The Trope of Death in Ahmed Yerima's *Mojagbe*

Solomon Olusayo Olaniyan
Lecturer, Department of English and International Studies, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria
solomon.olaniyan@uniosun.edu.ng | ORCID: 0000-0002-4842-5601

Ayo Kehinde
Professor and Head, Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
ma.kehinde@mail.ui.edu.ng | ORCID: 0000-0002-2784-054X

Abstract

Contemporary African nations are plagued with hegemonic, despotic, and unchallengeable leadership which is a major bane of meaningful development and growth to the black race in general. People often groan under such myopic leadership. In solving leadership crisis, which is like a deadly disease, Ahmed Yerima in his play metaphorically suggests *death* as a lasting panacea. Employing the postcolonial concept of hegemony as the theoretical framework, the study investigates the trope of death in Yerima's *Mojagbe* with a view to exploring the representations of the *deathly* reign of Oba (King) Mojagbe and a foreshadowing of the "death" of such dictatorial leadership as Mojagbe's in contemporary postcolonial nations. In order to liberate people from the hegemony of the absolute anarchical monarch, Death is consulted to put an end to the kingship of Oba Mojagbe. The collective effort of the Yeye who represent the judiciary paves way for the termination of Mojagbe's autocratic reign. Expounding the trope of death in *Mojagbe*, Yerima deploys proverbs, incantations/chants, code-mixing, and code-switching. The study therefore establishes Yerima's commitment to his polity by depicting one major problem bedeviling the milieu – leadership crisis.

Keywords: *Mojagbe,* Ahmed Yerima, Representations of Death, Post-independence Nigerian Leadership, Hegemony

Ahmed Yerima is one of the prolific 21st-century Nigerian playwrights whose thematic preoccupations cut across various socio-economic and cultural aspects. As a committed artist, he engages his plays in the depiction of the ills within the polity. Generally speaking, the subject of leadership crisis has become a major issue that has gained the creative attention of Nigerian, and indeed, African writers as a way of establishing their commitment to their crises-ridden milieu. Gbemisola Adeoti refers to Yerima as "one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary stage in the last decade of the twentieth century" (xi). Through the instrumentality of his writings, Yerima has been able to explore various cultures in the country. Most of his dramatic texts are "spatially and geographically situated in Nigeria and they depict the socio-cultural situation of the nation. His

creative muse has the Nigerian society (especially post-independence) as its canvas" (Oguntoyinbo 3). His literary prowess and commitment to playwriting have been recognized through the award of various local and international prizes. For instance, *Yemoja* won the best drama (globally) at the 2001 Cervantino International Arts Festival, Mexico. Similarly, *Hard Ground* won the Nigerian Liquefied and Natural Gas (NLNG) award for Literature in 2006.

Yerima's *Mojagbe* is an eponymous play that centers on the dictatorial rule of Oba Aderemi Mojagbe who unleashes terror on those who made him. He is divinely blessed with virtually everything. However, he is blindfolded by his egomania to the extent that he kicks against God. Mojagbe employs the instrumentality of death to suppress all his supposed enemies, including higher authority that he is not supposed to treat contemptuously. Meanwhile, the king who kills humans as though they are chickens is reduced to a weakling when confronted by Iku (Death). In the play, Yerima employs death as a check on the excesses of the authoritarian ruling class that often try to play God. However, the ability of man to *teach and learn* remains his challenge, and that is why he keeps repeating his errors. Considering the responsiveness of writers to serious issues confronting humanity, one would have thought that those problematic issues ought to have been resolved. Nevertheless, the reverse has always been the case. This is why rhetorical questions are asked in the blurb of the play: "But will man ever learn? When will history cease being a mere catalogue of catastrophe?" This implies that man has not actually learnt from his past woes; hence, the reason for their recurrence.

Yerima uses his plays to conscientize people about certain superfluous activities of postcolonial leaders whose actions are not different from the rejected colonial rulers. Writers in Yerima's class often highlight, in rather scathing burlesque and comedy, the travesty, which is African leadership. *Mojagbe* metaphorizes "African leaders' obsession with power, a seductive drive that breeds moral corruption, dictatorship, delusions, economic distortions and ruination, megalomania, perversion and desecration of all that is good in African traditions" (Adekoya 11).

The study is predicated on the postcolonial concept of hegemony. In postcolonial discourse, hegemony refers to the exertion of dominance by the ruling class on its subject through the subtlety and inclusivity of power over the economy and different state apparatuses. Although the term was originally coined to interrogate power relations between imperialist power and the colonized people, it becomes relevant in the exploration of postcolonial leadership due to the striking resemblance between colonial leadership and post-independence leadership. Hegemonic order in postcolonial polity involves the suppression of the masses' "desire for self-determination" (Ashcroft 107).

Yerima artistically reveals the psychological mania of humans, most especially leaders, as well as their unconscionable ambition, and associates them with delusion and social stasis. The playwright addresses the act of governance and the lapses

of the ruling class. In the author's note to the play, Yerima calls on the leaders or the political class to remember their mortality. Thus, they should direct the affairs of their people with conscience and reason as their attributes and conduct will indelibly eternalize their reign. He further explains in the note that what informed the writing of the play is the need to present the type of leaders that forget to learn from history and how man confronts himself while searching for inner peace, which he himself often destroys in the first place (Yerima 6).

In the play, death is depicted as a dialectic phenomenon. Although death is usually seen as a tragic experience, that of Oba Mojagbe is seen as a welcome development. The Yeye who mastermind the accession of Mojagbe to the throne observe the king's misrule and thus come to the rescue of the people. They summon Iku (Death) to visit the king in order to liberate the polity from his clueless claws. Mojagbe is known for his braggadocio and wickedness; he kicks against those who make him king. The cries of the people reach the Yeye who represent the judiciary, and the urgent action taken by them to bring succor to the masses is laudable. First of all, they see themselves as belonging to the people – "The people who own us" (Yerima 9) – and as the voice of the voiceless masses. Their ignorance and silence over the suffering of the people would have been unjustified. Thus, they represent hope for the disillusioned people over whom Mojagbe rules, though dictatorially. Although the political setting of the play is traditional or monarchical, the playwright uses it to mirror what operates in a democratic setting where many *demons* have taken over leadership mantles. It is envisioned that the modern-day judiciary should be more responsible and responsive to the unheard cries of the masses.

As far as the Yeye are concerned, the only thing that can bring respite to the people is the death of Oba Mojagbe. Bame A Nsamenang posits that an African worldview pictures the human life-cycle in three levels of selfhood. The first is the spiritual selfhood, which originates at conception, or earlier in an ancestral spirit that reincarnates. The second level is a social or experiential selfhood that begins at conception, the cycle from rite of incorporation or introduction of the child into the human community through to death, while the third phase is an ancestral selfhood which follows biological death (16). African idea/ideal of human existence is summed up in this statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 108-109). It is, however, ironical that a king who should uphold the ideals of his culture kicks against it and feigns ignorance of its existence. Mojagbe is oblivious of the connection between those who make him king and his kingship. It is his autotelic existence that eventually leads to his autonomous downfall. Africans value collectivism against individualism. On many occasions, Mojagbe turns down the counsel of his chiefs, acting as if he knows it all. His deafness to the suffering and oppression of his subjects paves the way for his *deathness*.

Mojagbe's dream of hovering death and white calabash is confirmed by Abese who tells the king: "We heard it, Kabiyesi … we heard the drums of death, and also

a white calabash is seated on your throne" (Yerima 12). The white calabash on Mojagbe's throne signifies the expiration of his tenure as an absolute monarch whose reign has brought more pains than gains to the people. The Yeye declare the throne empty and its occupant replaceable. The amnesiac Mojagbe thinks the dream is a mere joke; hence, he does not bother to give it a serious thought. Even when he is reminded, he tries to avert the realization of the deathly dream only by looking for "a head to put in it" (Yerima 12). Blames and counter-blames are major features of African leadership. The incumbent leadership blames its failure on the former's ineptitude, while the former accuses the present of irresponsibility and mismanagement of resources. This act depicts the narrow-mindedness of leadership in Africa. Mojagbe is supposed to assess his reign and listen to the views of his chiefs who should be his think-tank; he is, however, beclouded by his hegemonic notion.

Following the hue and cry of the people, Esan declares his availability and readiness to ameliorate the deteriorating situation in the village:

> I am ready. If to die is to have my village in peace, let it be. *Iku.* Death. Come and be my companion. Let us strike the heart of the old lion who enslaves my people. Be with me, my fathers, as we strive to remove the dictator, and enthrone the rightful king. (Yerima 14)

The characterology of Esan is symbolic. He is a son to the former king. He reveals that Mojagbe is "the usurper of my father's throne" (Yerima 14), which means that he is supposed to be the king. Thus, Mojagbe's accession to the throne is questionable. To perpetuate his domineering and unruly rule, he employs threats and various anti-people policies. Within the African cultural space, "the superiority of an individual is determined by his gender, position and age among other things" (Jegede 685). As Jegede enunciates, position and the traditional hierarchical and hegemonic leadership configuration plays a major role in *Mojagbe.*

In Yoruba cosmology, Esan means recompense. Esan has, therefore, come to repay Mojagbe the consequence of his illegal and oppressive tendencies. Esan sees himself as a solution to the age-long problems of his polity; thus, he comes to prove his messianism. To Esan, it is only death that can put an end to the dictatorial reign of Mojagbe; this is why he calls on Death to accompany him to actualize his liberation agenda for his village. The employment of animal imagery to describe Mojagbe foregrounds his display of animalistic nature – "the old lion" (Yerima 14). His presence on the throne indicates marginality, threat, enslavement, and oppression. The solution to these identified problems is to force his immediate abdication, which is encapsulated in his death. Mojagbe is a literary representative of many *old lions* sitting tightly on leadership thrones in African nations. It is observed that most African countries are governed by aged ones who have perpetuated themselves and, indeed, their lineage, in leadership positions. The institutionalization of gerontocratic democracy in the African political landscape is not unconnected to socio-economic and political retrogression being witnessed. Writing on "The

Problem of Gerontocracy in Africa: The Yorùbá Perspective as Illustrated in the *Ifá* Corpus," Omotade Adegbindin pontificates that "gerontocracy is coterminous with authoritarian traditions in traditional Africa which, supposedly, are responsible for the lack of sustained curiosity to look at issues from different perspectives" (454). As Esan declares, it is high time these *old lions* were removed, while the death of their terror-ridden tenure would be ensured. Esan re-echoes Kwasi Wiredu's standpoint on the unfortunate and increased exacerbation of the "authoritarian odour" (Adegbindin 456) that suffuses African polity. According to Wiredu,

> Our social arrangements are shot through and through with the principle of unquestioning obedience to our superiors, which often meant elders. Hardly any premium was placed on curiosity in those of tender age, or independence of thought in those of more considerable years. (4)

The hegemonic nature of Mojagbe is displayed when he employs death as a weapon to dominate his perceived enemies and opponents. He asks Isepe, the village high priest, to get rid of Esan, whom he sees as a threat to his kingship. The bestial nature of Mojagbe is brought to the fore as he roars like the lion he is described as. While the king has lost his sense of reasoning, Isepe, an elderly man, makes him realize that killing Esan would send a bad signal to the entire land. Isepe finds it difficult to convince him. The title, *Kábíyèsí,* emphasizes the unquestionable nature of Mojagbe's authority and pronouncement; hence, Isepe says: "… Kabiyesi. Who will question my king? *Ka bi o osi!*" (Yerima 17).

Mojagbe himself can be seen as death personified to the people. His breaths are not just threat, but also death. To checkmate the unlawful acts of traditional institutions, absolute monarchy needs to be reviewed. The conception of leaders as demi-god, second-in-command to God, is rather counterproductive as these leaders wantonly abuse power since they cannot be questioned.

Abese is asked to execute Esan by decapitation as "a warning to all those who dare look at the king straight in the eyes" (Yerima 18). One of the weapons that the ruled can use to checkmate the excesses of the rulers is criticism. Leaders need to be criticized to ensure that the right thing is done. However, the ruling class often abnegates criticism. Those who represent the mouthpiece of the downtrodden in the society are often labeled as a "national threat." Unquestionable and autocratic leadership should be rejected before total freedom can smile on the masses.

Achille Mbembe's description of the African state as the postcolony which implies "certain kinds of nation states that, having achieved political independence, govern with inherited structures of violence and domination" (Ashcroft 125) is apt. As a matter of fact, the postcolony is characterized by oppositionality. It is, however, argued that the "postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or collaboration but can best be characterised as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the commandemente and its 'subjects' having to share the same living space" (Mbembe 104). Mbembe submits that:

> … it would seem wrong to continue to interpret postcolonial relations in terms of absolute resistance or absolute domination, or, as a function of the binary oppositions usually adduced in conventional analyses of movements of indiscipline and revolt (e.g. counter-discourse, countersociety, counter-hegemony. …). (105)

Mbembe's position becomes practicable when postcolonial leadership redeems its already dented image and humanely treats its subjects. Leadership that is fond of executing lives of presumed enemies, instead of executing justice and fairness, and dispensing good governance deserves to be collectively resisted. Total demolition of hegemonic leadership structure and (re)construction of a responsible and responsive one in postcolonial Africa will eliminate the current reality of oppositionality with which the postcolony is submerged.

Whereas the water of wisdom is supposed to flow from the head to the other parts, the reverse is the case in Mojagbe, who acts foolishly whereas he is surrounded by wise individuals. An ordinary messenger to Mojagbe knows that it is wrong and sinister to kill a prince (Esan), but he sees Abese's view as an affront and contempt:

> Ha, **Baba, you should know**. The death of a prince this way will bring evil to the land. Cut him loose, Kabiyesi. Be a father to the people. The gods may revolt … causing pestilence and hunger throughout the land. We have seen this happen before. It left a bitter taste of gall on our taste buds. Please, reconsider, my lord …. We only want the king to walk right … in the footpath of his father …. Do not hurry to shed this blood. An act a king will think about consequences later is not a good act. A dog does not eat a dog …. (Yerima 18-19, emphasis added)

Abese's articulation above implies that the king is ignorant, wicked, amnesiac, and childish. Mojagbe does not envisage the lethal consequences of his abuse of power on the people and the land as a whole. Mojagbe ought to be a father figure to the people; ironically, he needs to be fathered considering his idiosyncratic amentia. This perfectly captures the praxes of postcolonial leaders who, though are old, act childishly. Some members of cabinet of postcolonial leaders are cerebral and reasonable, including Ibese; unfortunately, they are not often listened to as they frequently face removal during cabinet reshuffle. In spite of Abese's wise and convincing submission, Mojagbe remains recalcitrant and uneducable.

Yerima portrays Mojagbe as a coward even though he appears dreadful to those who try to challenge his draconian leadership style. His fear of looming death is shown during his conversation with Isepe:

> Now to the task ahead. Tonight, Isepe, Layewu came to my bed chamber. He revealed his face to me. (ISEPE *begins first with a chuckle*.) Abese found a white calabash on the throne. (*Then a laugh.* MOJAGBE *watches in disbelief*.) Why do you laugh? I say I stared death in the face, and you laugh? (Yerima 21)

It is ironical that the king who breathes death could be afraid of the same. Mojagbe identifies the implication of death to him and his reign.

Isepe is an archetype of sycophants who surround leaders. They are supposed to give them good counsel; however, the reverse is the case. Isepe is the priest who mediates between the deity and Mojagbe. As a representative of the gods, he ought to be truthful and responsible. Nevertheless, he only massages the ego of his employer in order to maintain his job; Isepe symbolizes modern day servility in African polity. Postcolonial leadership is laden with individuals of Isepe's caliber who know the truth but are always economical with it. Some leaders fall into error because of obsequious advisers with whom they surround themselves.

Moreover, Mojagbe's impolitic and tendentious leadership has a lethal effect on the future generation. Isepe informs the king that his young bride cannot bear children because all the six children in her womb have been sacrificed to elongate the life of the king. This denotes that the king is only interested in his own lifetime, while he kills the future generation to perpetuate his dictatorial rule. Mojagbe's dementia is further echoed when he blesses Isepe for sacrificing the children that his young wife would have given birth to, although he says "sometimes I long for a son. Just to sit on the throne when we are old and gone" (Yerima 23). This is similar to the monarchical democratic government being practiced in most African countries where political leaders replace themselves with their children at the expiration of their terror-filled tenure.

The corporealization of death is underscored in the play when Mojagbe narrates a fearsome dream he has where he observes that a big party takes place in the palace. In attendance are both the living and the dead who engage in eating and drinking. However, his presence is completely ignored. This signifies that, among leaders from different climes, Mojagbe is not given any recognition because of the kind of leadership he provides. Similarly, the dream prefigures his disbarment and spurning by both the living and the dead. He is, therefore, on his own as all those who are supposed to give him support have deserted him to his own follies and doom. Through this depiction, Yerima implies that one thing that can make bad leaders disquieted is to be deserted by those who massage their ego. It is, however, disheartening to note that there are people who encourage dictatorial leaders such as Isepe whose conscience has been seared because of what they would eat. Isepe, for instance, betrays the oppressed people by volunteering to be the priest who engages in divination for the tyrannical Mojagbe.

Another action of Mojagbe that underlines the motif of death is his usurpation of land belonging to the Oyo people whom he drives away. Chief Balogun who represents a voice of sense sees this illegal action of the king as "the brewing wheel of death" (Yerima 28). However, instead of paying attention to Balogun, Mojagbe remains intractable.

The conscientized women of the village protest against the deadly acts of the king. Their major demand is that Prince Esan should not be decapitated by Mojagbe whose mind is made up already to kill the innocent lad. The women dress half-naked as a way of demonstrating their rejection of the obnoxious and egomaniac leadership style of the death-breathing Mojagbe. Despite the fact that chiefs, including Otun, Osi, and Balogun, appeal to him to listen to the voice of the angry women, Mojagbe proves more stubborn. He asks Osi to "speak with your women" because "Our blood boils" (Yerima 31). This action of the women is supposed to challenge him, but he sees it as contempt. The power-drunk king does not have any regard for the personality of women. His attitude to the demand of the protesting women reiterates his non-responsiveness and irresponsibility as a leader. African literature is filled with the motif of women's commitment to ending socio-political problems. Historically, the likes of Moremi assiduously tried to end security threat in their times. Women have been variously portrayed as weak and incapable of doing anything serious. However, Yerima, the male-feminist, proves that women are not weak; they can do what even men may not be able to. For several years that Mojagbe has been oppressively ruling the village, men who are chiefs do not have the effrontery to confront him. However, the women exhibit their commitment to humanity when they challenge him. This supports Mary E Modupe Kolawole's view that "woman is particularly feared but respected … dreaded for possible supernatural impact on men and on the society. At other times, she is a potential Pandora with mystic powers" (66).

Contrary to Mojagbe's egocentric stance that he is a self-made ruler, the Yeye's view reiterates that no king or leader is self-sufficient. It is the people (populace) that are responsible for the making of a king/leader. However, upon his enthronement, Mojagbe soon becomes oblivious of this fact; hence, he bites the hand that had fed him. Leaders only beg for people's votes, but the moment they assume office, the electorate become beggars. Although the text is set in the old Oyo Empire, its thematic thrust is relevant to the leadership experience of modern Africa. In other words, the examination of an aspect of old Oyo history, the despotic rule of Oba Mojagbe in the pre-colonial years, is depicted for the contemporary world in order to identify the characters to absorb and those to deride and renounce. Again, the women reject wanton shedding of innocent blood by Mojagbe whose terror-ridden reign is characterized by multiple deaths. According to the Yeye, "you decided to spill the blood of a prince at the market square. The market women do not want blood in their market" (Yerima 35).

Metaphorically, the world is a marketplace, while human beings are market people. It is inferred that the earth dwellers frown upon the shedding of blood. They see judicial killings as a desecration of the "market." The Yeye further confront Mojagbe saying: "too many children have died during your tenure as king" (Yerima 35). Thus, Mojagbe has no regard for human life. He kills both the living and the unborn children.

Mojagbe only clutches at emptiness; he is beclouded by the transitory grandeur of the throne. He still dances, while the whole land has rejected him. His illusionary grasp of power shows that he is not living in the world of reality. His memory has been eroded by transient benefits and powers of kingship. He even threatens the women that he would let male slaves loose among them so that they would sexually assault them. As a king, Mojagbe believes so much in the title 'ka bi o si' (Yoruba), which means "no one can challenge your authority." In other words, he enjoys absolute, unchallengeable authority. In actual fact, there is no authority that cannot and should not be challenged. Postcolonial leaders are not different from Mojagbe who threatens those who oppose his anti-human policies. Contemporary postcolonial leaders tend to formulate some policies targeted at silencing opposition parties that criticize their ineptitude. The attitude of the king demonstrates vacuity of sanity:

> Yeye: The air here has gone suddenly foul and a mad king sits on his stench. Away! We must prepare the land for a new one. (Yerima 38)

The "air" here symbolizes the polity. Leadership actions make the ambience foul. The decision of the women from the conclave to prepare for the coronation of another king metaphorizes the outright denunciation of bad leadership. Some of the youths of the village decide to run away from home as a result of hardship and severity of life. Unfortunately, they end up as slaves and laborers in other people's land. Without mincing words, bad leadership is one of the factors that push people away to other places in search of greener pasture. Akande laments the condition of the émigré villagers thus:

> We found our own sons digging wells, common *konga* in Ipile. Dirty, cold and hungry. It was disgraceful. Children of royalty. *Shiioo*! (Yerima 49)

The above signifies the estrangement, non-belongingness, dehumanization, inhumanity, and indignity they are subjected to in the strange, faraway land. Although they are royal children, they are never treated as such in their own land let alone in the strange land. The experience of the returnee migrants could be described as unhomeliness; that is, the experience of dislocation, which Martin Heidegger describes as "unheimlich or unheimlichkeit" – literally "unhousedness" or "not-at-home-ness" (188) which is also sometimes translated as "uncanny" or "uncanniness" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 49-50). They do not feel at home even in their home; hence, their unhomeliness precipitates their homelessness following their dislocation. The testimony of Morili, one of the returnee migrants, is paradigmatic: "… at a point, there was nothing to live for here. No food … no work … even the palm tree went dry" (Yerima 49-50). This iterates the failure of the leadership to ensure provision of basic amenities for the citizenry. The palm tree represents the wealth of the village, just as petroleum is the major source of revenue for Nigeria. Unfortunately, the palm tree has dried up. This suggests the ruination of the major source of economy for the village as a result of the leadership's economic

cluelessness and lack of managerial ability. The economic situation of contemporary postcolonial nations is no different from what operates in the polity of Mojagbe whose (in)actions have contributed tremendously to political instability, economic stagnancy, and moral decay in the land.

Motunrayo, a slave captured from the Igbo Odo village by Mojagbe's warriors, is possessed by Mojagbe to be in charge of medicine and to attend to shrines. Eventually, Motunrayo is instrumental in his death. Motunrayo decries the tomfoolery of Mojagbe:

> Eledumare blessed him, put in his mouth food that he did not cook. But, once in power, he decided to take on even the spirits, and exchange roles with his God. See how easily man forgets his place. Like a child he hangs onto and claims a plaything he was only given to play with for a while. Little foolish children, all! (Yerima 71)

The above succinctly delineates the characteristic habit of contemporary political leadership in most developing countries. Yerima accentuates the transience of power as no one would continue to be in a leadership position; the moment death comes, everything ends. He therefore condemns leaders who hold on to power, which is a plaything that does not last forever. Indeed, man's understanding and awareness of his evanescence will help to know his limitation and not try to equate himself with God.

The trope of death in *Mojagbe* is double-edged in that it represents bad leaders like Mojagbe as death and that there is need for the death of such myopic and braggart leadership in order for true development and transformation to be ushered in to the polity. The literary representation and chronicle of hegemonic leadership is "an attempt to reflect the agonies of the time, the hopes of the time, to show a way out of all the problems and to condemn negative forces" (Edde 45).

Yerima demonstrates his literary and cultural resourcefulness through the employment of certain dramatic techniques. As a play that is rooted in Yoruba culture, *Mojagbe* deploys several proverbs to add local flavor to its thematic preoccupations, historical allusion and chants/incantations. The playwright engages in preponderant use of proverbs in the play to establish his cultural dexterity and also foreground the *Yorubaness* of the locale. Proverbs often occur casually in everyday oral conversation. The references of proverbs can be persons or situations that are familiar to the interlocutors (Olatunji 171). Most of the proverbs employed in Yerima's *Mojagbe* are uttered by Oba Mojagbe in his interaction with his chiefs and subjects. According to Olatunji,

> The Yoruba have great respect for age and proverbs enjoin respect for elders whose greater experience of life's hopes and sorrows yields worldly wisdom which younger people need for guidance. (171)

To some extent, the use of proverb is reserved for the elderly ones in Yoruba society as it is believed that *ẹnu àgbà lobì ti í gbó* (the kola ripens better in the mouths of the elders). This also apes the kind of respect accorded the elders among the Yoruba. Kaphagawani and Malherbe state that "there is in general among traditional African communities an emphasis on age as a necessary condition for knowledge and wisdom" (212). It is, however, contradictory that Oba Mojagbe, who is supposed to be the custodian of the cultural practices and philosophical corpus of his people, is found wanting in moral and character. Olatunji posits that Yoruba proverbs serve as social charters to praise what the society considers to be virtues and condemn bad practices (171). There are several Yoruba proverbs for different communicative contexts and purposes. Mojagbe only looks for some proverbs that suit his own purpose. Below are examples of the proverbs used in the play.

- "Hands that are clean abhor dirt, unless the owner intends to wash them again." (Yerima 25)
- "The hunter, who went into the bush with his dog for a month, returns home without it. (Yerima 26)
- "The villagers refuse to ask him about his dog, because he appeared well fed, and he takes offence." (Yerima 26)

The context in which these proverbs are employed appears tense. The suspicious and fearful Mojagbe uses these proverbs to attack his chiefs for conniving with his conjectural enemies to unseat him. The chiefs are, however, ignorant of the plot against the suspicious king. It is observed that the proverbs are used for condemnation. Furthermore, Mojagbe tells his chiefs: "Truly, on the day you invite a child to give you a bath, remember that the navel cannot be covered" (Yerima 30). Ordinarily, no one would leave one's navel uncovered because it is supposed to be hidden from the public. However, it becomes impossible for one to cover one's navel for somebody who is to bathe one. Mojagbe deploys this proverb to let the chiefs know that what they are trying to cover up is an open-secret. He accuses the chief of sending a message of death to him through Layewu, the late king, who appears to him in his dream.

At another instance, Mojagbe condemns the action of the Yeye, spiritual mothers of the conclave, who lead naked women in a protest against his misrule. He expects the Yeye to address the problem of insecurity in the land. The king is told that the people of Igbo Odo attacked and killed six members of the same family on their farmland. Thus, Mojagbe says: "They leave the seriousness of leprosy to cure ringworm" (Yerima 40). As far as Mojagbe is concerned, insecurity in the land is compared to leprosy, while his misrule is likened to ringworm. His use of this proverb foregrounds his delusion and maladroitness.

Apart from proverbs, Yerima also makes use of o*fọ́*, incantation. Incantation has to do with the verbal aspect of the magical act among the Yoruba, while others are

the rites, charms and medicines. Through magic, people tend to manipulate both the natural and supernatural worlds and subject them to their will. Incantation may also involve divination at times. In the play, incantations and divinations are employed to manipulate the perceived antagonists of the despotic king. Isepe serves as Mojagbe's priest and helps him consult with the oracle in order to know those plotting against him.

The essence of divination is to seek *definition* and explanation to knotty issues. Wande Abimbola avers that, in the traditional Yoruba society, Ifa priests were seen as the physicians, psychiatrists, historians and philosophers in their respective communities (14). Mojagbe recognizes those roles of Ifa priests; that is why he engages Isepe to help him with divination. Following the death of Isepe, Mojagbe *possesses* Motunrayo, the "very fair and beautiful slave girl" who is "found loitering in the bush" (Yerima 51), when the village warriors confront the people of Igbo Odo for killing six people from the same family. Mojagbe deliberately requests the *ownership* of Motunrayo so that she will be in charge of his medicine and help him spiritually.

Moreover, Mojagbe himself uses incantation in order to prevent Iku (Death) from killing him:

> Mojagbe: Iku Ojege Olona
> Iku Alumutu, it is you I call.
> Olonaaiye.
> Keeper of the gate between the worlds of the unborn, the living and the dead.
> Once he hugs you, you are gone…
> He provides food for mother earth.
> Death who kills a Babalawo bi enitikogbofa.
> Iku to pa onisegunbe'nitikologun un.
> Iku who killed Abiri, and Abiri died,
> Iku who killed Abiri, and Abiri went to the land beyond, beyond.
> It is you that I greet and call. (Yerima 67)

Mojagbe's incantatory rendition above attests to Abimbola's position that there are eight things which humans dread – ikú (death), àrùn (disease), òfò (loss), èpè (curse), ègbà (paralysis), òràn (trouble), èwòn (imprisonment) and èse (affliction) (50). These dreaded calamities are what people experience under the authoritarian regime of Mojagbe who is ironically frightened by death.

Similarly, Yerima employs both code-mixing and code-switching in the play. Code-switching and code-mixing represent linguistic phenomenon of bilingualism; they can be attributed to interference of language when they come in contact. Code-switching refers to the alternation between different linguistic varieties used by

the bilingual/bi-dialectal during the conversational interaction, while code-mixing means embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses that participants, in order to infer what is intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand (Bokamba 277). Below are instances of both code-mixing and code-switching in the play.

– Isepe: It is 'Edi' my lord… (Yerima 16).

Here, Isepe code-mixes English and Yoruba. The word "Edi" means spell. However, using its Yoruba version tends to carry more semantic weight than the English translation – spell

– Mojagbe: Ewo! My ears did not hear that… (Yerima 43).

Similarly, Mojagbe makes use of code-mixing in the speech when he decides to use "Ewo" which is a Yoruba lexical item for taboo, something that is forbidden.

> Mojagbe: Iku Ojege Olona
> Iku Alumutu, it is you I call.
> Olonaaiye.
> Keeper of the gate between the worlds of the unborn, the living and the dead.
> Once he hugs you, you are gone…
> He provides food for mother earth.
> Death who kills a Babalawo bi eni ti kogbofa.
> Iku to pa onisegun be'nitikologun un.
> Iku who killed Abiri, and Abiri died,
> Iku who killed Abiri, and Abiri went to the land beyond, beyond.
> It is you that I greet and call. (Yerima 67)

In the excerpts above, Mojagbe employs both code-mixing and code-switching during his apostrophic speech addressed to the late Isepe whose death he masterminds and in the course of his incantatory rendition to avert his looming death. The deployment of code-mixing and code-switching attests to the linguistic multiplicity of the locale of the play.

Conclusion

Yerima employs his creativity to challenge despotic and hegemonic leadership in the African context. Through the trope of death in *Mojagbe*, he exposes the cowardice and trepidation of such leaders and metaphorically wishes for the death (discontinuance) of autocratic leadership in Africa. This study has therefore examined the trope of death in the play by exploring deadly (in)actions of Oba Mojagbe who represents death itself. In other words, the playwright presents a catalogue of administrative jiggery-pokery in his polity. As a writer who is committed to his society, Yerima depicts the salient ills of his cultural milieu with a view to proffering possible cures to those ills which have rendered the regime agonizing for the people.

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