

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS DIALECTICS OF CULTURAL PRACTICES IN AHMED YERIMA'S *ABOBAKU* AND *AETU*

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Abstract

*African societies are of diverse cultures that have distinct historical and cultural values such as dance, music, storytelling, language, rite, ritual among others to showcase different aesthetics. This culture defines Africans, identify their sociological background and give certain uniqueness to different tribes and regions. Although, some of this African aesthetics tend to bring harmful cultural practices which may be less beneficial than the purpose of intention, however the aesthetical value embedded in this culture are pure and unique. Therefore, this paper examined the historical, cultural and religious aesthetical value and practice of the African people with regards to the passivity of the female gender in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* and *Aetu*. Arnold Van Gennep's Ritual Theory was used to analyze this study. It is observed that the dexterity in Ahmed Yerima's understanding of culture includes the burial process, burial rite of kings, rite of enthroning kings in the old Oyo kingdom, and the widowhood rite in the Yoruba culture. However, the paper concluded that, the dramatic texts of Ahmed Yerima have sometimes helped in giving ideas of some cultural and religious practices of the Yoruba people while the selected texts clamoured for a change in certain practices such as ritual murder, child marriage and widowhood that is archaic.*

Keywords: History, Culture, Religious Dialectics, Cultural Practices, Ahmed Yerima.

Introduction

In the world of theatre, especially in Nigerian theatre, every play is written or staged within a particular culture to pass a message across and to educate the readers and audience to a large extent. Nigerian playwrights such as: Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, Sam Ukala, Irene Salami-Agunloye and so on, have in one way or the other been showcasing the Nigerian cultural practices present in the ethnic groups in the country (Obafemi, 1996). Consequently, one of the dominant playwrights whose works have continue to reflect on the essence of culture and the significance of history is Ahmed Yerima (Aremu,

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Among the cultural practices that are peculiar to the Yoruba people is the concept of the "King's Horseman". This dates back to many centuries before the 21st century. It is history filled with tales of heroic grandeur and tragic failures, the rise and fall of state, the saga of kings and warriors, the story of slaves and nobles, and the epic of gods and man (Ogunbiyi, 1981). Above all, it is a fascinating story, the subject and object of many folklores, tales, rituals, songs, praise chants, proverbs, and riddles. It is a history conceptualised, preserved and transmitted through the agency of human memory. Abobaku is one of the ritual practices and burial rite of some kings in Yoruba land such as Ooni of Ife and Alafin of Oyo. Generally, the cosmological beliefs of the Yoruba's is that death is not the end of life, but a transition from one form of existence to another, and this is what Wole Soyinka refers to as the Fourth stage (Soyinka, 1976 & 2013). It is believed that one of the roles of the Abobaku is to protect the king in times of wars. The act of Abobaku is a death rite passage or ritual where an individual or a person is ordained with the title Abobaku and serves as a sacrificial lamb, carrier, servant and companion to the soul of a dead king on a journey beyond (Ogunba, 1975). It is an important part of burial rites for a Yoruba king who has gone to join his ancestors.

Therefore, this paper examined the cultural aesthetics and practices present in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* and *Aetu*. Both plays were selected because they have certain cultural practices and believe of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. It should be noted that *Abobaku* reflects the old cultural practice of the Oyo kingdom, where an individual is saddled with the responsibility to be buried with the king while *Aetu* on the other hand, discusses the widowhood rite that permits inheritance of the deceased wife to other male family members.

Theoretical Framework

Arnold Van Gennep's ritual theory was propounded and established in 1909, and since then has stood its ground in various fields including psychology, history, anthropology, and religious studies. Van Gennep extensively examined ritual theory using the rite of passage a translation of the French phrase *Les rites de passage*. Gennep (1909, p. 2) defines a rite of passage as a ritualistic act of transferring individuals or groups between social statuses and marking their incorporation into a typically higher or more valued status. He further states that the change in status doesn't only apply or reference religious ideas alone but also secular positions. However, Gennep wrote a second edition in the year 2019, and his ritual theory of the rite of passage became more concern with the transitional rite (human life cycles) which begins with birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death. Therefore, this research is foregrounded on Van Gennep Arnold second edition of theory of ritual, 2019.

Gennep (2019, p. 37) asserts that the transitional rite in this context is a middle phase where the individual undergoing the ritual process has left his old status but has yet to fully belong to the new status. The transitional phase is followed with expressive activities to celebrate the transition of the passage rite to end the temporal period and mark the beginning of a new one. Furthermore, Arnold Van Gennep analysed the

passage rite within a framework using three models which are the separation stage, transition stage, and incorporation stage.

Separation Stage

Gennep (2019, p. 39) sees the separation stage as the pre-liminal stage. It is a stage or phase that separates the subject from their original status. For example, a child being initiated into adulthood or a lady initiated into womanhood through the process of marriage and childbirth. The separation stage also cut across the selected play texts of Ahmed Yerima which served as a paradigm for this paper.

Transition Stage

As stated earlier, the transition or liminal rite stage is a phase when an individual is seen as powerful and at the same time vulnerable. Gennep (2019, p. 42) described both the transitional phase and persons undergoing transition as sacred. The transition stage contains a series of sacred actions that may last for days or months to protect the participants and separate them from the large community.

Aside from being sacred, another component of the transitional phase of initiation rites is the physical operations. Here, the participant is expected to undergo scarification, genital mutilation, or tattooing. These physically painful operations are believed to be hurdles the participant must survive for a smooth change in status which makes it a memorable act. Initiations often involve not an individual but a collectivity whose members undergo the rites at the same time and can as a result develop a special lifelong relationship. Also, the initiation provides a clear picture of the transition stage that cuts across to birth, marriage, and death.

Incorporation Stage

This is the last stage where the post-liminal rite takes place. At this stage, the participant is incorporated back into the social world after transition to occupy his or her new status. To break this stage down, Arnold Van Gennep uses marriage, one of the human cycles. Marriage in many societies occurs in processes starting from the bride taking up residence with her husband's group. In this situation, rites of incorporation involve the bride's induction into a house or settlement spatially separate from her natal residence.

Ritual and Rite in African Society

There are various commemorative acts, passage rites and rituals in the African socio-cultural settings to initiate members of the society into different stages of life and social status. Hill (1992, p. 62), views rites of passage are those structures, rituals, and ceremonies by which age-class members or individuals in a group successfully come to know who they are, what they are about, the purpose and meaning for their existence, as they proceed from one clearly defined state of existence to the next state or passage in their lives. Ritual and rite have been part and parcel of the Africans society and their way of life. Often time, scholars or people use them interchangeable depending on the context in which they are applied.

Cummings and McGarry (2016, p. 61) describe rite of passage as a ritual signifying a person's passage from one identity to the next. According to Gennep (1960,

p. 5), rites are groups of rituals which celebrate transition from one phase in the life of an individual or a community to another. Rites are ceremonial acts or social practices governing the activities of a group of people or society from one stage to another.

They are acts that occasionally take place at certain levels in human life. In the same view, Kyalo (2013, p.46) explains that ritual helps individual to make sense of life's transitions, providing some structure to ease movement from the familiar to the unknown. Naturally, human life is in stages starting from pregnancy to infancy, to being a toddler (childhood), to puberty and the other stages till death. Akinsipe and Babarinde-Hall (2018, p.3) note that, the entire Yoruba people's lives are shrouded in series of rites, especially that of birth, marriage and death. However, at each stage, it is natural and expected that man goes through some passage rites. Some of these rites include birth rite, scarification rite, marriage rite and burial rite.

Marriage Rite

Marriage is an institution and a ritual passage that cuts across every culture and nation that every grown adult must pass through. It is a well celebrated value in every culture to encourage procreation and productivity. However, it is essential to note that marriage rite vary from culture to culture. In the Yoruba culture, marriage is a sacred institution and a union based on traditional ethics and values. Gennep (1960, p.10) describes, Yoruba marriage rite by breaking it down into three stages; pre liminal (separation), liminal (transition) and post-liminal (incorporation). The pre-liminal stage is preparation stage for the transition of the woman to becoming a wife. The liminal stage is the most complex in Yoruba marriage rite. It is the state where both families come together to seal the union of both parties with the presentations of gift items from the groom's family. Some of the items include yam honey, bitter kola, sugarcane, salt, kolanut among others. These gift items have symbolic representation in the Yoruba culture.

Ogunkunle (2013, pp. 1106-1107) expatiates on the symbolic representation of the gift and prayer items. He defines the prayer items in the Yoruba traditional marriage from three perspectives; the quality, the association signs with the object of sign and their cultural implications. In Yoruba land, the sign objects are intentionally deployed in marriage and naming ceremonies because of specific relevant qualities and peculiarities deducible from the objects, which make them relevant prayer items for the occasions.

The liminal is a stage the woman takes another status from miss to Mrs. Activities during this stage include a farewell song, known as Ekun Iyawo from the woman to her parents. Raji and Ajadi (2013, p. 144) define Ekun Iyawo as the most emotional aspect of the marriage rite and the emotional vehicle that carries the woman across the two lines of her old status as a young unmarried woman and a new status as a married woman. It is the most emotional stage where the bride demands for prayers from her parents, family and friends. The last stage which is the post liminal is the point the bride realises that she has changed her social status and stand to carry out wife's duty. At this point, she is being encouraged for a blissful union.

Childbirth Rite

Procreation or child birth is one of the most celebrated ceremonies in every culture and the transition of a woman into motherhood. In the Yoruba culture, it is believed that children are the most important heritage and legacy to leave behind after death. The childbirth is interwoven with other rites such as naming ceremony, omugwo, burying of the placenta among others. The umbilical cord and placental practices form an important aspect of discourse around childbirth rite of passage. Kanu (2019, p.26) describes cutting of the umbilical cord as a rite of separation of the child from the world of the ancestors and incorporation into the world of human beings. It is a practice of incorporating the child into the society. Naturally, after the birth of the child, what follows is the naming ceremony.

The naming ceremony of a male child takes place eight days and seven days for a female child after birth. However, it is crucial to note, that naming in the Yoruba culture, also depends on circumstances or event around the birth of the child. Bamidele (2010, p.9) says an indigenous African name on the whole personifies the individual, tells some story about the parents and or the family of the bearer, and in a more general sense, points to the values of the society into which the individual is born. This birthed the general belief and ideology of coming or being named from heaven which the Yorubas call *oruko a mu t'orunwa*. For instance, Ojo, Aina, Ajayi, Taye, Kehinde, Idowu, Babatunde, Babajide, Yetunde, Yewande among others.

Another rite or practice associated with childbirth across various culture and society is Omugwo. Omugwo is a practice where the eldest female of the family, mostly the groom's mother in Yoruba culture assist the mother of the child in taking care of the child and to enhance quick recovery.

Burial Rite

Before the influence of Christianity and Islam, the Yoruba people buried their corpse in the room previously occupied by the deceased. In the Yoruba culture, it is believed that the dead ones go to live in another world similar to the one they left. Hence, they are buried with various items like cloths and food for comfort. This same act applies to Kings or prestigious people where their best servant or wife is buried with them. Ellies (1999, p.574) says burial rite in the Yoruba culture is accompanied with a ritualistic act where a black fowl is killed (*adiye irana*) to wave away evil spirit that may distort a smooth transition in the cause of their journey beyond. The ritualistic process involves removing of the fowl's feather while the leader, followers and those carrying the dead body say sing some chant-like songs. *Adiye irana* has three symbolic meaning; to wave away evil spirits, a reminder that death is inevitable and that there is life after death in the Yoruba cosmology. *Abobaku* is a death rite, ritual practices and burial rites for Yoruba king. The burial rite serves as the transitional rite for the king which is handled by the *Abobaku* himself because he is the sacrificial lamb and a companion to the soul of the dead king on a journey beyond.

Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku*

Abobaku is a cultural play that explores the Yoruba cultural rite of burying a king in the old Oyo Empire. The play revolves around Ajibade, the Abobaku and Faramola, a member of the Abiku cult who suffered from stillbirth until a child eventually stays after Ajibade voluntarily agrees to bear the sacrifice which leads to their union. Years later, Ajibade wears the robe of the Abobaku and saddled with the responsibility to accompany the King, (Oba Karunwi) on a Journey beyond. Mama, (Faramola's mother) is faced with fear of Faramola losing her husband. Mama consults Ifa priest where she is informed of the impending death in her household. To stop this, Mama is instructed by the Ifa priest to light three lamps (*Atupa*) and ensure the lamp does not go off all night to prevent them from dying.

Also, Mama visits Fadeyi and Woli to stop the incoming tragedy as Oba Karunwi's sickness is getting worse for Ajibade to prepare to carry out his duty as the Abobaku. Attempting to wave his duty, Faramola plans with Ajibade and Olori Ilari, her father to avoid death swinging around Ajibade, her husband. Ajibade elopes to a village known as Gbalefefe and meet them in search of a customary stranger who will be their new king. Ajibade is arrested and to be the crown king due to the circumstances surrounding his arrival. However, Oba Karunwi dies and the Abobaku is missing, which makes Faramola, (Ajibade's wife) to stand in the garb of *Abobaku* instead of Ajibade. Mama goes with her sister, Iyalode, to Gbalefefe to seek for the *Abobaku* and luckily, they caught him just before he concluded the rite of coronation and they begged him to come back to save his wife and his unborn child. He agrees to take up his responsibility, but then it is too late as Faramola has renewed her pact with Abiku cult.

Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu*

The play is about a fourteen-year-old girl, named Aetu and it is about fulfillment of the African culture of women as inheritance. She sees herself being transferred from one brother to another against her wish. Left to her, she would have loved to be married to her lover, Atiba, but Oke forcefully takes her to his house, after killing Atiba, rapes Aetu and gets her impregnated. Aetu is left with no option than to marry him which results to child marriage. Aetu is affected psychologically and she goes to the shrine of Esu to curse all the generation of her husband without even leaving herself out of the curse, because she believes that both her passage and womb belong to no other person than her lover Atiba. She feels saved to meet Atiba in the other world, and therefore, she kills herself.

However, the effect of her curse becomes devastating especially on the family of Otediran (Oke's family) where men have been dying sequentially and under the same circumstances and this brings Kande (Aetu last child) who seeks solution, to take his ill father, Obajimi, to Esu's priest for healing. After making divinations, Esu priest, Saura, reveals that Obajimi had been cursed by a dead woman and needs to offer a sacrificial lamb at the tomb of the dead woman. Arriving at the graveyard, they meet an Old Woman who keeps watch over the grave and claims to know all about Aetu. The Old Woman gives a good account of the story of Aetu and the reason behind the curse she placed on the family of Otediran to Kande and Saura while the sick Obajimi, who is

completely paralysed, lies beside them. Finally, the Old Woman assists them in appeasing the spirit of Aetu and pronounces an end to the series of death in their family, with a great warning to stop the act of forcing an individual against his or her will. In spite of this, Obajimi dies as part of Aetu's sacrifice.

Ritual and Religion Aesthetics in Abobaku

Ritual Aesthetics in the Burial Rite and Selection of Abobaku in Yoruba Cosmology. The selection of Abobaku is similar to the selection of Kings in Yoruba culture. Abobaku is a chieftaincy title that is selected from a particular family. However, during the ritualistic ordination, the Abobaku swear to carry out his traditional rite and duties willingly. The playwright captures this in Ajibade's (Abobaku) lines.

Balogun: Are you here on your own free will?

Ajibade: I am.

Balogun: Swear!

Ajibade: (Collect the sword.) This is the sword of Ogun. The next time we meet will be at the shrine of Ogun where you shall remove my head in order to allow me the honour to meet my king... my partner... my god, Oba Karunwi.

Also, from the play text, Yerima (2015, p. 8) unveiled through the dialogue of Abore that it becomes a taboo for the king and the elected Abobaku to see each other's faces for it is believed the moment the king sees the face of his Abobaku, he (the king) meets his ancestors. This was more evident and seen at the opening scene of the play in Abore's lines:

Abore.... Then stand backing the back of Oba Karunwi. (Pause as he watches them stand). Tonight, you stand backing each other. The next time you, Abobaku shall turn your face to the back of Oba Karunwi, your head shall carry him before your crossroads of the land of the dead, the unborn and the living. Now Balogun, let him swear. (Yerima, 2015, p. 8)

The king is respected and worshiped with trepidation. In respect to this believe, the playwright, displayed the Yoruba's believe in the death and the transition of a king to join his ancestors. The playwright emphasised on the respect accustomed to royalty regarding the death and burial of a king. The king must have someone to keep him company on the journey to the land of his ancestors. As a result of this, when a king is alive, he always has with him an Abobaku, someone who is prepared to die with him when he dies. While alive, he (Abobaku) enjoys everything the king enjoys. Also, Yerima highlighted the influence of western religion in the fabrics of Yoruba burial culture. This is noted when Iyaloja expressed how the bishop refused the body of Oba Karunwi being buried in the traditional way.

I curse the day Oba Karunwi became a Christian. That day amidst party and all, everybody was polite and friendly. But not today. We found ourselves bargaining for the body of the late king. They threatened to invite the police to explain why we forcefully took the body from the mortuary. (Yerima, 2015, p. 50)

The ritual aesthetics in the burial rite of Oba Karunwi was partially altered because Ajibade flew. However, in the burial rite, Ajibade (Abobaku) is meant to be buried with the king while he will be celebrated for bravery. Instead, he run away while Faramola takes his place as the Abobaku.

Cultural Aesthetics in *Abobaku*

Language is one of the cultural aesthetics and also one of the main tenets of African Aesthetics. MacArthur (1996, p.75) propounds that language is a form of symbolic communication in which elements are combined to represent something other than them. Furthermore, language is modeled on real-life conversation among people, a playwright can communicate with the reader not only through written words, but also through music, Philosophical expressions, chants and proverbs etc. Williams cited in Idoko (2012, p.32) argues that, Language has become indispensable to human historiography, understanding and development. Whether verbal or non-verbal or both, Yerima ingeniously deployed the use bilingual expression in the play *Abobaku* to showcase the aesthetics of song, and the message it aims to pass across.

Omo mi o akuru bebe kube
Omo mi o akuru bebe kube.
Ti n ba lase o, ma raaye fun o
Ti n ba lase o, ma ra ori mi fun...
Akuru bebe kube...

Aside from showcasing the aesthetics in Yoruba language, the above depict the love of mothers for their children. The song serves as a lullaby to keep the baby peaceful and sleepy. More so, Yoruba language also reflected in the names of characters in the play without the exception of locations. Some of which includes Karunwi, Faramola, Ajibade, Ilari, Iyalode, Otun, Adeoti, and many others. The creative mixture of these two languages created an understandable effect for the play.

Philosophical Expressions

Philosophical expressions are other forms of language which are the sayings with sub-textual meaning or statements that are beyond the surface meaning. Oftentimes, they appear as idiomatic expression as well as proverbs. Cain, Espinal and Mateu (2009, p. 280), states that idioms have both literal and figurative meaning, depending on the context. Some of the philosophical expressions which have been dexterously and artistically used by the playwright can be seen at the beginning of the play

Abore: The moment we have been waiting for arrives... In the name of Alafin Oyo, omo iku, omo ofo, omo arun, kabiyesi, iku baba yeye, we enthrone the new Abobaku who will escort our new king to the land of our ancestors as it is with our sacred culture and tradition. May the ancestors be with us. (Yerima, 2015, p. 8).

The philosophical expressions in the above lines include, omo iku, omo ofo, omo arun, kabiyesi, iku baba yeye. Also, Abobaku who will escort our new king to the land

of ancestors... According to the Yoruba philosophical belief, the Alaafin of Oyo is a son to iku (death), arun (sickness/disease/ailment), who must not be troubled by the same. Instead of being troubled by all these evil, they believe he has dined and wined with them and so, they will regard and treat him as one of them. The word iku baba yeye depicts Alaafin of Oyo as death himself. The word came to being from the king of the Old Oyo Empire who was referred to as Alaafin igba keji orisa which means the owner of the palace and the second to the gods. It is with this honour and high esteem that every King in Yoruba land is viewed.

Chant

Opoola (2019, p.67) opines that Yoruba oral literature is of three categories namely chant, song and recitation. He described chant as a combination of carefully arranged speeches or words in a poetic form. Chants are melodic words that portray the appraisal of a particular god or human or even particular culture. It is accompanied with drums, flutes and other instruments. The use of musical instruments most especially the traditional ones help add the traditional touch for the sense of aesthetics. A good example is seen during Ajibade's installation as the Abobaku.

Ajibade! Ajibade o!

Eni lo di Baba kekere

Eni lo di iko olokunola

Omo Ajisafe, aroju bobaku

Omo Ajibawe, Akeekuya!

Omo Oniku ariwo... (Yerima, 2015, p. 10)

The chant above exponentially explains the duty of Ajibade as the Abobaku and the respect attached to the title. It also tells that "on this day, Ajibade becomes Baba kere, Olokunola". The above names are attributed to the Abobaku to show a change in social status.

Ritual and Religion Aesthetics in *Aetu*

Ritual is embedded in the Africans way of life starting from their day-to-day activities which becomes a norm to them. Aponmade (2018, p. 91), defines ritual as a means of communication between the physical and spirit worlds". In every festival or indigenous ceremony, there is always communication between the spiritual realm and the physical where initiates or a traditional priest carry out some ritualistic acts such as carry sacrifices, consulting the gods and many more. Ogunbiyi (1981, p. 184) affirms that:

In ritual, man attempts to communicate directly with the supernatural, with the world that forces his control. Communication he makes through the priest, a person with unique knowledge and powers who leads and supervise the worship of ritual communication with the unseen agencies.

As stated in the definitions above, Yerima presented the African ritualistic practice of offering sacrifice to appease those in the meta-physical world, and their religious practice. The first religious act of Yoruba is to call their creator (*Eleda*). Then,

there is a consultation process where Ifa or Esu is asked for direction. In the Yoruba culture, Esu is seen as a deputy of Olodumare in the matters of ritual and human conduct. He looks into the conduct of both divinities and men and then reports to Olodumare who accepts his recommendations. This act is observed in Saura's line in scene one during Kande's visitation to Esu's shrine.

Saura: (Take a pebble and gives it to Kande) Say your mind. The way you just said it. Whisper this to Esu, tell him what you want. It will give him the chance to peep into your inner soul. (Kande collects the stone, talks to it, and gives it back to Saura) Good. Now let my master decide what we should do. Esu lalù, Ogiriko. In your hands, all are kept. What do you want your son to do? (As if in a trance, listening) I hear you. (To Kande) Do you know where your grandmother was buried? (Yerima, 2007, p. 11)

Often times, the religious practice leads to the ritualistic act especially when there is a need to prevent an impending doom. In place of this, sacrifice is offered which consist of various food materials and even living object. The playwright referenced this ritualistic practice in Saura's lines:

Saura: Call them. We shall need a baby goat. And some water from the shrine of Esu. (Kande goes out and comes in with two men, who carry Obajimi. He takes a little calabash and pours some water from the big pot into it.) Now let us go. We must get there before it gets too dark. Hurry! (Yerima, 2007, p. 11)

As mentioned above, the ritual rite did not stop at the first scene, the playwright created a continuum as Saura, Kande and Obajimi journey to the graveyard to appease the spirit of Aetu, their grandmother, Obajimi's wife to reverse the curse she laid on their generation.

Old Woman: Do not do that.

Saura: Who are you? I have work to do.

Kande: How did she get there? I can swear...

Saura: Mama, we do not have the time to banter. We have work to do. We have come for a small etutu, to appease the spirit of his mother, and his grandmother (pointing to Obajimi and Kande). (Yerima, 2007, p.12)

Widowhood Culture in Aetu

Widowhood is one of the cultural practices of the African people. Adeyemo (2016, p. 380) asserts that widowhood is a practice that cuts across all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa people. It is a state and moment of sadness where the wife mourns the late husband. During this period, the wife of the deceased is expected to dress in black or any dull coloured clothes. Traditionally, after the death of the husband is announced, the family of the husband come together to discuss sharing of properties among other themselves. The properties could be in form of lands, money and other valuables including the wife. It is the belief

of the Africans, most especially in Yoruba culture that once a woman is married to a family, she becomes their property. Yerima elaborates on the cultural practice of the unlawful inheritance of widows by the late husband younger or senior brother.

Dola: You have heard the head of the family. My elder, all our brother's properties are here. His clothes, his shoes, his cups, his landed properties, and his wives, all three of them. His two concubines are dead but between them they had five children. You choose first. All his children do not matter here. We have asked them to wait outside. Twenty-one of them. They are also part of the properties. Like their mothers, the family will share them too. Olori Ebi, you will choose first. (Yerima, 2007, pp. 31-32)

Cultural Aesthetics of Storytelling or Folktales in Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu*

One cultural practice that cannot be taken from African people is the oral tradition and moonlight tales or folklores which always take narrative forms. The playwright unveils the play using the folkloric and storytelling technique. He created a setting and scenario where the old woman serves as the narrator as she tells Kande the story of *Aetu*, his mother.

Old Woman: At that moment, did she have ears to hear? (Old woman begins to cough). Very well. But first, take the goat out. Its bleats tamper with my memory. The smell of the he-goat also makes me sneeze. (Exit Kande and the goat, When Kande returns, he sits like a child in front of the old woman. Feet folded, waiting for the story) Good. Now we can start. It was one dark evening. Esu, your god, had come out to play... a young girl dared the forces of nature... (Yerima, 2007, p.14)

The storytelling theatre technique always gives room for interaction between the storyteller or narrator and the audience or spectators.

Comparative Discourse of *Abobaku* and *Aetu*

As mention earlier in the introduction, Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* and *Aetu* are two cultural plays that showcased various cultural practices of the Yoruba people. The plays highlighted the religious procedure, burial rite, and widowhood practice amongst the Yoruba people. From the analysis of both plays, readers could deduce some similarities that cut across both plays. One major similarity between both plays is the religious practice of the Yoruba people. Before western religion was introduced into the African society, the African people worship and call on deities such as Orunmila, Obatala, Sango, Ogun, Esu, Osun etc. Ogun and Ifa were predominant gods in *Abobaku*. The plays emphasised the importance of deities in the everyday activity of the Yoruba people.

The moment we have been waiting for arrives in the presence of the three gods- Ogun, Osun and Esu of Adeoti village. This is the tradition we inherited from our fathers of Oyo. In the name of Alaafin Oyo, omo

iku, omo ofo, omo arun, kabiyesi, iku babayeye, we enthrone the new Abobaku who will escort our new oba to the land of our ancestors be with us. (Yerima, 2007, p. 8)

Esu and Orunmila (Ifa) are also predominant gods in the Yoruba culture with various functions. It is a norm in the Yoruba culture to consult either Esu or Orunmila before making a decision. Esu, serves as a messenger who runs errands for his worshippers and believer. Esu is believed to be two-sided which underscores in the colour of his cloth. He is well known for mischief, causing confusion and endangering personal relationship leading to why the god is feared and avoided. Aside from this, Esu, is sometimes a benevolent god. People believe and seek for his favour and benevolence. He is believed to be capable of blessing women with children and protecting them from suffering misfortune. In response to this, the playwright created scenarios where Aetu runs to Esu for help to punish the man who inflicted her with pain

Aetu: Then be still, Baba, let me arrange my thoughts, they mingle fast, with my pain. (Saura gestures to her to continue. She clears her throat). Lalu o! Hurry now to the house of Otediran. They have killed Atiba, then they raped me. Let the fool, Oke who calls himself my husband not find peace till he dies. Let his child that I carry die the same way. Let any man who decides to sleep with me whether in hatred or in love, die the same way. Let any child I will have in this world suffer the same fate. For both my passage and womb belong to no one but Atiba. Before they die, let them be sick in the head... one leg here on earth and one leg here on earth and one leg in the land of the dead. Let them remain haunted by the death of Atiba. Here! (Throws the stone at shrine) Baba, I have said my mind. (Yerima, 2007, p. 20)

From the lines above, the playwright also interpreted Esu as a fighter and a messenger. Esu is a god in Yoruba cosmology that is used to inflict pain and punish individuals according to worshipper or sender's wish.

Another underlined similarity in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* and *Aetu* is the feminine gender ideology. Ahmed Yerima is not a feminist playwright but has highlighted the role women play in the society as well as the pain they go through. As summarised in the synopsis, *Aetu* exposes the decadence in the Africa society where young women are bethrothed to the male family members after the death of her husband. However, with focus on feminine gender ideology, Ahmed Yerima showcases the patriarchy effect on how women are subdued and cheated in the society. Yerima displayed how they are not allowed to talk or decide their life. This was seen when Gbade the brother of Aetu's late husband refused to agree to Aetu's decision to return to her father's house and married her instead.

Gbade: I shall take this Tapa woman to enrich my bed. If I die with her by my side caring to my every need, let no one

blame the gods for loving me. I am not a greedy man. (Yerima, 2006, p.38)

On the other hand, Yerima showed the role of women in the society as noted in *Abobaku*. Using the character Faramola, Yerima displayed how brave and courageous women are in protecting their family. This was noted in Abore's line notifying the chiefs that Faramola was seen in the shrine room of death and as the stage instruction in her line.

Faramola: ... (She unwraps the thick damask cloth and wraps it on her shoulder. She puts on both the hand and neck beads. She takes the two horse whisks and stands, her back turned to the door. The door opens slowly. ABORE enters.) (Yerima, 2015, p.44)

The action of Faramola shows her love for Ajibade and her readiness to take up his place and carry out his responsibility as the Abobaku. Aside from this, Faramola juggled between traditional religion and Christianity which displays her effort in keeping her family together.

It is worthy of mention that the Separation Stage which is a major component of Genep's Ritual Theory is foregrounded in the two plays. For example, Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* vividly showcased the separation stage when Ajibade was initiated and installed as the Abobaku. The same process was seen in Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu* when the character Aetu changed her social status when she got married to her late husband's brother. Arite that promotes the widowhood culture in the African race.

To justify the essence of the transition stage within the world of Genep's Ritual Theory, the preparation of Ajibade in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* as a king was stated to take three days. Due to the participant's connection with the spiritual world, he or she is granted a special license to engage in actions like prohibited sexual relationships.

A very good example of the incorporation stage in Genep's Ritual Theory can be seen in Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu*. The character, Aetu's social status changed when she married Oke. Aside from marriage, the incorporation stage also applies to death rituals where the deceased soul is imagined to be fully incorporated into a community of the dead or a newborn child who becomes a full member of the community of the living (stillbirth). A good example is the character, Faramola in Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku*. Faramola is said to be a member of the Abiku (stillbirth) with a spiritual identity and earthly presence. The incorporation stage is characterised by elaborate rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations.

Findings

The paper revealed the dexterity in Ahmed Yerima's use of culture in his dramaturgy and forms of writing. It showed the various cultural aesthetical elements such as dance, song, and language among others in the Yoruba culture. It also revealed the cultural and traditional practice of the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria which includes the burial process, burial rite of kings, rite of enthroning kings in the old Oyo kingdom, and the widowhood rite in the Yoruba culture. It also showed the negative effect of this concept of Abobaku which led to the death of Faramola and Olori Ilari. Also, on the other hand *Aetu* revealed the negative effect of child marriage and women as inheritance in the Yoruba culture. The paper also revealed the patriarchy level in the

society where women are given less chance to make a choice or decisions for themselves.

Conclusion

Culture is an immense entity that cuts across the day to day activity of various groups of people or societies. It serves as a means of identification, and differentiates the practices of a group from another. It is important to note the huge role Nigerian playwrights play in helping to showcase and differentiate the various cultural practices peculiar to each ethnic group, society and tribe. Ahmed Yerima a Nigerian playwright whose dramaturgy has examined Yoruba cultural practices review the concept of culture, gender issues, scarification, and influence of western education and religion on indigenous values. However, this paper displayed the various cultural values and practices in the Yoruba culture. *Abobaku* explicitly identified the burial rites of Kings in Oyo Kingdom of the Yoruba culture. It also looked into the enthronement rite which includes the seclusion of the king to be at the *Ipebi* where he is walked through the custom and tradition of his people. *Aetu* revealed the decadence in the Yoruba culture in early female child marriage and the widowhood practice of the Yoruba people. Therefore, this paper concludes that African playwrights like Ahmed Yerima whose literary works is the crux of this paper has done justice in giving a clear picture of the cultural and religious practices of the Yoruba people indicating both the good and the bad practices. Also, the paper concludes that human beings have the power to define and determine their culture and traditions.

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