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YORUBA CULTURAL ETHOS AND LIMINAL DRAMATURGY: A DIRECTORIAL TOOL IN AHMED YERIMA'S *KUTELU* AND *IKUDETI*

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Abstract

African playwrights, relishing on the creative and artistic embellishments in their writings, have used creative ingenuity to present the cultural ethos of Yoruba people to the global world, especially those who are alien to cultural cosmology of the Yoruba people. In the same direction, play directors have also used the tools to bring to the fore of theatre audiences; entertainment, education and enlightenment. In this direction, the creative adventure of Ahmed Yerima, which captures some of these cultural mainframes are identified in the selected play-texts, Kutelu and Ikudeti (2020). This is with a view to showcasing the cultural ethos and the liminal dramaturgy of the Yoruba culture and their relevance to the existence of man in their terrestrial space. Arnold Berleant (2005) theory of cultural aesthetics is used in the paper to explicate the Yoruba ethos and liminal dramaturgy as exploited by Ahmed Yerima in the selected play-texts and how he has through the literary works construct the link that exists between reality and imagination of the cultural philosophy of the Yoruba people. The paper concludes that cultural ethos and liminal dramaturgy are tools that play directors can use to seamlessly articulate African dramatic expressions. Consequently, playwrights are encouraged to explore more cultural ethos and symbolic extractions to showcase African rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Playwrights, cultural ethos, liminal, dramaturgy, Play director, Ahmed Yerima

1. Introduction

African playwrights have been identified as one art experts whose creative ingenuity captures cultural ethos of African people, especially the Yorubas. They also remain the architect of

drama whose imaginative skills relish and embellish understanding of theatre dynamics. In turn, some of the ethos that they imaginatively coined have become artistic tools in the hands of play directors whose works capture the cultural mainframe of the society by bringing to the audience, education, enlightenment and above all entertainment. The creative adventure that playwright deploys engender innate knowledge of the people's culture which play directors used to construct a reality that can be validated by the replica. The playwright, intrinsically, uses this medium to project the cultural worldview, philosophy and the belief system of the people obviously for the benefit of the people. That is why Africa literatures are referred to as that artistic instrument, a reflective medium, a means of cultural projection and enunciation that captures holistically the societal structure of the people.

Culture is one of the unique inherent traits of a group of people hence, the place of human culture is reflected in the arts of the people because it is one of the determinant factors of their being and identity. Literature is a blend of reality with the imagination of writers to create liminal reality that exhibits the creative ingeniousness of the writer. This is why African literary tradition is a reflective emblem of the people's culture that is subsumed in the performance styles and tradition in a written form without losing the cultural finesse and the traditional values that is attached to it. Little wonder why literature has become a vehicle through which culture and tradition are encrypted and made accessible when the need arises. Apparently, literature plays a pivotal role in accommodating the cultural nuances and ethos of the people. This is what is aptly projected by the playwright who deploys his/her artistic mastery to capture the cultural ethos of the people. Adejumo (2010) citing Ogunsina (2006, p. 15), submits that:

Literature plays an important part in shaping or crystallising the views held by members of the society, views about the world, about man, and about society; it is in light of views such as these that the social order is both maintained and changed

The above view gives a multiple interpretation on the role of literature in the society, which ranges from shaping and crystallising the cultural belief of the people. It also serves as a tool that captures the society in its entirety and in another dimension an oasis from which the play directors draw their inspiration to communicate to the audience. Literature goes beyond the textual inferences; it encompasses the sub-textual underpinning circumstances in the text that shares some affinity with the society that birthed it. Corroborating this, Adeoye (2015, p.102) states that "literature is a central part of culture and experience; its text and sub-text draws inspiration from the society that it helps to create and give identity to." This means that because playwrights are not oblivious of their cultural belief systems they in turn share it.

Ahmed Yerima is one of the prolific playwrights that constantly engages the society by exploring cultural issues. These cultural issues are carefully expunged from the cultural mainstream of the peoples' myths, folktales and folklore. He is an experienced playwright who Adeoti (2007, p.3) describes thus:

Yerima is one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigeria Literary drama stage in the last decade of the twentieth century. Apart from being a playwright, he is an artistic director, a theatre manager [...] Yerima's dramaturgy combines the practical orientation of a theatre practitioner with the aesthetic consciousness of a critics...

The above alludes to the fact that, Yerima has garnered vast experiences as a playwright on one hand and as a play director on another, who has a constant engagement with the society. His cultural understanding serves as a pool from which he draws his creative expedition. He taps directly from the people's culture and their worldview purposely to give a balance

representation of the reflected society. In spite this, he engages in some artistic manipulations to create a saturated discourse that will be artistically reviewed and subjected to cultural verification.

2. Review of Related Literature

Culture is a vibe, an energy of the people, an umbrella under which the people's take rest and shared their values, tradition, language and cultural heritage. In culture are barrage of cultural ethos, which serves as the people's culture and as ingredient from where playwrights draw their artistic inspirations and usage found in both material and immaterial aspect of different cultures. Consequently, Hofstede (2015, p.51) submits that: "culture is seen as a defining trait of an individual's distinctiveness." Culture therefore, is the collaborative programming of the mind which differentiates the members of one group of people from another. Again, culture is the uniqueness of the people's identity that is evidence in the exhibition of their art. Literature on the other hand, is an instrument of reflecting creed, ideology, social, political, economic, and culture of the people. Iser (1993, p.4) sees literature as "a transitive, a boundary phenomenon that permanently escalates between reality and imagination and permanently links them with each other."

In discussing liminality, Balduk (2008, p. vi) in a broader perspective describes it thus:

Etymologically, liminality – as used by van Gennep (1909; 1960) – may have been derived from the Latin *limes* which denotes 'threshold'. It might also have come from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'boundary' or 'limit'. Both *limes* and *limen* derive from the same Latin root, *limus*, and, as can be seen, the two meanings overlap significantly.

From a not too radically different perspective, liminality as adopted by scholars such as Victor Turner (1967, p.10) to analyse human sociological interactions, elucidates on his concepts from the analysis of Ndembu rituals, giving it a more robust interface to encapsulate the significance of the liminal phase in human growth and development. The above shows that the applicability of the concept is flexible and can be adopted to enunciate and explain societal structure. Furthermore, Kees (2011) avers:

'Liminality' as a sociologically useful concept denotes the middle phase of any ritual process that can be divided, following van Gennep, into three analytically distinct phases and during which an individual undergoes a transition from one social status to another. For instance, and indeed classically, from being a boy to becoming an adult man, or when a girl becomes a woman (such as during what have come to be known as initiation rituals). (p.1)

These transitional phases are being given a conscious consideration by the philosophers to give credible explanation to some cultural practices within the society. The liminal phase is however not the only phases as identified by van Gennep, it includes the preliminal phase, liminal phase and post liminal phase. These phases when progressively analysed are stage-by-stage process which involves the formation of human transition. van Gennep gives a strong foundation to the theory by explicitly giving an in-depth overview. Critically analysing van Gennep's contribution on the theory of rites in van Gennep (1960, p. 36) cited in Sylwia (2015) submits:

van Gennep's most important contribution to the theory of rites is considered to be his differentiation between and description of their stages. According to van Gennep, the passage happens in three stages, one out of which the second one is a moment of a momentary suspension between stage one and two. van

Gennep (1960, p. 45) called these phases: preliminal (separation), liminal (threshold), postliminal (incorporation). He perceived each of these stages both as a part of a whole and as a separate rite. Thus, he wrote about three subcategories of rites of passage: rites of separation, threshold (marginal) and incorporation (integration). (p.95)

This concept, as elucidated by Gennep, aptly defines the Africa transitional system, whereby the people through different medium transit from one stage to another. These stages shift, from one societal plane to another is progressively weaved around growths and developments, which spell the socio-cultural changes in status, otherwise referred to as stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, womanhood to a motherhood and living to dead. These and many more are various transitional phases that characterises African traditional belief system. The African traditional belief system encapsulates the cultural ethos of Africa that are permissively inclined within the transitional structures that give a sense of identity to shift from one social class and spiritual realm to another otherwise known as a mundane and the spiritual phase of existence. To corroborate this, Ratiani (2012) posits:

The liminal phase constitutes an intermediate, transitional, ambivalent – ‘neither hither, not thither’ condition, in which the individual separates from the normative context and – through transformation – creates an appositionally contrary world. Accordingly, the liminal phase acquires the function of a special somewhat sacred temporal-spatial zone. The process ‘mystic journey’, ‘transitivity’, ‘mysterious movement’ are based on the symbolism of death and birth, fall and rise. The rites de passage is a transition from one model to another. (p.5)

The above assertion concretised the ideology behind various liminal phases that its adoption in literature can mean traditional reflection in the contents and forms of any literary works. Therefore, liminal dramaturgy is the reflection of liminal thematic preoccupation in literary work. Literature in itself is liminal. It dwells on the threshold of reality and imagination. The theory of liminality therefore, can be referred to as a blend of both reality and imagination or better still, the holistic acknowledgement of literature as a liminal phenomenon.

3. Theoretical Framework

Aesthetics as a notion that deals with the sensory and perception of arts has attracted scholarly discourses in the area of its dynamism and peculiarities, and particularly as it relates to human cultural differences as a factor in the interpretation of arts. Scholars like Kant (1790), Hegel (1975), Graham (2005) and Obafemi (2008) have interrogated aesthetic in its dynamism and peculiarities to humans. To foregrounds this study, Cultural Aesthetics theory propounded by Arnold Berleant (2005) is adopted as the theoretical framework. Aesthetic is a broad field with different variants and categorisations. Kant (1790) conceptualises aesthetic as the field of philosophy that deals with human perception. This perception is subject to the interpretative and judgmental dynamism of the people’s preferences. Therefore, the sensory perception of an artwork is attached to the aesthetical value that can be deduced from it, based on the artistic styles and culture that birthed the Arts. Arnold (2005, p.170) observes that:

...both style and taste are bound up in the history of culture. At the same time as different cultural traditions in the arts have become increasingly familiar, ethnic tradition has emerged as a powerful force in cultural identity. The arts are perhaps the most visible manifestation of that identity, and this raises a critical test for any theory of art that has empirical roots...

It is observable that, art in general, depends on the appreciable values that are attached to it, based on the structural (form and content) composition adopted to attain some level of acceptability within the context of the society that produced it. This, therefore, means that the aesthetical value of arts is the derivative perception of the people's cultural belief system. Every society produces an art that is peculiar to their cultural belief system as a way of propagating their worldview that intimate the people with their belief system. Culture is an essential part of art formation, hence, Arnold (2005, p.170) states that "the influence of culture on art is indeed the formative power of culture, (which) is even more true of environment." Drawing from this, it can be revealed that cultural aesthetic has three different analytical throngs, which include; environment, culture and the art. The link that exist between the three phenomenon enumerated above underscores the way culture perceive, creates and appreciates beauty, art and taste, which holistically is referred to as cultural aesthetics. This explains that it is culture that shapes people's perception (what is considered attractive), create (in form of fashion and design) and appreciate (through showcasing of cultural beauty in festivals, ritual, music, and dances). These aesthetic values are what this paper intends to elucidate on, as it is reflected in Yoruba cultural ethos and liminal dramaturgy, which play directors in-turn employ as tools that they use in bringing to perception the aesthetic value through creating beauty, and making the audience appreciate beauty in their playmaking presentations.

4. Synopsis of *Kutelu*

Kabiyesi ascends the throne of his fore father by defeating other princes, with the help of the witches who conceded the throne to him in exchange for his manhood. He ascends the throne and marries Olori with the agreement that Olori can have an affair outside the wedlock in order to procreate the crown prince. Olori engages Kutelu in an affair that rewards them with Olagunsoye and five other children. This top palace secret is later known to Apena the father of Kutelu who keeps the secrete knowing fully well that one day, one of his grandsons, Olagunsoye will eventually become the king. Unfortunately, the king decides that Olagunsoye will not be king after his demise rather he chooses the son of his sister. This is in negation of the tradition of the land, which forbids the child of a princess to become the king. On the other hand, Olagunsoye traditionally is forbidden from ascending the throne because he is not biologically from a royal family. This sets the conflict when Kutelu and Apena in the shrine of Esu, the god of wit and trickster ask Esu to avenge them by altering Kabiyesi's physical appearance, turning him to a hunchback. Esu answers the supplication of Kutelu. Consequently, the secret of Olori's extra marital affairs with a neighboring King is also revealed. Her failure to confess leads to her death, seven days after to taking a false oath that she did not engaged in extra marital affair with a neighboring king. While this is on, an Aroko (symbol) is sent by Alafin of Oyo who asked Kabiyesi to vacate his throne, within seven days, owing to his refusal to pay tribute to Alafin of Oyo and his illicit engagement with the District Officer (D.O). In order to escape the verdict of Alafin, Kutelu advise the King to forge an alliance with the District Officer, which further worsen the situation. The revelation of the palace top secret between Kabiyesi, the witches, Kutelu and Olori lead to the death of Kabiyesi, Olori and Kutelu.

5. Synopsis of *Ikudeti*

Oba Arabambi Ajantale Ikudeti attains the position of kingship by sacrificing five maidens each year to seven Orisa, who in turns reciprocate by donating one life each to him. This simply means that he can only reign for five years. His five years on the throne is filled with recklessness, callousness and acrimony in the land, boasting that he possesses the mysterious

power that can make him engage and subdue death in any contest, hence his nickname Ikudeti. After the seventh year on the throne, he is trapped between the frame of life and death. Subsequently strange incidences that begging to happen in the land that instigates different unpleasant reaction by the people. Yeye, the mother of Arabambi, as a concerned mother promise to uncover the mystery behind Ikudeti's being trapped between the world of the living and the dead. She passes through different phases of metaphysical encounters to free his son from the grip of death. The journey reveals the hidden secret of Yeye's illicit affair with Elesin Oba that produces King Arabambi Ikudeti and the unscrupulous activities of the king who defiles the Egungun cults. The people and the gods who sees him as the most notorious king that ever rule the land due to many misfortunes that befall Ikudeti. Subsequently, the gods decree that his body should be hanged on the Iroko tree until he dies. However, the option for him to live rests with his mother, Yeye, who must sacrifice her life for his son to live which she blatantly refuses to do.

6. The Cultural ethos and Liminal Dramaturgy in *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti*

The Yoruba worldview is explored by Yerima as a springboard to project, through these literatures, the cultural ethos of the people and the liminal artistic mastery in *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti*. He brings to fore, the indigenous belief system of the people in his artistic usages, in his literature as he explores a blend of reality and imagination. The playwright creates that liminal threshold through the reflection of liminal issues that stems from the cultural ethos and nuances of the people in the plays under examination. These Yoruba world views consists of their transitional stages and the layers of their existence within the multiple layers of abode that is seen to be habited by man. The transitional phases of human life in the Yoruba setting includes the transition from childhood to adolescence, woman to mother, from the unborn to the living and from the living to the dead. The cultural believe system of the Yoruba people captures their existence in different world and each stage has different abodes. That explain the interaction and transiting link that exists between the various worlds at various levels. Consequent upon this, Imam (2018, p.2) submits that:

The Yoruba metaphysics recognises four areas of human existence: the worlds of the ancestor, the living, and the unborn, and the abyss of transition (gulf). In most African metaphysics the first three worlds are clearly defined. The relationship between the three worlds can only be understood if viewed in a cyclic reality so that neither the child nor father is a closed or chronological concept.

Yerima theatrically explores these cultural realities of the people, which explains why he constructs his dramaturgy around the reflection of these in *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti*.

In *Kutelu* the dramatic conflict is tied around oath, which is regarded as a serious bind that must not be broken under any condition, which the Yoruba cultural ethos treats as sacred and sacrosanct. *Ikudeti*, on the other hand x-rays the liminal status of the character of Ikudeti whose life hangs between the two worlds of the dead and the living, which reflects the uneasiness of the king between this threshold, where he cannot transcend to the ancestral world and at the same time unable to dwell in the land of the living. This is succinctly explained by Yeye thus:

Yeye: He was a fool, a big stupid one. A goat, but he was my son. Your son. I brought him here and you embrace him...remember? I hear he is only suspended between life and death. You can forgive him. Blame his sins on poor mother and give him a second chance. (93)

The transitional obstruction is the crust of the conflict in the play. For the king to hang in a world in between, adumbrates the liminality of his transition. Efforts to take him out of that world is the liminal progression of the plot as well as the dramatic undertone that characterises the play. Gennep, Arnold van aptly describes passage to be ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another. (Gennep, 1960, p.37) In the case of Ikudeti's, ceremonial rite is not fulfilled hence he couldn't transcend from the world of the living to the cosmic world. This unfulfilled ceremonial rite Yeye confirms after he heard that his son's hanging situation has the undertone of human machination.

Yeye: Someone should have persuaded him. Tricked him...lured him. Were the drummers not lined out? Where rich sanyan and etu not displayed for him to pick from? Haa.. my son has been cheated in death. Corruption has entered the palace again. No king dies alone (73)

Yerima uses Yeye's consciousness to project the cyclical transition of the Yoruba culture from one stage to another. He explicitly captures the already defined concept of Abobaku and the implication of not having the cultural belief system followed as expected. The king is one of the victims of his cruel nature when he rules the people with iron hands as king. He rules with the fist of evil, which are the wicked attributes that his ruling exhibited in his action. The transition that is supposed to be funfair and hitch-free becomes his contraption in the liminal realm. The liminal stage is being represented by the gulf between the world of the dead and the world of the living. Oba Ikudeti falls into the abyss of this gulf and he is not able to dwell in the world of the living or the world of the dead. It becomes clear here that in the Yoruba cosmology, liminal process cannot be altered, in spite of the Yeye's efforts to save his son from this misfortune, process of liminality cannot be altered. This is the efforts yeye made where she has to travel across to the world of dead to unravel the mystery that surrounds his son's half-dead and half-living situation. Efforts to appease Iku to allow his son to dwell among the living underpins the sacrosanctity of the concept of liminality in the Yoruba cosmology. Yeye's effort is contained in the dialogue below where Oluawo asked Yeye of her readiness.

Oluawo: This trip...the grip we talked about is not one of seasoned meals or change of clothes. It is a ritual trip of life. Are you ready? (82)

Yeye's embarks on journey to the world of the dead and the living to recover her son from the gulf of death. Yeye's agreement is in line with Gennep van's submission that every man must go through the rite of passage. (Gennep, 1960). Cummings & McGarry (2016) explicitly describe the rite of passage as a ritual signifying a person's passage from one identity to the next.

Yeye wears another identity in order to be able to communicate and relate with the people of the other world. This confirms Gennep (1960) where he explains the structure of the rite of passage, which he states involves three sequential stages/phases: pre liminal (separation), liminal (transition) and post liminal (incorporation). This further indicate that irrespective of man's disposition, everybody must experience liminal state in life. This means that Yeye also pass through the pre-liminal stage, the separation stage where by Yeye is in seclusion with so many ritual activities in other to make her fit for the spiritual demands of the journey. This journey also require that the traditional cultural ethos must be explored to through the use of chant, invocation and incantation, conjure the spiritual forces who will aid her on the journey.

The second stage, which is the liminal stage is the transitional stage where Yeye is able to transit to the world of the dead in a bid to find solution to the issues of his son's inability to be free from the grip of death. There at the liminal stage takes supplication to has to the king's

father on the need to assist him so that his sons can be released back to the land of the living. The liminal phase is the phase where all cultural issues are treated and the consciousness of human deeds are revealed. There Yeye has a dose of the revelation her top secret where the mischievous act of how Yeye, who killed the Elesin, the biological father of the king, his son is revealed. The playwright dramatically reveals here that everyone on hearth must experience the three stages of the liminal phases.

The final stage is the post-liminal stage. Gennep (1960) describes this stage as the stage of incorporation. This is the final stage in liminality where initiate is reconciled to their previous state. Yeye is restored to her normal state. Yerima, playwright, has been able to deploy his literary work in *Ikudeti* to re-establish the concept of Abobaku as another dimension in experiencing of the three liminal stages in the play under examination.

7. Exploring Esu as the Contraption of Conflict Formation in *Kutelu*

Esu is one of the prominent Yoruba gods that has some deeper grip on human actions and inaction. The dual nature of the characteristic that the playwright gave Esu affords the theatrical opportunity presents the god, Esu as the mechanism for conflict formation. By this artistic liberty, Yerima explores the cosmic structure of the Yoruba by exploring the gods as an influencing factor in human actions. It is an undisputable fact that, the gods have some relationship with the people within the living and the terrestrial space. That is gods exist in both the human world and their supernatural world. To corroborate this, Soyinka (1976, p.11) avers that: “

The deities exist in the same relation with humanity as these multiple worlds is an expression of its cyclic nature. The cyclic nature gives them the free will to roam in both worlds with significance impact on the people. However, the humans are also responsible for the invitation of the gods into their affairs by invoking their presence in their place of worship.”

Aside the mutual relationships that exist between the gods they also share some affinity with one another. Yerima (2020, p.v) also explores this to capture the relationship that exist between Esu, other gods and human. This he submits thus: “I expanded the “fiend-ship” of Esu’s reverberation spirit and then highlight the partnership of Esu has with Orunmila and the other gods. I identify the position of Obatala, and re-identify man as self-deified acolyte of Esu himself or herself.

The deliberateness of the playwright to acknowledge the multilateral relationship that exist between Esu and other gods is a pointer to the influence he has on both the action of human and the other gods. He therefore advances the concept of Esu as the police of the gods whose abode is the cross road where three path meets, the point of conflict generation, and the place where human meet Esu to do their biddings. Euba (2002, p.167-68) succinctly captures the experience thus: “Esu stands at the crossroads, the transitional point of sacrifice. He is the factor of change and therefore the most important element of the ritual, and must be coaxed with the right kind of sacrificed.”

The above alluded to the attribute of Esu as the “factor of change” who exhibit this through ritual and the “right” type of sacrifice” This is demonstrated by Apena at the beginning of the play, *Kutelu*. Where Yerima uses this action to initiate the conflict of the play, which he weaves around the action of Esu who acted based on what he is commissioned to do. The playwright uses the concept of Esu as the god of conflict, to instigate the conflict of the play by using the character of Apena and Kutelu at the shrine of Esu where they serve Esu with his forbidden food, and claim to be sent by the Kabiyesi.

Apena: ...POURS THE ADI ON THE SHRINE

I beg you laalu, show him what you can do.
His people reject him... and he says what can you do?
I say show him what you can do.
Turn his royal household to the catacomb of hell.
Let doubt and shame be their new toga.
I have given you the message of the king.
I am not your enemy; he is the one
EMPTIES THE ADI.
Have more of his Adi and in anger, choke him (pp121-122)

The Adi, the oil extracted from palm kernel is what Esu detests. It is an abomination in his shrine. The understanding of this by Apena enables him to incite the gods against his adversary. The reaction of Esu to the abominable food serves him forms the basis of the conflict of the play. Yerima uses this as the springboard through which the plot gravitates while relishing on the African cultural ethos that must be traditionally obeyed. The playwright also portrays the characteristic of Esu as the god that rewards human action against one another. Apena consciousness enables him to seek revenge at the shrine of Esu for the cruelty that is meted by the king on Kutelu. Kutelu on the other hand is being strengthened by Esu to entrap the king in his bid to seek revenge.

Kutelu: Father, a moment. TURNS TO THE SHRINE. Esu,
My hunch back tells my tale of bitterness. You know all.
Everything has been taken from me. Return them in ten
folds. Give me the cunning strength to avenge my shame, and
I shall return to glorify you. (p.122)

The spiritual enablement is bestowed on Kutelu by Esu as requested in the above lines and he is able to cunningly scheme so many things that causes the downfall of the king. This affords, in the character of Esu to manipulate the king on several occasions until he pushed him to his problem, which brings to fruition Kutelu's revenge mission. Tricking is one of the attributes of Esu and this same trait is passed on to Kutelu as an answer to his request to take revenge from Ikudeti.

Yerima resolved the conflict of the play along the fulfillment of the request that is thrown to Esu by Apena and Kutelu. The margin of the conflict becomes wider with so many machinations between men under the influence of Esu throughout the play purposely to project the qualities of Esu as the gods that initiates and sustain conflicts.

On the other hand, in *Ikudeti*, Ikudeti despite his mischievous deed as the king, blames his misfortune on Esu.

IKUDETI: I am sorry mother. Esu, the gods I chose to protect deserted me.
And yet led me on. Drunk, I danced until I got to the edge of the
cliff to the edge of the cliff unaware of the bank of Ijekun Odo. He
nudged me. And I fell until the water filled my lungs (p.110)

Ikudeti on the other hand blame his misdeed on the influence of Esu. The character refuses to take the responsibilities of his action but blames it on the betrayal of Esu. The playwright places these contradicting points to explore the blame apportioning games human plays on Esu after heinous crimes were committed by a person against another. This, therefore, shows that, the

conflicting and multidimensional nature of the gods, Esu, to initiate a conflict and watch the principal actors of the conflict fall into the pit. This is the case of Ikudeti who uses the gods to perpetrate evils. Yerima, undoubtedly uses these plays to explore the multiple nature of Esu as the god that can assume different forms to initiate conflict and sustain it. Esu here can be said to be the muse of playwright who explore the wittiness to spark-off conflicts in their literary works, heighten them using some forces that influence human actions. This is in relation to Megbowon and Uwah 2017 cited Oyeniyi (2012) when they assert that: “The West African Esu-Elegbara is a figure of double duality, of un-reconciled opposites, living in harmony, the epitome of the paradox with the capacity to reproduce himself to infinitum”. This infinite nature of esu is sustain by Yerima to link the relevance of Esu in his fictitious settings at Ijeku Odo, across generation.

8. Destiny and Predestination in *Kutelu and Ikudeti*

One of the cultural belief systems of the Yoruba is shrouded in their belief in destiny and predestination. This concept formed their existence in their world view. Furthermore, in a bid to give clarification to the concept of destiny and destination Crother, (2009, np) in *Microsoft Encarta Dictionary* describes them thus:

The word destiny is here defined as the power believed to control events, which people simply call fate. It is about the future, the spiritual will of a person, which is usually affected by the time, place, and date of birth (environment). Predestination, on the other hand, is the theory or belief that everything that happens has been decided in advance by God and that humans cannot change it.

This belief system means that our predestination has been foreground by Eledumare before we exist in the world of the living. It further means that, humans are mere actors of destiny and they walk through life as it has been prescribed by Eledumare, the divine creator and Master artist.

AGUNLEJIKA: Yes, he became a king after me. Do you think you made him a king? When each of my thirty-seven sons were born I checked their destiny The babalawo said that your son is going to be king. That was akosejaiye. Again, you were just a tool. I swear by Oduduwa, if you had stand still, he would have been king. But again, your blood boiled and you could not wait, so you appointed yourself god.

Yerima brought to fore in the plays constant actions of men to change the order of their existence, which stems from human innate drive to orchestrate something contrary to their destiny, in a bid to live their desired life. This is portrayed in the major character of both plays *Kutelu and Ikudeti*. The playwright explores this, not restricting it to one specific gender but action that are exhibited by both genders. These characters include; Ikudeti and Yeye in *Ikudeti* and Kabiyesi and Olori in *Kutelu*. The repercussion of human forceful action to obstruct the flows of destiny and predestination result in the calamity that befalls Ikudeti. The will of creator supersede the will of human. When a twist is allowed the result is usually catastrophic as it was the case with Yeye in *Kudeti*. Agunlejika dialogue suffice:

AGUNLEJIKA: You see what you have done woman? You see how you have destroyed his life? I warned you I begged you. Let the will of Adaniwaye be fulfilled in his life. But no. You had to become a

life changer. You became the goddess in your son's life Now his life hangs. (p.107)

Yeye tries all possible means to enthrone his son has the king, unknown to her that she is only been deployed by the gods as a tool to actualise his destiny. Hence, the more, the characters deploy all their antics to escape the grip of destiny the closer they are to fulfilling the destiny. Yerima explore this through the character of Yeye and her son who uses their influences to scheme their existence unknown to them that it is divinely arranged. Ikudeti is destined to rule for seven years. Despite his desperate actions which are intended to extend his reign all his actions brought him to the futility of his desire.

In the same vein, the playwright presents the gods as actors and catalysts in destiny fulfillment. The god sees the end from the beginning so they only play along by making demands that makes their assailants sticks to their desire. For instance, the Orisa Meje requested for five maidens in order to make Ikudeti the king ahead of other thirty princes. This shows that they are fully aware of the year he will be spending as the king. In another development, Yeye until she exhausts her strength and destiny, the gods continue to drive her to take wrong decisions.

Interestingly, Yerima in his artistic characteristics of resolving conflict in his plays explicate in this context that destiny and predestination is not statics, rather, it can be changed, through supplication to Olodumare (the God of the universe), which shifts the discourse from an earlier held position that destiny and predestination cannot be changed. In that direction, Yerima submits that this can only be possible through the efficacies of prayers while the change can only occur when the person is alive. Earlier he projected the infallibility of destiny and predestination through Agunlejika, who warned Yeye about the ritual trip she intend to embark upon as unnecessary. The dialogue below suffices:

AGUNLEJIKA: Even your trip here is not necessary. Whatever you find will not change his destiny. He was born to hang between the two worlds. Only he could have changed it. When he lived... when he could pray to Olulande. His sins are stuck now. Woman, go home... (p.107)

This shows that destiny and predestination is a subject of human ability to make adjustment and readjustment by engaging in prayer, which can only be performed by the person concerned. The playwright deliberately hides this from the character of *Ikudeti* so as to create a rebounding dramatic action around the plot structure. Furthermore, it is also to analyse the depth at which human being can cause destruction to his destiny if not properly managed. In another vein, the characters who has such awareness of the influences of the gods on the action of mankind refuses to consider humane path towards fulfilling their desire, but rather they engage in things that will further aggravate the anger of the gods.

9. Yoruba Ethos and Liminal Dramaturgy as Directorial tools in Ahmed Yerima's *Kutelu and Ikudeti*

The play director's parasitic disposition and their tact in artistic summersault presents them as artistic captain who brings to life on stage the playwright's lifeless literary works through interpretation of the overall vision of the artistic work of a playwright. The role of the play director in any playmaking process cannot be overemphasised. Gone are the days when most plays written by playwrights are meant for reading pleasure, not necessarily for performances. Now the tide changed every playwright write for performance, which explains why the instructions in most of the written plays have what we call stage directions. The plays; *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti* by Ahmed Yerima also parade these innovations that this paper explores where the

traditional ethos and the concept of liminality in the African context are identified as tools for play directors who intends to direct the two plays either for film or the stage.

9.1 Culture as a tool in directing *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti*

The position of the play director is culturally strategic in the African theatre practice and especially in the Yoruba theatre tradition as he serves as an artistic interpreter as well as the negotiator of indigenous cosmology. Such position is in line with the cultural aesthetics of Berleant (2005, p. 25.), which locates artistic meaning within the cultural environment that produces and experiences the artwork. In *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti* by Ahmed Yerima, the cultural ethos of the Yoruba people and liminal dramaturgy serves as a basic instrument with the help of which the play director transforms the textual meaning into the embodied performance. The plays are entrenched in the Yoruba metaphysical thinking and the stage realisation of the play cannot be achieved without the consciousness of the symbolic expressions and liminal disposition as tools for play directors.

The ethos of the Yoruba culture, as manifested by both scripts, are rooted in the belief systems about destiny (ayanmo), oath-taking, ritual obligation, authority of the ancestral, and the cyclic nature of life, death and reborn. (Soyinka, 1976) These beliefs are not merely thematic concerns but active dramaturgical forces that the director must use as tools in his/her directorial decisions. As Adeoti (2007, p.23) observes, Yerima's dramaturgy deliberately resists Western realist conventions and instead privileges African ritual aesthetics, thereby positioning the director as a cultural translator who must decode for the purpose of re-enacting indigenous worldviews on stage.

In *Kutelu*, the dramatic structure revolves around oath violation, ritual transgression, and divine retribution, all of which are central to Yoruba moral philosophy. The shrine of Esu, where Apena and Kutelu instigate the central conflict, functions as a liminal space where human intention intersects with divine agency. Esu, in Yoruba cosmology, is a transitional deity who inhabits crossroads and presides over uncertainty, change, and moral contradiction (Euba, 2002). For the director, this shrine must be staged not as a realistic location but as a metaphysical threshold. Through ritualised gestures, chants, heightened sound, symbolic props such as *adi* (palm kernel oil), and controlled lighting, the director explores the sacred volatility of these symbolic objects and space to ease communication to the audience. In this direction, the director must bring to fore the shrine not as a realistic setting and as a metaphysical threshold. This is evident when Apena deliberately provokes Esu by pouring *adi*, an abominable substance, on the shrine:

Apena: ...I beg you laalu, show him what you can do... Turn his royal household to the catacomb of hell" (Yerima, 2020, p. 121).

For the director, this scenario demands ritualised staging using incantation delivery, focused lighting, and symbolic gesture to foreground the cosmic rupture in the act, which elucidates on the total theatre idiom prevalent in Africa theatre performances. This is with a view to exacerbate the conflict action that establishes Esu as the dramaturgical engine of disruption who possess the dual nature as conflict escalator and a rewarder. Esu's dual nature is demonstrated in the liminal duality that *Kutelu* asked of him in the dialogue below:

Kutelu: Give me the cunning strength to avenge my shame, and I shall return to glorify you. (Yerima, 2020, p. 122).

The request above presents Esu as a dual character who both instigates and enforces. A play director will pay attention to this dual nature of Esu so that he does not present a mono

characteristic disposition and consequently demean the powerful dramaturgical tool for conflict escalation which the play director should accentuate. This duality reflects in what Turner (1969, p.) describes as: “the ambiguity of liminal figures who exist “betwixt and between” moral categories.” Through fragmented blocking, abrupt shifts in rhythm, and non-linear movement patterns, the director can embody Esu’s unstable presence, thereby sustaining dramatic tension throughout the play. Consequently, Esu becomes not just a character or deity but a performative principle governing the rhythm and structure of the production.

The pouring of *adi*, which Esu detests, constitutes a deliberate ritual provocation that triggers the dramatic conflict. This moment must be emphasised theatrically to signify a rupture in cosmic order (Yerima, 2020). By foregrounding this action through silence, tension, and focused stage composition, the director reinforces the Yoruba belief that ritual violations inevitably attract metaphysical consequences. In this way, conflict in *Kutelu* is framed not simply as political intrigue but as a spiritually sanctioned process.

Similarly, the Yoruba belief in the sanctity of oath-taking is further dramatised through Olori’s fate. Her refusal to confess and subsequent death after swearing falsely exemplify the irreversible spiritual consequences of oath violation. In Yoruba culture, oath-taking is binding and spiritually irreversible when violated (Adeoye, 2015). The director’s manipulation of stillness, silence, ritual sound, and corporeal restraint at this moment transforms narrative action into a moral spectacle. Olori’s death thus functions as a ritual consequence rather than a mere plot resolution, reinforcing the ethical framework of Yoruba cosmology.

In *Ikudeti*, liminal dramaturgy is even more central, as the entire play is structured around the king’s suspension between life and death. Ikudeti’s condition reflects what Van Gennep (1960, p.) identifies as the liminal phase of rites of passage, a state characterised by ambiguity, instability, and transformation. Ikudeti’s condition is explicitly articulated in Yeye’s lament:

Yeye: I hear he is only suspended between life and death. You can forgive him (Yerima, 2020, p. 93).

This state of “in-between-ness” demands that the director construct Ikudeti’s body as a liminal body through slowed movement, disrupted vocal delivery, symbolic spatial isolation, and choreographed stillness. These performative strategies visually and physically communicate the king’s metaphysical entrapment to the audience through the director’s directorial presentation.

Yeye’s ritual journey to recover her son further exemplifies liminality as a directorial tool. Her movement through the preliminal (separation), liminal (transition), and postliminal (incorporation) phases mirrors Van Gennep’s (1960) tripartite structure of rites of passage. The gravity of this ritual journey is underscored when the Oluawo seeks her commitment:

Oluawo: This trip... is a ritual trip of life. Are you ready?” (Yerima, 2020, p. 82).

During the preliminal phase, the director will employ seclusion, reduced lighting, and introduce minimal movement to signify separation. The liminal phase (her encounter with the world of the dead) can be staged through chants, incantations, symbolic choreography, and spatial fluidity, dissolving the boundary between the physical and metaphysical realms. The postliminal phase restores narrative order but not without moral reckoning, underscoring the Yoruba belief that spiritual imbalance demands accountability.

The Abobaku tradition and Egungun symbolism in *Ikudeti* further reinforce Yoruba cosmological beliefs in ancestral continuity and ethical judgment (Soyinka, 1976). These

elements must be treated by the director as narrative signifiers rather than decorative aesthetics. Their integration into performance affirms Berleant's (2005, p.) assertion that aesthetic meaning emerges from cultural engagement and lived experience rather than formal imitation.

Destiny and predestination constitute another crucial Yoruba ethos shaping directorial interpretation in both plays. Characters such as Kabiyesi, Olori, Ikudeti, and Yeye attempt to manipulate divine ordination through human agency, yet their actions paradoxically fulfil their destined paths. This irony is articulated when Agunlejika states:

Agunlejika: If you had stood still, he would have been king” (Yerima, 2020, p. 107).

For the director, this line encapsulates the Yoruba understanding of destiny as divinely foreknown but humanly enacted (Hofstede, 2015). The director can underscore this inevitability through cyclical staging patterns, repeated chants, mirrored gestures, and recurring visual motifs that reinforce the cosmological principle of recurrence.

Ultimately, in making the plays; *Kutelu* and *Ikudeti* the director would operate simultaneously as artist, ritual interpreter, and cultural mediator. Hence, the Yoruba cultural ethos provides the philosophical foundation upon which performance meaning is constructed, while liminal dramaturgy offers the structural framework through which transitions between worlds, identities, and moral states are negotiated. Through these the cultural tools are deployed by the play director in the artistic transformation of Yerima's scripts into living performative rituals that articulate Yoruba metaphysical consciousness and affirm the aesthetic integrity of African theatre.

10. Findings

This study discovered that, the cultural ethos and nuances of the people are viable sources through which the playwright, Yerima explore and base his creative expedition on which in turn are seen as tools in the hands of play directors. The paper also finds that the Yoruba philosophy and worldview is explored by Ahmed Yerima in other to create a liminal world that stems between reality and imagination. He uses Esu as the god that superintends over conflict and its sustainability thereby exploring the dual nature of the gods, which is likened to the binary trait of conflict formation concept where two variables contend against one another. This contention is what generates the conflict just like Esu that was being deployed by Yerima as the harbinger of conflict. Furthermore, the playwright explores the concept of destiny and predestination by representing human has tools towards the fulfillment of divine ordination.as directorial tools in the play under examination. All these traditional ethos and liminal dramaturgy, this paper explores as tools in the dramatic playmaking expedition of play directors.

11. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study concludes that, Ahmed Yerima has through his literary work contributed toward the formation of a refracted society which accommodates imagination and reality. The literature itself is a liminal phenomenon. The playwright has used his creative mastery to blend reality with imagination in other to project the cultural ethos of the people. Yerima construct the link that exist between reality and imagination by accessing the cultural philosophy of the people to create an artistic balanced work which stems from the ample experiences he has with Yoruba culture. Therefore, drama experts should explore this type of conceptual framework to expand the holistic nature of drama.

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