

African Philosophy and Playwriting: Reflections on Ahmed Yerima's Abobaku
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Abstract

The concept of philosophy is such that it not only permeates but also holds sway over diverse areas of human life as much as it commands pertinence in every academic discipline. This also holds sway in playwriting, especially in the African context. However, the cognition of playwriting principles and African philosophical exploration are often scrapped. Therefore, This study looks into the concept of philosophy in generic terms and among Africans. Although it paraphrases the controversy on the existence of African philosophy, it also extrapolates playwriting principles for making a good play and the reflection of African philosophies in African plays. Using the analytic method, it analyses Ahmed Yerima's Abobaku as a paradigm for this study. It concludes on the importance of paying cognizance to the culture, philosophy, and history of a people as useful substances for playwriting.

Keywords: Philosophy, African Philosophy, Playwriting, Yoruba Culture, Abobaku

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Introduction

Every activity calls for critical thought, and by this, the curious instinct is set at work. This is not only to quench the thirst of the confusion of inquiry built within the mind but also for the aim of the acquisition of wisdom from the answers provided. Hence, epistemological satisfaction is attained, leaving the subject with that nudge of epistemophilia since philosophy is “the pursuit of wisdom” (Chatalian, 1983, p. 8). The philosopher is an open-minded personality who is willing to learn in his quest for the accrue of wisdom. He prods to acquire facts by the criticism of concepts and subjects. Staniland (1973, p. 3) extrapolates that philosophy is the “criticism of the ideas we live by.” That is, the normality becomes problematized, and questions are raised on why things are the way they are. For example, ‘Why do we grow older and not younger’? Or ‘Why can human beings not survive without feeding’? As weird as these questions may sound, one may be tempted to give a quick answer based on conventional or traditionally accepted beliefs; however, this will only explain the philosophical bluntness of the provider of such answers. On the other hand, the mind is ignited for critical thought and seeks to know beyond what has been known such that satisfactory answers are provided. It is not in unity with the culture of phenomenism or that which takes everything hook-line and sinker but instead raises questions and seeks answers (Siddique et al., 2020; Manirakiza, 2021). Importantly, the contingency of events becomes suspended while the a posteriori is reached through the a priori, as the rationalist and the empiricist schools would have it. Similarly, the requirements of “critical and rational thinking...natural to doing philosophy,” as posited by Levy-Bruhl and cited in Ademowo (2015, par. 5), come into play.

In African philosophy, however, there exist serious intellectual debates and positions on the non-existence and the existence of African philosophy (Tajjiou, 2023). It is pertinent to note that the positions of the schools that believe in the non-existence of African philosophy cannot be detached from the Eurocentric ideologies and beliefs of this school. One of such arguments is Levy-Bruhl’s, who maintains that Africans are only a “primitive people” and they do not understand the ideology behind natural explanations. He paints Africans as “people whose dreams are real experiences lacking the mental wherewithal to distinguish between subject and object, good and bad, moral and immoral. Primitive, barbaric, irrational, uncivilized and most importantly people without the capacity for critical and rational thinking- qualities that are natural to doing philosophy” (cited in Ademowo, 2015, par. 5). Notwithstanding, African philosophy is subsumed and submerged within the ethnophilosophical aura which may only gain acceptance with Afrocentric ideologies. This is justified in the assertion of Karp and Masolo (2000), who explain the history of African Philosophy as a history with two “contesting” divisions. “The first of these parties has come to be known as ethnophilosophy, the study of collective forms of culture as manifestations of African philosophical systems. The second, now known as African philosophy, argues that philosophical practice, as a second-order critical evaluation of first-order thinking about nature, culture, and experience, must be a vital activity in Africa” (p. 4).

Although there are different schools of African philosophy, as Kanu (2013, p. 276) examined thus, “...the Universalist, Particularist, Eclectic, National-Ideological, Sage philosophy, Literal/Artistic philosophy, and the Hermeneutic school”, however, in his article *Igwebuikie as a trend in African philosophy*, Kanu (2016, p. 109) notes from the particularist school that African philosophy has to do with “the philosophy indigenous to Africans, untainted by foreign ideas”. Consequently, African philosophy, is what the Africans do in their own distinctive beliefs and convictions. It includes their submissions based on their subjective and objective perception(s) of life. Thus, Kanu (2014, p. 93) asks, “if philosophy is a universal enterprise, what then makes philosophy African? What makes philosophy African is its ‘Africanity.’ Every culture makes a contribution from its house of experience to the universal themes of philosophy...” This contribution is what he sees as “relevant to the reality of life”. This paper, however, is not based on these notions and debates but emphasizes the philosophical nature of different cultures. This is in unity with the position that “...all people have a philosophy that guides the way they live, their perceptions of otherness and the decisions and choices they make about every aspect of their lives” (Letseka, 2000, p. 179). This is so with Africans. Africans have philosophies; they philosophize, and they believe in their own philosophies, too.

The Art of Playwriting

The art of playwriting is a serious business. It calls for high intellectual and critical thinking ability. The writing of a play is a communicative process of positing and transferring thoughts, theories, concepts, ideologies, and philosophies. This is the reason behind the subsumption of playwriting within philosophy and the inseparability of the two. The art of playwriting is more subjective than objective. It tends to appeal to the personality other than generality. Writing a play is like presenting one's feelings or impressions to other people. It could be a reaction to an action or a form of proposal to the general public. What the playwright does is to make others see what he has seen and to convince others about his philosophy. Hence, a playwright is a philosopher. This is because in most cases, his vision may go a long way in the betrayal of phenomenology – making him controversial. His conceptions may be referred to as the anti-mass, anti-traditional, or anti-conventional. Thus, the ideologies can become contestable.

The making of a good and certified playwright does not only come in the fantastic wish of it or the practice of the craft but also the clarification of some facts as regards the craft, and the seeking of knowledge that would serve as a base upon which the solidified playwright and his ideologies are built. Smiley (2005) opines that “playwriting is more than a career; it's a commitment to a very old, quite unique way of life. By taking up playwriting, a writer declares a calling. It's a special task requiring talent and expertise. If playwrights operate in a society that values drama and if their work is good enough, they will somehow make a living (p. 193). “Playwriting is a highly creative, meticulous, and challenging theatre art. It is a craft that gives the playwright and the director the license to create characters and present them like normal human beings” (Fasoranti, 2011, p. 58). A play is the work which a playwright has done. This work is the transfer of the playwright's ideology and observed beliefs and events, which cuts across his subjective and objective perspective, conviction, experimentation (in some cases), and philosophical conclusions in the form of a story.

The Playwright, the Play and Playwriting Principles

So, what is a good play? How is it made? “Any play that is receptive to an audience and arrests the concentration of their thought and emotion is a fine piece of dramatic work” (Ilo, 2010, p. 156). However, the art of playwriting transcends self-acclamation, an unthoughtful and untutored act but that which calls for the acquiring of the basic knowledge of the bits and pieces and the basic principles upon which the art is built. A playwright must know his onions since the art is a conscious one. It is when these elements are well understood that one can start the adventure of playwriting, as playwriting is an adventurous task. Smiley (2005) notes that “the essential areas of technical knowledge for playwriting are theatre design, scenic design, costume design, and makeup. Playwrights should be, at least imaginatively, originators of design concepts. In order to construct uniquely styled plays, writers need to know the potentialities and the limitations of each phase of theatre art” (p. 270). At this juncture, the playwright considers the first two icons, which will form his angle of approach. This could either be the subjective or the objective. While the objective approach is based on phenomenal and conventional considerations – the generally accepted views of the people about a concept, the subjective deals with the personality. As Yerima (2007, p. 32) puts it, “playwriting is very personal...” and like a “letter to the audience...” and so cannot be diminutively handled.

In essence, the playwright's importance in society cannot be overemphasized. As a teacher of mine would say, ‘The director will die, the actors will die too, but the only person who will not die is the playwright’. This means, the play will out-live the writer. Playwriting is the act of creating the plot, theme, characters, dialogue, spectacle, and structure of a play and organizing it into a play script form. It involves the ability to imagine the entire production scene by scene and to put it into written form so that directors may interpret it for the stage. The ideas of a playwright are governed by his philosophies, which are rooted in the cultures of the people from which he gathers his material.

In playwriting, there exists an array of categories and genres that the play may be woven around. It could be political, historical, contemporaneous, legendary, mythical, folkloric, and so on. Genres may vary from “*tragedy, Comedy, Tragic-comedy, Melodrama Farce, Absurd and the Epic*” (Obafemi, 2008, p. 20). More so, the elements which the playwright must pay attention to include:

Plot

Plot is the sequential arrangement of a story in the order of the actions. Plot is the literary element that describes the structure of a story. It exposes the causal arrangement of events and actions within a story. For example, Freytag's pyramid explanation of the plot, as posited by Lethbridge and Mildorf (2008), records that at the left base of the pyramid is the '*Exposition*' where actions are incited and characters introduced. Next to it is the '*erregendes moment*' where the actions start to tighten up and become complicated. At the apex of the pyramid is the '*peripetie*', this is the boiling point of the action; the climax of the whole event. Here, things begin to turn around. Descending the right side of the pyramid is the '*retardierendes moment*' which explains the falling action and the gradual loosening of tied up events. The last at the right base of the pyramid is the '*Katastrophe*', the denouement where all events are finally settled. While some plots are linear such that they start from the beginning to the middle and then to the end, some are cyclical and they present complete stories in each event or scenario. Yerima (2007, p. 35) puts it that, "the plot is the story of the play. Some plays have main and subplots. The plot again is developed from the idea. It involves the characters and the conflict. The plot moves the play, and allows the characters to play out their roles. It also lays out the sequence of the play". The development of the play itself is hinged on the plot. The plot is the main constituent of the play. Yet within the main story of the play, which happens to be the main idea, there exist some other sub-ideas that accompany the main storyline.

Conflict

Apart from the plot, the second most important element is the conflict. It is what brings about the whole action and events that make up a plot. Conflict is what Miller, refers to as "...a confrontation between one or more parties aspiring towards incompatible or competitive means or ends". Lawal (2015, p. 53) examines conflict as that which "...has to do with how the contrasting characters go about settling their differences. It can, therefore, be said that the degree of contrast among characters is closely related to characterization". He explains that there are conflicts of personality, conflicts of purpose and conflicts of motivation which combines the other two, thereby making it more profound. For any successful playwright to carry his audience along throughout his play, he must be able to build the conflict in his play creatively such that the attention of the audience who read his play/plays remain sustained. Closely related to, but different from the conflict is the crisis. What is meant by dramatic crisis is the peak for the turning point reached in a play before it is resolved.

Characters are the movers of any story. They are the dictator of the plot, the genre, and the tone and mood of a play, and the conflict of a play revolve around them. Character analysis is a vital part that must not be left untouched by directors of any play. In a play, the characters are like paper beings that the playwright has created. They exist only in imagination and on the page of the black and white until the play is moved from page to stage where each character is given life and made to speak, walk, communicate and tell the story. "Characters in a play involve the people through which the author of a play tells his story. To formulate characters for a play, a writer needs to know and control the various kinds of agents according to their appropriate functions. Each should be clear, receive the proper emphasis, and be developed to the necessary complexity. One of the chief difficulties of playwriting is the creation of characters that are at once precisely functional, credibly lifelike, and imaginatively stimulating" (Smiley 2005, p. 146). They are the ones that he uses to weave out the plot from the beginning to the end, they carry words, actions and thoughts. The characters in a play are as important as the story itself because they are the story, the life of the play. Each character must exhibit different traits by which we can define and/or classify them. "If plot is what happens, character is why it happens. The motivation is the bases of the action. Plot may be what gives the play its immediate sense of excitement, but plays are remembered for their characters" (Kernodle 1967, p. 349). Thus, there cannot be a story without characters. The characters form the frame around which the story evolves. The characters tell the stories both directly and indirectly, they form the bases of the playwright's arguments and theories or postulations. It is the characters in a play that makes the play remain in the mind of the audience through their various actions and responses in the plot. In the same vein, the determination of a genre is based on the characters. Whether a play will be tragic, or comic, satiric or melodramatic, all depends on the characters therein.

Settings

Settings in playwriting are important in the development of any play. The settings of a play consist of the time, place, and circumstances in which the events of the play have happened. By this, we mean the context, the scenario and the act. The tribe, religious and ethnic background must be known. "...a close look at the setting can thus contribute to a better understanding of the characters and their behaviour...the settings correspond with what is going on in the storyworld...setting tells us even more about the family...setting is used as indirect characterization and defines the characters' conflicts or struggles... etc" (Lethbridge & Mildorf, 2008, pp. 102 -105).

Language

Language in any play is a form of communication either by spoken words or gestures. "...by language, we do not mean solely words, but the grammar that we use to put them together to produce utterances that reflect our lives, experiences... environment, as well as enable us to affect people and events around us"" (McWhorter, 2004, pp. 3 - 4). There must be effective communication in playwriting, the use of language in the art of playwriting is an indispensable element without which there cannot be a play. Language in playwriting serves as a projector of the cultures and the settings of the play. It gives the writer and the audience the communicative tie of understanding that is desired for the play. It is within the language or languages of a play that we have the different dialects that come to use. A playwright may decide to be multi-linguistic by the application of multilingualism to drive home his expressions.

Yerima's *Abobaku* and the Yoruba 'Abobaku' Philosophy

Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* is based on the long existent Yoruba culture of choosing someone to die with the king after his exit to the yonder world. The play x-rays the cultural belief and practice of the accompaniment accorded demised monarchs. It is a form of ritual suicide committed by the person who holds the title of the 'abobaku' as his allegiance to the king. This same concept is what Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* centres on. "This practice was still prevalent in Oyo until the middle of the 20th century" (Ademuleya, 2009, p. 57). However, Ahmed Yerima's *Abobaku* criticizes the practice. He bases it on the African tragic notion with cognizance to metalinguistics and also the multilinguistic employment of the English language and the Yoruba language, hinging the setting in Oyo in South-Western Nigeria and with well-defined characters, thought, sociology and ideology. In the play, *Ajibade* vows to live and die for the king – *Oba Karunwi*. He swears to be faithful to his allegiance. Not long after that, the king falls ill. *Ajibade's* wife - *Faramola* who has been barren for about five years since her marriage to *Ajibade* starts to show concern, as she foresees her husband's death. At that time, *Faramola* conceives a child but does not disclose this to *Ajibade* her husband. *Mama* (*Faramola's* mother) starts to show concern too as she runs along with her daughter from pillar to post, moving from church to shrines for help to save *Ajibade's* life. All of these seem not to be working until she gets to the Ifa priest who instructs her to light three *atupas* (lamps) and watch them burn overnight. Each lamp signifies the life of a person.

IFADEYI: And you, go home. Take three oil lamps. Light them, and keep watch all night. Not one of them must die. As they go off, the life of each member of your family will end. Not a wink, woman...Not a wink (Yerima, 2015, p. 27).

Ilari Agba, the husband to *Mama* has just gone to *Ajibade* to help him escape to another land. He comes in and sees three lamps burning. While *Mama* goes in to serve him water to drink, he douses the lamps, that they should not waste oil.

MAMA: (*Returns and sees the lanterns off.*) Oh my God... the three lanterns are dead? This is a bad omen. Esu has blown off the lights, and has also blown out our lights. From now on, darkness looms and now, like cursed children, we will walk by the stones of fire led by Esu to the throne of Iku (p. 36).

Ready to die in place of her husband, *Faramola* prepares herself in the ritual attire to the amazement of the chief and *Abore*. This becomes the talk in the palace. Close to when *Faramola* will be used for sacrifice in the place of *Ajibade*, *Ajibade* walks in from the land he escaped to where they almost

made him king, according to their tradition there. Unfortunately, *Faramola* is no more in the human realm, taken closer to the yonder world by the ritual mixture she drank; she passes on with the young innocent life inside of her.

ABORE: Now you are ready

FARAMOLA: I have been ready since the day I adorned
the wrapper of death. (*Chuckles.*) you must consider
me the spawn of Esu. The first irritating seed of death.

ABORE: I don't know why you are set on doing this (p. 64).

AJIBADE: Stop! By the spirits of our fathers, please stop. I
am here to carry my load to the stream of death. (*He
goes to FARAMOLA, unties the ABOBAKU wrapper
and ties it on himself.*) ...

AJIBADE: Go home. (*He whispers into her ear.*)

FARAMOLA: (*Chuckles.*) I hear you. I shall go when
my feet are strong enough. But tonight, I shall return
home (*She falls down. Dead.*) (pp. 67 - 68)

Prior to this time, *Ilari Agba* died as a result of his treacherous behaviour right in the room where the body of late *Oba Karunwi* was laid. *Ajibade* is taken out and killed too, leaving *Mama* with no one and in state of lunacy. *Yerima* (2015) at the back page blob of the text sums the play up as “a foray into the traditional institution examining the age long belief in the idea of a king an *abobaku*, a man whose life is to be cut short by the death of a king. The play questions the relevance of an *abobaku* as well as the mystery that surrounds the gods”. Hence, *Yerima* interrogates the culture and philosophy of *abobaku* in his play.

According to the Yoruba culture, the king is revered by his subjects. In fact, “in Yoruba land, it is posited that Yoruba socio-political philosophy displays a fluid but complex combination of both the philosophy of absolutism and the prevalence of a system of checks and balances.” (William, 2011, p. 398). It is as a result of this that, “kings in most African kingdoms are sent into eternity, fully equipped with everything they would need including slaves, to continue life in the sumptuous style they have known on earth” (Ademuleya, 2009, p. 57). This is because the Yorubas do not believe in death as the end. This cosmological conception of the Yoruba people is that there is life after life. *Drewal, et al.* (1989, p. 14) explain that, “the Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realm – *aye* (the visible tangible world of the living) and *orun* (the invisible spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods and spirits) ... They believe that persons live, depart, and are reborn and that every individual comes from either the gods or one's ancestors on the mother's or the father's side”. More so, the real life is not where we inhabit presently but where we transcend to, after. *Drewal, et al.* (1989, p. 16) extrapolate the Yoruba saying that, “the world is a market [we visit], the other world is home” (*Aye l'oja, orunn'ile*). According to *Adeboye* (2013), “...death is not seen as the end of life. It is a means of crossing to the other side” (p. 196). The kings in fact, were seen as spiritual beings who live higher than normal humans. That is why the concept of “absolutism derives from the fact that the *oba* i.e., king, from whom the law emanates, according to certain myths, was regarded as sacred (*igbakeji orisa*). This sacredness translates, in theoretical terms, to absolute powers exercised by him” (Ademuleya, pp. 398 - 399). The *abobaku* philosophy of the Yoruba people is woven around the ideology of honor, culture, respect, and life. This philosophy is what *Ahmed Yerima* explores in his play.

Conclusion.

The cross-utilization of philosophy in all disciplines and in every human endeavor is not a hidden fact. Every play is philosophically-based, and this is also evident in the plays written by other African playwrights. While these philosophies form playwriting materials, the African writer also pays keen attention to aspects of culture. However, the acquaintance of the playwright with the basic concepts of playwriting is very important to put up a good play for the consumption of the audience, as evident in *Ahmed Yerima's* play *Abobaku*, which examines Yoruba culture and philosophy. In the play, he also expresses his own philosophical view of the practice, interrogating its relevance and

questioning the essence of barbarism. While trying to appreciate the Yoruba culture, his intention is that which aims to jolt the audience to the consciousness of humanity and value for the human life.

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