

“Crisis of the Soul”: Religious Trauma and Hypocrisy in Selected Plays of Ahmed Yerima

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Abstract

*A recurrent theme in the drama of Ahmed Yerima is religion – religious conflict, religious contradictions, hypocrisy, fanaticism, the issues of salvation and conversion. These issues are explored in varying degrees in most of Yerima’s plays. Yerima’s predilection for this issue is not unfounded, bearing in mind his personal experiences as a born-Muslim who attended Christian schools and is married to a Christian. Although this biographical detail is used tangentially in this paper, his personal contradictions find a way of escape in his creative explorations. Our focus is on Yerima’s *The Bishop and the Soul*, *The Limam*, *Uncle Venyil* and *Idemili*. In the light of the foregoing, this paper interrogates religion and its effects on the characters, how they are able to manage religious pluralism in their lives and live peaceably in the society. Our concern is not just to show what religion can do to man but what man does with religion. What are the various conflicts the characters face in a multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic setting like Nigeria? What are the different strategies adopted by the characters to resolve the various manifestations of fanaticism and hypocrisy identified in the plays? These are some of the questions this paper seeks to answer within the background of the present insecure state in the form of terrorist acts of the radical Islamic sect Boko Haram in Nigeria.*

Introduction

For me, man is a dynamic figure much like the insect that rolls excrement on the ground, the “yinmiyinmi”. It goes and as it does, it picks up other things. At the end, the shit now becomes the base of all the rubbish that have been picked up and it becomes a whole

bundle of life which the insect must roll from place to place. (Yerima in an interview with Gbemisola Adeoti in Adeoti (ed.) 2007 p.370).

This paper interrogates Yerima's dramatization of the "crisis of the soul" as experienced by his various characters and the characters' responses to the individual religious challenges they face. In other words, the paper examines the trials and tribulations each character faces when caught between earthly and "heavenly" desires. It discusses religious intolerance, hypocrisy, pluralism, apostasy and violence – issues which are various forms of abuse of religion that traumatise the souls of religious people as noted in the plays.

Most African countries are multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-tribal. Thus, the contradictions which attend such a continent are varied. One of such is the issue of religious conflicts. Africa is plagued by what Ali Mazrui calls "the triple heritage"(1986) which explains the presence of a traditional (indigenous) African religion and the importation of Islam and Christianity. Before the arrival of the colonial masters, Africa had its many religions which are referred to as Indigenous African Religions. In this case, it could be Sango, Oya, Ogun, etc. Colonialism brought Christianity and before this, Islam had made its inroads into some parts of the continent. It is, therefore, important to examine how the African man who is faced with a plethora of faiths resolves this seeming confusion in his life. A. E. Erubetina (2001, 2) states concerning Nigeria that it is a " a plural state with diverse and complex ethnic, economic, cultural, linguistic, religious and social realities with high conflict potential that colonial masters who created the Nigerian state were quite aware of and utilised as a basis for enunciating the administrative policy of divide and rule." The complex religious environment in Nigeria is responsible for the kind of religious conflicts found in the nation.

The Author and his Faith

Ahmed Parker Yerima was born into a Muslim home but he attended Christian schools. He is also married to a Catholic. Naturally, this has tremendous impact on his life. After all, a writer is the product of his environment. The religious contradiction, so bottled up in him desires an outlet, an escape to free itself, so to speak. Despite his exposure to

Christianity in the various schools he attended, he always went back to a Muslim home where he ate ‘Sallah Ram’. Yerima asserts: “I have extended this belief and practice of dual gods and beliefs by Nigerians into my professional and creative works. I mean, if theatre is a mirror of life, the mirror must be right in order, either to effect social change among the audience to tell the story right. In my plays, such as *The Bishop and the Soul*, *Ameh Oboni the Great*, *Idemili* and *Hard Ground*, we meet characters who believe like most Nigerians in the two religions.... (‘Religion, Culture and Development’ 2007, 141-142).

Thus, Yerima finds an avenue for resolving the religious contrariness of his life in his dramatic writings. A cursory look at his plays reveals a constant engagement with the issue of religious dilemmas probably out of his personal encounters with the conflict. In an interview with Adeoti, he asserts that “the living contradictions that has become my life” is played out in *Limam* (Adeoti (ed.) 2007, 370). This issue is confirmed by the playwright to Adeoti when he asserts:

In terms of my religion, I was brought up a Catholic. I went to a Baptist school. I ended up being the Senior Prefect... . When I grew up, I found out that my father was the head of the Muslim Society and I have to take over from him when he dies. We even had a mosque in the house... I felt deeply like a Muslim... but I have grown up to be tolerant; to become somebody who is exposed. That is why you find in some of my plays the conflicts of these religions. (Adeoti 2007, 369)

It is in the light of this conflict, that the prefatory statement that opens the paper becomes meaningful. To Yerima, man carries around with him a “burden of belief” that needs to be resolved. He uses the image of the “yinmiyinmi” insect to bring this idea home. Yinmiyinmi is not only symbolic, its activity is. Man, like the insect, moves from one place to another and gathers experiences, in this sense religious and cultural as will be shown in this paper. This becomes the basis and the pedestal upon which he reacts to issues of life. The complexities of this issue are played out in the selected plays. To do this effectively, religion and its elements need to be explained.

Religion Conceptualised

The word religion is generated from the 11th century Anglo-French word "religium". The word "religium" is derived from the Latin word "religio" which means "reverence for God or gods". Religion refers to human belief in God or gods, ancestors or supernatural and sacred phenomenon and spirits. It is a system of worship of the divine. Religion as used in this work is from the sacred and spiritual sense not the secular. The idea of "being religious" has secular connotations meaning thoroughness, difficultness, rigid obedience or attachment to an issue and a habit and tenacity of purpose. This is, however, not the idea of religion as used in this paper. Rather, religion is seen here as a necessary cultural system of belief. It is as old as man and is the basis of his existence. Religion is that chain that links man with his God and the essence of any religion lies in its capacity to shape man's mentality towards good deeds. Adesina (2007, 283) in "Religion, Morality and National Development" opines that "religion is a moral and spiritual core that must bind and hold together everything that we embark upon..." Quoting Farrant, Adesina goes on to state that religion "is a force which has mostly influenced the character of mankind, the ethical values and the moral behaviour" (283).

Thus, the place of religion in the life of an individual is an immense one. Whether as a Christian, Muslim, Indigenous African Religionist, Free-thinker, humanist, atheist, agnostic or mystic, there is a belief that there is a hand behind the wonders of the world, the galaxies cannot just be; it must have been formed by someone or something be it God, Allah, gods or goddesses or whatever. The use of the word religious in this paper, however, refers to the reverence for the supernatural. This adherence to the worship of God or gods must be viewed in two ways: how man worships God or gods and how man reacts to his society through his religion. In other words, the focus of the paper is on how he uses his religion and what the religion does to him. It is important to note based on the selected plays that what religion does to people is as crucial as what people do with religion. Religion might turn a man into a tolerant, humble and peaceable being. It can also turn him into a fanatic making the effect of his actions horrendous and devastating. In this way religion has been manipulated and it is no longer a source of harmony but of discord, disunity and of terror.

Religion is also universal. In spite of technological and scientific breakthroughs, religion as faith based activity still holds a pride of place in human society. It is also a communal thing despite its personal nature. While it rests on the culture of the people, it is also an individual conviction, that is, it is personal and psychological on one hand yet communal and social on the other hand. Thus, the notion of religion here involves both the internal conviction and external actions and attitude that the character in the selected plays exhibit. The response to their internalization of religion is shown in the external contexts and attitude either as tolerance and harmony or as discord and terror. The fundamental philosophy of all religions is love and peace, tolerance and fellowship. However, it has become a source of war and hatred. In fact, it is increasingly being abused and misused by many terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Boko Haram. The characters in Yerima's plays exhibit challenges that are derived from their socio-political contexts while the personal ones have their source in internal crises. Thus, they internalise and externalise the crises of the 20th and the 21st centuries - religious problems that seem to divide the world into halves.

The importation of Islam and Christianity into a society that has its own religious practices has led to crises which many writers have treated in their works. The complexity is made more glaring when a character is torn between two or more religions. The difficulties, traumas, turmoil and complications inherent in many Nigerians (and by implication, Africans) are well dramatized in the texts chosen for discussion in this paper. Unresolved conflicts which degenerate into mass killings like the Boko Haram have been noted in the plays. They show characters who cannot "live and let live"; who cannot accommodate and tolerate other religions. They have been sufficiently socialised in such a way that they display excesses of their religious faith and fight others for their gods or in the name of their gods.

Boko Haram Defined

Nations of the world at one time or another have been involved in political and religious violence which may arise out of a sense of wrong and injustice. Some of them include Algeria's Al-Qaeda,

Somalia's Al Shaabab, ISIS in Iraq and Syria. It is important to note that many religious skirmishes have been noted in northern Nigeria where Boko Haram originated from. Boko Haram began as the "Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda' Awati Wal Jihad, headed by Abubakah Lawan in 1995. The leadership fell on the Muslim Cleric, Muhammad Yusuf when its former leader left for further studies in Saudi Arabia. It was this man who gave the name "Boko Haram" to the group. Boko Haram literally translates as "Western education is forbidden". "Boko" in Hausa means "animist" Western or non-Islamic. "Haram" is an Arabic word which means "sin". This organisation recruits young men from the lower class. Initially, its sole aim was to overthrow the Nigerian government and enforce Sharia law in the country. It was a "silent" organisation until 2004 when it attacked government and police buildings.

However, in 2009, its operations became violent as it attacks a prison in Bauchi where hundreds of people died and Yusuf himself lost his life. The group has come to deny the way the public view them: "Boko Haram does not in any way mean "Western Education is a sin" as the infidel media continue to portray us. Boko Haram actually means "western civilization is forbidden. The difference is that while the first gives the impression that we are opposed to formal education coming from the west.... Which is not true, the second affirms our belief in the supremacy of Islamic culture (not education), for culture is broader, it includes education but not determined by western education". The sect frowns at the media's description of it as the "Boko Haram". Instead, it prefers to be addressed as the Jamaatu Ahlissunnah Liddaaw" atiwal Jihad meaning a "people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teaching and Jihad (89, see Matthew Ebim). Boko Haram sect believes that non- Muslims are "Kaffirs" meaning non- believers. To ensure and enforce Islamic laws, the group resort to bombing of Christian churches as in the Madala Christmas day bombing in December 2011. It has admitted to be the mastermind behind the bombings of a Deeper Life Church in Kogi state and of the United Nations building in Abuja. The abduction of over 200 school girls in Chibok in April, 2014 seems to mark the heights of its sheer wickedness and violence.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s”: Religious Traumas and Hypocrisy in *The Bishop and The Soul* and *Liman*.

In the Author’s Note to *The Bishop and the Soul*, Yerima gives us an insight into the play in this way:

The play represents my story or my version of the story of “Everyman”. As a little boy who grew up in a Catholic Convent School, I clash my beliefs in the purity of the Priests against the bitter reality of a world fraught with tribulations and temptations in my growing-up years. I question my faith and early beliefs within my psychological self and in doing so, create a new meaning for the very essence of my being. Most of all, the play allowed me the pleasure of walking through the esplanade of fear in order to find an inner peace to my own troubled soul. (1998, 6)

In this note, Yerima affirms our earlier statement that he uses his plays to work out his own religious fears and dilemmas. *The Bishop and the Soul* opens with an embattled Bishop who is to be “cautioned” for his erring ways. His activities seem to go against the tenets of the Catholic Church as he uses the pulpit to advance his political ideas. For instance, his Christmas sermon was considered too political. The Bishop openly advocates the incorporation of Pentecostal liturgy into the Catholic Church. The Bishop’s conflict with government leads to his being arrested and handcuffed. This, in itself, is an insult to the Church, and, in the presence of the “inquisitor” Archbishop Tiku, Madam Une insists on seeing the Bishop. She is angry at the Bishop for transferring Father Francis into the “bush”. She accuses the Bishop of being jealous of the Priest’s youth and popularity. Fortunately for the Bishop, he is able to clear the air about the transfer.

There are two major issues that necessitate the visit of the Archbishop. First is the stabbing of the Bishop by the love-struck Sister Vero and the possibility of another book written by the Bishop in which he attacks the church. Sister Vero is infatuated with the Bishop and claims she is to be the vessel to carry a child for him. Vero is cast in the mould of a temptress: one of the many crosses of the Bishop.

However, the Bishop is confined to his oath of celibacy and when the love/lust is not returned, she stabs him. Though this major temptation helps to fully foreground the Bishop's chastity, the fact remains that this attack and others are external and are aided by the inner turmoil that the Bishop suffers. His writings – both poetic and ecclesiastic – are riddled with a certain cynicism and quest for peace. As a matter of fact, Father Emmanuel questions him on this: “How can a Priest poke fun or make innuendoes at the church when he is not a man?” (19). The Bishop's statement in response to this probing is germane and instructive. It reveals a mind in turmoil and above this, it emphasises his humanity. He answers:

Bishop: But that is the mistake, the priest is human too. He is born, he grows old, he falls sick and he dies just like any other man. (1998, 19)

His remark gives vent to the assertion that man's life is riddled with contradictions. Even the Bishop's night is full of torment. To his assistant, he is probably suffering from hallucinations. But to the Bishop, it is a test of his faith. His dream in which he is being pulled into a burning furnace by two strong men and his mother's voice calling on him to ask for God's help and he is saved is significant (14). This dream is symbolic of the inner turmoil and the confusion he finds himself at the end of the play. In fact, the dream foreshadows the trial between him and Iya Gana who represents the traditional ritual side of him that he thought has been permanently tucked away or he wants to pretend to be unaware of and repressed.

This encounter is the proverbial last straw that broke the camel's back. It shows the indigenous traditional African origin of the Bishop, that he is not who he claims to be and that in spite of his holy facade; he is, by virtue of his origin, a man with an 'ugly' background. Iya Gana reveals Bishop's origin as Esubiyi, the son of Esugbayi and the next chief priest of Esu. This revelation is not so much a surprise as it is typical of most Africans who have come to accept the Christian or the Islamic religion. There is thus, a clash between what the bishop believes in and what he was born into. His contention that he is the servant of the Almighty God is fiercely countered by Iya Gana's

claims that when he was born, “we touched your lips with palm oil from the shrine of Esu” (51). In another light, Iya Gana’s revelation is significant, functioning, as it were, in understanding the root cause of the Bishop’s incessant “spiritual turbulence”. This is perhaps the conflict between his cultural or ritual memory and new experiences trying to establish their place in his mind. As such, what he shares with Iya Gana can be seen in Jung’s theory of “collective unconscious”, shared by all individuals in all cultures, especially in regard to “racial memories” dealing with primordial images and patterns of experience which he also calls archetypes. The Jungian concept aptly relates to Yerima as a writer, who finds theatre as a tool to release the tension of his religious contradiction and at the same time, find a parallel in the Priest’s dilemma.

Thus, Iya Gana makes powerful incantations to force the Bishop to accept the role of the Chief Priest of Esu. At first, in a trance-like state, Bishop appears to yield to her wish but the voice of his mother calls out to him again and he appeals, yet again to God for help. Iya Gana is disgusted with the way Bishop “grovels before the white man’s god” and she leaves with a threat that Esu does not leave its own alone.

The play ends with the Bishop symbolically removing his old gown for a fresh one. He lies on the bed while his Assistant prays for him. According to Adeoti (2007), the resolution of the play shows an unending confrontation, because the Bishop is left in a helpless state. He argues:

The play ends with a symbolic cleansing of the Bishop and the affirmation of his Christian essence. He emerges a new being, having shed the old garment... However, by retiring to the bed, a position of helplessness from where the play begins, it shows that the initial conflicts provoked are never resolved.... (2007, 28)

One cannot but agree with Adeoti that the physical removal of the old gown is symbolic. In fact, it symbolises renewal, a new birth, thus, a new Bishop at peace with his God. However, what is certain is the fact

that the conflicts will persist, but, as usual with him, he will win as long as he looks up to the cross.

In 1895, Freud and Joseph Breuer published a book entitled *Studies in Hysteria* in which they asserted that the factors that caused hysteria can be found in unresolved traumas that are buried in man from childhood. Later Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams* where he treated fundamental issues in psychoanalysis especially the concept of dreams, childhood and relationships with constituted authority such as parents and figures of authority. The unearthing of repressed events in the unconscious is one important issue in this discourse and it is a crucial issue in psychoanalytic criticism.

The Bishop's nightmares or hallucinations can be explained as the uncovering of childhood years spent in worshipping the Yoruba god called Esu. This traditional and indigenous worship has been largely repressed by his involvement with the Catholic religion. However, because it is in his subconscious, the Bishop's nights are spent in nightmare and traumatic dreams where he struggles between his present religion and his childhood religion.

Freud's most significant concept useful to the analysis of this play is the Unconscious. To Freud, man is controlled by fear, desires and conflicts which man is unaware of. To him, the "Unconscious" is "the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions, those wounds, fears, guilty desires and unresolved conflict we do not want to know about because, we feel we will be overwhelmed by them" (Tyson 1999, 15). Bishop tries to repress the unconscious. However, repressing those traumatic issues does not remove them because Bishop's actions and mind eventually play them out without recognising them. Thus, Freud does not see the unconscious as a "passive reservoir of neutral data" but "a dynamic entity that engages us at the deepest level of our being" (Tyson 1999, 15).

Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is equally useful to the analysis of religion in this paper. His theory counters Freud's sexual drive and posits that the internal conflict in human beings can be between their personal experience and their primordial knowledge. To him, all species memory is made up of all the events that had

happened to our ancestors as they affect modern men's lives. Culture is learned and is accumulated and lodged in a child's psyche in form of a collective unconscious. It is also important to say that conflict is produced because our collective unconscious does not tally with our conscious experience.

Jung also proposes the mother archetype and believes that human beings have a mother image behind them. This image of a mother is a loving and nurturing one. Humans project this image onto their mothers. In actual fact, the two images do not tally and this equally produces psychological tension. Thus, we find an explanation in the story of the Bishop. In time of trouble, in his dreams, he calls to his mother and sees her calling to him and actually helping to rescue him from the hand of his attackers in his dream.

The Limam (2004) is the dramatization of the fate of an Imam, a religious head, a priest of the Islamic religion. In a way, both *The Bishop and the Soul* and *The Limam* examine the trials and tribulations of men of God. However, the tests are not just social but also psychological because Yerima explores the inner turmoil of these religious leaders by probing the traumas these religious conflicts have caused. Both the Bishop and the Limam are fearless, vocal, devout, highly political individuals. In many instances in the two plays, they show courage in the face of great obstacles and stand their ground against hypocrisies and oppression especially by political heads.

Like the Bishop, too, the Limam's problems are both public and private. The play opens with the ousting of the Limam from his official residence by the forces of the king and the children of the mosque in a religious riot. First, the king's grouse with the Limam is as a result of the latter's refusal to grant the king's request for a new car out of the money meant for development. Thus, the king arranges for his removal. Then, at Abese and Tibe, he speaks vehemently against the heinous acts of vandalism by Muslim youths who burnt down two churches because they are situated beside the new mosque and curses the people who killed their Limomu in cold blood in the mosque. Limam justifies his outbursts against the ungodly acts when, in contrast, the Islam they claim to be fighting for is a religion of peace. The Limam is being persecuted for his righteousness against

abuse of religion by fanatics. The head of the herbalists, the Olosha, also reviles the Limam because of personal conflicts, just as the corrupt Local Government Chairman who has failed to fulfil his election promises.

The Limam may claim to be righteous but he also has his faults. He himself agrees that he may have been “too stiff for the new ways” (*The Limam* 21) meaning that his uncompromising ways could have earned him enemies. In addition, he leaves too many things unattended while “trying to please everyone” and “wanting to be the perfect Limomu.” He is so absorbed with his religious life that he does not know what is happening in his son’s life. He thus appears like the proverbial oil lamp which provides light for everybody but leaves his bottom in pitch darkness. Limam’s son (who is the next Limam) frolics with the Christian religion. His son’s wife becomes a prophetess in a Christian church. The Limam is shocked by these happenings and the thought that another Limam but his son should emerge as his “heir” weighs him down. Coupled with the religious riot against him and a heart condition, he dies.

Clash of Religions in Yerima’s *Uncle Venyil* and *Idemili*

In both *Uncle Venyil* (2004) and *Idemili* (2006), Yerima presents characters that are torn between what Gabriel Okara calls “Piano and Drums” in the poem of that title. The “piano” represents the European religion while the “drum” depicts the Indigenous African Religion in this sense. Both religions claim access to God and those who practise them commune with their God in expectations of safety, prosperity, long life and the fulfilment of such desires of their hearts.

The overriding theme in *Uncle Venyil* is the abuse of power by authoritarian leaders and the unquenchable voice of dissent. Venyil is a vocal and courageous activist who is incarcerated while some reap cheap political gains from his imprisonment. Despite this, the play’s subtle undercurrent is the conflict between Catholicism, a foreign religion, and the traditional religion of the Orim Cult. Kaka, a 65 year-old woman is a staunch Catholic who strictly adheres to the Catholic tenets against the “Orim” cult religion of the family compound. Venyil, her son, has been in prison for four years and all she could rely on was the church, her prayers and the hope that Venyil would

return. However, her husband's family resents her for her strict adherence to Catholicism at the expense of family custom and tradition. They, therefore, demand that she cooks for the "Orim" masquerades. This is against her belief and she vehemently refuses. The Elders demand also that when Venyil is released, he must be initiated into the cult and must be made to worship at the tomb of his late father. Kaka sees through their act when they warn that Venyil's father's spirit demands to know where Venyil is. To this, she responds that her late husband died at 72 years and a baptised Christian and if he is truly a spirit, he should know where his son is and not ask... (*Uncle Venyil* 2004, 54).

Venyil returns from the prison an angry man seeking revenge against his "punisher" – the Head of State. He learns that his wife has left him and the pain in his head increases so much so that he joins the family in Orim worship in order to punish his "punisher". All this is to his mother's chagrin. Kaka holds on to her belief by clinging to her Bible and rosary with more determination. Despite her worried state, she still believes in the church. She says

Kaka: The "punisher" is not a person but an animal.
See what he did to my son, and besides, now I
am a mother, later when he is dead, I shall be
a Christian. God must understand my plight.
Venyil is all I have (2004,70)

It is uncertain which of the two powers is responsible for the death of the punisher for he dies in his sleep. Despite this information, Venyil sews an effigy which he hangs on a rope believing it to be that of the "punisher". *Uncle Venyil* presents the clash between Catholicism and Traditional religion in a Nigerian Society. Kaka represents Catholicism while Venyil straddles both religions. Also, the play is built on Christian songs, prayers, and supplications. Kaka affirms the belief in the Catholic Church while her son seeks power from the Orim Cult. Kaka eventually capitulates and agrees to cook for the Orim Cult.

Yerima's focus on the clash of Christian religion and traditional religion as depicted in *Uncle Venyil* finds greater expression in *Idemili*

set in a semi-rural Igbo community. *Idemili* presents a clash between two religions also within one family as we find in *Uncle Venyil*. Ngbeke is a worshipper of Idemili, the river goddess and the river goddess has shown her favours. She is “given” a male child by the goddess when she needed one. Thus, she has no reason to doubt the efficacy and potency of the powers of Idemili until her husband Ugwuojia becomes trapped in the belly of the earth where he was mining coal in Enugu. Ngbeke calls on Idemili to spare the life of her husband. In desperation, she vows with a cutlass at the shrine of Idemili that if her husband dies, she would not last two days before she follows him. Meanwhile, her estranged son, a Catholic Priest who has been away from home for 15 years learns of the problems at home and comes in disguised. Oheja, now Reverend Father Paul, left home because of the religious differences he had with his father. Paul sees his parents as pagans and tries to convert them by all means. One way of changing them, according to Paul, was to destroy their ancestral shrine, where, unknown to him, he was conceived. Like he admonishes Father Emeka, he has forgotten that he is only to take “people to God, not play God” himself (42). Paul hates his birthplace because of what he refers to as “the blackness of the coal” not just the physical coal for which Enugu is noted but its blackness in terms of idolatry and paganism. This stubborn stance of Rev. Father Paul underscores his inadequate knowledge of the human psychology and his inability to come to grasp with the fact that faith is supposed to be a conviction and no one should be compelled to profess it under any circumstance.

However, in a change of mind, he blames himself for staying away so long. He justifies his action in this way:

I left home when I became overwhelmed by the spiritual filth in my family. My parents are pagan worshippers... when I became a priest, I felt better than them. I thought they were not good enough to be my parents. And when I tried to convert them and they refused to listen, I left them, cursing them to damnation. (*Idemili* 2006, 38)

Paul's rationalisation of his abandonment of his parents exposes his limitation. It shows the typical African man who has imbibed the European religion and sees his ritual background as filthy, primitive, backward, paganist and horrendous.

Yerima probes the inner mind of Ngbeke by making her head "hot", thereby revealing her past and commitment to the river goddess. Ngbeke is not only embittered against the goddess but also pathetic. With each sharp sound of the bell, that pricks her conscience, she goes back in time to ascribe the blame of her husband's situation to herself. Ngbeke feels she is suffering because of her inability to fulfil the vows she made to Idemili. In fact, she sees a vision of Idemili mocking her. Therefore, she sacrifices both food and white cockerel to Idemili hoping that the river goddess will release her husband and her child.

Religious Pluralism is depicted visually in the painting of the old house. The house is painted half in black and the other half in white. This image of plurality is reinforced by Father Paul's action when he takes a wooden cross and nails it on the lintel of the house. Meanwhile, Idemili's shrine adorns the front of the house. It is also symbolic as it depicts the religious state of its occupants. Despite Ngbeke's Christian faith, she kneels in front of Idemili's shrine pledging her life in place of her husband's. She realises her ambivalence and quickly asks God for forgiveness.

This pluralism is also reinforced by Ngbeke's actions at the end of the play. The stage direction has it that "she sits between the cross on the door and the shrine". Her conscience wakes her to the duality of her life now. She says: "as simple as drinking... and eating. I crossed from the side of Idemili's river to the forest of wooden crosses." (51) The river is the symbol of Idemili while the crosses are symbolic of the Catholic faith. Ngbeke takes permission from the Christian God and rushes to fulfil her vow to Idemili only to be told that her husband has been rescued. Confused, she looks from the shrine to the cross on the door and asks the question on the lips of the audience: "So, who did it? Was it you, Idemili? Or you, Jesus?" Her plight is typical of most Nigerians who are caught between two religions.

A recurring image that pervades the play is the sharp sound of the bell. At critical stages in the play the sound brings information to its hearers. It could be the “siren of death” according to Ngbeke, or one that wakes the characters up to the full realisation of their state as we find in Ngorie’s case. Or it could be the one ringing in the “hot head” of Ngbeke making her confess her past deeds. In such state of religious confusion, torn between traditional practice and contemporary faith, Ngbeke cuts a picture of humanity that is trapped between conviction and circumstance.

The conflict generated by different religions has informed the theme of many literary works as these writers watch their countrymen and women torn apart by what should have served to unite. Among the poets, David Diop and Kwesi Brew have explored this thorny issue. In prose, Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah narrated this ordeal. In drama, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Femi Osofisan dramatized the fortunes of their people in a state of religious hypocrisy and dilemmas. The focus has been the drama because of its ability to involve the other art forms. In Nigeria, Soyinka’s and Osofisan’s interrogations of religion in *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *Midnight Hotel* respectively focus on social contradictions engendered by religion. These dramatists explore the abuse of religion and dwell on the social rather than the psychological. Their depictions are on hypocrisy, abuse and misuse of religion. More often than not, religion is turned into a tool of manipulation and treachery, as exposed by Soyinka in the relationship between Brother Jero and Brother Chume.

However, Yerima goes further to expose the psychological traumas these characters undergo. His foray into the minds of his characters and the effects of such on their attitudes make his dramatization unique. Significantly, he is also a man torn between many religions as stated in the body of the work. Yerima moves beyond the social by concentrating on the impact of the conflicts on the psyche of the characters. The socio-psychological explorations are especially useful for our discussion because of its rounded approach. He has gone further than Soyinka and Osofisan by extending the frontiers of discussion to include an examination of the impact of the contradictions even on the lives of men of God whether as the Bishop, or the Limam.

Conclusion

A significant number of Yerima's plays deal with religion. This paper has critically examined Yerima's fascination with religion. The experiences depicted reveal that human relations with religion are complex and the complexities are not only revealed in socio-political interactions but also in the psyche of the characters. Yerima's drama is not limited to the exploitative nature of certain men of God but also the burdens of the religion in the lives of the adherents represented here by the Bishop or the almost tragic ending of the Limam whose cross was too heavy for him to bear. Issues of fanaticism and dogma are also dealt with in *Uncle Venyil* and *Idemili*. Religious intolerance seems to be the bane of development in Nigeria. The incessant conflicts between Christians and Muslims have led to great damage to security, peace and unity of Nigeria. From the days of Maitatsine and now to the seemingly insurmountable Boko Haram, Nigeria has lost millions of human and material resources to acts of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and lawlessness, usually from religious intolerance and fanaticism.

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