

“I Am Trying to Redefine the Place of the Playwright”: An Interview with the Nigerian Playwright Ahmed Yerima

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A notable Nigerian playwright, director and Professor of theatre and cultural studies, Ahmed Parker Yerima¹ was born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1957 and currently teaches in the Department of Theatre Arts, Redeemer’s University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. He had taught theatre arts at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife), Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and the University of Lagos, Nigeria. In 1991, he was appointed Deputy Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria. In 1992, he led the National Troupe of Nigeria on a performance tour to the United States of America. In 2000, he was appointed Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria. Between 2006 and 2009, he was the Director-General of the National Theatre/National Troupe of Nigeria. Yerima is a member of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, Fellow of the Society of Nigerian Theatre

¹ The research on which this paper is based was conducted during my M.A. programme in Literature in English in the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. Entitled “The Aesthetics of Oil Crisis in Ahmed Yerima’s *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*”, the M.A research was meant to examine how Yerima deploys elements of drama to represent the Niger Delta oil crisis. My sincere appreciation goes to the notable Nigerian playwright Professor Ahmed Yerima for offering me the opportunity to grant the interview. Also, I am immensely grateful to my supervisor, Professor Gbemisola Adeoti, for his quality guidance during the project.

Artists (SONTA) and Fellow of National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners. In March, 2023, Yerima was appointed the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

Yerima has written twelve books and co-authored five books on various aspects of drama, theatre and performing arts. He has published over seventy plays which include *The Silent Gods* (1996), *Kaffir's Last Game* (1998), *Attahiru* (1999), *The Sick People* (2000), *Dry Leaves on Ukan Tree* (2001), *The Sisters* (2001), *Tafida* (2001), *Yemoja* (2002), *The Lottery Ticket* (2002), *Otaelo*—an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (2003), *Ameh Oboni the Great* (2006), *Hard Ground* (2006) and *Idemili* (2006), *The Wives* (2007), *Akwabata* (2008), *Majagbe* (2008), *Little Drops* (2009), *Ajagunmale* (2010), *No Pennies for Mama* (2011), *Mu'adhin's Call* (2011), *Igatibi* (2012), *Heart of Stone* (2013), *Orisa Ibeji* (2014), *Abobaku* (2015), *Pari* (2016), *Iyase* (2016), *Jakadiya* (2017), *Odenigbo* (2017), *Drugga* (2018), *Hendu* (2019), *Queen Amina* (2019) and *Ala* (2020). *Hard Ground* (2006) won the Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas Literary Prize for drama category and the Association of Nigerian Authors/Niger Delta Development Commission J.P Clark Drama Prize.

Whether set in precolonial, colonial or post-independence Nigeria, Yerima's plays often deploy elements of myth, dream, legend, indigenous religions, contemporary history and politics to depict and interrogate socioeconomic, political and cultural conundrums that characterise the condition of life in Nigeria. *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*, for example, capture the complexities of the oil crises in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. While *The Silent Gods* depicts the political crises occasioned by Nigeria's presidential election of June 12, 1993, which was annulled by the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida, *Heart of Stone* and *Pari* centre on the plague of terrorism ravaging the North-Eastern region of Nigeria.

Apart from the fact that Yerima's plays enjoy regular performances in many universities across Nigeria, they have continued to constitute subjects of scholarly engagements and sources of data to students and academics of theatre arts, film studies, performing arts, English and literary studies in many universities and colleges of education in Nigeria and other parts of the world. They have also engendered full-length books, masters' and doctoral theses. These include Gbemisola Adeoti's *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama* (2007) and *One Muse, Many Masks: Reflections on Ahmed Yerima's Recent Plays* (2021).

The following interview took place on the 4th of November, 2014, in the playwright’s office at Redeemer’s University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria, during my visit to him as a postgraduate researcher in the Department of English, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria, where I was then researching on Yerima’s artistic intervention on the Niger Delta oil crisis as reflected in his three plays entitled *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*.

Nurudeen Adeshina Lawal: *Would you give an insight into your background?*

Ahmed Yerima: My name is Ahmed Yerima. I was born on the 8th May, 1957 to one gentleman, I like to call him a gentleman (laughs), a police officer called Musa Yerima, and my mother, Saidatu Yerima. I was born in Lagos and grew up in Lagos. I went to Saint Bernadette Primary School, Abeokuta for my primary school. From there, I went to Baptist Academy, Lagos, for my secondary school; and from there, I went to Ife, the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), to do my first degree in Dramatic Arts. I left Ife and went to University College, Cardiff, for my Postgraduate studies. Then I did my M.Phil/PhD at Royal Holloway College, University of London. I am basically a teacher. I love my teachers who taught me. People like Wole Soyinka, Kole Omotosho, Yemi Ogunbiyi and Biodun Jeyifo. They inspired me a lot. So, when I finished my PhD, I came back to Nigeria. I taught at Ife for a year. I spent about six years at ABU (Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria), and then went into government in 1991. Ogunde had died and they wanted people to run the National Troupe. In 2000, I became the Head of National Troupe. In 2005, I was appointed the Director-General of Abuja Carnival. And in 2006, I became the Director-General of the National Theatre. At Ife, Soyinka had taught me how to write a good story and in England, they had taught me how to write plays in terms of language and humour. But I think that the government taught me how to know my people and how to use culture for my people. So, I think that was where I started my flirtation with multi-culturalism—how to write plays on people whom I do not come from. As I became de-culturised, acculturised and hybridised, one started to pick things from other people and I was looking at the process of cultural hegemony and fusion here and there because that was my background. It became somewhat easier for me to see Nigeria or Nigerians as one. May be few symbols and images change. So, it became easier for me to tell stories of each person. That’s me in a nutshell. I write plays.

NAL: *What actually spurred you into playwriting and the theatre?*

AY: I think television did that. I was born a television boy. The first television came in 1959, two years after I was born. I grew up seeing a television.

My father bought a television, I think, when I was about ten years. I was very impressionistic; it was something that I liked. It was nice because at that time, there were so many movies that told stories that I loved. Apart from that, I saw stories from the Nigerian angle, *The Village Headmaster*. I watched people like Femi Johnson, Garuba, Funso Adeolu and the likes. I was impressed with what all these people were doing. At that time, Soyinka was in prison, and his group led by Prof. Dapo Adelugba who started the Amphitheatre. I saw people like Joy Modi, Sam Loko, Wale Ogunbiyi etc. All these people were actors, young actors. And they would perform and I would see them. I didn't know them then, but I liked what they were doing. I loved the art of creating characters. I was also a talkative small boy. So they thought I would be a good lawyer since my father was a policeman, not knowing that I was going to be a good story-teller and actor rather than a good lawyer. I feel that I was in form three when the thing became overpowering. I started seeing scripts, *Lamb Tales from Shakespeare*, Ene Henshaw's *Medicine for Love* and so on. I think in form three, I wrote my first play, *Batuma's Daughter*. I had a drama group, the Georgian and the Victorian. And the play was performed by the group. I had an English teacher, Mrs. Agboola, who was an American, but she was married to a Nigerian. She was very encouraging. She read my scripts with my terrible English then. I developed a serious attitude to the theatre in Ife where I met great people like Laide Adewale, Kola Oyewo, Toun Oni, Peter Fatomilola and Tunji Odeyemi. These people were brothers; they were professionals and untutored tutors. And I had teachers, people like Soyinka, Segun Akinbola and others who would teach the basic theoretical aspects. So, you find out that one was privileged at that time to have a rounded education, especially exposure to the theatre. So, you read the plays of Wole Soyinka, then you performed them with the great actors. I was glad that I met those people. And by the time I became the Artistic Director of the country, it was easier for me to call on anybody to work with me as a small boy grow up and become a man. It was their responsibility to make me a man.

NAL: *You have not said anything about your religious background.*

AY: I think my religious background is as diverse as my cultural background. I was born a Muslim, but my father was such a liberal man that he allowed all his children to do what they wanted to do. I was the first child. Later, when he became a King, I knew my responsibility. That was also trapping. But having attended, first, a Catholic Primary School, Baptist Secondary School and, then, married a Catholic lady, the liberal aspect of Christianity is there. I can say that the religion I prefer is Christianity. I like to say I am a Christian; sometimes, maybe not in a strict sense, but I always have a sense of guilt that I had a father

who was a liberal man. So, I must live an element of liberal essence in my belief. You know religion has become so trapping these days when people have built walls around what a Christian and a Muslim should be. But when we were growing up, we had all of them in one family. So love was an overpowering thing. I think in my message, if you read my new play, *Heart of Stone*, that's what I tried to preach there. And if you even look at my play like *The Bishop and the Soul*, you find the confusions in my soul and you know what kind of Christian I am. There is also the issue of cultural background in it. So, you find that I am trapped in many contradictions.

NAL: *So how do you reconcile the contradictions?*

AY: I am myself. I try to be myself.

NAL: *So, for now, you are a Christian?*

AY: For now, I find peace in being a Christian.

NAL: *Do you go to Church?*

AY: When it is convenient I do.

NAL: *To what extent would you say you have been influenced by indigenous religions?*

AY: Heavily! If you read my plays you find them there. My latest play, *Orisa Ibeji*, my most popular play, *Yemoja*, and *Ajagunmale*. You find out in those plays that they are heavy on me.

NAL: *Therefore, you still feel that our indigenous religions are still useful?*

AY: They are. They are useful. They guide us in their own way. I am not saying you will find me killing a goat and say it's for my promotion, instead of writing a few papers and a new play. I am saying that it is good if this will make my ancestors happy. You may try to run away from them or bend them, but they catch up with you.

NAL: *As a cultural officer under the military regime, how were you able to cope?*

AY: I almost got into trouble with the first play I wrote, *The Silent Gods*. Coming from Soyinka's background, he gave us notes on theatre as a tool for

conscientisation; the playwright as teacher, prophet, seer, etc. I was coming from that background. I had taught it and I had written a book on basic techniques in playwriting. Soyinka had also taught me Iconoclasm where I would make a fun of you in a play and you would not know. So, when I became the cultural officer of the country, I wrote *The Silent Gods*. I think it was my comment on June 12. If you read it on the superficial level, it's a village in search of a King. The gods had always chosen a King for them, but this time, the gods say you always kill your Kings. So, we are not choosing for you. We are keeping quiet. You choose your King and so they start trying to pick a King. Then, the intrigues and friends betraying friends. It was time for a confab in the country and my good friend, Prof. Jerry Gana who was my colleague at ABU in the Department of Geography took the play to Abuja and called the people of the Assembly to see the play. It was around that time we were trying to write the 1999 Constitution. The SSS went to see the play in Lagos and saw the symbols and the hidden meanings. I forgot that theatre arts people were also employed in the SSS. This made me grow and I know that if you have to write, you have to take the responsibility. So I was asked if I wanted to be thrown out of the job or remain radical. Do I have the connection, the power, the gift and blessing of God as Soyinka has to confront government? All the answers were: NO! I asked, can I not stay within the government and write plays? And the same Soyinka taught me that drama can be used for or against the government. I found out that the theatre could be used in a very subtle form to give a message, even revolution. And that was how I survived. And I think I wrote the best plays of my life while I was serving in the National Theatre. I don't think I could have another one like that again.

NAL: *Some of your critics have argued that the majority of your plays are meant to affirm the values of the establishment. How would you react to this?*

AY: Most times, they didn't trust me. And if they didn't trust you, the best thing you could do is to be consistent. Then, one or two people would now say I think we can give him some credibility. And I think that was what they did with *The Silent Gods*. They were not too sure where I stood. But later, I found out that the way I could escape were language and the stories which were so beautiful. I believe in consistency and dedication. And they started to accept one and it was wonderful when one became the Artistic Director.

NAL: *The Professor in Kaffir's Last Game actually approved the military regime of Sani Abacha.*

AY: Yes.

NAL: *Why?*

AY: Because most Professors did then because the military actions were fast. They wanted anything that would bring change; forget it now that they tell big stories (Laughs). The appointments were also very quick. If you had an uncle who was in the Army, you would call him and ask him to include your name. And before you knew it, you were a Minister. You didn't have to go to the television and be criticising and analysing. The decisions were quicker and faster.

NAL: *Coming to your plays on the Niger Delta oil crisis, what takes precedence—is it to offer alternative views of the crisis or to just document it?*

AY: My fear is for people like Nimi who jump into the crisis without understanding the problems. And you find out that at the end they destroy themselves. And that was why I destroy Nimi at the end of the play.

NAL: *A critic like Adeoti has argued that you fail to capture the government's role in the crisis. What's reaction to this?*

AY: Yes, because that time the government had no policy. It took time before they set up the Ministry of the Niger Delta. Up till today, you would see that it has no direction, no focus. It keeps coming on and going off. And the people could rather talk for themselves. You would see that I took that up in *Ipomu*.

NAL: *You also fail to tell us the role the multi-national oil companies in the crisis.*

AY: The multi-national oil companies were not even sure who were fighting them. They were paying their dues to government and you can see that I handled that in *Little Drops*. And the government were paying the Chiefs. But the Chiefs just kept the money to themselves. Because of this, a number of them were beheaded at that time.

NAL: *What character exactly is Inyingifaa?*

AY: Inyingifaa is a business man. He's like Mr. Slime in George Laming's *In the Castle of My Skin*. Inyingifaa has no soul. Inyingifaas are everywhere. They are middle-men who exploit every situation for their own benefits. Inyingifaa must survive, even at the expense of his sister and his own people. Most of the so-called rich people in the Niger Delta are now Inyingifaas. They have exploited the situation. Look at the self-help programmes, they take them, set up crises,

collect money and share and disappear. And when the money finishes, they come and evolve a new crisis, but gradually they benefit from the crisis and walk away. So, what *Hard Ground* did was to begin to look at them critically and say your issues are within. So, stop blaming others. They are very good at blaming others for their problems. They are very good at saying, “see what they do with our money” when they go to Abuja. But, their share was given to them, but they misuse it.

NAL: *Tingolongo, the dreaded masquerade in Hard Ground, is it your own artistic invention or does it exist in the Niger Delta culture?*

AY: Tingolongo is a masquerade from Niger Delta. It is a masquerade of death. I was telling them that Tingolongo will continue to move around them and become a figure of death and their visitor if they do not sit up and resolve the problems of the Niger Delta.

NAL: *Critics like Adesi have argued that the setting of Hard Ground is shrouded in uncertainty. What's your reaction to this?*

AY: Critics like him?(Laughs). First, they were embarrassed, because what the play did was to tell them that you cannot go about and create a great man like John Pepper Clark and keep blaming others for your problems. Even Clark, when he saw *Little Drops*, he attacked it. I made him the Chairman of the premiere. He said, “Beautiful literature, beautiful writing, perfect play. But why is Yerima turning our problem into a pedestrian problem?” And at that point, I felt he has failed and getting too old because you cannot tell me that the issues of children and women in a crisis are pedestrian.

NAL: *Why is Hard Ground set in Lagos?*

AY: It was set in Lagos because I wanted you to know that the problem of the Niger Delta was not a Niger Delta problem alone. In Nigeria, we have a way of creating a dichotomy. “Ko kan mi” (I don’t care attitude). And as long as we continue to think like that, then we cannot nib our problems in the bud. The problems will overwhelm us and swallow us up.

NAL: *In Writing Little Drops, what level of influence did you derive from Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage?*

AY: You cannot read Bertolt Brecht, especially *Mother Courage* and not be influenced by it. If you are not influenced by it, then you are not a good story-

teller; you cannot see human beings and the character of their complexity as Brecht presents them. The duality of man and his capabilities amaze me a lot.

NAL: *That Old Woman, Memekize, in Little Drops, who is she?*

AY: She's a spirit. She doesn't exist. She is Ahmed Yerima. She is the voice; she is the one who sees everything. She's my continuity, my spirit of continuum. Remember, there are four graves on the river bank. So, how come I told you about people buried in three graves, the fourth one belongs to her. And at the end of the play, she carries the digger, lamp and goes back to the back stage. She's always there like an old helper. There's always an angel to assist man, but does man listen? Man doesn't learn. So, Memekize is just there waiting for the next victim to prepare the food. She knows what they will eat. She has the drinks; she has everything. She has the story that will move you. She is the mother, the only one you can trust and yet you find you don't know her. And at the end, none of them knows her. She has the right questions and was not afraid of anyone. In her courage, the women found courage to escape. I transfer all my dreams and hopes into her and I say, I will wish and hope that there will be god who will come and send us a leader who will take us through the crisis.

NAL: *There is a kind of paradox in the play—the dagger with which Kuru, a militant, uses in beheading the King is the same dagger Azue forces him, Kuru, to swear for peace.*

AY: The dagger is the symbol of power. Death is the final judgment. Is dagger not what they understand? Force? And it is a dramatic irony. That was when I was able to touch their conscience. I needed an image which could touch the conscience of the people. I was scared when I saw the play.

NAL: *The dagger is a symbol of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron. Is there any equivalent god in the Niger Delta?*

AY: I didn't go there. There may be. But I know that Ogun is in every culture of this world.

NAL: *In Little Drops, what form were you experimenting with, satire or tragedy?*

AY: I think it was a mixed up. I was more interested in the emotions of the audience. I wanted to talk to the audience, but I didn't want a boring story telling section, where Memekize will sit to tell a story. I didn't want the cliché,

everybody come and tell me your personal experience. But I needed to tell a story that touched the conscience of the people.

NAL: *I read your book, Discourse on Tragedy. And it appears you never come out with any particular definition. What exactly is your concept of tragedy?*

AY: I purposely didn't come out with a definition, because I didn't want people to quote me. If you quote me, you block the idea of reading it, what they will do with it is like what they did with Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*. The mistake he made was that he spent so much time explaining the concept of tragedy, and when people got his meaning of tragedy, they threw the book away. When I was writing my own concept, I wanted to write my own idea, I took it and I looked at it and I said, this is what they used to believe in but, we have gone like this up to the self-degenerative process of tragic element of man. Man becomes a tragic hero that never dies. You don't need a village to push you, but we say that man possesses two qualities. There's a thin line between a madman and a tragic hero. That is the element. I believe in Aristotle. So, I situate my tragedy within the society and not among individuals. I believe in the greatness of effect in tragedy and also that he that is down need fear no fall and that man's reaction to tragedy depends mainly on the economic state of Man. Man is not concerned again on how the tragic situation occurs; it is the effect of tragedy that touches him. And in Nigeria, my own immediate society, I still believe in the fact that tragedy is shared; tragic effect is shared and when it occurs, it becomes more difficult. The playwright has to work hard to make the audience feel the pains.

NAL: *Ipomu deals with the Federal Government Amnesty Programme for the Niger Delta region. The play shows that the programme does not end the crisis.*

AY: (Cuts in) Yes, the crisis continues. The amnesty programme pours cold water on some of the reasons, on the major reasons for the crisis, poverty, unevenness of the largesse. Basically, the society can now see that, from what I heard, some don't even work. They just wait for a certain amount of money to be brought for every community; they share and go home. Eventually, the demands of the society will come, now they can buy second-hand cars with the kind of money they are getting, but by the time you see my car and you hear it is ten million Naira, you will know that the five million Naira you are getting is not enough money. Then, you will want to ask for more money. By so doing, you will want to increase the tempo of your crisis and so we will go back to the square one.

NAL: *Ipomu, the eponymous character, is a Prince, yet he is a militant. Isn't that a contradiction?*

AY: He's a Prince, but he finds out that his mates, the Princes now become blocs, power blocs. So, he has his own cell. He cannot confront the society. Because he has tested two lives and can no longer stay in the creek. That's why he has to leave.

NAL: *The King's ritual of life, is it your own artistic creation?*

AY: Almost every culture has it.

NAL: *What message are you trying to pass across with the ritual of life?*

AY: The King's ritual of life is the man's lust for life. When life is good, no one wants to die. The King does not want to die. What I was trying to show is that, the old man wanted to live forever; nobody who has tested sweet life wants to die, look at his age, when he took a new wife and Ipomu said, my father, "is life so sweet that you do not want to leave it?" That is man for you. But man is forced to leave life.

NAL: *Ipomu participates in the amnesty, yet he fails to surrender his gun. There is still presence of guns in the region. The militant leader also attacks the JTF soldiers, despite the amnesty deal.*

AY: Yes, because once there's money, there's greed. You see, God in His power did not give the spirit of contentment to everyone. The fact that greed is in everybody, about one-forty million plus of Nigerians, maybe one million persons have the spirits of contentment, out of the one-forty million. And this is because they do not have money because if you have, you do not want not to have again. If you don't have the spirit before God gives you an opportunity to have money, you do not want to stop having money. These are the spirits of greed. That's why Campaore removed Sankara and killed him. Now see how Campaore ended after twenty-seven years.

NAL: *I have to ask you this question before I end the interview—how do we place you ideologically?*

AY: I don't think you should try and place me ideologically. What I like people to say about me is that I am concerned about my society. I was brought

up to be concerned by my society. My father being a policeman, and someone like Soyinka being my teacher, there is no way I would close my eyes to the needs of my society. That's the problem and then, I am trying to redefine the place of the playwright. The society designs for me and determines for me what I should write about. Yesterday's night I told my wife, I said look, I have not written a play about my friends whose families or great grand families were white men who came to Nigeria because I have a lot of them and I said it's not just Christianity but how did they survive?

NAL: *In your own view, what direction should Nigerian literary drama take in the first two decades of the 21st century and beyond?*

AY: I think the first two decades of 21st century which is going already will determine that. All what the writers have to do is to listen and watch the society. Society and the effect determine the relevance. The playwright must listen to the society; you do not write for yourself. You cannot say I have an ideology and that's the problem with playwrights with ideologies. They become rigid, stoic and they have a problem of being enlarged and you find critics now wanting to force them into an expansion which they themselves do not have the image of. If you allow your work just to come, we can interpret it in whatever way.

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