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The drama of Ahmed Yerima : studies in Nigerian theatre
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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 Igalaland. 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. Luggard. *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 Specifics: 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, Ohiooga, 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 illalah*, 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 seven, 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]xcellency, 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 lillah!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 Ovonoramwen 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 *Ameh 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