

Cultural Interpretation and Traditional Perspectives in Ahmed Yerima's *Akudaaya*

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Abstract

*Culture remains a clear indicator of the organic identity of mankind. Cultural materials are therefore one of the dominant sources from which playwrights have continued to draw. However, an attempt to dramatise certain inherent cultural practices of a people often comes with challenges especially for a playwright who does not belong to such culture. Hence, this study examines Ahmed Yerima's *Akudaaya* with the view to define the cultural trajectories and traditional dispositions reflected in the play. Through textual analysis, the study analyses the selected play-text. It is revealed that Ahmed Yerima's attempt to reflect the cultural identity and traditional perspectives of the Yoruba people is manifested in his dramatisation of the symbolic representation of the king's crown; the cultural interpretation of *akudaaya* and the dichotomy of language; cultural norms and the significant position of *Iyalode*; ritual aesthetics and the spirit-cosmic identity of the Yoruba people. The study concludes that Ahmed Yerima's *Akudaaya* remains one of the notable plays written by a Nigerian playwright which reflects the cultural identity of the *akudaaya* view among the Yoruba people. However, Yerima is able to achieve cultural reconstruction and initiate a challenge to create cultural consciousness through his play-text.*

Keywords: Culture, Traditional Perspectives, *Akudaaya*, Ritual Aesthetics, Ahmed Yerima.

Introduction

Culture remains one of the clear indicators of the organic identity of mankind. The word "culture", according to Dongxiang (2018, p. 811), derives from its Latin root *cult* meaning "cultivation, reclamation, development and enlightenment". In the opinion of Mathews and Savarimuthu (2020, p. 1), culture "is the social change of any character in society". In other words, it is "the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterises an institution, organization or group, influences all aspects of a society's and an individual's life" (Gaygisiz, 2013, p. 170). Wole Soyinka cited in Okome (2004, p. 16) also submits that, "culture is important for mankind to understand itself and necessary for the engine of social progress". Due to its broad nature, scholars such as Birukou et al. (2013, p. 3) have argued that "culture is a slippery and ubiquitous concept" and this justifies why it is "the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation".

The above indicates that culture is an inherently wide concept that spans the trajectories of both material and non-material components of a people's way of life such as their values, beliefs, norms, symbols, language, clothing, food, artifacts, objects of beautification, traditional tools and technology, mode of greeting, and so on. Thus, every culture is characterised by both verbal and nonverbal aspects of a given society which help to project their uniqueness to the world. It is important to mention that symbols which often represent the nonverbal aspects of culture are common denominators of the cultural identity of a people. Dongxiang (2018, p. 811) underscores this fact by asserting that both symbols and cultures are closely related to human. According to syllogism, symbols are closely related to cultures, thus, both of which

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are related to human activities. Once interactive relations among symbols, human and cultures are established, symbols will serve as the central bridge.

It is clear from the above that symbolic elements as compared to verbal elements such as language also possess the same degree of value when it comes to reflecting the cultural disposition of a particular people.

In view of the above, cultural materials remain one of the sources of inspiration from which playwrights across time and space have continued to borrow. However, in their quest to write plays that capture the cultural consciousness and traditional perspectives of a people, playwrights are often saddled with a wide array of challenges, some of which may or may not come with commendations. In the same vein, there is no doubt that Ahmed Yerima remains one of the notable Nigerian and indeed, African playwrights who possesses a rich understanding of the cultural peculiarities of the Nigerian people. This largely justifies the position of Julius-Adeoye (2013, p. 193) 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 ... Yerima is a culturally, socially and politically conscious playwright whose works reflect conditions as they affect the people of his society.

Having opined that culture is "the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment" (Yerima, 2007, p. 43), Yerima often navigates the worlds of various Nigerian cultures in his plays without committing cultural hara-kiri. This fact is equally corroborated by Adeniji and Osunbade (2014, p. 12) who aver that:

Yerima tactically locates his stories in the various Nigerian cultures to give it a sense of reality. He has written over twenty seven published plays that have to do with the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo cultures. His treatments of characters and issues reveal a clear indication of Yerima's mastery of the people's aspects of culture such as proverbs, wise-sayings, norms, ethics and codes, religions and expressions.

Scholars such as Adeniji (2014) cited in Adeniji and Osunbade (2014, p. 11) have also identified recurring themes in Yerima's attempt to reflect on the cultural and spirito-cosmic identity of the Yoruba people in his plays by submitting that:

The masquerade (*Egúngún*), the witches (*Àjé*), religion; God (*Olórún*, *Àjagúnmalé*) and the gods - *Èsù*, *Ògún* (God of Iron), *Sàngó* (God of Thunder), *Yemoja* (River Goddess) - , *Ifá* cult, knowledge, beliefs, myths and legends are cultural parameters that characterise and locate Yerima's plays in the African literary spatial setting.

In light of the above, this study examines cultural interpretation and traditional perspectives in Ahmed Yerima's *Akudaaya*. The study adopts the textual analysis method of research which enables the researchers to critically analyse the selected play-text.

Cultural Interpretation and Traditional Perspectives in Ahmed Yerima's Akudaaya

• *The Symbolic Representation of the King's Crown*

Ahmed Yerima elaborates on the Yoruba culture in *Akudaaya* using a number of peculiar symbols. First amongst them is the *Ade Ire* otherwise known as the King's crown. The crown of a Yoruba King is a prominent symbol of power and status. Modern Yoruba Kings usually have several different beaded crowns and caps which are worn on state occasions and during public functions. These crowns are often regarded as *Ade* or *Adenla*. In most cases, they are cone-shaped, with distinctive features and designs, while the entire crown is covered with brightly coloured beads. Elaborate glass beading which is a sign of royalty is also often conspicuous among crowns of Yoruba Kings as they are used to emphasise the wealth and status of the King. Since the King is protected by the gods, the colours symbolise his divinity and each bead colour represents a different Yoruba god.

It is worthy of mention that the images on the King's crown may express the King's personal interests or taste. A great crown with a beaded veil is called *Adenla*. Each part of an *Adenla* has a purpose and every motif symbolises kingship. For example:

the veil on a crown protects people from the king's powerful gaze and signals his connection to the gods;

stylised faces are a way to remember a royal line, honour ancestors and represent ancestral kings or Yoruba gods;

birds represent a king's ability to mediate between spiritual and secular worlds. It also allude to the powers of women;

triangles and diamond shapes reflect a crown's sacred qualities;

interlace patterns refer to the continuity and balance of life;

an elephant is a symbol of longevity and power; and so on.

Many of these traditional designs are still being used to create modern *Adenlas*, however, it is important to remember that the meanings and motifs on a crown can vary among the Yorubas.

- *Cultural Interpretation of Akudaaya and the Dichotomy of Language*

According to the Yoruba people, an *akudaaya* is a supernatural entity who journeys to a new place to start life again after being confirmed dead in a previous place. The Yorubas say this happens when someone dies untimely. This is further reiterated by Magbagbeola (2021, p. vii) who opines that:

Growing up as a little child in the hinterland of Lagos, I was told countless stories about how a dead person re-appears elsewhere to begin a new life. These beings, most of whom are believed to have died untimely, are called *Àkúdàyà* (living-wraiths) in Yoruba cosmological hypothesis.

In addition to the above, *Akudaayas* upon their death, begin to roam the earth until they settle in a place far from where they lived when they were alive. They then start to lead seemingly normal lives, never revealing themselves to anyone in their past lives except through dreams. The existence of *Akudaayas* is usually terminated when someone who knew them in their former lives discovers them. When recognised, they simply relocate but leave traces of the lives they have led e.g. children they may have had. From the foregoing, *Akudaaya* is known in Yoruba worldview hypothesis as the return, transformation or transmigration of a dead person into a living being post untimely death.

The existence of *Akudaaya* in Yoruba thought system continues to parade socio-cultural and supra-empirical thinking of being. The belief in *Akudaaya* is one of the metaphysical psychologies in Africa, most especially Nigeria with specific focus on Yoruba culture. It is strongly believed in Africa, being a multi-religio-cultural society, in her polytheistic convictions on the unseen and celestial creeds that an untimely murdered person can still metaphorically transmigrate to another place to continue his or her time on earth. This sort of supernatural transformation is mythically conceptualised in Yoruba thought system as the *Akudaaya* philosophy.

It is pertinent to mention that as a cosmological belief, *Akudaaya* is not restricted to Africa alone as there accounts of its occurrence in other continents across the world. Yoruba people believe that most of the victims of accidents, fire hazards, deadly diseases, and so on are subjects of sudden death and could as a result have the grace of returning back to this material world. The individual is entitled to the privilege of completing their assigned mission on earth like marriage, procreation, and accumulation of wealth that was suspended prior to his or her untimely death. *Akudaayas* may disguise their looks when relocating to another area to complete their mission.

Consequently, language is a key symbol of any culture that is crucial for communication amongst people within a community. In other words, language is a system of words and symbols used to communicate with other people. It also includes body language, slangs and common phrases that are unique to a certain group of people. Over the years, the cultural and philosophical depth of the existence of *Akudaaya* accounts for the reason why stories about it are often portrayed in Yoruba language. However, in *Akudaaya*, Ahmed Yerima tries to explain a Yoruba phenomenon with predominantly English language and this rubbed off on the authenticity of the plot of the play.

Similarly, there are certain Yoruba tenets that were short-lived in Yerima's *Akudaaya* due to the heavy reliance on English Language as a means of communication for a predominant Yoruba cultural phenomenon. This heavy reliance on English Language hinders the beauty that the story would have gotten from a Yoruba perspective. This is first noticeable in the dialogue of Iyalode:

IYALODE: *Esu laalu ogiri oko, Eboru ti n je latopa!*

Here is groundnut oil for you

The very way you hate it. (p. 11)

Realistically, in Yoruba cosmological belief system, it is said that Esu feels an aversion towards palm kernel oil otherwise known as *adi eyan* in Yoruba language. As little as this error might seem, it negates the interpretation of the play by a Yoruba who deeply understands the cultural context of Esu and his relationship with palm kernel oil.

Another notable instance where the language of communicating the plot redefines the cultural ideology of the background the story erupts from is in the issue of prayers as seen in the following excerpt:

IYALODE: Let the rats cry as rats, Let the bird chirp like birds and let humans speak like humans... (p. 12)

Originally in Yoruba Language, this prayer goes thus; "*K'eku ke bi Eku, K'eye ke bi eye, K'omo eniyan si fobun bi eniyan*" which means that, "things should take the rightful turn or pattern of existence." This prayer by Iyalode is common in Yoruba land and it is often done after the rendering of a sacrifice. Conveying such an important prayer in predominantly English Language dilutes every sense of Yoruba cultural interpretation in this moment of the play.

The above notwithstanding, Yerima deserves to be applauded for his exceptional exposition of panegyric expressions throughout the play. A typical example of this is seen in the excerpt below:

MALOMO: Iyalode oo o

Iya tiwa ni gbogbo Ijekun Odo de oo

Alagbara laarin oloye pata

Iya gbogbo wa re o o

Abiyamo tooto

Iya mi mogamoga eye sooro moga

Eye mogamoga sooro

Yeye omo ni i gbomo

Irukere ni i gbomo Orunmila

Otun ni i gbawa nibi Olori gbogbo obinrin pata

Otun ree e o o Iya lo je fun gbogbo wa

Otun, alagbara nla

Olowa, Oloro, Abiyamo,

Afagbo sase ... (p. 33)

• *Cultural Norms and The Significant Position of Iyalode*

Norms as elements of culture are the rules and the guidelines which specify the behaviour of an individual. Norms keep a person within the boundary of the society and its culture. They serve as guide for the people and detail the dos and don'ts of the society. Hence, norms are the formal and informal rules regarding what kinds of behaviour are acceptable and appropriate within a culture. This infers that norms are specific to a culture, period and situation. Consequently, norms are often divided into two types, namely: formal norms and informal norms. Formal norms can also be called "mores" and "laws". They refer to the standards of behaviour considered the most important in any society. Examples in Nigeria include: traffic laws, criminal codes, etc. On the other hand, informal norms can also be called "folkways" and "customs". They refer to standards of behaviour that are considered less important but still influence how we behave. Table manners are a common example of informal norms, as are such everyday behaviours as how we interact with a cashier and how we ride in an elevator.

Ahmed Yerima in *Akudaaya* gets it right with his characterisation of Iyalode on whom the play is based. The playwright in the author's note revealed that:

That is the lot of the engrossed storyteller like me. Sometimes, he moves from one world to another world to search for the settings, the characters and the colour of his stories. When I then decided to build the story round an Iyalode who is an Akudaaya – a wraith. (p. 5)

In Yoruba land, women are not allowed in the affairs of government but only one woman stands out. She is the only female noble in the midst of the *Obas* (Kings), chieftains and advisers which are positions that are mainly dominated by men. Of every woman in the village or community, the Iyalode stands out. Iyalode is a short form for the Yoruba expression, "*Iya ni ode*" which means "head of the women" or "queen of women". She is the first lady in the Yoruba Ruling Council. The Iyalode is a title bestowed on the wealthiest, prominent woman in the Yoruba community by the King. Iyalode is usually a market woman. An instrument of the King, the Iyalode influences the women folks who are traders majorly found in the market if not at home. She rapport with the King on behalf of the women, gives feedback to the King on the views of the market women or what they expect of the King because they are "mothers" of the community of which the King is metaphorically one of their sons.

To quantify the assets of the Iyalode, her massive fertile farmlands, her unnumbered slaves, businesses, houses and other things makes the Iyalode a respected woman in the village. Women come to her for advice on child-related matters as well as other domestic issues. The position of the Iyalode has evolved to be a powerful one that in some climes, the Iyalode now has sub-chiefs who are constituted under the aegis of Market Women Council, and they are answerable to her. In Yerima's *Akudaaya*, the person and position of the Iyalode in Yoruba land is seen in the play as contained in the following excerpt:

OTUN: She is rich. I also want her wealth. I want her slaves. I want her body. I want everything ... (p. 59)

• *Yerima and His Reflection of Ritual Aesthetics*

Ritual is a formalised mode of behaviour in which the members of a group or community regularly engage. Religion represents one of the main contexts in which rituals are practiced, but the scope of ritual behaviour extends well beyond religion. Different cultures also have different rituals or established procedures and ceremonies which often mark transitions in life's course. As such, rituals reflect and transmit a culture's norms and other elements from one generation to the next. Yerima's *Akudaaya* is rich in the reflection of ritual elements and practices of the Yoruba people and this is notable during the discussion between Tooke and Malomo:

TOOKE: Let the moon continue to drift. I cannot sleep. Let us perfect the dance steps of the new life to come. Listen ... I hear the drummers approach in my head. Teach me the dance of Paramole, when she leaves his ancestral home.

MALOMO: He. Even though you are a woman, the masquerade is a man. The Costume wipes out your womanhood. Nobody must know. Listen to the music in your head. First, you bow to Baba Amusan, who gives you a whip and a cloth to wipe your face. You collect a glass of drink from him, you taste it and you must give the glass to Iyalode, and pray for the family. The four eldest women will come and carry you into the world from the land of the ancestors. The Abore will lead you to the palace. Keep your energy; do not dance at that time. At the shrine of Ogun, Abore will scream, as the head of the dog is slit from its neck with one stroke. That is when the music grows with your spirit. At that point, you do not belong to us anymore but to the village. Are you ready? (pp. 50–51).

The excerpt above outlines the process of the ritual dance which Tooke is expected to carry out as the *Paramole* Masquerade of Ijekun Odo. Malomo, Tooke's *atokan* instructs Tooke on what is culturally appropriate for her to do to cleanse Ijekun Odo off the predicaments and ills that has befallen her.

• *Values and the Spirito-Cosmic Identity of the Yoruba People*

Values are another important element of culture which involve judgments of what is good or bad and desirable or undesirable. A culture's values shape its norms. Anything that is important to us in our daily life becomes our values. Owing to the fact that culture varies from society to society, values are different in every social context. This is why some values are hereditary while some can be learnt.

In Yoruba land, kingdoms maintain an orderly and unified political system which is still in effect today. A Yoruba kingdom was usually made up of an headquarter and other local towns with villages. However, its political administration consisted of a central level and subordinate units. The central level was headed by the Oba (King) and assisted by a handful of Chiefs and other political figures in the administration of the kingdom with the help of a Priest whose divining guides the territory. The subordinate units are headed by Baales who concentrate mainly on the administration of the towns and villages in the kingdom. Like the King, the Baales usually have a group of Chiefs who assist in overseeing their jurisdictions. However, the Baale of each town and village is entitled to pay annual homage (*isakole*) to the King at the central level. Any erring Baale can be relieved of his post or sanctioned to certain punishment respective of his offence since all Baales are responsible to the King at the central level.

The traditional authority in Yoruba land was perceived as divinely ordained and, therefore, was revered by its subjects. Historically, Kings in Yoruba land were regarded as the divine representatives of the gods on earth. They were often credited with various kinds of supernatural powers, including that of divining. The Yoruba traditional society is comprised of traditional and spirito-religious concepts and practices. Yoruba traditional religion celebrates a wide array of beliefs, myths and legends which are woven around the

existence of Olodumare (the Supreme Being), *Orisas*, masquerades, the witches, the gods (Orunmila, Esu, Ogun, Sango, Oya and so on), Ifa and so on. Hence, this explains why Ahmed Yerima makes mention of messengers of these gods.

Conclusion

Culture cannot be eroded and neither can tradition be wiped away from the psyche of an African man. Therefore, more research into the critical aspects of the Nigerian cultural history is necessary for the sustainable growth and development of African traditional literature. Ahmed Yerima's *Akudaaya* remains one of the notable plays written by a Nigerian playwright which has sought to reflect the cultural identity of the Yoruba people. By so doing, Yerima has been able to achieve cultural reconstruction and search for a challenge to create cultural consciousness amongst the lovers and readers of Nigerian play-texts, especially the ones that are set in Yoruba culture.

As the advent of technology and modernism has captured the minds of youths today and almost everyone seems to have been influenced by the doctrines of the modern world, it is of worthy note that a well-documented history in literary form is a dominant source document which can serve as evidence of historic happenings in our various African communities. With the abysmal transformation from decency to indecency and decline in morality that has befallen Africa over time in terms of culture, we are certain and hopeful that the near-dead African culture will be revived to the joy and admiration of all. The institution of the theatre which is an extension of culture can still be used functionally to propagate and preach what is culturally correct.

It is recommended that playwrights conduct adequate research and write in accordance to the sanctity of the culture they intend to portray in their works, and their culture and traditional beliefs should be highly respected rather than diluted. Also, the principles of check and balance can be employed by playwrights when writing about a particular culture. To avoid causing harm or starting off a tribal conflict with the power of your pen, playwrights should endeavor to conduct sufficient research so as to have a vast knowledge about what they are writing about.

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