

Gender and Time in Ahmed Yerima's *Aetu*

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Summary

This article explores the effects of time and historical change on Nigerian feminist literature by focusing on the work of a prolific contemporary Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima. The history of Yerima's writing reveals a shift from plays with historical themes to plays which engage explicitly with questions of gender and gender-related oppression. In this way, his writing trajectory provides one example of the growing importance of gender concerns in Nigerian literature. The article goes further to present an exegesis of one of Yerima's gender-focused plays, namely *Aetu*, published in 2007. It looks at the play's engagement with the way in which traditional Yoruba practices fix women in socially subordinate positions. It also considers the play's handling of time in relation to feminist concerns with time and non-linearity.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die uitwerking van tyd en historiese verandering op Nigeriese feminis-literatuur deur te fokus op die werk van 'n produktiewe kontemporêre Nigeriese dramaturg, Ahmed Yerima. Die geskiedenis van Yerima se skryfwerk toon 'n verskuiwing van toneelstukke met historiese temas na toneel wat eksplisiet met vrae van gender en gender-verwante onderdrukking handel. Sodoende dien die verloop van sy skryfwerk as voorbeeld van die toenemende belangrikheid van gender-aangeleenthede in Nigeriese literatuur. Die artikel gaan verder en bied 'n eksegeese van een van Yerima se gender-gefokuste toneelstukke, naamlik *Aetu*, wat in 2007 gepubliseer is. Die artikel verken hoe die toneelstuk omgaan met die manier waarop tradisionele Yoruba-gebruike vroue in sosiaal-ondersgeskikte posisies hou. Dit beskou ook die toneelstuk se hantering van tyd met betrekking tot feministiese gemoeidheid met tyd en nie-lineariteit.

Introduction

Ahmed Yerima is regarded as one of Nigeria's foremost male playwrights, a male writer who has a keen interest in the ways in which cultural and social norms subjugate women. The history of Yerima's writing reveals what I call *thematic diversification*, moving from plays with historical themes to those which engage explicitly with questions of gender and gender-related

oppression. In this way, his writing trajectory provides an example of the growing importance of gender concerns in Nigerian literature.

Yerima started writing in 1980. However, it was only in the post-2000 period that Yerima turned to the dramatic exploration of the position of women in Nigerian society. His evolution from a Marxist playwright concerned with historical reality and socio-political issues to one who is almost completely dedicated to questions of gender and the plight of women aligns with the history of Nigerian literature itself. As Omoyele Fasan explains, Nigerian literature was initially concerned with “themes of cultural alterity, recuperation, urban versus rural life, and the encounter between the indigenous and imported cultures of Nigeria and Europe while calling for an end to colonial rule” (Fasan 2010: 39). Since the emergence of the first generation of Nigerian writing, concerns have shifted to contemporary socio-political issues. Pius Adesamni and Chris Dunton (2005: 15) observe that “the tropes of Otherness and subalternity are being remapped by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies”. This change in thematic engagement is also apparent in Yerima’s writing.

This article addresses the ways in which gender inequality and patriarchal oppression are negotiated in Yerima’s work, focusing in particular on the play *Aetu* (2007) which, like many others in Yerima’s oeuvre, is built around the Yoruba cultural practices of wife inheritance and girl-child marriage. The analysis of the play is pursued through an examination of the play’s representation of time, drawing on western feminist theorisations of time as well as the Yoruba mythological belief in *akudayaism*. *Akudayaism* is the transmigration of the spirit of a dead person who, as a result of untimely death, is unable to find a resting place among the ancestors and therefore continues to live on. As I go on to argue, *Aetu* employs a complex temporal structure which challenges conventional androcentric and western understandings of time. Through the engagement with gender and temporalities, therefore, this article alerts readers to the importance of time and its interconnection with gender.

Theoretically, this article is positioned in relation to the work that has been done by western feminist theorists such as Leela Fernandes (2010) and Victoria Browne (2014) who have argued that the historical representation of women’s experiences as being linear and sequential does not accurately represent the different temporalities that define women’s experiences and struggles. In addition, the article draws on African feminist theory, focusing in particular on Obioma Nnaemeks’s notion of nego-feminism (2004), to analyse Yerima’s exploration of gender concerns in *Aetu*. The ideals of this theory – which argue for gender complementarity and the incorporation of African men into women’s fight for gender equality – are applied in analysing how the play resolves the gender questions it raises.

In the works of earlier Nigerian feminist novelists such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Zaynab Alkali and feminist playwrights such as Tess

Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo and Irene Salami-Agunloye, we find trenchant criticisms of patriarchal precolonial and post-colonial cultural practices. Yerima's writing has adopted this trend of questioning and problematising patriarchal cultural norms across a range of historical contexts. However, all of the writers mentioned above are women. Yerima is thus distinctive in the way he addresses gender concerns despite being socially categorised as the "culprit" because of his gender. This article, therefore, also serves to fill the gap that has been created within Nigerian feminist literature due to the negligence of male-authored feminist texts.

Yerima's foray into writing began in 1980 with "*Asylum*", "*The Flood*", "*The Movement*": *Three Plays in Transition* (1980). Since 2000, Yerima has published over thirty-five plays and more than two-thirds of these explore questions relating to gender inequality, patriarchy and women's disempowerment. In these plays, he gives detailed attention to the ways in which culture and other institutionalised practices (social, political and economic) in Nigerian society placed and continue to place constraints on the social development of women and the female child, while simultaneously representing women as resistant to these forms of subjugation. He demonstrates how men disempower women using various traditional and religious norms and customs. These include the practices of wife inheritance, girl-child marriage, polygamy and property inheritance.

Although the playwright and his feminist works have not received merited international recognition as have his female counterparts, he has received accolades from within the Nigerian literary society. For instance, writing about *The Wives* (2007), Nigerian theatre critic Osita Ezenwanebe (2009: 201) observes that "many of [Yerima's] works explore the cultural oppression of women, especially widows and the less privileged women in the society". Speaking about *Aetu*, the play examined in this article, Taiwo Osanyemi and Babatunde Adewole Adedeji (2017: 113) state that "with dramatic aesthetics and dexterity, Yerima portrays the pathetic and helpless state of womanhood under the firm grip of patriarchal hegemony and neurosis of tradition of inheritance in African culture". In general, the playwright's work has received acclaim for its conscientious effort not only to alert readers and viewers to the ways in which culture subjugates women, but also for its representation of women as resilient, strong and dynamic.

As suggested above, scholarly criticisms on Yerima's work are unanimous in their appreciation of the way in which Yerima engages with gender concerns in his plays. The significance of Yerima's work, as I argue in relation to *Aetu*, lies not only in its focus on the oppressive aspects of precolonial and colonial traditional Yoruba practices involving women, but also for the ways in which these concerns are made relevant to contemporary Nigerian society. From the perspective of time and temporality, Yerima's plays are important because of their ability to connect the past, the present and the future. Before undertaking an analysis of gender and time in the play *Aetu*, it is important to

situate Yerima's work and the play in particular in relation to the historical evolution of feminism in Nigeria.

Yerima's Writing and African Feminisms

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Nigerian literary scene was animated by debates around the relevance of western feminism to Nigerian women, with many women writers and scholars responding in different ways. Many rejected western feminism on the ground that it was not able to account for the specifics of African histories and cultures. Some of the earlier writers and scholars who rejected western feminism were Buchi Emecheta, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Catherine Acholonu and Obioma Nnaemeka. Since then, critics like Ogunyemi, Acholonu and Nnaemeka have added to the debate by developing alternative theories of gender equality which address the needs of African women and men. Their theories are African womanism, motherism and nego-feminism, respectively.

However, these theories have not gone without their own criticisms. For instance, Naomi Nkealah (2016) argues that these Afrocentric feminisms have shortcomings such as their romanticisation of motherhood, adherence to ideologies of heteronormativity, and their inability to speak for all African women. Furthermore, she asserts that these feminisms are paradoxical in that their "emphasis on cultural specificity inadvertently results in cultural alienation for women from other cultures who feel marginalised – consciously and unconsciously – by the dominant culture on whose artifacts and symbols the feminist model is built" (Nkealah 2016: 69). Nkealah's observation gives credibility to the view by Huma Ibrahim (1997: 147) that "any attempt at naming/renaming [feminism] is inclusive of some and exclusive of other experiences". These criticisms seem to suggest that African feminisms themselves are riddled with some of the contradictions equally prevalent in western feminism. No wonder, Chidi Maduka (2011: 18) states that these theories need "some refinements". However, notwithstanding these criticisms, the role of these theories in helping us understand the dynamics of gender relations in African societies, and Nigerian societies in particular, as different to those in the west, must not be undermined. Yerima's play, written in the wake of the feminist debate, and with a particular focus on Yoruba culture, can be understood as a further engagement with African feminisms. The question to answer now is: to what extent can Yerima's play *Aetu* be understood as offering an *African feminist* perspective on gender relations in Nigeria?

Aetu is a play that represents an event in the life of Yerima's maternal grandmother, Ayishetu (shortened to Aetu in the play). Even though the story is set in the period before Nigeria's independence in 1960, it presents challenges which continue to confront feminists today. In the play, Aetu becomes a victim of girl-child marriage: she is raped at the tender age of fourteen by a man of seventy years and forced into marriage with the man.

The interconnected concerns of forced marriage and child marriage are pivotal for the plot of the play, as Aetu subsequently becomes a widow who is transferred from one man to another at the death of her husband. The cultural practice of wife inheritance is also problematised in this play. This is a practice in which a widow is forced to marry a male kin of her late husband's family. Linked to this is the issue of rape, which is forced sexual domination of a female body. As a result of rape, Aetu is traumatised, but she also exercises agency in seeking vengeance on her rapist. To achieve this, she visits the shrine of *Esu* (the trickster god) where she casts a spell on the man who raped her. In addition, she casts the same spell on any man in the future who has sexual intercourse with her. This shows that while Yerima dramatises feminist concerns such as rape, he also portrays how women stage resistance to gender-based violence. Yerima's play can, therefore, be said to offer a feminist engagement with patriarchal practices still plaguing Nigeria.

Gender and Time in *Aetu*

Aetu begins at the shrine of *Esu* where a young man, Kande, has brought his extremely ill father, Obajimi, to the *Esu* priest for healing. After making divinations, the *Esu* priest, Saura, reveals that Obajimi had been cursed by someone who is now dead and so needs to perform a ritual at the tomb of the curser. As the trio journey to the graveyard, they meet Old Woman who initially prevents them from making sacrifices at the graveyard but later gives her approval. Before this agreement, she narrates a story to Kande and Saura while the sick Obajimi, who is completely paralysed, lies beside them. Old Woman discloses that Obajimi's sickness is caused by a spell that has been cast on him by Aetu who had initiated the curse as a result of her extreme anger at those men who had abused her. Various analeptic sequences in the play show Aetu being raped by Obajimi's father and later forced to marry him. Because of the potency of the curse, the husband dies and this marks the beginning of another oppressive journey in Aetu's life.

In accordance with tradition, Aetu is married off two more times to kinsmen of her late husband's family, each time against her wishes. After the death of her third and last husband, Aetu commits suicide as a way of rebelling against the patriarchal culture that has kept her bound for years. After the birth of her third son, Aetu picks up the knife used to sever the child's umbilical cord and kills herself. Prior to this, all three of the men who have married her have died as a result of the spell she had cast when she was raped as a girl. The play's exploration of gender oppressive practices such as levirate marriage or wife inheritance, child marriage and rape suggests that these are practices that need to be discarded in order to allow for gender equality, irrespective of cultural beliefs.

As suggested by the synopsis above, *Aetu* employs a complex temporal structure in which the sequential unfolding of events in the present is periodically interrupted by scenes and encounters from a traumatic past. Through the literary technique of analepsis, the chronological sequence of events is distorted, thus enabling the simultaneous performance of events from the past and the present. In addition to the disruption of linear time, the play also invokes cyclical time. The play engages non-linear time in the telling of the events of Aetu's life and eventual death, but the play also invokes cyclical time through the story of Aetu's death and reincarnation. In the opening of the play at *Esu's* shrine, the priest makes immediate reference to events of over seventy years prior to the present time, thus introducing the narrative device of analepsis. Similarly, Old Woman at the graveside narrates the story of Aetu which occurred many years before the current action of the play.

In incorporating different temporal moments in its narration, the play underscores an understanding of time not as sequential (as in conventional historiography) but as multiple, consisting of different lived human experiences. According to Victoria Browne (2014: 1), in an argument about the historical representation of feminism, the linear method of history telling "begets a closed minded attitude toward the past, preventing us from grasping the unfinished possibilities of feminisms from earlier times". In this way, she argues that history, particularly feminist history which represents the experiences of women, is best understood as non-linear, consisting of different spatio-temporal paradigms rather than the "straightforward past-present-future chronology" (Browne 2014: 2). In the same vein, Leela Fernandes (2010: 114) posits the view that "feminist thought ... requires a conception ... that can contain both the insights of the past and the potential breakthroughs of the future within the messy, unresolved contestations of political and intellectual practice in the present".

The treatment of time in Yerima's *Aetu* harmonises with both Browne and Fernandes' ideological propositions on the history of women's experiences. Through the literary technique of analepsis, the chronological sequence of events is re-arranged in the play, thus enabling the simultaneous performance of events from the past and the present. By invoking these different temporalities, the play also points to the repetitive or cyclical nature of time.

In the play's exploration of gender concerns more broadly, what is evident is that emphasis is placed on the many aspects of Yoruba culture which invests power in the hands of men. Of these cultural practices, levirate marriage/wife inheritance and girl-child marriage emerge as central. Wife inheritance allows for the abuse of a widow who is treated as property by being transferred from one male family member to another at the death of her husband. According to Samson Olanisebe and Olusegun Oladosu (2014: 4), in Yoruba culture when a man dies, "the property to be shared ranges from farmland, houses, material property, landed property and the widow of the deceased". What is striking here is that, besides being denied the property that belonged to her and her

late husband, the widow is also now classified as property and shared accordingly. This practice, known as *Isupo*, sometimes degenerates to the extent that a widow is handed over to a man who is as young as her own son. In *Aetu*, Yerima presents a critique of this Yoruba traditional practice, highlighting its unfairness towards women. A few days after the burial of Aetu's first husband, Oke, who had raped her at the age of fourteen years, Aetu is called in to a family meeting where men, wives, children and other family members of the dead are present and where the "properties" of the dead are shared. Gbade, Oke's eldest brother and *Olori Ebi* (family head), decides to claim Aetu just as he claims other properties of his late brother. He states: "I shall take this Tapa woman to enrich my bed" (34). In this context, there is absolutely no room for Aetu to reject Gbade's declaration: with the authoritative declaration "I shall take", he binds her to him and she is obliged to accept.

Interestingly, this dramatic enactment of a scene of masculine power is at odds with the argument made by Olanisebe and Oladosu (2014: 1) that among "the traditional Yoruba, measures are put in place to take care of the widow through widow's inheritance". What is suggested in Yerima's play is that, rather than the need to take care of widows, it is the satisfaction of men's lust that drives the practice of *Isupo*. Gbade's statement that Aetu will "enrich [his] bed" suggests that he does not marry her for the purpose of providing for her needs, as Olanisebe and Oladosu claim, but rather he marries her for his sexual gratification. This thinking illuminates the point that in traditional Yoruba with its patriarchal definition of gender roles, woman is given value based on the pleasure she gives to men. In the play, Gbade limits his wife's role to satisfying his sexual needs. This suggests that women within his society are seen as nothing but sexual objects. In other words, "women are reduced to their sexual body parts and evaluated as instruments to be used by others" (Franz, DiLillo & Gervais 2015: 262). The perception and treatment of Aetu in Gbade's hands is a clear way in which Yerima censures masculine thinking.

The playwright uses female characters like Aetu and Old Woman to convey the feelings of women toward these various oppressive cultural practices. In different scenes which do not conform to any linear order, these women express their varying understandings of wife inheritance. The presentation of a variety of voices and positions on the practice of *Isupo* evinces Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of literary polyphony (1984), a term which refers to the existence of multiple voices within a literary work where characters are able to speak for themselves, sometimes against the author. For Bakhtin (1984: 6), a literary work is polyphonic when it contains "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses". In *Aetu*, Agbebi, for example, thinks Aetu should count "herself lucky [that] a family loves her enough to want her to stay ... [and] she should be thankful to Olodumare" (46), the Yoruba god of creation. For Aetu, however, there is nothing good or lucky in transferring

a woman from one brother to another in the name of tradition, which is why she considers herself as being used by these men to satisfy their wanton desires and in the process multiply her pain. The use of phrases such as “used again” and “multiplies my pains” (40) emphasize the fact that Aetu’s experience of marriage is one of exploitation and suffering.

Her experience is one that radical feminism would condemn. Marlene Dixon, for instance, argues that “the institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained” (Dixon 2000: 76). Dixon’s view echoes that of Sheila Cronan who claims that freedom for women “cannot be won without the abolition of marriage” (Cronan 1973: 129). In another avowal, Rashmi Singh and Pooja Singh (2016: 71) note that “marriage is a patriarchal institution which is designed for the subordination and subjugation of women by men”. These observations about marriage synchronise with Aetu’s experience of marriage in the hands of the different men to whom she is married at different times in the play. Her frustration intensifies during the ceremony of her third marriage which she describes as a “session of mockery” and “dance of shame”:

Aetu: Hold my hand, as I walk into another session of mockery. The sacrifice is ready, let the old fool prepare to feast. Esu I step out again ... again and again in tune with your jeers and laughter. Women, take me to the dance of shame.

(41)

Aetu describes herself as a sacrifice which is to be feasted upon by another man “again and again and again” (41). The threefold repetition of “again” represents the three times she has been given over in marriage. In the Yoruba belief system, a sacrifice is offered as either a preventive or curative measure in relation to a calamitous event. In the context of the play, the continuous enforced marriage of Aetu to different brothers and her subsequent untimely death ultimately brings an end to this form of marital practice; as such, she becomes the sacrificial lamb for the younger women, serving a preventive function.

Like Aetu, Old Woman is used in the play to stage women’s responses to wife inheritance. Old Woman is the restless apparition of Aetu. After the young Aetu pronounces her curses at the *Esu* shrine, Saura admonishes her and tells her to drink from *omi idi Esu* (water from the shrine of *Esu*). Unless she does so, he warns, she will continue to roam the earth even after death. Aetu refuses to heed Saura’s warning, and so, after her death, she roams the earth for seventy years until her re-encounter with Saura when she finally drinks the water and her spirit comes to rest. Here, Yerima introduces the concept of *akudayaism*, the Yoruba mythological belief in the restless roaming on the earth of a dead soul who has not found rest with the ancestors. The play’s inclusion of this Yoruba concept of *akudayaism* expands the idea

of non-linear time explored in the play. Through Aetu's death and transmigration in the form of Old Woman, we see a synchronistic concept of women's experiences as consisting of different spatial temporalities rather than lineal sequentiality. Aetu's experience as a victim of patriarchy does not stop at her death but transcends time to what would have become eternity – which is eventually prevented by her acceptance to take the water from the pot the second time it is offered to her.

Old Woman who resides at the graveyard for seventy years expresses her views on levirate marriage when she describes Aetu's second marriage in the following terms: "the day she was made over to her second husband, the woman was stripped of her honour" (30). This statement not only affirms the negative effects of wife inheritance already articulated in the play, but it also touches on the subject of women's honour. Understanding the importance of honour in the Yoruba world, Old Woman realises that once Aetu is "made over" to the second husband and then the third one, she lost her honour, which is why the people continue to call her names. According to Old Woman, Aetu's continuous marriage to these brothers results in her becoming an object of social scorn, jest and mockery. She explains this to Kande, the grandson of Aetu and son of the seriously ill Obajimi, in the following way:

Old Woman: The day she married her third husband ... [she] flowed in names and shame. After her first dance of shame ... she was called *opo*, one who evokes pity, enthroned by death ... Iku baba yeye *o*. Her second dance in which she became Okanjole, the thief of the heart of men. She has begun to lose the garb of pity, which Iku had given her and was beginning to wear the garb of thief. On her third, she became all in all, the Queen of greed, Okanjuwa. With all these names, how could she think straight, son?

(36)

Old Woman explains to Aetu's grandchild what his grandmother had to endure and why she made the decision to take her life. After the death of her first husband, Oke, Aetu becomes an *Opo* (widow), but after the death of her second husband, the community gives her another name – *Okanjole* (the thief of the heart of men). This is because, in Yoruba tradition, when a woman loses more than one husband to death, people begin to question her destiny/fate and then sometimes accuse her of having a hand in the deaths of her husbands. Thus, when Aetu loses her third husband to death once more (even though the marriage is imposed on her), she is given another name, *Okanjuwa*, which the play translates as queen of greed. This is because they claim she had greedily married and killed three brothers/husbands. At the end of the story, Aetu takes a decision to eliminate this shame, dishonour and name-calling by committing suicide.

What one observes in this scenario is that while the patriarchal society forces Aetu into various unwanted marriages, the same society condemns her when the marriages turn fatal, calling her offensive names. The play then suggests

that women are condemned whether they accede to tradition or try to resist it. Either way, the society – ruled and controlled by men – makes life unbearable for women. Simone de Beauvoir (1949: 16) criticises this when she states that women are condemned to “simply [be] what the man decrees”.

As characters who embody gender mistreatment and patriarchal exploitation in the play, Aetu and Old Woman are featured as two characters, yet they are one because Old Woman is portrayed as the restless apparition of Aetu. Again, the idea of time as non-linear is referenced here. The play begins with the fourteen-year-old abused Aetu, then moves to a seventy-year-old lonely “ghost” (Old Woman), and comes back to a resistant Aetu who, at this time, resists her status as property by taking her life, and finally moves back to Old Woman at the graveside. In the different temporalities in which Aetu features, we see the different forms of subordination she passes through. She is raped, forced to become a wife, and denied her childhood at a young age. As a wandering restless soul, she serves as the guard of the graveyard for seventy deserted years. This explains why she embodies a feminist re-definition of women’s time: by employing a non-linear chronology – a restless movement between different linked experiences – the play promotes the idea of women’s time as complex and entangled.

In many of Yerima’s gender-focused plays such as *The Sisters* (2001), *The Wives* (2007), *Little Drops* (2011) and *Abobaku* (2015), gender issues are raised and positively resolved with women being empowered in diverse ways and abusive customs being required to be abolished. *Aetu* offers a similarly positive resolution to the problems foregrounded in the play, in this case, by turning to an imagined future. The younger generation of men who are represented in the figure of Kande, the grandson of Aetu, is used to project this imagined future. This younger generation is presented in a positive light as those who are more amendable and acquiescent to ideas of gender equality and as those capable of learning from the painful experiences of their elders concerning the damaging effects of patriarchal norms on both women and men. As a result of what he has heard at the shrine and the graveyard, Kande makes a pact with Old Woman:

Old Woman: ... But you children must stop the act that forces a human spirit against his or her will. Come, child. (*Chuckles*) I send you a message that is beyond your age.

Kande: (*on his knees*) It will never happen again. Not within the walls of this house. I am the *Olori ebi*, the oldest child alive and the head of this family after my father. I give my words, Mama, Never!

(54)

Old Woman makes use of the phrase “human spirit” to suggest that, just like a man, the woman is also human. And her spirit – which in the Yoruba cosmology means human – should not be forced or coerced into accepting and practicing a belief she does not agree to. Although Old Woman acknowledges

the enormity of what she asks Kande to do – since the practice of wife inheritance predates him – she nevertheless understands that its eradication would be a gradual process, and that the example of one family would be a powerful way to achieve it.

In the dialogue between Old Woman and Kande, the negotiating and accommodating feature of nego-feminism is presented. According to Nnaemeka, nego-feminism

challenges [patriarchy] through negotiations and compromise ... it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework.

(2004: 378)

Rather than a forceful or radical resolution to the problem of wife inheritance in the play, such as *Aetu* attempts to implement by refusing to forgive the men who hurt her, Old Woman settles the matter with Kande. She asks him and other men of his generation to stop the act of forcing women to marry men they do not wish to marry just because of tradition. This resonates with the theory of nego-feminism in that it engenders the idea of negotiating women's release from patriarchally oppressive customs. Nnaemeka (2004: 376) also notes that African feminism, which is rooted in African cosmology, is "not reactive; it is proactive". At the end of the play, we see a compromise from both the wounded Old Woman and Kande as they come to a resolution of their differences with the aim of achieving a unified goal. Even though men are responsible for her abuse, Old Woman still requires that men should be involved in finding solutions to problems affecting women, an idea which is the crux of various forms of Afrocentric feminist theories, including nego-feminism. At this stage, Kande, who is now the head of the family after the demise of his father right there at the graveyard, promises to put an end to this practice, starting with his family.

As it turns out, the play *Aetu* is remarkably prescient about an event which was to shake the Nigerian cabinet and the country as a whole sometime in 2013. On 17 July 2013, Senator Ahmed Yerima, unfortunately a name-sake of the playwright, after having married a thirteen-year-old girl, decided to go to the National Assembly with a proposition to pass a law that will permit the marriageable age of a girl to be moved to thirteen years from the eighteen years that the constitution stipulates. The proposition was thrown out with very few parliamentarians supporting it, and Senator Ahmed Yerima and his supporters were disgraced. The sagacity of playwright Yerima and his ability to foresee and write about this event before Senator Yerima's action has earned him accolades from many quarters. What this shows is the power of literature to interpret past events and to anticipate those in the future. As has been argued in this article, the conceptualisation of time in *Aetu* aligns with

feminist theories of time which reject notions of linearity, progression and sequential development. By its complex exploration of the events that take place in the life of the protagonist, Aetu, by its exploration of *akudayaism*, a mythological belief among the Yoruba people, and by its forecasting of Senator Yerima's proposition, the play speaks to the ephemeral nature of time.

Conclusion

In exploring the play's negotiation of gender and women's oppression, it is evident that *Aetu* offers a clear and unambiguous condemnation of the different kinds of culturally oppressive practices that it explores. Even though *Aetu* is a male-authored text, it is sensitive to patriarchy and gender oppression. Therefore, the play serves as a rallying call to Nigerians, especially men like Senator Yerima, to terminate what I call "pedophilic marriages" as well as the insensitive practice of wife inheritance. In addition, the play's employment of a complex temporal structure (using circularity and analepsis) demonstrates the entanglements of women's time and experience, thus reinforcing feminist arguments against masculinist historical time.

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