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The drama of Ahmed Yerima : studies in Nigerian theatre

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Cover Page



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Summary

The Drama of Ahmed Yerima: Studies in Nigerian Theatre is an exploration into the dramatic oeuvre of one of Africa's finest dramatists, namely Ahmed Yerima. Though I present the dissertation as a study of the creative works of Ahmed Yerima, I frame this playwright by giving a detailed chronological description of drama in Nigeria. I trace the development of what is presently known as Nigerian theatre from its stage of masquerade drama in the pre-colonial period through the colonial period to literary theatre in the post-colonial present. I describe early Yoruba travelling theatre before it came into contact with the dramatic traditions of Euro-American culture.

I use the generational divisions that critics of Nigerian drama are already familiar with to discuss Nigerian literary theatre. However, I argue that the third generation dramatists of which Ahmed Yerima is one, is different from the preceding two generations on the level of ideology and writing style. The first generation of dramatists is considered as proponents of cultural liberation. This is because they discuss nationalistic ideals, and they pursue with their plays cultural re-affirmation. The second of generation dramatists is referred to by critics as radical dramatists. This is because their dramas are committed to promoting revolutionary change by Nigerian peasants and workers. Both the first and second generation dramatists preach collective survivalism. To these group of dramatists, the people must work together to change the political situation or system, which is repressive of their community. The third generation dramatists champion the ideas of individual survivalism. This is because in their writings they emphasize the importance of the survival of an individual in a repressive and chaotic society.

In spite of the differences within the generational stratification of Nigerian dramatists in the line of ideological commitments, all of them pursue a just socio-political order in Nigeria. The issues they all reflect upon in their writings are leadership crisis, failing health system and infrastructure, corruption, military misadventure, national unity, political rivalry, ethnic rivalry, and state oppression plaguing the nation's socio-cultural and political landscape.

In this study, I argue that Ahmed Yerima is a socio-political realist playwright, because his dramatic representations reflect Nigeria's socio-political reality. He is a playwright that is conscious of his immediate environment, and he reflects this in his drama. While representing a typical day in the life of his characters, Yerima often re-enacts Nigeria's and indeed, Africa's contemporary social, political, economic, cultural and religious issues.

I conceive realism as a style of writing, on the basis of which I can discuss the main devices of Yerima's drama. Realism as writing style presented itself to me as a hydra-headed concept which I had to analyse in its main narrative devices in order to understand the socio-political realism of Yerima's plays. As such, socio-political realism became the main perspective through which I looked at all the plays analyzed in this study.

This study is divided into five chapters and an introductory chapter. The interviews and discussions I had with Ahmed Yerima with the chronology of his life and dramatic development are presented as an appendix. In order to effectively look at the development of Nigerian theatre and to discuss Ahmed Yerima's drama extensively, I selected fourteen plays for analyses. These are: *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *The Bishop and the Soul*, *The Wives*, *The Mirror Cracks*, *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe*, and *Little Drops*.

In the **introductory chapter**, I discuss the classification in three generations of Nigerian literary drama with the names of the dramatists who represent these various generations with their plays. As a springboard for my discussion, I used the argument of both Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Ahmed Yerima that literature does not develop in a vacuum, rather, it is shaped by what takes place in a society. I discuss post-independent Nigeria's social situation, its politics and economy as background to this study. In this introductory chapter I also introduce and group under three headings Ahmed Yerima's creative and literary works: historical realist plays, religious realist plays and socio-political realist plays. I map the historical development of theatre in Nigeria in **chapter one**. I start the historical development with the masquerade drama which J.A. Adedeji (1981) has traced to the 15th century as court theatre that later metamorphosed into "Alarinjo Theatre", which performed in honour of Hugh Clapperton at Old Oyo Katunga in 1825. I discuss the emergence of the European type of theatre beginning from mid 19th century, and the involvement of the missionary churches and schools in the staging of Western plays in Nigeria. This chapter also includes a discussion of modern Yoruba Travelling Theatre pioneered by Hubert Ogunde and practiced by people like Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi, Moses Olaiya. I discuss the appearance of theatre as an academic discipline in Nigerian universities in 1962 up to the present when written plays in literary form began to displace traveling theatre on stage. I also discuss the involvement of theatre practitioners in television drama from the 1960s, in film production from

1970s, and in video-film known in some quarters as “Nollywood” from the late 1980s to the present.

In **chapter two**, I analyze *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Attahiru* and *Ameh Oboni the Great* as historical realist plays by focusing on dramatic structure, character, language, thematic preoccupation, and the socio-political context of the plays. These five elements, which I introduced in this chapter, are also used to analyze the plays studied in the following two chapters. I situate my discussion of historical drama on the understanding that these types of plays are multi-functional and engage living history. I argue that, even though the references to drama in the study of history have been called to question, it brings to immediate remembrance subjects that are lost in the passing of time. I discuss how Yerima reconstructed the historical details of the defeat of Oba Ovonramwen and the Benin kingdom in *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen*. I also look at the fall of Sultan Attahiru and the Sokoto Caliphate to British military might in *Attahiru*, and the death of the paramount ruler of Igalaland, Atta Ameh Oboni, based on the machination of the British government’s representative in Kabba area of Nigeria.

In **chapter three** I analyze *The Angel*, *The Twist*, *Uncle Venyil*, *Mirror Cracks*, *The Bishop and The Soul*, and *The Wives*. I categorize these works as religious realist plays because of their thematic preoccupation and style of writing. In this chapter I discuss the plays by looking at the influence of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Beliefs (ATBs) on contemporary Nigerian society. I look at the roles religions are playing in the government and in people’s everyday life. I discuss how religion determines the perception and thinking of the people in relation to the society and societal institutions. I argue that Yerima’s plays demonstrate that there should be a form of cultural interaction, a kind of hybridity or syncretism that will guarantee the preservation of each culture within a society for the future generation. This is contrary to the danger of extinction of indigenous cultural practices and customs being propagated in Nigeria by the majority of Nigerian Pentecostal Christians. This is because Nigerian Pentecostal Christians parents consider their ancestral past and indigenous cultural practices as pagan practice which their own children must not be exposed to.

I discuss *The Lottery Ticket*, *Kaffir’s Last Game*, *The Sisters*, *Mojagbe*, and *Little Drops* as socio-political realist plays in **chapter four**. This is because they represent the social and political reality of the country from which they emerge. I argue that women and children are the primary victims when there are domestic conflicts that involve the use of arms and ammunitions as we have

in the cases of the Niger Delta militants versus the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) and the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) versus the Islamic Fundamentalist Boko Haram in the northern part of Nigeria. I argue that in the plays studied in this chapter, Yerima makes the lines between illusion and reality almost non-existent as he stresses the impermanency of life, political power and social status.

In **chapter five** I conclude this study by aligning all the arguments I raised in the introductory chapter and in the other chapters. In this conclusion, I emphasize the fact that although many scholars and critics argue the decline of theatre practices in Nigeria, there is an unprecedented increase in the number of institutions of higher learning where theatre is being studied as academic discipline. These institutions have produced more theatre practitioners in the last two decades (1990-2010) than the period that critics referred to as Nigeria's theatre "golden period". I also reiterate the fact that all the plays studied lend credence to my conclusions that Yerima is a culturally, socially and politically conscious playwright whose interest is with the general public and not the Nigerian government. This negates the position of critics like Bakare Ojo-Rasaki and Gbemisola Adeoti who postulate that, because of Yerima's position in the government, he cannot write a play that can criticize government policies. I stated that Yerima's plays are popular among academics because they discuss socially relevant issues that confront people in the society daily. By looking at Yerima's works and the rate at which they are mounted on stage in Nigeria, I can say that theatre is still vibrant in the country. This is contrary to the concern raised by some scholars that the popularity of television and the emergence of the Nigerian video film have succeeded in killing theatre in Nigeria. In this work, I contend that Ahmed Yerima's drama has established a fresh direction for Nigerian literary drama of the twenty-first century and for the country's new dramatists.