

Mystical Dimensions of Prayer in Ahmed Yerima's *Idemili*: Human Quest to Learn

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Abstract

This study is an analytical contextualization of the Igbo trado-cultural and Christian perspectives on the context of prayer as a mystical reality and experience. Thus, this study examines the inter-play of faith and testimonies in the validation of the efficacy of prayer, as well as the relationship between fate and prayer from the dominant Igbo socio-cultural worldviews. This study's case-study is Ahmed Yerima's *Idemili*. However other relevant African plays form part of the secondary analytical data. The authors apply content analysis in the discussion of the focal study *Idemili*. Thus, the interpretive argument of relevant suggestions, positions and perspectives of the characters form the basis of contextualization. Theoretically, this study discusses the mystical and efficacious essence of prayer as a faith and a culture defined experience. Therefore Geertz's concept of interpretation of culture forms the pivot and frame of our analysis. Again this paper adopts Selmon's elucidation on magical realism in its explanation of the phenomenon of prayer, particularly as regards to the efficacy and the social view as projected in *Idemili*. Thus, this paper illuminates on the centrality of prayer in life, its none-ordinariness, and the various trajectories to its essence as projected it *Idemili*.

Keywords: African Drama, Culture, Faith, Fate, Igbo, Mystical, Prayer, Supernatural

1. Introduction: Prayer in Yerima's *Idemili* as a Universal Common in an Interpretive Community

This paper revisits some realities of humans' perpetual quest to better understand self, the essence of life, the living of life, and some subsisting ambiguities that confound him. Consequently, our thematic focus is on how the concepts of fate and destiny as portrayed in the focal study, *Idemili* accentuate the nature of prayer as fundamentally ambiguous and unempirical. Hence, the research problem that forms the through-line in this analysis is; why has prayer and philosophy on fate and destiny remained constant life's puzzles that consistently negate empirical and logical plausibility? Thus, this study analyzes Yerima's presentation of Christian and Igbo trado-cultural definitions and perceptions of prayer as a mystical and efficacious reality in his play *Idemili*. Primarily our interest is on how the Christian and Igbo socio-cultural worldviews on mystical reality and supernatural essence influence the individual's as well as the communal socio-cultural ideology and perception on the interplay of faith and prayer on the one hand, and prayer and fate on the other. Thus this provides the basis for theoretical descriptions on the socio-cultural significations of supernatural experience, fate, and faith, and the influence of the supernatural on socio-cultural philosophy on faith and fate. For a brief insight on the playwright, Adeoti notes that "Ahmed Yerima is one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary drama stage in the last decade of the twentieth century" and "apart from being a playwright, he is an artistic director, a theatre manager, a university lecturer, a researcher, and traditional paramount ruler in his village" (xi). Again, Adeoti observes that notably, "Yerima's dramaturgy combines the practical orientation of a theatre practitioner with the aesthetic consciousness of a critic" (xi). Adeoti furthers, noting that Yerima evidently, "draws broadly from generic elements of tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy and satire; freely experimenting, in sometimes eclectic manner, with theatrical forms known in theatre history" (xi). Rightly, as Adeoti observes, Yerima's central focus in his plays is Nigeria, mostly "life as lived in post-independence Nigeria as well as the history, culture and traditions of the people" (xiii – xiv). Emphasizing on the universal common in Yerima's plays, such as *Idemili*, Adeoti observes that though the subjects of Yerima's drama range from the specific to the general, "the modes of re-presentation make them pertinent and relevant to a wider context of humanity" (54). Similarly, Awosonmi observes that Yerima's plays reflect a robust "cross-cultural taste for mythological and folkloric materials" from across Nigeria (287).

The play *Idemili* is a linear plot drama with its setting located in the colonial era coal miners' staff quarters at Enugu in southeast Nigeria. *Idemili's* story is built around four dramatis personae, namely Ngbeke – a seventy year old woman, Ngorie – a forty year old spinster and an only daughter of Ngbeke, Father Paul – a thirty-five year old catholic priest and an only son of Ngbeke, and Father Emeka – a twenty-five year old catholic priest and junior minister in Father Paul's diocese. In *Idemili*, Yerima indicates that people say prayers

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at different instances on daily basis and that early in their lives, people learn to make prayers of varied kinds. Prayer according to *Encyclopaedia of Christian Theology* is perhaps, a “fundamental religious activity; as such, it is elusive of definition, being implied in diverse activities and taking various forms” (1265). Again from the above source, prayer may be viewed cardinally along two trajectories, which are, prayer as “the notion of asking or request, primarily addressed to God” and prayer as “communion or even union with God” (1265). In this regard, Yerima’s treatment of prayer in *Idemili* is a universal common, narrowed down to an interpretative community, the Igbo people of Nigeria. To this end, Adeoti posits that Yerima in his plays, “often reflect the imponderable conundrum of existence, noting the collective consciousness” (54). Thus it is plausible to suggest that, Yerima’s *Idemili* is in line with the perspective of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who argues that literature thrives within substance, hence “it is given impetus, shape, direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society” (xv). Thus playwrights’ such as Yerima, as exemplified in *Idemili*, engages in representation or re-telling of topical historical or ideologically driven tales in a bid to challenge the public to reminisce and discuss “the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes” (Althusser, 204). Hence, prayer can be described as a way of life, more or less a part of human culture? Explaining the dimensions of culture, Taylor notes that culture includes socially acquired knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs, and habits (76). Elaborating, he indicates that culture can be classified into social culture and ideological culture. Furthering, he explains that social culture relates to a people’s forms of social organization whereas ideological culture relates to what people think, value, believe, and hold as ideal (Taylor, 76). Similarly Ukeje notes that “culture can be defined as the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skills, tools, aesthetic objects, methods of thinking as well as customs and institutions into which each member of the society is born” (4). Undoubtedly, Ukeje’s definition situates fabric of ideas, beliefs and method of thinking which summarizes the nuances of prayer, faith and fate as elements of culture. Affirming Ukeje’s position which places prayer as a culture centred reality, Duruaku opines that the “[...] collective expression of a people’s way of life is recorded in their hopes and aspirations; practices and beliefs; their creative output; language and traditions; all which make that society different and distinguishable from other societies” (25). In line with the perspectives of Taylor, Ukeje, and Duruaku on social reality of culture, we can now begin to argue that the shared worldview of the Igbo on the influence of faith on the perception of prayer and fate, as presented in the play *Idemili*, is culture based as well as culture defined. To buttress the contexts of the expressions ‘culture based’ and ‘culture defined’ as supposed in this study, we can say that the perception of prayer can be locale culture specific or trans-locale culture informed. The example as presented in *Idemili* indicates that the prayers to the deities Idemili, Amadioha, and Ala are locale culture specific ideology and philosophy, whereas the prayer directed to God through Jesus Christ is trans-locale informed culture. Again on the locale culture specific nature of adherents’ perception of prayer, we turn to Geertz’s view on pattern of culture analysis, where he notes that culture analysis must be cast in terms of the interpretations to which persons of a particular domination subject their experience, because that is what they profess to be the descriptions of their ways of life (15).

1.1. Discussing Prayer through Magical Realism¹ and Interpretative Theory of Culture

The analysis of a culture based phenomenon such as prayer according to Geertz is most effectively treated in its own terms “by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way, according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which is the surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based” (17). In line with Geertz postulation, this study views the application and implication of prayers as portrayed in *Idemili* from the socio-cultural perspective of the characters’ supposed ethnic and religious affiliations. Therefore, the aim here primarily is to appreciate first and foremost the supposed characters’ lines of thought on why they say prayers and how they expect prayers to affect their subsisting circumstances. Again this study appreciates the social importance of prayers to the individuals that say prayers and what other individuals think about other people’s views on their perceptions of prayers as portrayed in the case study, *Idemili*. To Stone prayer is a universal, human phenomenon which is defined variously based on the various features that characterise the nature of both public and private prayer (683). Thus prayer is communion and communication with God or a transcendent other, or communion and communication between created beings and their Creator (Hinson 494; Dalrymple 213). To Dalrymple, prayer is a call and response, where the human response is only possible because of the ‘prior initiative of God’ (213). Again prayer is holding a conversation with God and this conversation may be held verbally (including singing), but other elements of communication – gestures,

¹German art critic Franz Roh, first coined the term in 1925 in connection with Post-Expressionist art which Gustav Hartlaub describes as ‘New objectivity’ (Reeds, 177). The term, as used by Hartlaub, was used to describe a new art form that Roh realised as succeeding ‘Expressionism’ which itself was a reaction against realism in art. Expressionism was described by Roh as presenting a ‘fantastic dreamscape’ (Reeds, 177). The term magical realism at its introduction in the 1920s, applied to a school of surrealistic German painters, however, later in the 1940s and 1950s, it made its way into literary analysis

movement and attentive silence – are all ways of conversing with God (Hinson 494; Dalrymple 213). There are different types and dimensions of both individual (private) and corporate (public) prayer such as petition or intercession, thanksgiving, confession/repentance, praise or adoration as well as surrender and dedication prayer. Prayer is an ‘entirely normal action’ made during times both of joy and sadness, health and sickness, good fortune and hardship. As such, it is an expression of the nature of life itself and varying states of being. Therefore, it is anyone’s privilege and not just ‘the prerogative of the few’ (Clements 1). In essence prayer is mystical and in this paper we lean on the theory of magical realism to provide background for critical analysis.

According to Slemon, magical realism is “an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that, roughly, of fantasy” (10). Slemon observes that magical realism represents a situation in the language of narration whereby there is a technical “foregrounding of two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other” and that “this sustained opposition forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (12). Similarly, Allende notes that “magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world” such as “dreams, legends, myths, emotion, passion, history” (54). Furthering Allende argues, that all these forces, “find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism” thus “it is the capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality” (54). Equally, Faris thinks that magical realism subsumes the enchanting, disturbing elements and atmosphere of human existence with the insistent quotients of magic within realistic discourse (103). In essence, Faris is of the view that “magical realism often gives voice in the thematic domain to indigenous or ancient myths, legends, and cultural practices, and in the domain of narrative technique to the literary traditions that express them with the use of non-realistic events and images” (113). The views of Allende, Faris and Slemon define the perspective of this study. Thus the basis of our argument is that the concept of magical realism predicated on human experiences and realities is a conceptual platform aiding the classification and discussion of various phenomena usually and widely referred to as mystical or mysticism. Thus, looking at the universal social perspective on mysticism, Penner concludes that mysticism covers a host of beliefs and experiences (11). This premise concurs with Sallie King’s view that mystical experience may be understood as “a form of awareness in which the experiential sense of a separate subject and object is not present” (273). To a number of acclaimed scholars, such as Robert Forman, G. William Barnard, and Jonathan Shear, mystical experience should be understood as a form of pure consciousness or unmediated awareness, whereas Proudfoot describes the non-ordinary quality of mystical experiences as ‘anomalous’ (148). On the socio-religious dimension, Brainard observes that “people involved in the study of religion, question the important roles mystical experiences play in religion, yet it has proven difficult to agree on what it means for an experience to be mystical” (359). Furthering Brainard argues that “much of the research and writing in the field of mysticism continues to presume that the phrase ‘mystical experience’ does, in fact, designate a coherent category of experience” (360). Again Brainard contends that “the experiences we call ‘mystical’ or translate from other languages as being ‘mystical’ all have two characteristics” which are ‘non-ordinariness’ and ‘profundity’ (362). Non-ordinariness, Brainard notes, pertains to mystical experience not being explainable within a conventional and naturalistic context, whereas profundity, encapsulates experiences such as telepathy or clairvoyance or astral travel, which may be considered naturalistically unexplainable (373; 379). The convergence of opinions is that people appreciate that some realities may not yield to empirical and common sense approach to their understanding and these perspectives are in concordance with African worldview on mystical realism and mystical experience. Again these scholarly views will help us in our analysis to appreciate the dimensions of Africans’ socio-cultural worldviews on mystical realism and mystical experience, which are replete in Nigerian plays such as *Idemili*.

1.2. Dimensions and Essence of Prayer in *Idemili*

In many ways, Yerima in *Idemili* illustrates the kinds of circumstances that necessitate prayer. Prominently in *Idemili* people say prayers when there is the need for forgiveness of sins, the need for protection against dangers of all kinds, the need to avenge perceived affliction and brutality from others, the need for rescue from problems and looming calamity, and the need for material and immaterial blessings. To drive home the primal focus of his enactment in *Idemili*, Yerima commences his story with the instance where Ngbeke was making a fervent prayer to the goddess *Idemili*. In this prayer, Ngbeke pleads to *Idemili* to rescue her husband Ugwuja, who was trapped in the collapsed mines. She prays:

Idemili, I am here! Nkwo, we are here! Ekulu *wan nem*, we are here! Ataba, we are here! Naked... even as the storm gathers... and... the rain drops gather, and swell... Swell to my eyes, and weigh down this heavy heart. *Idemili*...goddess of our fathers... We are you? Here (pours libation of wine). Drink and hear my plea (pours). Your son, Ugwuja lie in the belly of the earth... trapped... waiting to die. Trapped in the darkness of life... helpless like a blind bat in daytime... all his hopes are on you... *Idemili*. Here (breaks Kolanut) (12)

In the instance above, Yerima indicates that people habitually resort to prayer as the last resort, particularly in

the moments of anguish and despair, which are mostly brought about by life's travesties and incongruities. Specifically, in this prayer Ngbeke pleads to Idemili to intervene for her, in softening the supposed anger from Ala, the earth goddess. At the same time, Ngbeke prays to Idemili to save other men trapped in the collapsed mines with her husband "so that no woman shall be a miner's widow this Easter" (12). In the course of her prayer to Idemili, Ngbeke indicates that prayers could be directed at different supernatural beings simultaneously: "[...] my husband is buried alive. Oh save them Ataba. Save them Idemili. I beg you (15). In this regard, Yerima's portrayal suggests that it might be hard to effectively verify the god that answered Ngbeke's prayer eventually. Again Ngbeke's prayer projects the dimension of polytheism as a practice amongst the Igbo traditional worshippers. Though without clarity, Ngbeke indicates that Igbo philosophy and religious ideology acknowledges the existence and potent influence of deities on human conditions and socio-environmental happenings on earth. Consequently, Ngbeke's need for prayer indicates that prayer is useful and that prayer is a routine. Though Ngbeke has made the necessary prayers and supplications, laced with promises of sacrifices to the river goddess for her to intervene, she relies on hope and faith for favourable outcome. Hence, Ngbeke appreciates that the mystical and supernatural essence of prayer is a factor that keeps humans in the dark as regards to what the outcome of a prayer will eventually be. In another instance, Ngbeke begins to cry while saying her prayers, her daughter comes in and starts to console her with words of hope: "he will be fine", referring to Ugwuja, her father who is among other men still trapped in the collapsed mine. At this point, Ngbeke who had made prayers to Idemili retorts, responding to the words of faith uttered by Ngborie:

How? They have all been in the belly of the earth for two days. No food, no air to breath. My husband is buried alive. Oh save them Ataba. Save them Idemili. (Cries) I beg you (Pause). How about the other wives? (13)

Essentially, Ngborie uttered those words hope to cheer her mother, in an attempt to pull her out from her psycho-traumatic pains, whereas Ngbeke's response indicates that she cannot certainly say that her prayer has accomplished her desires. Again through the dialogue between Ngborie and Ngbeke, when Ngbeke inquired for information about those trapped in the collapsed mine, Yerima points at the palliative and therapeutic essence of faith through the mechanism of hope. Again Yerima alludes to the complexity of prayer as a mystical reality and its perceived efficacious effect from culture specific perspectives. In this instance, undoubtedly, Yerima's portrayal in *Idemili* indicate that there is no empirical way to validate whether the goddess Idemili has accepted, heard or will act on the prayers. Thus the individual making a prayer just have to wait and see.

Contextualizing another dimension to prayer and its efficacious reality, Yerima points at the believe system among the Igbo which propels the individuals to suspect one another upon the death of the other. Rationalizing on the influence of the ethereal and supernatural forces, this study emphasizes on Yerima's suggestion projected through the character Ngbeke, which suggests that the Igbo people believe in retribution, such that an action taken today usually instigates the anger of the gods thereafter. Hence Ngbeke notes: "Ala wants my husband, Ugwuja, but why? Everything around me is going bad. I have offended Idemili" thus "I can feel her hand in this" (15). Yerima also touched on the dangers of militant approach to conversion of individuals from a subsisting faith to another. This is indicated where Father Paul asserts that he wanted to save his father's soul by destroying his father's shrine. To this, Ngborie chides her brother Father Paul: "you were arrogant my brother and so father resisted you, son or no son" (19). In his superiority complex, Father Paul soliloquises:

I shall go. I can't stand all these. I must. I can't talk to someone who will not listen. (Turns) I have done my duty to my parents (19).

Ngbeke makes allusion to the efficacy of prayers as she speaks to her son Father Paul, expressing her happiness for his return after many years away from home. Again Ngbeke in response to Ngborie's information about success achieved by Father Paul in his missionary career remarks: "Idemili be praised! Come son, tell me all about it. How the white man's god has blessed you. You are a big man. (Goes on her Knees) Idemili *dalu* thank you for protecting my son" (23). Similarly, when Father Paul was transferred from Nsukka Parish to the Holy Ghost Cathedral Enugu, the Nsukka parishioners looked towards supernatural channel to reverse the transfer, hence "they prayed and fasted so that the Bishop will change his mind" nevertheless it never happened (24). Likewise, through the following dialogue between Ngbeke and Father Paul, Yerima projects the Igbo worldview on the efficacy of mystical influence. Thus, Yerima indicates that the misfortune of a person or persons could be as a result of the mystical influence conjured by someone on another through prayer as suggested in the following dialogue:

Ngbeke: [...] what will I tell those ones now? What will I tell my in-laws about their son?

Paul: They have eyes and ears. If anything happens they will hear after all and read about it. Nobody will blame you.

Ngbeke: Little boy, you won't understand.

Paul: (Getting Angry) were you at the mines? Did you push or ask the mines to cave in?

Ngbeke: Indeed you are a child in our ways. They will... they will say I killed him. (Pause) They never

wanted us to marry. So when he said he got a job at the mines, and he sent me some money, I ran here to be with him.

Paul: But that was forty years ago.

Ngbeke: Even a hundred years of marriage will not wash away the fact that this people will believe that when I got tired of their son, and jealous of his new promotion as foreman ... I kill him. (27)

Ngbeke goes ahead to explain to her son, the circumstances that indicates to her that she did brought the evil upon her husband.

Ngbeke: When... After... his promotion, his people wanted him to take a chieftaincy title, and marry a new wife. (28)

She goes on:

Ngbeke: So like a woman in pain, angered by the action yet to take place, I came to the shrines of Idemili in the dead of the night, naked and in tears, made my pleas, and begged her to intervene. (Crying) This is it. This is the way Idemili decided to intervene. (Crying) I swear, I never knew she would do this ... I never knew... (28)

Also in the following comment there is an indication that the gods can punish people and that such punishment could be as a result of the individual's or communal iniquities.

Ngbeke: The white man lies! He always does in matters of this nature. Ten years ago, he made the same promises; Okadigbo my brother and eight others all perished. They all died, their tongues stuck out like those strangled by the gods. For days we did not know which god had killed them, or which god to offer sacrifices to. Some felt Ala the goddess of the earth had eaten too much. Nine young men in their prime all died at the same time. (13-14)

In line with Yerima in *Idemili*, usually when an individual experiences situation which is out of his/her control, that person usually resorts to prayer directed to ethereal beings, which is a form of pleading or begging for assistance. Thus Yerima places prayer as an act which has supernatural dimensions in line with African worldview. According to Imasogie African worldview traditionally revolves around a spiritual pattern that is reflected in the social aggregation, which recognizes six basic categories: the domain of gods, spirits, humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects (16). All these categories share the same universe with human beings, and all are linked by their relationship with people, who are ontologically viewed as the centre of existence. According to Animalu, Igbo worldview reflects the strong reality of the supernatural as an unavoidable force in the life of a community and man individually, thus the Igbo reverence to "the heavens above, the earth below it and the underworld beneath the earth" (10). Animalu's view is in line with Nwoga's contention that the Igbo recognize the existence of "the physical, the spiritual and the abstract" (17).

1.3. Conclusion

In this study, we focused on the philosophical and ideological worldview of the Igbo on mystical essence of prayer, faith and fate as portrayed in the focused play. Thus, the thematic focus of this study is informed and guided by the following sub-themes: the focused study's portrayal of Christian and Igbo culture-specific perspectives on the supernatural, faith, and fate; the influence of the supernatural on fate, and the influence of faith on reality of fate. Hence, this study is of the view that the notion of the supernatural as defined and held by the Igbo people can be most appreciable when we attempt an analysis in line with Geertz's theory on culture analysis and appreciation, in which he states:

Ideas and beliefs, we have tried to explain, can be related to reality in a double way: either to the facts of reality, or to the strivings to which this reality, or rather the reaction to this reality, gives rise. Where the former connection exists, we find thought which is, in principle, truthful; where the latter relation obtains, we are faced with ideas which can be true only by accident, and which are likely to be vitiated by bias, the word taken in the widest possible sense. The former type of thought deserves to be called theoretical; the latter must be characterized as para-theoretical. Perhaps one might also describe the former as rational, the latter as emotionally tinged-the former as purely cognitive, the latter as evaluative. (Geertz, 197)

The weaving of diverse images around metaphysical and mythical objects in African cultural milieu underlies Acholonu's observation that, "in traditional African religion, religious practice is evocative; as in the religion of the Negro spiritual, faith is expressed through the invocation of a god. In this ritual, which is a form of occultism or magic, three main vehicles abound. These are: dance, drum (flute, or other musical instruments) and the spoken word, which is recited or sung" (138). Again this study appreciates Yerima's point of view on how religious sentiment can segregate a once united family, and consequently keep them fractured and fragmented for a long time. This study also illuminates on the Igbo socio-cultural perspectives and the place of prayer in social life and reality. Thematically *Idemili* unambiguously extrapolates two religious philosophies, thereby juxtaposing the correlations between mystical, typical and actual realities in relation to man's ineffectual attempt to grapple with life's travesties, traumas, trials, tribulations and throes. Through measured melancholic ambience *Idemili* elaborately encapsulates how members of a family individually endeavoured to

trudge ahead despite their limited control over their life's happenings. This reality is usually referred to as fate. Thus, this study appreciates how *Idemili* illustrates each individual character's unending frustration with life's incongruities, and their individual and collective efforts to codify their ignorance as fate as well as their readiness to take solace in faith in pursuance of an ever receding peace and closure.

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