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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 easthetic 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.

