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The drama of Ahmed Yerima : studies in Nigerian theatre

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Cover Page



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Chapter Five

Conclusion

In concluding this work, it is expedient for me to reiterate that Ahmed Yerima's dramatic fecundity transcends his other creative works (directing and critical analysis). His creative oeuvre has established him as a social and cultural theoretician with easily accessible writings. His treatment of contemporary societal issues, especially in Nigeria, in his dramatic works belies his position as Assistant Director, Director and later Director-General of the National Troupe of Nigeria and National Theatre of Nigeria (1991-2010). Although holders of political positions in Nigeria are known to project the perspective of the government, Yerima's dramas show the social reality of the masses instead of the government's position. In an accessible mode, he writes for the people by criticising the government's policies. At the same time, some of his plays take a critical look at the conflicts between Nigerians' traditional cultural beliefs and Christianity. All the plays studied lend credence to my conclusions that Yerima is a culturally, socially and politically conscious playwright whose works reflect conditions as they affect the people of his society. This negates the position of critics like Bakare Ojo-Rasaki and Gbemisola Adeoti who postulate that, because of Yerima's position in the government, he cannot write a play that can criticise government policies. With this thesis, I have also countered other critics who claim that he is not a serious dramatist because he (Yerima) does not belong to the group of Nigeria's radical/Marxist dramatists whose drama call for revolutionary change in the nation's polity. In this work, I have argued that his drama is re-directing the focus of Nigerian literary drama of the twenty-first century especially for the country's new dramatists. In terms of cultural documentation, many of his plays contribute to the preservation of the people's past for the emerging generations. My argument here is that while Pentecostalism attempts to erode the mythical and indigenous beliefs from the youth and future generations in Nigerian society, by representing ATBs in his plays, Yerima is helping to retain for posterity the indigenous culture.⁵⁷⁶ He

⁵⁷⁶ This point is not to negate my criticism of Yerima's representation of ATBs in his plays. As stated in a previous chapter, he often presents events as the people perceive it in their everyday life, including the perception of Christians that practitioners of African Traditional Beliefs are unenlightened pagans who need to forsake their indigenous ways and accept Christianity, a "progressive way of life". In reality, most of Nigerian Christian youths have little knowledge of their indigenous cultural practices due to the viewpoint of the church against the culture. This only suggests that, in the near future, if the situation is not checked, there will be no authentic indigenous culture in Nigeria. Even the indigenous languages are at the risk of extinction. I have

believes that long before the emergence of Christianity among the various groups in Nigeria, cultural institutions were established and the spiritual life of the people greatly flourished. Western education, Western television/film and Christian schools are presented as a threat to the preservation of indigenous culture in Nigeria. There is a serious danger of extinction of indigenous cultural practices and customs. What is more, the majority of Nigerian Pentecostal Christian parents are working assiduously to pursue the total extermination of indigenous beliefs. Yerima's plays show that there should be a form of cultural interaction, a kind of hybridity or syncretism that will guarantee the preservation of each culture within a society for the future generation.

For social relevance, and for theatre not to lose its potency to bring people together in the twenty-first century, I argued that Nigerian literary drama should continue to be socially relevant by discussing issues that affect the society and the people. This is what makes Yerima's plays popular among academics as they deal directly with issues that confront people every day. Nigerian academics are critical of the country's leaders and welcome any material that challenges their positions. On the other hand, the youths are more interested in plays that they can easily understand. Looking at Yerima's works in the framework of theatre in Nigeria, we can say that despite the concern raised by some scholars, neither the popularity of television nor the emergence of the Nigerian video film have succeeded in killing theatre in Nigeria. My argument remains that although the popularity of the theatre has diminished within the society at-large due to social, political and economic reasons, theatre is still very vibrant in various institutions of higher learning in the country. There are also performances at some selected venues outside the walls of educational institutions although attendance at these venues cannot be compared with those of the traveling theatre. Literary theatre, which replaced the once popular Yoruba travelling theatre of the early and late twentieth century, is not only popular but has a considerable number of theatre makers and dramatists of importance practicing it. Travelling theatre finally succumbed to the new form in the early 1990s.⁵⁷⁷ The majorities of the traveling theatre practitioners of the 1940s to 1990s are either dead, retired or have moved to

already explained the contradiction in the life of most practitioners of Christianity in Nigeria in page 127

⁵⁷⁷ The demise of the traveling theatre form came as a result of movement of the practitioners to the film medium between 1970-1985 and finally to the video film format after the economic recession of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Virtually all the major Yoruba language form of the Nigerian video film practitioners started off from the traveling theatre period, although there is now a shift in generation as the new entrants are coming from the children of the old players and their friends and young theatre graduates.

become part of Nigerian video-film makers. Aside from the theatre for development (TfD) that thrives on improvisation and traditional theatrical performances that parades masqueraders and carnivalesque entertainment, contemporary Nigerian theatre is literary. At the moment there are more than fifty academic institutions where literary theatre is being practiced in Nigeria. These theatre arts departments' admit a high number of students and graduates. This is in contrast to the period before the 1990s when there were not more than eight such departments in the country.⁵⁷⁸ Many social and political plays are being performed by the students, and notable actors and dramatists have also emerged during the years.

The new dramatists in postcolonial Nigerian society are employing theatre to address pressing societal issues and needs. This functional aspect of the theatre has moved from the periphery of the nation's political culture to the centre, making it one of the key instruments used in the sensitization of the population and the elites toward negotiating a change within Nigerian politics. In a nutshell, the new dramatists have clearly defined the trend that forms the third generation of the nation's drama.

In my thesis, I have traced Nigerian theatre from oral, travelling and masquerade theatre as already discussed by Ogunba, Ogunbiyi, Jeyifo, Banham, Obafemi and other Nigerian theatre historians, to the emergence of the literary form. My thesis also discusses the involvement of Christian organisations in theatre both in the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century. I have discussed how the theatre has fed other media that emerged in the Nigerian popular entertainment industry in the late 1950s (television) through the 1970s (cinema) and the 1990s (Nigerian video film). I have attempted to give a chronological overview of practitioners in the theatre industry in the country since the turn of the 1900s to the present with obvious emphasis on notable contributors to each of the industries.

As mentioned earlier in the introductory chapter, it is important to note that the ideologies which separate the three generations of literary dramatists that have succeeded each other within the six decades of its emergence, have at the nucleus of their works, issues that affect contemporary Nigerian society. The point I am making here is that the nationalistic ideology that permeates the dramas of Wole Soyinka and his colleagues of the first generation, the collective radical stance of Femi Osofisan and his fellow second generation

⁵⁷⁸ The universities at the time who offered degrees in theatre studies are: University of Ibadan; University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ife); University of Jos; University of Benin; University of Nigeria, Nsuka; University of Calabar; and University of Port Harcourt.

colleagues, and the individualist and survivalist ideology of Ahmed Yerima and his group of third generation dramatists all strived to address socio-political themes. Though the belief in community orientation and development has diminished to give rise to individualism and one-man survival strategies, one should not lose sight of the fact that the shift of attention from collective or community orientation to individual survival is occasioned by the changes going on within the Nigerian society itself. The shift in orientation from the survival of the collective to the survival of the individual is demanded by the culture of capitalism that pervades contemporary Nigerian society. Hence, the new plays are somehow in continuity with the old plays in terms of the reason for dramatic construction. For example, *The Swamp Dwellers*⁵⁷⁹ raised the fundamental question of what fate will bring to the people on whose land oil was discovered in 1958. As premature as the issue was at that time, it became a prophetic landmark in the nation's history when, almost five decades after, the region of the Niger Delta where petroleum is being exploited became a theatre of unrest, guerrilla warfare and militant activities. While describing the role of drama in the Niger Delta Crisis, Denis Akoh notes that the play *All for Oil* by J.P. Clark-Bekederemo reminds us of the fact that the struggle for the resources of the Niger Delta region that began in the end of the nineteenth century, has not ended.⁵⁸⁰

In the play *All for Oil*, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo exploits the colonial history at his disposal to address burning socio-political and economic issues in the contemporary Niger Delta region of Nigeria. As Reuben Embu posits, the play *All for Oil* exposes the "intrigues, betrayal and oppressions involved in the business concerns of the colonial administration of the region and the questionable role of the local business and political bourgeoisie."⁵⁸¹ It was the decadence of the Nigerian society, especially in the decades following the senseless Civil War of 1967, which prompted Femi Osofisan and his colleagues like Kole Omotosho, Biodun Jeyifo⁵⁸² and others to take a radical/Marxist stance in creating dramatic works. The world addressed in Osofisan's *Once*

⁵⁷⁹ Soyinka, Wole, "The Swamp Dwellers" in *Three Short Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). The play was written in 1957, a year earlier than the time oil was discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria.

⁵⁸⁰ Akoh, D. Ameh, "All for Oil? Theatre and Crisis management in the Niger Delta" a paper presented at the 21st Annual Conference and General Meeting of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SONTA), University of Benin 13-17th May 2008.

⁵⁸¹ Reuben, Embu, "Drama and Environmental Challenges in the Niger Delta in Selected Nigerian Plays" a paper presented at the 36th Annual Conference of African Literature Association (ALA), held at the University of Arizona, USA, 10-14 March, 2010.

⁵⁸² He was among the popular Marxist's voices of this period though not a playwright himself but a literary critic that helped project the ideology of the radical dramatists.

Upon Four Robbers and *Who is afraid of Solarin* is post-independent Nigeria with its crop of corrupt politicians and the social malaise of armed robbery. With *Kaffir's Last Game* and *The Lottery Ticket*, Yerima attacks various government institutions and their corrupt practices. As mentioned in chapter two, Yerima's *Hard Ground* and *Little Drops* were based on the social unrest created by oil multinationals like Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Total, Elf, etc, as they carried out exploration activities in the Nigerian Niger Delta. The Niger Delta unrest is one of the major issues that confronted Nigeria at the dawn of the twenty-first century. This unrest which brought Nigeria to the attention of the world as a place for militant activities and social unrest including domestic terrorism, readily becomes material for creative works. I have grouped Yerima's works under three thematic headings, namely: historical realist plays, religious realist plays; and socio-political realist plays. I have also argued that though Ahmed Yerima is quick to state that he is not inspired by a particular ideological stance, it is clear enough that individualism and survivalism are two ideologies visible in virtually all of his works. His protagonists think of the "self" as the only agent that can spring the wheel of change and watch as it will spin for good or bad in the presence of other variables.

Nigerian society, like the majority of African countries, is religiously inclined. The people rely more on help that will come from an "external God" rather than the one from the disillusioned political leaders and colleagues who are continually failing them. Yerima exploits this societal fact by making his protagonists seek supernatural solutions to challenges that are bigger than their physical ability. In chapter three of this thesis, I made it clear that Yerima imbues his characters with religious contradictions. He locates within a singular character the belief in the monotheistic Christian God and indicates a constant reminder of the gods of his ancestors. With this contradiction, he continues the argument that no matter the involvement that Africans on the continent have with foreign religion and culture, there will always be an occasional pull by the religion and culture of the continent that he is born into. It is well known in religious and anthropological studies that some indigenous gods are wrongly portrayed in the Bible written in African languages in order to give both the Bible and the Christian religion local colouration. While I have paid emphasis to the relevance of modern Nigerian drama to the socio-political and cultural development of the nation due to its topicality, I also believe that the dramatists are not doing enough to affect changes in the socio political system.

This thesis is not an analysis of all of Ahmed Yerima's artistic creations; rather, it is only a modest contribution to the forest of critical works

yet to emerge on this notable Nigerian dramatist. If anything, it is taking a humble step as the first thesis on the analysis of the work of an enigmatic playwright. It is also an attempt to introduce Nigerian literary drama and dramatists to a new audience by contributing to the already existing critical literature on the subject of African theatre. Yerima and, indeed, contemporary Nigerian literary dramatists, have become like a huge elephant that different people look at from different sides and relate to from different perspectives. It would be difficult for only one person to claim a total understanding and objective portrayal of the whole elephant. I hope that new theses will be written to further enhance my argument and if warranted, that my position will be challenged. So, I have only taken a little slice of this huge elephant for analysis, inspired by my position and perspective.