

**COLONIAL PREJUDICE AND LEADERSHIP ASSERTION IN AHMED YERIMA'S
*AMEH OBONI THE GREAT***

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ABSTRACT: *One of the concerns of drama is to re-enact societal events through performances. This research thus, explores Nigerian historical evidences in dramatic form. The aim is to treat some vicious themes of the colonial era, yet prevalent in contemporary Nigeria. Yerima's Ameh Oboni the Great directs attention to some socio-economic, political and cultural issues born out of the superiority of wills in governance that need to be addressed for a better society. Thus, adopting the principles of Stephen Greenblatts' new historicism and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics; which places history on a transcending platform and makes it possible to relate issues of the past with the present, this study re-evaluates the play for the purpose of contributing to the pool of knowledge available on the subject and for the advancement of society.*

KEYWORDS: Colonial Prejudice, Leadership Assertion, Ahmed Yerima, Ameh Oboni, African Drama

INTRODUCTION

Umar-Buratai (2007: p.149), notes that "in Nigeria, the predominant perception among playwrights about the role of history in drama is that it enables the correction of acute biases of colonial history." This position draws from the notion that the basis of colonialism in Nigerian history brings to the fore the misrepresentation of her culture, values and belief systems. Yerima recognises this problem and so he notes that "Ameh Oboni was a wronged tragic hero, the reluctant one pushed by the wit of his people" and so his aim is to exonerate him from all colonial (*Ameh*, p.5) prejudices. Thus, Yerima presents a dogged leader who, despite his challenges of betrayal from his people and external hostility from the Europeans, he remains resolute to protect his tradition and Igala kingdom from the imperialists.

With the foregoing insight, the present study examines or evaluates how colonial prejudices and deliberate acts of hostility and subversion aimed at traditional institutions, coupled with internal wrangling and betrayals, brought out the leadership qualities of the Igala King. This is not to say, however, that the king was without blemish or flaw. As we have highlighted in the discourse, he also made certain avoidable mistakes and prioritized certain wrongs, like breaking the laws during the coronation rituals. The key aim is to map this historical event into the activities and predilections of contemporary politicians and traditional rulers in order to wean them of divisive and neo-colonialist tendencies and clear the path for a more rational and progressive society.

Yerima who loves writing about 'real-life top kings,' like the Sultan of Sokoto, the late Maccido, Ovonramwen Nogbaise of Benin, Ameh Oboni the Great and others, succeeded his father as the Ezeomo of South Ibie Kingdom in Edo. He has won some awards, including the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) award with the play *Hard Ground*, the Saventino Award, the Mexican award with *Yemoja*. Some of his works/plays include: *Modern Nigerian*

Theatre: The Geoffrey Axworthy Years, 1956-1967 (2005), *Basic Techniques in Play Writing* (2003), *Fragmented Thoughts & Specifics* (2003), *Theatre and Democracy in Nigeria*, co-edited with Ayo Akinwale, *Attahiru* (1999), *The sick People* (2000), *Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees* (2001), *The Sisters* (2001), *Yemoja* (2002), *The Lottery Ticket* (2002), *Otaelo* (2003), *The Angel and other Plays* (2004), *The Limam and Ade Ire* (2004), *Ameh Oboni the Great* (2006), *Kaffir's Last Game*, *Idemili*, *Erelu;-kuti* (2006), *Hard Ground* (2006), *Aetu* (2007), *Wives* (2007), *Akuabata* (2008), *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen*, *The Bishop and the Soul with Thank You Lord*, *The Silent Gods*.

Synopsis of the Play

Ameh Oboni... represents how the British forces subverted and finally conquered Igala kingdom in 1956. Prior to the intrusion of the colonial forces in Igala kingdom, Attah Ameh Oboni acknowledges that he read how the Whiteman dealt with other great kings and captured the Niger area. He notes that he:

read about great kings like Ovonramwen of Benin, Nana of Itshekiri, and Jaja of Opobo. Great kings whom the British Empire fought, trapped and dragged out of their kingdom in chains, with soldiers guiding them to faraway lands, to die. I put myself in their places, and swore never to let it happen to me (*Ameh*, p.26).

This realisation makes him resolute and willing to do everything possible to protect his land and people from British control. However, The Attah could not stand the tricks, threats and intrigues of the whites, who also instigate some natives against him. Thus, to avoid being captured like the leaders he read of, he tries to commit suicide, but Ajamalede representing the gods stops him; contrary to the historical account where he commits suicide. Yerima introduces a deus ex machina technique to escort the Attah to join his ancestors, instead of allowing him to commit suicide. Yerima, states that he does not "believe that kings could commit suicide, because the Yorubas have a saying that powers belong to Almighty God through the kings. So how can a man who is bigger than death go and commit suicide." (appendix 2, p.211).

Meanwhile, in an interview, Jubrin notes that the Attah's action was futuristic:

He killed himself because they were going to depose him. The tradition is that Attah never dies, he transcends. So Attah does not see Attah. So if he is deposed or sent on exile that means he will be living while another Attah will be enthroned meaning that it is a break of tradition. His family will never smell that place. He had to commit suicide as a sacrifice. Now his son, Idakwo Michael Ameh Oboni 11, is the present Attah of Igala after about fifty-seven years or so (appendix 4, p.215).

Thus, the Attah's act is justified, because if the Europeans had caught him, he would have been exiled like Oba Ovonramwen, King Jaja of Opobo and others. Which means he would be alive somewhere, while a new Attah exist in the kingdom. That would have hindered his lineage from ascending the throne of Igala kingdom.

Plot Structure

The play is divided into eleven short actions, separated by slow light fades and sharp blackouts. It begins with a song by two palace musicians, whose duties as tradition demands, is to wake the Attah every morning. Adigede-Attah, one of the senior palace officials stops them, because according to him, "the night was bad, very bad. *The Attah* did not sleep a wink" (*Emphasis mine*, p. 12). He however allows the Ohioga (Ifa priest), to perform his incantations and praise singing, which also prepares the Attah's mind for the day. This scene introduces and connotes the sense of uncertainty that conditions the mind of the reader/audience, for the troubles ahead.

Scenes two to four constitute the rising action of the play, revealing the causes of conflict. The basic situations centre on the Attah's worries; for the past seven days, he has had a repeated dream that spells doom. He confesses to the Ohioga that the dream drives fear into his soul. "A dream repeated for seven days at the same time, and same place, is no longer a dream, but a message" (p.17). He reveals that he is being chased and he calls for help, but he hears his chiefs "cry out... grab him... kill him...strangle him..." (p.19). In response, to the Attah's dreams, Ohioga explains that the gods are angry because he violates the laws of the land during his coronation, by skipping some rituals. Furthermore, the Attah is troubled about the intrigues of the whiteman, who lures his subjects, including his son Gumuchi, with gifts and they conspire against him. He notes that they accuse him of "high handedness...of *being* stubborn... arrogant..." (p.25). These happenings constitute the early complications in the play. However, Yerima describes the Attah as "a very wronged tragic hero- the reluctant one- pushed by the wit of his people" (*Aneh*, p.5). Hence, despite the accusations of the whiteman and his people, the Attah remains resolute in his conviction to help his people. Thus, conflicts in the play build around the Attah's disobedience to stipulated laws during his coronation and his refusal to yield to Western imperialism. Unlike king Koko who turns to his people for help, the Attah is not only rejected by his people, but also the gods, who chose him "for their sacrifice" (p.22). It becomes obvious that the Attah's reign is doomed, as he struggles with the conflicts within him (that is the burdens of his dreams) and the ones without (caused by his people and British authority).

The highest point of tension comes in scenes five to seven, where the Attah resounds to his people the dangers ahead, due to their fraternity with the whiteman. He notes that:

A concerned mother. A concerned mother goes to the big bush to farm with her three little children. Hearing the sound of the big bad lion, she wraps her children up, and puts them all in the big water pot for safety. She creates little holes in the pot, so that the children can breathe. She goes into the bush, and from a distance, she watches, praying to Odoaba for help. When the hungry lion roars, the children, being children, think it is play, so they kick and break open the pot, and one by one, they crawl out into the hungry deadly jaws of the lion... She has done her job, she remains in the bush watching, as the lion feasts on her children, sobbing, wetting herself with the urine of fear... (p.32).

Just like the concerned mother, he has done everything in his power to provide the basic amenities of life for his people. Yet some of them, including "the chiefs are not happy." They feel that he overshadows their importance with his successes (p.34). Thus, out of jealousy and hatred, they prefer to support the whiteman whose goal is to take control of the land. Majority of them sign Muffet's (the District officer) letter to the British government, in order to depose the Attah. Muffet accuses him of being an idol worshipper and a murderer. For those reasons and more, Muffet says he cannot work with the Attah because he "will invariably make the indirect rule system very difficult in Idah..." (p.38).

In addition, the Attah notes that he "tried to be a king, a friend and a father...conducted the affairs of the state of Igala kingdom in harmony according to customs and traditions...tried to be fair and just to all...yet *his* people are happy to sell me and their conscience so cheaply" (p.46). Thus, in view of their actions, the British government prods further, by asking the natives to leave "Idah for Ochala" (pp. 36-37). This means they will abandon their shrines, the king's palace, and their royal cemetery. This, the Attah vehemently disagrees with and in order to plead his case, the Attah seeks solution from Muffet's boss in Kaduna.

From scenes eight and nine, we begin to experience the falling action. The Attah returns from Kaduna disappointed at the outcome of his meeting with Muffet's boss. He notes that his mind is heavy with thoughts of what his people wrote to the Governor, hence, the Governor also accuses him wrongly. "You are a murderer he kept on shouting. You use your people for sacrifice" (p.48). In response, the Attah says he "asked them to show *him* a report from a family to the District officer claiming the Attah or any of *his* messengers abducted a child of theirs" (p.48), but no proof was given. Hence, the connivance of Igala people against the Attah not only confirms his earlier fears, but also shows the extent humanity could go in venting anger; even if it means betraying or killing their fellow man. This scene also reveals that he receives message that he should not return to his throne at Idah, because Muffet orders policemen to bar him from entering the palace (p. 52).

Finally, the denouement of the play comes in scene ten and eleven, to the disappointment of Muffet, who seeks to make a show of the Attah's arrest. He orders "forty men to mount road blocks at the outskirts of the town", with the intentions to disgrace him (p.60). However, in view of his realisation that he stands alone, and Muffet's obvious plans to overthrow him, the Attah tries to commit suicide, to avert being disgraced like the leaders he read about (p.56-58).

At the end, with pride Amana-Attah tells Muffet to go home, noting that "the enemy you seek has won the battle," because Muffet did not succeed in capturing the Attah (p. 61). Amana-Attah's comment shows that a few of the natives understand the Attah's predicament. This prompts Etemahi's conclusions that the Attah "was a good one...only he moved faster than our feet. So we, unsure, pushed him to a fall" (p. 62). Yerima uses the play to frown against saboteurs, who are keen to lie and betray their own in order to achieve their personal gains. Just like Rotimi's *Akassa You Mi*, Yerima also promotes the need for "unity in tongue and soul" in the face of internal or external aggression (p.62).

Characterisation

Yerima notes that "**Ameh Oboni** was a wronged tragic hero" (p.5). Yerima's observation is a revelation of the historical circumstances of Ameh Oboni, whose repeated dreams at the beginning of the play spells his future ordeals. His motivations for characterisation are thus,

... tied to his dreams. Ameh Oboni acknowledges that his dreams drive fear into his soul. Each time "it starts with the twinkle of a star, it shines bright and then it dims into total darkness, as if one blows out the oil lantern..." (p.17). He further notes that he is chased in his dreams by white masquerades (which represents the whiteman), and he calls for help "with his last breath," but no one answers him (p.19). This portends a threat not just to his life, but his throne as well. There is also the notion that even his people will abandon him at his time of need.

Nevertheless, he strives to prepare his people against the ploys of the whiteman by establishing schools. He believes that they could stand a better chance to defend themselves if they are educated to understand the "foolery of the whiteman's wisdom" (p.33). However, according to Etemahi in the conversation below, the Attah's mistakes lie in his goodwill, in his desires to free his people from the shackles of ignorance without their consent:

Etemahi:... you give too much. Your education makes the youths look bold at issues and ask questions. Question that I fear may even begin to shake the very root of our existence one day...

Attah: Afraid? Of what? I want us to be equal to the rest of the world. I want every Igala man to hold his head up high, walk tall and stand tall.

Etemahi: You want, you want, has the Attah ever asked us what we want?

Attah: Okay, what do you want?

Etemahi: Too late, your Highness, the lost dog, deafened by his pride has already started to gallop... (pp.34-35)

The above shows that even when a leader has good intentions for his subjects or subordinates, there should be room for regular interactions. That way, ideas are shared and decisions reached; otherwise the latter party could easily misunderstand their leader, as in this case. Meanwhile the Attah's rush to make his people bold and confident, makes them feel he is overbearing.

Muffet, the District officer also fears that the Attah is "too independent minded" (p.39), which makes it difficult to work with him and of course plots his downfall. This shows that the whiteman capitalises on the Attah's weak area; he is a good leader quite alright, but the failure to carry his people along creates a loophole. His predicament comes to a head, when Muffet succeeds in instigating the natives to petition him. The kingmakers and chiefs "agreed that the king must go for meaningful and lasting progress to take place..." (p.40). Thus, in all his goodwill, both the invaders and his people see him as "the stumbling block" that must give way for Igala to move forward (p. 55). This confirms his dream where he calls for help "with his last breath," but no one answers him (p. 19). This clearly marks the Attah as a victim of betrayal and circumstance.

Just like the leaders he read of, the Attah, is no exception of the whiteman's wrath. They pick on his self standing approach to issues, in addition to his refusal to renounce his traditions, as well as, move his kingdom from Idah to Ochala. Hence, Muffet describes the Attah as "a stubborn man," who is ready to give him trouble and he (Muffet) will not hesitate to give him

same. He accuses the Attah of being a "juju man, idol worshipper" who uses his people for sacrifice (p.39). This is like painting him in bad light to justify his dethronement. However, Etemahi contradicts Muffet's claim by noting that Ameh Oboni is a good man. He notes that the Attah "opened their eyes and they now have schools, roads and even the road for the white man's mystery bird to land..." (p.33), that is the airplane.

In spite of the Attah's good works, he also has his flaws. For instance, he breaks the laws surrounding the coronation ritual, which is to last for nine days, but he observes only five days. He notes that in order to receive his Staff of office from the British Resident Officer, who is "going on transfer, he asked that we speed up the coronation procedure" (p.20). The Attah's sole decision proves that from the onset, he has been avoiding issues that might cause threat to his throne, especially from the whiteman, hence, his decision presents him somewhat as an impulsive leader. However, Ohioga, the diviner makes him understand that for that reason, the gods are angry. This means he gives due honour to the whiteman's wishes against those of the gods.

Again, the Attah listens to seven, instead of nine diviners during the prediction session at his crowning. This he says was because they all gave the same prediction. However, Ohioga explains that the remaining two would have cautioned him in "dealing with the White man and in the dealing with some of the people who plan to connive with the white masquerade against the royal dance" (p.22). In addition to the Attah's crimes, he unjustly sends his supposed first wife away; the inherited wife who according to Ohioga would have assisted him in time of need. Hence, in order to pacify her, Ohioga advises the Attah to send gifts to her, but he vehemently says he "shall not" (p.21). These allegations confirm the Attah's stubbornness and pride, which makes Ohioga proclaim that the Attah's ears are "blocked by pride" (p.22). Thus, the gods have chosen him for their sacrifice and the only remedy is "death...the type that mingles with shame..." (Pp. 22-23).

However, in realising his mistakes towards the end of the play, the Attah sustains his leadership and fatherly role by forgiving his people. He notes that he "was just playing out" his book of life and so he forgives those that betray him. He claims to be "the fearful python who, out of kindness, slips away into the big bush instead of crushing the children of the house he lives" (pp.58-59). Thus, his actions are motivated by his desire to improve the lives of his people. The realisation of his mistakes makes him an outstanding leader, a rounded character who adjusts to issues as they unfold. Etemahi confirms that he is a good leader, (p.63). Thus, realising his good intentions only at death, the Igala people honour him with the royal burial he deserves.

Colonial Prejudice and Leadership Assertion in the Play

Ameh Oboni treats issues of invasion, conspiracy, disregard and disrespect for tradition and the people of Igala kingdom by the European powers. The thematic preoccupation of Yerima in this play is to correct some anomalies, especially misrepresentations around the Attah. According to Yerima "Ameh Oboni was a very wronged tragic hero- the reluctant one- pushed by the wit of his people..." to his downfall (*Ameh*, p.5). Part of Ameh's predicaments, just like Oba Ovonramwen's and Attahiru's emanate within his domain, as well as external factors (colonial interference). His fall greatly lies in his quest to make things right for his people in a rather precarious situation that finally overwhelms him; on that premise, he sacrifices himself for peace to reign. The indictments on the Attah by the colonial forces are not different from the verdicts of his counterparts. Jubrin (see index D, p.176) notes that the Attah was wrongly treated by the Europeans who accuse him of:

human sacrifice and cruelty to animal, which they did to King Jaja of Opobo, Oba of Benin and others. In one case, a forensic team was set up, they took blood sample at the site of a sacrifice, to Ibadan and came back and people say it was human blood. Further investigations took it to London and they said it was not human blood, but by the time the London result came out, he had already committed suicide.

Although the Attah makes it clear in this dialogue, when the whiteman summons him to respond to the petitions against him by his people:

Attah: My mind is heavy with thoughts of what our children wrote, and told the Governor. You are a murderer he kept on shouting. You use your people for sacrifice.

Ukagidi: Impossible. None of our gods eat or drink human flesh or blood.

Attah: I screamed that throughout the meeting. I even asked them to show me a report from a family to the District Officer claiming the Attah or any of my messengers abducted a child of theirs.

Ukagidi: Did they my lord?

Attah: No. But they said the blood sample they took from the shrine of Inikpi was confirmed to be human blood. So I said I would like to know the name of the human being... And when all attempts to find the human being failed, they now said that I had too much juju, and that with my witchcraft, I was cruel to animals as I feed them to my gods. And that at the Ocho festival, I had killed a goat with my arrow. That was when I asked if in the white man's land they begged animals to come and die (pp. 48-49).

Yerima and Jubrin's account exonerate the Attah from all accusations of human sacrifices or cruelty to animals, as Muffet claims. However, the accusations were a sort of threat, to ensure the Attah succumbs for the indirect rule system to succeed.

Yerima also uses the play to question the identity of the Igala people, in view of their geographical location in the middle belt. Although some of them are Muslims, they have their traditions, language and characteristics different from the northern group like; Niger, Sokoto, Kaduna, Kano and others. For this reason, they sometimes regard them as not good or God fearing Muslims, (p.39). Which is why the Attah worries that they only recognise them as true Muslims, when "it is time to vote for a northern desire..." (p.27), but after the vote they regard them as Kafiris, (infidels). Thus, since the British government is already in control of the core north, in order for them to have a firm hold on the Attah, as a 'true Muslim', they urge him to renounce his tradition. They declare that he should "throw away the royal symbol of the Attah, Eju b'aju ailo, the sacred beads, the royal stool, the Ikebe 'Onunu Ere crown, otogbo and cow

whisk for baban riga" (p.28). But the Attah turns down their request, lamenting that those in "the middle belt are a problem of geography...like an additional cloth from a different inferior material to the north" (pp. 28-30). His desire therefore is to ensure the freedom and confidence of his people, so they could be "equal to the rest of the world *and for every Igala man to hold his head up high, walk tall and stand tall* (Emphasis mine, p. 35). Unfortunately, Muffet and his group forestall the Attah's desire by luring the natives against him, including his son Gumuchi with "gifts of position or a car..." (p. 28). Ochijenu notes that they also apply threats to remove anyone against their wish from office (p.42). This proves that aside false accusations employed by the British government in order to gain grounds in Nigeria, they also adopt bribery, threat and deceit, which of course fuels division amongst the people.

Adeoti (2007:p.40) confirms that "the divide and rule style of the British accentuates divisions and promotes differences in the region, fuelling inter-group rivalries and incessant communal clashes decades after independence." A clear case in present times, are pockets of internal and communal clashes in Nigeria, especially in oil producing communities in the South-south region over sharing formula of compensations. A related case, was the crisis in Ogbolomabiri-Nembe of Bayelsa State in 2000, caused by the divide and rule practice of SHELL Petroleum Development Company. They empowered a group called Isengu-Furo, to take care of the welfare of youths in the community, but at a point, the group became oppressive. This led to a revolt by an opposing group called Eсени-asawo, leading to the death of hundreds, while so many fled the community for several years.

CONCLUSION

Yerima succeeded in interrogating the history of Nigeria, by looking at the social forces interacting in human societies, beyond images on historical pages. This research arrives at the findings that the developmental challenges of Nigeria, typified by oppression, corruption, betrayal, hypocrisy, insecurity and other aberrations, are rooted in her distant past. These vices breed hostility, acrimony and insecurity in governance, which hinder the progress of society. Although the play is not completely faithful to the historical accounts, but Yerima adopts some salient parts of history to create a dramatic platform that enables the continuous re-assessment of the past in the present. In this regard, he emphasises the resistance of Ameh Oboni to European imperialism and promote peace, the essence of unity in fighting a common goal and the love and respect for Nigerian traditions. The study, thus, recommends that the leaders and citizenry of Nigeria as a matter of obligation should uphold her ethical values and shun the current trend of neo-colonialism, so as to rescue the nation from the grip of economic, cultural and political decadence.

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