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IDENTITY, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE IN AHMED YERIMA'S *THE SILENT GODS*: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE

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We live in a world that is irreversibly plural where culture is concerned, but a basis for the harmonious coexistence of cultures can be found in the mutual sharing of what is convergent ...and in a mutual respect for what is divergent - where this does not involve the oppression of individuals or groups. Peter Caws (1994, 385)

One major factor that has hindered the growth of democracy in many post-independent African countries is the invidious manipulation of identities, especially by the elites, in the competition for limited national resources (International IDEA: 2000, 89 – 105). As Olaniyan clearly puts it: “Part of the contemporary crisis of the African state is its inability to forge a nation from its awkwardly thrown together constituent parts, parts that were routinely manipulated into fierce competition and set off against one another by the colonizers during the colonial rule”. (2000, 271). Identities may be ethno-geographical, sexual, religious or generational in nature. It becomes difficult to secure a consensus on issues of democratisation among the people and in combating autocratic tendencies of postcolonial leaders, whether military or civilian. It breeds electoral fraud, nepotism, thuggery and arson. The consequence is that democratic governance is imperiled in such a dispensation. In Nigeria as it occurs in many parts of Africa, the battle for exploration, allocation and control of resources have been so fierce, leading to “the enthronement of an atavistic ethnic consciousness, a major civil war, and an epidemic of *coup d’etats*” writes Olaniyan (2000, 271).

Several studies have identified the causes of conflicts arising from the manipulation of identities and its consequences on the process of democratisation. For instance, some scholars have explained identity as a dynamic reality that can be historically constructed to achieve a predetermined goal, as it was the case under colonialism. Some theorists conceive it as a weapon often explored by elites in post-colonial politics to gain advantage in competition for inadequate resources and benefits (Nnolim, 1980). Writers like Horowitz (1985) have argued that ethnic identity is a product of modernisation. According to the modernisation theory of ethnicity, ethnic groups do not have equal access to the benefits of modernity and the uneven distribution of resources is at the base of many political conflicts in different parts of the world (see Nnolim: 1994; Obi: 2001). A society divided along ethnic cleavages as Horowitz reminds us endangers democratic practice. In his words, "ethnic divisions strain, contort, and often transform democratic institutions" (682). This is made more so because in such a context, issues and events are easily prone to ethnic interpretations – from education to development plans, adjustment of boundaries, party formation, finance, trade matters, provision of social amenities and employment. Even the military as an institution has been shown to be susceptible to identity politics.

Diversity or group differentiation is a more typical reality of most countries in the world today as examples of monolithic countries are quite few. Groups are bound to interact. But when group relations go sour in this context usually over territory, resource distribution or power sharing, the survival of democracy is bound to be jeopardised. For example, strained group relations expressed through violent conflicts have undermined democracy in African countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan in the 1990s.

Identity and Difference in a Multicultural Polity.

Identities are often engaged to achieve solidarity behind a common political cause which may sometimes threaten the legitimacy of the state itself, or imperil the democratic rights of the "outer group" i.e. those who do not fall within the precinct of the identity. Identity and difference are crucial elements in the epistemology of multiculturalism. Both are products of history, culture, and ideology. Against the backdrop of an increasingly pluralistic world, identity and difference have remained constant subjects of negotiation within and beyond the academia. Thus, multiculturalism as a bye-product of alternative worldview and daring innovations associated with postmodernism is one of the sites where the issue of identity has been problematised with a view to broadening its epistemological frontiers.

It should be noted that politics is a crucial factor in the construction of identity and negotiation of difference. It plays no less a significant role in the articulation of multicultural perspectives. Consequently, the centrality of politics, identity and difference to the notion and praxis of multiculturalism recommends it for attention in this essay. Of course, politics implies a dynamic interaction of social forces and one's identity is signified within the context of a dialogic relationship with others in the same group so identified and in the notion of the Other, so constructed as difference. Admittedly, difference can be used to impede co-operative actions required in a democracy.

Multiculturalism seeks to transform the hegemonic framework of the state in pursuit of socio-political heterogeneity and cultural pluralism. As Goldberg explains, "multicultural heterogeneity ... first encourages and enables interactive and intersecting multiplicities in social and subject positions. It thus gives voice to, and works to clear an institutional space for, that which might otherwise be eclipsed or effaced" (1994, 30). Thus, it recognises the existence of multiple cultures within the boundaries of a state. It seeks due recognition for each of the culture; affirm their distinctness and autonomy as well as their interdependence at a larger plane.

Like postcolonialism, multiculturalism is both a theoretical practice and “a reading strategy” (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, 2). It developed in the American Academia as a response to the cultural multiplexity of the American Society. “There is no denying that the multicultural initiative arose, in part, because of the fragmentation of American society by ethnicity, class, and gender”, writes Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1994, 204). To be sure, it received a boost from affirmative actions against unearned privileges nurtured on the basis of solidarity along the lines of race, gender, class and ideology. However, migration and movement as defining elements of modernity, account for the multicultural nature of many nations across the world today, hence, the relevance of its discursive strategies to other nations and situations beyond the North Atlantic. From the Aborigines and French population of Canada, to the American Indians, African-Americans, Black women, Nigeria’s Niger Delta etc, multicultural viewpoint, hinges on identity consciousness. It rejects the totalising tendency of the dominant culture while affirming the presence, essence and distinction of “Other” cultures. It also endorses the inclusion of subaltern voices in inter-cultural dialogue within local and global contexts. Although, its critics like Louis Gates have accused multiculturalism of having the tendency to fragment cultures into a warren of ethnic enclaves, “each separate and inviolate”, it is capable of boosting the self-esteem of the hitherto marginalised peoples while strengthening cultural particularities and universal principles.

Identity and difference are constructs of social relations, which are essentially characterised by a sense of sameness, inclusion and solidarity, on the one hand, and discrimination, oppression and exploitation on the other. Identity, as earlier remarked, excludes those who fall outside the walls of its definition, while it binds together as members of a collective, those embraced by the definition. Like language, signs and symbols in which they are expressed, identity and difference are dynamic, shifting and can only enjoy temporary permanence. That is why they are subject to constant negotiation and re-definition. Identity consciousness, for

instance, has been used to achieve solidarity of the colonised people against the colonialists. In another vein, it is the tonic of theorists of White racial superiority like Hegel, David Hume, Herr Adolf Hitler (who propounded the theory of Aryans racial superiority) and ideologues of the Nationalist Party in the old (pre-1990) South Africa. Identity was behind Nigeria’s pogrom of 1966, the attendant Civil war, the current onslaught of terrorism and so on. Succinctly put, therefore, identity can be activated to subvert hegemony and achieve liberation. It can also be appropriated to service dominance and socio-economic exploitation (see Said, 1993).

Underlying identity is the issue of power within the social formation in which it is expressed. That is why it is often defined in a way that reflects those who exercise power, “author-ise” knowledge and control mode of representation as well as those who are at the margins constructed as the Other. Democracy provides opportunity for mediating inter- group conflict and tension that sometimes arise from unequal relations of power achieved through identity manipulation. This, perhaps, informs the aspiration of multicultural societies like Nigeria, for democratic mode of governance. Multiculturalism is in step with democracy, which, subsists on equality, co-operation, inclusion, participation, diffusion and multiple centres of power¹. Ideally, each culture, each identity and each person is supposed to be worthy of recognition and dignity as the other in a democracy (see Taylor, 1994).

Specifically, federalism as a political system is a step in the direction of negotiating multicultural reality. It recognises difference and respects the autonomy of multiple groups that constitute the political structure. The centre becomes an arena of healthy competition of interests, free interplay of values in a federation. The tendency for dominance by a group is checked with necessary institutional apparatus like the constitution.

It should be remarked that in practice, there is usually a wide gap between the ideal and practical reality. However, from the foregoing, there

is a clear intersection between identity, difference and the praxis of multiculturalism. In terms of its ability to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of democratisation in a plural society like Nigeria that is being governed on aberrant principles of unicentricism dictated by the experience of military rule, multiculturalism merits further scholarly attention. This essay, therefore, critically studies the manifestation of diversity / pluralism and the manipulation of identity in Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods*. It observes that the playwright depicts the travails of democracy in Nigeria, using drama as a site for historical struggles by competing forces of ethnicity, gender, generation, class and ideology. The basic challenge of democratisation in an increasingly polycentric world is how to encourage co-operation across primordial divides. The failed transition to civil rule programme of the Nigerian military government in the decades of 1980 and 1990 presents this challenge in bold relief as dramatised in the welter of conflicts in the play.

Negotiating Identity Politics and Democracy in *The Silent Gods*

Ahmed Yerima is one of the few playwrights who emerged on the Nigerian stage in the last decade of the twentieth century. A former Lecturer at the Department of English and Drama, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, he was appointed as the Artistic Director of the National Troupe of Nigeria, Lagos in 1999. Historical narratives, both ancient and contemporary, fascinate Yerima² *The Silent Gods* is a demonstration of this interest, as it enunciates the ethos of multiculturalism within the framework of diversity and political pluralism.

Through its pattern of conflict, the play shows that political instability is a natural consequence of a nation's inability to properly manage the phenomena of pluralism and identity consciousness. It is made clear that discrimination along ethnic, religious and even political party lines inhibits democracy. Close ties among diverse groups need to be forged and

literature is a signifying code that can contribute to this agenda by exposing dominance and socially divisive factors. It can also do this by promoting new consciousness of democratic values among the people.

Using Nigeria's recent history, Ahmed Yerima in *The Silent Gods*³ grapples with the dangers posed to democratic governance by ethno-nationalist, gender, class and intergenerational conflicts. Consequently, despite the authorial equivocation on it in the preface of the play, the similarity between events depicted, and political realities during the regime of General Sanni Abacha (1993-1998) is quite unmistakable. The play's artistic strength lies not in its accurate reproduction of historical reality, but in the exploration of the dramatic form to mediate the crises of governance stirred in part by the military as a ruling class and their collaborators outside the armed forces. At the centre of the conflict is the question of power: who holds the lever of power and exercise it? Who benefits from power and who are those excluded from its and benefits accrue there from?

In the words of the traditional storyteller who opens the play, *The Silent Gods* focuses on "the twist of life and the need to be together". "The twist of life" is occasioned by the inconclusive transition to civil rule programme of the military. Consequent upon the failure of the political Transition Programme, the state of anomy that Nigeria became during the period is fictionalised in its setting, Ilu-Oja.

Judging from its name, "Ilu-Oja" means "the market town". Here is a diffused polyvocal community that is divided along primordial cleavages. It is a society founded on the Rousseauan principle of liberalism, which advocates politics of equal respect and dignity. It is economically disoriented just as it is politically adrift. The community, therefore, needs urgent reconstruction both at personal and communal levels. As the Narrator explains, Ilu Oja begins from a simple economic interaction among few people only to become later, the "Great market town". The acrimony that characterises relations in a plural society occurs in the market. Amidst the

inter-group conflict, the operation at the market hinges on dialogic exchange, friendship, tolerance, consensus and accommodation. These multicultural principles are required in a democratising society if such a society will not slip back into arbitrary rule.

Besides, the market is an expression of diversity in a federation. A federation recognises distinction in identity and equality in inter-group relationship. It advocates equity in the sharing of opportunities. Here, individual preferences and differences are acknowledged, but tempered by what can be described as "common good". The centre here is site of struggle with multiple voices. Ilu Oja is like a federation where all parts are expected, within the context of their autonomy and self-determination, to contribute resources toward development of the centre and the constituent units. The Narrator espouses the principle of federalism when he provides an insight into the origin of the town:

This is our great market square. Our town is called Ilu Oja, the Great Market Town. We grew up in the market place. First it started as a spot, one man comes from one village with his fat goat, another with his fat yam tubers. Then they exchanged oil for salt, dried fish for pepper and green vegetables. Soon they exchanged daughters for grand-children, and we decided to stay. (TSG 11)

Truly, Ilu Oja is a nation of diverse people and beliefs. Its heterogeneity as attested by the Narrator, is achieved through movement and migration, which encourage commodity flow and cultural traffic. Thus, it is a society transformed from its monoculture origin into a heterogeneous polity through what Goldberg calls "interactive and intersecting multiplicities" (30).

From the beginning, a link is established, through the director's note and narrative of the Storyteller, between the town's primaeval serenity and the blissful gaiety of its present. Through the dance patterns, music,

songs and costume, Yerima appeals to multi-cultural nature of the Nigerian society. Though the idea of richness in diversity created through these theatrical elements stand subverted by the upheaval that greets the succession tussle, they have contributed to the projection in Ilu-Oja, of a heterogeneous society that is trying to mediate its diversity through the restoration of free speech and collective action. Perhaps, a brief summary of the plot will be appropriate here, as it will help our subsequent analysis.

As a result of the transition of Ilu Oja's King, the community is enmeshed in succession crisis. The traditional process of filling the vacant stool places enormous responsibilities on the gods and representatives of the five ruling houses. But what is intriguing in the present case is that the gods decline to categorically name a successor. When they appear to name one, the answer bewilders the people. Although the gods throw back the responsibility of selection on the human community, their silence, in a way offers the people an opportunity to exercise a freedom of choice and participate in the leadership recruitment process which democratisation process entails. Unfortunately, the opportunity is not properly utilised by the community.

Efforts by the representatives of the ruling houses who hold the suffrage as members of the council of elders to resolve the crisis deepen the confusion. They narrow the contest down to two affluent chiefs with royal blood – Togba and Aseburupo who both head their ruling houses. While majority members of the elders' council prefer Chief Togba on account of his wealth and generosity, Aseburupo equally lays claim to the throne, reasoning that he is favoured, not only by the succession pattern, but also by his affluence and philanthropic actions.

Togba's face appears on the divination board, suggesting that the gods endorse him, but he does not have the requisite paraphernalia of a chosen King on the board, that is, the calabash of life in his beaded hands. Chief Aseburupo feels cheated by the Elders' decision to install Togba in

spite of the misty message of the gods. The acrimony generated by this situation turns two friends into bitter enemies and what starts out as jostling for the throne by the candidates sinks their immediate families, the whole of Ilu Oja and its environs deeper into chaos. Market women and farmers in solidarity with Aseburupo join the protest against perceived injustice done to him. Other women groups in neighbouring towns become involved. Hence, socio-economic activities are paralysed in an oblique reference to the general strike by workers in the oil sector and the organised labour in Nigeria between June and August 1994.⁴

The tension is further aggravated by Togba's sudden death after chewing a poison-coated *kolanut of life* (*Kolanut of life* is part of the rites of kingship which a new monarch must undergo). Ironically, in the case of Togba, "*kolanut of life*" turns into "*kolanut of death*". The unfathomable silence of the gods in the face of this tragedy and their refusal to decisively intervene in the matters of men engender more violence and social paralysis.

As a solution, Togba's widow (Subu) is made the regent by the elders for three months, pending the choice of another king. Since it is agreed that the family of Togba should produce the regent, as the crown is to go to Aseburupo's family, Subu offers herself for the regency in place of her son, Dide. She has a vengeful mission to accomplish and she becomes ruthless in her brief stay in power. Consequently, people's freedom of association, movement, expression and employment are violated on her orders with impunity.

The adversity of Subu's dictatorship and the obvious threat of social disintegration compel the common people to eschew individual differences and primordial prejudices to press for urgent solution to the crisis. Incidentally, the gods break their silence after the community observes seven days of intense propitiation. The youngest virgin in the land is chosen as the new king to circumvent the previous hereditary,

aristocratic and oligarchic power structure. The new choice is joyfully celebrated in the epilogue with traditional cleansing rites of broom and songs.

Apart from the trope of the market, which symbolises the heterogeneity of Nigeria, the choice of a virgin and the concluding rites of purification are symbolic. The virgin is a symbol of fresh beginning and by extension, a break from the past. The post-Subu regime will be a new era that is undefiled by the manipulation and malevolence of the preceding era. As Yerima explains, the play was written in response to the socio-economic crises that characterise attempts by the military regime of General Sanni Abacha to sustain the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. According to Yerima:

People were being denied their positions, even after election, even after the gods had elected them. And the future of Nigeria was on the brink. That is why at the end, I bring in the virgin, the young virgin⁵

The cleansing option adopted in the play sounds plausible. The atmosphere here is typical of what obtains in a traditional African festival, which shows unanimity of purpose and solidarity among various categories of participants. Nonetheless, from the way it is handled, it is somewhat facile and escapist as a solution to sensitive problems of inequality and difference. In the first instance, it fails to adequately address the root of inter and intra group distrust that it raises in the plot and which, in reality, has been undermining democratisation in Nigeria since the colonial period. Apart from this, the solution also fails to put in proper perspective, the class dimension to national politics evident in the unity of the suffering masses against the elite toward the end of the play. This can partly be ascribed to the fact that the play is propagandistic in its intent and realisation. Written for a government establishment - the National Troupe of Nigeria, which is an arm of the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, the

hazy resolution can be seen as an attempt not to clearly confront the issue before a government whose legitimacy was under severe questioning in the civil society at the time of performance of the play.

Be that as it may, the intolerance of difference or the "Other" contributes to social dislocation experienced in Ilu-Oja. In this community, leadership is closely associated with group identity. The battle between Togba and Aseburupo, exemplifies competition for power by the elite. But they represent larger groups, be it political, ethnic or racial. A leader determines the action of members of his family in the quest for power. Aseburupo cancels, for instance, the marriage plan between Dide (Togba's son) and Kike (his daughter). In doing this he declares:

Women listen and stop all this whimpering. How can I accept Chief Togba as king and as an in-law? The relationship won't work. We are both heads of our families. When we fight, the families fight too. When oil stains one finger, the whole hand is stained. (TSG, 25)

Indeed, the hatred between the families of Togba and Aseburupo recalls the bitter quarrel between the families of Montague and Capulet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. But one redeeming feature about Aseburupo is that in spite of pressure on him by the elders of his family to form a separate town called *Aseburupolu* where he will rule as a king, he declines. Through this aspect of Aseburupo's character, Yerima contends that the solution to the crises of democratic governance manifest in identity and differences does not lie in constant tinkering with borders. Indeed, to quote Horowitz again, "the answer to the problem of democracy and ethnic conflict is not to re-draw the map of the world" (1985, 682).

Beside the battle of the sexes in the play is the battle of generations. There is a link between the sub-text of marriage and the text of political conflict. The young lovers, Dide and Kike, represent a new generation trying to eschew the rancour of the older generation represented by their

parents. They are reluctant to embrace the bitter politicking of their parents, which threatens their marriage. The final adoption of a virgin as this should be seen in the same light of generational contestation, resulting in the displacement of the old oligarchic order. Though Yerima's choice here is anything but democratic, the play as a signifying element shows obstacles, which a nation should avoid in its effort to democratise the polity. If we do not have a picture of democracy in the play, there is a notion of what democracy is not and what it should not be.

To make the play realistic and credible, Yerima draws characters from across the social strata. These characters represent diversity that typifies Nigeria as a multicultural society with patriarchal and gerontocratic practices.

The Narrator, for example, provides the audience a recast of past events and insight into approaching ones. He offers vital links in the main plot and the sub-plot through his narration. He weaves in and out of the action on stage in a manner that blends the dramatic and the narrative in the aesthetics of the play. He is the traditional historian who embodies knowledge about the culture and environment of the people. The play from the onset attracts attention towards him through the use of spotlight, which picks him out from the dark stage in order to underscore his importance. Having attracted the audience's attention, the Narrator introduces the thematic pre-occupation of the play – group identity against the backdrop diversity and competition for power.

Close to the Narrator in terms of cultural essence is the priest, Chief Koma. He is a diviner who, by his calling, is the link between the human world and the realm of divinities. Like the story-teller, he embodies ancient wisdom and knowledge of the present. But more than the story-teller, he is capable of prognostication due to his association with the gods.

Meanwhile, a materialist dimension is subtly inscribed into his character by the playwright. The Culture of the gods is to intervene in the

matters of men initially tends to position man at the centre of decision-making. Consequently, the divinities that have always decided the right candidate for the crown are “de-centred”. According to Chief Koma:

I cast the shell across the divination board only to be told that the choice of our New King has to be made by us...? The gods refused to choose the King. Seven times did I ask them, and seven times did they answer, too. (TSG, 13)

In an open preference for free will, the people in the universe of the play are required by the gods to choose, but the priest too loses his superhuman essence in the process. Equally undermined is the omniscient ascription of the gods. The priest is as ignorant of the future and bereft of solution to the political problems of succession as any other citizen of Ilu-Oja. Therefore, the contraction of the gap between Chief Koma and the ordinary men in terms of prescience demystifies Koma and the gods. It also spells doom for the whole town as the situation of silence is twisted to suit each strand of competing interests. The gods’ silence in the face of Togba’s murder leaves the people (especially Subu) to engage in suspicion, blind accusation and misdirected anger. It also leads to the removal of Koma as Chief Priest, his banishment to the forest and the installation of his brother in his place. But the materialist re-invention of the gods is not sustained till the end. The gods step in once again and offer a solution.

The five elders represent different ruling houses, which arguably imply political parties, or ethno-geographical divisions that constitute the basis of representation. Togba and Aseburupo demonstrate the bitter rivalry that often mark and mar power contests. The stage formation during the meeting of Elders summoned to choose a successor to the late king is used to establish this sharp antagonism:

The scene opens in a meeting of elders. Chiefs Togba and Aseburupo sit at the opposite sides of the meeting of five elders. (TSG, 13)

Shortly after, both of them are hotly contesting for the throne. Though they both have something admirable about them, the fact that neither of them could reign successfully shows that there is something fundamentally wrong with the oligarchic order, which they represent. The system opens competition to only “the richest and most loved man chosen by the gods” (TSG, 12). It is a government of the “rich and mighty”. The message encapsulated in this reality is that the solution to the crises of democratisation should be sought outside the range of politicians and soldiers who usurp power and the structure that produce them. Since democracy is inclusive, expanding the scope of choice beyond the ruling house is one affirmative step toward that direction. Perhaps, it is in this sense that one can understand the reason why the gods jettison the “obvious” aristocratic choices and settle for a new possibility represented by the virgin.

The gender factor in the conflict is articulated by Subu. Through her character, the playwright opens up a space for the silent voices of women in the power contest. But more significantly, Subu represents something else. She, Subu personifies the autocratic tendencies of military regimes, including coercion and lack of respect for due process. She also demonstrates the tendency to appeal to differences in order to gain sectarian advantage. Notwithstanding the customary provision, she wants her son to ascend the throne after his father, and she seeks the support of the Head Eunuch – the symbol of coercive and protective instrument of the state. The support is to be rewarded with Kike, Aseburupo’s daughter who is hitherto engaged to marry Dide her son. The gesture is to punish a perceived enemy rather than to reward a faithful servant. It depicts the tendency to distribute reward and punishment under a non-democratic regime (like Subu’s) in accordance with personal whims of the leader(s) and not necessarily in accordance with a collectively defined procedure. Beside, it shows the tendency by some politicians to resort to coercion (using soldiers or thugs) to gain advantage over opponents. Such arbitrary

means of resolving political differences are the bane of Nigeria's democratisation process.

On the other hand, the townsfolk of Ilu-Oja, like the Roman plebeians are presented as being fickle minded because their opinions are easily swayed. The most enduring thing about them is their acknowledgement of the transience of human situation. Hence, the crowd that holds Aseburupo in high esteem at the beginning (judging from how the people swarm around him at the market) swiftly turns to demand his death, over an unfounded allegation that he is involved in Togba's death. Though a clear evidence of ignorance, the seriousness with which the opinion is arrived at and conveyed as if it is the truth shows the crowd's slender capacity for rigorous reasoning and consistency (TSG, 58-59). It is this inadequacy on the part of the common people that the elite explore in order to manipulate existing cleavages for sectional interests.

The masses, in a bid to tackle the problems of existence, later recognise themselves as victims of manipulation by the elite. Their act of coming together is a step toward self-reliance with a view to addressing what Yerima elsewhere refers to as "democratic gamble" (2002, 12) of both the civilians and the military. The transformative awareness by the masses exemplifies the collapse of boundaries, the merger of interests and the elimination of primordial differences, which are expected to be the hallmark of democratic politics in the twenty first century.

Concluding Remarks

The essay has, in the preceding paragraphs, examined the dramatisation of identity, difference and indices of multiculturalism in the expression of the democratic imperative in Ahmed Yerima's *The Silent Gods*. Through a close study of theatrical and rhetorical devices employed by the playwright, the paper shows democratic experiments in Nigeria as usually being ambushed by the orchestration of identity and difference in the pursuit of sectarian interests. Yerima affirms the importance of hitherto

marginalised or excluded groups – be it youths, women or the poor – in the struggle for democracy, hence, the attempt to create a new narrative of historical struggle. Notwithstanding its propagandistic motivation, *The Silent Gods* formulates some responses to the nagging problems of identity and difference in the quest for democratic governance in Nigeria. Through the prism of contemporary history, the playwright creates a socio-politically relevant drama that merits more critical inquiry.

Notes

1. The centrality of inclusion in the notion of multiculturalism and its oppositional construct as a mode of knowing connects it with "hybridism" which as Homi Bhabha, one of its proponents, has noted, is "a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (see Goldberg, 1994, 10).
2. Yerima's fascination with history as material for contemporary drama is evident in other plays like *The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen*, *Kaffir's Last Game*, *Attahiru*, *Erelu* and *Tafida*.
3. The play was premiered at the National Theatre, Lagos between July 22 and 27, 1994 by the National Troupe of Nigeria. Yerima was at the time of producing the play, the Assistant Director of the Troupe. The National Troupe of Nigeria is a performance organisation established by the Federal Government in 1988 under the leadership of Late Hubert Ogunde. The troupe was conceived as an avenue for promoting the rich diversity of Nigeria's cultural and artistic heritage through the performing arts.
4. The strike was on when the play was premiered in Lagos between 22 and 27th July 1994. It was called to protest the cancellation of the results of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the

detention without trial of Chief Moshood Abiola, the presumed winner of the election. The workers demanded immediate termination of military rule.

5. Yerima made this assertion in an interview conducted by me on November 21, 2000 at the National Theatre, Iganmu Lagos.

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