial inherited theatre. David Kerr writes that the unique creative achievement of Rotimi's work at the Ori Olokun Theatre is that "it evolved out of the ivory towers of the University, an 'unfriendly' territory as far as the indigenous theatre is concerned."²²⁹ "Ola Rotimi dedicated his art to exploring the traditional/indigenous artistic expressions of the Nigerian people at a point when the African aesthetic had completely lost ground to the European value system."²³⁰ Rotimi distinguished himself as a

²²⁶ Arthur Smith, "Blending The Traditional With The Modern In John Pepper Clark's Plays." <http://ezinearticles.com/?Blending-The-Traditional-With-The-Modern-In-John-Pepper-Clarks-Plays&id=990961>. Monday 04/01/2010

²²⁷ Obafemi, Olu, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (Beyreuth: Beyreuth African Studies, 1996), 109, see <http://www.amazon.com/Ola-Rotimis-African-Theatre-Development/dp/0773461477>

²²⁸ Kerr, David, *African Popular Theatre: from Pre-colonial times to the Present* (London: James Currey, 1995), 117

²²⁹ Coker, Niyi, *Ola Rotimi's African Theatre: The Development of an Indigenous Aesthetic* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press New York, 2005)

²³⁰ Yemi, Ogunbiyi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 36

historical dramatist with *Kurunmi* (performed 1969, published 1971) a dramatization of the Yoruba nineteenth Century war and its actors, as well as in *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, (performed 1971, published 1974), a stage documentation of the fall of the last ruler of Benin before the fall of the empire to the British imperialist in 1897. He also wrote *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) an exploit of Harcourt White and the bravery of the inmates of the lepers' colony in 1939. In his argument for historical plays, Ola Rotimi posits:

Most of us Africans are ignorant of our history. When I was in secondary school, we learnt tangentially African History and usually from a myopic, jaundiced perspective of Western scholars.... The play tries to teach history through drama. My second mission is, of course, to see whether we could emulate some heroic figures in history.²³¹

Based on his beliefs of the importance of drama in the documentation of history, he wrote some plays with reference to historical figures and institutions. "Rotimi's philosophical belief is in justice and fairness, gender equality, and religion tolerance. All of these influence his plays which centre on the oppressed in the society."²³² For example, in *If: A Tragedy of the Ruled* (performed 1979, published 1980) and *Hopes of the Living Dead* (1988) he champions the cause of the masses and the downtrodden in the Nigerian society. Rotimi's other plays include *Holding Talks* (performed 1970, published 1979), *Initiation into Madness* (performed 1973), *Grip Am* (performed 1973), *Akassa Youmi* (performed 1977), *Everyone His/Her Own Problem* (a radio drama broadcast 1987), *When the Criminals Become Judges* (1995), *The Epilogue* (contained *Tororo Tororo Roro* and *Man Talk Woman Talk*, 2002).²³³

Zulu Sofola (1935-1995) was the first female dramatist in Nigeria. She belongs to the first generation of the country's literary dramatist; although her first publication would not appear until 1972, she was already writing and performing her plays in the 1960s. Many feminist critics find it difficult to define her works as examples of feminist writing but, rather, define it as celebrating African culture. Some critics complain that women characters are

²³¹ Kunle Ajibade, "The Man Ola Rotimi", in *Weekend Concord*, April 20, 1991 <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2870300065.html>. 04/01/2010

²³² Okafor, C.G., "Ola Rotimi: the Man, the Playwright, and the Producer on the Nigerian Theatre Scene", in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 64, 1990, (online). Accessed on Wed. 04 Jan. 2010. <http://www.questia.com/googleScholar.qst?docId=95710474>

²³³ *Epilogue* was published after the death of Ola Rotimi in 2000, but the two plays were staged and directed by the playwright before his death.

poorly projected in many of her plays. They argued that, in Sofola's works, their education as women is taken as unnecessary at critical points while men are favourably drawn.²³⁴ Tejumola Olaniyan concludes that in *The Sweet Trap*, "the playwright's vision is anti-feminist with a dogmatic closure on gender identity and difference."²³⁵ Olu Obafemi, on the other hand, concludes that Sofola's preoccupation is with the "plight of womanhood in the modern world and the exploration of the tragic and the traditional in contemporary society in her plays from the eighties and nineties."²³⁶ Sofola wrote voraciously, drawing themes extensively from both African cultural milieu and the Bible. After the performance of her first play, *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* (performed 1969, published 1971), which was commissioned by an all-girls secondary school in Ibadan, she wrote *Wedlock of the Gods* (performed 1971, published 1973), *King Emene* (1974), *Old Wines are Tasty* (performed 1975, published 1981), *The Sweet Trap* (performed 1975, published 1977), *The Deer and the Hunters Pearl* (performed 1976), *The Wizard of Law* (1976), *Song of a Maiden* (performed 1977, published 1991), *Memories in the Moonlight* (performed 1977, published 1986). She also wrote *Eclipsos and the Fantasia* (performed 1990), *Lost Dreams and other plays* (contained *The Love of the Life*, *The Operators*, and *The Showers* 1982), and *Queen Omu-Ako of Oligbo* (performed 1989). Other plays written by her are *Celebration of Life*, and *Ivory Tower*.

Wale Ogunyemi (1939-2001), who first started writing his plays in the Yoruba language, is regarded as the most indigenous of all the Nigerian literary dramatists writing in English. He was a member of the Wole Soyinka's theatre companies and an ardent believer in the Yoruba religion and cultural worldview. Wale Ogunyemi was extolled for his mastery of many theatre techniques. Apart from his knowledge of European theatre, he employed all the known traditional African performance elements. These elements which play prominent role in traditional Yoruba drama in which Ogunyemi is very familiar, made his work an important reference point for other artists. He is also one of the earliest Nigerian dramatists to have their plays broadcast on

²³⁴ Obafemi, Olu, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth University, 1996), 161

²³⁵ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Zulu Sofola and Her Sisters: The Example of *The Sweet Trap*", in Wylie, H., Brutus D., and Silenieks J., (eds.), *African Literature: New Mask* (Washington: Three Continents, 1988). 40-49

²³⁶ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Zulu Sofola and Her Sisters: The Example of *The Sweet Trap*", in Wylie, H., Brutus D., and Silenieks J., (eds.), *African Literature: New Mask* (Washington: Three Continents, 1988). 40-49

television. He is often regarded as having his legs between the two generations of the Nigerian literary drama firmament until his death in 2001. He used myth and history as a base for his drama more than any other playwright in Nigeria, constantly researching into different Yoruba cultures.

In 1965, Ogunyemi co-founded the Theatre Express along with two of his friends. The mini-troupe was established for the purpose of staging plays at civic functions as well as taking theatre to other venues such as market places. He was part of both the Yoruba Travelling Theatre in the 1960s as well as the thriving literary theatre of the period.²³⁷ Ogunyemi's *Langbodo* (performed 1977, published 1979), a stage adaptation of D.O. Fagunwa's novel, was Nigeria's entry to the 2nd Festival of World Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77).²³⁸ A major concern in most plays of Ogunyemi is the quest for national unity, evident in *The Divorce* (performed 1975, published 1977), *Langbodo*, and *The Vow* (completed in 1962, performed 1972, published 1985) which won the African Arts award of the University of California, Los Angeles in 1971.²³⁹ His other plays include *Business Headache* (1966), *Are Kogun* (1968), *Be Mighty, Be Mine* (1968), *The Scheme* (performed and published 1967), *Esu Elegbara* (performed 1968, published 1970) about the Yoruba trickster-god, *Ijaye War* (1970) and *Kiriji* (performed 1971, published 1975), both dramatizations of Yoruba society during the nineteenth-century internecine wars. Ogunyemi also published *The Sign of the Rainbow* and *Eniyan* (performed 1982, published 1987) an adaptation of the medieval *Everyman*.²⁴⁰

The Second Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

The period after 1970, considered the post-civil war phase in Nigeria, witnessed the emergence of a different crop of playwrights, regularly referred to as second generation dramatists. The best in this group of playwrights were set apart from their predecessor not necessarily by any age difference, *per se*, but rather by what Yemi Ogunbiyi considers to be temperament and vision, hardened, as it were, by the trauma of the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war.²⁴¹

²³⁷ See Martin, Banham, "Wale Ogunyemi: A actor and playwright he celebrated Nigerian myth and Legend" in <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2002/feb/14/guardianobituaries.books>

²³⁸ See Biographical Note on Chief Wale Ogunyemi (J.P., M.O.N, CNT).http://www.waleogunyemi.net/abridged_biography.html 09/09/2012

²³⁹ See Dictionary of Literary Biography on Wale Ogunyemi. 4. <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/wale-ogunyemi-dlb/4.html>, 05/01/2010

²⁴⁰ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 17

²⁴¹ Yemi, Ogunbiyi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 36.

Among these writers are Wale Ogunyemi, Fela Davies, Comish Ekiye, Soji Simpson, Kole Omotosho, Bode Sowande, Meki Nzewi, Laolu Ogunniyi, Bode Osanyin, Esiaba Irobi, Tunde Fatunde, Ahmed Yerima,²⁴² Akinwunmi Isola, and Femi Osofisan. However, Wale Ogunyemi glides between both the first and second generations as a founding member of the old Orisun theatre, the travelling theatre and part of early television in Nigeria. These second generation writers led by Femi Osofisan, out of an ideological commitment, were initially shunned or, at best, were indifferent to Western acclaim by refusing to publish with foreign firms. They firmly believed that the production of literature cannot be divorced from its content and overall objective in a neo-colonialist economy. Akinwunmi Isola is prominent within this group as the most versatile of the writers who adopted the indigenous Yoruba language in the writing of his plays. Unlike their older predecessors Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi and Sofola, these playwrights are unequivocal in their sympathies with the working masses, and “even when they use myth as their backdrop for dramatic action, it is manipulated in such a way that the message comes out clearly in favour of radical change.”²⁴³ They appropriated Marxist exegesis in their creation of drama and in the analysis of existing literature.

Femi Osofisan (1946-), thought of as the most vocal literarily of this generation of radical dramatists, is considered to have written ideologically situated plays to reflect the struggle of the neglected masses of the Nigerian population. Osofisan ventured into all of the genres of literature and excelled in all. He writes poetry under the pseudonym Okinba Launko. His *Kolera Kolej* was published as prose before being adapted for the stage under the same title. In plays such as *The Chattering and the Song* (1977), *Morountodun* (1982), *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), including his early social farce, *Who's Afraid of Solarin* (1978), he demonstrated a commitment to social justice and political change. To reiterate Sola Adeyemi, “Osofisan continues to create a radical shift in the psyche of our nation, Nigeria, his drama staunches our open wounds and his songs rouse us from our lethargy and set us ‘ablaze’.”²⁴⁴

²⁴² See Yemi, Ogunbiyi, “Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile”, in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 36. Many critics have failed to include Ahmed Yerima among the second generation dramatists. However, with the performances and publications of three of his plays at the time the second generation playwrights were becoming fossilized, thus, he deserved to be so included.

²⁴³ Oyekan, Owomoyela, *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/James Currey, 1997), 162

²⁴⁴ Adeyemi, Sola, (ed.), *Portraits for an Eagle: Essays in Honour of Femi Osofisan* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 2006). For information on Osofisan, I relied on this collection of essays edited by Sola Adeyemi, I also consulted Muyiwa P. Awodiya, *The Drama of Femi Osofisan: A Critical Perspective* Revised Edition (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2010)

In addition to creating the Kakaun Sela Theatre Kompany, a semi-professional troupe, he created a form of theatre style for which he used Bertolt Brecht's alienation technique changing the set, costumes, and recasting actors in the middle of a performance. Although Osofisan admires Brecht a great deal, his theatre is markedly different from Brecht's. Osofisan's theatre employs the use of music, dance, and spectacle to communicate pungent messages. In 1982, Osofisan wrote thirteen scripts for Unibadan Performing Company (UPC) for production on the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State (BCOS) Television, Ibadan.²⁴⁵ The scripts include *To Kill A Dream*, *At the Petrol Station*, *Operation Abandoned*, *The New Cathedral*, *A Success Story*, *Operation Rat-trap*, *And Fear Comes Calling*, *The Audience Also Dances*, *A Debt to the Dead*, and *A Date With Danger*. Osofisan's fecundity on stage is without unequaled among Nigerian dramatists. He wrote upward of more than three dozen plays which include, *Behind the Ballot Box* (1967), *Oduduwa Don't Go!* (1968), *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1975), *Morountodun and Other Plays* [with *Morountodun*, *Red is the Freedom Road* and *No More the Wasted Breed*] (1983), *Once Upon Other Robbers* (1984), *Farewell To A Cannibal Rage*, and *Midnight Hotel* (1986), *Two Short plays* [containing *Altine's Wrath* and *The Oriki of A Grasshopper*] (1987), *Another Raft* (1989). From the 1990's he published *Birthdays Are Not For Dying and Other Plays* [containing *Birthdays Are Not For Dying*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard* and *The Inspector and the Hero*] (1990), *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992), *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1993), *The Album of the Midnight Blackout*, and *Ire Ni!, Nkrumah-Ni!...Africa-Ni!*, and *Tegonni, An African Antigone* (1994). He also published *The Oriki of A Grasshopper and Other Plays*, *Twingle-Twangle*, *A Twynning Tayle*, and *The Engagement* (1995). Others include *One Legend, Many Seasons* (1996), *Fiddlers on a Midnight Lark* (1996), *Making Children is Fun* (1996), *Reel Rwanda!* (1996), *Many Colors Make the Thunder-King* (1997)²⁴⁶, *Ajayi Crowther*, *The Play of Kolera Kolej*, and *Women of Owu* all in 2006. As Yemi Ogunbiyi notes:

Eclectic as he is original, Osofisan has sought to reshape traditional Yoruba mythology and ritual in the light of the contemporary realities, to squeeze out of old myths fresher meanings, in the belief that Man, in

²⁴⁵ See Muyiwa P. Awodiya, *The Drama of Femi Osofisan: A Critical Perspective* Revised Edition (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2010), 22

²⁴⁶ Adeyemi, Sola, (ed.), *Portraits for an Eagle: Essays in Honour of Femi Osofisan* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 2006)

the last analysis, makes his own myth. Not content to merely expose the ills of the society, he has dared to provide us with glimpses of his vision of a new society. It is interesting to note that Osofisan's plays are popular fares at institutions across the country.²⁴⁷

His works are characterized by what Tejumola Olaniyan regards as "skillful appropriation and re-interpretation of indigenous performance form, a fine-tuned materialist revision of history, and a consummate dramaturgic sophistication."²⁴⁸ He represents a significant number of his generation of Nigerian writers well who accept neither Eurocentric "conceptions of an ideal African past nor naive enthusiasm about Western influence, a generation that has seen both colonialism and postcolonialism and has few illusions about either."²⁴⁹ Bode Sowande (1948-) is "known for the theatric aesthetic of his plays about humanism and social change."²⁵⁰ He is a member of the radical dramatist school where there is a belief in the deployment of Marxist aesthetics in drama creation, a group "that favours a post-traditional social and political landscape where the"²⁵¹ people are "the creator and maker of their own history not just the subject of norms and tradition."²⁵² According to Osita Okagbue, "Sowande favours a much more political tone in his writing and seeks to promote an alliance or acquiescence to a change in the status quo and fate of the common man within the Nigerian society."²⁵³ He took an active role in Ori Olokun the production company of Ola Rotimi in the late 1960s. His plays are *Lamps in the Land* (1973), *Bar Beach Prelude* (1976), *Farewell to Babylon and other Plays* (contained *Farewell to Babylon*, *The Night Before* and *The Angry Bridegroom*) 1979, *Kalakutu Cross Currents* (1979), *Barabas and The Master Jesus* (1980), *Flamingo and other plays* (contained *Flamingo*, *The Master and the Frauds*, *Afamako-The Workhorse* and *Circus of Freedom Square*) 1986, *Tornadoes Full of Dreams* (1990), *Arelu* (1990), *Ajantala-Pinocchio* (1992).

²⁴⁷ Ogunbiyi, Yemi, "Nigerian Theatre and Drama: A Critical Profile", in Yemi Ogunbiyi, (ed.), *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book* (Lagos: Nigerian Magazine, 1981), 36-37

²⁴⁸ Tejumola Olaniyan, "Femi Osofisan: The Form of Uncommon Sense", in *Research in African Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 4, *Drama and Performance* (Indiana: Indiana University Press. Winter 1999), 74-91

²⁴⁹ Elaine Savory, "Femi Osofisan", in Pushpa Naidu Parekh & Siga Fatima Jagne, (eds.), *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 376

²⁵⁰ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bode-Sowande>

²⁵¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bode_Sowande

²⁵² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bode_Sowande

²⁵³ Okagbue, Osita, "Bode Sowande", in Brian Cox, (ed.), *African Writers*, Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997) (online)

Others include *Mammy Water's Wedding*, *A Sanctus for Women*, and *Arede Owo*, a play in Yoruba language.

Bode Sowande drama draws extensively from Yoruba sources and infuses large amounts of music and stage technology into his performances. He founded the Odu Theme, a professional theatre company at Ibadan that presented both television and stage dramas. Odu Theme has taken its founder's plays on performance tours of Europe, America and around Nigeria.

Akanji Nasiru (1945-) has also contributed significantly to this generation with over one dozen plays: *Our Survival* (1985), *The Bold Choice* (1987), *Come let us Reason Together* (1987), *Love and Strife* (1991), *Citizen Andrew's Dilemma* (1991), *Man in a Well* (1991), *Let's Find an Answer* (1991), *Alatise* (1992), *What Lies Beyond Six* (1992), *Ajosee Wa Ni* (1992). He recently added *The Irepodun Plays* (2005) and *Let's Find an Answer and Other Plays* (2006) to his volume of plays.

It is worthy to note that, apart from the playwrights discussed in this thesis, there are others who share the radical ideology but who are not as prolific in their dramatic outputs as those already mentioned. These playwrights include Kole Omotosho (1943-) with *The Curse* (1976) and *Shadows in the Horizon* (1977); Tunde Fatunde (1951-) with *Blood and Sweat* (1983), *No More Oil Boom* (1984), *No Food, No Country* (1985), *Oga Na Tief Man* (1986), *Water No Get Enemy* (1989), and *Shattered Calabash* (2000); Rasheed Gbadamosi (1943-) with *Echoes from the Lagoon* (1973), *Behold, my Redeemer* (1978), *Trees Grows in the Desert* (1991), and *3 Plays*; Olu Obafemi (1950-) with *Naira Has No Gender*. There are few who choose to write in Yoruba language and other Nigerian language in order to communicate effectively with the masses. A very good example is Akinwunmi Isola (1939-), the author of *EfunsetanAniwura: Iyalode Ibadan*, *Koseegbe*, *Olu Omo*, *Abe Aabo*, *Madam Tinubu: the Terror of Lagos*, and *Iku Olokun Elesin*; Adebayo Faleti (1931-) with *Basrun Gaa*, *Sawo Sogberi*, *Fere bi Ekun*, *Idaamu Paadi Mikailu*, *Omo Olokun Esin* (a Yoruba version of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*), and *Ogun Awitele*. Samson Amali (1947-) also made some attempts at writing in Tiv language with *OnugboMloko*.

I have decided to include the female playwrights who emerged after Zulu Sofola under the third generation dramatists because, aside from the fact that they were not visible during the period discussed, they are not entrenched with the hegemony of revolutionary aesthetics. Nevertheless, they are, at times, very virulent in the representation of the feminist ideology. Some of these women are energetic and prolific female playwrights like Tess Onwueme, Julie

Okoh, and Stella Oyedepo, who has more than three dozen plays to her credit. The interests of these female playwrights are sharpened more by feminist ideology than anything else.

The Third Generation of Nigerian Literary Dramatists

The third generation of Nigerian dramatists is defined not by nationalism or mythopoetic ethos. They are not particularly interested in revolutionary aesthetic or Marxist cantos but in individual survival strategies. However, hardly any of the plays by the third generation's playwrights deviate from what Ameh D. Akoh refers to as "the burning issues confronting postcolonial transitory state of Africa or Nigeria."²⁵⁴

Most of the dramatists within this group began their dramatic careers in the 1980's as a form of experimentation but, by the turn of the 1990s, their ideas have become solid and a challenge to their predecessors to a certain extent. Although the ranges of issues that are compartmentalized into individual survival strategies or survivalism is diverse, they are geared towards a single direction 'emancipation'. These issues are defined within a socio-political context as emancipation, recognizing individual survivalism which, in turn, serves as strength for collective emancipation in the face of strangulating cultural and societal blocks. The female members of the third generation have sharpened their voices and fervently aligned them with the course of their gender. Notable female third generation playwrights within this group are Tess Onwueme (1955-) with *A Hen Too Soon* (1983), *Broken Calabash* (1984), *The Dessert Encroaches* (1985), *Ban Empty Barn, and other Plays* (1986), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Legacies* (1989), *Tell it to Woman: an Epic Drama* (1995), *Riot in Heaven: Drama for the Voices of Color* (1996), *The Missing Face* (1997), *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000), *Then She Said It* (2003), *What Mama Said: an Epic Drama* (2004), and *No Vacancy* (2005).

Tess Osonye Onwueme is the most decorated of all Nigerian female playwrights, winning major awards like "the prestigious Fonlon-Nichols award (2009), the Phyllis Wheatley/Nwapa award for outstanding black writers (2008)."²⁵⁵ She also won "the Martin Luther King, Jr./Caeser Chavez Distinguished Writers Award"²⁵⁶, among others. In 2007, she was appointed to the US State Department Public Diplomacy Specialist/Speaker Program for

²⁵⁴ Akoh, A.D, "The Constraints and Prospects of Post-Military Literary Engagement in Nigeria", in *Nebula*, Vol. 6, No. 4, December, 2009, 264-272

²⁵⁵ See "Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme" <http://www.writertess.com/>

²⁵⁶ See "Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme" <http://www.writertess.com/>

North, West, and East India.²⁵⁷ Onwueme is currently a “Distinguished Professor of Cultural Diversity and English at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire”²⁵⁸, a position she attained in 1994. Julie Okoh (1947-) is the author of *Austerity, Mask* (1988), *Mary, Model for all Woman*, *The Mannequins* (1997), *In Search of Jesus*, *The Nativity*, *Edewede* (2000), *In the Fullness of Time* (2001), *Who can Fight the Gods?*²⁵⁹ (2002), *Aisha* (2005), and *Closed Doors* (2007). Okoh is a Professor in the department of Theatre Arts, University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria.

Stella Dia Oyedepo (1952-) began writing with *Our Wife is not a Woman* (performed in 1979) and, since that first attempt has written and published many plays which include *The Greatest Gift* (1988), *Beyond the Dark Tunnel* (1992), *Don't Believe What You See* (1994), *My Daughter is an Egg* (1997), *Doom in the Dimes* (1997), *A Play that was Never to be* (1998), *See!: A Play* (1997), *Alice, oh! Alice* (2000), *Brain has no Gender* (2001), *The Mad Doctor* (2001), *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* (2002), *On His Demise* (2002), *At the Devil's Mercy* (2002), *The Dainty and the Dirty* (2004), *Blindfolded by Fate* (2004), *All for Nothing* (2006), *The Day of Woe* (2006), etc. She was the Director-General of Kwara State Cultural Centre, Nigeria for more than ten years.

Other female playwrights include Irene Salami-Agunloye (1962-) with *The Queen Sisters* (2001), *Emotan* (2001), *More Than Dancing* (2003), *Sweet Revenge* (2004), and *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin* (2009); Foluke Ogunleye (1962-) with *The Innocent Victims and other Plays* (2003), *Nest in a Cage* (1985), *The Broken Edge* (2002), and *Jabulile* (2005). The growing lists also include Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh (1966-) with *A Night of a Thousand Truth*, *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, *Cauldron of Death*, *Every day for the Thief*, *Who Owns the Coffin?* *Forest of Palmtrees*, *Nneora: an African Doll's House* and *Out of the Mask*; and Bunmi O. Julius-Adeoye (1973-2010) a promising and energetic playwright who passed away suddenly on May 16, 2010, after establishing her presence with plays like *Ajarat*, *The Thorn*, *War at Peace*, *I will be Dead by Tomorrow*, *Ibidunni-A Choreo-Musical Drama*, *The Three wives* and *Atunto*. These female playwrights have feminist philosophy permeating out of every fibre of their works. Nevertheless, their works also discuss the issue of survival like material emancipation, economic emancipation, political emancipation, educational emancipation, and so on.

²⁵⁷ See “Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme” <http://www.writertess.com/>

²⁵⁸ See “Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme” <http://www.writertess.com/>

²⁵⁹ Perkins, Kathy, A., Amandina Lihamba, *African Women Playwrights* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 249

Apart from male playwrights like Ahmed Yerima, Ben Tomoloju, Sam Ukala, Chukwuma Okoye, Emeka Nwabueze who have distinguished themselves within this generation, there are others who are waiting to break into the mainstream of playwriting. People like Bakare Ojo-Razaki, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Lekan Balogun, Debo Sotuminu, Segun Ashade,²⁶⁰ Alex Asigbo, Solomon Igunare, Greg Mbajiorgu, Makinde Adeniran, Akpos Adesi, Benedict Binebai, Chris Egharevba, John Iwuh, Victor Dugga and others are quickly making their impact felt on the Nigerian dramatic firmament. Ahmed Yerima and Tess Onwueme parade the definitive works for this generation's dramatists who are bent on re-orientating the Nigerian society to take a new course in order to survive the harsh reality of the Nigerian nation.

Nigerian Theatre in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century

The turn of the new millennium brought to Nigeria and Nigerians its own challenges and new developments, and these are also reflected in the nation's drama. Democracy seems to be taking a firm root in the country for the first time since its independence in 1960. After being in the grip of military dictatorship from 1983 to 1999, the country transited to an elected government in May 1999 and subsequently had a change of democratic government in 2007. Though the election was characterized with many irregularities, the transition was smooth. However, mounting internal tension and restiveness in various parts of the country resulted in carnage in many parts of the nation especially in the Northern and Niger Delta regions of the country.

Nigerian drama of the first decade of the twenty-first century deals with issues of nationalism. Most of the playwrights who write during this period seem fascinated with the treatment of contemporary societal and gender related problems. Most of the old dramatists are still visible during this period; however, there are new crops of playwrights who were still students of theatre in the 1990's but have now become established as writers. Also of significance is the popular Theatre for Development (TfD) which has somehow replaced the old itinerant or popular theatre; nevertheless, it is not yet professionally constituted because it is geared toward solving a particular social problem within the community, and it is most often agitation-al in presentation. The list of playwrights during this decade soars to a proportion that is difficult to follow as they cover the whole landscape of Nigeria. They are scattered within and

²⁶⁰<http://senatorihenyen.wordpress.com/2009/08/19/a-dream-beyond-the-pyramids-ferment-harvest-bazaar-and-carnival-in-nigerian-literature-of-the-post-soyinka-nobel-prize-era-by-anstine-amanze-akpuda-daily-independent/>. Friday 06 Jan. 2010

without the institutions of higher learning within the country and beyond. Some of these playwrights are quick to publish their plays without first trying them out on the theatrical stage. However, some of them such as Ben Tomoloju and Makinde Adeniran submit their plays for performances without any recourse to textual publication.

Chukwuma Okoye produced large bodies of dramatic works which include *We the Beast* (winner of the 1993 Association of Nigerian Authors Prize for Drama), *Poison*, and *Time*, but had very few of them published. This makes it difficult to follow the volume of available dramatic materials and dramatists of the age. Another significant development in the country's theatre industry is the increase in the number of universities and theatre arts departments. Unlike in the 1950s and 1960s when literary drama crept into the country's theatrical landscape surreptitiously through the UICDS, 1960 Masks, Ibadan School of Drama, etc. to compete with the already vibrant Nigerian or Yoruba Popular Theatre, the first decade of the twenty-first century boasts of over fifty universities and colleges of education offering theatre arts courses.²⁶¹

These literary theatre study institutions complement the National Troupe of Nigeria and the various State Arts Councils to present drama on a constant basis to both the academics communities and the larger Nigerian societies. However, these performances on many occasions are unlike the traditional performances of the Yoruba travelling theatre or Hausa puppet theatre in construction and in audience command. The dramatists of this period follow the trend of writers of the twentieth century by presenting dramatic texts constructed with Nigerian historical content, the country's civil war of 1967-1970, the incessant ethno-religious crises in the Northern part of the country, the militancy activities of the Niger Delta region, and the corruption within the polity and the nation's political upheavals. Feminist thought finds an outlet in the dramatic creation of some of these playwrights. Adaptation is also a ready material for dramatic creation of this age. A.A. Onukaogu and E. Onyerionwu draw a list of prominent dramatists of Eastern Nigeria in the twenty-first

²⁶¹ The lists of institutions include: University of Ibadan, University of Lagos, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, University of Ilorin, University of Benin, University of Port-Harcourt, University of Jos, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Calabar, University of Uyo, University of Abuja, University of Maiduguri, Ahmadu Bello University, Lagos State University, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Delta State University, Imo State University, Benue State University, Ambrose Alli University, Anambra State University of Science and Technology, Kogi State University, Niger Delta University, Nassarawa State University, Redeemer's University (RUN), Ogun State, Igbinedion University, Okada, Adekunle Ajasin University, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State College of Education, Osiele, Michael Otedola College of Education, Epe, College of Education, Ikere-Ekiti, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Ijanikin, Osun State University, Kwara State University.

century.²⁶² Though the list is not comprehensive, it captures to an extent some playwrights that are seemingly unknown in other parts of the country. I believe that the popularity of their plays is based on the acceptability of the performances by the audiences who saw and read the texts within the higher institutions. The analysis of the chosen dramatic text drawn by this duo is eye opening and incisive. These playwrights include Tess Onwueme, Julie Okoh, Emeka Nwabueze, Effiong Johnson, Chris Anyokwu, John Iwuh, Onyebushi Nwosu, Chris Ngozi Okoro, Chukwuma Anyanwu, Ebereonwu, Hope Eghagha, and Helon Habila.²⁶³ The few non-Igbo playwrights mentioned in the book are Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare, Ahmed Yerima, Bakare-Ojo Rasaki and probably Isiaka Aliagan.²⁶⁴ However, a big downfall of such volume is that the list excludes dramatists like Ben Tomoloju, Sam Ukala, Chukwuma Okoye, Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh, Bunmi Julius-Adeoye, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Lekan Balogun, Debo Sotuminu, Segun Ashade,²⁶⁵ Makinde Adeniran, Akpos Adesi, Benedict Binebai, Leke Ogunfeyimi, Toyin Abiodun and Victor Dugga who have distinguished themselves within this generation as serious playwrights. At the time that Onukaogu and Onyerionwu published their book, a renowned poet Helon Habila, and John Iwuh have only published or staged one play each. Helon Habila's "The Trials of Ken Saro Wiwa" appeared as the only play in an anthology *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Writing from Nigerian*.²⁶⁶ However most of the unmentioned playwrights had their plays both as published texts and manuscripts and performed in many parts of the country.

The thematic preoccupations of the plays of this early part of the century reveal the socio-political, socioeconomic and sociocultural situation of

²⁶² Onukaogu, A.A., Onyerionwu, E., *21st Century Nigerian Literature: An Introductory Text* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2009). Although the work of Onukaogu and Onyerionwu is relevant in as much as it draws attention to the growing lists of playwrights from Eastern Nigeria, they have exhibited a parochial sense of ethnocentrism which lack an indepth scholarship by mainly documenting dramatists much like themselves.

²⁶³ Onukaogu, A.A., Onyerionwu, E., *21st Century Nigerian Literature: An Introductory Text* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2009), 175. The list is based on the importance of these playwrights and the quantities of their plays available to reader-audience

²⁶⁴ The non-Igbo playwrights mentioned in the volume are too well-known within the Nigerian academic institution, so, the authours have easy access to their plays and critical materials written on them.

²⁶⁵ <http://senatorihenven.wordpress.com/2009/08/19/a-dream-beyond-the-pyramids-ferment-harvest-bazaar-and-carnival-in-nigerian-literature-of-the-post-soyinka-nobel-prize-era-by-anstine-amanze-akpuda-daily-independent/>. Accessed on Friday 06 Jan. 2010

²⁶⁶ Habila, Helon, "The Trials of Ken Saro Wiwa", in Nduka Otiono and Odo Diego Okoyendo, (eds.), *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Writing from Nigerian* (Yenagoa: Treasure Books, 2006), 147-156

the Nigerian nation of the period. For example, in *Who Can Fight the Gods?* Julie Okoh comments on the anti-social activities such as cultism, misappropriation of funds, and immorality. The play is considered a satire of contemporary Nigerian campus realities.²⁶⁷ Chris Anyokwu's *Ufuoma* and Bakare Ojo-Rasaki's *Once Upon a Tower* also take swipes at the Nigerian contemporary realities, especially the decay within the institutions of higher learning. Both plays dramatize the rampant corruption within the institutions, cultism, power politics, sex and money related exploitations.²⁶⁸ John Iwuh's *The Village Lamb* (2007) and the sequel *Spellbound* (2009) take a swipe at the penchant for double standard and hypocritical nature of most African Christians. More common among the Igbo community in Nigeria is, when adherents of the Christian faith are called, almost everyone proclaims their freedom and equality in Christ Jesus but when marriage is to be contracted, the same people are quick to point out the fact that someone who is freeborn cannot marry into the people known as Osu because tradition considers them as social outcast. In both plays the Osu caste of the Igbo's becomes the thrust for the dramatic plots. Separation must be drawn between those of free birth and those belonging to the traditional gods of the people. According to John Iwuh "despite the proclamation of Christianity by the people, it is difficult for non-Osu 'born again' Christians to contract marriage with Osu of the same faith."²⁶⁹ On the other hand, Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors and Other Plays* ("Ebidein-ere" and "Seiki-ebi") reveal the mismanagement and incongruous sharing formula of the country's resources between the land owners and the supposed lords. It also reveals the supremacy of love over treachery, and the fact that the supreme judge of human action is the creator of the universe. These plays, in contrast to the playwright's confrontational dramas like *When the Table Turns* and *The Leopard of Kalama*, assumes a subtle dialectical approach to the Nigerian Niger Delta crisis despite the playwright's dedication of the plays to the region's militant leaders. Nonetheless, Akpos Adesi is quick to point out that he does not "subscribe to the criminal nose-diving tendencies of some Niger Delta militia who have diverted a rather noble cause to the lure of pecuniary gains."²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Onukaogu, A.A., Onyerionwu, E., *21st Century Nigerian Literature: An Introductory Text* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2009), 191

²⁶⁸ Onukaogu, A.A., Onyerionwu, E., *21st Century Nigerian Literature: An Introductory Text* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd, 2009), 190

²⁶⁹ John Iwuh revealed this to me in a private conversation on March 31, 2010 in his Redeemer's University's office.

²⁷⁰ Adesi, Akpos, "Author's preface" to *Agadagba Warriors and other plays* (Ilorin: New Art Publishers, 2008)

Nigerian Stage Audience and the Influence of Nigerian Video-Film

Jide Malomo argues the following about the importance of the audience for theatre:

Theatre is an important medium of communicating thoughts and feelings, but without an audience it cannot hope to achieve this objective....Virtually everything in the theatre, including the repertoire, depends on the audience. For it is the audience for which the playwright communicates, while the other elements in the production, from the director, the actors, the designer, the costumer, the make-up artist and the publicist, think first about the audience in executing their creative impulses. Also from [an] economic point of view, the audience is consumer in relation to the producer. For it is the audience that pays directly by buying tickets and indirectly by paying taxes which subsidize and sustain a number of performances. It is the audience which applauds or boos a production and, therefore, represents society in general and public opinion in particular.²⁷¹

Jide Malomo believes that the audience is very important in any theatre, and they determine to a great extent the continuity of a theatrical tradition. Attendance situations at performance venue in Nigeria today are of mixed feelings. Many recent critics of Nigerian theatre believe that there is a lower turn-out of audiences at theatre venues since the advent of the video-film. The issues responsible for this fate towards a one-time African robust theatrical pride are multifarious. In spite of this, there is adequate audience attendance at various performances within the academic institutions in the country. However, outside the confines of the institutions the fortune of the theatre is not very robust. There is a myriad of reasons adduced for this. One fundamental issue as to audience analysis in dramatic performances in both the higher institutions and the non-academic environment is the aim and objective of the performing company. A performance in which the audience does not have to pay to attend, attracts a large audience anywhere in the country, however, commercial performances need to resort to aggressive campaigns for sizable numbers of patronage.

There are nearly two hundred institutions of higher learning in Nigeria where performances take place. Apart from the National Theatre building in

²⁷¹ Malomo, J., "Theatre and Audience Research", in Remi Adedokuns, (ed.), *Arts Administration in Contemporary Nigeria* (Lagos: CBAAC, 2001), 89

Lagos where, of recent, constant performances have been resuscitated and the ill-equipped Terra Kulture, Lagos, where performances have been every Sunday since 2006, there is no other viable performance venue in the country. The thirty-six Arts Councils of the various states in the federation which cater to theatrical performances and other needs prefer to host social and religious events like wedding ceremonies, burial ceremonies, weekly church programmes and so on. Theatre performances can be presented by a private theatre company after full payment has been received for the cost for renting the council hall.

Performances within the Nigerian institutions of higher learning are considered educational (for the purpose of training), while the Theatre/Performing Arts department are seen as “cultural centres dedicated to the promotion of the arts and the human artistic excellence”,²⁷² thus, profit is not of major consideration. However, within the larger Nigerian society apart from Theatre for Development and play performances commissioned by organizations, institutions and private individuals, commercialization remains the sole aim of theatrical performances in the twenty-first century. This commercialization of theatrical performances determines to a large extent the audiences’ attendance at theatrical venues. Another major influence on the dramatic performances and audience attendance in Nigeria is the availability of performing spaces and theatre. However, these influences are not within the purview of this dissertation.

²⁷² Nwamuo, C., *Theatre Marketing Process*, (Calabar: Optimist Press, 2007), 33

Chapter Two

Studies of Dramatic Texts: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru and Ameh Oboni The Great*

Introduction: Historical Realist Plays

In this chapter, I will focus on three historical dramas: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru*, and *Ameh Oboni the Great*. I will begin my discussion on the interrelationship of history and literature by drawing inference from existing arguments on the subject. From there, I will look at the structure, characters, language, thematic preoccupation, and finally the socio-political context of the plays. Some of the questions raised in the introduction of this dissertation will form the bases of my argument in this chapter as well as in the remaining part of this work. For example, how independent are playwrights in Nigeria in their artistic expression? Is Yerima's drama conditioned by his position in the government establishment or not? Based on the structure of this thesis, repetition of elements in the analysis of the plays in the various chapters will be an unavoidable, consistent occurrence. The use of the same elements (structure, character, language, thematic preoccupation and socio-political contextualization of text) in the analysis of the texts is duplicated as Yerima uses realistic narrative strategy in the construction of his plays. In order to not form a single-sided argument for this analysis, I will refrain from pitching my discussion with one form of dramatic theory or another, because theory is not static but follows a developmental process through periods, time and space. While a majority of scholars are familiar with European theatre theories, there are theories from other parts of the world as well. The theory of Chinese theatre, dating from the Confucius period²⁷³ and recently made available to international audience in English by Faye Chunfang Fei, challenged formally known theatre theories, especially that of Aristotle. Worthy of note is the characteristics of Japanese Kabuki theatre that influence the theory of theatre which Sergei M. Eisenstein developed in his work and "later transferred to the cinema."²⁷⁴ Although we are now familiar with the Indian Natyasastra, and both the similarities and dissimilarities in Japanese No and Greek tragedy²⁷⁵,

²⁷³ See Faye Chunfang Fei, *Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999)

²⁷⁴ See Kuiper, J.B., "The Stage Antecedents of the Film Theory of S.M. Eisenstein" in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Dec., 1961), 260

²⁷⁵ See Grant, Shen, "Chinese Theories of Theater and Performance from Confucius to the Present (Review)" in *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 2000), 285

we must understand that there are still many theatre theories from other part of the world that will challenge our present knowledge as we become aware of them.

As mentioned previously, even the known theories are not static and are always evolving. For example, the theory of tragedy formulated by Aristotle for the Greek stage was based on the plays of Aeschylus and other great playwrights of the period. It became contestable by the work of Horace and Longinus, just as theirs was also contested during the period of Shakespeare. By the time of modern theatre of Brecht and his contemporaries, a universally acclaimed theory on either tragedy or drama as a whole became a subject for debate. Aristotle suggested that it was much better for the playwright, in selecting a subject, to look to “myth, a fantasized reality, than [rather] to history, a factual reality.”²⁷⁶ To Aristotle it is better to imagine or invent a story than to take it from historical reality. Biodun Jeyifo writes that Marx and Hegel contradict Aristotelian principles on tragedy when they argue that: “True tragedy – tragedy based on historical events – reflects the collisions of men and forces that are more or less conscious of the socio-historical roots of the tragic issue.”²⁷⁷ I believe that any dramatist should be free to select that aspect of history which he feels will enhance his creativity and give it a new interpretation for the enjoyment of his audience. According to Wole Soyinka, the “artist or the ideologue is quite free to reconstruct history on the current ideological premises and, thereby prescribe for the future through lessons thus provoked.”²⁷⁸ In view of this, my intention is to analyze dramatic works based on presentation of certain historical details visible in these plays that I have selected for discussion. The overt presence of historical details in these selected dramas supports and encourages my decision to classify them as “historical drama”. It is necessary to emphasize that, for historical dramas, there are dramaturgical supports, entirely fabricated, which helps to create points of departure from the existing historical materials. These dramaturgical supports inarguably belong in matters of dramatic structure, texture and tension.²⁷⁹

Ahmed Yerima, in one of his many critical essays, sees a creative writer as a griot, seer, and even as a potentate. To Yerima, a creative writer is a

²⁷⁶ Jeyifo, Biodun, “Tragedy, History and Ideology”, in Georg M. Gugelberger, (ed.), *Marxism and African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1985), 94

²⁷⁷ Jeyifo, Biodun, “Tragedy, History and Ideology”, in Georg M. Gugelberger, (ed.), *Marxism and African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1985), 95

²⁷⁸ Soyinka, Wole, *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1988), 126

²⁷⁹ Jeyifo, Biodun, “Tragedy, History and Ideology”, in Georg M. Gugelberger, (ed.), *Marxism and African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1985), 97

griot because of his repository of oral tradition and can extemporize on current events; he is a seer because he foresees the impending goodness or ills of the society. According to Yerima, “society creates these potentates; because they are born by society, they feel the burden of the society; gifted, they see the ills of the society.” He writes further:

[...] they rule through the power of the ‘word’ for the soul of the society which they spend all their lives grappling to capture and nurture. Sometimes they fail, and sometimes, they succeed. But the true potentate trudges on always, reassured that one day, someone would listen or pick the gist of his thematic preoccupation.²⁸⁰

In Nigeria, such men as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, and Ahmed Yerima are the “potentates”, rulers or monarchs of the creative consciousness of the society from which they have emerged. It is noteworthy to state that history and literature may appear as one, but they are not the same. They are two different but mutually related disciplines, as both draw milk of sustenance from one another. As Ray E. Scrubber notes; “although historical accuracy and dramatic effect do not always clash, inevitably they will.”²⁸¹ What Scrubber seems to be saying is that historical accuracy and the effect that drama seeks to elicit from audiences does not necessarily have to create any controversy. He believes that the value of drama will prevail over history to the audience if there is a clash with history. He argues that: “If the play is going to work and hold the interest of the audience, the value of drama must prevail.”²⁸²

Historical plays are multi-functional, as Erwin Piscator notes. His wish, and that of other historical dramatists, is to “engage living history, and act politics.”²⁸³ History has had to grapple for attention in many dramatic works. Though the references to drama in the study of history have been called to question, it brings to immediate remembrance subjects that are lost in the ocean of time. Over-time, the significance of William Shakespeare’s chronicle plays like, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV*, and other tragedies like *Macbeth*, and

²⁸⁰ Yerima, Ahmed, “Agonies of the would-be Potentates: Soyinka and the Challenges of New Nigerian Dramatists” speech delivered at Wole Soyinka’s 70th birthday, organized by the Committee of Relevant Arts (CORA) at the National Theatre, Lagos. This lecture is published by McPhilips Nwanchukwu in *The Guardian* of Sunday, June 20, 2004 (online)

²⁸¹ Scrubber, R.E., “Dramatic History or Historical Drama?” in *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 2001. 133-137

²⁸² Scrubber, R.E., “Dramatic History or Historical Drama?” in *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 2001. 133-137

²⁸³ Piscator, Erwin, *The Political Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1963), 250

Hamlet cannot be underestimated in the historical knowledge of old England, Scotland, and Denmark. To buttress Scrubber, dramatic texts around these heroic figures are what we remember. I must state that, although the mythological drama of ancient Greek dramatists' like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are not in the realm of historical drama, sometimes they can be so regarded because they give us the knowledge of Mycenaean socio-political life and ancient Greek cultural and religious life. Apart from *Eumenides*, the majority of classical Greek plays are set in Thebes²⁸⁴, and if Thebes thus existed then we cannot neglect the importance of the plays in and on Greek history.

Modern drama of August Strindberg like *Master Olof*, *Magnus the Good*, and *Gustav Vasa: The Wonder Man of God* has been a surreptitious attempt to thrust aspects of Swedish history on the world. Behind the personal relationships of "the three characters in Paul Claudel's greatest play *The Satin Slipper*, develops a historical drama"²⁸⁵ about renaissance Spain. In Africa, Wole Soyinka through his dramatic work *Death and the King's Horseman* also gives to the world an aspect of traditional Oyo customs. Both Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo's play, *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*, is an attempt at keeping the evil of British colonialism and the Kenyan Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s in the consciousness or remembrance of the world. The audience that sees these plays in theatres remembers them and what they represent. According to Ahmed Yerima, "historical plays go beyond documentation"²⁸⁶ because, in the process of historicizing an event, a form of alteration must take place for history to have an entertaining importance in theatre.

History, as material for dramatic text, is often distorted for aesthetic reasons because the creative imagination (fiction) of the playwright presents the action they have experienced to the audience, yet the underlining message is never lost. Though "drama may be the specific mode of fiction represented in performance"²⁸⁷; it could also be the documentation of a true-life account for performance before a present or future audience. My position is that, while the actual plot of play may be a derivative of a fictionalized material, there would always exist those factual elements in drama that represent the period in

²⁸⁴ Wallace, Jennifer, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25

²⁸⁵ See John Gassner and Edward Quinn (eds.), *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1969), 305-306

²⁸⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (Lagos: Bookplus, 2003), 103

²⁸⁷ Banham, Martin, (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

performance. Factual elements like setting, songs, costumes, and properties: characteristics synonymous with a particular people, period and location. These factual elements, however, make the work a reference point in the studies of history.²⁸⁸ It is advisable for a dramatist who engages in historical drama to observe some of the essential facts of history which becomes more binding when the subject matter with which he deals is familiar to his audience.

The dramatist, like every artist, enjoys a large amount of artistic license to employ materials that will create a high standard drama. This artistic license is what distinguishes two dramatists who use the same material in the construction of their works. According to Bunmi Julius-Adeoye, “there are limitations to this license [...] a playwright has both ethical (moral) and educative responsibility to his society.”²⁸⁹ Some historical dramas from Nigeria are eloquent testimonies to this. For example, Enwinma Ogieriaikhu’s *Oba Ovonramwen*; Ahmed Yerima’s *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru, Erelu Kuti and Ameh Oboni the Great*; Ola Rotimi’s *Kurunmi, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, and *Hopes of the Living Dead*; Wale Ogunyemi’s *Ijaye War and Kiriji*; Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* did not blindly chronicle historical events without the infusion of necessary dramatic elements.

The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru and Ameh Oboni the Great

Yerima was commissioned by the Benin monarch to write *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* (here on referred to as *The Trials*) for the centenary celebration of the 1897 assault on the Benin kingdom by the British imperialist. He also enjoyed the patronage of the Sokoto Emirate Council in order to write *Attahiru*. However, in the case of *Ameh Oboni*, there was no support from the reigning monarch, the Attah²⁹⁰ of Igala. This piece of information is necessary in order to ascertain the level of objectivity in the historical details used in the three plays. As mentioned in the introduction to this study, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* chronicles the fate of the Benin Monarch in the hands of the British government during the last decade of the nineteenth century. At the time that this play was being written by Ahmed Yerima, a few of the people who own the story were readily available for interview; as such, overt distortion in

²⁸⁸ Julius-Adeoye, R.J., “History as Drama, Drama as History: A Study of Three plays as Windows into People and Groups in the Niger Area”, in Osuntokun, J., Ukaogo, V., Odoemene, A. (eds.), *Nigerian Studies: Reading in History, Politics, Society and Culture* (New Jersey: Goldline and Jacobs, 2010), 189-199

²⁸⁹ Julius-Adeoye, Olubunmi, O., “Artistic License and Ritual: A Case Study of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*” A paper presented at the 50th Conference of International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR), University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2007, 3

²⁹⁰ Attah is the general noun for the paramount ruler of Igalaland

the presentation would hurt the pride of these people. As the audience was familiar with the story, the playwright often relied on information derived from distinguished members of the group and archival materials for the creation of the drama. Thus, in the case of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, Yerima employed archival materials, the current Benin monarch (Omo N'Oba Erediauwa I), and the people of Benin as sources. As Yerima puts it:

[...] at writing a historical play on the last days of the Benin Empire of Oba Ovonramwen, the present Benin monarch, Oba Erediauwa I, had appointed his brother, Prince Edun Akenzua, [...] and Osayande Ugiagbe, the then director of the Edo State Arts Council, to work with me. They [sic] to work with me in order to authenticate the issues of culture, the use of historical materials, the interpretation of the materials, and the treatment of the person of the Oba of Benin, and the royal institution which up till today remains a symbol of unity among the Benin people.²⁹¹

Yerima further writes that in Sokoto, apart from archival materials upon which he extensively relied three major people assisted him in making sure that he was loyal to the story of the martyrdom of their heroes in his construction of *Attahiru*. He gained the support of the Sokoto Emirate Council through the efforts of Alhaji Muhammed Bello and Alhaji Muhammed Idris. Sultan Maccido the serving monarch appointed Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the Turakin of Sokoto (Former President of Nigeria (1979-1983)), agreed, “to edit and authenticate the play manuscript.”²⁹² In the case of the Attah Igala *Ameh Oboni* story, Yerima relied on the support of people from the community. For example, the Attah *Ameh Oboni* story was brought to his attention by some Igala indigenes, therefore, for constant consultation, apart from existing historical materials, he relied on the support of Chief (Dr.) Danjuma Uteno Achor, the Ohioiga Attah of Igalaland. However, unlike the earlier two historical plays, the present Attah Igala, Aliyu Ocheja Obaje did not share Yerima’s passion for the representation of Ameh Oboni as a tragic-hero. To Attah Aliyu Ocheja Obaje who succeeded Ameh Oboni in 1956 and many prominent members of Igala community, the former monarch is considered to have brought shame to the institution of Attah of Igala and the palace, by his

²⁹¹ Yerima, Ahmed, *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (Lagos: Bookplus, 2003), 103

²⁹² Yerima, Ahmed, *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (Lagos: Bookplus, 2003), 204

act of suicide. This attitude towards Ameh Oboni began even while he was alive, and the presence of those who colluded with the imperialists represented by J.D. Muffet remain to make sure that no honour be given his name in Igala history.²⁹³

Yerima's use of historical details buttress Kalu Ogbaa's argument that part of the relative success enjoyed by West African writers can be attributed to the fact that their traditional past is not really distant or better, the past is still very much alive.²⁹⁴ To the kingdom of Benin, Sokoto Caliphate, and Igala kingdom that Yerima writes about in these plays, the past is still very much alive. Also, to present the side of the indigenous people in the matter that leads to the "desecration"²⁹⁵ of their lands and traditions in the first place is made poignant in the community through the power of drama. The three plays under discussion *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, and *Ameh Oboni the Great* share the preoccupation of African resistance of European imperialism. This imperialist interference, according to E.B. Uwatt, "terminated the sovereignty of traditional African monarchies in the late nineteenth century, and early twentieth"²⁹⁶, and we can add in the mid-twentieth century. Egoism and thirst for power accounted for both the Acting Consul-General James Phillips refusal to respect the instruction of Benin peoples' constituted authority and J.D. Muffet's insubordination towards Attah of Igala, as well as Colonel Frederick Lugard's crave for military superiority against the natives of Sokoto Caliphate.²⁹⁷ Lugard unilaterally nullified all existing treaties with Sokoto and claimed right of conquest as the basis for British colonial rule.²⁹⁸ The British punitive expedition or massacre of Sokoto soldiers and their monarch Attahiru that formed Yerima's *Attahiru* are presented in a lesser tense style than *The Trials* whose protagonist is trapped within the shortcoming of human nature.

²⁹³ This statement is based on information provided by some indigene of Igalaland to Ahmed Yerima, which he shared with me during an interview on July 22, 2010.

²⁹⁴ Ogbaa, Kalu, *Understanding Things fall Apart: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999)

²⁹⁵ The destruction of Benin Palace, the killing of Attahiru of Sokoto-a religious leader by British soldiers and the act of suicide carried out by Attah Ameh Oboni are considered as desecration of the land by indigenous community.

²⁹⁶ Uwatt, E.B., "Yerima's Theatre and Nigerian History: The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen and Attahiru", in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 123

²⁹⁷ According to Thomas Hobbes, "man is naturally an egoist and a hedonist, in pursuit of egoistic satisfaction; men perpetually and restlessly seek for power after power until death, see Molesworth, William, B., *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, 1844), 17

²⁹⁸ Frederick J.D. Lugard. *Collected Annual Reports for Northern Nigeria 1900-1911* (London: Colonial Office, 1914), 157

The Trials and *Attahiru* chronicle the collapse of African traditional institutions just at the beginning of colonialism in Nigeria, this situation also marked the collapse of defence against British imperial subjugation in any part of the country. In 1956, shortly before Nigerian independence in October 1960, Ameh Oboni, the Attah Igala, monarch and spiritual head of the Igala people became the final victim of the colonial intrigues, harassment and disgrace of traditional institution, and cultural representation. Ameh Oboni, rather than seeing his kingdom in the hands of the imperialists, left the scene in a way he believed to be honourable by committing suicide as had Ovonramwen, Nana of Itsekiri, Jaja of Opobo and many more before him. According to Chris Egharevba, Ameh Oboni “asserts his heroic status by achieving immortality in the hearts of his people in spite of the diverse machinations of the colonial powers to subvert and subjugate the traditional order in Igalaland.”²⁹⁹ Yerima uses the travails of the Attah in the hands of the colonialist and the political intrigues of Northern Nigeria as the creative muse for the construction of *Ameh Oboni the Great*.

It is interesting to note that the version of Yerima’s Ovonramwen’s story is slightly different from that of Ola Rotimi,³⁰⁰ who is reputed to have written a heartrending dramatic piece on the tragedy of the Benin Kingdom of late nineteenth century. The first play by Ola Rotimi deals with a long period in the life of the monarch, the palace chiefs’ intrigues against the enthronement of the Oba and the people’s reaction to the circumstances. According to A.D. Akoh, “Rotimi portrays the humanism of the Oba within the limits of his strife to have a firm grip at his kingdom bedevilled by internal and external distractions.”³⁰¹ Yerima’s play³⁰² focuses on the state of mind of the monarch in the twilight of his reign. Yerima noted that, on the basis of new materials made available to him by the Benin palace, the play afforded him a chance to

²⁹⁹ Egharevba, C., “Destiny of Sacrifice: Ahmed Yerima’s *Ameh Oboni The Great*”, in Uwemedimo, Atakpo & Stephen E. Inegbe (eds.), *Making Images, Remaking-Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern business Press, 2007), 94-95

³⁰⁰ Ola Rotimi’s play is titled *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (Benin: Ethiope Publishing, 1974)

³⁰¹ Akoh, A.D., “Towards a Historiography of the Text: The Plays of Ahmed Yerima”, in Gbemisola Adeoti, (ed.), *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 126

³⁰² Apart from the two plays on Oba Ovonramwen and the Benin Kigdom, there are other two other versions of Oba Ovonramwen by Iyamu and Ogieriaikhu. The two versions were staged in Benin during the centenary anniversary of the British “expedition” in 1997. See Ogieriaikhu, Emwinma, *Oba Ovonramwen* (London: University of London Press, 1966). There is also comment on Emwinma versions of the Ovonramwen play in Ahmed Yerima’s *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifcs: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (Lagos: Bookplus Nigeria Ltd, 2003)

exonerate the king and become his advocate.³⁰³ It is possible that, because the material he refers to here is from the Benin palace, it is bound to be favourable to the monarch, thereby making the view biased. The fact remains that both Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* and Yerima's *The Trials* have maintained the neutrality of the King in the killing of the Acting Consul-General James Phillips and his party. In *The Trials*, after Oba Ovonramwen was informed of the white men's persistence to visit the palace at an inauspicious time, he pleads with the chiefs thus: "...a white man my people the word is caution."³⁰⁴ The monarch further advised: "One does not offer to share with his teeth the meat that he forbids. The white man's ways are different. If we do not want war, then let us treat them with care, giving them no reasons to stay in Bini."³⁰⁵

The new information which Yerima gathered in Benin is supported by a source contemporary to the fact D.P. Bleasby, who was very familiar with Benin during the year before the expedition gives a detailed description of the monarch and his contribution to the events:

If the men did not actually die in the fight, which must have taken place when the king's men came down on the expedition, then I have every faith in their safety. From what I know of the king, I don't think he would kill the men if his people captured them alive. It is not always known to the King what is taking place in his own town. His chiefs know, and I believe they keep him in ignorance of many things. When the King ascends the throne of Benin, he goes into his house and is supposed never to leave it alive. He is given servants and stewards, and there are several houses each in its own compound, but beyond these the king of Benin never goes....I repeat we have more to fear from the chiefs than from the king. It is they who put obstacle, in way of trade. It is quite possible for white men to be in the city of Benin and the King not to be informed about it.³⁰⁶

We see that Yerima's portrayal of the king is not completely different from who and what the monarch represents in the life of not only his people and the society but also from colonial sources. The account of the king written by Captain Alan Boisragon who alongside R.F. Locke, escaped the offensive on the British party, is poignant: "He was supposed to be the impersonation of the

³⁰³ Yerima, *The Trials*, see the author's note to the play.

³⁰⁴ Yerima, *The Trials*, 34

³⁰⁵ Yerima, *The Trials*, 38

³⁰⁶ D.P. Bleasby in an interview titled "All About Benin" in *Star*, Issue 5838, April 3, 1897, 2

Juju or religion of the country and, was in consequence never allowed to leave the Compound and only to be seen by his people once a year.”³⁰⁷

The British government’s desire to control the trade and trading routes within these region is the reason for its expedition and the sacking of Benin, Sokoto and Igalaland: the three monarchical domains at the center of these plays; the desire born out of the interest of European nations to control both trade, economic and human resources of a territory they described as an otherwise “dark continent” running with barbaric and “gentle savages.”³⁰⁸

What appears as a truthful interpretation is in the play corroborated by Lugard in a discussion with Abbass:

This is not a religious war. It is a war of the superiority of wills. I have the machines and guns; you have what I need to trade with, so if one of us is stubborn or refuses to cooperate then a little nudge is needed. But, you all get excited with your charms, amulets, and religion; you refused to be our friends.³⁰⁹

Yerima shows evidence of historical research in the three plays under discussion. In order for his plays to not be considered another historical text, he blended fact with fiction in order to achieve composite and well balanced dramatic creations. While the works have historical references, their strength is not dependent on this. For example, in *Ameh Oboni*, Yerima introduces folk ritual and entertainment tradition when Attah Ameh Oboni transits from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors by creating a meeting between the ancestral masquerade and the monarch.

Structure

These plays are written in a style that allows for fluidity in presentation. *The Trials* opens from Oba Ovonramwen’s cell aboard a boat, whereas *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni* open in a palace. This is because *The Trials* is built on the dramatic technique of flashback, beginning from the end rather than the beginning of the events as in the other two plays. In his incarcerated state, Oba Ovonramwen recalls, with an aching heart, the events that brought him to this place. He decides to be the story-teller as, according to him it may “never be written well if I don’t tell it myself... He, the white man, desired my Empire and envied my

³⁰⁷ Boisragon, Alan, *The Benin Massacre* (London: Methuen, 1897), 165

³⁰⁸ This is the description of the Benin people as used by Alan Boisragon, *The Benin Massacre*,

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³⁰⁹ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 56

position and wanted my throne”³¹⁰ Oba Ovonramwen assumes the role of a narrator:

Oba Ovonramwen, son of Adolo. Here in subdued glory with the white man’s feathers fluttering like a peacock unsure of what weather of the day to spread its wonderful, colourful wings. Here I am, posing for the white man’s jeers [...] He desired my empire and envied my position, and wanted my throne. [...] Here I am aboard the British yacht in leg irons.³¹¹

From this point, the events follow chronological sequences drawing on the Oba’s desire to pursue with a bit of trepidation the insistent request of the Acting Consul-General Phillips’ visit to Benin City during the Ugie festival when the monarch is mandated to be in seclusion, and not attend to any guests. According to Benin tradition, during the annual Ugie festival, the King is not allowed any visitors because of certain ceremonial rites he had to perform.³¹² In *Ameh Oboni*, the Attah did not appear until the third scene. The opening scene is between Adigede-Attah, Okolo and some other palace officials. The non-appearance of the King within the first two scenes foretells that something is awry as no sound must be made in the palace until the cognizance of the Attah’s health.

The issue concerning the King is the conflict within him brought about by a recurring dream. The “dream” motif used by Ahmed Yerima in *The Trials* also becomes a propelling factor in *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni*. The dream becomes a metaphor in all three plays; because in every account it is suggested that the monarchs have a supernatural foreknowledge of the impending disaster that is to befall their various kingdoms. In *The Trials*, Oba Ovonramwen dreamt for seven consecutive days and, after the last day and towards the end of the play, he reports: “I had another dream last night. This time I saw my father, Adolo. With a sweet and gentle smile, he hugged me with a reassuring grip. He beckoned me to follow.”³¹³ *Ameh Oboni* also had the same dream repeatedly for seven days, “A dream, Ohloga, one that drives fear into my soul. A dream repeated for seven days at the same time and same place is no longer a dream

³¹⁰ Yerima, *The Trials*, 19

³¹¹ Yerima, *The Trials*, 19

³¹² Chief Nosakhare Isekhure (current chief priest Benin kingdom) in an interview conducted by Mike Jimoh titled “Benin and its Mystique”

http://www.edoworld.net/Benin_and_its_mystique.html/ accessed Monday August 30, 2010

³¹³ Yerima, *The Trials*, 79

but a message.”³¹⁴ The dream of Attahiru is more elaborate as he recounts it to his son Mai Wurno and his spiritualist, Mallam:

Always it starts in the early hours of the morning. There is smoke, heavy smoke. It is at the battlefield. Dead warriors litter everywhere. Then images of my ancestors appear in a circle round me. They pass the flag from one hand to another. As they chant, *la ilah illallah*, I watch them helplessly stretching my hands as Caliph Atiku gives it to Muazu, then to Caliph Umoru, then to Abdul-Rahman and, as he passes it to me, the flag falls, dripping blood. In all the smoky confusion, Dan Magaji tries to help me pick it up, but he is tripped by a white pebble, he too, falling on his sword. The dream subsumes me in thought.³¹⁵

Attahiru’s dream reveals three facts to the reader-audience. The first fact is that he lists the various Caliphs before him in order to make known to the people his right to the throne; secondly, the manner of his death as a warrior in battle through white pebbles which becomes symbolic of the British forces; and thirdly the falling flag becomes the impending downfall of Sokoto Caliphate.³¹⁶ The significance of the seven dreams of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru, and Ameh Oboni is to re-enforce the constant presence of belief in traditional African culture, the number seven signifying as, in the Christian Bible, completion and time of appraisal. From the beginning through to the end, Yerima uses songs and poetry to propel the mood and loose exposition of *Ameh Oboni* and *Attahiru*. Uwatt recognizes this looseness in *Attahiru* when he posits: “Although *The Trials* is Yerima’s first attempt at writing an historical play, it seems to be more successful than *Attahiru* in stagecraft, construction and development of plot, and the evocation of royal dignity and cultural glamour.”³¹⁷ The dearth of royal dignity and cultural paraphernalia that Uwatt bemoans in *Attahiru* is heavily present in *Ameh Oboni* to the extent that they slow down the development and pace of the drama itself. Moreover, based on the period of ascendancy to the throne of Sokoto, such paraphernalia could not exist at the time. His period of ascendancy to the throne of the Caliph coincided with the period that the British annexed his domain and, as a warrior, he

³¹⁴ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 17

³¹⁵ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 12

³¹⁶ Yerima, *Fragmented Thoughts*, 197

³¹⁷ Uwatt, Effiok, B., “Yerima’s Theatre and Nigerian History: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen and Attahiru*” in Gbemisola Adeoti, ed., *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima’s Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 2007), 124

assumes the position to embark on war of territorial defense that claims his life and that of his warriors. The seriousness of the issue and the revolutionary stance of the monarch would not allow for development along the line of cultural glamour or the evocation of royal dignity. Sultan Attahiru inherited crises that had been foretold to bring down the caliphate a century earlier and Yerima capitalized on this. Finally, in presenting a classical protagonist, delving on palace paraphernalia, may reduce the intensity of the tragedy that the monarch symbolized. Thus, Yerima refrained from displays of elaborate ceremony in order to concentrate on Attahiru's psychological disposition. The slow development in the beginning of *Ameh Oboni* is seen by Chris Egharevba as relevant to the play's overall aesthetic:

The waking up of the Attah is a ritual performed by Ogbe which stresses the divinity of the Attah. By the door of the inner chamber, Ogbe prostrates with his head on the ground three times toward the door. Then he proceeds to calling the praise names of the Attah [...] this royal protocol of waking up a king from sleep is in itself beautiful with its wonderful ululation, its assurance of life, its celebration of the majestic and glorious nature of the king.³¹⁸

While *Attahiru* begins with a rapid development after the Sultan learns the content of the letter from the British High Commissioner, Frederick Luggard, *Ameh Oboni* on the other hand, begins to develop in the third scene when Attah awakes from his terrifying dream, the seventh in seven days. As the fourth scene opens, Ukagidi is made Chief Idirisu Ukagidi, Gago of Dekina, and district head. Afterwards, the chronology of events does not follow a continuous sequence. In scene five, Attah reports on the machination of Igala chiefs and prominent citizens and on the various reports written to District Officer Muffet, thus:

Attah: Oh Odoba, how great you are. Sometimes the tongue of man sings a song different from what the heart whispers. The same voices I have just heard have accused me of high-handedness. Some say I am stubborn. Some even say I am arrogant.

³¹⁸ Egharevba, C., "Destiny of Sacrifice: Ahmed Yerima's *Ameh Oboni the Great*", in Uwemedimo, Atakpo & Stephen E. Inegbe (eds.), *Making Images, Remaking-Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern business Press, 2007), 94-95

Odoma-Atta: The eloquence cannot be matched. But be gentle on your sons, great king

Attah: Are my sons gentle with me? They strip me naked with their tongues at the tea dinners with the District Officer and then come here to coat me in beautiful praises so that I can show them more of my naked body for them to pour insults on at their white man's palace.³¹⁹

After this accusation, Attah sends a letter to the District Officer. In scene six, Muffet dictates a letter to his secretary accusing the Attah of heinous crimes including human sacrifices and being too powerful of a ruler. Muffet, desirous of the king's removal from the throne, writes a petition to the Governor. This is the only scene where an external voice accuses the King rather than his reported speech of the intrigues within his kingdom. However, beginning in scene four, the King properly briefs the audience of many schemes of perceived enemies of his throne. In scene eight, Attah addresses his subjects after he returns from the meeting with the Governor in Kaduna:

I have just returned from Kaduna, where I went to see the chief of the white men.³²⁰

In scene nine, the audience is led to believe that he is in Dekina with Ukagidi, on the way to his palace:

Abutu: Sir... your royal Highness. The situation in Idah is tense. The District Officer, Muffet, thinks it is unwise for you to come to Idah now.

Attah: A trick...a wise trick. One tells me to go, another says don't come. A trick aided by the Gods? (In a cool, slow voice) What you say is sacrilege! No one tells the wind where to blow, no one!

Abutu: We...we felt it was good to advise your Highness, that was why I was sent to you.³²¹

The confusion in the location of the two scenes, and which scene comes first, is pronounced in the stage direction. This is because until now we are not familiar with the particular part of the kingdom where Atta's palace is located. Since the

³¹⁹ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 45

³²⁰ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 45

³²¹ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 51

setting of the play moves from one part of the kingdom to the other, it is important to know where a particular action is taking place. Moreover, in Atta's present state, one needs to know how he moves from one location to the other.

Ayingba. A crowd is formed, all in expectation of the Attah. Adigede-Attah comes in with two old palace chiefs. Adigede-Attah comes before the crowd. The crowd is noisy with expectations.³²²

Dekina. Inner chamber, Ukagidi is with the Attah.³²³

It is noted that prior to scene eight, there was no mention of the location of the Attah's palace. The description in scene one is simply:

Darkstage. Sound of early morning birds and cockerel. Lights slowly come on to reveal the courtroom of a palace....³²⁴

This inconsistency is not visible in both *The Trials* and *Attahiru*, where Yerima clearly describes the location and movement of the monarchs in the stage directions. However, the ending of these plays seem confusing for a reader of the texts as well and leaves much room for improvement. It shows that the performance will clarify the knotty climax that is quickly becoming consistent in Yerima's works. However, the previous scenes and the scene where Ameh Oboni committed suicide by hanging, are too loose in construction and the grounds for the action are not well laid. For example, Ameh Oboni's suicide speech is not in conformity with his characterization, not even the curse at the end. The dying speech of Attahiru becomes so plain and insincere that it does not command the required mood. It probably would have sufficed if Yerima had described their deaths or moments leading up to it. Another issue is the afterlife action immediately after the death of Attah Ameh Oboni, the stage direction reads:

(He puts the noose on his neck. He jerks and remains still for a while. The lights go off and slowly come back on again. Just then the drums of the "Ajamaledé" masquerade is heard. The Ajamaledé dances until it goes to the Attah whose neck is in the noose)³²⁵

³²² Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 45

³²³ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 48

³²⁴ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 11

³²⁵ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 56

After this description the next speech is from Ameh Oboni:

Who dares mimic the dance steps of my masquerade?³²⁶

There seems to be no need for this speech and the subsequent one in the scene as it gives the impression that the Attah is still alive. Yerima could have made Attah Ameh Oboni's transition to the world of the ancestors' into a new scene itself or described the action in a ritual form with music and dance accompaniment.

Characters

All plays are product of a society, and since the playwright sets out to write for an audience, whatever type, "he must be aware that his characters are familiar social types which emerge from his society so that both actors and audience can relate to them."³²⁷ If drama is a literary composition involving conflict, action, crisis and atmosphere designed to be acted by players on a stage before an audience this then means that the playwright tells his story through character(s), whose portrayal and development he uses to balance the plot of the play. Therefore, the character(s) development is crucial to the construction of a good drama. I believe that, in tragedy, the playwright is mandated to create characters that will be imbued with characteristics that will make the reader-audience feel the emotion and spirit of the character. The importance of character as both the vehicle and force in dramatic text demands of the playwright a good understanding of what he wants the audience to read or feel in the character. The materials for Yerima's *The Trials*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni* are in the public domain archive and part of oral history, thus, are available for him to consult. He couches fact with fiction in a systematic way to project the protagonists in a larger-than-life frame. All three plays have, as part of their title (*The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni the Great*), the names of the protagonists. To the society that owns the stories being adapted for stage, the events are tragic. Oba Ovonramwen, Sultan Attahiru, and Attah Ameh Oboni represent all that traditional Nigerian societies stood for before, during and after colonialism. They represent the spirit of resistance. Among the prominent characters in *The Trials* are Ologbosere, a son-in-law of the King who doubled as the war general that sparked-off the war by playing into the carefully laid plans of the Acting-Consul General James Phillips

³²⁶ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 56

³²⁷ Yerima, Ahmed, *Basic Techniques in Playwriting* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2003), 90

against the advice of the monarch; Obaseki, the British mole in Benin City, a traitor and impostor; Ezomo the war chief; and Chief Obakhavbaye, who exonerates Oba Ovonramwen in the trial by testifying that he is responsible for the plot to kill the visitors against the King's earlier warning. Among the European characters are Acting-Consul General Philips, whose personal desire for promotion leads to his untimely death in the hands of the Benin warriors and Moore, whose position as the substantive Consul-General leads the British Army against Benin kingdom. He also records the testimony of Obakhavbaye exonerating the King:

Let it be entered that the testimonies of the other prisoners agree with the fact that the Oba did not order the massacre.³²⁸

Ahmed Yerima imbues his powerful characters of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru and Ameh Oboni with maximum level of human traits; however, he moved the latter two to a higher level. This is because, for them, death must come before dishonour. In the case of Attahiru, even when the fall of the Caliphate had already been decreed a decade earlier, he died for what he believed to be just. The plays are tragedies and depend on the internal make-up of the leading characters in terms of mannerism, speeches and actions to effect heroic attributes of these characters. Unlike Oba Ovonramwen, Yerima gives Attahiru and Attah Ameh Oboni the hubris synonymous with Greek protagonists. Both characters, not beingsatisfied with being a noble hero-character, explore their hubristo the fullest to defend the honour of their societies and cultural institutions with their different lives. This hubris, instead of being negative, becomes a virtue. The stoicism with which they faced their deaths in defence of their various institutions raises them to the status of the divine. Anger and honour push Attah Ameh Oboni to the point of suicide. He refused to allow his culture and traditional institution be ridiculed by men who, because of their possession of superior weapons disregard the belief of the people of Igala. To remain in Dekina because D.O. Muffet demands it will make the District Officer greater than the institution of Attah who is likened to god by his people. The ultimate intension of Muffet is captured in his letter to the governor:

To be frank, [Y]our [E]xcclency, the man is feared by his people, and I find it extremely impossible in the present circumstances to work with him. For the indirect rule system to work perfectly here, I must be seen

³²⁸ Yerima, *The Trials*, 77

to have total control. The present Attah of Igala is too independent minded for me to work with. [...] This is why I seek your approval to have him deposed from his present position.³²⁹

For Attah Ameh Oboni, attainment of immortality becomes the means to maintain the pride of the Attah as an institution greater than any individual. This action draws to Attah Ameh Oboni both individual and communal empathy:

The whole crowd shouts, “Gaabai’du!” The music sounds louder as the villagers dance carrying the corpse of the late Attah in. They sing to his glory, and take him into the palace.³³⁰

Etemahi sums up the crowds actions as thus:

See how well they send him into the shrines of his fathers. See how well they accept him in death. Look back, great king, and see your escorts in thousands cry. Gaabai’du! Sleep well, the son of Inikpi! We all have stains of his blood in our hands ...either for watching while it lasted...and doing nothing or for taking an active part in the dance of woe [...] I must go and bury our son, like a great king that he was.³³¹

In reference to the other plays, the end is included in the beginning, especially in regard to the faith of Attahiru. Like King Oedipus in Sophocles’ play of the same title, and King Odewale in Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, the future of both Sultan Attahiru and Sokoto caliphate have been foretold. This account is contained in a historical work by S.J. Hogben and A.H.M. KirkGreen:

One often comes across the alleged prophecy that the Fulani Empire of Sokoto would last for exactly one hundred years; and that is the time span from acknowledgement of Usman dan Fodio as Sarkin Musulumi at Gudu and the victory at Lake Kwotto in June 1804 to the death of

³²⁹ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 39-40

³³⁰ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 62

³³¹ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 62-63

the fugitive, Sultan Attahiru, in July 1903. Lugard credits this prophecy to the Shehu in person.³³²

Honour and faith become Attahiru's vehicle to attainment of divine status. He, like the other two monarchs mentioned earlier, is the custodian and protector of the religion, culture and tradition of their various domains. It seems to me that Oba Ovonramwen refuses to transcend the physical hero-character to become hero-god because, as Oba Ovonramwen bows to the caprices of the white colonialists, he removes the essence of his kingship and the sacred position of the divine-like ruler. His Majesty of Benin has had to fly³³³ into hiding, leaving his kingdom without a ruler, only to come out of his hiding place to remove his crown and bow to the representation of another monarch. Boisragon had to ridicule Benin religion, the position of the Oba and his cowardice, as follows:

The King himself, according to native accounts, had not nearly so much to say towards it, and was more or less a figure-head. He was supposed to be the impersonation of the Juju or religion of the country, and was in consequence never allowed to leave the Compound and only to be seen by his people once a year. The mere fact of his having had to run away and leave Benin City ought to destroy, to a great extent, the belief of the natives in the power of their Juju.³³⁴

When Oba Ovonramwen bowed, I believe that the whole Benin traditional institution was slaughtered in order to preserve the life and innocence of a man (Ovonramwen) rather than the Obaship institution and the society. This is at variance with Yerima's submission that:

In his dreams and internal struggle, Ovonramwen steps from Oba that he is to show himself as a victim of circumstance, hence, the overflow of empathy when he removes his crown and is forced to bow to the picture of Queen Victoria.³³⁵

³³² Hogben, S.J., Kirk Greene, A.H.M., *The Emirates of Northern Nigeria* (London, 1966), 410. This quotation is taken from Ahmed Yerima's *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature* (Lagos: Book Plus, 2003), 197

³³³ Boisragon, Alan, *The Benin Massacre* (London: Methuen, 1897), 27

³³⁴ Boisragon, Alan, *The Benin Massacre* (London: Methuen, 1897), 165

³³⁵ Yerima, *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics*, 48

The tragedy of Ovonramwen as personal pain, he should have completed the cycle of life at this instant and, therefore, the empathy he generates from the reader-audience should be lower compared to the empathic feeling of the audience towards the Benin kingdom as a whole. After Oba Ovonramwen had given himself up to the British, he was dragged, in the words of G.N. Uzoigwe, “in chains and exhibited in market places throughout the kingdom by Ralph Moore.”³³⁶ To allow his sacredness to be so desecrated, Oba Ovonramwen sacrificed the tradition, culture and the various institutions in Benin in order to achieve a momentary reprieve in life, and this in itself is a tragedy of a people. Thus, as a tragic-hero, the pain for Oba Ovonramwen being the monarch on the throne at that time that Benin becomes subject to another king. In this argument, we find a compact, complex critique of the contradiction in the person of Oba Ovonramwen, the Benin institution and the concept of tragedy being put forward in *The Trials*. Yerima recognizes this when he writes after the performance of the play: “In the moment of empathy, the Nigerian audience and, indeed, the African audience, believes that it is the whole of Africa that is being forced to bow, rather than a character on stage.”³³⁷ However, it is still possible to argue that Sultan³³⁸ Attahiru and Attah Ameh Oboni create a lasting tragic-image for the motive of immortality by skipping over logical reasoning to consciously throw themselves at death. If the action of these latter Kings is thus viewed, then the question will be: why do Christians attribute Christ’s self-sacrifice to divine will? Like King Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the fate of Sultan Attahiru and Attah Ameh Oboni rests entirely with the gods, so, it becomes nearly impossible to escape. Attahiru accepts the burden of martyrdom as decreed by the gods, with his words:

If, indeed, there is a prophecy that must end Shehu’s Empire in my reign as Caliph, then this is no time to mourn, but a time of gratitude. [...] A time to stand firm, defending the faith and carrying out the wish of the Almighty. (Pause) And what can I say to him, but Al-hamdu lilah!³³⁹

If we consider the fatalistic death of Sultan Attahiru and Ameh Oboni as having been orchestrated by the gods and their lives having been shaped by their fates,

³³⁶ Nzoigwe, G.N., *Britain and the Conquest of Africa: The Age of Salisbury* (New York: NOK, 1974), 97

³³⁷ Yerima, *Fragmented Thoughts and Specifics*, 48

³³⁸ Sultan is a noun for the paramount ruler of Sokoto.

³³⁹ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 14

they become elevated to the place of the ancestor gods, therefore, on their part there is no psychological complexity in their final action as mortals. British subjects like Phillips, Moore, Lugard, and Muffet become causal agency to the accomplishment of the gods' desire. What Ahmed Yerima has done with *The Trials*, *Attahiru*, and *Ameh Oboni*, is to thrust on the reader-audience the fact that moral dilemmas lay at the heart of man, "but that divine providence existed to reward or condemn the individual appropriately."³⁴⁰

Language

E.N. Obiechina captures the extent to which African writers have matured in adapting the language imposed on them by the colonial imperialists for their own use:

In the transition from an oral to a written literature, African writers have borrowed European languages as vehicles to express the African reality. [...] African writers can effectively bend the foreign languages in which they write to resonate the African mind, situation, and experience.³⁴¹

Apart from popular theatre performances, occasional drama written in some indigenous languages, and Nigerian video-film in ethnic languages, almost all-Nigerian drama is written in the English language. There are various reasons for this, but one major factor is that the largest numbers of those who see or read drama in Nigeria are of the literate class. Institutions of higher learning remain almost the only fertile ground for dramatic-text creation and consumption in the country. Ahmed Yerima and most of the other literary dramatists before him, as well as his contemporaries, write in English in order to serve this academic constituency. In spite of this knowledge, proponents of African indigenous language based literature have argued that, if these writers had appropriated any of the indigenous language in their writing, their plays would have been communicated to a larger audience. However, the argument of appropriateness of indigenous languages for African literature or drama is not within the purview of this work.

In the plays studied, Ahmed Yerima uses language as a signifier of tragedy. He imbues each character in these plays with a unique language

³⁴⁰ Wallace, J., *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54

³⁴¹ See the inner cover of E.N. Obiechina's *Language and Themes: Essays on African Literature* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1990)

appropriate for their status, station and mood, in order, to achieve a required sense of tragedy. As M.L. Mele points out, proverbs and some figurative expressions are intrinsically related to culture and reflect and safeguard a society's way of life. [...] it incorporates materials, social and ideological features of a culture such as technology, forms of social organization, values, beliefs and morals which are coded (linguistically) and passed down as tradition.³⁴² Language, in this case, transcends the verbal to the non-vocal communication mode covered in the dialogue between characters in the plays and the reader-audience. According to Jennifer Wallace, "the translation of trauma into language is itself the source of further bewilderment."³⁴³

In contrast to Wole Soyinka, who is often accused of obscurantism, Yerima enriches the reading and comprehension of his historical dramas by using proverbs, wise-sayings and metaphors. The plays are laden with language that is seen as the transliteration of African indigenous tongues. The reader-audience of the plays needs to understand the culture from which they emerged and his use of language to achieve characterization. He distinguishes royal language, the language of European characters, and that of the ordinary members of the society. Among the chiefs in *Ameh Oboni*, *Attahiru* and *Oba Ovonramwen's* palaces, the language of communication becomes poetic, renders in proverbs, parody, and metaphor. Thus, this language gives the plays elevation. A good example is when Attah says:

Are my sons gentle with me? They strip me naked with their tongues at the tea dinners with the District Officer and then come here to coat me in beautiful robes of praises so that I can show them more of my naked body for them to pour insults on at their white man's palace.³⁴⁴

The use of figurative expressions is most consistent in all the plays. For example, the reference to the naked body referred to by Attah Ameh Oboni in the above quotation is deeper than its literal meaning. Instead, the term is used

³⁴² Mele, M.L., "Nigerian Languages and Conflict Resolution: The Case of Proverbs and Figurative Expressions" in Ozo-Mekuri Ndimele (ed.), *Nigerian Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Reforms: A Festschrift for Ayo Bamgbose* (Port-Harcourt: The Linguistics Association of Nigeria (LAN), 2007), 246. The quotation used here is taken directly from an undated online article by Sanusi, I.O., Omoloso, R.K., *The Role of Yoruba Proverbs in Preserving Archaic Lexical Items and Expressions in Yoruba*, (University of Ilorin publication) <http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/publications/omoloso/>, 11/09/2010

³⁴³ Wallace, J., *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113

³⁴⁴ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 25

to represent the secrecy of his power and kingdom. Madawaki in *Attahiru* is not referring to a physical donkey in his statement, either, when he says: “You did well, your highness. No matter how well one glorifies a donkey with beautiful apparels at durbar, a donkey is still a donkey, and a horse, a horse.”³⁴⁵ Those familiar with cultural life in the northern part of Nigeria know that durbar is a festival of horses and riders popular in the Northern part of Nigeria. Even, if the statement refers to an actual donkey, the meaning of the words and circumstances of its utterance suggests something much more, and the wisdom of it is only visible to those who can decipher it. One will have to access the significance and the underlying meaning of an adage like, “...My friends, it is not kindness but the need for a clean mouth that makes the hippopotamus open its mouth wide for the river bird to peck at”³⁴⁶, in order to appreciate the richness of the play’s language. Of the two statements above, the reference to “donkey” in *Attahiru* and “hippopotamus” in *The Trials* signify white men. The statement also indicates a broader understanding of human nature: as most proverbs, they have a general meaning and specific “implementation” adapted to the context.

Ahmed Yerima, whose gift is simple and localized language and not obscurantic poetry, creates characters with both expressionistic and impressionistic speeches laden with traces of African indigenous languages and thought, yet he renders them in beautiful English language. For example:

I clear the earth and another says the land belongs to his mother. I plant my seeds, and another says it belongs to his father. My seeds grow, and he says he worked hard during the planting season. Like the lazy python, he has always had eyes on my eggs...³⁴⁷

The reference to land in the statement is explicit enough; it is simply in relation to the land grabbing and control and the exploitative system adopted by the British imperialists during the scramble for the partitioning of Africa. After confiscating the lands of the community, the British mandate taxes and rent from them in order to farm the same land.

Ahmed Yerima utilizes his knowledge of Yoruba proverbial lore and oral tradition to maximum benefit. He adequately employs the poetic significance of language in the discourse of the characters in his plays. A

³⁴⁵ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 20

³⁴⁶ Yerima, *The Trials*, 19

³⁴⁷ Yerima, *The Trials*, 70

significant moment of this is when Oba Ovonramwen used euphemism such as “new wife”, “brother” and “stomach” to reveal the moral probity and complicity of his palace chiefs, especially Obaseki:

I asked my new wife to stay with my brother until I thatch my roof.
Soon she begins to put on weight, and she says he is kind and gentle.
But slowly, the day breaks and her stomach reveals the secret.³⁴⁸

This proverbial lore laden with imagery becomes a narrative device as Chief Obakhavbaye prays with Ovonramwen not to flee the palace when the British expedition approaches:

The Leopard who hunts down the prey relentlessly Ogbaisi
The second only to the gods
Don't turn away
We your Chiefs erred
And now our act like an oily finger has stained your white robes
Ogbaisi we should have listened
We should have known
That like the Seer, you saw this end
But set like the lost dogs
We galloped ourselves into disaster
Ogbaisi for the sake of our souls
Don't turn away.³⁴⁹

Here the King, as a fearless warrior, is compared to a leopard for many reasons; most notably because the animal is strong and instills fear in its preys and for its royal status as being a member of the cat family. In fact, one of the praise names of the King is leopard as used by Eyebokan, the Itsekiri chief, “Tell the king that it is Eyebokan. [...] When he hears my name, the leopard will see me (shout).”³⁵⁰ Ovonramwen acknowledges this representation after his trial: “Oh suddenly, the leopard's limbs grow weak.”³⁵¹ Moreover, it is common in Africa to praise the king using the name of one strong and the community's favourite, wild animal. The reference to “now our act like an oily finger has stained your

³⁴⁸ Yerima, *The Trials*, 73

³⁴⁹ Yerima, *The Trials*, 75

³⁵⁰ Yerima, *The Trials*, 35

³⁵¹ Yerima, *The Trials*, 79

robes”³⁵², simply talks of the shame brought upon the institution of Obaship by the Chiefs dastardly acts. Since the robe of the King and the noble is expected to always be clean, especially in public, wearing a robe with oil stains signifies a child that is not tutored in the importance of etiquette. Among the Yorubas, of which history has it that the Benin descended, white is the colour that signifies purity of the King’s royal robe and any oil stain will become apparent. The word “robe” here is not used to mean ordinary cloth, but the person of the Oba in whom there is no variableness or fault. In fact, reference is made to the link between stain, dirt and whiteness; plainness of the royal thought in another part of the text:

Ovonramwen our Lord
 A rare one that has no stain
 Nor does he has dirt
 One whose character is as white as the white bird (enibokun)³⁵³

Proverbial lore is utilized more in *Ameh Oboni*. Attah Ameh Oboni’s speech, which is too long at times, bears the imprint of proverb:

(Gives a great sigh) First, it starts with the twinkle of a star, it shines bright, and then it dims into total darkness, as if one blows out the oil lantern.³⁵⁴

With every speech uttered by the three monarchs and palace chiefs, imagery, proverbs and other figurative codification of everyday language makes clear the distinction in class and status.

The proverbial lore and traditional idioms that seem to be defining features in the language of *The Trials* and *Ameh Oboni* enjoy almost the same level of presence with straight and plain English language in *Attahiru*. For example, there is no delineation between the speech of Morland and Attahiru when the former suggested the enthronement of Muhammed Al-Tahir Aliyu as Caliph when Attahiru left for Burmi:

Morland: We need our man there. There is the prince, the present Caliph is supposed to have beaten in the race as the final choice,

³⁵² Yerima, *The Trials*, 75

³⁵³ Yerima, *The Trials*, 78

³⁵⁴ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 17

Muhammed Attahiru Aliyu. He could be more amiable towards us. I have my contact that can get him.³⁵⁵

And:

Attahiru: ... The Emir of Burmi tells me that my Brother Prince Muhammed Al-Tahir Aliyu climbs the throne as the new Caliph. I wish him luck with his infidel friends. But he must remember that...it is not how long but what you did while on the throne that people will remember... let them remember us all here as heroes not as Whiteman's slaves...that when it was time to say no in the name of Allah, one humble Muslim led a group of believers to say no to colonial oppression even at the cost of our lives! We shall never surrender.³⁵⁶

Though, towards the end of Attahiru's speech the reader-audience is able to ascertain that it is the tone of a wronged character talking from a courageous angle, yet the tone of the language is no different from the earlier one by Morland. Furthermore, in a later instance, the Caliph came to the knowledge through prophecy that his reign would be the last in the Caliphate. This information is especially important, as this knowledge of being the last is supposed to draw the reader-audience's sympathy. The simple language that is employed distracts from the mood. However, it is difficult to ascertain if the simplicity is well intentioned because of the faith of Attahiru or it is a mistake:

Attahiru: If indeed, there is a prophecy that must end Shehu's Empire in my reign as Caliph, then this is no time to mourn, but a time of gratitude. A time of prayers and great thanks to Allah that I am the chosen one...³⁵⁷

This is not a tragic speech; it is too superfluous and lacking in emotion. A more appropriate speech full of imagery and proverbs and vivid illustration is rendered by Ubandoma:

³⁵⁵ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 35

³⁵⁶ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 61

³⁵⁷ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 43

Our case reminds me of my mother and her little story about the neighbour who kept saying that the matter of plundering in the neighbourhood did not concern him as long as it did not happen within his family and household...we stood aside and watched while they plundered our neighbours for too long, this may well be the downfall of Sokoto.³⁵⁸

In short, this codified language that is laden with traditional lore synonymous with African elders' speeches embedded with rhythm of indigenous dialects and translated into the English language is in tandem with another language strategy in Yerima's work. This infusion of indigenous dialect into plays written in English language is what Dapo Adelugba called Yorubanglish.³⁵⁹ Adelugba was discussing the drama of two Yoruba playwrights, Wale Ogunyemi and Ola Rotimi, but Wole Soyinka is most noted for his application and utilization of this new language. Yerima used it extensively as praise language for the monarchs, thereby, ostracizing a non-native reader-audience.

Thematic Pre-occupation

There are many issues raised in *The Trials*, *Attahiru*, and *Ameh Oboni*; issues ranging from deceit and corruption, greed and selfish ambition, anger and honour, power and pride, loyalty and nationalism, fate and faith. Acting Consul-General Phillips betrays the strands of greed and personal ambition when he ignited a fire of war for a selfish ambition:

The Home Office will be proud of me after the expedition. They could confirm me Consul-General with all the powers I need to establish a government in Benin. They might jolly well tell Moore to go to India or give him a desk at the Home Office.³⁶⁰

Phillips' intention as captured in the speech above is to become the British substantive Consul-General in Benin region in order to control both the economic and political government by, first and foremost, deposing or making irrelevant Oba Ovonramwen and subsequently assuming the control of affairs

³⁵⁸ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 31

³⁵⁹ Adelugba, A., "Wale Ogunyemi, 'Zulu Sofola, and Ola Rotimi: Three Dramatists in Search of a Language" in Ogunba, O., Irele, A., (eds.), *Theatre in Africa* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1978), 216. Adelugba, describes it as: A language which is not Yoruba English or Yoruba mixed with English but the many-sided attempt to catch the flavor, tones, rhythms, emotional and intellectual content of Yoruba language and thought in an adventurous brand of English.

³⁶⁰ Yerima, *The Trials*, 22

of Benin Kingdom. This greed recognized in Philip is also visible in Chief Obaseki:

Burrows: [...] The Bini people seem to be different from the Jakri people. From my study, they seem to be fanatical in their zeal about their king. He seems to be a symbol of life and death to them. Most of the natives were afraid to talk about him during our investigations.

Carter: Not Obaseki. His ambition whets his appetite for preferment. A little pressure here and a carrot there ...³⁶¹

Obaseki, having his own selfish ambition, supported the British expedition against the Benin Empire of which he is a senior palace chief:

Carter: Oh, Chief Obaseki, please come in. (They shake hands) I must say how grateful we are, the expeditionary forces I mean, for your hospitality.

Obaseki: It is an honour to be able to serve the British Empire in this manner.³⁶²

The British officers whose inordinate ambition is to control the economy of Benin and its people see in Obaseki a ready ally and a businessman, but someone who will also switch camp as long as it will be to his personal gain:

Burrows: He was the king's business partner. Do you think he can be trusted?

Carter: He is a businessman. I am sure he will sell anything, once the price is right. We should find him a most reliable and helpful Chief to the government.³⁶³

Trust is also a major subject in the play; this is because neither Burrow nor Carter trusts Obaseki. They describe him as a man who "will sell anything, once the price is right" because of his greed for business success and position of power. In *Attahiru*, Morland is not sure of the loyalty from Mohammed Al Tahir Aliyu, even though he suggested Al Tahir Aliyu be made the new Caliph:

³⁶¹ Yerima, *The Trials*, 58

³⁶² Yerima, *The Trials*, 58

³⁶³ Yerima, *The Trials*, 62

Morland: We need our man there. There is the prince [that] the present Caliph is supposed to have beaten in the race as the final choice, Muhammed Attahiru Aliyu. He could be more amiable towards us.³⁶⁴

The word “could” suggests that the speaker is also skeptical of the character in question. Though this could mean that Morland’s use of the term is in relation to his relationship with Al Tahir Aliyu, of whom we have no knowledge or that Morland has met him before this time.

The ultimate ambition of the British imperialist and its officers is to control the economy of Benin and its people, Sokoto, and Kabba region. This action was later achieved by Ralph Moore after destroying the kingdom and banishing the monarch to Calabar. This is also the intention of both Lugard in Sokoto and Muffet in Igalaland. In an act of deceit and in order to have a ground on which to depose Ovonramwen, the British representatives secured the loyalty of Obaseki-a high Chief of Benin. With the assistance of Obaseki, the British representatives were able to bribe and coerce some of the king’s subjects to implicate him in the murder of the British citizens:

Carter: He must come in un-armed. My men shall mingle with his party, if we see one single weapon, something that suggests it, we shall attack. Understand?

Obaseki: I understand. I do not want any suspicion, his arrival must be of an Oba. He must not suspect anything.³⁶⁵

Obaseki’s ambition of becoming the paramount ruler of the Benin Empire turns him into a traitor. He believes that the position will confer power to him that will enable him to have total control of Benin trade with the British. However, by nursing the ambition of becoming the oba of Benin, Obaseki falls into a well laid plan of the British:

Carter: Of course, you know I do not want to tamper with your tradition and custom. There has to be a change, as in Lagos, Opobo, and the change among the *Jakri* people after the fall of Nana.

Obaseki: The Bini people are not the same. That type of change will be different. The Oba’s power is supreme.

Carter: Not when he is deposed.

³⁶⁴ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 34-35

³⁶⁵ Yerima, *The Trials*, 61

Obaseki: Then who will lead? The Bini people are used to having a leader.

Carter: The answer to that depends... we will need the services of tested hands like you.

Obaseki's intention of reigning as King of Benin is so glaring that Carter only needs to use it as a bait to draw his loyalty to the British invaders.

Obaseki: I am ready to be of service. My plantations are ready to trade with you. I understand the market. I have traded with the Itsekiri's for long now. I am a powerful and loved Chief and I can help the British Empire prosper in trade and governance. But who am I to rush you into a decision? It is entirely at your discretion and we all know how wise you are. Chief Dore tells me that so many times when we meet at the trade stations.³⁶⁶

Power and wealth, which the monarch of Benin commands as the supreme ruler of the land, seems to be too much for Obaseki to comprehend, so, he not only desires the throne but the whole of Benin trade and plantations. After Obaseki and the British officers had succeeded in convincing Oba Ovonramwen to surrender, their first action is to depose him of his Obaship.

Moor: *Oba Ovonrami*, you are hereby deposed as Oba of the *Bini* country. The land, from this day, belongs to the British Empire and, therefore, all its citizens and properties belong to her Majesty, Queen Victoria, Queen of England, Scotland, and Wales, and [the] Empress of India who, by sheer superiority, has conquered the *Bini* country.³⁶⁷

True to Moor's statement, the British conquered Bini by the sheer wit, connivance of Obaseki and superiority in weapon.

Yerima captures the pervading issue of discontentment in the political and geographical arrangement of present day Nigeria by employing the subject of religion and nationalism in 1956, subtly, to project this thought through Ameh Oboni:

³⁶⁶ Yerima, *The Trials*, 59

³⁶⁷ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 68

Ameh Oboni:...they want me to discard my past, my tradition and live the life of what they call a true Muslim ...that type who will be controlled by the so-called true Muslim of the core north. The ones the white man can trust, because of his white Rawani, he does not care for excesses of the white man and his Queens. Because of what they have told the white man, he is no longer comfortable to work with me. And my son helped to fuel this dislike for me and our ways. (chuckles) My son indeed.³⁶⁸

As Ovonramwen used the rhetoric of wife, brother and swollen stomach to discuss betrayal, so is the last sentence of the above speech by Ameh Oboni. The collusion of Obaseki in *The Trials*, Al Tahir Aliyu in *Attahiru* and Gumuchi in *Ameh Oboni* with the British imperialist become acts of betrayal of collective thrust for individual gain. Nationalism, faith and pride become an overriding influence in both *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni*. The fate of Sultan Attahiru and Attah Ameh Oboni rests entirely with the gods, hence, it becomes nearly impossible to escape what comes to them. Attahiru accepts the burden of martyrdom as decreed by the gods. Fatalism is inescapable for Ameh Oboni and Attahiru, who prefer death to come above dishonour. This fatalism explains Ovonramwen's statement:

Ovonramwen: ...for it is only a deaf king set to tumble that fails to hear the drum of downfall. The whiteman beats his drums. Oracles have spoken. Not too long ago, the oracle of Uhe sent word of destruction, strife and doom...³⁶⁹

Ovonramwen confirms that the drums of the white man mean his downfall. If we take the statement of the oracle to mean a conditional word, because the fall of Ovonramwen is not expressly stated in the above context, it is nevertheless, in an earlier situation he accused the gods of ordaining his travails:

[...] the gods ordained this and like a sacrifice fit for the gods, I must look good and bear my new garb with dignity.³⁷⁰

³⁶⁸ Yerima, *Ameh Oboni*, 27

³⁶⁹ Yerima, *The Trials*, 26

³⁷⁰ Yerima, *The Trials*, 19

Fate as a theme explains the final position of all of the plays' protagonists. For the decree of the gods to come is often passed by human agents. For example, both Gummuci in *Ameḥ Oboni* and Mohammed Al Tahir Aliyu in *Attahiru*, like Obaseki in *The Trials* are the human agents needed by the gods to bring down the three kingdoms of Igala, Sokoto, and Benin. How fate affects the position of the protagonists of the two other plays has been explained earlier. The issue of fate, predestination, and prophecy is crucial in African culture, as Yoruba wisdom states: "Akun'le yan ni a'daaye ba, kadara oleyi pida."³⁷¹ Fate or destiny is the absolute being and the ultimate ground of being in the African metaphysics. It is a common idea among the majority of Africans, especially West African people, that the Supreme Being constitutes the controlling principle in the world.³⁷² James Mbiti, writing about the African conception of God, says: "God not only continues to create physically, but He also ordains the destiny of His creatures, especially that of man."³⁷³ This view is not only held by Africans but also by many other cultures of the world. The Bible is replete with many accounts of fate, for example, the account credited to Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' twelve disciples³⁷⁴ and in the life of Esau and Jacob.³⁷⁵

Socio-Political Contextualization of Texts.

The social and political conceptualization of African literature has always existed and is here to stay—at least for a long while. I agree with Eileen Julien that "it is not easy to write or speak well about socio-political reality, to avoid the path of least resistance which consists of making a (necessary pale and poor) copy of the real. If art has anything to give to that reality, it is its power to symbolize, to balance the realistic with the visionary."³⁷⁶

It is pertinent to state that the imperative of nationalism and the need for re-asserting authentic national histories underscore the essence of interpretation, lest the playwright bends to nationalistic pressure. This is ignited by the desire not only to produce a drama of romantic idealism but also one that

³⁷¹ Loosely translated as "What a man chose in the beginning of time, he will meet in life, destiny cannot be altered." Other translation may put it thus: *That which is chosen kneeling at creation, it is that which is found on getting to the world destiny cannot be altered.*

³⁷² Molefi, K.A., Abu, S.A. (eds.), *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 301

³⁷³ See Mbiti, quoted in Molefi, K.A., Abu, S.A. (eds.), *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 301

³⁷⁴ See *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 26:53 & 54

³⁷⁵ See *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 25

³⁷⁶ See Eileen Julien, "Introduction" in Julien, E., Mortimer, M., Schade, C., (eds.), *African Literature in its Social and Political Dimensions* (Washington DC: African Literature Association and Three Continents Press, 1983), 1

glamorizes, what Obiechina regards as the past heritage and thereby calling its authenticity into question.³⁷⁷ *The Trials*, *Attahiru*, and *AmehOboni* following the re-awakening of the socio-political past of Nigeria are dramatic representations of the subjugation of its different entities by the British colonial forces. The socio-political contextualization of the plays concerns the reconstruction of the representation of Africans and their monarchies in historical material of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, especially at the turn of the twentieth century. Yerima also seizes the opportunity to make a bold statement, namely, that the reason for the British invasion of Benin is commerce rather than the over-played Christianization or civilizing of a race whose belief in juju is well pronounced. The Europeans who visited the Oba's palace before this event all gave a glowing description of the city and how economically viable it was to the survival of the British government trading mission in the area.

The projection of the resistance of the Sokoto Caliphate against colonial forces nullifies the view held among citizens of Nigeria of the Southern extract that the Northern part of the country never resisted the advancement of the British colonialists in their territory, thereby, becoming an accomplice in the introduction of colonial rule in the country. With these plays, Yerima projects a balance in valour among historical figures from different geographical composition of the present day Nigeria. His affirmations of cultural and religious beliefs in these plays become a way of preaching to the ever warring Nigerian nationalities who, under pretext of faith, create ethno-religious unrest in the polity. Yerima admonishes the people to embrace peace:

We must find common ground for peace. The times we are in are not time for land and well problems. We all heard what happened to great Kano. This worries me, and indeed should worry us all.³⁷⁸

Conclusion

At the end of this chapter, it is imperative to draw attention to a scene in *Attahiru*, where Yerima makes a statement to inform his countrymen of the need of a strong willed leader to preside over the affairs of the nation at a critical period in its history when Nigeria was transiting to democracy after a long period of military rule.

³⁷⁷ Obiechina, E.N., "Cultural Nationalism in Modern African Literature" in Eldred Jones, (ed.), *African Literature Today*, Volumes 1-4. (London: Heinemann, 1972), 24-35

³⁷⁸ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 25

...a strong-willed man as Caliph. A man chosen by the light of Allah, who will carry the flag of Islam past the whiteman's threat. A man who will stand shoulder to shoulder and eyeball to eyeball with whiteman.³⁷⁹

In the year 1999, Yerima's play *Attahiru* was published, and a significant point of reference in the Nigerian democratic process occurred. Two of the aspirants jostling for the presidential position were retired military Generals, namely Olusegun Obasanjo and Muhammadu Buhari. Prior to this period, Nigeria had been under military governance for sixteen years (1983-1999), moving from one coup to the next. Bearing this in mind, it could be suggested that a retired General who can withstand military aggression should be allowed to assume leadership of the country in order for the country to be able to resist the return of serving military personnel through or by the act of force. With the promise of a return to democratic governance in 1999, many Nigerians were of the opinion that it might be a wise choice to elect one of the many retired military officers jostling for the position of civilian president. This is based on the assumption that a former military leader may be able to prevent a return to military governance during his tenure as President.

³⁷⁹ Yerima, *Attahiru*, 18

Chapter Three

Religious Realist Play: *The Angel, The Twist, Uncle Venyil, Mirror Cracks, The Bishop and The Soul, and The Wives*

As stated previously, it is not my intention to discuss realism as a literary movement but as a writing style in the selected dramas. The Nigerian reader-audiences are already familiar with the language of the characters, the issues in the plays and other nuances that help to embellish the work. I categorize the dramas in this chapter as religious realist plays because of their thematic preoccupation and the style of the writing of the plays, which are consistent factors for the progression of the plays. This does not mean that the language and characters of the plays are different from what is inherent in the society. In fact, these elements are visible in the Nigerian reader-audience reality.

In a society like the one of Nigeria where religion has a lot of bearing on both the government and on citizens, how independent can Yerima be allowed to write? This question will guide the discussion of this chapter. In Nigeria, there is a measure of contradiction in the practice of the three dominant religions: African Traditional Beliefs (ATBs), Islam and Christianity. There is palpable evidence that the practitioners of Christianity and Islam are not fully converted from the indigenous belief system. Therefore, they practice the dominant religions side by side with the suppressed ones.

The term religious realism is used in this work as the representation of contemporary religion by literature using a certain writing style. In this chapter I investigate Yerima's plays by looking at the influence of Christianity, Islam and ATBs religion on contemporary Nigerian society, especially the important role they play in the government and in the people's everyday life. I look at how religion determines the perception and thinking of the people in relation to the society and societal institutions. J.N.K. Mugambi argues that, "[f]rom the period of the missionary enterprise, African converts came to understand the Christian way of life as being identical with the norms of conduct set for them by the missionaries who introduced Christianity in each particular locality."³⁸⁰ According to Mugambi this explains that Christianity was seen "not just as a new way of life, but as a Euro-American way of life."³⁸¹ In Nigeria, there is a visible conflict between those who practice the three dominant religions.

³⁸⁰ Mugambi, J.N.K., (ed.), *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 1

³⁸¹ Mugambi, J.N.K., (ed.), *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 1

However, while Islam is relatively receptive to the ATBs, Christianity aims to annihilate it. For example, introduction of Christianity coincided with introduction of colonialism which the people fought strongly to resist. In fact most of the missionaries who brought Christianity to the country are members of the colonial community. Because of this link, Christianity was accepted with a level of skepticism by the majority of the people. African critics of Christianity argue that it is a religion imposed by colonialists in order to allow them easy control of the minds of the people. Critics like Wole Soyinka, Biodun Jeyifo, Femi Osofisan, and Ahmed Yerima believe that the Christian religion works negatively on the psyche of the people and destroys the communal spirit innate in their indigenous beliefs (the belief in a common ancestor):

The greatest negative contributions of colonialism to the minds of the African was the introduction and forceful adoption of the second religion to their consciousness and process of opening the eyes of the Africans to the ethnic and race differences among them. This destroyed the innate African communal spirit, and sadly, [...] The ‘figure of double religious mind’ started to emerge. In order to not be seen to have lost one’s traditional identity, the African, or Nigerian in particular, kept his traditional links with his ancestors. This link was usually consciously suppressed, but the expressed one was to either attend mosque prayers on Fridays or church services on Sundays. The duality of religion also allowed the African or Nigerian to live within the duality of his societal signification.³⁸²

Within the Yoruba area of Nigeria alone at least four hundred gods exist which form the peoples different spiritual beliefs. The Yorubas are one group in a country with more than three hundred ethnic nationalities. So, to homogenize the spiritual beliefs and age-long understanding of these various groups into two faiths (Christianity and Islam) will only present a sense of confusion within the individual.

Christianity in Nigeria and, indeed, in many other parts of Africa, is opposed to “traditional cultural and spiritual beliefs”³⁸³, thereby, creating a

³⁸² Yerima, Ahmed, *Theatre, Culture and Politics: Essays in Dramatic and Cultural Theory* (Lagos: Concept Publications, 2007), 141

³⁸³ Reid, Abra, “Christianity and Yoruba: The Fusing of Influences in Wole Soyinka’s works” in *African Postcolonial Literature in English*, English 32, Spring 1990
<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/nigeria/xytyyorub.html>

duality of religious practices. This is not to mean that there is no evidence of syncretism between traditional spiritual beliefs and Christianity in some instances.³⁸⁴ However, those who attempted or practiced a mixture of the two religions are often frowned at and/or rejected by the missionaries and some over-zealous practitioners of Christianity whenever they meet. Nevertheless, it must be noted that, despite this hostility, many of those who practice Christianity also observe traditional cultural and spiritual beliefs in a suppressed form at one point or another in their lives. For example, it is common for a Nigerian Christian to visit a *Babalawo*³⁸⁵ or traditional healer when struck by an unknown ailment or in search for solution to what he considers an impediment to his attaining material and spiritual satisfaction. This is done because of his beliefs that a Babalawo communicates with the gods and other esoteric powers that control the affairs of man. It is also common to have traditional chieftaincy titles like *Otun* (Right Hand of the Leader), *Osi* (Left-Hand of the Leader), *Baba Ijo* (Father/Elder in the church), and *Iya Ijo* (Mother/Senior-woman in the church) in some churches. Though, these people who are thus referred to in the church are often not known to hold the same title in traditional society. Their influence as title-holder is only within the church. This is a form of syncretism. In many instances, these people (practitioners of dual religions) make a clear demarcation of the two practices even when there is an overlapping of titles. The practice is in contrast to the position of Euro-American missionaries who imposed the Christian doctrine on Nigerians.

It is also against the views of some over-zealous Nigerian Pastors, Evangelists, and converts who hold the position that “there was nothing valuable in African cultural and religious heritage.”³⁸⁶ Such a position is contrary to what was taught by the missionaries who brought the faith to Africa and introduced some of their pagan festivals like the celebration of Christmas, weddings, days of specific saints, and others as part of the religion. In Nigeria, if you want to overtly hold onto your cultural and spiritual beliefs, you are

³⁸⁴ United Native African Church or First African Church Mission (the first splinter group from Anglican Church in Nigeria), The Aladura Church, Cherubim and Seraphim Church Movement, Celestial Church of Christ, and other white garment Churches are noted to have allowed the a mixture of some African cultural practices into Christianity.

³⁸⁵ Babalawo is derived from two Yoruba words; Baba (Father) and Awo (Mystery). The name can be Babalawo or Baba awo. A Babalawo is a sage or high priest who is well versed in the rituals, the lore and the history of the Yoruba tradition/religion called IFA. He is a father in the knowledge of things material and spiritual. For a clearer understanding of Babalawo see <http://ifa-houseofwisdom.com/babalawo.html>

³⁸⁶ Mugambi, J.N.K., (ed.), *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 5

annonbeliever; because the first criteria to be a true Christian is to ignore your African background as it is “primitive” and the people are “pagan” and “heathens.”³⁸⁷ According to Mugambi, “this assumption has led to the hesitation and widespread refusal by many missionaries and African Christians to take African religions seriously, for fear of syncretism.”³⁸⁸ Western-style educated Nigerian Christians are most guilty of this. However, some of them discreetly follow some aspects of the religion of their ancestors which the non-Western-style educated people embrace. This is explained by a popular Yoruba dictum: “Igbagbo oni ki ama s’oro” (Christianity does not forbid us the practice of the mystery of the conclave³⁸⁹).

Religious duality is a common aspect of Nigerian society. Yerima explores this aspect of the Nigerian people in many of his characters. For example, Kaka in *Uncle Venyil* is an embodiment of this duality of religious practice; she succumbs to the consciously suppressed traditional cultural and spiritual beliefs when it becomes apparent that the overt Christian religion has failed to rescue her son from incarceration.

Yerima’s major concern in the analyzed plays revolves around death, the influence of religions, and the search for inner peace. He uses realism as a mode of writing to investigate the contradictory nature of religious man within society. In the author’s note of *The Angel*, Yerima writes that it:

is my definition of faith, salvation, greed, politics, death, and the world we lived in. I have tried not to trap myself within the inhuman existence the world finds itself [in] today. For fear of forcing the play to be relevant, I have embarked on a trip of self-identification, self-education of a now dangerous world replete with the dangers of human ambition and what I like to call the trapping of a changing society. Finally, I have not gone too near culture here, just ordinary everyday

³⁸⁷ Mugambi, J.N.K., (ed.), *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 5

³⁸⁸ Mugambi, J.N.K., (ed.), *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature: With particular Reference to the East African Context* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 5

³⁸⁹ Oro is a cultic society closely guarded by the Ogboni (Assemblage of powerful members of the traditional community whose duties include the making, fortifying of Kings and punishing same if he errs) to inspire awe in the people of the community and to pronounce final punishment on any one accused by the town as being evil after thorough investigation. The Ogboni is the traditional law enforcer and Judge of the Yoruba community, and Oro is paraded round the street when there is propitiation to be done on the land and before the burying of an important member of the community who is recently deceased.

life and people both young and old, you and I, so that I may just be able to touch you.³⁹⁰

While I agree with the statement that the play discusses “faith, salvation, greed, politics, death”, I disagree with Yerima’s statement, “I have not gone too near culture here.”³⁹¹ This is because the latter contradicts the earlier statement. If the dictionary definition of culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group”³⁹² is acceptable, then Yerima’s plays are rooted in the cultural belief system of his people. According to the following definition, culture is:

the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.³⁹³

Yerima’s definition of culture as “the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment”³⁹⁴ buttresses my argument that these plays are culture specific.

I will reiterate here J.P. Lederach’s viewpoint which is suitable for my argument: “Culture is rooted in the shared knowledge and schemes created and used by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to social realities around them.”³⁹⁵ Based on this, I believe that faith, salvation, politics, and death, apart from being universal subjects, have different meanings in different societies and cultures. Moreover, the way that Yerima presents the subject of death in the plays is based on traditional cultural and spiritual beliefs. Since the setting of *The Angel* is Yoruba culture, the behavior of the characters will be based on cultural and spiritual beliefs that are common among the people (Yoruba) even when the playwright’s intention is to distance them from it as much as possible. Though the statement referred to above is not

³⁹⁰ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 9

³⁹¹ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 9

³⁹² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>

³⁹³ This definition by The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) University of Minnesota is on the center’s website

<http://www.carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html>

³⁹⁴ Yerima, Ahmed, *Theatre, Culture, and Politics: Essays in Dramatic and Cultural Theory* (Lagos: Concept Publication, 2007), 43

³⁹⁵ Lederach, J.P., *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 9

part of the play itself, it is still important for me to quote it here because it sets the tone of the play. It tells the reader-audience of the gloom that can be expected in the narrative. The melancholic disposition of the playwright is already visible before one opens the play, when he writes: "For fear of forcing the play to be relevant, I have embarked on a trip of self-identification, self-education of a now dangerous world replete with the dangers of human ambition."³⁹⁶

He is not particular about the reception that awaits the play; rather, he expects the work to be an attempt at self-identification and self-education. It is not unlikely for a playwright or reader-audience to identify a character in a play or action to being similar to his own person. On the level of education, it depends largely on what he wishes to learn. Identifying oneself in a performance or play-text can help in purging the person of a certain emotion. In other words, such identification brings about *katarsis*. It is my understanding that purgation of emotion provides psychological analysis of the operation of the conscious and the unconscious in an individual's present circumstance. It is what Etop Akwang refers to as "the fracture of psyche and subjectivity."³⁹⁷ With *The Angel*, Yerima questions what it is that determines "superior religion", the logic of faith and the belief in miracles, dreams, and the supernatural. He presents a reality that appears logical and normal by revealing the daily sufferings of the characters in his plays. Though someone not familiar with the society that Yerima is writing about may argue that those who are dead do not appear to the living in any way, many of his people have a contrary view. Thus, he imbues his characters with frailty that continually draws them to powers that are external to their physical reality in order to be set free from the sufferings they are experiencing. In *The Twist*, Yerima's note is not necessary because it is misleading, and also contradicts itself:

The play *The Twist* is just me twisting round the concepts of fate, faith, logic, guilt, forgiveness, illusion, and reality. This is why it was easy for me to find a solution to this play that does not end but attempts to introduce a discourse in the depth of your mind. I hope you do meet

³⁹⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 9

³⁹⁷ Etop, Akwang, "Rembrandt's Consciousness: A Study of the Recession and Recovery of Subjectivity in Yerima's *The Bishop* and *The Soul and Thank You Lord*" in Inegbe, S.E., and Uwemedimo Atakpo (eds.), *Making Images, Re-making Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 32

your own stumbling blocks in trying to unravel the reasons why faith is such a heavy burden.³⁹⁸

I think “easy for me to find a solution to this play”, means that he was able to resolve all conflicts in the play. However, he contradicted himself when he writes that, “this play does not end.” If Yerima’s plays are looked at in this manner, it will be easier to unravel how the explicit and the implicit dialogue relate with the happenings in the characters social community. In *The Mirror Cracks*, Yerima writes:

...my preoccupation, if any, is of the child and family values. What makes a man what he becomes and how human beings learn to bear and cope with the loss. Most of all, I hope I have transferred my inner fears of death, of life, in contrasts with our acts in life and the judgment after, to the three-dimensional cracked images which often mirror the complex symbiosis of the human psyche.³⁹⁹

The statement “Most of all, I hope I have transferred my inner fears of death, of life, in contrasts with our acts in life and the judgment after” links what I said about the fact that fate, faith, guilt, forgiveness, discussed in *The Angel*, may belong to the realm of cultural and religious beliefs. While secular reasoning will state that, after death, man ceases to exist, culture and religion often talk of “the judgment after”. In this statement, Yerima is concerned about the influence of the environment and social community on man. External influence often questions man’s position on life and death, and the influence of both on human consciousness. It is true that life ceases for the dead, but those alive cannot objectively conclude that those who are dead do not exist somewhere else, and neither can anybody state with all certainty that they are existing. So, we often rely on culture and religion to find a solution to the mystery presented by the phenomena of life and death.

Yerima revisits the thought of death and pain in *The Portraits* as he writes:

...Writing *The Portraits* allowed me to express the wonderfully complex human nature with the use of words. Most of all, it allowed

³⁹⁸ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Twists*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 81

³⁹⁹ See Yerima, Ahmed, *The Mirror Cracks*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 113

me to express how sometimes it is too late to make amends when we hesitate, when all we would have said was ‘sorry’.⁴⁰⁰

How effectively one can portray the complexity of human nature in dramatic text is hinged on the knowledge of the human psyche. Playwrights often dissect their characters using rhetoric to communicate what might be their own fear or inner conflict. Yerima’s statement on *Uncle Venyil* is important here to substantiate my argument:

...the Nigerian society and my personal life created all the possibilities for me to find my thematic thrust and hang the meaning of my play on characters so innocent, so pure and yet so total in becoming victims of circumstances beyond them. ...my play inhabits and emerges from a society in a complex clash with its own psychoanalytical search for the meaning of self, while it also highlights the internal conflict in order to achieve obvious societal self-destruction. In the play, repression becomes an instrument of fear. Venyil is the victim of the absoluteness of power personified in the person of the “punisher”. Venyil captures, for me, a level of dehumanizing violence...real and raw pain...which pervaded my country for a frightful while. And the sad reality is that no matter how high up or low the victims were, the experience broke the defensive or protective mechanism which separates man from animal or sane from insane.⁴⁰¹

Yerima uses terms like “dehumanizing violence...real and raw” which he said pervaded his “country for a frightful while” as a motivation for not just this singular play but for most of his plays. His representation of death in *The Wives* is not different from the murky, pessimistic, death, pain and the gloom that seems to be familiar in the other plays. In this play, revelation of incest that follows Chief Gbadegesin’s death suggests that man cannot escape judgment in this life. Death will not be a cover of any immoral act perpetuated by man while alive. In *The Wives* and *The Mirror Cracks*, Yerima seems to suggest that, in death, many secrets will be revealed and judgment will be delivered here on earth with whatever reputation the deceased left behind.

⁴⁰⁰ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Portraits*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 143

⁴⁰¹ Yerima, Ahmed, *Uncle Venyil*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 43

By allowing the appearance of an already dead character to resolve the conflict in *The Angel* makes a mockery of Christianity. This is because Otunba Durosimi is a self-professed Christian who does not subscribe to ATBs. To Otunba Durosimi Christian's mind, Chief (the ghost) is an angel sent by God to his family. It is likely that these plays *The Portraits*, *The Angel* and *Uncle Venyil* are an attempt by Yerima to question the belief in the superiority of one religion over another. This is because while one religion (Christianity) states that death is the end for all man, another religion (ATBs) believes that the dead can be summoned to mediate in the affairs of the living.

Structure

Yerima employs traditional cultures, proverbs and religions that audiences of his plays are familiar with as tools for the play's progression. All of the plays under discussion consist of one act. All the ofplays have plotlines with subplots, and each of them maintains a single setting. In all the plays studied, the actions take place in one day. In *The Angel* action takes place in the sitting room of Otunba⁴⁰². The play opens with Otunba praying to "Father" for a miraculous healing for his sick and bedridden wife, Rachel. Through him, we learn that she is suffering from a terminal kidney disease. In *The Twist*, a miracle is what Rev. Noah seeks for his condemned son who is sentenced to death by the court. He is scheduled the following day to face the hangman's noose for murder during a robbery. *The Twist* is set in the sitting room of Chief Ojuolape. He is making final arrangements for the burial the next day for his late son, Dolapo a victim of the armed robbery attack of Rev. Noah's son. The play opens with Noah entering the sitting room of Otunba Ojuolape to beg for mercy for his condemned son.

The Angel, *The Wives*, *The Twist*, and *The Mirror Cracks* deal with the subjects of death and pain especially the emotional pain associated with the death of loved ones. Apart from *The Bishop*, most of what serves as the springboard for the other plays is reported to have taken place before the beginning of the plays.

The death of Christopher two years earlier is reported to be the cause of Rachel's illness in *The Angel*, as she lost the will to live, thus, every action follows this revelation. The play is set on the second anniversary of his death. In *The Mirror Cracks*, Ambassador Gabi is also making final preparations, getting ready for the burial of his son Supo who died on a peace-keeping

⁴⁰² *Otunba* which means the right-hand of the King is a chieftaincy title among the Yorubas. It is often bestowed on a wealthy individual within the community.

mission, when a young lady of sixteen years old suddenly arrives from their son's mission field in Sierra Leone. She informs Supo's parents that their late son was an animal. All the events in *The Mirror Cracks* centres on the memory of Supo and the perceived collective failure of his parents. While they were busy building their own careers to become a successful diplomat and a judge, their son was left to the care of servants when he was growing up. The entire course of action takes place a day preceding the burial of Supo.

Yerima's choice of setting for the two plays (*The Twists* and *The Mirror Cracks*) on the day before the burial of the sons of the main characters is not a mere coincidence but intentional. As it is the case in *The Wives*, he believes that, before the burial, truth about the deceased must come to light. Most often at the death of a member of the family, good deeds and other qualities are discussed in order to paint a picture of sainthood. I assume that Yerima's intention is to buttress his point on the judgment that comes after death takes place on earth.

Yerima also weaves in these plays elements of surprise. This dramatic element allows the plays to build up to denouement. However, as most of the plays end suddenly, he leaves the reader-audience to come to their own conclusion. *The Wives* revolves around the sharing of the properties and burying of Otunba, whose casket is placed at the centre of the sitting room from the beginning of the play to the end. Yerima put four women together discussing the life and death of their husband and father of their children while the corpse still remains unburied and foul-smelling. At one particular time, the women were even drinking and dancing to the music of Frank Sinatra "I did it my way" when Baba Ajagbe and Ifagbemi, two elderly male relatives of Otunba, enter the room. The song is used in the play as a metaphor; it signifies the fact that everybody is responsible for his own actions in life. However, this is in contradiction to what occurs in *The Twists* and *The Mirror Cracks* where the parents are working to better the careers of their children. The appearances of the two elderly men and the Chief's lawyer on the stage turn the direction of the play to that of fact finding on the cause of his death. After discovering that he died as a result of having committed an abominable act of incest, the rest of the actions only follow a trajectory course to the end, leading to the identity of the chief's incest victim and the identity of the child born as a result.

In analyzing *The Bishop*, it is important to ask the following questions: Which among the following two forces is responsible for the evil machination in the life of man: Esu, the Yoruba's god of mischief who dwells on the cross-road and boundaries of the world, or Satan, the biblical devil who deceives the

people of the world against God's instructions in order to have them as his followers? Is man's escape from other forces foreign to him based on his personal effort or the performance of supernatural forces? What significance does man's belief in the supernatural have on his existence and survival in the world? Will man still remain man without the presence of supernatural forces? These questions propel the plotline of *The Angel*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Twists* and *The Mirror Cracks*. For, in all these plays, there exist dual supernatural forces that wrestle within the various characters. There is Esu and God in *The Bishop*, and Sango and God in *The Twist*. Yerima imbues his protagonists with dual characteristics. All the protagonists believe in the existence of God, yet question God's position in their precarious situations. Otunba in *The Angel* kneels and prays to God for a miraculous healing of his wife and, at the same time, blames the same God for her sickness:

Otunba: ... First, her legs, now she finds it difficult to even breathe. They say only one of her kidney works now. Father, do something. Can't you do something to help her get better? [...] Send something, Send us a miracle, Father, save Rachel ...save my beautiful jewel. You give her so heavy a cross to bear.⁴⁰³

While Otunba believes that, without a miracle, Rachel cannot get better, Kaka in *Uncle Venyil* has little or no faith in miracles even though she prays to God. Kaka prays frequently to God for early release of her political activist son, Venyil, from the solitary confinement of the government. Even though she prays, she has doubts as to the ability of God to have an effect on the early release of Venyil before she dies.

Both in Otunba and Kaka, I find examples of the contradiction that religion has come to represent in our daily lives. It becomes a place of solace to retire to when one becomes helpless in the face of a threat coming from superior forces. Although Yerima did not indicate the length of time Venyil is in government detention, it is suggested by Kaka that she has been going to the church to pray for his release for a long time. Based on this point, it is normal for her to have some doubt in a miraculous release after a long period of time. Kaka believes in the existence of God, which is why she goes to church for prayer every day. However, for her, the church has nothing to do with her belief in God. As a Christian she goes to church simply to pray and show off her new dresses.

⁴⁰³ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 11

As a parishioner in Nigeria, you pay tithe of your income and offering to the church, and you give gifts to the reverend priest. You are also required to make contributions to the construction of a new church building and also to the purchase of a new set of musical instruments. So, to Kaka withdrawal of her contribution to the church is a way of punishing it. As the church makes demands on her and other members, she can exert punishment on the church because church is like a human being who makes demands. She blames the church for making her sell her fattest goat in order to pay for a cloth; the church ought to have bought it for her and the rest of the elderly people in the parish. She concludes that if the church, in this case represented by the Reverend Priest and those who direct the service cannot meet the needs of the widows and elderly members of the congregation, she too can reduce her contribution to them as well. To Kaka, the church has failed her, and God's helps to release her son from prison while she is alive is uncertain:

Kaka: ...God! So I have resolved to punish the [c]hurch for making me sell my fattest goat. I have the money, but I shall pay a naira every Sunday until Venyil is out of prison, and I have a good reason to wear the dress to church to glorify God. But if I should die before Venyil come[s] out, or I finish paying the balance of their money is in the old snuff tin under the bed. I want to go to the gate of heaven singing, not explaining to God how I sold my goat and still kept the money from the church...⁴⁰⁴

As I have mentioned earlier, to Kaka, church is a "Being" which makes demands on the members. So, refusing to make any tangible contribution to the church or not responding to the call to give to the church makes her feel as though she is punishing the church. Kaka also believes that the church is not taking care of the needs of the aged and the widows as instructed by the Bible. Kaka's anger is reinforced by the fact that she sold her precious goat in order to meet the church demand. In *The Twist*, Rev, Noah, as a young man, and his father worshipped Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, as the family god. However, as an adult, he became a reverend in the Anglican Church after graduating from the theological institution.

⁴⁰⁴ Yerima, Ahmed, *Uncle Venyil*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 47

In *The Bishop*, Bishop, like Rev. Noah in *The Twist*, was born into a traditional African family. He was dedicated at birth to the family god Esu⁴⁰⁵ and given the traditional name, Esubiyi. At his birth he was consecrated the priest of the trickster god. On the contrary, as fate would have it, instead of becoming the priest of Esu, he became a Christian priest, performing healings with his acquired supernatural power. However, he is torn between two opposing forces who want his services:

Iyagana: Esubiyi, you are still a child ... From the day you were born ...we touched your lips with palm oil from the shrine of Esu, you were marked for him ...My Bishop, it is time to leave this rubbish and find peace with yourself. Let us go home.⁴⁰⁶

With this statement and the tone of its finality “Let us go home”, Iyagana means that Bishop should embrace the priesthood of Esu. Etop Akwang considering the various problems, both physical and spiritual that the Bishop has had to pass through in a short while and concludes that Bishop’s “present travails in the play seem to be rooted in the innocent childhood initiation into the cult of Esu.”⁴⁰⁷ However, this interpretation can be questioned. First of all, there is no reason to suggest that Bishop’s travail is not normal occurrence. Second, such a conclusion misrepresents the figure and functions of Esu, the Yoruba god of mischief. By understanding the importance of Esu, or other gods within the Yoruba or Africans’ cosmogony, both Akwang and Yerima are not helping to clarify the blurred boundaries the early Euro-American missionaries created in their literature and history⁴⁰⁸ of Africa. What Euro-American missionaries and colonialists created in Africa was the concept of higher religion against lower religion. The lower religion is considered inferior to the higher religion. This can be described as a process whereby known African institutions, traditions and culture become inferior to both the Euro-American

⁴⁰⁵ Some interpretations, especially the Yoruba’s in Nigeria write the name as Esu, while others prefer Eshu. The meaning is the same.

⁴⁰⁶ Yerima, *The Bishop*, 51

⁴⁰⁷ Akwang, A., “Rembrandt Consciousness: A Study of the Recession and Recovery of Subjectivity in Yerima’s *The Bishop and The Soul and Thank You Lord*”, in Inegbe S.E., and Uwemedimo Atakpo, (eds.), *Making Images, Remaking Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima* (Uyo: Modern Business Press, 2007), 39

⁴⁰⁸ Kalu, Anthonia, C., “African Literature and the Traditional Arts: Speaking Arts, Molding Theory” in *Research in African Literature*, 31/4 Winter, (Indiana University Press, 2000), 46-62

missionaries' religious order and to new institutions of the colonial tradition.⁴⁰⁹ In this process, "servant" is negative while "master" is a positive force. To continue to relate to indigenous gods and cultural practices in Africa as being negative in relation to Christianity by Africans and is nothing but the greatest evil against the continent. How can we blame the constant struggle in the life of Supo in *The Mirror Cracks* and Bishop in *The Bishop* against Esu, a god which the two characters never acknowledged? Supo grew up in a wealthy house with a gentleman father, a mass server in the church who joined the military with his own mission in mind:

Hawa: ... Then, I felt sorry for him. He was in a constant struggle to control the animal in him. He would burn down a house because he was not sure if people were hiding there. Yet, that same night, I saw him risk his life to save two little babies the mothers had abandoned. [...] For each life he wasted, he saved two to buy back his soul.⁴¹⁰

In the Christian Bible, when a man constantly struggles to control himself of any malevolent spirit, it suggests the possession of a demonic spirit. For example, Mary Magdalene⁴¹¹ and the man at Gadarenes that is possessed with the legion demon.⁴¹² Yerima has a penchant for imbuing his characters with two poles called "tradition and modernity". Tradition, in this case, refers to that culture which is indigenous to Africans such as faith, fate, customs, social practice and other lores of pre-colonial Africa that remained in existence even during colonial and post-colonial experiences and that are presented as "unchanging" in the course of history. By modernity, I mean that Yerima refers to the culture which is introduced through contact with the non-Africans at the end of the nineteenth century. This is a form of modernity which Terence O. Ranger discussed extensively in his article "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa."⁴¹³ This perceived modernity came to Nigeria through colonialism, Euro-American missionaries and Western-style education.

⁴⁰⁹ Terence O. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211-262

⁴¹⁰ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Mirror Crack*, in *The Angel and Other Plays*, 126

⁴¹¹ See Luke 8:2 of *King James Version Bible* for the deliverance of Mary Magdalene from seven different demons.

⁴¹² See Mark 5:1-13 of *King James Version Bible* for the deliverance of Gadarenes' man delivered from demon called Legion.

⁴¹³ Terence O. Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" in Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211-262

Modernity came with faiths and new cultural beliefs alien to the indigenous communities. The notion of tradition, as opposed to modernity, was not in existence in Africa prior to its introduction through colonization. This is what T.O. Ranger refers to as “European invented tradition.”⁴¹⁴

It must be noted that the modernity that the colonialists imposed on African countries is alien to continental Europe. In the perception of colonialists, non-Western cultures and traditions to which Africa belongs are considered to be “fundamentally hostile to modernity and incompatible with modernization.”⁴¹⁵ This was the thinking until the emergence of the nationalist spirit which brought many African countries independence from their colonial masters. The nationalists discovered that their fathers had been susceptible to accept without questioning the imposed “modern” traditions which aimed to annihilate the existing traditions. As Christianity was a major tool in the modernization by the colonial masters, contemporary African Christian elites still hold the erroneous position of defining modernity by the introduction of Christianity in Africa. They project a master-servant position. In Europe and America, modernity is defined from the position of economic and technological advancement of a nation, including the adoption of modern political principles which separate religion from politics. In such a concept of modernity neither Christianity nor any other world religion has any primal position. Rather, it is secularisation which is seen as fundamental to modernity and governments do not impose a form of religion on its citizenry as the state distances itself from a particular religious stance.⁴¹⁶ The people are thus free to belong or not belong to a religion and even choose to completely dismiss religion at all without criticism.

In Africa, Nigeria in particular, secularism is not yet a definitive political concept or ideology. Although the government did not impose a singular religion on the country, secularism has no form among people whose beliefs are God centered. The Nigerian government maintains a close relationship with the religions of its citizens. For example, the government house (Aso Rock) in Abuja is home to both church and Mosque. Since religious beliefs and cultural practices often define what is tradition and what is modern in Africa, its various governments make great efforts to have both

⁴¹⁴ Terence O. Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa” in Eric J. Hobsbawn and Terence O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 228

⁴¹⁵ Mirsepassi, Ali, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2

⁴¹⁶ This view is with the exemption of United Kingdom and Germany as both still give a measure of authority to Christianity.

developments side by side. However, indigenous religion and Christianity are standing on two opposing sides. In an attempt to make a distinction between Esu and the Biblical Devil or Satan, as well as to answer some of the questions I raised earlier in this work, it is better to talk briefly about the Yorubas' belief on Esu. According to the Yoruba worldview, Orunmila is the deity imbued with power of world knowledge, the god of Ifa oracle and principle of preordained order in Yoruba religious reality. He is outwardly opposed to "Eshu-Elegba, the principle of chance, uncertainty, and chaos."⁴¹⁷ Despite this opposition, Esu is ever present in the Ifa divination tray as the messenger god of Orunmila and other deities. The function of messenger of gods is an assignment given to Eshu, the god of contradictions, exposition of text and mischievousness by Olodumare, the Supreme God, who created the heaven and the earth and everything in it. In the Christian metaphysics, the Devil exists as opposition to Jehovah/God in heaven. To the Yoruba Christians, a new level of contradictory consciousness becomes apparent in the existence of God and their various indigenous gods. This contradiction was created by the Euro-American missionaries of the Nineteenth century who viewed all the gods in Africa as evil, and those worshiping them as worshipping the devil. In support of my argument is a statement by Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, which I find appropriate for this discussion. He describes well how contradictions in consciousness cause anguish and despair:

The consciousness of this contradiction causes anguish, and anguish ends in despair -- the individual accepts existence as a mystery which he cannot hope to fathom. But because of the coincidence of opposites, from despair rises faith and faith gives the individual the hope of redemption by means of grace. I abandon myself to the grace of God; I pray, and the prayer gives me the "pre-sentiment" that time will be changed into eternity and death into life.⁴¹⁸

While Yerima tries to appeal to his own religious consciousness by locating evil and good in his religious realist dramas, he could be accused of furthering the assumptions of Euro-American missionaries, and African Christians. These assumptions assign the evil part to African indigenous religions and gods (especially Esu) and the good act to the Christian God. For example, in *The*

⁴¹⁷ Wright, Derek, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 10

⁴¹⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren in *The Philosophy of Existentialism: Danish and German Existentialism*. <http://www.radicalacademy.com/adiphiexistentialism.htm>

Bishop, Iyagana is presented as Esu's messenger who arrives on the scene to tempt Bishop. Iyagana's statement bewitches Bishop until the arrival of Rev. Father Emmanuel, who releases him from the spell. Iyagana's mission is to summon Bishop back to his ancestral gods. Esu, whom Yerima regarded as the force of evil in *The Bishop*, is a fate-deity, messenger-god and interpreter for the other deities. He is imbued by *Olodumare*⁴¹⁹ with "Ase" the power that propagates itself, in this case "the force of coherence of process itself, that which makes a system a system."⁴²⁰ Esu, the cross-road and boundaries' god is likened to Hermes in Greek mythology. All that Hermes possesses, Esu also possesses. According to the Yorubas' belief, Esu is the indigenous "black metaphor for the literary critics, and Esu-tufunnalo is the study of the methodological principle of interpretation itself, or what the literary critic does."⁴²¹ I understand that Esu is the text interpreter. Esu's crossroad and boundaries metaphor is to serve as a place of individual choice. Every man arriving at the crossroad and boundaries of life is responsible for his own actions and inaction. This is because Esu does not choose for a man, he allows free-will and, however, as a messenger of gods, he is a fate enforcer. The shrine of Esu with its priests and devotees are found in almost all the Yoruba cities in Nigeria, Africa and even in South America where you can find a large population of diasporic Yorubas.⁴²² The fact that the Yorubas have spread in population and the transposition of their worldview across boundaries and geographical spread gives any of its numerous gods a wider appeal. Esu, according to Femi Osofisan "has been much maligned by Christians and mistaken for Satan."⁴²³ Osofisan adds that Esu:

Far from being the repulsive devil of Christian mythology, he is, in fact, among the most important deities in the Yoruba pantheon, representing the principle of free choice and of revolution –the god who, with his prominent Phallus, promiscuously incarnates [not only]

⁴¹⁹ Olodumare is the Yoruba Supreme Deity, the same as the Christian God. The Yorubas' believe that Olodumare is the creator of heaven and the earth and everything in it, including man.

⁴²⁰ Molefi, K.A., Abu, S.A., eds., *African Intellectual Heritage: a Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 163

⁴²¹ Molefi, K.A., and Abu, S.A., (eds.), *African Intellectual Heritage: a Book of Sources* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 163

⁴²² Euba, Femi, *Archetypes, Imprecators and Victims of Fate* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989)

⁴²³ Osofisan, Femi, "Femi Osofisan: Formal Strategies and Social Commentary" in Jeyifo Biodun (ed.), *Modern African Drama* (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001), 616

the place of doubt and disjunction, but also of justice and accommodation, in our metaphysical cosmos.”⁴²⁴

Based on the characteristics of Esu as described by Osofisan, there is a difference between the god and Satan. It has also been argued by many scholars of Yoruba religions that Esu is not the same as the Satan of the Judeo-Christian Bible.⁴²⁵ To appropriate evil to any religious form from Africa is not acceptable in an unbiased discourse. Nevertheless, this is contrary to what we have in both *The Bishop* and *Uncle Venyil*, as Iyagana is presented as the tempter of Bishop, and Venyil’s uncles are seen as sinners for furthering the ancestor’s worship cult. It is my opinion that the playwright allows these characters in order to have balance of representation of faith since there are family members in Nigeria who prefer the indigenous religious pull to the new religion.

Having dwelled on explaining that Esu does not represent the same force of evil as *The Bishop*, it is important to clarify that the religion of ancestors’ worship does not confer on the practitioners the status of “bad people” and “devil” as we have in *Uncle Venyil*:

Kaka: You spoil that boy. He is a no good. These bad people have spoilt him. He beats his drum for them now at their meetings.

Zwan: Mama, you used to like the boy. He was Venyil’s favourite.

Kaka: That was before he joined them. He was found in the latrine at the back of the church. One of those prostitutes had done it I am sure. Only God will judge. Then the church took him in, nursed him to life, taught him to play his drum for Jesus, but the bad people soon noticed him, and in order to make more money, he started to play his drum at their meetings. That was when we threw him out of the church and our homes. The devil uses him now. When Venyil comes, no more of his used clothes for him. I shall personally see to that. If he wants to drum for the devil, then let the devil feed and clothe his own.⁴²⁶

Kaka’s reference to the “boy is no good” is mainly because he plays drums at the ancestors’ cult meeting. She considers them as people who worship the

⁴²⁴ Osofisan, Femi, “Femi Osofisan: Formal Strategies and Social Commentary” in Jeyifo Biodun (ed.), *Modern African Drama* (New York: Norton Critical Editions, 2001), 616

⁴²⁵ See Balogun, O.A., “The Nature of Evil and Human Wickedness in Traditional African Thought: Further Reflections on the Philosophical Problem of Evil” in *Lumina*, vol. 20, No.2. Oct. 2009, 7

⁴²⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *Uncle Venyil*, in *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 49-50

“devil”. So, to Kaka, people being “bad”, “no good” and the devil mean practicing a religion that is not Christianity. However, the contradiction in Kaka’s statement is “If he wants to drum for the devil, then let the devil feed and clothe his own.” Yerima did not balance the view of Kaka with a positive outlook or comment on the ancestors’ cult the same way he did not provide a balance presentation of Esu in *The Bishop*.

The setting for *Uncle Venyil* is the Tarok community and the Orim cult which Kaka refers to as “bad people meeting” and the “devil”. In order to clearly understand the Tarok people, known traditions of the people need to be highlighted. The Taroks are an ethno-graphically distinctive people in Langtang-North, Langtang-South, Wase, Mikang and Kangke Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Plateau State in central Nigeria. However, they can also be found in other LGAs like Shendam, Qua'an-Pan, Kanam and Pankshin in the state. Outside Plateau State, the Tarok can be seen conducting their farming occupation in Nasarawa and Taraba states. The ancestors (referred to as Orim by the Tarok) are “essentially a powerful male society into which young men are initiated.”⁴²⁷ According to research conducted by Roger Blench “The Tarok are overwhelmingly Christian, although traditional religion also plays an important role in maintaining social order.”⁴²⁸ This religion that Blench refers to is Orim cult into which all adult males are initiated. One of the major functions of the cult is to maintain order in the Tarok community. Tarok society is strongly patrilineal and has highly authoritarian attitudes to women. In order to make sure women are respectful and submissive to their husbands and to also comport themselves well in the community, Orim places fines on any erring woman. The fine is to force the woman involved to cook food for the cult.

In *Uncle Venyil*, Kaka is “fined” for disrespecting her late husband’s family. However, she considers the “fine” ridiculous because, according to her Christian view, cooking for the ancestors amounts to her accepting the traditional cult. At the end, when the pull of the traditional religion becomes too strong in her family, she capitulates and agrees to do the cooking. Yerima’s presentation of African cultural and religious beliefs in both *The Bishop* and

⁴²⁷ Blench, Roger and Dendo, Mallam, “The Coded language of the Orim, the ancestral spirit of the Tarok of Central Nigeria” A paper presented at the conference on “Spirit, Languages, Silence and Secrecy African Secret Languages. Köln, December 2-3rd, 2005.

<http://www.rogerblench.info/RBOP.htm>

⁴²⁸ Blench, Roger and Dendo, Mallam, “The Coded language of the Orim, the ancestral spirit of the Tarok of Central Nigeria” A paper presented at the conference on “Spirit, Languages, Silence and Secrecy African Secret Languages. Köln, December 2-3rd, 2005.

<http://www.rogerblench.info/RBOP.htm>

Uncle Venyil is contrary to Tunde Awosanmi's conclusions that African artists use their artistic creation as a conscious ideological resistance against the dominating vistas of "colonialism and neocolonialism."⁴²⁹ Awosanmi argues that in the "process of re-animation of antiquity, African pristine figures have been engaged in social and political discourses as interrogators-a post-modern rite of resurrecting pre-colonial metaphysical and the communal significances."⁴³⁰ In both *The Bishop* and *Uncle Venyil*, the pre-colonial indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs and communal significances are highlighted but still interpreted in the light of imposed notions and ideas, therefore, not yet represented unbiasedly. In the *The Bishop*, Iyagana, Bishop's paternal aunt puts the Bishop in a hypnotic position with her esoteric power. In *Uncle Venyil*, Venyil the protagonist, while in the process of seeking power to avenge himself of the punisher who was his tormentor, crossed the imaginary divide of the physical to the spiritual realm of the Orim cult⁴³¹ and became possessed by the power of his ancestors:

Kaka: ...at the compound, my son became an animal. With one swift move, like an eagle, he perched on a white cockerel. And in a wild dance, he went to the ancestral shrine, where like a lioness, he bit off the head of the cockerel. He drank the blood, oh God, my son drank the blood of the dying cockerel, still jerking, still twisting. Then wildly he bathed himself, Boyi and the shrines in blood. Boyi started to beat his little drum first in one slow rhythm, you should have seen my son dance. Gradually, he started to spin like one possessed, until he fell, exhausted, [...] my son. He is theirs now. They will initiate him into their cult.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ Awosanmi, Tunde, "Myth, Mimesis and the Pantheon in Nigerian Literary Drama" in *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 284

⁴³⁰ Awosanmi, Tunde, "Myth, Mimesis and the Pantheon in Nigerian Literary Drama" in *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 284

⁴³¹ Orim, the ancestors, among the Tarok people of east-central Nigeria. The singular form, ùrim, is applied to a dead person or an ancestor, while orim refers to the collective ancestors and the cult itself. Men above a certain age are allowed to enter the grove and engage with the ancestors. These inhabit the land of the dead and are thus in contact with all those who have died, including young people and children who were not admitted to the orim. On certain nights when the 'orim are out', women and children must stay in their houses. See Roger Blench: The secret language of the orim, Tarok ancestors. A paper presented at "Spirit, Languages, Silence and Secrecy" African secret languages conference, Köln, Germany. (December 2-3rd, 2005), 5. Post conference draft, 2005. <http://www.rogerblench.info/Language%20data/Niger-Congo/Benue-Congo/Plateau/Tarokoid/Tarok/Tarok%20papers/Tarok%20secret%20language.pdf>

⁴³² Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 69

After witnessing the action of Venyil, Kaka accepts the indigenous religion as having a stronger pull on the people. Although she had resolved earlier not to acknowledge the religion, she capitulates and accepts to prepare the food as demanded by her in-laws:

Kaka: Gone to join them. My own son ... who was baptized in the spirit of Jesus, gone to join them. The gods forbid! Before my eyes, he crossed the threshold, he embraced my shame, making my belief a laughing stock.⁴³³

In a split moment Kaka crossed the threshold with “The gods forbid!” The threshold is that imaginary line between the indigenous religious belief and the Christian faith. Kaka surrenders to the Orim cult when she asks Azwan to call his in-laws to come for Venyil:

Kaka: I must have prayed too long. Azwan, go call the fathers of the house. Tell them their first says they should come for their son. Hurry, woman, hurry.⁴³⁴

She had initially refused the title “first wife” from the so-called “fathers of the house” based on her Christian faith. The duty of the first wife is to welcome the masquerade of the ancestors’ cult and prepare meals for all the members that visit her or the family compound on that day. Kaka’s speech of “I must have prayed too long.” simply means that she has practiced Christianity for such a long time that she has forgotten the power inherent in the indigenous spiritual belief. In the play, this realization is to explain that the ancestral belief lurks in the sub-consciousness of most professed African Christians. It is ever present, though made docile and unacknowledged until a big travail causes it to resurface.

The process of crossing the threshold from the physical realm to the spiritual one happens in a trance-like state without the characters being in total control of their physical state. In case of the Bishop, he is able to break loose because of the presence of dual spiritual forces, one of which he is in full-consciousness and the other lurking in the periphery until Iyagana brought it forth. The fact that Bishop is accustomed to transcending the plane was not sufficient to hold him back until Rev. Father Emmanuel intercepted Iyagana in

⁴³³ Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 67

⁴³⁴ Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 76

her quest. Father Emmanuel, the Bishop's Curate, is not just a physical being but a representation of Christ himself in the life of the Bishop. Yerima deliberately situates him in the play to serve as the Bishop's guarding angel since human's flesh is considered weak by the Bible. He comes to the Bishop's rescue anytime he is too weak to help himself; the first time when he (Bishop) is almost raped by a sister. The sister had earlier inflicted an injury on the Bishop for failing to respond to her love advances. At a public function to which Bishop was invited, the lady attacked him and, in the process, inflicted injury to his head. Though it was concluded that the sister is mentally ill, she says that her action was based on an affection she has for the Bishop which he refused to reciprocate. The second time Father Emmanuel rescues the Bishop, he stops Iyagana's onslaught on him.

The spiritual plane is introduced again in *The Angel* when the assassinated politician, Chief appears to Otunba as an angel. Both Otunba and the late Chief begin a conversation which centres on the pain Rachel, Otunba's sick wife, who is suffering on her sick bed. Their second discussion is the inability of the Nigerian police to arrest the person responsible for Chief's murder. In this scene, Yerima's breaks the wall of the two parallel worlds of the dead and of the living appealing to the belief that anyone who dies before his appointed time by Olodumare will remain on the surface of the earth as a "Akudaaya"⁴³⁵, until he fulfills his days on earth. The belief in Akudaaya also stipulates that the deceased will not rest if he has an important message to deliver to a loved one. Until the message is delivered, he will continue to roam on the surface of the earth even though he has been buried. In this case, Chief wants to meet with his wife in order to reveal the identity of his killer. Otunba becomes the messenger who conveys Chief's message to his wife and sister:

Chief: As you spoke, my mind wandered to my own family. My wife and my children. We had big plans, and now all this happened. (*Pause*) My wife ... can you help me call her please?⁴³⁶

After the "Akudaaya" represented by Chief has had his message delivered, he will depart and finally "rest in peace".

⁴³⁵ Akudaaya, within the Yoruba world refers to a man/woman who died from an unnatural course, especially before his or her time. He/she will remain on the earth, but away to some place where nobody knew of his/her death. See Matory, J.L., *Sex and the empire that is no more: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 126

⁴³⁶ Yerima, *The Angel*, 31

Characters

The plays discussed here have a minimal number of characters ranging from two in *The Twists* (Rev. Noah and Otunba Ojuolape) to seven in *The Wives* and eight in *The Mirror Cracks*. However, *Uncle Venyil* has a fairly large number of characters. Along with the thirteen visible characters are drummers, dancers and masquerades. Despite the fairly large number of characters, the play revolves more around Kaka and her two children: Venyil and Zwan, and Boyi the young drummer. The characters of the plays are drawn from different strata of society. Though all the plays set out to communicate a common message and employ similar forms, the settings are very diverse. This is not to mean that some of the plays do not share related settings.

Apart from *Uncle Venyil*, whose characters are drawn from among the ordinary members of the society, the others mainly have characters that belong to the middle political class of society. This suggests that, in Yerima's plays there is a clear attempt at constructing plays based on class consciousness. His plays emphasize social groupings: evidence of elite culture is pronounced. For example, when the play discusses the lower members of the society, the characters are drawn from that particular segment of the society. Elite culture during the first decades of independence in most societies of Africa (Nigeria included) revolved around the close "connection between education, state power, and personal wealth"⁴³⁷, which is what Yerima reveals in his plays. Chief Gbadegesin in *The Wives* is a member of the highly influential secret (Ogboni) cult. As a very high chief in the community he gravitates within the government circle, and, upon his death, the family is presented with the national flag by the government. One of his three wives is the Chief Executive Officer of a successful commercial bank; in that regards, she represents women empowerment. The rest of Chief's wives, especially Tobi, the youngest who was an air hostess before her marriage to Chief, loved to travel around the world for shopping.

Chief's younger sister Antimi, who is later discovered to be the mother of his first child (Lawyer Akande), is regarded as a committed woman and strength to the other women. Antimi explains that the act of incest happened when she was a teenager living with her brother who had taken to alcohol on a particular night after he lost his job. The action which they both later regretted took place under the influence of alcohol. Antimi did not say if the incestuous act was committed on her under violent circumstances as Gbadegesin was

⁴³⁷ Chazan, N., Mortimer, R., Ravenhill, J., Rothchild, D., *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, 2nd Edition (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1992), 86

drunk. After the birth of their child, Chief Gbadegesin lied to Antimi saying that the child that resulted from the incest affair was a stillbirth. It was unbeknown to her that the child is Lawyer Akande, Chief's personal lawyer trained in the United Kingdom.

In *The Wives*, Baba Ajagbe and Ifagbemi-two elderly men from the village-are the only people who do not belong to the upper class of the society. Notwithstanding, they both belong to the powerful Ogboni cult to which Chief was a member until his death. The two Chiefs represent the belief in the indigenous faith of the Yorubas.

The Twist has two characters: Otunba Ojuolape and Rev. Noah. Otunba Ojuolape is a successful lawyer and former adviser to the president of the country. He was born into the most influential family of Lagos society. He studied law at Oxford and Cambridge and sent his late son Dolapo to the same institutions. The second character Rev. Noah is an influential clergy man of the Anglican faith within Lagos society. He has been in this capacity for almost forty years. As a prominent Anglican Priest he is part of the people who are highly connected in the society because many of the politicians and aristocrats worship in his parish.

The seven characters in *The Mirror Cracks* are from diverse backgrounds. Gabi, Supo's father, was an ambassador; Tundun, the mother, is a senior judge of the Court of Appeal. They represent the aristocratic class, like Otunba Ojuolape in *The Twist* and Chief Gbadegesin in *The Wives*. Their son Supo attended the University of Oxford. Both Gabi and Tundun paid more attention to their career after they separated. Supo was only six years old when the parents separated. He grew up with Joseph (Gabi's domestic house help) and his family. Even Bishop Gerald, Tundun's elder brother and Gabi's best friend, did not give Supo, who happened to be his godson much attention in his formative years. The remaining characters are Daku, the representative of the Federal Military Government who presents Supo's posthumous awards to his parents; Hawa, Supo's sixteen year old fiancé; and Tade his best friend.

There are six characters in *The Bishop*: the Bishop, Archbishop Tiku, the young Rev. Father Emmanuel, two parishioners and Iyagana, the Bishop's aunty. In *The Angel*, we also have six characters: Otunba and his sickly wife Rachel who remains on her sick bed until the last moment of the play. There are Dr. Tela, and Chief-a recently murdered politician who is seen only by Otunba. The manner of the late Chief's appearance is why Otunba regards him as an angel from heaven. Towards the end of the play, Patricia and Jope Chief's wife and sister appear. Jope is considered by Chief as an aggressive woman

who, like the doubting Thomas of the Bible, will not believe anything until she has a fact or experienced it.

Due to the socio-economic placement of the characters and the fact that the plays record activities that occur in a single day, there is no variation in the characters or any other development than the one present at the opening of the plays. Yerima, being conscious of the elitist and materialistic culture of his characters and the taste of the class they belong to, gives the same name to almost all the main characters of the different plays. They are addressed by their title in society, for example, Chief, Otunba, Bishop, Reverend, Ambassador, and so on.

Language

In the analyzed plays are simple poetic and parabolic language laden with metaphor. In the plays studied, simple and easy to understand English language is used as the communicating tool. Though, in some circumstances, there seems to be an illogical dialogue from a particular character. For example, in the scene where Venyil's describes his suffering in detention to his mother is incomprehensible in *Uncle Venyil*:

Venyil: (*Lost in thought, as if in a trance*) He was always there ... like a watchful hungry wicked vulture ... he was always there. As if they wanted you to know who your "Father punisher" was. His icy photograph adorned every room. I saw it, and hated him. I saw it until I transferred my pain to the thought of hurting him one day. I lost my being, my humanity, in the kicks of their boots. For exchange, I gained this animal you see before you. I wanted so very much to die sometimes, and yet, his face kept me going ... my bile ... the strand of life ... cocoon in the shell of my own self-destruction.

Kaka: I am sorry, son ...

Venyil: And at nights, for the nights were worse, the cold air brought in the ghosts. For a long time, I did not know them, neither did they bother to speak with me. But we were always there. Keeping a cold watch of each other. I, the living, they, the dead.

Kaka: I am sorry, son ...

Venyil: Then one night we could not take it any longer. We started to talk. They had wandered into my world, and I was the guest in the

valley of cold existence. Ah, Mama ... I saw the nakedness of the mind.⁴³⁸

Kaka's interjection of "I am sorry, son" reveals her state of mind on hearing the suffering of Venyil, yet it portrays her as someone who is detached from the conversation. Venyil's speech presents him as a character on the brink of psychological breakdown. A constant strand is repetition of words. Incoherency and repetition are also consistent in *The Angel* when Otunba talks with the family doctor Tela, and even with Chief:

Otunba: She hates white (*He walks past Tela, opens the door to the bedroom, and comes out with a coloured wrapper. He covers her up.*) She hates white. There. She lies like a rose flower.

Tela: You need to eat.

Otunba: (*Lost in thought*) We got married on a wet day, you know? It rained that day as if it was not going to stop. As if all the angels in heaven were praying at the same time. It rained also each time she had our children. (*Pause. With tearful voice*) I heard it even rained the day Christopher, our son, was buried. (*Chuckles, still in pain*) Christopher and water. He never liked water when he was a baby. Each time he would struggle and fight his mother and aunties before having his wash. And there he was, buried in a wet grave, on a wet day. And he could not even say a word. (*He begins to cry. Tela watches him for a while and goes to him.*)

Tela: It is okay.

Otunba: It started after Christopher's death, you know?

Tela: What?

Otunba: Rachel's sickness. It started after we received news of his death. It killed a part of her. He had always been her favourite. She hated the twins because they gave so much problems at birth. They even tore her womb as they came out. She gave him her love, her time ...everything, and when he died, it was as if she had willed her own death too. She blamed everybody for his death.⁴³⁹

Like Venyil in *Uncle Venyil*, Otunba becomes incoherent when he jumps from Rachel's hatred of white colour (white colour here has no relation to racial

⁴³⁸ Yerima, *Uncle Venyil*, 66

⁴³⁹ Yerima, *The Angel*, 18.

discourse), to their getting married on a wet day, having her children when rain falls, Christopher's dislike for water and being buried in a wet grave, to Rachel's hatred of her twin children. The statement is both disjointed and illogical. Albeit, in reality, man is often found in this complex web of irrationality when he is trying to suppress a pain or simply looking for an outlet to be purged of a bottled-up emotions.

The characters in the analyzed plays are not separated by language as we often see with most Nigerian plays. It is a common factor in Nigerian drama for domestic staff characters and those with little or no formal education to speak NPE or code-switching between English and the indigenous language. Yerima on the contrary, did not try to elevate one character above the other, except in *The Bishop*. Even when Reverend Father Emmanuel is portrayed as a timid and naïve character in relation to the vivacious nature of the Bishop, the subordinated position of the character is not achieved in language. Rev. Father Emmanuel merely discusses his admiration of Bishop's philosophical poems and other writings by reciting the words of the poems to him. Iyagana in *The Bishop*, as an acolyte of Esu, is steeped in the esoteric language of her indigenous religion. She is similar to the two elderly men in *The Wives* who are Priest of Orunmila. Both Iyagana and the two men use chants, incantations and proverbs to communicate with other characters.

The genre the plays belong to is dark comedy; the plays maintain fluctuating moods because of the subject they all treat. The treatment of death, pain and incest presents a melancholic feeling and a sense of fear in the reader-audience. For example, from the beginning of *The Wives* to the end, Chief Gbadegesin's coffin remains at a corner of the room. Antimi constantly sprays perfume on the corpse. Her reason for the action is to douse the stench from the decomposing body.

On an ethical ground, incest is considered an immoral act or taboo by many religions and societies in Nigeria. To discuss it freely in *The Wives* in a society that treats such an act as taboo is to tell the people that it exists within the society. For a lucid interpretation of the plays for different strata of audience and the playwright's awareness of government censorship for politically assertive plays, Yerima situates his works within a domestic environment. As the plays are not to be taken at face value, the language used is metaphorical yet the message being communicated by the plays is easily decipherable by those who have some mediocre knowledge of Nigerian history.

The title, *The Mirror Cracks*, is a metaphor which I find easier to explain as representing, Gabi, Tundun and Supo's true identity. Supo is a

bundle of contradictions and does not reflect his father's gentlemanly disposition, which is what people believe him to be. This suggests that things are not always as they seem, and every human being has his own identity. The crash of a symbolic mirror in the play shortly before Tade reveals what Supo had always been and what he later became in Sierra Leone is a suggestion of this:

Gabi: Oh, the army say[s] he died well. That is alright by me. But Tade, you were there, you saw him last alive. What really happened?

Tade: Well, sir ...

(There is a clash of a mirror cracking upstairs. Tundun screams....)⁴⁴⁰

The crash of the mirror, though an accident by Tundun, is aimed to draw the audience to the vagaries of man and to the deceit in human existence.

Tundun: Yes, clumsy me. It was the funny mirror in my room. It made me look fatter, monstrous. I thought I could fix it. But it fell off the hook as I moved closer. I cut my little finger trying to save it. It cracked into tiny little pieces.

Gabi: (Manages a laugh) So you met Supo's funny mirror. He bought it in Spain for my sixty-four[th] birthday. It was the card that came with it that really made me laugh. It read "things are not always what they seem. If you think you are great, look at the mirror and see how awful you could have been."⁴⁴¹

The metaphor of the mirror and the crack are enhanced by the irony in Tundun's reflection after seeing herself in it, the laughter of Gabi, and the message of the card, the meaning of which both Tundun and Gabi did not decipher.

Thematic Pre-occupation

As is clear now the representation of religion is a major theme in these works. However, hypocrisy of both the Christian and ATBs religious practitioners is evident. Many of the characters follow a particular religion based on the material satisfaction to be derived from it. The majority of the characters in all of the plays, indeed, profess the loyalty to the Christian doctrine but clandestinely follow the ATBs for instantaneous solutions to problems. Even

⁴⁴⁰ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 130

⁴⁴¹ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 130

those with traditional chieftaincy titles prefer to be associated with Christianity so as not to be regarded as pagan. To be known as Christian is to be socially accepted even when the person is a sceptic like Kaka in *Uncle Venyil*. She is a typical example of most Nigerian Christians whose reason for going to church is the opportunity it affords to wear new clothes on Sunday and to secure a church burial at death. Like Otunba in *The Angel* and Gabi and Tundun in *The Mirror Cracks*, going to church as a wealthy individual and providing financially to church project guarantees you and your family a permanent seat in the church. At the same time, the works extensively discuss the importance of indigenous cultural and religious beliefs to the Nigerian society. Kaka's returning to cook for the ancestors' cult members in *Uncle Venyil* is a way to keep the practice alive.

Women's emancipation is portrayed in *The Wives* and *The Mirror Cracks*. In order to attain an enviable position, Cecelia separated from Chief Gbadegesin as his second wife to pursue a successful banking career and rises to the position of Chief Executive. In *The Mirror Cracks*, Tundun becomes a senior judge of the Appeal Court (the second highest court in Nigeria). At the death of Chief Gbadegesin, the rest of the women, rather than be in mourning, dance and drink to celebrate their emancipation from the stranglehold of marriage. While their husband was alive, they were like his properties.

Fate as a theme often occurs in many of Yerima's plays. Its presence in these religious realist dramas is poignant. Yerima employs critical questioning of the existence of man in relation to his essence in these plays.

In *The Twist*, Rev. Noah has the fate of being the father of a child who becomes a condemned armed robber. Furthermore, the boy is going to face execution as a result of his action. Fate deals the Reverend a heavier blow when it comes to light that the murdered victim was a son he never knew he had. The victim was a product of his relationship prior to his becoming a Reverend gentleman forty years before. He had requested his young lover to abort the pregnancy as he was going to the seminary. Also Chief Gbadegesin's incestuous act with his sister in *The Wives* is as a result of fate. In these two works, Yerima uses fate to discuss moral subjects. Morality is another constant issue in these works: the questioning of man's reaction, action or inaction as being good or evil. Incest is a condemnable act on the ground of morality by many religions of the world. The Yoruba society considers it a taboo with many consequences. Baba Ajagbe and Ifagbayi who are from the village, after seeing Chief Gbadegesin's corpse are quick to note that Chief's swollen corpse is a result of having committed an abomination. On moral grounds, in *The Mirror*

Cracks, Supo was evil; Bishop Daku, Gabi and Tundun, and Kaka in *Uncle Venyil* are all hypocrites; Chief Gbadegesin in *The Wives* was morally bankrupt. He (Chief Gbadegesin) believed that by pretending to be a Christian while at the same time holding a high position in the indigenous secret cult, he could cover his many atrocities. More pronounced in these works is the conception of God as the author of good and evil, pain, sickness, accident, and ultimately death. This explains why Otunba Durosimi accuses God as the one who gives his wife “so heavy a cross”⁴⁴² of sickness to bear.

Otunba: ... First, her legs, now she finds it difficult to even breathe. They say only one of her kidney works now. Father, do something. Can't you do something to help her get better? [...] Send something, Father. Send us a miracle, Father, save Rachel ...save my beautiful jewel. You give her so heavy a cross to bear. She is weak. She has never been too strong. She has given you too much to carry this heavy cross.⁴⁴³

Thematically, these plays further dissect Nigerians festering problems where everyone, especially serious agents of change, connives with visible opposition to the societal goods in making life difficult for the people. Conspiracy and deception are, thus, part of the thematic thrust of these plays. In *The Bishop*, despite the Bishop's hallowed position and his objective of building a god-fearing youth for the nation, government would not allow such a gesture. Government agency demolishes the Sunday school building Bishop uses with the claim that it is built on a piece of land that belongs to the government. For daring to challenge the government demolition agents in the pursuance of their duty, the Bishop is arrested by the police in the full glare of television journalists and remanded in detention.

On the other hand, when we consider the deception in *The Mirror Cracks* and *The Wives*, we are left with two dead people, Supo and Otunba, who both died believing that they have succeeded in covering their evils and negative deeds from being known to people around them and the world in general. Yet at death, every secret comes into the open before their burial.

Revenge is another point raised in the plays. Rev. Noah in *The Twist* attempts to use his position as a reverend to prevail on Otunba Ojuolape to get a government pardon for his condemned son. However, Otunba Ojuolape

⁴⁴² Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 11

⁴⁴³ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Angel and Other Plays* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2004), 11

declined wanting an eye for eye, so, he refuses to demand for the life of his son's murderer to be spared when he gets the opportunity to do so. Venyil's ultimate intention of avenging his incarceration leads to his joining of the ancestors' cult. In *The Angel*, the purpose for the murdered Chief's appearance to Otunba is to reveal the identity of his murderer to his wife, Patricia, and his sister, Jope, so that he can be punished for his crime. The murderer is Chief's younger brother whose motive is the appropriation of the deceased's property. Chief releases the evidence needed to the women and asks them to give the evidence to the authority in order to allow that the law take its course and convict the murderer. In *The Mirror Cracks*, the late Supo, in order to avenge the death of some soldiers under his command becomes an animal, killing ruthlessly both the rebels and non-rebels.

Socio-Political Contextualization of Texts

A clash of religion can be detected in all of the plays studied in this chapter. The assumption among Christianized Nigerians that ATBs is the celebration of pagan and heathen culture causes opposition between the two religions. Contemporary Nigerian Clergies are quick to point out to people that relinquishing ATBs for Christianity is what the Bible refers to as "being born again". In *The Angel*, Yerima is able to talk about the Nigerian police's failure to resolve cases of the assassinations of politicians in the country since the return to democratic governance. Yerima says in *The Bishop* that, "it is difficult to draw a line between politics and religion." This is because the church would rather keep a sinner who commits to the "work of God" for financial gain than a pious Reverend Father who is overly concerned with righteousness.

Elevation into higher rank and posting to a lucrative Parish by the efforts of "godfathers" are more important than soul-winning. These are visibly displayed in *The Bishop*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Wives*, as well as in *The Twist*. Reverend Noah, in *The Twist*, explains:

Noah: In my parish, what amazed me was how upright men, deacons, church workers, were willing to give up their souls for positions. [...] Those who had joined the secret cult and lost the elections, came dejected, they came to make confessions of their trials...⁴⁴⁴

Money, rather than salvation of the human soul from eternal condemnation as the Bible instructed is considered by many Nigerians as the hallmark of

⁴⁴⁴ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Twist*, in *The Angel and Other Plays*, 94

Christianity in the country. It is important to reiterate the fact that in *The Angel*, *The Bishop*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Wives*, as well as in *The Twist*, Christianity's subjugation of ATBs and other cultural practices like polygamy are considered as a continuum of Euro-American colonization of Nigeria. For example, some of the churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim, and Aladura Churches who synthesize some aspects of ATBs into their worship, are considered un-Christian churches, meaning that, for immediate response to the needs of most Nigerian Christians, the indigenous spiritual realms seem more reliable than their Christian spiritual realm.

Christianity for this set of people means a system to be used in order to secure a position in the here-after, while indigenous belief is for here-and-now. So, for many of them, there is no harm in practicing two different religions, and if it is needed, one can synthesize the two opposing beliefs. As I have mentioned above, some of the Churches will not take kindly to a member who flagrantly follows ATBs. Also in this case, the socio-economic position of the person plays a very important role and churches appear hypocritical. In *Uncle Venyil*, the church will not bury Anthony because he is polygamous and also a member of the ancestors' cult. However, the Bible did not say that polygamy is sinful in any way. Apostle Paul only recommends monogamy to the people seeking to be Bishop and Deacons in the church.⁴⁴⁵ To deny Anthony a church burial on the ground of his marriage has no biblical corroboration. On the contrary, the same church will bury Supo, an embodiment of contradiction in *The Mirror Cracks*. Supo not only lies by portraying a Christian side to his parents and their friends, but he also killed and raped innocent people in Sierra Leone where he had gone as a peace-keeping envoy. Even when the Bishop is aware that he fornicated with a sixteen year old teenager, the position of his parents in society as an ambassador and a high court judge guarantees Supo a church burial.

Yerima uses *The Mirror Cracks* to comment on the activities of various peace-keeping organizations, using Economic Communities of West African State Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) as a focus. Among many other atrocities, the peace-keeping group was accused of committing heinous acts like looting, rape, killing and destruction of properties. Hawa narrates her experience, thus:

Hawa: He ordered his men out and as he dropped my mother, even I knew the end had come. Silently, she began to cry in our language, that I should not try to help her. The language infuriated him the more. He

⁴⁴⁵ See *The Holy Bible* King James Version, I Timothy 3:1-12

raped her and with the pistol, my father's pistol, he shot her in the head at close range. [...] All I remembered later was finding myself at the back of his jeep in handcuffs.⁴⁴⁶

Hawa's revelation to Supo's parents is also corroborated by Tade, Supo's best friend and colleague in the army:

Tade: Yes. It was a cold Friday morning. There had been an uneasy calm in Freetown. There was only one bank operating downtown Freetown. And reports had reached us that a group of rebels had robbed the bank killing all the officials. Every available man was drafted. A major had been asked to lead us. We double-crossed the men, killing everyone of them. We had also captured their loot intact. Then came the argument about what we were to do with the loot. Only twelve of us survived the operation out of some twenty-five men. Supo wanted us to keep some of the money, but the Major wanted everything returned. The argument became heated, and Supo drew his pistol and shot down the officer.⁴⁴⁷

Tade reveals further:

When we got to the camp, we all told a cock and bull story and Supo was rewarded with a promotion for his gallantry.⁴⁴⁸

Apart from these atrocious acts in *The Mirror Cracks*, reports on the West African peace-keeping groups are replete in the play. During both the Liberian civil war of the 1990s and Sierra Leonean war of 2000s, peace-keeping groups are accused of looting and corruption. According to Stephen Ellis:

Throughout the mission, corruption and organized looting by ECOMOG troops led some Liberians to re-coin the acronym ECOMOG as "Every Car or Movable Object Gone." Stephen Ellis reports one of the most egregious examples as being the total removal of the Buchanan iron ore processing machinery for onward sale while the Buchanan compound was under ECOMOG control.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 126

⁴⁴⁷ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 133

⁴⁴⁸ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 132-133

⁴⁴⁹ Ellis, Stephen, *The Mask of Anarchy* (New York: NYU Press, 2006). Updated Edition

Yerima also captures the irony inherent in the national awards and honours bestowed on individuals by the government and some organizations in society. The awards are presented to questionable characters, like to Supo in *The Mirror Cracks*:

Daku: (In a formal tone.) Your excellency and your Lordship, on behalf of the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and also on behalf of the Supreme Commander of the Joint ECOMOG forces serving in Sierra Leone, [...] I present you both the Award of Gallantry and Military Leadership earned by your son ... for laying down his life well and beyond the call of duty.[...] On behalf of the Federal Military government, I am to present the Posthumous National Award of the Officer of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for outstanding service to the nation. [...] Please accept our condolence. Major Adegabi was a first-class officer and an international hero....⁴⁵⁰

Here, Yerima derides the awards of both military and national honours to an officer reputed for mercilessly killing his superior and the people he is sent to protect. This is a risky venture for Yerima who, at this point, is working in a government owned institution. In Nigeria where Yerima resides, almost all the awardees of national honours worked for the government in the capacity of heading a ministry, parastatal or commission of inquiry which are riddled with corruption allegations. The majority of the awardees are noted for ruthlessly enriching themselves to the detriment of the Nigerian masses. In *The Mirror Cracks*, Yerima's authorial voice can be heard as Tade says that Supo starts to ask some fundamental questions before his death:

Tade: ...After a while he started to ask too many questions about why Nigeria was in the war; whose interest it was to have too many people die; why the gold and diamond of Sierra Leone people had become such an issue for international interest; why Liberia was fuelling the war; who were his real enemies. All this was wrong.⁴⁵¹

Tade's speech refers to the involvement of Liberia in the Sierra Leone war and the fact that Charles Taylor's contribution to the illegal mining of the country's

⁴⁵⁰ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 121

⁴⁵¹ Yerima, *The Mirror Cracks*, 133

diamonds have been said to reinforce the rebels with arms' supplies used in perpetuating the most heinous crimes against humanity. According to Leo Cendrowicz, "Witnesses have also testified about arms smuggled from Liberia into Sierra Leone in sacks of rice and diamonds sent back in a mayonnaise jar."⁴⁵² However, Charles Taylor has vehemently denied the allegation of his involvement in the war in Sierra Leone even when his aides have confessed to it. Charles Taylor, the former President of Liberia was arrested in 2006 in Nigeria where he was in exile. He is currently being held in United Nations Detention Unit on the premises of Penitentiary Institution Haaglanden in The Hague, where he is standing trial before the Special Court for Sierra Leone because of his role in the civil war.⁴⁵³

Conclusion

In order to effectively conclude this chapter it is pertinent not to lose sight of the paradox that is in both *The Twist* and *The Bishop*. The subject of divine law and of legal status appears when Rev. Noah and Bishop who both represent the Christian Divine law, are placed against the State law. While the Christian law recognizes forgiveness of sinners or criminals, Nigerian law stipulates death penalty for a first degree murder offender. In *The Twist*, Otunba Ojuolape as lawyer and the Governor who is a custodian of law represent opposition to the Christian law.⁴⁵⁴ The state law on armed robbery and murder recognizes no religious order even when Rev. Noah attempted to influence the course of justice by employing antics of his religion:

Noah: (*Frantic, hysterical, Noah crawls to Ojuolape on his knees.*) by the grace, save him! Save my son, please. Save me from the shame of my church! Pick up the phone and save my son. The Lord has heard my prayers through you. Save him! (*Breaks down*) In the name of God, please! I beg you ...⁴⁵⁵

This is a clear example of how the influential members of the Nigerian societies attempt to manipulate the judicial system by employing wealth, political positions, religious and cultic affiliations to gain self advantages to the

⁴⁵² Cendrowicz, Leo, "Lie and Rumour: Liberia's Charles Taylor on the Stand", in *Times*, July 14, 2009 <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1910365,00.html#ixzz18DyBjcyD>

⁴⁵³ Cendrowicz, Leo. Lie and Rumour: Liberia's Charles Taylor on the Stand, in *Times*. July 14, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1910365,00.html#ixzz18DyBjcyD>

⁴⁵⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 2

⁴⁵⁵ Yerima, *The Twist*, 108

detriment of the less privileged members of society for whom the law must take its course.

In the case of *The Twist*, Otunba Ojuolape does not agree with Rev. Noah to pervert the cause of justice. As *The Twist* talks about a death sentence for armed robbers, the play lends its voice to the campaign against this aspect of Nigerian society on the execution of any criminal.

In conclusion, Nigerian religious problems are well articulated in these plays. Yerima's position on the fact that man's deeds shall be judged on earth even when he is dead is well captured in *The Twist*, *The Mirror Cracks*, *The Wives*, *The Angel* and *Uncle Venyil*. According to a popular maxim which Shakespeare utilized, "the evil that men do, live after them; the good is oft interred with their bones."⁴⁵⁶ Their deeds are not forgotten even after they exit the physical plane. As Yerima revealed in some of these plays, death ought to be perceived as continuum of life and not as a termination of a cycle. For example, the appearance of the ghosts of Chief in *The Angel* and Ovievie in *Little Drops*, the discussion of the Chief Gbadegesin's deeds in *The Wives* and Supo's atrocities in *The Mirror Cracks* lend support to this argument. Within the Yoruba cyclical worldview described by Wole Soyinka as an unbroken link between the world of the dead, the living and the yet to be born, and spaces between each action,⁴⁵⁷ death is no negation but a crossing over to the world of the ancestors.

Yerima discusses religion as an integral part of Nigerian society. Even with all of its contradictions it becomes necessary to look further at the social reality of his other works. Therefore, the idea of social-political realism in Yerima's theatre will be explored further in the next chapter of this thesis using other plays to support my argument that he is a politically aware playwright.

⁴⁵⁶ See William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Mark Anthony's eulogy of Caesar

⁴⁵⁷ Soyinka, Wole, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976)

Chapter four

Socio-political realist plays:

The Lottery Ticket, Kaffir's Last Game, The Sisters, Mojagbe, and Little Drops

The relationship between drama and socio-political engagement is at stake in Nigerian literary criticism at least since the first playwrights began to publish in European languages.⁴⁵⁸ This chapter will investigate this relationship in the specific case of Ahmed Yerima's drama. It will also raise the question if the playwright's artistic expression can be independent or not. According to Femi Osofisan:

Literature can entertain, in fact must entertain, but it is only the dim or brainwashed artist who is content merely to entertain, to play the clown. The primary value of literature seems to me to lie in its subversive potential, that explosive charge which lies hidden behind the facade of entertainment and which must be controlled and made to [explode] for the use of our people, of mankind . . . Literature must be used to play its role in the advancement of our society, in the urgent struggle against neocolonialism and the insidious spread of fascism.⁴⁵⁹

This statement by Femi Osofisan captures, to a large extent, the thematic preoccupation of the majority of Nigerian literary drama. Nigerian literary dramatists often rely on what Osofisan refers to as the "subversive potential, that explosive charge which lies hidden behind the facade of entertainment."⁴⁶⁰ This potential serves to remind the people of the wrong-doing of governments and other social institutions. While it was a little difficult to stage political assertive plays under the military government of the 1990s, there was no censorship of published texts. Playwrights in Nigeria usually publish their own texts by giving them to desired press. Nigeria government has not clamped down on publishing companies who publish material without first submitting it to the necessary government agency. This means that a playwright will have his work published as long as he can afford the cost of publication. The publishing

⁴⁵⁸ See James E. Henshaw, *This is Our Chance: Plays from West Africa* (London: ULP, 1956)

⁴⁵⁹ Awodiya, Muyiwa, (ed.), *Excursions in Drama and Literature: Interview with Femi Osofisan* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1993), 9

⁴⁶⁰ Awodiya, Muyiwa, (ed.), *Excursions in Drama and Literature: Interview with Femi Osofisan* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1993), 10

companies are privately owned; to remain in operation, they will publish any material given to them. Based on the almost lacking of censorship of published drama in Nigeria, playwrights seize the opportunity to discuss political and social issues as the issues affect them. However, at what point did socio-realist issues become fulcrum for dramatic creation in Nigeria? According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi:

Nigeria, Athena-like, popped out of Lord Lugard's head without the would-be Nigerians participating in the birthing process. In the absence of the patriarch, the result has been a monstrous polygynous household, incapacitated with petty rivalries, perpetually at war with itself. ...⁴⁶¹

What Ogunyemi Chikwenye called “monstrous polygynous household” (a coalescence of different ethnic nationalities) coupled with an unstable political system, electoral fraud and corruption brought about the first military coup in Nigeria on January 15, 1966, six years after its independence. Shortly after, the nation was plunged into an orgy of killing in a three-year civil war that began in 1967 and ended in 1970. Since its independence in 1960, political changes in Nigeria through elections have been fraught with manipulation, hence, the military is always waiting in a corner to seize power when the people complain. Past military leaders in Nigeria were no different than politicians because they were not particularly interested in conducting a credible election. For example, until Gen. Sani Abacha, the military head of state at the time died suddenly in office in 1997, he organized a symbolic election in order to remain in office whereby no significant change of any sort was going to transpire. The symbolic election is a system, which does not constitute a means of altering the top leadership, the administration, or the regime. This process of forced political transition in the form of military coup d'état has been the most prevalent way of inducing change against the will of those in office⁴⁶² in the majority of African countries. The outcome of these symbolic elections have been political instability and civilian insurrection, which are now of rapid frequency in Nigeria. In his reconstruction of the Nigerian civil war barbarity, Soyinka wrote *Madmen and Specialist* (1971), as a tragic satire of humankind immersed in war. As indicated in the introduction, Femi Osofisan and Kole Omotosho are basically concerned with the neo-colonial state of the Nigerian nation with all

⁴⁶¹ Ogunyemi, Chikwenye O., *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 332

⁴⁶² Chazan, N., Mortimer, R., Ravenhill, J., Rothchild, D., *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 215

its attendant problems. In the 1990s, attention of the various dramatists shifted from creating a collective or community heroic figure to creating survivalists; how an individual survived the strangulating neo-colonial social, political, and economic realities within the society.

The new plays are focused on individual survival strategies rather than an elusive utopian society as the one that is presented in the plays of the radical dramatists. The survivalist dramatists present characters that strive to emerge from the strangulating laws and treatments given by the government and society at large. To these characters, attention is not focused on fighting for the freedom of the group by rousing collective heroes, but finding an opportunity for individual survival with or without external support.

The Lottery Ticket, Kaffir's Last Game, The Sisters, Mojaḡbe, and Little Drops, are socio-political realist plays because they represent the reality of the country where they emerged in the same manner as the previous plays. I have grouped these plays under realism based on their thematic preoccupations and writing style of the playwright. Some of these works also deal with the impermanence of human existence. Contrary to the religious realist plays discussed in chapter three of this thesis, all the plays discussed in this chapter are human-centred. They emphasize "people's rational understanding, agency, and progressive capacities."⁴⁶³ These plays are inspired by on the social, political and economic reality of the Nigerian state. They discuss the decadence that permeates the nation's social and political space over the past two decades (1990-2010). This is a period when greed, corruption, unemployment, poverty, political and sectarian violence were at their highest. This is also the period when government marginalization of the working class is a determinant for the mass exodus to the land where the grass seems greener (Europe and United States).

In Nigeria, coup d'état, sit-tight governance, and violence were the alternative to good government. Between 1990 and 1999, Nigeria had five different governments, three of which were military. In the following decade, there were two transitional governments as a result of the return to democratic governance. In some of the works studied, especially in *Little Drops*, the issue of women suffering at the hands of weapons-wielding violent militants who call themselves freedom fighters and government's forces is discussed. These militants' violence, as well as the recent destructions being perpetuated by the

⁴⁶³ Morris, Pam, *Realism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 166

Islamic Fundamentalist Boko Haram⁴⁶⁴, have put Nigeria in the global map of modern domestic terrorism. The military activities treated in *The Mirror Cracks*, which I have already discussed in chapter three, would have found a space here, but it is not a central issue in the drama. Supo's military violence is used in the play to explain the hypocritical attitude of religious organized institutions. Another topic related to political violence is to be seen in *Kaffir's Last Game*⁴⁶⁵: The play discusses the current diplomatic relations between South Africa and Nigeria by x-raying the socio-political entanglement in and between the two nations. The play also highlights that the violence the Nigerian military government of General Sanni Abacha visited on opposition groups. In order to escape assassination, many political activists and academics fled the country; those who were not lucky enough to escape were put in jail or murdered. Yerima uses Professor Omobusola in *Kaffir's Last Game* to represent the voice of freedom fighters that were put in jail by the government.

In the author's note to *Kaffir's Last Game*, Yerima writes that the play is his "reaction to the relationship between two great countries, South Africa and Nigeria...The essence... is the love-hate relationship between both countries."⁴⁶⁶ His motivation for this play, some few years after South Africa emerged from a strangulating apartheid regime, is worthy of study. To help South Africans out of the evil of apartheid, Nigeria played a pivotal role by expending both human and financial resources. Nigeria also provided a ready home for the oppressed black population of South Africa. However, true to Yerima's prognosis, "the love-hate relationship between both countries" came to a head in 2008. In a series of xenophobic attacks, many South Africans began to dispossess of properties and, in some cases outrightly to kill non-nationals in South Africa, including Nigerians residing or travelling through the country.⁴⁶⁷

In *The Sisters*, there is the unraveling of the vanity and deceit that characterize the lives of the high and mighty in the Nigerian society. The play

⁴⁶⁴ None of the plays studied discuss the issue of Islamic Fundamentalist group known as Boko Haram. This is because the group only became known in 2010 when President Goodluck Jonathan assumes office as the President of Nigeria at the sudden death of President Umar Musa Yar'dua in March 5, 2010. The Boko Haram (No to any form of Western education) group, whose mission is to enthrone Sharia in Nigeria, plans to overthrow the government of Jonathan whom they consider an infidel as he is a non-Muslim. They have succeeded in destabilizing government in some states in Northern Nigeria by detonating bombs in many public buildings including Christian Churches and killing innocent worshippers.

⁴⁶⁵ *Kaffir's Last Game* was written in 1997, and had its premiered performance in February, 1998

⁴⁶⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *Kaffir's Last Game* (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 1998), 6

⁴⁶⁷ See BBC mobile, "SA Leader Orders Army to Deploy", 16:17 GMT, Wednesday, 21 May 2008 17:17 UK. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7412128.stm>

stresses the impermanency of life, political power and social status. The play, along with *Mojagbe*, makes a truism of the Nigerian maxim “No condition is permanent.” In *Little Drops*, through the overt deployment of socio-political realism, the playwright makes the lines between illusion and reality almost non-existent. In both *The Sisters* and *Little Drops*, there is the exposition of the facts that in most male dominated or phallogentric societies, women remain subservient and are often reduced to commodities.

Structure

All the plays studied are one-act plays that follow a linear progression. Apart from *Kaffir's Last Game*, the rest of the plays have a “moving” plotline-a situation where there is a constant entry and exit of characters. All the plays have more than a single subplot; nevertheless, one issue leads to another in quick succession without abandoning the main plot. The storylines are simple enough for ease of understanding without major complications. Apart from *Mojagbe*, whose action takes place over many days and which also has a change of scene from Mojagbe's palace to the masquerade grove, the rest of the plays take place in one day and in one location. With these plays, Yerima seems to be making a call to the reader-audience to re-examine government attitude toward civilian lives and national values and to resist the onslaught on integrity of human lives that is fast eroding the moral lives of society.

As the plays progress, Yerima, at intervals, brings the reader-audience back to the seriousness and the setting of the plays with much paraphernalia. For example, *Mojagbe*⁴⁶⁸, the only one among the plays under discourse with a pre-colonial setting, is crafted within the traditional African performance mode with music, dance, chants and songs as embellishment and propelling tools. In *Kaffir's Last Game* there is an occasional announcement from the airport public address system informing passengers of the arrival of a new flight, delay, departure and cancellation of others. In *The Lottery Ticket* and *Mojagbe*, there is the use of radio jingles, songs, incantations, poetry, backchannel communication like “yes, oh yes, uh, yeee, hum, yeah, ha ha, oh, taitai, mama”, and so on, which are also frequent in *The Sisters* and *Little Drops* as vehicle for effective communication. There is a continuous sound of guns, and explosive devices and war music in *Little Drops* to constantly remind the

⁴⁶⁸ I have not included *Mojagbe* under historical realist plays because it is not a play constructed based on any historical occurrence. The protagonist and other characters of the play were imagined. *Mojagbe* is a fictionalized play that Yerima uses to comment on the contemporary leadership situation in Nigeria. Although, the names of some villages and towns used in the play exist in Nigeria.

characters and the reader-audience where the play is set. All of this paraphernalia, apart from reinforcing the settings of the plays to the reader-audience, also indicate changes in mood and tempo of the plays. They serve as evidence of attention, interest and understanding on the reader-audience's part, and they clearly keep conversations flowing smoothly between the characters of the play.

In *Mojagbe* and *Little Drops*, there is the continuation of the technique of bridging the gap between the worlds of the dead and the living which he had already developed in *The Angel*. This technique allows for the recently dead to appear on stage to reveal a hidden aspect of the play to the protagonist in order to effectively resolve the plays' conflicts. At times this technique creates its own challenges; for example one may ask, "what is the need for breaking the wall of reality with the introduction of the ghost into a possible situation?" and "why does Yerima use the ghost to resolve conflicts?" However, as indicated in the previous chapter, the religious background from which the play emerges recognizes the collapse of the physical and the spiritual world. The traditional Nigerian society believes that some people within the physical world can visit the spiritual world and, in the same manner that some spiritual beings visit the physical world.

The Sisters opens with Nana who comes on stage to switch on the light to reveal a grand room. This is a significant action to the understanding of the play itself since the play is about death; light in this context symbolizes life, while darkness symbolizes death. Within this short interval, there is a transition from death to life (from a world where everything seems to be still to the world where everything moves), from the gloom that the president's death presented to the vivacity that the reunion of the ambassador's children signify. The room, which serves as the setting of the play, is a presidential palace, and the president had just died suddenly in his office, therefore, the nation is in a state of mourning. Like in *The Mirror Cracks* and *The Twist*, death becomes the springboard that propels the movement of *The Sisters* as the play takes place a day before the burial of the late president. According to Yerima, "The president's death provides an occasion for the sisters to come to grips with... realities and to re-examine their lives after all the disappointments and misfortunes they have been through."⁴⁶⁹ I think that what Yerima is saying is that the fear of death and void provide an occasion for self re-assessment by the living.

⁴⁶⁹ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 2001. See the back page.

Like *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game* and *Little Drops*, *The Sisters* is a one-act play with non-stop action from the opening to the end. The play is structured around four sisters who are the children of a late ambassador. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, Yerima is class conscious in his plays. Funmi, the supposed eldest of the sisters, is the First Lady of the country (Nigeria). She is powerful and influential. In order to demonstrate her power, she employs state resources to summon her sisters. It is to be noted that her sisters were not part of her life when the president was alive, at least not Taiwo and Toun. This time she wants her sisters by her side in the moment of her grief. This unfortunate meeting and the manner through which they come together allows for the sisters to bare their souls without any restriction. It also allows for the revelation of the atrocities committed by the men in their lives.

Mojagbe, set in a fictitious Yoruba town,⁴⁷⁰ is a play crafted within the traditional African society. It has power and leadership as its thrust and especially how it is easy for the two to be wrongly applied. At the opening of the play, four women in ritual clothing appear on stage with oil lamps bearing staffs with bells, and they move to the rhythm of a ritual music. According to the play, these four women possess the power of witchcraft.

The supernatural power associated with witchcraft among Africans is a malevolent spirit often used to perpetuate wickedness. The people who consult witches and wizards exert esoteric knowledge to achieve negative deeds over their victims. These women are regarded as the owners of the night and darkness, even of the material world. This does not mean that there are no male witches. In many Yoruba communities, there are representations of two types of witchcraft in the society. The witches who often perpetuate wickedness are *Aje Dudu*, while those who work for the good of the society are called *Aje Funfun*.⁴⁷¹ The attributes of African witchcraft share semblance with medieval and later Renaissance Europe, especially as contained in Reginald Scot's *The Discoveries of Witchcraft*.⁴⁷² I doubt if there is much difference with witches represented in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and in the works of many Elizabethan writers either. Raymond Prince argues that among the Yorubas, witchcraft is regarded as feminine art:

⁴⁷⁰ The playwright did not give the name of the town in the play rather he refers to it as a tributary state of Oyo kingdom.

⁴⁷¹ Personal interview with Dr. Gabriel Adekola Oyewo, the Balogun of Oba Community, Osun State, Nigeria on March 15, 2012

⁴⁷² Regina Scot, *The Discoveries of Witchcraft* (Kent: R.C., 1584)

...witchcraft is a feminine art and has its power from Eshu, the trickster god, and was sanctioned, if somewhat reluctantly, by Orunmila (Ifa) the god of Fate, and by Olorun, the Lord of all. This power is generally attributed to older women, but young women or even girls can sometimes be involved. [...] A witch's malignancy may be turned upon a man for almost any reason-for some slight impoliteness, or because he accuses her of being a witch, or because he is getting too high in the world or often for no reason "just because they are evil women".⁴⁷³

Esu, the trickster and messenger god, has been previously discussed in chapter three of this work. Therefore, I will not discuss it again here. It must be noted that the belief in the existence of the witches among the Yorubas, and indeed Africans, is powerful: it is part of everyday reality even among the educated elites and Christians who are always seeking protection from God against their perceived evil machinations. However, it must be noted that the Nigerian traditional society is very well biased towards the emancipation of women from traditional authorities that are often put in place by men. Women who are powerful enough to challenge the male organized traditional institutions are often regarded as witches. For example, Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti⁴⁷⁴, who organized a women's rebellion against the traditional ruler of Ake, Abeokuta and the colonial imposition of female tax in the 1950s was labelled a witch for her actions.

Wole Soyinka acknowledges the power of the telluric women in his *Madmen and Specialist*, where he refers to them as "Earth Mothers." The Yorubas call the telluric women "Awon Iya Aye" (The Mother of the Earth).

In *Mojagbe*, the telluric women are imbued with positive characteristics as they invoke the spirit of Layewu (ancestral Masquerade of Death) to consume King Mojagbe: the oppressor of the masses. This is often the case when there is fallout between them and someone who had earlier consulted with them for power. Mojagbe was formally under their protection but later falls out of favour with them. According to the leader of the women, the death of the king will "give our people the respite that they need."⁴⁷⁵ The

⁴⁷³ Raymond Prince, "The Yoruba Image of the Witch" in *The Journal of Mental Science* 107, 1961, 795-805

⁴⁷⁴ Mrs Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti was an educated political figure in colonial Nigeria. She organized the women who sent the paramount ruler of Ake kingdom, Abeokuta on an exile in 1950s. She was the first Nigerian woman to drive a car and was also a part of Nigerian delegate to London to demand for the country's independence in the late 1950s. She is the mother of the Nigerian famous Afrobeat musician Fela Anikulapo-Kuti.

⁴⁷⁵ Yerima, Ahmed, *Mojagbe*, 9

people united together and, by aligning their voices with the king-makers, place a white calabash on the throne. The significance of the calabash presentation is synonymous with the Oyo Mesi (king makers of Oyo kingdom) who demands that a failed king commits suicide in order to bring peace to the kingdom. This is where the idea of calabash placement on the throne is borrowed from. Mojagbe, recognizing the demands of his people, refuses to act accordingly. Instead, he (Mojagbe) reprimands the Chiefs and pronounces: “and here you all are, the only ones who could have sent such messages of death to the king, my once trusted friends, handpicked by me.”⁴⁷⁶ In order to unseat King Mojagbe, the people embark on protests and demonstrations against his various inhuman actions and kingship. Abese reports to the king thus:

Kabiyesi ...it is the women. They have all come from the market led by Iyaloja and the elders of the conclave. They refuse Prince Esan to be beheaded at the market square. Half of them are naked.⁴⁷⁷

King Mojagbe responds with anger and irrationally summons his war generals to kill the protesters:

...Insolence! Insubordination! Balogun, take a few palace soldiers and cut them all down.⁴⁷⁸

As *Mojagbe* is a social commentary on the Nigerian political situation, *Kaffir's Last Game* discusses the festering socio-political situation in Nigeria under the tyrannical government of General Sanni Abacha. It also reveals South Africa's problems of youth restiveness and incessant crimes which are often blamed on long years of the apartheid regime. *Kaffir's Last Game* is a two character play; its action is based on the unexpected meeting of a Nigerian Professor of Political Science, Benjamin Omodele Omobusola, and his former student Mbulelo Kwandebile Makwetu from South Africa. Mbulelo Kwandebile Makwetu studied Political Science in Nigeria under Professor Omobusola during the apartheid period in South Africa after which he became a member of the Youth Wing of African National Congress (ANC). At the time, ANC was the leading opposition to the apartheid regime in South Africa. In order to avoid arrest, many of the members' carried-out covert operations from outside the

⁴⁷⁶ Yerima, Ahmed, *Mojagbe*, 26

⁴⁷⁷ Yerima, Ahmed, *Mojagbe*, 30-31

⁴⁷⁸ Yerima, Ahmed, *Mojagbe*, 31

border of the country. Professor Benjamin Omodele Omobusola secures an eighty thousand dollar per year lecturing appointment with a University in Cape Town, and Mbulelo Kwandebile Makwetu asks him to not take the position in South Africa. He wants the professor to continue to fight from within because his departure will deplete the ranks of Nigerian activists who are challenging the military government. It might also be that Mbulelo, who considers the professor as a guru of political science, nurses the ambition of having him write new books on the Nigerian experience from within rather than as an external observer. Professor Omobusola sees his new appointment as manna from heaven after thirty-five years of teaching. He is going to earn in one year in South Africa more than all he earned in total as a professor teaching in Nigeria. Infact, his salary until retirement in Nigeria was ten thousand naira per month. Mbulelo does not share the optimism of the professor; rather he sees departing Nigeria as a bad omen for the nation he is fleeing from. Mbulelo prevails on the professor to not view the appointment as an opportunity of striking a supposed goldmine in a foreign nation.

While Professor Omobusola is a retired university don back in Nigeria, Mbulelo on the other hand is an important political figure in the South African government having risen from the Youth Wing of ANC to the main political party as a freedom fighter. This unexpected encounter of the two political scientists at the Johannesburg Airport reveals many political issues in both countries (Nigeria and South Africa). *Kaffir's Last Game* employs political satire in shedding light on socio-political menace (brain drain, unfavourable political climate, youth restiveness, and dictatorial governance) that are confronting both Nigeria and South Africa. As in *Kaffir's Last Game*, also in *The Lottery Ticket*, Yerima discuss the socio-reality of both the Nigerian society and South Africa. *The Lottery Ticket* is based on the prevalent greed and corruption which pervade every strata of the Nigerian society. Violence and religious chalatanism characterize the lives of many of the play's characters. *Little Drops*, on the other hand, is a tragedy and a realist play set in the swamp or 'battle field' of the Nigeria Niger Delta. The play talks about the pugnacious militant activities in the oil region. Since the militancy activities in the Niger Delta, government revenue from crude oil exploration has dwindled. The government establishment of Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) to combat the militants turns the Niger Delta's creek into a theatre of war. The residents of the region live in fear constantly. For this, in *Little Drops*, the approach of the intruder only means the arrival of danger to Memekize, the hero of the plays, and on whose side of the creek the whole action takes place.

Characters

The characters in the plays studied are realistic. As said earlier in page 3, realism is a discursive strategy that constructs the “impression” of realistic description for a large array of motivations. The plays here are one-act plays, of which their language and characteristics are typical of the role they represent. For example, it is typical in Nigeria to address individuals according to their professions or titles. Their names are means of characterization as in some of the plays of Femi Osofisan. In the plays of Osofisan, it is common to have the characters named after their occupation or social position. Often personalities like clergymen wear their robe or cassock in public to depict their positions. In *The Bishop*, *The Twists* and *The Mirror Cracks*, all the clergymen characters have the prefix reverend or bishop before their names. They are also imbued with mannerisms like calling God at intervals, blessing the characters with them and so on. In *The Sisters* and *The Wives*, the characters wear black clothes to signify mourning. Professor in *Kaffir's Last Game* is an example of how Yerima use name and description to enhance characterization and make his characters a representation of their class in society. Apart from the military officers in *The Mirror Cracks*, the other characters wear black clothes. The characters in *The Lottery Ticket* use speech as appropriate with their class. Their clothes as described in the play and language are appropriate with their characters.

Yerima often draws his characters from the same social class. It is common to see politicians, diplomats, lawyers, reverend gentleman or bishops as characters in the same play than having them play with people of social status far below their standing in society, except for an occasional inclusion of domestic staff. Since all the plays under discourse are one-act, attention is placed on the characters for the duration captured and not on the physical appearances or their states of mind before the opening of the play.

In *Kaffir's Last Game*, a two character play, there is the technique of playing multiple roles. Both the sixty-five-year-old Professor Omobusola and the forty-year-old Mbulelo constantly swap roles. They also play different characters in order to achieve the effective satirical exposé of some of the situations being discussed in the play. On one occasion both become singers with Mbulelo leading and at the same time singing the chorus with the professor. The song is to deride the anti-people policies and sit-tight syndrome of African political leaders.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁹ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 21

Little Drops has six characters who are victims of the militant confrontational activities and government repression tactics in the oil rich Niger Delta region. The play *Little Drops* opens with Memekize, the old woman of about seventy-five years who lives in the swamp by the creek. She is roasting yam and at the same time bemoaning her fate under the barrage of gun fire, when suddenly she hears the approach of an intruder. Almost all six characters in *Little Drops* are women except for Ovievie's ghost and Kuru, a wounded militant leader. Kuru, who is in his early thirties, is seeking an escape route out of the creek as he has lost his colleagues to the superior fire-power of the government JTF forces. The others include Mukume, a woman in her early twenties who was raped by three militant members on her wedding night; Azue, she is in her early twenties, young wife of the murdered King. At the time she appears on stage she has her dead son strapped to her back; and Bonuwo, a school teacher in her mid-forties whose forty-one students were bombed by the JTF's explosives.

The playwright's choice to make a play that has predominantly female characters is intentional. This is an attempt to give voice to females to talk directly to a society that fails to address the plight of women even when it realizes the loss of women yet still requires them to be docile and accept their losses quietly. Women live in fear constantly, losing their husbands, children and daily lives. Even in the midst of the clashes between the militants and the government forces, the women are poised to defend their territories:

She is frightened but tries to remain calm as she continues to watch out for any danger. Then she hears the sound of someone breathing and running. She wears a hood and a big leather jacket. She looks like a tough militant in the dim lights on the stage. She runs to carry what looks like a wrapped gun with a wrapper. She covers the roasting water yam, and hides by the bush.⁴⁸⁰

In the few lines above, Yerima gives a vivid portrayal of life in a war-like situation where the strong-willed prepares to kill or be killed. Memekize, an old woman who has seen both the good and the bad periods of life, becomes the strength and the resilient spirit of the rest of the women and even of Kuru, the defeated militant leader. She symbolizes the resilient spirit of the creek dwellers. To most of the inhabitants of the creeks and the adjoining villages, she is assumed to be a mythical figure. In reverence of her assumed

⁴⁸⁰ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 9

superhuman nature, songs are composed in her name, and she is referred to as the legendary old woman by the river bank. Memekize's dwelling is like a shrine, as it becomes the nourishing point for the deprived and those escaping from the degradation of life. As a realistic character like the others in the play she has suffered losses and shows fear at the approach of danger.

Psychologically, Memekize, who has become unbalanced by the loss of her husband and children in a single day, prefers a melancholic life by staying close to their graves, which she personally dug. For forty years, life stood still for her, and she closed herself to the changes going on in the world around her by staying at the same spot. She survived only on what she could get from the river and swampy forest where she lives.

The beautiful thing about the character of Memekize is that it is not static and not given to a singular interpretation. Her character shifts between realism and symbolism. She symbolizes healing, strength, courage and also a kind of god all the women could worship. She is like the four telluric women in *Mojagbe*, imbued with longevity, power of discernment and manipulation as she easily disarms everyone that comes her way. Azue, Bonuwo, and Mukume unlike Memekize are more realistic in presentation.

In all of the characters, there is evidence of torture, agony and deprivation in time of war. The characters are used as a moral agent to remind humanity of the meaninglessness of war in any guise. From a realist point of view, Mukume is in her early twenties, beautiful, lively and ready to bloom. The symbolic Mukume can be interpreted as the Niger Delta land, defiled and destroyed by different multinational oil companies exploiting for crude oil and running their pipes through the many villages in the creek. The teacher Bonuwo, who had taught some of the militant youths, including Ovievie at the village school, is in her middle-age, while Azue, the young and beautiful widowed queen, is around the same age as Mukume. Azue not only loses her husband (the king) to the militants, she also loses her only child to a stray bullet which could have been fired by either the JTF or the militants. The death of Azue's son signifies the end of a generation. While the old generation represented by the King is murdered in cold blood by those he was representing, with the death of the child the play seems to be telling the Niger Delta militants that if the insurgency is continued, very soon there will be no generation to take over the land they are warring over. The play, to an extent, vindicates the government forces rather than condemning the repressive action taken by it. The massacre of the innocent children by the government explosion

may be interpreted as an attempt to further bring to an end the future generation of the Niger Delta.

Ovievie, as a minor character in the play was killed by his own camp of militants whom he defrauded before running ahead to get married to Mukume. The character of Ovievie seems not necessary in the play, however, as he appeared to explain to Mumuke why he was murdered and to invite her to join him in the land of the dead. Mukume and Bonuwo may be looked upon as not being in the fullness of their senses due to these recent experiences. Their seeing and speaking with Ovievie's ghost may only be a figment of their imaginations as he was taken away and killed by the militants on the night of his marriage to Mukume.

Like in *The Angel* where the murdered Chief appeared to Otunba in his living-room, Ovievie appeared to Mukume, who was not aware that he was part of any militant group, to apologize and abeg for forgiveness. However, at the end of both encounters, we are still at a loss as to whether the two dead people really appeared or if it was only the imagination of those they appeared to. Nevertheless, the reader-audience accepts it as it is part of the social reality of the society of the play. In both plays, at the departure of the ghost characters, both Otunba and Mukume looked as if they have suddenly come out of a trance; they are not sure if the meeting was real or imagined. Since other characters are not aware of their (Otunba and Mukume) experiences, it can be justifiably argued that it is not a real encounter but a ploy to achieve a sense of purgation for these characters.

In the *The Sisters*, Toun is the second of Ambassador's children from his legal wife and is in her mid-fifties. She is a school administrator and a divorcee. She is pretentious and constantly professes her dependence on the Christian faith but relies more on her elder sister Funmi—a superficial character—for support, always ready to agree with her on issues because she lacks the capacity for independent reasoning. Taiwo is quick to reprimand her for always agreeing with Funmi on every matter, even when the latter is wrong:

Taiwo: Please for once Toun agree with yourself. Be your own person, and speak up. Say what you feel.⁴⁸¹

Taiwo, who is fifty-three years old, is the last child of the ambassador. She is a lawyer, novelist, poet, and fearless character. She represents the intellectual minds and conscience of the oppressed people in the Nigerian society. Her

⁴⁸¹ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Sisters*, 33

husband, Joe, had been implicated in a coup against the president ten years earlier and was subsequently executed with the rest of those involved in the coup. According to her, her husband was captured in the night by the government forces at their residence. She was shot at in the melee of the arrest, lost her pregnancy in the process and, subsequently, the use of her legs as a result of a broken pelvis which later confined her to the wheelchair. Throughout the play, Taiwo allows herself the liberty of pointing to the reader-audience the various short-comings of each of the sisters and the men in their lives.

Nana is the illegitimate daughter of Ambassador. At age sixty-two, she is the eldest of four sisters, however, her identity as a blood member of the ambassador's family is unknown by the other sisters who believe her to be a maid until the end of the play. She is docile and dedicates forty-three years of her life to the service of her other sisters without complaints, having promised Ambassador's wife shortly before her death that she would take care of them. Nana is the symbol of uprightness and the strength of her sisters:

Nana: It is funny how we pick all this sadness,

Taiwo: How profound. Nana, how long have you been with us? You always said and done the right things. Always.

Funmi: She has been my rock.⁴⁸²

To all of the sisters, Nana is their source of defence. Funmi says, "She has been my rock" because Nana becomes her strength, help and comfort in time of distress. By referring to Nana as "rock", Funmi invariably equates her with God in her life. A quick look at the Christian Bible reveals at least four instances in the Book of Psalms where we can find references to God as "My rock."⁴⁸³ Yerima's concern in most of his plays seems to be the socio-political effect the message embedded in them will have on the consciousness of the reader-audience and not on the development of a single character. This may have been the reasoning behind individual characters; characters whose actions and speeches can directly affect the reader-audience.

The characters of *The Sisters* and *The Lottery Ticket* are used to satirize the hypocritical nature of human being no matter his status in society. It is possible that many on the lower rung of society are more fraudulent, greedier

⁴⁸² Yerima, *The Sisters*, 26-27

⁴⁸³ See The Book of Psalms 18 verse 2 and 46; Psalms 28 verse 1; 31 verse 3; 42 verse 9; 62 verse 2 and 6; 71 verse 3; and 92 verse 15. In *The Holy Bible*

than the political elite whom they blame for their present status. As situations in *The Lottery Ticket* reveal, many of them lack human compassion. *The Lottery Ticket* has seven characters that ably represent the lower class of the Nigerian society: Mama Lizi, an illiterate operator of a shanty-eating parlour is a fifty-year-old woman. She is strong, zealous in her business, and interested in any venture that will give her more money. Lizi, the daughter, is eighteen years old and helps her mother at her food vending business. She is a self-professed Christian, yet she befriends Danger, a notorious criminal. She is a trained tailor and more intelligent than her mother. Landlord is a sixty-year-old retired civil servant and the owner of the house where Mama Lizi and her daughter reside. He also operates their shanty-restaurant. He is greedy, corrupt and lacks human compassion. To Landlord, money is more important than human life. Yellow Fever, a traffic officer, and Sagent, a police personnel, are two law enforcement officers.

The characters of Yellow Fever and Sagent are a true reflection of the negative aspect of Nigerian security force. The two of them are corrupt officers who prefer to be paid by criminals rather than arresting them. Instead of Yellow Fever telling the circumstances that leads to Danger's death, he collaborates with Mama Lizi to give a false account of the event. Sagent demands that if he is paid, he will not report Danger's death as murder. This means that the murder suspects will not be arrested because he (Sagent) will provide them the needed alibi:

Sagent: Now, now. I want una to know say I be gazetted Police Sagent. If not to say book don spoil we country, I for don be ASP or even DSP, but na as God want am so. Dis case simple, but e fit hard. All dey for una hand. If una see me well, na as una talk and wan do am, na so gofment go take hear am. (SE⁴⁸⁴: *Right now. I will like you to know that I am a confirmed Police Sergeant. I would have been made an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) or Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), except that everything goes to those who are well educated in this country, however, this is the way God as planned it. The issue here is simple, but it can be made serious. It all depends on you. If you pay well, things will be the way you said it is, I will report it to the government like that.*)

Landlord: ... Oga Sagent, how much you want? (SE: *Sergeant boss, how much do you want?*)

⁴⁸⁴ SE is Standardized English

Sajent: Good una get sense. Each dead body na three hundred naira. Say I come look for them, two hundred naira.⁴⁸⁵ (SE: *Good you all are sensible. Each of the corpse cost three hundred. You have to pay another Two hundred naira because I found them here.*)

Within the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) is what we can refer to as “systemic corruption.”⁴⁸⁶ Many of the leaders of the force are corrupt, thereby, affecting the other personel’s moral for uprightness. Sajent (Sergeant) is the representation of systemic corruption within the Nigerian Police Force. He sets a price on criminal cases: the seriousness of the crime determines the price in financial terms:

Sajent: Wait, den say I write the report, another two hundred naira. One thousand naira na him I go collect for dis case.⁴⁸⁷ (SE: *Stop, the fact that I write the report, another two hundred. I must be paid One thousand naira for this very case.*)

Sajent will also set a price on his service as the police officer in charge of the case involving two murder victims. The One thousand Naira (N1000.00) equivalent of \$10 is to cover the cost of each of the victims set at three hundred, two hundred for his effort of discovering the bodies himself and the remaining two hundred naira in order for him to write a report that will exonerate the suspects rather than indict them. Danger and Baba Tailor are the two remaining characters of the play. Danger, a young man of twenty years old, is a violent criminal whose stocks-in-trade are robbery and assault. He is a representation of the decay and violence that the unemployed youth of Nigeria have become associated with. Danger just as his name typifies, has no regard for anyone except Lizi, his girlfriend, whom he calls “my sweet potato.”⁴⁸⁸ Lizi is the only person that can calm his raging spirit, especially when he becomes violent. He patronizes prostitutes, and he is always ready to kill for any amount:

⁴⁸⁵ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 46

⁴⁸⁶ Robert Klitgaard says that the term is used to distinguish two situations. One is where some people are corrupt. Another is where many people are corrupt—where the system itself has grown sick. The situation in Nigeria is that NPF as grown sick. See Klitgaard, Robert, “Leadership Under Systemic Corruption” a paper presented to six Mekong Delta countries at a summit meeting in Vientiane, Laos, December 2004

http://www.cgu.edu/include/Leadership_Under_System_Corruption_12-04.pdf

⁴⁸⁷ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 47

⁴⁸⁸ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 21

Danger: Na not-nine-not self even tug go dey use. I fit just hold the telefon say make dem wet one man with petrol, or burn one opponent shop. I tell you tief na tief. As politics dey go nuclear, na so tug work go go nuclear. As my man dey swear oath to chop Nigeria for Aso rock na so me too go dey swear to chop de man.⁴⁸⁹ (SE: *Criminal will use mobile 090 mobile phone line. I might use the phone to command my boys to pour fuel on a political opponent's shop. A thief is a thief. In as much as politics is becoming vibrant, so is criminality. Just as my political boss is taking his oath of office in Aso Rock to drain Nigeria of its wealth, I will also take my own oath to drain the man of his loot.*)

Danger becomes a ready tool in the hands of unscrupulous Nigerian politicians to perpetuate their nefarious deeds of killing, maiming and destroying political rivals. As Danger rightly points out, Nigerian political leaders' oath of office is geared towards "... to chop Nigeria for Aso rock..."⁴⁹⁰ In this case since Aso Rock is the official resident of the Nigerian president, Danger is saying that those who have been occupying this position are thieves whose sole purpose in government is to steal the wealth of the country. Danger's death in the play suggests that crime and hooliganism will come to an end only when the people collectively rise against it. Baba Tailor is a seventy-year-old sickly tailor whose uprightness is rewarded with the winning prize of the Tuba Cola Lottery. As a sickly and good hearted-man, his character represents a great deal of poverty. His presumed death by the other characters in the play put a new twist to the narration. At their supposition, the greed in the other characters manifests: even Baba Tailor who suddenly regains consciousness, heightened the greed in all the characters when the first thing said by him is "Wey my ticket? Where I put am?"⁴⁹¹ (SE: *Where is my ticket? Where did I drop it?*)

Language

In his plays, language is used to represent the multi-layered Nigerian society; he gives expression to a sense of increasing disgust and unrest within its population. The language in *The Lottery Ticket* is the popular Nigerian Pidgin English or NPE, a synthesized or creolized style of the English language. It is popular in Nigeria because it is spoken by almost all of the population. The language allows for the inclusion of indigenous languages into a simplified

⁴⁸⁹ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 29

⁴⁹⁰ SE: To embezzle Nigeria's wealth at the government's official residence.

⁴⁹¹ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 50

English language in order to give the speaker ease of expression and comprehension of communication among the various strata of the Nigerian society. In order to reach a new audience in theatre,⁴⁹² Yerima adopted the synthesized English language (NPE), which Biodun Jeyifo had observed earlier in some of Wole Soyinka's plays:

Perhaps the most impressive of Soyinka's feats of entering into, inhabiting and then appropriating the "languages" internal to a particular social group that is distant from his own middle-class background are to be encountered in *The Road* and *From Zia with Love*. In both plays, there is a complete hermeticization of the milieu of the lumpen, semi-employed and working class characters, together with the "world" of their social and demographic neighbor, the criminal underclass of extortion racketeers, jailbird felons and petty crooks. Indeed, on the strength of these two plays, not to talk of the two "*Jero Plays*" Soyinka must be ranked with the late Ken Saro-Wiwa as one of the two most accomplished creative translators of West African [P]idgin English into a highly nuanced literary language.⁴⁹³

Nigeria is a nation of diverse ethnic nationalities and languages (in the excess of 300 different tongues) with very high numbers of non-English language speakers. The synthesized English breaks the ethnic gulf and also allows for barrier breakage between the high and the low within the society. For citizens without formal education or easy access to higher education (even those with higher education), picking up a few words of English and mixing it with elements of their native tongues has been a much easier way of communicating across cultures and class.

Average Nigerians look at Pidgin English as a recognized language in its own right, with sufficient differences in vocabulary and structure which distinguish it from standardized English. Ogaga Okuyade believes that Nigerian "Pidgin English is the medium of expression, a language whose syntax is wholly African, while most of its vocabulary is premised on lexical borrowing

⁴⁹² It is argued by some African theatre scholars that the elitist nature and over dependence on sophisticated English language by the continent's literary dramatists are parts of the many reasons for the low attendance at theatre venues in Nigeria.

⁴⁹³ Jeyifo, Biodun, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 103

from English and indigenous languages.”⁴⁹⁴ The beauty of the language is that it is fluid and does not follow any stylistic form or rigid structure. There is no doubt that a form of pidgin language may have evolved between the Yoruba, Benin and their earlier European traders like the Portuguese, with whom they came in contact in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in order to facilitate effective trading relations. K.U. Ihemere believes that words like *Sabi* (know) and *Pikin* (child)⁴⁹⁵ found in the contemporary NPE have a Portuguese origin. Based on my little knowledge of the French language, I have also discovered that words like *Boku* (much/many) have a French origin. Pidgin English on its own had a long history with Nigerians having been adopted as far back as the early nineteenth century.⁴⁹⁶

The present NPE, however, became popular in Nigerian literature through the works of Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe at the turn of the 1960s and in music by the late Fela Anikulapo-Kuti Afrobeat music creator in the late 1960s. If we take into reckoning the year of publication for Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960) and *The Road* (1965), and Chinua Achebe’s *Man of the People* (1967) that are written in NPE, then one can justifiably credit these two writers as the first set of people to document the language for popular culture and not Fela Anikulapo-Kuti whose Afrobeat music did not appear until late 1960s or Ken Saro-Wiwa whose writing career commenced in the 1970s and, as claimed by some critics⁴⁹⁷, brought NPE language to international limelight. For elucidation I will reproduce Samson’s speech from *The Road* which brand of Pidgin English contains Yoruba, pidgin and many other English varieties:

⁴⁹⁴ Ogaga, Okuyade, “Recent Nigerian Bards and Minstrels: Forms of Counter Narratives” in *California Linguistic Notes*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Spring 2010 (online)

⁴⁹⁵ Ihemere, K.U., “A Basic Description and Analytic Treatment of Noun Clauses in Nigerian Pidgin” in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (2006), 296-313. After I crosschecked these two Portuguese words against English, I discovered that *Sabi* is saber and there is no such word as *Pikin* in Portuguese language.

⁴⁹⁶ Magnus Hubber calls this form of language English-lexicon Jargon which is likely to have developed in Western Nigeria in the 1860s with the establishment of the Lagos colony and the increased presence of the Anglophone Europeans officials. Hubber, M., *Ghanaian Pidgin English in its West African Context: A Sociohistorical and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin B.V., 1999), 125

⁴⁹⁷ Ahmed Yerima in his *Discourse on Tragedy* (2009, 60) writes that Fela Anikulapo-Kuti popularized the language while Biodun Jeyifo, which I have quoted above recognizes Ken Saro-Wiwa and Wole Soyinka as the two most accomplished translator of NPE. Achebe and Soyinka’s use of NPE is limited to specific characters in their work, whereas in Saro-wiwa’s works, all the characters speak the NPE.

Samson: Sisi! A-ah. Sisi o. Sisi wey fine reach so na only bus wey fine like we own fit carry am. Wetin now sisi? Oh your portamentaeu, I done put am inside bus. Yes, certainly. We na quick service, we na senior service...Oyo, mama, we done ready for go now now. Come-o come now. Service na first class, everything provided. If you want' pee we go stop. No delay!

In the drama of Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and others that later emerged from Nigeria after this first generation playwrights, NPE becomes a meansto distinguish between the literate or sophisticated characters and the illiterate, most especially the house-help or market women's characters, for example, Polycarp the house boy of Lejoka Brown in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, and Chume, Jero's assistant in Soyinka's *Jero Plays*. The language also distinguishes the criminal underclass of extortion racketeers, jailbird felons, thugs and petty crooks like Danger in *The Lottery Ticket*. In the long playing album titled, "Unlimited Liability Company"⁴⁹⁸ which also featured in the film *Blues for a Prodigal* (1984), Soyinka composed the song in Pidgin English and had it recorded:

I love my country	<i>I love my country</i>
I no go lie	<i>I will not lie</i>
Na inside am I go live and I die	<i>I will live and die in it</i>
A no my country	<i>I am aware of my country</i>
A no go lie	<i>I will not lie</i>
Na him and me go yab till I die	<i>myself and my country shall argue until I die</i>

Yerima incorporated this song also in *Kaffir's Last Game*⁴⁹⁹, and he adopted the same style in the composition of the Tuba Cola promotional advert in *The Lottery Ticket*:

⁴⁹⁸ The songs in the album are written by Wole Soyinka who also produced them through his company Ewuro Production, however, it has the voice of Tunji Oyelana and his musical group The Benders. Ewuro Productions also produced the film *Blues for a Prodigal*

⁴⁹⁹ Yerima, Ahmed, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 25

“Tuba Cola don come again oh!	<i>Tuba Cola has arrived again</i>
Yeah! Come see naira, yanfu yanfu	<i>Come and see naira in large amount</i>
One hundred thousand naira Naira rain dey fall oh!	<i>Naira rain is falling</i>
“Tuba Cola don come oh!	<i>Tuba Cola has arrived</i>
Na today we go know oh!	<i>We will know today</i>
All the people wey don buy lottery ticket	<i>Those who already bought the lottery ticket</i>
Na today result go come out for ten o’clock	<i>The result will be out today at 10 o’clock</i>
Woman, men, pikin wey dey drink Tuba	<i>Women, men and child that drinks</i>
Tuba Cola go collect plenty money	<i>Tuba Cola will get a lot of money</i>
Buy one bottle collect plenty money	<i>Buy one bottle, receive a lot of money</i>

Yerima, aware of the popularity of NPE as a tool for effective communication and the class of people who frequently utilize it in everyday conversation with comical rendition without inhibition, put the reader-audience in a hilarious mood from the opening of the play with the Tuba Cola lottery jingle. Yerima’s use of language buttresses my earlier statement that NPE is a barrier breaker which did not distinguish between classes and educational attainment of speakers; Yerima belongs to the upper middle-class of the Nigerian society. Having been to the university, schooled at a prestigious college in the UK, a university lecturer and Director-General of the National Theatre, a political appointee, ought to remove Yerima from the level of NPE speakers. However, this is never the case. One can argue that since NPE language is very popular within Nigerian universities, he may have picked it up from there or from the popular place of convergence “Abe Igi” (under the trees) at the National Theatre. Yerima explained that in being a child of a police officer, it was a must for him to understand NPE because it is the language spoken in Nigerian police barracks. Therefore, anyone who grew up in that environment is bound

to speak it.⁵⁰⁰ His realistic presentation of the market and street language is exceptional, more flexible, musical and highly developed. Take for instance the dialogue between Mama Lizi, Lizi and Landlord:

Mama Lizi: But Tuba Cola people get sense. Dey wan sell plenty, den dem go give people one hundred thousand naira. See wayo. Dat one na money? Dey don make millions well well, den dem go give us only hundred thousand. Everybody na tief for dis kontri. Dey just dey punish poor man.

Landlord: Madam na money o. Nobody force anybody. Na you get your money, na you drink am.

Mama Lizi: Ha Oga Landlord. You wey God don bless. You get house for Lagos, you dey collect money, wetin you wan take hundred thousand naira do?

Landlord: I go take am marry your Lizi. I don old, I need small girl wey go dey rob my back till I die.

Mama Lizi: Heeh, so na your hidden agenda be dat? Men self, wayo full una head.

Lizi: God forbid.

Landlord: Wetin God wan forbid? E good say since my wife run commot for house run follow that yeye 419 boy wey god don soda him yansh, e good say make I sit down dey look ayanyan? ...Lizi good. Na you go bury me.

Lizi: I say God forbid. I no go bury oldman. God forbid! No be me go do replacement wife for you. You dey forget say I train as tailor.⁵⁰¹

This triangular conversation is full of witty remarks, puns, innuendoes and hyperbolic statements on the part of the Landlord and Mama Lizi. These figures of speech enhance the comical nature of the play. When Mama Lizi asks what Landlord is going to do with a Hundred Thousand Naira (N100,000.00) an equivalent of Six Hundred and Fifty-five United State dollars (\$655), Landlord, who had been lusting after Lizi promptly responds with "I go take am marry your Lizi."⁵⁰² Landlord's quick response was not lost on Mama Lizi who also accused him of nursing such a hidden agenda all along and ranking all men together to be full of deceit:

⁵⁰⁰ The statement was made during an interview with this writer on 10th November, 2011 at Redeemer's University (RUN), Nigeria.

⁵⁰¹ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 10-11

⁵⁰² SE: *I will marry Lizzie with the money*.

Heeh, so na your hidden aganda be dat? Men self, wayo full una head⁵⁰³. (SE: *You mean that is your hidden plan?*)

Lizi rejects Landlord's offer of marriage and he goes into the story of how his wife left him to go after a useless fraudster "yeye 419 boy" (*stupid fraudster*). Other comical words used by Landlord here include "god don soda him yansh" (*god has sealed his anus*), and "ayanyan" (*empty space*). Being aware through experience of how to get the attention of Lizi and her mother, Landlord reveals his intention for mother and daughter, a plan that he has no desire to fulfill:

...Na him I dey talk, if you gree my own, when I win I go pay your dowry. We no go go church. I go drive Electrician commot the shop wey dey Ebute-Metta. I go put you there. I go buy you Tokunbo sewing machine and your mama no go pay rent again.⁵⁰⁴ (SE: *That is what I am talking about, if you agreed to be my wife, I will pay your dowry when I win the lottery. We don't have to go to Church. I will send the Electrical worker in the Shop at Ebute-Metta away. You will occupy the space. Then I will buy a used sewing machine for you, then you mother will cease to pay rent for this space she occupies.*)

This bait which Mama Lizi easily falls for does not elicit equal reaction from Lizi who is already in love with Danger, a noted chronic criminal. She only said Landlord should first of all win the lottery before making plans of marrying her. Landlord who is very optimistic of winning the lottery after collecting eight packets of tickets, wants to marry Lizi with the winnings:

Lizi: (Lizi walks to him) Make I bring your food? (SE: *Shall I bring your meal now?*)

Landlord: Yes Sugar!

Lizi: Na as you chop am yesterday? (SE: *Do you want it the same way you ate it yesterday?*)

Landlord: Yes honey!

Lizi: Water? Or Tuba Cola?

Landlord: Tuba Cola, Orange Banana of my nose.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰³ This is a Hausa word meaning deceit.

⁵⁰⁴ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 11

⁵⁰⁵ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 14

Landlord employs every known trick within his domain to entice Lizi, even referring to her as his most loved fruit. Jargon is used to elicit laughter from the reader-audience. Of course, Landlord's intension is not lost on Lizi, so she insisted that he should win the lottery first. When he realizes that Lizi is not ready to leave her boyfriend, Danger, Landlord changes his approach by warning her of the danger in going ahead to commit her life to a common criminal:

Lizi wetin you think? No dig hole wey rabbit no dey. I be sure banka make you follow me o. you wan suffer follow that tief tief boy. Man wey dem dey call Danger na man?⁵⁰⁶ (SE: *Lizi, what do you think? Do not embark on a fruitless venture. It is certain I will win you need to come with me. You will be badly treated by the criminal you are following. Is the man called Danger a person?*)

Two important statements in the speech are: "No dig hole wey rabbit no dey"⁵⁰⁷, and "Man wey dem dey call Danger na man?"⁵⁰⁸ The first one is a figurative expression used in advising someone not to embark on pointless venture, while the second one is a rhetorical question. The first "man" is used in its literary sense whereas the second "man" is in relation to the word danger as not being human. The conversation between Landlord, Mama Lizi, and Baba Tailor is even more hilarious. Though it relates to death and sickness, one still feels the lightness at which it is discussed:

Baba Tailor: I sick no be small. (SE: *I had a terrible sickness*)

Landlord: Na die we even hear. (SE: *We heard that you died*)

Baba Tailor: I die, but God no call am my time. I see death, na man. I see my mama and papa, dem dey call me. Adolfos come. Na him I remember my shop. I say I still get mission and I refuse to follow them.⁵⁰⁹

(SE: *I died, but God says it is not my turn yet. I saw death, it is a male. I saw my mother and father, they both called me by my name, Adolfos. However, I remember my shop. And I told them I have a mission on earth, so, I refused to go with them.*)

⁵⁰⁶ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 14

⁵⁰⁷ The meaning of the statement is, "do not embark on a fruitless venture."

⁵⁰⁸ The meaning of the question is, "man that people refers to as Danger is not a human-being."

⁵⁰⁹ Yerima, Ahmed, *The Lottery Ticket*, 16

Mama Lizi was quick to ask from Baba Tailor if it is possible for a dead person to recognize anybody in heaven, to which the man responded in the affirmative. Baba Tailor described his experiences in “the supposed visitation” heaven as pleasant since the place is pleasant and sweet to be at. Here, I think Baba Tailor is only re-echoing what the Bible⁵¹⁰ says concerning heaven as a place of happiness. Mama Lizi, not satisfied with Baba Tailor’s response, retorted:

Eeh if death sweet why you no kuku die well now? Shebi you for just leave all dis wahala die well well. You say you get mission. Dey deceive yourself. Which mission poor man dey get pass suffer head?⁵¹¹
(SE: *But if truly death is pleasant, why did you not die finally? It means that you would have left this earth with its numerous problems.*)

She is not being unnecessarily hard on Baba Tailor, but re-echoing a normal response that would have come from an average Nigerian within the social class being discussed. That is “If the state of death is as sweet as you proclaimed, why come back to earth”? “Suffer head” is used to explain a state of poverty. One will have to say that Mama Lizi’s remark to Baba Tailor is later justified when he (Baba Tailor) starts to list the different kinds of sickness he is diagnosed to be suffering from:

Diabetis, atiritis, hanpertension, high blood pressure and heart problem⁵¹² (SE: *Diabetes, arthritis, hypertension.*)

Mama Lizi again reprimands Baba Tailor for leaving heaven to come back to earth:

I say wetin come remain for life for you? If Doctor tell me say I get all dis sickness and my mama dey call me for heaven, I for kuku stay.⁵¹³
(SE: *I repeat what else do you have on earth? If a doctor diagnosed that I am suffering from the entire ailment you mentioned, and my mother beckons to me in heaven, I will stay with her.*)

⁵¹⁰ See John accounts in the book of Revelation, and Jesus Christ words on the many mansions in heaven in the book of John 14.2

⁵¹¹ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 16

⁵¹² Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 16

⁵¹³ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 17

Landlord introduces a humorous dimension to the sickness by giving a perceived general analysis of the sickness and causes:

See heen, diabetes na wen bigman don chop many sweet things. Atiritis na wen bigman sidown dey drive moto dey chase women. Which moto you get, pass pasenja for molue bus? Herpatension na wen you wori for account wey dey London, you wey be say na ajo you dey do. High blood na wen life sweet bigman and everything wey him dey do na highlife, e chop leg of chicken, he chop woman leg, wash am with odeku (*All laugh at Landlord's analysis*)⁵¹⁴ (SE: *You need to know that diabetes affects wealthy individuals who live life indulging in sweet foods. Arthritis affects the wealthy individual who spends most of his days sitting in a car chasing after women. What kind of car do you have that is more than a seat in a public transport bus? Hypertension comes when you give in to too much worrying about your savings account in London, but you only make a daily contribution to the thrift collector. High blood pressure only comes when a wealthy individual enjoys life to the maximum by eating chicken legs, woman legs, and relax with stout beer.*)

Landlord and Mama Lizi laugh at the sicknesses (Arthritis, Hypertension, Diabetes, High blood pressure and heart problem), which they both perceive as being meant to affect wealthy individuals, therefore, for Baba Taylor to be plagued by them, he must be a very wealthy man (bigman) in God's sight. The man (Baba Taylor) is quick to inform them that he owes bills at the hospital including the bills of some food vendors who had assisted with food while he was in the hospital. Landlord interprets Baba Taylor's sickness from the perspective of a deprived class of society: you can only develop hypertension when you constantly think of your bank accounts overseas, and to him, Baba Taylor's bank account is little daily contributions done in the market.

In Nigeria there are thrift collectors who go to food vendors, small traders and market women collecting some amount of money from them as a daily savings which they can always get back at the end of the month or whenever the need for it arises. This is the circumstance that Landlord refers to. He explains further that in order to be diagnosed with high blood pressure, the victim must be in the habit of excessive eating of chicken, sleeping around with women and drinking beers. Of course to the poor illiterate members of the

⁵¹⁴ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 17

lower class of the Nigerian society, the rich are plagued with many sicknesses because they indulge themselves a great deal without care for their health. Danger's NPE has fluidity, and it often means the reverse of what is stated. For example: "Oga Landlord. Alaye Baba, my rice and beans dey your hand this morning o"⁵¹⁵, would be translated, "Landlord, the boss. Area Father, the owner of the world, my meal this morning is in your hand", however the NPE means more than we have in English. Danger merely uses the words boss and owners of the world to praise Landlord expecting him to be drawn into the flattery before telling him that he (Landlord) is to pay for the food he (Danger) will be eating that morning. Conversely, the language in *The Sisters* and *Kaffir's Last Game* is elevated. The language is of highly educated characters laden with poetry, metaphor, sarcasm, allusion and other figurative expressions, even with philosophy. The language of most of these plays is determined by the social class of the characters. The three sisters are children of an ambassador, well educated (attended prestigious high schools and universities in England), and one of them is the widow of the late president. The language is not localized like we have in *Little Drops* and *Mojagbe*, or in Yerima's historical dramas like *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni The Great*, discussed in chapter two. Although we have, especially in *Kaffir's Last Game*, some words in both Afrikaans and Yoruba, these were meant to remind the reader-audience of the setting of the play and the background of the characters. The deployment of sarcasm in *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket* is intended to deride the human's hypocritical attitude and recourse to religious obligations, prayers and supplications to God. Nigerian type of Pentecostal Christianity is the most common brand of Christianity in Africa. Nigerian pastors are quick to establish churches wherever they are found in Africa, Europe or America. For example, Redeemed Christian Church of God and Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministry, two of Nigerian's fastest growing churches, have a presence in Australia, North and South America, Europe, and in many countries of Africa. Professor is quick to refer to these activities in *Kaffir's Last Game* as a product being exported from Nigeria:

Professor: In fact, after oil, it is the recent second most popular product being shipped for export. And we are well-organized about it too. After committing all atrocities from Monday to Thursday, we spend Fridays and Sundays praying. We have so many churches, mosques and

⁵¹⁵ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 21

shrines. Sometimes I wonder how god has escaped being confused by our numerous supplications.⁵¹⁶

And Lizi comments in *The Lottery Ticket* "...Dey no wan work dem dey wait make Jesus come put water for them gari."⁵¹⁷ From the opening of *The Sisters* we are introduced to Taiwo's poetry which is very rich in imagery and metaphor. For example:

Dark embers of my inner soul
The drink lobes of sadness pour.
Melting, pelting ...dropping drops of tears
Wrapped once in stately glory,
Now naked in cloves of sorrow ...pity!
(Pauses, looks around
Oh the drink lobes of the rich and powerful
Must now tilt to pour out ...pour out
The innocence of a shaded life
Now searching for pity
Where there is none...pity!⁵¹⁸

I decided to write down the whole poem as Taiwo renders it in order to point out how Yerima departs from his simple and straight forward approach to dramatic dialogue to create deeper meaning with simple words and images. The first three lines of the poem convey the sadness that Taiwo harboured for years after the execution of her husband at the order of the president. The later part of the poem makes mockery of Funmi's expectations of pity at the death of her husband. She ends the poem with confirmation that she has no pity for Funmi in her state of loss. Taiwo is happy that the president died. The first two lines of the poem refer to Taiwo's long period of solitary grief, while line eight to ten refer to her current state of mind:

The innocence of a shaded life
Now searching for pity
Where there is none...pity⁵¹⁹

⁵¹⁶ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 33

⁵¹⁷ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 20. SE: The people do not want to work, but await Jesus Christ to put food on their table.

⁵¹⁸ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 9

⁵¹⁹ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 9

Taiwo sees the death of the president as her personal triumph as she blamed him for her many woes. The night that her husband was picked-up by the military for execution, she was shot at and the bullet broke her pelvis. From that moment she lost the use of her legs. At the hospital, neither Funmi nor the president visited her or paid for the treatment. By ordering the killing of her husband years earlier, the President brought Taiwo her untold sorrow:

I am sorry again. Besides, I did not want anyone to share in my supreme moment of glory. God had handed over the moment to me, and in triumph, I scribbled ...death ...oh death ...which breaks through the mighty walls ...of Egypt. Treks down the well-paved road to Jericho only to snap the neck of the almighty.⁵²⁰

Having used Taiwo's speech to describe the kind of language in *The Sisters*, let us examine Professor's and Mbulelo's dialogue in *Kaffir's Last Game*:

Mbulelo: I am sorry, but let me get this clear ...you mean that you a Professor of Political Science trained at Oxford, London and Cambridge lost your wife to a lottery ticket?

Professor: No, to an America Professor. My God these American people ...

Mbulelo: Permit me to cut in, Professsor. The Americans are not a people. They have lost that status and description. They are just Americans. If you think of them just as Americans, then their action will never hurt. Look at Libya. Even now they want to tell President Mandela who to shake or visit. I tell you they are not a people.⁵²¹

Mbulelo equates Americans with their country. The understanding in many African countries is that the United States of America (USA) controls the economy and political sphere of Africa. Mbulelo's reference to Libya is in relation to the sanctions that the US placed on the country from 1980s to 2000s. Both Mbulelo and Professor believe that, in order for your country to enjoy the support of the government of USA, your nation's president must maintain relations only with nations that are in good relationship with the US.

⁵²⁰ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 11

⁵²¹ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 17

Professor: They also did that to us. And our government cannot stomach their political machinations and intrigues also. The African [p]residents, no matter what aids they get, must begin to assert themselves.⁵²²

In *Little Drops*, neither the terror activities of the various militant groups in the Niger Delta nor that of the Nigerian Military Joint Task Force (JTF) is shrouded in metaphors like we have in Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* or Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors* and other plays about Nigeria's socio-political landscape.⁵²³ For example, the militant boys blew up oil refineries and killed their own people including leaders in *Little Drops*. In Niger Delta, there was constant bombing of oil installations, and kidnapping of expatriate oil workers for ransom. All these are captured in *Little Drops*. He uses Azue's description of how the militants beheaded their king to reveal that the groups have constituted themselves into an uncontrollable institution of terror: "They cut off the head of the king right in front of his family."⁵²⁴ Azue shows her grief not by simple words but through the gory picture of the king's death:

Azue: ...the king died like an animal at the shrines. The eyes of his headless body still twitched with life. His stomach rising and falling as blood gushed out from his headless neck....No man deserved to have died like that. They killed him like an animal for sacrifice.⁵²⁵

The horrid image of death and mangled bodies in *Little Drops* is distressing to both the actors and the play's reader-audience; however it enhances the tragic mood of the play. Let us take for instance, Bonuwo's psychological wellbeing when she lost her students:

...I ran out when I heard screams and shouts. First, it was like a bad dream. The roof of my classroom was blown open. Huge smoke and heavy smell of charred skin and burnt flesh. Not one soul ... not one child was spared. All we saw were cut off limbs, little trunks, cut off heads, with their hair still burningforty-one of them ...all dead.⁵²⁶

⁵²² Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 17

⁵²³ In *Hard Ground* and *Agadagba Warriors*, there is no direct mention of Nigeria or JTF.

⁵²⁴ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 22

⁵²⁵ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 23-24

⁵²⁶ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 39

Bonuwo ran out of the toilet on hearing agonizing screams. She saw what used to be a classroom now turned into an open field. Psychologically, she became unbalanced. The burnt flesh and charred skin, cut off limbs, and heads of forty-one innocent children—who were unaware of the ongoing war or the cause of it or whose war it is anyway—churned her stomach. Bonuwo’s predicament did not end with the experience of the bomb blast; the parents of the murdered children blamed her for their children’s death. This must have accounted for her seeing the images of the slain children at a point in the play. Bonuwo’s description of the manner of death of the children provoked the humanness of the audience who saw the play when it was premiered in Lagos.⁵²⁷ Memekize recounts her ordeal with a gory description of how she lost all her family in one day as a poor fisherwoman in the swamp of the Niger Delta during the Nigerian Civil War which claimed over a million people between 1967 and 1970:

Memekize: All my blood. My husband and two sons. They all perished the same day. During the Biafran war ...unknown to us there was a war. How were we to know in this swampy bush? As they jumped in and out of the river, diving...checking the nets ...*dugum!* A shell. It tore them to pieces. I never picked one complete. I found a head there ...a limb here ...a toe ...a finger ...a manacled trunks. In the rain, I picked each piece until I had each wooden box full.⁵²⁸

Memekize’s reference to the Nigerian Civil War is to tell us that Nigeria as a country is not new to carnage and war, perpetrated by political leaders as an alternative for a peaceful dialogue approach to conflict management or resolution. Her plight further highlights the point that, in the event of war, the victims are mostly civilians who have no knowledge of the cause of the war. If Mukume suffers rape three times in *Little Drops*, and the other women and children suffered uncountable humiliation and deprivation in the hands of their perceived revolutionists, then it is important for me to ask: “Who are the militants fighting for?” The militants themselves are quick to respond that they are fighting for the people, especially the women, children and youths. The actions of the militant groups confuse the women and children they claim to be protecting. In the play we have these two positions interpreted by Ovievie and Kuru:

⁵²⁷ The play was premiered in November, 2009 at the Nigerian National Theatre, Lagos. In the audience were many high school and university students. I saw many of the audience crying during the performance, especially during Bonuwo and Azue’s speech.

⁵²⁸ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 34

Ovievie:No. There was no way one could seat on the fence. No. You could not watch the world exploit your people. With so much neglect, you could not turn your face away. We all felt a sense of duty. We had to fight.⁵²⁹

On the other hand, the militant leader Kuru believes that the women should be active in the fight against the Nigerian Government and the oil multi-nationals or else he will kill them:

...Shoo! Is this a women colony? Wake them up. We men are fighting, you women are sleeping. Wake up the stupid fools!⁵³⁰

....I will skin you all alive, hang you upside down on a pole each, and prick a little hole in your chest until you all die by dropping little drops of blood to the progress and development of the Niger Delta Republic....We are at war out there. Dying for you! But here you are. (Look around.) Eating water yam.⁵³¹

Yerima seems to be saying that Kuru stands as symbol for the militants whose concern is the achievement of a Niger Delta Republic. To actualize this desire, they find that the deaths of both children and women are justified and inevitable. On the contrary, the Niger Delta women choose peace instead of war, life instead of death; because they are aware that, in the course of wars, the female gender is hardest hit: "We have not sent anyone to kill and die for us. We want peace. We are tired of burying our beloved ones...."⁵³² The effect of the Niger Delta militants' activities against women is not different from what female groups encounter under any war situation. The women's psychological integrity is often destroyed by heinous acts such as rape and other sexual violence which often results in unwanted pregnancies and enforced termination of pregnancy. Women are most often seen as loot of war and the instrument of pleasure for the male fighters. Even under the Niger Delta insurgency when the militants are "paid ransom for the release of the kidnapped, they spend it partying with young women."⁵³³ So, according to Memekize, "...women and the innocent children will always lose their lives."⁵³⁴ The International Committee of the

⁵²⁹ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 48

⁵³⁰ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 51

⁵³¹ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 52

⁵³² Yerima, *Little Drops*, 52

⁵³³ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 21

⁵³⁴ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 63

Red Cross organization writes that women are, in most part, the civilian “caught in the crossfire, and show astonishing resourcefulness and resilience in coping with the disintegration of their families, the loss of their homes and their belongings and the destruction of their lives.”⁵³⁵

The details of death in the play literarily present horrific images that are often seen in scenes of Hollywood war movies, terrorist actions in the streets of Iraq, or the outcome of an explosion that rocked Moscow Domodedovo airport on January 24, 2011.⁵³⁶ They present a devilment angle to humanity’s insane application of power. The action removes from the perpetrators any ounce of humanity they once might have had. In *Little Drops*, the reader-audience relates with death not in its orthodox form, but as a tragic end to existence and also as an instrument of destruction of innocent lives. Death becomes the method for settling resource control issues both by the Nigerian government and the militants. Whatever sympathy the reader-audience might have felt towards the militants disappears by their continual killings. I think this is what Yerima’s *Little Drops* wants to achieve. The play puts the blame of the conflicts and the carnage that follows on the militants and exonerates the Nigerian government to a large extent. However, while the militants are the people responsible for the killing of the king in *Little Drop*, the Joint Military Taskforce who launches a grenade attack on the militants are responsible for the massacre of innocent children.

The language of the play shocks, affects and effects an offensive emotional reaction that necessitated an unsympathetic condemnation of both the actions of the militants and the government forces by the reader-audience. Memekize’s recounts of her loss in the Nigerian Civil War of the late 1960s that confines her to the same spot for forty years after the incident employs language not different from the others in the play. The reference to the manner in which the King died like sacrificial animals at shrines is too atrocious. I think Yerima’s use of the statement “The eyes of his headless body still twitched with life” and the description of the death of the children is aimed at telling the warring parties that they have thrown away the little humanity existing in them.

⁵³⁵ See paragraph two of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) official statement

⁵³⁶ Vasilyeva, N., Sekretarev, I., “Moscow airport terror attack kills 31, wounds 145”

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/eu_russia_airport_blast

Thematic Pre-occupation

Gender abuse is one of the major themes in *The Sisters*, *Little Drops* and *Mojagbe*. All of the women in these plays are denied one right or another. For example, Funmi, the first lady in *The Sisters*, suffers the agony of the loss of her sisters' companionship when the president was alive. Her husband prevented her from visiting Taiwo in the hospital when she received a bullet to her pelvis. She could not commiserate with her on the death of her husband. Nana was treated by her Father the Ambassador and his wife as a servant rather than as a member of the family. This is the reason why Ambassador's wife demanded that Nana should serve her sisters as a servant. She was warned never to reveal her real identity to them. If not for the clause in the Ambassador's will, Nana's identity will not have come to light. The will states that the three sisters (Funmi, Toun, and Taiwo) must discover the identity of their fourth sister who is the oldest before the properties can be shared.

For Oba Mojagbe, women are properties to be acquired and an instrument of sex. As a property they can be put away anytime the owner (male) desires so. This is why Mojagbe used his women for sacrifice. In order to attain immortality, he killed his first wife and his own mother for sacrifice. With his supernatural power, he blocked the womb of the new Olori (queen). Because he has blocked her womb, she will not be able to have a child of her own:

Mojagbe: And that one, too. She now wants children ... I see her drinking concoction and whispering incantations in my room before coming to bed. Often she cries out in her sleep. ...⁵³⁷

Though Mojagbe is happy that Olori will not give birth to a child, she, on the other hand is traumatized by her inability to have a child. She suffers constant nightmares in which she sees Isepe, the medicine man of Mojagbe, killing her unborn children:

Olori: The Baba that I saw said as long as your man, Isepe, lives, my womb is sealed. (Crying)....Why would he want to stop my children from coming? ...⁵³⁸

Olori's desire for a child that will continue the lineage of Mojagbe leads her to consult a medicine man. The man whom she refers to as Baba makes her drink

⁵³⁷ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 23

⁵³⁸ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 54

different herbal preparations. Her desire is rooted in the belief among the Yoruba's that a man or woman without a child is like a pot that cannot contain water. His or her root will wither off the surface of the earth after a while. Though there is no logic in the statement, it still holds strongly among the people. Motunrayo, who becomes the symbol of death in the play, is regarded by Mojagbe as a slave girl whose purpose is for sexual gratification and as a shrine-hand (someone who attends to the shrine gods aside the priest). Mojagbe abuses the sensibility of the women of the community by letting slaves loose to go and rape them for daring to protest against his kingship half-naked:

Mojagbe: Take six strong and virile slaves. Let them loose amongst the half-naked women. And if they desire older women like my mothers' here, they can have them....⁵³⁹

Mojagbe's action is not different from those who raped Mukume the night of her wedding:

Mukume: ...Please! I have been raped three times today already. Kill me instead. Shoot me and let me die! (Crying.) No! I will not let another man touch me. Kill me first.⁵⁴⁰

As a casualty of terror activities who constantly lives in fear of what might happen next, Mukume refuses to plead for her life; instead, she wishes for death as she thinks of life in the hands of another militant after being dehumanized by those she encountered earlier.

Despite the level of abuse suffered by the women in *Little Drop* and *The Sister*, they still desire men. Even the level of academic attainment of the women in *The Sister* cannot extricate them from abuse. Though Taiwo's pain and past abuse becomes the driving force for her survival, others refuse to get out of the shackles of male domination or male controlled space. Even in *Little Drops*, apart from the old woman, Memekize, the rest of the women align with their torturer (represented in Kuru) in the end and continue as if everything is normal. Funmi in *The Sisters*, Azue in *Little Drops*, and *Olori* in *Mojagbe* rely on the status of being married and on the insulation provided by their office as the wives of the paramount rulers. Because of the economic cover which their

⁵³⁹ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 37

⁵⁴⁰ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 10

marriages provide, they are likely to accept whatever abuse that might come from their husbands.

The major issues discussed in *Kaffir's Last Game* are brain drain, betrayal and patriotism. The migration of the skilled laborers or highly educated members of a particular society to a foreign land where it is believed that they can have better living conditions is what I refer to as brain drain. Yerima's choice of a character like Professor is not an accident. It is to draw attention to the fact that many renowned academics in Nigeria have relocated to universities in the United State of America, Canada, Europe, and South Africa with the intention of finding a better environment for research and remuneration of service. Greed is the main theme of *The Lottery Ticket* as death and betrayal are the main subjects in *Mojagbe*, *The Sisters*, and *Little Drops*. Danger's greed pushes him to make attempt on Mama Lizi's life in order to get Baba Tailor's winning ticket. The same greed binds all the characters of the play together to consider the death of Danger in the hand of Mama Lizi as normal. This is because Danger's death removes him from the number of people that will share the lottery. A common theme prevalent in all the plays is corruption (both of power and of resources). The telluric women in *Mojagbe* were the people who manipulated the people's choice of a King by presenting *Mojagbe* as the people's choice on the contrary:

Mojagbe: [...] ... the people begged me to become king.

Yeye: We know how that water entered the coconut. Leave that story alone. It is what you became that spoiled the taste ...pity.⁵⁴¹

Among the Yorubas, the source of the water found in the coconut is a mystery. The fact that the four telluric Yeye are powerful manipulators and mischievous elements make them the people behind the mystery of how the "water entered the coconut." In this case, both water and coconut are metaphors for secrecy.

Religious charlatanism is a subject in both *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket*. Nigeria is a nation of profuse contradiction, a place where religious piety and corruption cohabit simultaneously as the following dialogue between Professor and Mbulelo in *Kaffir's Last Game* reveals:

Professor: ...We in Nigeria are a very prayerful people. Even a former president of ours wondered how, with the bad economy and all, the country still survived. It was prayers.

⁵⁴¹ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 36

Mbulelo: Prayers. That is a new one on me.⁵⁴²

Nigerians' recourse to prayer as mediation for solving social, political and economic problems is also a major issue in *The Lottery Ticket*, "Na as Muslim dey beg, Christian dey beg."⁵⁴³ They pray for material needs rather for spiritual sanctity. Lizi narrates an experience that, at a Sunday service, a church member who claims to be possessed by the spirit was poured a bucket of water to drive away the spirit. She recalls the number of a car to warn the owner of an impending danger and the people, including the Pastor, were disappointed as they thought the numbers were for the lottery. All of the characters in *The Lottery Ticket*, apart from Lizi, will kill to be the receiver of the lottery jackpot, the subject on which the play revolves. As a measure, Mama Lizi is ready to prostitute her only daughter as long as the old Landlord will exempt her from paying house rent. She is quick to justify herself by calling it a "business" opportunity when Landlord suggested marrying Lizi:

Mama Lizi: Lizi if oga Landlord serious, say I no go pay rent, abeg make you give am eye small.

Lizi: Mama!

Mama Lizi: Na business me I dey.⁵⁴⁴

As political satires, *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket* make mockery in a lucid manner of the pretentious religious fanaticism and double standards of the government.

Socio-Political Contextualization of Texts

Mojagbe: (With disgust.) A cricket ... a common cricket fit for food for the wall gecko ... a common lizard comes to the palace to kill a king. (Walks round him.) A childish fool!⁵⁴⁵

In *Mojagbe*, Prince Esan's attempts to assassinate King Mojagbe in his palace fail. For his action, Prince Esan is condemned to death in the market square to serve as a deterrent to others who may want to attempt the same act. Esan can

⁵⁴² Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 33

⁵⁴³ SE: The Muslims are praying the same way the Christians are praying. Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 19

⁵⁴⁴ Yerima, *The Lottery Ticket*, 11

⁵⁴⁵ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 15

carry the title of prince because he has right to the throne as he comes from the same part of the kingdom as Mojagbe.

The action of Esan is similar to what happened in Nigeria under the Military government. For example, General Yakubu Gowon - who profited from the nation's coup and counter coup of 1966 - ruled for nine years promising to hand over to a democratically elected government on many occasions before he was finally overthrown by General Murtala Mohammed in a coup-d'état in 1975. General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), who overthrew the government of General Mohammadu Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon (1983-1985), ruled the country for eight years with various failed attempts at handing over to a democratically elected government. Even when he had conducted an election that was adjudged as the freest and fairest in the annal of Nigeria's history, he would not leave until he was forced to hand over to an interim government headed by Chief Ernest Sonekan.⁵⁴⁶ Gen. Sanni Abacha, before his untimely death after four years in office, was planning to transit into a civilian President.⁵⁴⁷ Nigeria's latest attempt at democracy (1999 to present) was almost marred by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's attempt to prolong his stay in office after two terms of four years, as stipulated in the nation's constitution. Obasanjo attempted in 2006 to have that part of the constitution changed by the nation's National Assembly in order to incorporate a third term in office for president. Prince Esan's action in *Mojagbe* can be interpreted as a throwback to April 22, 1990, when Major Gideon Orkar succeeded in entering the Dodan Barrack Palace of the Nigerian military dictator Gen. Ibrahim Babangida. Though he captured the Head of State, the coup failed, and Orkar and others involved were executed.

Prior to the Orkar led coup d'état, Babangida's bosom friend, General Mamman Vatsa (1940-1986), was executed in 1986 alongside many senior military officers for an attempted coup on his government. This information is well intended by Yerima to draw the attention of Nigerians to their historical past. Gideon Orkar and Mamman Vatsa were from the Northern part of Nigeria, the same region as Gen. Babangida who ordered them to be executed for their attempt to forcefully remove him from power. There is an echo of both the Vatsa and the Orkar coup and the eventual killing of the masterminds in

⁵⁴⁶ The election of June 12, 1993 supposedly won by late Nigerian businessman MKO Abiola was cancelled by the Head of State without providing a cogent reason. As the time of writing this paper, Ibrahim Babangida is preparing to contest the Nigerian Presidential election in 2011.

⁵⁴⁷ In Ahmed Yerima *Kaffir's Last Game* published in 1998, it was one of the thrusts of the play as Mbulelo asks Professor to make a categorical statement to the position of the Nigerian Head of State on what they in South Africa presume to be a rumour.

The Sisters. Yerima's intent is to present a slice of Nigeria's history in both plays. Mojagbe's position as a war general before assuming the position of king is intended to reinforce the message of the play. *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket* put a searchlight on the people's reliance on supernatural intervention on both economic and other daily needs, even the government's declaration of prayer days for the public. The ironic aspect of the nation and its people is that, despite its religious nature, corruption is rife even among the religious leaders who also throng the corridor of power seeking to gain financially from the prayers offered to God for the protection of the politicians' lives. In *Kaffir's Last Game*, the Nigerian transition process of 1996 is revisited and clearly dissected for its merit. Mbulelo, the South African character in the play, eager to know Professor's view on the transition, asks:

Mbulelo: ...How is the transition to civil rule going in your country?

Professor: On course. 1998 is our year, and there is so much activities already.

Mbulelo: Yes, we hear that the activities are people criss-crossing. They are all in a game of trying to guess which party your head of state will join. It is less than a year to go and there is still no one with clear presidential aspiration. This is very strange, don't you think so, Professor?⁵⁴⁸

Professor who is fully aware of the political situation in his home country, tries to deflect the questions by attempting to change the direction of the discussion which he does not seem comfortable with. Mbulelo, who is not ready to end the discussion, poses a direct question to Professor Omobusola concerning his opinion on the sincerity of the transition programme being embarked upon by the Nigerian Head of State:

Mbulelo: Professor, you are just coming from Nigeria, do you think that your Head of State will hand over to elected civilian President come October, 1998?⁵⁴⁹

Professor becomes religious in his response and would rather allow God to intervene. Professor, though, would have chosen not to respond to Mbulelo's question but for his insistence.

⁵⁴⁸ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 18

⁵⁴⁹ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 19

Professor: I will like to reassure the people of Africa and indeed the world, that I have no doubt that by the grace of God, the military will handover to a democratically elected civilian government by October.

Mbulelo: What about your Head of State?

Professor: General Sani Abacha? What about him? There is no big deal about a military officer becoming an elected president. Look at Lt. Rawling in Ghana, people voted for him. If the people vote for him, please let him rule.

Mbulelo: ...We in South Africa need to know. The whole world needs to know. You Nigerians need to know that gone are the days when you could live in isolation.⁵⁵⁰

At that time, Nigerians and the rest of the world shared Professor's sentiment for the on-going democratic process being orchestrated by Gen. Sani Abacha. Insincerity in the democratic process is also a major subject in *The Sisters* where the late president continually had himself re-elected into office on four occasions and was still planning to succeed himself before his untimely death. Of course, in reality it was not the first time in the history of Nigeria that the process of transition from military to civilian government would be set up. And on all occasions, apart from 1979 when Gen. Olusegun Obasanjo handed over power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari and 1999 when Gen. Abdusalam Abubakar handed over the power to Olusegun Obasanjo, were efforts in futility. During the eight-year rule of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), there were more than two failed attempts of transitional process. *Kaffir's Last Game* positions Yerima as a social commentator: a socio-political critic.

As a social commentator, Yerima entrenches the socio-political realist issue of religions in his drama, especially the perennial contradictions of Christianity and African indigenous belief which I have talked about in chapter three. It is a perennial contradiction because, in the same breath, many of Yerima's main characters invoke the services of the Christian God and the indigenous gods simultaneously to resolve a knotty crisis:

Memekize: ...I prayed to Jesus through his mother the Virgin Mary for you, and he heard me. He always listens to me. They all do. And when

⁵⁵⁰ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 19-20

I wanted to wash you, I called on Benikurukuru to heal, and she too did.⁵⁵¹

The opposing religious factors that I mentioned earlier re-vibrate in Memekize's prayer to both the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ of the Christian faith and Benikurukuru, the indigenous goddess of the Niger Delta creek for healing power. As mentioned in my Chapter three, the Christian religion restrains its adherents from believing or worshipping any other god, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me"⁵⁵² apart from Jehovah who can only be reached through Jesus Christ.

In most of the plays investigated in this thesis, Yerima employs a socio-political realist approach to criticize the cultural and political reality of Nigeria. When one considers the events that caused the militant insurgencies in the Nigerian Niger Delta which Yerima presented in *Little Drops*, one would be apt to agree with Chinua Achebe that "The old white master was still in power. He had got himself a bunch of black stooges to do his dirty work for a commission."⁵⁵³ Environmental degradation and neglect of corporate duties and social responsibilities of the foreign multinational oil companies like Shell, Chevron, and Mobil, in collusion with the Nigerian federal government, are major pointers to Achebe's statement. Whatever leads to the actions of the Niger Delta militants is planted by both the foreign oil companies and the Nigerian government. Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye, and Okhonmina statement captures it thus:

To all intents and purposes, it was the nature of state and corporate responses, treatment and governance that made violence the only option. They pushed the region into violence, insurrection and insurgency.⁵⁵⁴

Rather than accede or dialogue with the aggrieved youths and elders of the Niger Delta, the government and oil companies resort to force, suppression and

⁵⁵¹ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 15

⁵⁵² See Exodus 20:3 in *King James Version of The Holy Bible*

⁵⁵³ Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (Bloomington/Oxford: Indiana University Press/James Currey, 1997), 137

⁵⁵⁴ Osaghae, E.E., et al., *Youth Militia, Self Determination and Resource Control Struggles in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria* (Lagos: CDP Nigeria, 2007), 78

repression. As Osaghae notes, “The youths chose to chest out and challenge the state with counter violence.”⁵⁵⁵ According to Joab-Peterside:

In some of these conflicts, the state security forces watch while violence raged especially in cases where intelligence reports indicate that the State’s business interests are not threatened. The reluctance of the State to provide security in perceived non-oil conflict situations created civilian insecurity that in turn stimulated rapid privatization of security [...] often times counterproductive as small arms provided for collective security resurfaced in intra community disagreements ultimately exacerbating violence.⁵⁵⁶

The international communities were only drawn into the Niger Delta crisis when the actions of the creek boys caused an increase in the prices of crude oil in the international market because of shortfall in production from the region. Efforts by humanitarian agencies were noticed when women and children became victims of the government’s counter attack in the region. How will one explain this statement by Memekize: “I hear the government people have sworn to wipe us all out tonight.”⁵⁵⁷ This question-like statement is made out of fear, against the backdrop of what the federal government is known to have done in pasttimes.

In November, 1999, the Nigerian federal government, under former President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), gave orders for the massacre of the Ijaws of Odi, a town in the Niger Delta, and this action was promptly executed by the country’s army. Prior to the massacre, it was reported that twelve members of the Nigerian police were killed by armed militants from the town. The onslaught of the government saw the death of many civilians. The figure which Nnimmi Bassey, Executive Director of Environment Right Action, put at nearly 2500. The three buildings that were left standing in Odi town were the Anglican Church, the health centre and a bank. In fact, Odi was wiped out. Like in *Kaffir’s Last Game* and in *Little Drops*, Yerima uses realistic “language, images, characters and conflicts as vessels”⁵⁵⁸ to draw his Nigerian reader-

⁵⁵⁵ Osaghae, E. E., et al., *Youth Militia, Self Determination and Resource Control Struggles in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria* (Lagos: CDP Nigeria, 2007), 78

⁵⁵⁶ Joab-Peterside, Sofiri, “On the Militarization of Nigeria’s Niger Delta: The Genesis of Ethnic Militia in River State, Nigeria” in *Niger Delta Economies Violence* 21 (2007), 2

⁵⁵⁷ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 21

⁵⁵⁸ Yerima, *Theatre, Culture and Politics: Essays in Dramatic and Cultural Theory* (Lagos: Concept Publications, 2007), 234

audience to the reality around them. He uses vivid imagery in statements such as:

Memekize: A straight small bullet like a pistol straight into his small back not breaking a bone ...lodged in his stomach. It is swelling. The stench you smelt, woman, is from his breath. His small stomach is beginning to rot. That was why he did not ask for food. His stomach is full of the lead of death....Little drops of blood....His life continues to sip (sic) away with every little drop of blood.”⁵⁵⁹

The expressions are used to draw out the empathic feeling of the reader-audience towards the plight of the innocent victims. The ire of the reader-audience will be drawn towards the actions of both the Militants and JTF against innocent children as they are killed without restraint. They are both guilty of the heinous crimes against humanity. As I have said in my introduction on the work of Ahmed Yerima, he represents society in many of his plays without taking a particular position either for or against the government. In one of my interviews with him, he states that it is the duty of the playwright to tell the people how things are without thinking of playing God by providing a solution. Although it is possible to come across some forms of contradiction when analyzing his plays as I have done. This is because, in many of his plays, he pitches his tent with the people instead of the government which he worked for until January 2010.

Yerima writes that one of the inspirations for the play *Mojagbe* “is the type of leaders we have. How we forget to learn from history and how man confronts himself searching for an inner peace which he himself often destroys in the first place.... And because power itself is excitedly sweet, man will never learn.”⁵⁶⁰ This inspiration from failed leadership and the self-destructive stance of African governments is poignant in plays like *Kaffir's Last Game*, and *The Sisters*.

The play *Mojagbe* reveals the tyrannical life of the main character, King Mojagbe, who, before the opening of the play, committed inconceivable atrocities, including human sacrifices and matricide. Mojagbe's matricide is intentional and purposeless. The king also involves the town and its citizens into an unnecessary war with a more powerful state. Whereas the meaning of sacrifice among the Yorubas' is for cleansing the land/community, oneself or

⁵⁵⁹ Yerima, *Little Drops*, 30

⁵⁶⁰ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, (Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2008), 6

home of any perceived evils and to deflect impending doom, Mojagbe's case has the opposite meaning. The purpose of King Mojagbe's sacrifices is for the sole aim of achieving illusionary immortality (longevity in office). Through the ill advice of his personal priest Isepe, whom he later killed, King Mojagbe commits matricide and also murders his first wife as requirements for the needed sacrifice for longevity. He also refuses to perform the yearly kingly ritual at the Ogun festival; an act the people believed caused the sudden death of Ogundele, the young priest of Ogun. The yearly kingly ritual at the Ogun festival is supposed to cleanse the land of evil of the year before and usher it into a peaceful and prosperous new year.

After the death of Ogundele, Mojagbe marries his widow. This act within the Yoruba socio-cultural belief is sacrilegious and a taboo because the young woman is in mourning, and needs to refrain from a relationship with the opposite sex for a certain period of time. According to Oyeniyi and Ige, "The mourning period among the Yorubas may last for forty days or four months (120 days) and the widow is expected to wear a pensive look and be clad in black attire to all public places."⁵⁶¹ The marrying of Ogundele's widow while in mourning is, in the words of Balogun, a "forbidden act even for a king."⁵⁶²

As a tyrant, King Mojagbe shares characteristics with some of Nigerian's military governments like General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and General Sanni Abacha (1993-1998). King Mojagbe represses freedom of speech and disperses revolt or protest by employing all of his military might; a situation similar to what happened in Nigeria during the government of Babangida and Abacha when protesters against their regimes were ruthlessly gunned down. In April, 1986, under General Ibrahim Babangida, many who protested against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) orchestrated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were gunned down in various cities of Nigeria. General Sanni Abacha's government was noted for shooting at protesters, especially following protests against the annulment of June 12 presidential elections in 1993 by Gen. Babangida which saw Abacha seizing power from the interim government of Chief Ernest Sonekan.

As death becomes inevitable for King Mojagbe, he is remorseful and regrets his atrocious acts of killing his own mother and his wife. He begs God to forgive him his many sinful acts: "My wife and my mother ...all wasted souls

⁵⁶¹ See Oyeniyi, A.J., Ige, A., "Widowhood Practices Among the Yorubas of South West Nigeria: are there Differences in what Women Experiences Due to their Status?" in *Gender and Behaviour*, 8/2 2010
<http://www.faqs.org/periodicals/201012/2187713301.html#ixzz1EnsxKQyN>

⁵⁶² Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 17

then? May Eledumare forgive me.”⁵⁶³ One can also liken the late president in *The Sisters* to King Mojagbe as they both share many similarities. Yerima’s intention is to use both King Mojagbe and the late president to teach modern African leaders the end result of misrule and tyranny. Before the sudden death of the president, he had ruled for four terms of five years each and was preparing for a re-election under the grand illusion that he was liked by the people. Taiwo informs Funmi (the widow) that her late husband was a tyrant who was never liked by the citizens of the nation he presided over:

Taiwo:The man had ruled this country for twenty years. Four terms, four rotten terms, and he was still looking ahead to the future? What future? Whose future? The people were praying for you to leave, and you had the grand illusion that we loved you and wanted you to stay for another term? Did you have no eyes? Were you so much in love with power that you became blind?⁵⁶⁴

Taiwo statement recaptures the mood of Nigerians when Gen. Sani Abacha died suddenly on June 8, 1998. At the announcement of Abacha’s death the street of Lagos and other major cities in Nigeria was full of jubilant people who celebrated his demise.

In the world of Funmi, after the president’s death, the people celebrated with a poem composed to belittle his government: “It revealed to me how so intently, the people my husband had laboured for and served all his life, hated him. The whole nation celebrated the words of the poem. Children I heard learnt by heart...”⁵⁶⁵ This sit-tight syndrome is common with most African leaders who are under the grand illusion that without them in power, the nations they preside over cannot move forward. Cases in point are Egypt under almost thirty years of Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) and Libya under Col. Muammar Gadhafi (1942-2011). Gadhafi ruled for forty-two years and would not leave power even after six months of violent protest, until he was captured and killed by those rebellious to his government. It took violent protest and civil war for changes to occur in these two countries in 2011.

The two major problems of African leaders are greed and fear. They are so comfortable being in possession of the nation’s commonwealth which they can spend alone with their families, and so afraid of becoming ordinary

⁵⁶³ Yerima, *Mojagbe*, 44

⁵⁶⁴ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 19

⁵⁶⁵ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 12

citizens, they refrain from making any post-presidency plans. This fear of being ousted out of the privilege position of “Your Excellency” to become a member of the masses is what Funmi grudgingly voices in *The Sisters* as Taiwo asked her what she is going to do after leaving the comfort of the presidential palace:

Taiwo: How will you cope Funmi?

Funmi: I don’t know. I am so scared. I have not given a thought to life outside here.⁵⁶⁶

Most African leaders and those around them are afraid of life outside the confines of presidency; frightened of the reactions of the masses to many of the atrocities they (leaders) committed while in office, so they refuse to give a thought to living as ordinary members of society without the accustomed retinues. These are some of the reasons why the majority of leaders will want to live and die as the head of state of their various nations.

The Lottery Ticket depicts the contemporary social reality of the Nigerian lower class. At the lowest step of the Nigerian economic ladder are those ordinary people who toil daily to provide a manageable sustenance for themselves and their family. This step is populated with the small quantity food vendor like Mama Lizi, the road-side tailor, the motor-park tout, the beggar, the junior police and traffic control personnel; in some instances the landlord in a squalid or shanty community can belong to the group. In fact this is where you find the lowest class of the society. The play gives a naturalistic portrayal of this people as they are found in this society. “Buka”⁵⁶⁷, a squalid restaurant is where people of this class of society frequently congregate. Visible in all the plays discussed are bad leadership, selfishness, the desire to accumulate sinful wealth, corruption, illiteracy, hunger and superstitions by the deployment of cynicism.

Yerima revealed to the world the evils committed under the military regime of Gen. Sani Abacha in *Kaffir’s Last Game*. The issues of the cancellation of the June 12 election, the murder of Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, the perceived “troublesome-wife” of the acclaimed winner of the 1993 election, Chief MKO Abiola, features prominently in the play. Yerima went ahead to

⁵⁶⁶ Yerima, *The Sisters*, 35

⁵⁶⁷ The word Buka is a short form of Bukatariat. The word derived from the combination of Buka and cafeteria refers to a small canteen or space for selling already prepared meals for diners to either eat right there or take it away. It is different from a restaurant because of the dirty state, it sells only food popular with the indigenous people and mostly manned by poor and illiterate people. The word and its application are initially popular among the Yoruba language speakers until lately when it entered into Nigerian lexicon.

call the Head of State names like, “Populist Dictator! Embezzler! President and Liar for life.”⁵⁶⁸

The situation that necessitates brain drain in the Nigerian educational sector up to the end of the twentieth century is treated in the play and captured by Reuben Embu as he writes:

Generally education has not been accorded the necessary attention in Nigeria. Governments at all levels have been paying lip service to the educational sector. This is reflected in the primary, secondary and higher institutions including the universities that are considered the highest citadel of learning. The story is usually the same from the elected civilian government to dictatorial military regimes over the years.⁵⁶⁹

Apart from the political situation in Nigeria, there are other factors like the inadequate salary paid to academics, incessant closure of the universities and infrastructural decay in the various institutions of higher learning. A strangulating experience for academics, Professor tries to explain to Mbulelo why he must take up an appointment at the University of Cape Town:

Professor: ...Do you know that right now, I am richer than two Universities' vote put together? Do you know that for the past two years after the so called review of University teaching staff salaries, I have been earning ten thousand naira a month. One hundred and sixteen miserable dollars for a Professor of twenty-five years and still counting? Do you know that as a Dean, all I was given was ten thousand naira to run the faculty, with researches, conferences and all?⁵⁷⁰

Though Mbulelo puts it succinctly that, despite the efforts of the South African government the youths are not positioning themselves for the many opportunities available to them. Whether the South African government is

⁵⁶⁸ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 34

⁵⁶⁹ Embu, Reuben, “Brain Drain and the University in Contemporary Nigerian: Lessons from Kaffir's Last Game” in Gbemisola Adeoti, ed. *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2007), 74

⁵⁷⁰ Yerima, *Kaffir's Last Game*, 14

planning for its population⁵⁷¹ is not visible as evidence suggests otherwise. The constant labour unrest and the xenophobic attacks that occurred in the country since 2004 sheds light on the fact that the majority of black South Africans do not have jobs.

As indicated in the previous section, the violence among the black youth in South Africa that *Kaffir's Last Game* refers to as “sitting on a keg of gun powder.” finally escalated with the killing of foreign (African) nationals staying in the country. The violence against foreigners is a way of telling the world that all is not well. The play explores to a greater extent, the historical and political linkage that existed between the two countries (Nigeria and South Africa) during the period of apartheid in South Africa to the collapse of the white minority rule. The political relationship between the two countries is such that it cannot be termed congenial on all sides; it is neither cold nor hot. The two nations (Nigeria and South Africa) are playing a cat and mouse game interchangeably, rivalling one another in who is the ‘giant’ of Africa. There is no bilateral agreement between the two countries for free movement of their citizens without recourse to visas. Meanwhile citizens of US, UK, and other European countries can move in and out of South Africa without visa restrictions.

Though the issue of brain drain seems to be the main thematic preoccupation of *Kaffir's Last Game*, one should nevertheless not lose sight of the delicate relationship between the two countries in the play. A situation that necessitates the movement of a nation's skilled labour from their own country to another deserves to be addressed. In order to address the issue of loyalty to one's nation, Professor is left in a state of confusion at the end of the play. He has to resolve a raging inner conflict by making a decision of whether to go ahead to take up the position at the University of Cape Town or return to his home country. This juncture, if Professor wants to go back to Nigeria or proceed on his journey to Cape Town, is left to his decision. The exposition of man's inner conflicts is a constant technique in Yerima's narrative style as it is present in virtually all of his plays.

With *Little Drops*, *Mojagbe* and *Kaffir's Last Game*, Yerima clearly positions himself as a dramatist with concerns for the masses. Unlike the allegorical plays of Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan, Yerima refrains from couching the world of his plays in phantasmagorias by presenting them as they are with visible references. At the time of writing this work, apart from Bunmi

⁵⁷¹ By the population here I am referring to the indigenous African community and not to the European-African community.

Julius-Adeoye's *War at Peace* and Ahmed Yerima's *Little Drops* there seems to be little or no other play from Nigeria's literary landscape which takes a realist approach to the dramatic construction of the Niger Delta crisis.

Conclusion

These works present Yerima as a fearless, twenty-first century socio-political realist dramatist who is not afraid of whose horse is gored. Just as he did with his other plays, he risked his position⁵⁷² as the Artistic Director of a government owned institution by continuously pitching his tent with the masses and allowing his art to reflect Nigeria's society. In most of the works, especially *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Lottery Ticket* and *Little Drops*, Nigeria's festering political system and social institutions are x-rayed in order for the generality of the reader-audience to proffer a suitable solution. I have also highlighted the fact that the issue of religious realism, which I discussed in chapter three, has a place in *Little Drops* and *Mojagbe*. All the plays reflect Nigeria's socio-political reality. I have linked the analyzed plays to some visible historical past within the post-independent Nigerian and indeed African society, drawing on visible names and political figures within the country and the whole of the African continent. Socio-political realism in drama is not necessarily a new form of realism; I believe what makes it different is that it uses popular indices like names, professions, institutions, events, etc., within the society to interrogate dramatic discourse. Socio-political realist plays give representations of everyday concern and the politics of the society by arguing the point of the disenfranchised members of the community. A definition of socio-political realism that best captures my argument is the one which states that it "is a term used to describe visual and other realistic art works which chronicled the everyday conditions of the working classes and the poor and are critical of the social environment that causes these conditions."⁵⁷³

Socio-political realism is faced with the same problems that its hydra-headed root (realism) has. I believe that socio-political realism, as one of the

⁵⁷² Shortly after staging *Little Drops* in 2009, Yerima's position as the Director-General of the National Theatre, National Troupe and Abuja Carnival was taken away from him by the government. To force him out of the position, he was returned to his formal position as Artistic Director of Nigerian National Troupe while other people took over the headship of National Theatre of Nigeria and Abuja Carnival. This decision may have contributed to his decision to resign the government appointment and return back to the university system as a professor. At the moment, he is a Professor of Theatre and Cultural Studies at Redeemer's University (RUN), Nigeria.

⁵⁷³ See "Social Realism Vs. Socialist Realism" at

<http://www.huntfor.com/arthistory/C20th/socrealism.htm>. Accessed on 15 dec. 2010.

many sprouting heads of realism, aims at an intimate as well as critical relationship between art and the society it claims to be representing. Yerima's socio-political realist plays give details of everyday life (names of persons, of places, of events, of institutions, languages etc), creation of social types characteristic behaviour, etc. For example, *Kaffir's Last Game* and *Little Drops* have narratives that deal with the social and political system in Nigeria and how they affect the ordinary man in the community with visible references.

Dramas of socio-political realism that criticize anti-masses policies of governments or harmful socio-cultural practices may have immense impact on cultural and political debates as well as among intellectuals. But to what extent is the power of socio-political realist drama able to effect change in society? Many theatre critics of African descent have argued that theatre has a dual functionality. That is, theatre is both entertaining and didactic. According to Femi Osofisan:

...all our artists—from the ancient oral performers to their modern scribal heirs; from Negritude's Leopold Senghor to TigrITUDE's Wole Soyinka—have accepted and reveled in their identity as communal spokespersons and as the conscience of their societies. The art of narration in our communities has always served didactic as well as pleasurable ends. The injunction to 'teach by entertaining', that dictum so basic to Aristophanes, to Racine, and to Synge, underlies the raconteur's praxis in black Africa. The folk tales entertain with their wit and song, but they also teach and inculcate the community's acceptable ethics, they enlighten the young about the nature of human society and the environment, about the teeming life of the forests and rivers, and the appropriate canons of social interaction and penal redress. From them we extract the valuable lesson that stories are never ideologically innocent.⁵⁷⁴

The question that arises from the foregoing is what is socio-political realist drama? In this context I refer to socio-political realist dramas as those plays that are constructed with the intent of aiming to reveal some social and political malaise besetting society.

German playwright Bertolt Brecht employed the theatre as a platform for political ideas and for the creation of a critical aesthetics. He refined epic

⁵⁷⁴ Osofisan, Femi, "Reflections on Theatre Practice in Contemporary Nigeria" in *African Affairs*, 97 (London: Oxford university Press, 1998), 83

theatre to further project his political ideas. Brecht's works are not only popular in Europe and United States of America; they are also an inspiration for Nigerian dramatists like Femi Osofisan. To Africans, his alienation technique is not what is of paramount significance, as such, but the didactic nature of this technique. The didactic nature of his theatre helped dramatists like Femi Osofisan to shroud his revolutionary dramatic content in metaphor in order to avoid censorship.

Socio-political realist plays by Nigerian playwrights discuss the malaise in Nigerian society. They reveal the fraud and corruption endemic in the Nigerian polity. Fraud and corruption are negative Siamese-twins that are present among the different strata of the Nigerian government. More than half (approximately 29 years) of the fifty years of the nation's self-rule were spent under military dictatorship,⁵⁷⁵ who were more corrupt than the civilians they sacked on allegation of corruption. The years under democratic government were not spared of leaders who also used their power and influence primarily in the pursuit of private goals. Infact, the military's excuses for coming into government in Nigeria is always premised on the corruption of civilian leaders and their employment of power and influences primarily for their own gains. These leaders (civilian and military) subject the society to decay and poverty. Dilapidated structures, international debt, incessant strikes, failed social systems, corruption, civil unrest, extra judicial killings etc., are the results left behind by successive governments in Nigeria.

⁵⁷⁵ These leaders are military Generals, starting with Aguiyi Ironsi (1966-1966), General Yakubu Gowon, (1966-1975), Generals Muritala Mohammed and Olusegun Obasanjo (1975-1979), Gen. Mohammadu Buhari (1984-1985), Gen. Ibrahim B. Babangida (1985-1993), Gen. Sanni Abacha (1993-1997), Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar (1998-1999). See Nigeria: Chronology of main political events since independence, IRIN, 2003.
<http://www.irinnews.org/InDepthMain.aspx?InDepthId=30&ReportId=70462>. Accessed Thursday 26/08/2010. 06:55

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In concluding this work, it is expedient for me to reiterate that Ahmed Yerima's dramatic fecundity transcends his other creative works (directing and critical analysis). His creative oeuvre has established him as a social and cultural theoretician with easily accessible writings. His treatment of contemporary societal issues, especially in Nigeria, in his dramatic works belies his position as Assistant Director, Director and later Director-General of the National Troupe of Nigeria and National Theatre of Nigeria (1991-2010). Although holders of political positions in Nigeria are known to project the perspective of the government, Yerima's dramas show the social reality of the masses instead of the government's position. In an accessible mode, he writes for the people by criticising the government's policies. At the same time, some of his plays take a critical look at the conflicts between Nigerians' traditional cultural beliefs and Christianity. All the plays studied lend credence to my conclusions that Yerima is a culturally, socially and politically conscious playwright whose works reflect conditions as they affect the people of his society. This negates the position of critics like Bakare Ojo-Rasaki and Gbemisola Adeoti who postulate that, because of Yerima's position in the government, he cannot write a play that can criticise government policies. With this thesis, I have also countered other critics who claim that he is not a serious dramatist because he (Yerima) does not belong to the group of Nigeria's radical/Marxist dramatists whose drama call for revolutionary change in the nation's polity. In this work, I have argued that his drama is re-directing the focus of Nigerian literary drama of the twenty-first century especially for the country's new dramatists. In terms of cultural documentation, many of his plays contribute to the preservation of the people's past for the emerging generations. My argument here is that while Pentecostalism attempts to erode the mythical and indigenous beliefs from the youth and future generations in Nigerian society, by representing ATBs in his plays, Yerima is helping to retain for posterity the indigenous culture.⁵⁷⁶ He

⁵⁷⁶ This point is not to negate my criticism of Yerima's representation of ATBs in his plays. As stated in a previous chapter, he often presents events as the people perceive it in their everyday life, including the perception of Christians that practitioners of African Traditional Beliefs are unenlightened pagans who need to forsake their indigenous ways and accept Christianity, a "progressive way of life". In reality, most of Nigerian Christian youths have little knowledge of their indigenous cultural practices due to the viewpoint of the church against the culture. This only suggests that, in the near future, if the situation is not checked, there will be no authentic indigenous culture in Nigeria. Even the indigenous languages are at the risk of extinction. I have

believes that long before the emergence of Christianity among the various groups in Nigeria, cultural institutions were established and the spiritual life of the people greatly flourished. Western education, Western television/film and Christian schools are presented as a threat to the preservation of indigenous culture in Nigeria. There is a serious danger of extinction of indigenous cultural practices and customs. What is more, the majority of Nigerian Pentecostal Christian parents are working assiduously to pursue the total extermination of indigenous beliefs. Yerima's plays show that there should be a form of cultural interaction, a kind of hybridity or syncretism that will guarantee the preservation of each culture within a society for the future generation.

For social relevance, and for theatre not to lose its potency to bring people together in the twenty-first century, I argued that Nigerian literary drama should continue to be socially relevant by discussing issues that affect the society and the people. This is what makes Yerima's plays popular among academics as they deal directly with issues that confront people every day. Nigerian academics are critical of the country's leaders and welcome any material that challenges their positions. On the other hand, the youths are more interested in plays that they can easily understand. Looking at Yerima's works in the framework of theatre in Nigeria, we can say that despite the concern raised by some scholars, neither the popularity of television nor the emergence of the Nigerian video film have succeeded in killing theatre in Nigeria. My argument remains that although the popularity of the theatre has diminished within the society at-large due to social, political and economic reasons, theatre is still very vibrant in various institutions of higher learning in the country. There are also performances at some selected venues outside the walls of educational institutions although attendance at these venues cannot be compared with those of the traveling theatre. Literary theatre, which replaced the once popular Yoruba travelling theatre of the early and late twentieth century, is not only popular but has a considerable number of theatre makers and dramatists of importance practicing it. Travelling theatre finally succumbed to the new form in the early 1990s.⁵⁷⁷ The majorities of the traveling theatre practitioners of the 1940s to 1990s are either dead, retired or have moved to

already explained the contradiction in the life of most practitioners of Christianity in Nigeria in page 127

⁵⁷⁷ The demise of the traveling theatre form came as a result of movement of the practitioners to the film medium between 1970-1985 and finally to the video film format after the economic recession of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Virtually all the major Yoruba language form of the Nigerian video film practitioners started off from the traveling theatre period, although there is now a shift in generation as the new entrants are coming from the children of the old players and their friends and young theatre graduates.

become part of Nigerian video-film makers. Aside from the theatre for development (TfD) that thrives on improvisation and traditional theatrical performances that parades masqueraders and carnivalesque entertainment, contemporary Nigerian theatre is literary. At the moment there are more than fifty academic institutions where literary theatre is being practiced in Nigeria. These theatre arts departments' admit a high number of students and graduates. This is in contrast to the period before the 1990s when there were not more than eight such departments in the country.⁵⁷⁸ Many social and political plays are being performed by the students, and notable actors and dramatists have also emerged during the years.

The new dramatists in postcolonial Nigerian society are employing theatre to address pressing societal issues and needs. This functional aspect of the theatre has moved from the periphery of the nation's political culture to the centre, making it one of the key instruments used in the sensitization of the population and the elites toward negotiating a change within Nigerian politics. In a nutshell, the new dramatists have clearly defined the trend that forms the third generation of the nation's drama.

In my thesis, I have traced Nigerian theatre from oral, travelling and masquerade theatre as already discussed by Ogunba, Ogunbiyi, Jeyifo, Banham, Obafemi and other Nigerian theatre historians, to the emergence of the literary form. My thesis also discusses the involvement of Christian organisations in theatre both in the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. I have discussed how the theatre has fed other media that emerged in the Nigerian popular entertainment industry in the late 1950s (television) through the 1970s (cinema) and the 1990s (Nigerian video film). I have attempted to give a chronological overview of practitioners in the theatre industry in the country since the turn of the 1900s to the present with obvious emphasis on notable contributors to each of the industries.

As mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter, it is important to note that the ideologies which separate the three generations of literary dramatists that have succeeded each other within the six decades of its emergence, have at the nucleus of their works, issues that affect contemporary Nigerian society. The point I am making here is that the nationalistic ideology that permeates the dramas of Wole Soyinka and his colleagues of the first generation, the collective radical stance of Femi Osofisan and his fellow second generation

⁵⁷⁸ The universities at the time who offered degrees in theatre studies are: University of Ibadan; University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ife); University of Jos; University of Benin; University of Nigeria, Nsuka; University of Calabar; and University of Port Harcourt.

colleagues, and the individualist and survivalist ideology of Ahmed Yerima and his group of third generation dramatists all strive to address socio-political themes. Though the belief in community orientation and development has diminished to give rise to individualism and one-man survival strategies, one should not lose sight of the fact that the shift of attention from collective or community orientation to individual survival is occasioned by the changes going on within the Nigerian society itself. The shift in orientation from the survival of the collective to the survival of the individual is demanded by the culture of capitalism that pervades contemporary Nigerian society. Hence, the new plays are somehow in continuity with the old plays in terms of the reason for dramatic construction. For example, *The Swamp Dwellers*⁵⁷⁹ raised the fundamental question of what fate will bring to the people on whose land oil was discovered in 1958. As premature as the issue was at that time, it became a prophetic landmark in the nation's history when, almost five decades after, the region of the Niger Delta where petroleum is being exploited became a theatre of unrest, guerrilla warfare and militant activities. While describing the role of drama in the Niger Delta Crisis, Denis Akoh notes that the play *All for Oil* by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo reminds us of the fact that the struggle for the resources of the Niger Delta region that began in the end of the nineteenth century, has not ended.⁵⁸⁰

In the play *All for Oil*, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo exploits the colonial history at his disposal to address burning socio-political and economic issues in the contemporary Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As Reuben Embu posits, the play *All for Oil* exposes the "intrigues, betrayal and oppressions involved in the business concerns of the colonial administration of the region and the questionable role of the local business and political bourgeoisie."⁵⁸¹ It was the decadence of the Nigerian society, especially in the decades following the senseless Civil War of 1967, which prompted Femi Osofisan and his colleagues like Kole Omotosho, Biodun Jeyifo⁵⁸² and others to take a radical/Marxist stance in creating dramatic works. The world addressed in Osofisan's *Once*

⁵⁷⁹ Soyinka, Wole, "The Swamp Dwellers" in *Three Short Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). The play was written in 1957, a year earlier than the time oil was discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria.

⁵⁸⁰ Akoh, D. Ameh, "All for Oil? Theatre and Crisis management in the Niger Delta" a paper presented at the 21st Annual Conference and General Meeting of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SONTA), University of Benin 13-17th May 2008.

⁵⁸¹ Reuben, Embu, "Drama and Environmental Challenges in the Niger Delta in Selected Nigerian Plays" a paper presented at the 36th Annual Conference of African Literature Association (ALA), held at the University of Arizona, USA, 10-14 March, 2010.

⁵⁸² He was among the popular Marxist's voices of this period though not a playwright himself but a literary critic that helped project the ideology of the radical dramatists.

Upon Four Robbers and *Who is afraid of Solarin* is post-independent Nigeria with its crop of corrupt politicians and the social malaise of armed robbery. With *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket*, Yerima attacks various government institutions and their corrupt practices. As mentioned in chapter two, Yerima's *Hard Ground* and *Little Drops* were based on the social unrest created by oil multinationals like Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Total, Elf, etc, as they carried out exploration activities in the Nigerian Niger Delta. The Niger Delta unrest is one of the major issues that confronted Nigeria at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This unrest which brought Nigeria to the attention of the world as a place for militant activities and social unrest including domestic terrorism, readily becomes material for creative works. I have grouped Yerima's works under three thematic headings, namely: historical realist plays, religious realist plays; and socio-political realist plays. I have also argued that though Ahmed Yerima is quick to state that he is not inspired by a particular ideological stance, it is clear enough that individualism and survivalism are two ideologies visible in virtually all of his works. His protagonists think of the "self" as the only agent that can spring the wheel of change and watch as it will spin for good or bad in the presence of other variables.

Nigerian society, like the majority of African countries, is religiously inclined. The people rely more on help that will come from an "external God" rather than the one from the disillusioned political leaders and colleagues who are continually failing them. Yerima exploits this societal fact by making his protagonists seek supernatural solutions to challenges that are bigger than their physical ability. In chapter three of this thesis, I made it clear that Yerima imbues his characters with religious contradictions. He locates within a singular character the belief in the monotheistic Christian God and indicates a constant reminder of the gods of his ancestors. With this contradiction, he continues the argument that no matter the involvement that Africans on the continent have with foreign religion and culture, there will always be an occasional pull by the religion and culture of the continent that he is born into. It is well known in religious and anthropological studies that some indigenous gods are wrongly portrayed in the Bible written in African languages in order to give both the Bible and the Christian religion local colouration. While I have paid emphasis to the relevance of modern Nigerian drama to the socio-political and cultural development of the nation due to its topicality, I also believe that the dramatists are not doing enough to affect changes in the socio political system.

This thesis is not an analysis of all of Ahmed Yerima's artistic creations; rather, it is only a modest contribution to the forest of critical works

yet to emerge on this notable Nigerian dramatist. If anything, it is taking a humble step as the first thesis on the analysis of the work of an enigmatic playwright. It is also an attempt to introduce Nigerian literary drama and dramatists to a new audience by contributing to the already existing critical literature on the subject of African theatre. Yerima and, indeed, contemporary Nigerian literary dramatists, have become like a huge elephant that different people look at from different sides and relate to from different perspectives. It would be difficult for only one person to claim a total understanding and objective portrayal of the whole elephant. I hope that new theses will be written to further enhance my argument and if warranted, that my position will be challenged. So, I have only taken a little slice of this huge elephant for analysis, inspired by my position and perspective.

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Appendix 1: Interview with Ahmed Yerima

This interview of Prof. Ahmed Yerima was conducted by Julius-Adeoye R.J. at National Theatre of Nigeria, Lagos, and at Kwara State University (KWASU), Ilorin between November 2009 and July 2010. After the interviews I have on many other occasions engaged Professor Ahmed Yerima in discussion relating to his works of which he readily obliged me more information to enrich my research.

Julius-Adeoye R.J. (J-A.R.J): *Sir, you are a dramatist of note in Africa and apart from being a dramatist you are also a social commentator, I read many of your creative works that attest to this fact. Though I have read virtually all your published plays, I found The Wives, The Sisters, Kaffir's Last Game, Hard Ground and Little Drops as works that realistically discuss Nigeria's current socio-political state. My conclusion is that you are a social realist dramatist. I will like you to comment on this issue of social commentary and how it affects your writing.*

Ahmed Yerima: I think I'll like to start from the point of where you asked and also the environment where the playwright writes. I find myself in a third world-a developing third world country and I find that issues in this third world country are issues which we must talk about. People must examine them and I don't believe in ideological points of view that have no roots. I believe in ideological points of view that the roots are firmly on ground and they are even in the domestic lives of the people. I believe that the problems of the society starts from a man, on man and spreads to the society, and for us to get that right, there is a need for us to examine these things through whatever medium that we want to use- medium of play-writing, prose, and poetry. Drama, for me is a very touching medium because we are able to take the people physically and create them and put them on stage. Another fascinating thing that makes me love drama is because the characters are able to talk, the playwright in different characters is able to talk to the society from where he has drawn the materials, drawn history, drawn the topic, created the story, and has also drawn the characters. Usually, if you say I am a social commentator, I don't mind that but I don't think a playwright is a prophet. I think he is more of a commentator who is part of a wheel of incidences or a wheel of activities that he gets to a point and says: "please can we just stop for a while and think. How did we get here? Where are we coming from? There is Mr. Bad who was pushing us, there is Mr. Good who we didn't listen to, and this is why we are here."

J-A.R.J.: *Thank you sir, you said something about a playwright not being a prophet but I've seen from works of Soyinka and some others who have taken time to use fragments of what happened in their own time to project into the future of their societies, and overtime we have come to realize that what they said in those plays have played out in our present society. A very good example is The Trials of Brother Jero play that was written in 1960, at the time of writing the play, the issue of religious proliferation was not a big thing then but at the moment it really is a big issue. Although you comment on recent happenings in Nigeria in your works, yet some of the things you wrote in your plays like Silent Gods and Kaffir's Last Game fifteen or twenty years ago we can still relate to at this present time. What do you have to say to that?*

A.Y.: Soyinka is a philosopher I am just a story-teller, I think that is the great difference between us. Soyinka may be like he wrote "a playwright is gifted beyond that" maybe and again sometimes his prophecy is radical condemnation which is what frightens me about him. He is closer to the society. He antagonizes the society to a point where he gives himself as the carrier of the problems of the society. We have them, we just lost one Gani Fawehinmi⁵⁸³, and then when society fails him even after carrying these problems for them he damns them. That is why you have something like *The Wasted Breed* where Osofisan was saying *No More The Wasted Breed* because you cannot condemn a whole generation of people. But I think Soyinka does that, because he says: "I am here, I have prophesied you didn't listen, I have written you didn't listen so I don't think you people have hope", which is different from me. What I do is take an issue and say this is the problem and the problem is caused by you and me. Like *Hard Ground*, I said this problem we are having in the Niger-Delta is going to eat us all up, it is going to get to a point where children are going to kill fathers, parents. Adults' looking for positions and things and it is the wrong ones, negative ones they are looking for: Capone, foreign titles. This is going to destroy us if we don't curtail them, it is beautiful now but if we are not careful this thing will go out of the cubic and become a nightmare and that is what it is becoming, and I can see things like that but I can't prophesy. I can't go before the society. Maybe because I'm in government now and I see a lot of things but there is a limit to what I can say, like *The Silent Gods*, the June 12 thing was very pertinent in my mind. I couldn't understand why an election well guided should turn out that way and that is why the gods in my play said they'll be

⁵⁸³ Gani Fawehinmi (1938-2009) was a famous Nigerian human right lawyer and pro democracy activists who was in the vanguard of the struggle against military dictatorship in Nigeria. He is also reputed to have challenged government of Nigeria on many anti-people policies.

silent, you go and pick your leader, we are tired of picking leaders for you and when we pick them you either kill them or destroy them. I'll be very happy if you say that there's an element of prophecy in those plays but honestly I'll be more comfortable to be seen as somebody who lived through a period and didn't let it pass and said there's a need for me to say something, I must say something before this period, this moment goes because it may go forever.

J-A.R.J.: *I agree with you to an extent, I want to take it from another angle. Let me drop this issue of social commentary and prophecy aside and now talk about the issue of philosophy that you brought in. Some of your plays can be ranked among existentialist plays, for example the plays where you talked about pain, death, incest and what have you. I will really love to call them religious plays or fantasia but within the drama genre we don't have fantasia we have existential plays. If you say Soyinka is more of a philosopher, reading those lines in your works makes you a philosopher too, you talk about ethics, morals...*

A.Y.: Yes, but my ethics are seeped and dipped in tradition and cultural beliefs. Take a play like *Aetu* and you look at the issue of making over a woman from one man to another within a family where three brothers make over this girl to a point where she gets angry and curses even the children's children unborn through her. I take those topics from the traditional point of view and try in my little way to see if I can reason out any common sense in them and in that way pain comes in. I have always been afraid of death, I know it is going to come one day but it plays such a prominent role in our society that there is no way you can escape it. It is like my play *Mojagbe*, I had to finally pull death out of my consciousness and bring her, because I felt maybe we were even getting it wrong. I mean death cannot be this wonderful that great kings and men will follow if it is not a beautiful woman. I give death that kind of transformation and imagery. If you say that is philosophy okay, but I'm happy that they emerged from the good stories I want to tell. I want them to be part of the story and then let them be like the moral of the story. And I know in your doctoral thesis you will want to raise the moral to philosophical and ideological positions but honestly that is the comfort. Maybe that is why it is easier for me to write as many plays as possible because I can sit down and moralize without knowing about Descartes, about Heidegger, about all these great philosophers and moralize within the traditional African concepts of our morals and ethics.

J-A.R.J.: *That takes me to TheWives, incest and issue of polygamy. Like I said earlier that polygamy to me in the play is not an issue because it is part of the African culture and it is not a negative part of our culture, but the subject of*

incest is a moral issue. Juxtaposing polygamy and incest side by side, is really an issue.

A.Y.: Yes, but you see in African traditional societies-because I make it a point not to write for Hausa alone or Yoruba or Ibo people- incest is a damnable offense. It is so bad in *The Sick People* you remember that the root of their problems is that the woman slept with two brothers, twins. And I am always interested in the effect within the family of traditional taboos like incest and that is why Auntie mi in the play *The Wives* is portrayed in the most central and important role in the play and yet she is involved in this damnable offense which she thought has been washed away by the death of her son. While the man has a smile on his face even in death, for me it is not more of the incest but he believes that he has conquered both life and death and that's it. So everybody tries to turn the side of pity and glory that they have of him to the corpse, which is why the corpse is on stage from the beginning to the end of the play.

J-A.R.J: *But there is something I do not understand in that play. The play is beautiful as dark comedy from the beginning, but towards the very end becomes something of a tragedy, the tragedy of a family. There is this strand that tends to be missing. One is Auntie mi not realising the elderly man is her brother...*

A.Y.: She recognizes everybody, those two people from the village recognise her, they know her.

J-A.R.J: *But she did not until the last and she said 'who are these people?'*

A.Y.: She knows them, but it's the others who didn't know them. The wives didn't know them very well, I think the first wife knew one of them but Auntie mi knows all of them that's why the problem wasn't even that. The problem for them was that you who knows us, knows our traditions, who knows the circumstance of a great man, the Araba dying, is joining these people in dancing and singing around the Araba, is there something you people are celebrating that we are not aware of? And I've had to on several occasions and discussions tried to defend Antimi that she was not aware that her son was alive and that the lawyer was her son.

J-A.R.J: *But she is the one who says, "you, here". She points to the lawyer.*

A.Y.: Yes, because as the story unfolded, she now knew. It's almost like *The Sisters* when it got to a point, although I always enjoy it when the audience argue, "it's Nana, no another woman is going to come in." For me that was the only thing I could hold. By the time she said she was told by her brother after the birth that the child died, she accepted it, but she now knew why the brother

was going to Ibadan all the time, why the brother went to Ibadan to bury this old woman who had taken care of the lawyer, how he would accept the lawyer like his son. You know there are certain things people like to say, “let’s look for where you kept your laptop, you woke up this morning then you said you think you left it in the car of Yerima, then you say ‘I’m not too sure, before I entered that car I went to eat’ and then this man who you said followed you, “yes that is the man, that was where I lost it between eating, talking to this man and entering Yerima’s car.” I think that was how Auntie resolved the issue.

J-A.R.J: *I’ll take it from that angle, so, that settles it the strand I was looking for in the play all through. What about the theme of incest as a moral issue?*

A.Y.: Incest is a very moral issue, but I’m interested in it as traditional element for telling my story and also for destroying a powerful character, because I always believe in the inner being, inner person. I believe that this is the Yerima, this is the Julius-Adeoye you are seeing, well-dressed shirt, handsome looking, but by the time like a banana peel you begin to unpeel and the people you meet, the stories you hear, you say this man is an animal, not a human being and they say, “but he writes well” and you say “I don’t care about his writing anymore, I now care about what I heard and what I saw.” And I always like to do that, which is why I built him up to national level, the president sending a delegation and yet the women in his life he had used them. His sister is an example. I wanted to show man’s callous and powerful yet traditionally supported power to use human beings, especially women around them.

J-A.R.J: *I want to talk about the issue of feminism in the play. In most of your works we’ve taken time to see the female hero and the issue of their place and how the society has positioned them. Their being positioned side by side the male characters is mostly to subject them under male domination in society, but in your plays you always try to raise them psychologically above the situation and at the same time situate them within the African culture which trapped them in the first place, though they are receptive they can be assertive as well. This strand is also seen in all the women in The Wives including Auntie mi, the banker and the one that you call the tiger, she use her womanliness to put the late Otunba Gbadegesin “the Araba” in a situation that makes him dance to her tune and then give in to whatever she demands. This means she use her position to get what she wants. What is your position regarding the female hero?*

A.Y.: The female hero for me is a contradiction within the Nigerian reality. It’s a contradiction in the sense that the “modern” you and I want the woman to be independent, we want the woman to be powerful, to be educated and yet we

have created traditional stumbling blocks on her path. The more we empower her, the more another stumbling block will bring her down. In a new play I'm writing, the woman who is Ibo wants to leave her husband and she has gone and built a house in the village in her father's compound, this is regarded as a taboo, nobody will come and live in the house and yet she is a successful bank manager. She has everything but she doesn't want to marry her husband anymore, she wants to marry a young man and yet because of what she has done, she must go through a cleansing period – which is going to bring all her degrees to zero – for her to be accepted by the society one more time. I believe that that is always the thing about the African woman. It is good to say we are talking about empowerment but look at all the women from the First Lady in *The Sisters* they all crumble all because they were brought up by an ambassador – wonderful, handsome father – who taught them that this is his ideal. And the more they believed that that was the ideal when they left the protective arm of their father they found that they could not cope. All of them, the three of them failed. And that is my painful process of presenting woman within the feminist angle that the society creates room for her to grow but it also creates traditional stumbling blocks and when the stumbling blocks are not there the husbands – if they are married – create the stumbling blocks. He just says, 'ok, you are well-dressed to go to work, I feel like making love to you, come back, undress' or go and make me pounded yam with this your suit.' These are the problems that my women encounter. Look at Onirode in *The Sick People*. Onirode has tried everything until she now finds out that she is the problem and until she goes this family will not find peace. Just a little sin she committed, yet she helped her daughter to cleanse herself, she helps another one to have a child, she saves her grandchildren but she must go. Have you read *Akuabata*? The woman here is a woman who finds love only for her to realize that she was made over to a god who says "go and have children but the children are mine" and she says 'no'. She becomes a catholic, a Christian, and she has a daughter who wants to become a reverend sister. In anger, the god comes back and starts to kill the people of the village just because of her action and at the end take her begotten and beloved daughter away. So the society creates those blocks for them, even the judge in *The Mirror Cracks*, even in *The Portrait*.

J-A.R.J: *I was going to The Portrait but before I get to The Portrait, I want to stick to The Sisters which you mentioned earlier, your heroine in *The Sisters* is Nana. How come you who said you want your female hero to rise above the society dictate did not allow Nana to rise in The Sisters?*

A.Y.: But the ironical thing is that Nana did not, because of the society. Nana was even an accident of birth within the modern setup; it's like me taking a child home. My wife will kill the child. And yet what I wanted to show is the contradiction, she was the most behaved, she was the one who kept to her word. Remember on the ambassador's deathbed he had made her promise to take care of the girls as her sisters and when offers come for her to marry, she didn't marry. She kept an eye on all of them and she didn't talk back to them.

J-A: *She could have done that even while she was married.*

A.Y.: She wouldn't have the time because the society, the parents had spoilt them. In trying to make them modern women – the modern women whom they eventually became, they couldn't cope and that was why she was moving from one person's house to the other to take care of them and yet they took her for granted. I just had to compensate her.

J-A.R.J.: *Does that mean that the women in The Sisters apart from Nana are shallow minded?*

A.Y.: No they are not shallow minded. What I was trying to show with those three women is that no matter how empowered a woman is, when it comes to matters of the heart, when it comes to the sustainability of temper, of mood, of manner she cracks.

J-A.R.J.: *That takes me to the First Lady and her position.*

A.Y.: She didn't have a child because she wanted to keep her shape and so at the first excuse the husband says, "it's ok, it's alright, I don't want anything to happen to your shape." She is gullible, she does not realize... and at the end of the day that is what the family told her: "it is the person who has children that we know, if you don't have a child we don't know you." Look at Taiwo - Tai Tai - who is the most brilliant of them all, the most resolute, the strongest willed person in the family, she cracked.

J-A.R.J.: *The strongest willed on a wheelchair.*

A.Y.: I purposely put her on a wheelchair because I gave her too many strong lines so her mouth was going to be stronger than the legs. She was the one embodied and endowed with the pen, she could write poetry, she could appreciate lines and yet when it came to being strong enough to take the challenges of life she took everybody as an enemy. She fought the world.

J-A.R.J.: *I read The Sisters from the angle of feminism and I read under the lines that it is not feminism; it's your own way of talking to the society, the government of the day, your own way of saying "well – well – well, this is the house that I'm not privy to but I believe this will happen within that confine. Can you say something about that?*

A.Y.: I think I wanted to write about women, I'd gathered enough material but what I didn't like was the pretentious lives most educated women were living. My first and former wife is a judge so you find the judge character, the lawyer character running in through *The Sisters* to *The Mirror Cracks*. But in *The Sisters* I set out to show the trappings, because that was the period of Beijing spirit, you know and women empowerment, everything came in, so I wanted to have a laugh. For me it's more of a lampoon, a lampoon on feminism. It's ok to say: "I'm Carol, I'm a woman, I was born in so and so, I went to Leiden University, I've got my PhD, I got a double PhD that year: Literature and then Drama, I've been teaching since and I'm a professor." And yet when you read all that CV, Africans brings just one useless tradition and culture and take it all away from you and that's it. My cousin came with all the PhD and we couldn't get a husband for her. All the men including those who had PhD were afraid of her, they said she was too aggressive – "a woman doesn't look into the eyes of a man." She got so angry that she told me: "get me a mechanic, a tailor, all I want is just to show these useless people that I'm a woman, I want to marry, I want to have a child." It became an obsession until she went back to the US and finally found an American who could understand at that point, her level, but she can't come back home and she loves home. So, this is what we do to our educated women. The element of politics is there, but I really wanted to write about women and this is why I'm always angry when people do not see me as a genuine feminist. I've tried everything but I must place them within that reality they are in.

J-A.R.J: *But sir, I want to see you as a feminist playwright, not from the angle of The Sisters but from the angle of Erelu Kuti. You tend to make us understand that the African woman from inception has always been given the position of leadership, position of power and authority; you either see them as heads of the market guild superseding over the men to the extent that Erelu Kuti becomes the King of Lagos. Lagos seemed to be a powerful Yoruba state within that period and for her to have risen that high shows that you really tried to portray the woman from the African perspective that no matter how, within the Yoruba cultural setting, there has always been respect for the womenfolk.*

A.Y.: I loved Erelu Kuti's history, I loved the story and I was commissioned to write it by the present Erelu Kuti and the late Oba Oyekan. Both of them gave me all the materials. But what I found fascinating in the first Erelu Kuti was that she was dedicated, she was committed, but see what happened to her. She rose to be king because her brother trusted her. Her brother was asked: "look, take somebody you trust that can give you back this throne when you come

back, you are not well, we need to treat you and we need to take you away from Lagos, as long as you are on the soil of Lagos you will not get well.” He told his sister and she said: “go, come back and took it.” He came back and she gave it back to him. But look at what he did, when he wanted to say thank you to a common Babalawo, Alagba, the smelly old Babalawo who took care of him he went to his daughters and said: “daughters, I want you to marry my Babalawo” and they refused because they were princesses. He went to his sister and she said: “if that is what will make you happy ok, I will do it.” In modern society, it is bringing down of the first order. I have an Optician whose sister is not married in Lagos, if I told her: “this man assisted me, he got me well, he is my driver and I want you to marry him.” Even though she is not married, she will kick me and the man out of her house, she will even tell the police to arrest me for having temporary madness.

J-A.R.J: *But in those days you could not reject a King’s edict.*

A.Y.: This man was very poor; he wasn’t even a Lagosian he was from Ibafo, that was how Eyo came to Lagos. The problem was at the point she married the Babalawo.

J-A.R.J: *But the Babalawo was the one that advised the King to place somebody that he is so sure of on the throne.*

A.Y.: But he didn’t know it was his sister he was going to bring, he could have brought anybody. He could have brought his son.

J-A.R.J.: *But I think it’s just the love of the sister for her brother...*

A.Y.: That was what I respected: the love of the sister for her brother.

J-A.R.J.: *That is womanhood and that is an African example of a feminist, a woman hero.*

A.Y.: But the problem is: how far did he take Erelu, he didn’t. If the man was not even kind, by the time she married her gesture has been forgotten.

J-A.R.J.: *But Erelu’s son later became the King.*

A.Y.: Up till today, the mantle said “from now onwards the two most important lineages from you. You will produce the king and you will produce another great...” You know she had two sons, Balogun something and that was how she became the most important woman in Yoruba history, but she was humiliated by tradition.

J-A.R.J.: *The tradition that humiliated her is the same tradition that is worshipping her now.*

A.Y.: Yes, but you see, this is the problem I’m talking about. Maybe Africans are not ready for feminism, maybe Africans are not ready to give a woman full position of trust, of power. If you put a woman here as an artistic director and

she does Ahmed Yerima's plays twice they will not say she loves Yerima's plays. The society will say "Yerima must be sleeping with her", or they will say "no, it was Julius-Adeoye; he came, told her he did a PhD on him and that was where they started the affair." They will never say that she had chosen the plays on her own. The society is always suspect of the success of a woman. If my wife who is a Deputy Director in the government organization comes and says she has been appointed as Acting Director, instead of her friends to call me and say congratulations they will say: "sir, *efura, efura gan ni*⁵⁸⁴, I don't know where this promotion is coming from, what was she? What did she read?" And that is what pains me each time I write a feminist play or a play that places a woman at a very high level. I find that the society itself has created points that must be reflected in the play.

J-A.R.J.: *Why don't you create a woman that is near perfect?*

A.Y.: Is there a woman near perfect? Would she be true of my society? In which world will she be near perfect?

J-A.R.J.: *I want a situation whereby you'll re-enact the character of Taiwo in another light.*

A.Y.: Taiwo yes, but I couldn't make her perfect because God doesn't make people perfect, he always leaves a little comma and once your characters are perfect, the audience cannot relate to them. The audience relate to Taiwo because they are sorry for her and I love the way Joke Silva played the role. She made it so powerful and she put a lot of power there. When she got up from the chair the audience in Abuja was so happy (because they didn't know her) that she wasn't a cripple after all, thank God. Look at Imaguro, just because a chief told the King: "I trust my wife" and the king went out of his way to destroy that marriage using his power and position.

J-A.R.J.: *That takes me back again to Existentialism. I will not want to discuss naturalism, but realism into your characters instead. When you develop your female characters, you tend to develop them putting in mind their socio-cultural make-up. You defined them from the angle of the society in which they grow up and their own psychological and physical development. I derive that you write having in mind Emile Zola's definition of naturalism.*

A.Y.: No, my own is that it must be natural and recognizable. My audience is not a sophisticated audience. If you give to them symbols and images they might not understand it. I tried absurdism in school, I tried writing *The Flood*, *The Movement*, *Asylum* and I found that I couldn't go far with the storytelling

⁵⁸⁴ The statement is commonly spoken by the Yoruba's, loosely translated as "Sir, be suspicious, be truly suspicious."

and I found the only way I could get my audience who have a very short attention span and who are in constant conflict with the attraction of film video, is that I must make my characters interesting, they must come alive, they must be so naturalistic in such a way that the audience can say, “yes, I recognize this person.” In fact one of the reasons why NLNG in their citation for the award of best prize for Nigerian Literature 2006, they said: “Yerima’s characters appear as if they live next door, they are so real you can almost touch them even as you read.” And I love it when some of my senior colleagues read it, like Professor Olu Obafemi who said: “I didn’t put it down because the characters kept telling me finish this story before you put it down.” And that, for me is my source of power, the ability to be able to create characters, to see them and to put them on stage so that they can talk to the audience and in that way they can appeal to the audience, they can get my message through, they can become figures of criticism for the audience, they can become figures of damnation and figures of praise. Once they do that for me, then my story has sold.

J-A.R.J.: Thank you sir for the way you’ve taken time to decipher pieces and throw your work so open for me. I agree to a great extent to the realist and naturalist analysis of your characters. I will want to discuss *Uncle Venyil* and *The Portrait*, at the same time I will like to discuss *The Bishop and the Soul*, and *The Twist* because I noticed in these plays, conscience and identity; the internal conflicts of characters, I mean, fighting ones’ inner self. This issue of conflicting identity in one man that I notice in Venyil is in *The Bishop* and also in many other characters of your plays. Bishop is torn between two worlds the same way Venyil, Reverend Noah, and Otunba Ojuolape are torn between two worlds.

A.Y.: Conscience and identity, I wrote those plays at a time when I was getting out of my first marriage and I was trying to answer some questions, I was trying to find myself, I was trying to move on to the second stage of my life and I kept asking myself how prepared I was for the battle ahead. *Uncle Venyil* which is one of my favourite plays – you catch me reading it again, one, because of Kaka. Kaka is a woman that emerged from a close look at my present mother-in-law, she is so strong willed, she is a very strong Christian and she is ready to fight anybody, she even fought me before I married her daughter and we became friends later. The central there was Abacha’s government, it is also a very political play, Dr. Fasheun is uncle Venyil in my play. Remember Fasheun was put in prison in Ikoyi cemetery and he said he kept asking what he had done to come through that.

J-A.R.J.: I was looking at a union leader.

A.Y.: It was Fasheun.....

J-A.R.J.: *I want to continue our discussion on your feminism ideology. What really informed your interest on this feminist issue? Actually you said something about your personal encounter, your sister, your niece and people around you who are well read and finding it difficult to come to terms with the African tradition and what is expected of them. Sir, that aside, I want you apart from their own personal experience, what really informed your own decision to align yourself with the women issue.*

A.Y: I think the first thing for me was to realize that your story cannot be complete without predominantly the people who inhabit the world with you, which is women and children and so I find myself each time you want to tell a story you must be able to tell the other side of the story. And Africa is such a very masculine society where all the rules are set for us, where even though because my father was married to about two, three wives all the other women including my mother couldn't call me by name as the first son. I was either called the head or our husband or our man- you understand what I mean- it gave you this sense of supremacy which for me is very false but at the same time I found that man had cleverly-even within the twenty-first century- created those stumbling blocks that the women find difficult to climb and no matter how empowered they are, even in the twenty-first century where the empowerment of women and equality of women is so well sung about you still find that these structures, these little taboos; a woman doesn't whistle or else she'll call down evil spirits upon herself. A woman does not climb or walk across somebody lying down, you know those little things that have been put there already have put a form of restriction on them and when I now grew up and found cousins, sisters going to school I said 'good, these people are educated, they are now prepared to go over and above the treatment of women in the traditional way and then you find that even then they are trapped and becomes a very interesting issue to look at when you want to write a play and you begin to look at different aspects; why a woman cannot build a house in her father's home, why a woman cannot take certain decisions even though she may have the wherewithal, the funds, the capital to do it.

J-A.R.J.: *But sir, do you think the woman, apart from the fact that the traditional setting has taken time to inhibit their free expression, do you think on their own they'd not taken time to see themselves as being under male.*

A.Y: I think the male domination is so strong that they have – I don't want to say they cower – but they have learnt to accept the society and the way the society has placed them, they've kind of accepted it and they have said "ok for

peace to be I'm willing to conform. If my husband beats me and not too much I can stay for the sake of the children rather than to stay for the sake of myself. Even though I'm married to an animal that beats me, for the sake of the children I am ready to stay, you understand." And they started looking for other convenient reasons that would make them say: 'this is why I stayed.' And this is why in *The Mirror Cracks*, the judge and her husband the ambassador are people of the 21st century, they want to be successful, the ambassador wanted to be the best, the judge also wanted to be the best...

J-A.R.J.: *That takes me to their daughter and The Portrait...*

A.Y.: Yes, take it to the daughter because it's almost the same situation.

J-A.R.J.: *Her own situation, she grew up – I am in The Portrait now although the situation in The Mirror Cracks is almost the same – she grew up in a society or in a kind of society where the father and the mother are independent people. And she is within that world of being independent minded, however, she is also putting herself in a kind of cocoon, a situation that will put her under the domination of a man. She wants to marry, not minding that the man is younger than she is by many years. As an independent minded/liberated woman she wants to damn the society by marrying a man of her choice no matter the age gap between them, yet she is listening to the same society by accepting to be part of the marriage institution. I think that is a contradiction. Don't you think that putting herself within that very institution determined by the society will affect her independent and women empowerment mind?*

A.Y.: I think that in both *The Portrait* and *The Mirror Cracks*, I was looking at families. ...if a husband and wife are not together what you create becomes a portrait of yourself. And when you look at the mirror of the child that you have created it always cracks. Look at *The Mirror Cracks* they didn't know their son; they had a totally different view. They thought that going to the best schools - going to King's College Lagos, going to Oxford University – that would make him a gentleman. And yet to them, this is what you want isn't it? This is the mirror you want to see, but he was an animal. And so when they heard what he had become it became a problem. But the girl in *The Portrait* is the portrait of the contradiction of the lives of the two parents not wanting to grow together, not wanting to respect each other. All that the woman would have said was I'm sorry and she says it the day the man dies. But it's too late. What I was trying to say is that, yes it is good for a woman to fight to be successful, to be empowered, but the problem still remains with the cultural roles given to women within the African setting. If you want to fight to become

an independent woman, you will miss out these cultural roles and what you will create in terms of your children, the harmony in your family will be scattered.

J-A.R.J.: *You don't come up to me as someone who is an apologist of the feminism, you are more in line with the womanist ideology because you tend to tow the same line as Zulu Sofola. To her, the tradition is not to be jettisoned but you should try and find your own world within that very frame of tradition. See the kind of freedom and the kind of liberty that the society leaves for the woman to grow in. That is the way I see it because at every point in time the women don't tend to defeat the culture because at the end of the day they often compromise...*

A.Y.: The difference between Zulu Sofola and I is that Zulu Sofola traps her characters within the cocoon of tradition. I show you characters who attempt to fight this tradition, they want to break away from the cocoon but the sad irony is that the more they fight to break from the cocoon the more they are held back. I mean look at *The Wives*. All I'm trying to say there is no matter how empowered a woman is her heart is still that of a woman. She must fall in love. And because the man knows he has the power of love over them either through comfort, through money, wealth, whatever, man will dominate.

J-A.R.J.: *This issue of womanism and feminism ideology takes me back to your play Little Drops. In Little Drops I have come to see that this ideology is well pronounced there than in the other plays that I've read. In this play, the women are pouring out their minds, seeing the negative things that the so-called male ego has done to destroy the society and I think: 'this is it.' You came to see the she-hero as the other woman. Even the Queen in the play starts to explain her reason for staying around the king, how she has taken time to talk to the King, that don't do this, don't do that. I tend to see it that this is a more direct way of exonerating a woman from the so-called decadence that has come into the Nigerian polity in the 21st century. What is your take on this?*

A.Y.: I think the word that I was waiting for you to use was that for the first time the women are more direct, but the women are more direct because they are women talking to each other. I find that women are more honest with themselves and once a man is there they are no longer honest. They don't want the man to see their weakness; that is the point about them. And it is the same problem I had when I wrote *The Sisters* where it was four women trying to talk about their problems and I was more interested in breaking them down because I wanted to show the inadequacy, the harsh faces even at the point of empowerment. But in *Little Drops* the women are more honest because the she-hero Memekize is able to say: "look I have problems too, the four graves you

see there are my people. I buried them myself and people are fighting, I don't know why they are fighting and yet I keep losing and I may lose all of you if I don't take care of you. And one of them actually says: "I thought I had a deep wound—the Queen—not knowing that yours was deeper than mine." When it comes to sharing not within the expensive, wealthy world in *The Sisters*.... When it comes to sharing within the realistic down-to-earth-look-we-are-poor-this-is-who-we-are world in *Little Drops* the women had to be honest. But look at what happens immediately Kuru came, they came back to becoming the dreamers, "I want to go to Port-Harcourt, from there I'll get another job. I'll be able to teach, I'll become a nurse." In fact it was interesting the first day we read it, somebody was saying oh I think Mukume will marry Kuru, oh it is the Queen, oh no it is Bonuwo. You understand, because they quickly go back into their roles and that is the problem I have. I have a problem with each time a woman finds a man around-the African woman-she hides under "you are the man, lead." And this was the man who was ready to kill them just five, ten minutes ago, yet they are ready to elect him the leader to take them to the freedom land in Port-Harcourt, giving him back all his guns, trusting him. What of if he kills all of them? Just by swearing, biting a knife, they believed him. I don't understand, I don't know whether it is womanhood or feminism I'm always afraid of being trapped in terms of ideology. I think it is the *storyhood* that creates that kind of woman.

J-A.R.J.: *You are trapped within the world of domestic tragedian that you have become because virtually all your works are within this domestic squabbles and domestic....*

A.Y.: Yes but it has to be because life itself is there, there is no way. I have found out that the only way to hold an audience together is by telling them what they are, who they are, where they are coming from and if you don't know these people, they live next door and that I think forever I will treasure the judges' report on *HardGround* where they said "why Yerima's play won is because the characters appear to you, they live next door, you can recognize them, you can say that's that woman who lives down the road."

J-A.R.J.: *You had a problem with the government based on Hard Ground and the revelation in Little Drops seems to be deeper than what you revealed in Hard Ground when you are talking about the youths and what they are facing and what they tend to face afterwards. What do you think will be the government's take on this one?*

A.Y.: Well I'm leaving government soon, but that's not it, I think a play must be objective the facts are there. I used to think the Niger Delta was just a group

of people, maybe eight million or maybe at most 10 million but when I read that they were twenty-eight million out of a hundred and forty million, I found that there was a need to pay serious attention to the issue of Niger Delta. And I find most times that what we do in Nigeria is to draw a dichotomy - you are travelling on Sunday I'm not travelling so there is no need to worry myself I'll just stay in bed, if you were not travelling on Sunday you would have had our dinner with us but you are travelling- you understand, we always look for reasons to say it is his problem, it is not my problem. Ebonyi, Bayelsa, Rivers are all so far away to a man who stays in Lagos and that was what we all felt during the Biafran war. I was tucked away in a private school in Abeokuta, St Benedict private school and that's where the children of most of the army officers were put. So the war could have swallowed the whole of Nigeria and it wouldn't have touched us because we were there with Reverend Sisters, we were children of God, it would take a heartless soldier to bring a gun and come and shoot us. But the point was our fathers were the ones doing the war and that created problems for me. And I feel that when you have to tell a story and the story has information, people are going to come. Like we have J.P. Clark coming as the special guest of honour on the command performance, and you know J.P. Clark, if he sees the play – yesterday when they gave him the invitation card and the letter he said he wanted to speak with me on the phone (I won the JP Clark award with *Hard Ground*) and he is going to come and say look I want to see what this is all about and he is one of the fighters, one of the voices of the Niger Delta- and if I write rubbish he will just take the microphone and say, “look, this play is rubbish.” And that's why I was happy when my friend, the Judge from Ogoni area saw the play at rehearsals and said, “fantastic, but the play is not to be shown in Lagos and Abuja because they will not understand it”, he said “bring it to us, I understood even the sound of the guns, I could tell you which one was an AK47, which one was a Tommy rifle, which one was a pump action.” He said he could say it even from the recording. I think the government must be honest to be able to say this is it, and I think they have tolerated me this long, from *Silent Gods* where I spoke about June 12. A playwright must be relevant and if you are not relevant to your society then, you are not honest.

J-A.R.J.: *I think that will make me go personal a bit, because I remember when I delivered a paper on your work on Lottery Ticket in South Korea, I was looking at the situation in Lottery Ticket side by side the situation in Lao Tse's Tea House. For me, the environment of the two plays seems alike. In Tea House, they are under a hostile colonial system, while in Lottery Ticket it is a*

stifling system where the dictatorial government was making things difficult for people. And I looked at it and said, you have a relationship with the government. For me relationship is a two way thing, you have a good relationship and a bad relationship with them too and within the good relationship you are probably romanced as representing the Northern part of Nigeria in government one way or the other, so, the censorship will be tolerated. On the other hand the government may be saying, let us give him a voice because he is one of us so let him just talk nobody will listen to him, because Nigerians don't come to see the plays. From your own perspective do you think that your appointments within the government establishment reduced your capacity as a serious dramatist?

A.Y.: No, I don't think so; I think the play that really brought me close to knowing full well between writing in the University setting and writing with a government appointment is *Silent Gods* and because Soyinka had taught me Iconoclasm, where he said you could allow the story to be so buttered and beautiful that you hide the criticism and you could abuse government like he did in *Opera Wonyosi* (Ope ra Wonyosi). You will do it in such a way that you will be laughing and the government will be laughing even when they are being insulted and I thought I could get away with it but I didn't. I think the problem I've had is that I've been suspect by the government: "let's watch what he does and what he says", and suspect also by the society especially the Press. The Press for a long time did not want to accept me; they felt this was a "propaganda man and what he was just doing was pretending to abuse the government and then give them the real story of what he wanted until the government said no, the gods must not be silent when you bring this play to Abuja, the gods must speak and that was that." I think again another play was *Attahiru* and then *Tafida*. In *Tafida*, both the President Olusegun Obasanjo and the then Vice President Abubakar Atiku sat down to watch it at the Yar'adua Foundation it was their night and we did it for them. And then *Attahiru*, the whole hall was so quiet. I played *Attahiru*, Bayo Oduneye was the one who directed it. And there is a photograph which I would always treasure. I came down and was introduced to shake hands with Mr. President and I brought out my hand but he hesitated, and it was during that period when there was this Sharia thing going on quietly in the country. And what I found out was I knew that if I didn't tune down.... in fact the play never left Abuja. They just understood that the play was going to arouse some spirit especially the comments on why Lord Lugard treated the North that way, he left them alone and I remember President Obasanjo telling Vice President Atiku: "You see why

I left Sharia alone? People are asking me to make comments, to ban, to ban, if Luggard was wise enough not to ban, like this play is saying and leave the Northerners alone then either way I can't get out of it." It is either you say I am a pampered Northerner or as I said in an interview, an adopted Yoruba son because I've written more Yoruba plays than Hausa or Ibo plays; but the point is my own sincerity to myself. If you read *Dami's Cross* you will find out that I criticized the government. I didn't like the way the government treated Gwari people. Gwari people own the land and what they (government) have done is to enrich some of them who have sold the culture and gradually they (Gwari) are moving. When you get to Abuja now they are expanding the road and that means they are driving them more and more away. Yes they are migrants, they came from Chad and they are migrating. But the problem is: what plan does the government have for them and I asked that question in the play and it was also supposed to have been done, instead craftily and quietly the government of Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T) refused to do it. The issues in Nigeria demand attention ... that is why I have not allowed brain-drain to take me out of the country. I've had quite a number of invitations: "come and work here, come and teach here, you are wasting your time in Nigeria" but I have stayed on because I believe that from my plays – maybe they will learn something. I try to be sincere with the topics that I treat, I am not sensational and I don't seek attention instead I allow the works to be the ones that will get the attention ... I hope you believe me.

J-A.R.J.: *But you tried as much as possible on many occasion to escape the Northern-child theme. Specifically, I have taken time to go around some of the issues that affect me in your work, especially in The Twist. I was initially at a loss on the theme of the play... in the play you brought in so many stories ... but only resolved few of them. For example, the Reverend's prostitute sister, even the supposed son that killed the original son and the mother that was coming in but did not enter at the end of the end of the play. Where is the "twist" really? Is the twist on Reverend Noah's realization that he is the real father of the murdered young man? Is the twist on fate as we find in *The Bishop and the Soul*?*

A.Y.: I always look at religion... I was born a Muslim (Ahmed), I was brought up my early years a Catholic, attended a Baptist school and married an Anglican wife. In *The Twist* I wanted to know the difference between being an Anglican and a Catholic and the issue of forgiveness, faith and destiny. In *The Twist* I tried to play on all these, I have found that in most plays that you raise quite a number of issues, I never intended to solve them. What I wanted to do

was, I wanted that twist, I wanted for you to know that the play was going to start all over again especially when a woman comes in and all that has happened is between the man and another man and they were looking at the issue of faith. The Anglicans believe that if I offend you I should come to you and say: “please I am very sorry, your laptop I mistakenly pushed it” whereas the Catholics believe that if I offend you I can send an intercessor, someone to intercede on my behalf and that’s that. And I was now saying, within all that what if a man who is Anglican comes in and the dramatic irony is that he ends up becoming someone who is used to intercede and later also becomes the root of the crime, the father of the crime and also finds fate playing a joke on him. That is what I did with *The Twist*. Maybe I didn’t do it successfully that is why you find all these obvious mistakes. I also fell in love with Lagos as I grew up and I still am in love with Lagos and as I’m preparing to leave Lagos again because I have to go to Kwara State University to teach after I’ve finished here. I find that in Kwara I am more comfortable. There people call me Ahmed Yerima, Hausa-Yoruba which makes me comfortable. They look at me, speak Hausa and obviously just go into Yoruba. The beauty of Kwara is that the people are historically Hausas but physically and realistically Yorubas. I find them more interesting to stay with because I am trying to do a new play on “Afonja” and I’ve found somebody who said he will give me materials, I want to look at the story of Afonja critically. I want to know why there is Balogun Fulani, Balogun Gambari, and then the true Yoruba in Kwara. I want to be able to look at those three themes, these are what interest me about writing plays, and there is always something to write about. But when it comes to *The Twist* I did it unresolved because I was just coming from J.P. Priestly *An Inspector Calls*. I enjoyed it. I watched the play in England and I had to read it for a course and then teach it later. My late favourite British actress was in it. I saw the play every night because I was a stage hand in the play. I fell in love with the play and fell more in love with her, but what I now did was to say this can happen in Nigeria. At that time my father-in-law was Chief A.M.A. Akinloye. What I liked about the play was that the play ends where it starts. That is what J.P. Priestly was able to do to end the play when it started. At the end of the play he says: “may we now sit again.” I think, let’s take it all over again. And I wanted to do that, do my own story that would end that way and that is what I did. And when he looks at the family photograph on the wall and says “is that your wife?” There is something I always do, I always like to see somebody I’m going to meet from afar and then be able to prepare myself. “You don’t mind if

I look through the window? Is that your wife, it can't be." And then I leave that part un-ended.

J-A.R.J.: *So, there is a bit of you in the play?*

A.Y.: A bit of me in the play, a bit of me in my ending in *The Sisters*. I also did that with who is our sister, it is me and the audience says: "it can't be." I liked it.

J-A.R.J.: *You have a play that I loved so much when I read it, but unfortunately I've not seen on stage, that is AmehOboni the Great.*

A.Y.: We did *Ameh Oboni*. It was the independence play for 2005.

J-A.R.J.: *I heard it was staged in Kogi State as well, the home of Ameh Oboni.*

A.Y.: I was happy because that was the first thing on Ameh Oboni that they will ever do. I was overwhelmed. And why I was very happy was that the night it was shown in Abuja, his son came to see it and he was in tears as he spoke to me on the phone. He told me that they have always wondered why their father committed suicide. He thought I came close to explaining it. What amazed me was why would a King who at that time was so powerful in terms of traditional medicine, chieftaincy power, you know. The whole of the Middle Belt under Ameh Oboni was very powerful, and yet the envy of (I can't get the name), the man he sent to Kaduna House of Reps was what destroyed him and he got Muffet to decide with his D.O. (District Officer) to dethrone him. I didn't even understand Ameh Oboni until what happened to me at the national Theatre happened, where there was a split of my kingdom. People who were friends the night before suddenly became those with the long knives. I now started to understand why a man would take decisions and everyone thought I was going to end up back in University of Lagos (Unilag) where I had thought for eight years as adjunct Visiting Professor, but I said no. I didn't trust anybody around the environment; I just wanted to go to a village or somewhere different where nobody knows me. I can walk in the streets and they are more interested in what I have in my brain than. I don't care. And it is lovely now when I go to shops in Ilorin and just say look "do you have this" and the man says "do you read news on Telly?" And I say "yes, I used to." He is trying to remember where he has seen the face, and that is good for me. But *Ameh Oboni* for me was very touching, it was a painful experience. I drove round from Lokoja to Ayangba to Dekina to Ankpa and I did not see any statue, any school, anything named after him. And when I eventually went back to Dekina where he killed himself I asked and they said it was taboo for an Ayangba man to commit suicide. And I said why? If the King knew it was taboo why did he do it? And I started to find a reason why a king of his eminent stature will commit suicide.

And just a simple reason that if he died on the throne then his children could become kings but if he allows himself to be dethroned that is the end of his lineage.

J-A.R.J.: *Sacrifice. When I read the play, I had to read it again ... three times. When I did the analysis I was looking at this trend of British imperialism and colonial rule that I find in Attahiru and The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen. Actually that was what I wanted to touch in the play. Instead I found the theme of sacrifice, a situation where a man puts down his life in order for his people not to be trampled upon. Ameh Oboni carry's the cross for the whole people. So that is what I was looking at. I was really trying to find that thing you put in as a Great Hero, if I die, my children will continue. That same play says it is a taboo for a King to kill himself, but for Ameh Oboni to kill himself marked the end of his lineage as Monarch of Igaland. So I now said there is a problem with this story.*

A.Y.: Yes, there is. There was a big problem. And I was trying desperately not to beg people to say I am a hero. I want people to say this was his destiny, he could not escape it. And assess him especially when the spirit comes to him and says "what are you trying to do? Your life is not yours to take." In all my plays I always say that the King is a sacrifice. In fact the new one that has not gone to press, *Ajagunmale*, that is what I try to prove. After everything happened to me here, I now said ok, let me take a bow, let me understand. And that is what I always use plays to do, certain plays that I write. I want to use it to understand what is going on in my own life.

J-A.R.J.: *My discussion is going to be basically on your existentialist or religious realist plays where you to talk more about your fear of death and the mystery of life. Apart from the fear of the unknown, do you have more reason for writing such plays? Are you trying to use it to speak allegorically to African people and leaders? Do you know that those plays comment on the socio-political issues in Africa?*

A.Y.: Basically, I always start from self, my own personal fears and hopefully leave it to scholars and critics like you to expand the meaning and give other meanings to it. But for me I am always afraid of death, the finality of it. And yes, to a great extent you almost want to believe that death should be like a warning isn't it? To a bad ruler for example that look, if you are a bad ruler remember that you are going to die, and if you die how do you want to be remembered by the people, and for what? Legacy... what kind of legacy is it you want to leave behind? And because of that I am hoping that fear of death, fear of the mystery of it would help one correct his ways or her ways,

especially the leaders, but usually I'm very afraid of it, the process of transition. I am afraid of it because I know that once it takes place it is taking place and it's difficult, though I believe also in ghosts as you find in *The Angel*, it is only to correct a few things, to come on visitations just to say oh, I have a beloved one here, oh, I need to sort out something I forgot to say, but usually it is still a final end. That line, that passage which Soyinka talks about, that chthonic realm once crossed, is crossed. You get my point.

J-A.R.J.: *The strand of death tends to cut across many of your plays, apart from that there is also the issue of questioning one's self. For example, ThePortrait is about self examination. When I read it what I was able to deduce was that the mother and father of the main character of the play see their own mistake in their daughter. The mistake they did not want to repeat itself is actually happening in the life of their daughter. So what really motivated you into writing that?*

A.Y.: *The Portrait* for me was again the fear of what people do to hurt themselves. I was going through a divorce at the time. And from that marriage I had three sons and I was afraid because my wife then was as ambitious as I was. And I was afraid that in her trying to make it as a Judge which she later became and I wanting to make it as a big guy in government which I hope I became....

J-A.R.J.: *I am sure as a Director-General of the National Theatre and the National Troupe of Nigeria you did attain that position in Government. Thank you, sir, for your time.*

Appendix 2: Biographical Note on Ahmed Yerima

Ahmed Parker Yerima was born on May 8, 1957 in Lagos to a Police Officer father and Petty trader woman. In 1963, he attended Saint Barnardette Private Nursery and Primary School, Abeokuta, and from 1969 to 1975, he was a student at Baptist Academy, Lagos where he sat and passed the O'Level Certificate Examination. At the encouragement of his Literature-in English teacher, he wrote and staged his first play at Baptist Academy. In 1977, Yerima entered University of Ife to study Law, however, with the news that there is no space for a new student in the department for that year, he became a student of drama under the distinguished Professor Wole Soyinka. While in the Dramatic Arts Department, University of Ife, he wrote and staged his first four matured plays. While at Ife, he assisted the Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka to write satirical revue for his Guerilla Theatre. Also in 1977, as a fresh undergraduate student in the University, he acted the role of DeeJay in Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi*. In 1981 after graduating from University of Ife with both Certificate in Drama and Bachelor of Arts (Dramatic Arts), he proceeded to University College Cardiff for a Postgraduate study. He obtained his PhD degree from Royal Holloway College, University of London in 1986 and returned to Nigeria to take up a position in Dramatic Arts Department, University of Ife. Due to the internal politic among the faculty of the department as regarding Yerima's position in the department, he moved to Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria as a Drama Lecturer. While at ABU he adapted JB Priestley's *An Inspector calls* and Moliere's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* to "The Inspector's Call" and "Sikapin Seriki Wayo" respectively. He was impressed by JB Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* which he acted in London before returning to Nigeria, and regards the play as one of his favourite. As a Senior Lecturer in 1991, Yerima left the university environment briefly to take up appointment with the National Troupe of Nigeria as Assistant Director. Between 1991 and 2004, Yerima rose to become the first and only Director-General of the National Theatre of Nigeria and The National Troupe of Nigeria. He took over the position of the Director of The National Troupe and National theatre from one of Nigeria's greatest theatre director Bayo Oduneye, and Femi Osofisan. While working at the National Troupe, Yerima wrote more than twenty-four plays that were directed by Bayo Oduneye. In 2004, Yerima also added the position of Director-General of Abuja Carnival to his position thereby overseeing all the Nigerian Federal Government owned Arts and Cultural Institutions until 2009. Despite holding many positions and having such a busy schedule, Yerima

accepted an adjunct Visiting Professor position at the Creative Arts Department University of Lagos, Nigeria. In 2006, Yerima's *Hard Ground* a play on the Nigerian Niger Delta won the prestigious NLNG Literature Award and the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA/NDDC) Drama Prize. In 2010, Yerima's *Little Drops* made the final 3 lists of NLNG Literature Prize. Yerima resigned his position as the Artistic Director of National Troupe of Nigeria in January 2010 for a Professorial Chair at Kwara State University (KWASU), Kwara State, Nigeria, and became the pioneer Provost of the School of Performing Arts after he had been made a Professor by the same university in November 2009. In July 2011, Yerima accepted the position of Professor of Drama and Cultural Studies at Redeemer's University (RUN), Lagos, Nigeria and left KWASU in October the same year. As the present, Yerima has written and published more than thirty-six plays. Since 1986, Yerima has supervised numerous M.A. Thesis and PhD Dissertation, and has acted as external examiner to many universities in Nigeria. Ahmed Yerima has served as a member of many professional bodies, including: Society for Theatre Research (STR), London, International Theatre Institute (ITI), Nigeria, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Nigerian English Studies Association (NESA), Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (ANTP), Literary Society of Nigeria, West African Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, World Dance Alliance and many more.

Appendix 3: Chronology of the life of Ahmed Yerima

May 8, 1957:	Born in Lagos to a Police Officer father and a Petty trader mother
1963-1969:	Attended Saint Barnerdette Nursery and Primary School, Abeokuta, Nigeria
1969-1975:	Attended Baptist Academy, Lagos where he sat for his O`Level Certificate
1974:	Participated in the Royal Commonwealth Essay Competition
1976:	Participated in the Kennedy Essay Competition
1977-1978:	Admitted into the Dramatic Arts Department of University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria to study for Certificate in Drama under Prof. Wole Soyinka. He was the first and only student of the Department in 1977
1978-1981:	Graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) Honour Degree in Drama and Literature at University of Ife, Ile-Ife
1980:	Staged and published his first plays “Asylum”, “The Flood” and “The Movement” as <i>Three Plays in Transition</i> , Ogunbiyi Press, Ile-Ife, Nigeria 1980.
1981:	ublished the Monograph <i>Reflections: Axworthy and the Development of Nigerian Theatre, (1956-67)</i> , Lace Publications, Ibadan: University of Ibadan.
1982:	Studied for a Postgraduate Diploma in Playwriting & Acting at University College, Cardiff
1982-1984:	Awarded Federal Government of Nigeria`s Scholarship for a Postgraduate Studies
1982-1984:	Became part-Time Lecturer at Royal Holloway College, University of London
1982-1986:	Wrote and defended his PhD Thesis titled: “Changes in the Nigerian Theatre with special Attention to Four Post- Soyinka Playwrights” under the Supervision of Professor Katherine Worth at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, School of Drama and Theatre Studies, University of London, London.

- 1984-1985: Became a Lecturer at the Dramatic Arts Department, University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria
- 1986-1991: He was appointed a lecturer at the Department of English and Drama, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, Nigeria.
- 1987: Published "Wole Soyinka's Experiment: Guerrilla Theatre at the University of Ife" in *Odu Journal of West African Studies* No. 32, 1987. 145-159.
- 1987: Published "Zulu Sofola and her concept of Tragedy" in *IVIE: Journal of the Bendel State Arts Council* 4th Edition. 28-33.
- 1988: Published "The Guerrilla Theatre as a Tool for National Re-Awakening: A Study of the Soyinka Experiments" in Ernest N. Emenyonu (ed), *Literature and National Consciousness*, Heinemann Nigerian. 181-204
- 1988: Published "Literature and Social Relevance: It's Application to Writing in Nigeria" in *Work in Progress*, No. 6. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University (ABU).
- 1989: Published "The changes in images and symbols to effect understanding in Contemporary use of folk stories for children" in Vol. I *Faculty of Education Research and Developments* Vol. 1. Zaria: ABU, 1989. 64-68
- 1989: Appointed contributing Editor and Assessor Matatu: Journal of African Literature, Germany
- 1989: Awarded the British Council Visitors Scholarship to England to study Administration. He presented a paper titles: "Literature and Social Transformation. The Writer's Reality in Nigeria" at the Silver Jubilee Conference of University of Kent, ACAS Canterbury, England. August 24-31.
- 1990: Staged and published with Kasumu Yero his bilingual play-text *Sakapin Sarkin Wayo*, an adaption of Moliere's, *Les Fourberies De Scapin*. Kaduna: Alliance Francaise Centre

- 1990: Published “Wole Soyinka: A Review of James Gibbs Book”, in *MATATU: Journal African Literature*, (ed) Verlag Holger Ekling (ed), Frankfurt. 45-46
- 1990: Member, Editorial Board, Work in Progress, Journal of the English Department, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria.
- 1990: Published “The Contemporary Nigerian playwright in Search of New Mythologies: A Study of Sowandes and Osofisan” in *SAIWA: Journal of English Department*, ABU.
- 1990: Appointed Guest Writer and Contributing Editor, New Agenda Newspaper.
- 1991-2000: Appointed as Deputy Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria
- 1993: Awarded the United State Information Service (U.S.I.S) Visitors Grant to USA. He presented two papers titled: “Dance Survival and Dance Presentation in Nigerian Societies” and “Advocacy and Funding of the Arts in Nigeria”, at the First World Dance Congress, International Dance Institute, San Francisco, State University U.S.A. October 20th-24th.
- 1995: *The Silent Gods* is premiered at the National Theatre, Lagos
- 1996: Published *The Silent Gods*, Ibadan: Kraft Books
- 1997: The premiere of *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* in Benin, and Lagos.
- 1998: *Kaffir’s Last Game, The Bishop and the Soul with Thank you Lord and The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*: Ibadan: Kraft Books
- 1999: Published *Attahiru*, Ibadan: Kraft Books
- 2000-Feb. 2006: Appointed as Artistic Director of National Troupe of Nigeria.
- 2000: Published *The Sick People*, Ibadan: Kraft Books
- 2001: Published *The Sisters, Tafida, and Dry Leaves on Ukan Tree*, Ibadan: Kraft Books
- 2002-2010: Appointed Associate Senior Lecturer at Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos and later as

- Adjunct Professor. Published *Yemoja*, and *Lottery Ticket*, Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- 2002: Edited with Ayo Akinwale, *Theatre and Democracy*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- 2003: Published *Otaelo* (an adaptation of Othello by William Shakespeare), Ibadan: Kraft Books. Published *Fragmented Thoughts and specifics: Essays in Dramatic Literature*. Lagos: Bookplus Ltd., and *Basic Techniques in Playwriting*, Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- 2003: Appointed Artistic Director, Commonwealth Head Of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Abuja 2003 cultural opening ceremony.
- 2004: Published *The Angel and other plays*, Ibadan: kraft Book *The LimamandAde Ire*, Ibadan: Kraft Books “Soyinka, the Director and the Nigerian Stage” in *Wole Soyinka @ 70 Festschrift*. Dapo Adelugba, Dan Izebaye and Egbe Ifie, (eds.), Ibadan/Lagos: LACE Occasional Publications/Dat & Partners.39-66. Edited with Olu Obafemi *Ideology and Stage-Craft*, Lagos: Bookplus Ltd.
- 2005: Published *Modern Nigerian Theatre: The Geoffrey Axworthy Years (1956-67)*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, and with Bakare Ojo-Rasaki and Arnold Udoka, (eds.) *Critical Perspective on Dance in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Kraft Books.
- 2005: Appointed Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abuja Carnival
- 2006-August 2009: Appointed as the first Director-General, National Troupe and National Theatre of Nigeria.
- 2006: Published *Ameh Oboni*, *Hard Ground*, *Idemili*, and *Erelu Kuti*, Ibadan: Kraft Books. Won the NLNG Prize for Literature (\$50,000) with his play *Hard Ground*
- 2006: Won the Association of Nigerian Authours ANA/NDDC Drama Prize with his play *Hard Ground*

- 2006: Became a Fellow of Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA).
- 2006: Appointed Technical Director, Abuja Carnival
- 2007: Published *Aetu*, and *The Wives*, Ibadan: Kraft Books, *Playwright Thinking, Essays in Playmaking and Dramaturgy*, Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd., and *Theatre, Culture and Politics, Essay in Dramatic and Cultural Theory*, Lagos: Concept Publications Ltd, 2007.
- 2007: Chairman Editorial Board, SONTA Nigerian Theatre Journal 2007-2009
- 2008 to Present: Appointed as Visiting Professor of Theatre and Cultural Studies, Department of Theatre and Cultural Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria. Published “The Future of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” in *LARES: A journal of Language and Literary Studies*, Vol. 16.No.3, 1-11. Published *Akuabata, Tuti, The Ife Quartet* and *Mojagbe*, Ibadan: Kraft Books. Edited with Duro Oni, *Trends in the Theory & Practice of Theatre in Nigeria*, Ibadan: JFR Publishers, 2008.
- 2009-January 2010: He is returned back to National Troupe of Nigeria as the Director-General and Artistic Director
- 2009: Awarded the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA) Leadership Award. Premiered “Little Drops” at the National Theatre, Lagos. Published *Little Drops*, and *Dami’s Cross and Atika’s Well*, Ibadan: Kraft Books. Published *Discourse on Tragedy*, Minna: Gurara Publishing. Edited with Lizi Ben- Iheanacho *Abuja Carnival in Pictures*, Lagos: Galaxy Publishers.
- 2009 Nov.-Sept. 2011: Appointed Professor of Theatre and Cultural Studies, Kwara State University, Kwara State, Nigeria. In January 2010, he assumed the position of Provost and Head, Performing Arts Department, Kwara State University.
- 2010: Published “An Appraisal of the Nigerian Cultural Policy” in *Culture, Identity and Leadership in*

Nigeria, Dandaura, E.S. and Adeoye, A.A., (eds.), Ibadan: SONTA, Kraft Books. 42-52. Published *Ajagunmale*, Ibadan: Kraft Books

2011 July-present:

Appointed Professor of Theatre and Cultural Studies, Redeemer`s University (RUN), Ogun State, Nigeria. Published “Issues and Development in Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre Practice”, in *Development in the Theory and Practice of Contemporary Nigerian Drama and Theatre*, Duro Oni and Sola Adeyemi (eds.), London: Alpha Crownes Publishers. 47-67. Published *Ipomu* to complete a trilogy on the Nigeria`s Niger Delta unrest.

2012 Sept:

Appointed Dean, College of Humanities, Redeemer`s University (RUN), Nigeria.

Summary

The Drama of Ahmed Yerima: Studies in Nigerian Theatre is an exploration into the dramatic oeuvre of one of Africa's finest dramatists, namely Ahmed Yerima. Though I present the dissertation as a study of the creative works of Ahmed Yerima, I frame this playwright by giving a detailed chronological description of drama in Nigeria. I trace the development of what is presently known as Nigerian theatre from its stage of masquerade drama in the pre-colonial period through the colonial period to literary theatre in the post-colonial present. I describe early Yoruba travelling theatre before it came into contact with the dramatic traditions of Euro-American culture.

I use the generational divisions that critics of Nigerian drama are already familiar with to discuss Nigerian literary theatre. However, I argue that the third generation dramatists of which Ahmed Yerima is one, is different from the preceding two generations on the level of ideology and writing style. The first generation of dramatists is considered as proponents of cultural liberation. This is because they discuss nationalistic ideals, and they pursue with their plays cultural re-affirmation. The second of generation dramatists is referred to by critics as radical dramatists. This is because their dramas are committed to promoting revolutionary change by Nigerian peasants and workers. Both the first and second generation dramatists preach collective survivalism. To these group of dramatists, the people must work together to change the political situation or system, which is repressive of their community. The third generation dramatists champion the ideas of individual survivalism. This is because in their writings they emphasize the importance of the survival of an individual in a repressive and chaotic society.

In spite of the differences within the generational stratification of Nigerian dramatists in the line of ideological commitments, all of them pursue a just socio-political order in Nigeria. The issues they all reflect upon in their writings are leadership crisis, failing health system and infrastructure, corruption, military misadventure, national unity, political rivalry, ethnic rivalry, and state oppression plaguing the nation's socio-cultural and political landscape.

In this study, I argue that Ahmed Yerima is a socio-political realist playwright, because his dramatic representations reflect Nigeria's socio-political reality. He is a playwright that is conscious of his immediate environment, and he reflects this in his drama. While representing a typical day in the life of his characters, Yerima often re-enacts Nigeria's and indeed, Africa's contemporary social, political, economic, cultural and religious issues.

I conceive realism as a style of writing, on the basis of which I can discuss the main devices of Yerima's drama. Realism as writing style presented itself to me as a hydra-headed concept which I had to analyse in its main narrative devices in order to understand the socio-political realism of Yerima's plays. As such, socio-political realism became the main perspective through which I looked at all the plays analyzed in this study.

This study is divided into five chapters and an introductory chapter. The interviews and discussions I had with Ahmed Yerima with the chronology of his life and dramatic development are presented as an appendix. In order to effectively look at the development of Nigerian theatre and to discuss Ahmed Yerima's drama extensively, I selected fourteen plays for analyses. These are: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Bishop and the Soul*, *The Wives*, *The Mirror Cracks*, *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe*, and *Little Drops*.

In the **introductory chapter**, I discuss the classification in three generations of Nigerian literary drama with the names of the dramatists who represent these various generations with their plays. As a springboard for my discussion, I used the argument of both Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ahmed Yerima that literature does not develop in a vacuum, rather, it is shaped by what takes place in a society. I discuss post-independent Nigeria's social situation, its politics and economy as background to this study. In this introductory chapter I also introduce and group under three headings Ahmed Yerima's creative and literary works: historical realist plays, religious realist plays and socio-political realist plays. I map the historical development of theatre in Nigeria in **chapter one**. I start the historical development with the masquerade drama which J.A. Adedeji (1981) has traced to the 15th century as court theatre that later metamorphosed into "Alarinjo Theatre", which performed in honour of Hugh Clapperton at Old Oyo Katunga in 1825. I discuss the emergence of the European type of theatre beginning from mid 19th century, and the involvement of the missionary churches and schools in the staging of Western plays in Nigeria. This chapter also includes a discussion of modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre pioneered by Hubert Ogunde and practiced by people like Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi, Moses Olaiya. I discuss the appearance of theatre as an academic discipline in Nigerian universities in 1962 up to the present when written plays in literary form began to displace traveling theatre on stage. I also discuss the involvement of theatre practitioners in television drama from the 1960s, in film production from

1970s, and in video-film known in some quarters as “Nollywood” from the late 1980s to the present.

In **chapter two**, I analyze *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni the Great* as historical realist plays by focusing on dramatic structure, character, language, thematic preoccupation, and the socio-political context of the plays. These five elements, which I introduced in this chapter, are also used to analyze the plays studied in the following two chapters. I situate my discussion of historical drama on the understanding that these types of plays are multi-functional and engage living history. I argue that, even though the references to drama in the study of history have been called to question, it brings to immediate remembrance subjects that are lost in the passing of time. I discuss how Yerima reconstructed the historical details of the defeat of Oba Ovonramwen and the Benin kingdom in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. I also look at the fall of Sultan Attahiru and the Sokoto Caliphate to British military might in *Attahiru*, and the death of the paramount ruler of Igalaland, Atta Ameh Oboni, based on the machination of the British government’s representative in Kabba area of Nigeria.

In **chapter three** I analyze *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *Mirror Cracks*, *The Bishop and The Soul*, and *The Wives*. I categorize these works as religious realist plays because of their thematic preoccupation and style of writing. In this chapter I discuss the plays by looking at the influence of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Beliefs (ATBs) on contemporary Nigerian society. I look at the roles religions are playing in the government and in people’s everyday life. I discuss how religion determines the perception and thinking of the people in relation to the society and societal institutions. I argue that Yerima’s plays demonstrate that there should be a form of cultural interaction, a kind of hybridity or syncretism that will guarantee the preservation of each culture within a society for the future generation. This is contrary to the danger of extinction of indigenous cultural practices and customs being propagated in Nigeria by the majority of Nigerian Pentecostal Christians. This is because Nigerian Pentecostal Christians parents consider their ancestral past and indigenous cultural practices as pagan practice which their own children must not be exposed to.

I discuss *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir’s Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe*, and *Little Drops* as socio-political realist plays in **chapter four**. This is because they represent the social and political reality of the country from which they emerge. I argue that women and children are the primary victims when there are domestic conflicts that involve the use of arms and ammunitions as we have

in the cases of the Niger Delta militants versus the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) and the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) versus the Islamic Fundamentalist Boko Haram in the northern part of Nigeria. I argue that in the plays studied in this chapter, Yerima makes the lines between illusion and reality almost non-existent as he stresses the impermanency of life, political power and social status.

In **chapter five** I conclude this study by aligning all the arguments I raised in the introductory chapter and in the other chapters. In this conclusion, I emphasize the fact that although many scholars and critics argue the decline of theatre practices in Nigeria, there is an unprecedented increase in the number of institutions of higher learning where theatre is being studied as academic discipline. These institutions have produced more theatre practitioners in the last two decades (1990-2010) than the period that critics referred to as Nigeria's theatre "golden period". I also reiterate the fact that all the plays studied lend credence to my conclusions that Yerima is a culturally, socially and politically conscious playwright whose interest is with the general public and not the Nigerian government. This negates the position of critics like Bakare Ojo-Rasaki and Gbemisola Adeoti who postulate that, because of Yerima's position in the government, he cannot write a play that can criticize government policies. I stated that Yerima's plays are popular among academics because they discuss socially relevant issues that confront people in the society daily. By looking at Yerima's works and the rate at which they are mounted on stage in Nigeria, I can say that theatre is still vibrant in the country. This is contrary to the concern raised by some scholars that the popularity of television and the emergence of the Nigerian video film have succeeded in killing theatre in Nigeria. In this work, I contend that Ahmed Yerima's drama has established a fresh direction for Nigerian literary drama of the twenty-first century and for the country's new dramatists.

Samenvatting

The Drama of Ahmed Yerima: Studies in Nigerian Theatre is een verkenning van het dramatische oeuvre van een van de bekendste toneelschrijvers van Afrika: Ahmed Yerima. Deze dissertatie betreft een onderzoek naar zijn creatieve werk, en ik plaats daarbij deze toneelschrijver in de context van de toneelgeschiedenis van Nigeria. Ik geef daarom ook een gedetailleerde chronologische beschrijving van het toneel in Nigeria. Ik volg de ontwikkeling van wat momenteel bekendstaat als het Nigeriaanse theater, vanaf de fase van het maskerade-drama in de prekoloniale periode, via de koloniale periode, tot aan het literaire theater in het postkoloniale heden. Ik beschrijf het vroege reistheater van de Yoruba voordat het in aanraking kwam met de dramatische tradities van de Euro-Amerikaanse cultuur.

Om het Nigeriaanse literaire theater te beschrijven maak ik gebruik van een indeling in generaties, bekend bij de critici van het Nigeriaanse drama. Ik stel dat op het vlak van ideologie en schrijfstijl de derde generatie toneelschrijvers, waarvan Ahmed Yerima deel uitmaakt, verschilt van de twee voorafgaande generaties. De toneelschrijvers van de eerste generatie worden gezien als vertegenwoordigers van de culturele bevrijding. Ze behandelen nationalistische idealen en streven met hun toneelstukken een culturele herbevestiging en heropbouw na. De toneelschrijvers van de tweede generatie worden door critici radicaal genoemd, omdat hun toneelstukken gericht zijn op revolutionaire veranderingen door Nigeriaanse boeren en arbeiders. De toneelschrijvers van zowel de eerste als de tweede generatie prediken een collectieve overlevingsideologie: het volk moet samenwerken om de politieke situatie of het politieke systeem dat hun samenleving onderdrukt, te veranderen. De toneelschrijvers van de derde generatie verspreiden het idee van een individuele overlevingsideologie. In hun werk ligt de nadruk op het belang van het overleven van een individu in een onderdrukkende en chaotische samenleving.

Ondanks de verschillen tussen de generaties wat betreft ideologische overtuiging hebben Nigeriaanse toneelschrijvers allemaal hetzelfde doel, namelijk een rechtvaardig sociaal-politiek klimaat in Nigeria. In hun werk beschrijven ze de problemen die het sociaal-culturele en politieke klimaat ondermijnen: leiderschapscrisis, een falend gezondheidssysteem en gebrekkige infrastructuur, corruptie, militaire mislukkingen, gebrek aan nationale eenheid, politieke en etnische rivaliteit en staatsonderdrukking.

In dit onderzoek betoog ik dat Ahmed Yerima een realistisch, sociaal-politieke toneelschrijver is: zijn dramatische werk weerspiegelt de sociaal-politieke realiteit van Nigeria. Hij is zich als toneelschrijver bewust van zijn

directe omgeving en verwerkt dit in zijn toneelstukken. Een gewone dag uit het leven van Yerima's personages toont vaak de sociale, politieke, economische, culturele en religieuze problemen van het Nigeria van nu, zelfs van Afrika als geheel. Ik bespreek de belangrijkste technieken in Yerima's toneelstukken op basis van realisme als schrijfstijl. Realisme als schrijfstijl heeft zich aan mij voorgedaan als een veelkoppig concept dat moest worden opsplitst om in Yerima's belangrijkste verteltechnieken het sociaal-politiek realisme te kunnen begrijpen. Het sociaal-politiek realisme als zodanig is het hoofdperspectief geworden van waaruit ik alle toneelstukken in dit onderzoek heb geanalyseerd.

Dit boek is verdeeld in vijf hoofdstukken met voorafgaand een inleidend hoofdstuk. De interviews en discussies die ik met Ahmed Yerima had, zijn samen met een chronologisch overzicht van zijn leven en werk als bijlagen opgenomen. Voor een effectief overzicht van de ontwikkeling van het Nigeriaanse theater en een uitgebreide behandeling van het toneelwerk van Ahmed Yerima heb ik vijftien toneelstukken uitgezocht om te analyseren. Dit zijn: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Bishop and the Soul*, *The Wives*, *The Mirror Cracks*, *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe* en *Little Drops*.

In het **inleidende hoofdstuk** bespreek ik de classificatie in drie generaties van het Nigeriaanse literaire drama, met de belangrijkste toneelschrijvers die elke generatie vertegenwoordigen. Als uitgangspunt heb ik de stelling van zowel Ngugi wa Thiong'o als Ahmed Yerima gebruikt, namelijk dat literatuur zich niet in een vacuüm ontwikkelt, maar wordt gevormd door wat er in een samenleving plaatsvindt. De sociale situatie van Nigeria sinds de onafhankelijkheid, de politiek en de economie vormen de achtergrond voor dit onderzoek. In dit inleidende hoofdstuk introduceer ik ook het creatieve en literaire werk van Ahmed Yerima en verdeel dit in drie groepen: historisch-realistische toneelstukken, religieus-realistische toneelstukken en sociaal-politieke realistische toneelstukken. In **hoofdstuk 1** geef ik een overzicht van de historische ontwikkeling van het theater in Nigeria. Dit begint met het maskerade-drama, dat door J.A. Adediji (1981) is herleid tot het hoftoneel van de vijftiende eeuw, en later veranderde in 'Alarinjo-toneel', voor het eerst opgevoerd ter ere van Hugh Clapperton in Old Oyo Katunga in 1825. Ik behandel de opkomst van het Europese toneel vanaf het midden van de negentiende eeuw, en de rol van de missionariskerken en -scholen bij het opvoeren van westerse toneelstukken in Nigeria. Dit hoofdstuk bevat ook een beschrijving van het moderne Yoruba Travelling Theatre, dat is opgericht door Hubert Ogunde (1916-1990) en dat wordt uitgevoerd door mensen als Kola

Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi en Moses Olaiya. In dit hoofdstuk komt ook de opkomst van het toneel als academische discipline aan Nigeriaanse universiteiten – vanaf 1962 tot heden – aan de orde. Hiermee begon toneel in literaire vorm het reizend theater te vervangen. Ook de betrokkenheid van theaterbeoefenaars in het televisiedrama vanaf de jaren zestig, in filmproducties vanaf de jaren zeventig, en in de videofilms (die in sommige kringen bekendstaan als ‘Nollywood’) vanaf eind jaren tachtig tot heden komen aan de orde.

In **hoofdstuk 2** geef ik een analyse van *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen, Attahiru and Ameh Oboni the Great* als historische, realistische toneelstukken, door me te richten op vijf elementen: dramatische structuur, personages, taal, thema en de sociaal-politieke context van de toneelstukken. Deze vijf elementen worden ook gebruikt om de toneelstukken in de volgende twee hoofdstukken onder de loep te nemen. Bij de bespreking van het historisch drama ga ik ervan uit dat dit genre toneelstukken multifunctioneel is en over levende geschiedenis gaat. Ik betoog dat, hoewel de verwijzingen naar toneel in het historisch onderzoek ter discussie zijn gesteld, het toneel kwesties in herinnering brengt die met het verstrijken van de tijd vergeten worden. Ik bespreek hoe Yerima de historische details van de nederlaag van Oba Ovonramwen en het koninkrijk Benin heeft gereconstrueerd in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. Ook komt de val van sultan Attahiru en het kalifaat Sokoto voor de Britse militaire macht in *Attahiru*, en de dood van de opperbeheerser Atta Ameh Oboni van Igalaland door toedoen van de Britse regeringsvertegenwoordiger in het Nigeriaanse gebied rond Kabba aan de orde.

In **hoofdstuk 3** analyseer ik *The Angel, The Twist, Uncle Venyil, Mirror Cracks, The Bishop and The Soul* en *The Wives*. Vanwege hun thema en schrijfstijl heb ik deze werken als religieuze toneelstukken gecategoriseerd. Ik bespreek hier de toneelstukken door te kijken naar de invloed van het christendom, de islam en de African Traditional Beliefs (ATB's) op de huidige Nigeriaanse samenleving. Ik kijk naar de rollen die religies spelen in zowel de regering als in het dagelijkse leven van mensen. Ik beschrijf hoe religie de perceptie en het denken van de mensen over de samenleving en maatschappelijke instellingen bepaalt. Ik betoog dat de toneelstukken van Yerima laten zien dat er een vorm van culturele interactie zou moeten zijn, een soort hybriditeit of syncretisme als garantie voor de toekomstige generatie voor het behoud van elke cultuur binnen een samenleving. Dit is strijdig met de uitroeiing van inheemse culturele praktijken en gewoonten die in Nigeria wordt gepropageerd door de meerderheid van christenen van de Pinkstergemeente. Deze christenen beschouwen hun voorouderlijke verleden met de inheemse

culturele gewoonten als heidense praktijken, waarvoor ze hun kinderen willen behoeden.

In **hoofdstuk 4** bespreek ik *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe* en *Little Drops* als sociaal-politiek realistische toneelstukken. Ze vertegenwoordigen de sociale en politieke realiteit van het land waaruit ze zijn voortgekomen. Ik betoog dat vrouwen en kinderen de voornaamste slachtoffers zijn bij gewapende binnenlandse conflicten, zoals in geval van de Nigerdelta-militanten versus de Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) en de Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) versus de islamitische fundamentalist Boko Haram in het noorden van Nigeria. Ik betoog dat in de toneelstukken die in dit hoofdstuk worden bestudeerd, Yerima de scheidslijnen tussen illusie en realiteit vrijwel opheft wanneer hij de tijdelijkheid van het leven, van politieke macht en sociale status benadrukt.

In **hoofdstuk 5** sluit ik dit onderzoek af door alle argumenten uit alle voorgaande hoofdstukken op een rij te zetten. In deze conclusie benadruk ik het feit dat, hoewel veel onderzoekers en critici betogen dat de toneelpraktijk in Nigeria op zijn retour is, er een ongekennde toename plaatsvindt van het aantal instituten voor hoger onderwijs waar toneel wordt bestudeerd als academische discipline. Deze instituten hebben in de laatste twee decennia (1990-2010) meer theaterbeoefenaars opgeleverd dan de periode die door critici het 'gouden tijdperk' van het Nigeriaanse theater wordt genoemd. Ik beargumenteer tevens dat alle bestudeerde toneelstukken mijn conclusie ondersteunen dat Yerima een cultureel, sociaal en politiek bewust toneelschrijver is, wiens belang bij het algemene publiek ligt en niet bij de Nigeriaanse regering. Dit ondergraaft de positie van critici als Bakare Ojo-Rasaki en Gbemisola Adeoti, die stellen dat Yerima vanwege zijn positie in de regering geen toneelstuk kan schrijven dat het overheidsbeleid bekritiseert. Ik heb geconstateerd dat Yerima's toneelstukken populair zijn onder academici omdat ze ingaan op de sociaal relevante problemen waarmee mensen in de samenleving dagelijks te maken krijgen. Door de werken van Yerima en de frequentie waarmee deze in Nigeria worden opgevoerd te onderzoeken, kan ik zeggen dat het theater nog steeds leeft in dit land. In tegenstelling tot bezorgde onderzoekers, die menen dat de populariteit van televisie en de opkomst van de Nigeriaanse videofilm het Nigeriaanse toneel te gronde hebben gericht, beweer ik dat het toneelwerk van Ahmed Yerima een nieuwe richting heeft gegeven aan het Nigeriaanse literaire drama van de eenentwintigste eeuw en daarmee aan de nieuwe toneelschrijvers van het land.

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Curriculum vitae

Julius-Adeoye 'Rantimi Jays was born on January 2, 1972, in Lagos, Nigeria. He attended Saint Finbarr's College, Akoka, Lagos, from 1985 to 1991. He studied Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, obtaining a diploma (2000), Bachelor of Arts with honours (2002/2003) and Master of Arts in 2005 with specialization in Directing, Media, Theatre History, Dramatic Literature and Theatre for Development. Upon receiving his degrees in Ibadan, he taught at Doreen Royal Academy, Ibadan (2005) and Redeemer's High School, Redemption City, where he prepared students for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE), and the University Matriculation Examination (UME) in English language and Literature-in-English. In 2006, he was appointed a Lecturer in the Department of Photojournalism and Cinematography, School of Communication of Lagos State University (LASUSOC). He was there until 2007 when he moved to the Theatre Arts Department, Redeemer's University (RUN), Ogun State, Nigeria.

In February 2009 he started his PhD research at the Institute for Cultural Disciplines (LUICD) of Leiden University. During his doctoral research in Leiden, he had the opportunity to attend workshops and international conferences, and present his work at several international conferences in Ife, Jos, Keffi, Legon, Calabar, Leiden, Berlin, Munich, Seoul, Osaka, and elsewhere. He also had the opportunity to direct three plays by Ahmed Yerima in Nigeria.

'Rantimi Jays has published articles on the drama of Ahmed Yerima, Femi Osofisan, Nigerian drama, Nigerian video-film, community radio, events management, and stand-up comedy, in edited books as well as refereed journals such as *Nigerian Theatre Journal*. He has facilitated more than ten Theatre for Development (TfD) projects around Nigeria as well as directed more than twenty plays by notable African dramatists like Wole Soyinka, NgugiwaThiong'o, Femi Osofisan, Athol Fugard, Ahmed Yerima.