

Her Story in His Story: Examining Gendered Undertones in Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*

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Abstract

African playwrights consistently explore issues of gender and history in their works. This paper examines the roles women have played in shaping African history, drawing on Ahmed Yerima's play *Igatibi*. The significance of this study lies in foregrounding women's roles in traditional African society as custodians of our cultural heritage. Ahmed Yerima is well known in the Nigerian drama scene; however, there has been limited scholarly investigation into the contributions and historical roles of women in his plays. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the authentic roles of women in traditional society, emphasizing their position as custodians of culture and tradition. Using theories of Womanism and New Historicism, the study, through a close analysis of *Igatibi*, highlights the significance of women in traditional African society as custodians of culture and discusses Ilorin's history. The research examines how the playwright employs literary elements such as proverbs, songs, dance, and myth to reveal the history of Ilorin's traditional religion and the contributions of women. The conclusion is that women play diverse roles in the historical development and progress of society, especially in Ilorin's traditional society.

Keywords: African Drama, Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*, Myth, New Historicism, Womanism

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Introduction

The flavor of African dramaturgy has evolved over the years, with playwrights drawing on oral traditions, especially myths and folklore, to explore contemporary issues rooted in their histories. Playwrights have also utilized history and societal gender roles to create their dramatic texts. Some African playwrights, such as Wole Soyinka, Efua T. Sutherland, and Ama Ata Aidoo, are recognized for highlighting women's roles in society through their dramaturgy. However, in Ahmed Yerima's earlier works, the focus was on male characters and their exploits, with little or no consideration for women's agency, especially for women in traditional histories, myths, and legends.

The significance of the study is that, in contrast to earlier presentations of women as insignificant in the historical development of African societies, as reflected in male writers' works such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where women are portrayed as docile, weak, and subservient to men, the central figure in the present text under study is a woman of valour and courage, as well as the custodian of the cultural heritages of her people. Thus, the paper examines the roles of women in narrating history, using Ahmed Yerima's play *Igatibi* as a reference text. In modern African drama, most playwrights draw on their people's culture and traditions to weave the plots of their plays. For instance, Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* alludes to the 1879 British invasion as its source material. Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is also based on the story of Elesin Oba in the old Oyo Empire. The English playwright William Shakespeare is renowned for incorporating his people's history into his plays. Shakespearean works such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Richard II*, and *Coriolanus* all draw on historical events. Therefore, the importance of history cannot be overstated in both African and non-African dramaturgies.

Currently, the issue of gender is at the center of African literature. From the mid-1960s, African women writers began creating inclusive dramas featuring both women and men. Works by Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and others, mostly novelists, include many female writers, such as Zulu Sofola, Efua T. Sutherland, and Tess Onwueme, who place women characters at the heart of their plays. The discussion around gender often focuses on the roles society assigns to men and women based on their biological sex. They argue that men and women are created equal, but the differences in the roles they play stem from a male-dominated society.

There are also instances where male writers assign central roles to female characters, as seen in Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, and Nuruddin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*, among others. This trend in contemporary drama further reflects shifts in perceptions and roles assigned to women in society. However, in today's literary scholarship, women are no longer relegated to the periphery. Today, women take center stage in African literary texts, either as writers or protagonists, embodying emerging realities. Therefore, this article focuses on gender discourse—specifically, the authentic representation of African women in African drama texts.

Accordingly, this article, through critical analysis, will explore issues of gender, myth, and history, focusing on the role of the central female character in Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*.

Literature Review

Myth, History and Gender Issues in African Dramaturgy

The roles of myths and folklore in recalibrating history in African dramaturgy cannot be overstated. This is because dramatists often explore myths and folklore to uncover people's history. Onuh (2005), in her paper "Myth in African Drama: A Postcolonial Assessment of

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*", argues that Greek drama is rooted in Greek mythology and legends. Among African playwrights, myths and legends serve as the raw material for drama texts. Evidence abounds among African/Nigerian writers who have dwelt on myths and legends in their dramaturgies. *Anowa* by Ama Ata Aidoo is a perfect example of a combination of myth and history. It is a myth of Akan origin, a tribe in Ghana, connected to Ghana's history of the 1870s, a period of slavery. Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* is also based on the trickster's story, in which a small animal, Ananse or the tortoise, outsmarts other, larger animals. This trickster's story technique is used to condemn the tradition of bride-price, in which a young lady is effectively given to the highest bidder in marriage. Myths can be seen as stories that affirm a society's worldview and belief system. They are not verifiable because they lack scientific proof. However, myths help uphold society's moral codes and reveal its historical truths. According to Omotayo Olorunbobajobi, Soyinka believes in a "Cyclical Continuum" (2012, p. 195). This Yoruba belief is widely explored in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The cyclical continuum explains why Elesin is eager to plant his seeds in the new wife's womb before accepting death, as tradition requires after the death of Alaafin, the paramount ruler of Oyo. This same belief heightens the play's tragic significance when Olunde, Elesin's son, must die in his father's place. Among the Yorubas, it is taboo for a child to die while the father is alive. Therefore, myth serves as a window into society.

Figwelredo (2011), in her paper "The Drama of Existence: Myths and Rituals in Wole Soyinka's Theatre," agrees with Wole Soyinka and Carl Jung, who asserted that "myth and ritual as the natural effluence of man's yearning for spiritual meanings in life" (p. 106). This implies that myths help us understand issues related to spiritualism. They help explain something extraordinary beyond what we can see or touch.

Sesan and Iyanda (2024) argue that the actions of the women in the text under review are antithetical to the expected roles of women, owing to their radical feminist approaches. According to the essayists:

Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*" (2002) is one of the plays with radicalist theme. She patterns her interpretation of African gender in consistence with the radicalization of feminism. The radicalization in the plays is reflected in language, characterization and thematic perspectives with the assumption of changing women marginal representation in literature and life. This approach to feminist/gender discourse, however, is antithetical to African gender relations. (p. 47)

This paper supports the above position on the basis that concerted efforts are underway to assign significant roles to women, challenging previous stereotypes of women in African literature. The female character in the present work is not only active but also the custodian of her people's ancient cultural tradition. Simply put, women now occupy the center stage in African dramaturgies and are no longer confined to lesser or subservient roles as they appear in earlier literary works, especially those published by male writers.

Recalibrating Gender in African Literature

Gender refers to the roles assigned to men and women by society. There is no inherent connection between sex and the gender roles assigned to both sexes; they are socially constructed. In contemporary discourse, it is understood that most roles assigned to men and women are

merely conventional—they are not natural. Still, they are shaped by the society in which they exist. Most African societies are patriarchal, so men predominantly assign masculine and feminine roles. The emergence of gender discourse is driven by women challenging the roles that men have assigned to them. Jick and Temeching (2016) argued that “gender is socially and culturally bound” (p. 14). It is also suggested that most societies are patriarchal and patrilineal, with men determining gender roles. In many traditional societies, women are denied numerous opportunities and face discrimination even in their chosen professions (Alexander (1988, p. 18). The patriarchal nature of African societies diminishes women's power and relegates them to secondary roles (As cited in Jick & Temeching, 2016, p. 14). They are often labeled witches, and all misfortune in the family or community is attributed to them. From this perspective, this paper aims to challenge these long-standing misconceptions about women and to highlight their contributions as custodians of history and as pillars of family and community values. According to Chukwuma (1990):

The female character in African fiction hitherto is a facile, lackluster human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making, both as a daughter and mother, even when decisions affect her directly. Docility and complete subsumption of will are demanded and enacted from her. The traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially in the background of patrilineage, which marked most African societies. (p. 133)

The above excerpt from Chukwuma further explores the concerns of many womanist writers, particularly the subjugation of women to the whims and caprices of male chauvinism. Women face many challenges in society, but the most severe of these is men's relegation of women to secondary roles.

Another relevant piece of literature for this discussion is Nkeweteyin, Patricia, and Henry Jick's article, “Alternative Vision of Gender in the New Literatures of Africa in English: An Appraisal of Bole Butake's Dramaturgy.” In the article, the two scholars analyze the literary works of Bole Butake, a male Cameroonian writer renowned for exploring African women, particularly Cameroonian women. Like Yerima and other African male writers, Bole Butake is dedicated to challenging male chauvinism in African society through his art. Although this research has not confirmed whether Yerima frequently engages with gender discourse in his dramaturgy, the existing literature indicates that he has other works featuring women prominently, such as Yemoja, a play based on a Yoruba legend. Butake (2016) “empathizes with women and seems to be sensitizing them to stand up and make a difference in their lives” (p. 13). The present research, however, is not a case of empathy but a celebration of the grandeur and significant contributions of women in traditional society, an aspect of African life often overlooked or undervalued in previous studies.

In discussions of gender, one aspect that consistently requires clarification is the distinction between gender and sex. While sex is biological, referring to male and female, gender pertains to the social roles assigned to men and women. Although sex is determined by nature, such as being male or female, gender roles vary from one society to another. In traditional African communities, specific roles are assigned to men and women. Consequently, energy-intensive jobs such as hunting and palm wine tapping are traditionally regarded as men's responsibilities, while women are typically tasked with domestic work. Beyond these roles, women also serve as

mothers and assistants to men. In Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Desertion*, a female character, Mamake Saituni, is a traditional orthopedic surgeon who revives an exhausted Martin Pearce, a British officer and explorer.

Akpore (2026) examines gender inequalities and the representation of female characters in Nollywood. The author examines the Nigerian film industry and how it has been portraying women positively. The central focus of most modern African literary texts is to project positive images of women in African society, in contrast to earlier portrayals of women as subservient to men.

Gender discourse also considers the roles of women in traditional society. In a paper titled "The Female Indian Ocean: Subverting Male-Dominated Narratives of the Sea in Khadija Bajabar's *House of Rust*", the paper argues that the Indian Ocean "...relates to vastness, power, impossibility, invasion and entrapment" (p. 293). Bajabar in Kasembeli (2025) further argues that "... the power of the sea as a metaphor contrasting that of slavery and shows how it can be turned into agency, disruption, freedom, and recovery of lost identities, particularly for women." (p. 294). In the same light, Madumare (2022) examines the challenges facing women, especially those that are associated with trafficking, and its associated challenges, such as sexploitation, slavery, trauma, healing, psycho-social problems, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and others. (p.93.)

Therefore, this article explores the contributions of women in traditional societies, with particular reference to the history of the Ilorin people before the introduction of Islam and modernity.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The Intersection of Gender and History: Womanism and New Historicism in View

This research explores two main aspects: gender and history as they relate to Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*. It combines New Historicism and womanist feminism to analyse the selected text. While Womanism highlights women's contributions to societal development, New Historicism seeks to reconstruct history within the text. The work presents an alternative history narrated from the perspectives of a female character. Womanism, as a theoretical framework, will focus on the character development of Nga and on women's agency in the play. At the same time, New Historicism will address the play's reconstruction of history. Hence, Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi* is both a play that dwells on gender discourse and a historical play.

New Historicism, as a literary theory, gained popularity in the 1980s through the work of Stephen Greenblatt, who published "New Historicism" in a special edition of *Genre*, Volume 15 (1982). New Historicism is an interdisciplinary field of study and a branch of historiography. According to Seldan in his work entitled: *Reader's Guide in Contemporary Literary Theory*, New Historicism "saw literature as part of a large cultural history (Lyu, 2021, p. 1075). The central argument of the New Historicists is that history is at the bedrock of literary work (Lyu, 2021, 1075). Literature is produced within the scope of history that produces the work. According to the writer: "The New Historicism has viewed literature as the reflection of the worldview of a period. From the perspective of the new historicists, history is not merely the background of literature anymore" (Lyu, 2021, p. 1075). The New Historicists hold that literature is part of the making of history.

The rise of New Historicism is shaped by other existing literary theories, such as "post-structural theorists, especially Louis Althusser's Marxist ideology, Michael Foucault's discourse and power, the central concept in deconstructive criticism, and Clifford Geertz's anthropology"

(Seldan, 2004 p. 105). It is common for emerging theories to incorporate ideas from earlier theories, and this holds for New Historicism as well. Louis Althusser's Marxist ideology influenced Stephen Jay Greenblatt's development of the theory. New Historicism argued against Old Historicism, contending that "there is no single 'history' only discontinuous and contradictory histories" (Lyu, 2021, p. 1076).

White (1978) argued that both fiction and history are constructed through language. This argument holds when we consider the influence of structuralism and post-structuralism on New Historicism. Similarly, Matt Hackling, in his paper titled "New Historicism," defined the theory as "an interpretative strategy in the study of History and Literature" (p. 53). Cantor (1993), Hackling contended that New Historicism is an attempt to "reconcile history on the model of Literature" (p. 54). These positions indicate that New Historicism examines history from a literary perspective. In Frank Obodo Ogbeche's *Harvest of Corruption*, a play set in Gabu that lampoons the excesses of the ruling elites—such as oppression, exploitation of the masses, and sexual harassment—the plot, thematic focus, and characterization suggest the realities of Abuja, Nigeria. Therefore, there is always a connection between history and literature, which New Historicism seeks to explore. The New Historicists believe that one can read the past in the present, since both history and literature are constructed through language. In the words of Akpah and Fadare (2025), one of the core values of New Historicism is its aim to unmask the influence of "socio-political and historical contexts in the making of a literary text" (p. 9).

Conversely, "Womanism" as a theoretical framework was first introduced by Alice Walker, the African American writer and author of the highly acclaimed *The Color Purple*, as a departure from mainstream radical feminism, which overlooks the unique challenges faced by black women who bear the dual burdens of gender and race. Womanism in African literature thus draws on Walker's feminist perspective, which emphasizes the specific struggles of black women and their contributions to self-actualization and to the broader cultural landscape. Walker is also concerned with raising awareness of black women's experiences and their efforts to overcome the constraints of subjugation and invisibility. Izgarjan and Marker (2013) argue that womanism "strived to challenge all power structures which inhibit human growth and development, and it largely contributed to the discussion about dynamics of power not just within feminist and womanist circles but also on a more global scale (pp. 309-310). This implies that womanism, as a feminist theoretical framework, recognizes the inherent value women bring to human development, especially in African societies.

In Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*, the playwright depicts female characters who are not only strong voices within the community but also stand resolute against injustice and patriarchal dominance. This explains why Nga emerges as the protagonist and acts as the community's pillar. According to Tally (1986), Womanism "has a strong root in Black women's culture but also means instinctively pro-woman (p. 215). Womanism, therefore, is defined by what Tally (1986) describes as "strong, outrageous or outspoken behaviour tailored not against men but for advancing community development and addressing racial and economic injustice". Similarly, Akpah (2018), in "Voice of Liberation: A womanist reading of Lynn Chukura's *Archotyping*", argues that the concerns of womanism are the intervention of both women and men in the issues affecting human society. It further highlights the integral role of women in advancing a community. Hence, the wholeness and well-being of everyone, regardless of gender, age, or race, are essential to the growth and development of human society and are qualities of womanism.

The research methodology involves a close reading and critical analysis of Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi*, together with consultation of relevant research materials. The adoption of eclectic theories, namely Womanism and New Historicism, to examine the reconstruction of history and the roles of women in traditional African society as custodians of African heritage and culture.

Textual Analysis

Myth and Mythology in Ahmed Yerima's Igatibi

Ahmed Yerima's *Igatibi* primarily explores oral tradition, particularly myth and folklore, to engage a new generation of audiences. The playwright contends that his main concern is "how a playwright in the twenty-first century could use oral literature, and oral history to speak to the new audience to raise new questions, new awareness, and make contemporary sense." (*Igatibi*, p. 6).

It is well known that Ahmed Yerima portrays female characters positively when recounting the history of the Ilorin people. Women have always played a leading role in social change within African society, roles that men often try to overshadow through patriarchal dominance. The main female character in *Igatibi* refuses to be silenced, speaking for herself and other women in the play. Her character development challenges the traditional roles assigned to women by earlier writers such as Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. The focus of Nga, the principal female character in the play, is on the family and how to sustain it. She acts as the pillar of the family, and her main concern is the well-being of the entire family. That is why she ensures that the family's history and valued traditions are preserved and upheld. Her character in the text can be compared to the admirable characters of Li and Seytu in *The Stillborn* and *The Descendants* by Zaynab Alkali, respectively.

The play opens with the appearance of an '...ageless, old, frail but strongly will woman' (p. 6), named Nga, first seen in her room. The room is simply arranged, with a prayer mat and a tesbih, indicating an Islamic setting. Nga, the elderly woman, is distressed by the belief that she is a witch who has been bewitching people to extend her lifespan (p.8). Nga now becomes a mythological figure, feared and regarded as a witch because of her long life. The old woman wishes she were dead just to escape people's prying eyes.

Through a well-crafted story, the playwright reveals that the society depicted in *Igatibi* still adheres to the pre-Islamic customs of the Ilorin people in North-Central Nigeria. It is a social and cultural environment that believes a woman who has lived a relatively long life is a witch. Consequently, all society's problems are blamed on her. Despite these limitations, Nga becomes the epitome of reason as she continues to support her daughter-in-law, Amina, whose husband intends to divorce her because she has given birth to five daughters without a single male child, in a patriarchal and patrilineal society that values male children over female children. Amina has spent about fifteen years in Nga's family; marrying Kamal, Nga's grandson, and returning to her parents would bring shame to her family. It should be emphasised that Nga has been an obstacle to patriarchy, and without her persistence, Amina would have been expelled from her matrimonial home by her husband, supported by other men. In her words: "No one sends a wife from his house, not when I am alive." The numerous confrontations Nga has had with patriarchy might also be a reason why patriarchy opposes her. In summary, Nga's daring and her longevity are enough reasons for patriarchy to detest her, as it prefers to mistreat obedient and helpless

women who offer no challenge or resistance. According to Nga: "...I thought you said your husband was the Ustadz, waiting to adorn himself with Lawani and the Alkinba of the Lemomu after his father, my son, what a fool. What a learned stupid fool..." (p.10)

In gender discourse, male chauvinist characters are often portrayed as fools. This is exemplified by Nnaife in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood* and Narou in Aminata Sow Fall's *The Beggars' Strike*. In this play, Nga serves as a voice of reason, caricaturing society, particularly on issues of polygamous marriage and women's oppression. She declares that she will not remain silent until the world acknowledges that it is wrong for a man to abandon his wife and marry another woman on the flimsy excuse that the previous marriage did not produce a male child. According to Nga:

I am in trouble. The parrot will not stop talking until the world hears our little secret story. What the world is turning into amazes me. A man cannot live peacefully with one wife, yet he goes to take another... On the flimsiest excuses that she has only girl children, or that she does not cook well anymore or grunts like a log in bed when she should be proclaiming his prowess... What a stupid grandson I have." (p. 11)

Nga condemns her grandson Kamal, who has been gathering women under the guise of tradition and religion. Because of her persistent opposition to women's oppression, Nga has been branded a witch by the male-dominated community. When Kamal's second wife endures a prolonged pregnancy and fails to deliver after carrying it for thirteen months instead of nine, he seeks Isabi, a form of religious necromancy, which reveals that the child is male. Kamal concludes that the delay is caused by Nga's witchcraft, calling her "Prophetess of the devil" (15) because her witchcraft is rooted in traditional gods rather than the Islamic Allah. However, despite Kamal's attempt to accuse Nga, Isabi exonerates her. Notably, Isabi and related practices are part of the new social order introduced by Islam. Eventually, Nga suggests she has found a lasting solution to the problem of the trapped pregnancy. Earlier, Kamal recalls that during a period when the entire family was afflicted with smallpox, only Nga and her son, Kamal's father, were spared. It is also revealed that Nga was the one who resolved the convulsions experienced by Amina's daughter, a task that modern hospitals have failed to address. This demonstrates the potency of African medicine, which women often boycott.

Hamidat, Kamal's second wife, has invited her mother, Hajia, from Osogbo, to soothe Nga on her behalf. It is reported that Hamidat accidentally broke Nga's red oil bottle, and she now believes this is why Nga is punishing her. Meanwhile, Hamidat is her husband's favourite, who has been treating her "like an egg...in this house" (p. 19). Yerima argues that it is foolish for a man to marry a second wife on the flimsy excuse that the first wife has only given birth to female children. After all, all children are from God and are valuable. According to Hajia, Hamidat's mother: "I am an Osogbo woman, I only married an Ilorin man. And when he took his second and third wives, it was alright by me, but when he brought the fourth one, the age of my little sister, I left for my father's house" (p. 19). This revelation by Hajia shows that no woman is truly pleased with polygamy; they only pretend to tolerate it. Polygamy is a practice many women detest but lack the courage to challenge because of patriarchal dominance.

Hajia, Hamidat's mother, consults an Ifa priest, who assures her that her daughter is "...destined to have five children, all sons. If the world will let her" (p. 20). The priest also confirms that the child she is carrying is a boy. Kamal and Hamidat jointly accuse Nga of witchcraft and of being the root cause of Hamidat's prolonged pregnancy. This accusation

infuriates Nga; nonetheless, she prays for Hamidat's safe delivery. Kamal accuses Nga of faking prayer, while Nga accuses Kamal of lacking 'fate' or 'faith' (p. 23). Kamal views his father, Lemomu, as a weakling whose mind has been broken by Nga. However, Nga perceives Kamal as daft. She informs him of the roles she has played in the family and how she was instrumental in his birth after Kamal's mother laboured for over six days without delivering. According to Nga, she plunges "...this now sinful hand into her and pull you out" (p. 25). This powerful revelation aims to humble Kamal, who wrongly accuses Nga without knowing his own history. On her deathbed, Kamal is handed over to Nga, who eventually raises him, which explains why he is named "Eniitan" (p. 26), meaning the child of history.

Kamal becomes confrontational and, at one point, repeatedly intends to fight Nga, accusing her of witchcraft. He protests that Nga's original name is Khadijat—"...named after the wife of the great prophet of Allah, but you reject it and allow the world to call you Nga. A meaningless, sinful name" (p. 26). Kamal threatens to bring "true believers" (p. 27) to Grandma the following day for a mob action and has vowed to "...cast the first stone and send you to the hottest part of Hell... of Nar" (p. 27). Kamal believes that Nga's witchcraft has been used to afflict members of his family with smallpox. The second accusation is that Nga has tied the womb of Hamidat, Kamal's second wife. Nga wishes she had died to spare her the shame and humiliation she suffers at the hands of her grandson, Kamal.

By the way Kamal has been treating Nga, it seems Kamal has been initiated into a radical Islamic sect, particularly those that believe in killing people indiscriminately in the name of religion. Such sects often reject traditional beliefs and adhere solely to the teachings of the Quran and the Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam). According to Kamal: "Our new Islam forbids all Hantu, Tira or Kundi. The Tesbir and the Quran are all we need for the battle of life" (p. 29). Despite his smallpox and his misunderstandings about Nga, the old woman still finds time to visit him and prays for his recovery. She curses those responsible for her grandson's suffering while advising him to seek treatment at the hospital. The playwright suggests that many of the family's misfortunes stem from wrongful accusations against the innocent old woman, Nga. Kamal trusts in the Islamic Isabi, which has revealed that Nga holds the cure for all the family's ailments.

The Myth and the Historical Relevance of Igatibi

The play deconstructs the widely accepted but mistaken story that the Ilorin Emirate has always been a Muslim community devoid of Egungun, literally translated as masquerade, and other traditional religions. The playwright uses his art to argue that the people of Ilorin practised their traditional religion before the arrival of the Fulani Jihadists and the introduction of Islam, and that one of the most revered gods was the Igatibi masquerade. Additionally, the traditional women represented by Nga held significant power and were not entirely submissive to male chauvinism.

In the play, Kamal's first encounter with the spirit of Igatibi occurs in a terrifying dream in which he is tormented by a masquerade. Lemomu, Kamal's father, mentions having had a similar dream in recent weeks (pp. 32-33). However, the old woman Nga understands that what has been frightening Kamal and Lemomu is nothing but IGATIBI (p. 33), which is also the play's title. Igatibi is the ancestral head of the family, revered as "Egungun," which literally means masquerade. Nga knows from the beginning that what has been disturbing Kamal is the spirit of

Igatibi, which the family has abandoned due to the spread of foreign religions, especially Islam. According to Nga: “Childish fools! A long time ago, long before the coming of Islam, Igatibi and his kin ruled our houses and hearts. We worshipped them, and they in turn protected us” (p. 34). With this, Nga recounts the history of life before Islam's advent. The people worshipped Igatibi, the family's ancestral head, along with other related gods. Igatibi has protected the family for centuries, before Afonja, one of the founders of modern Ilorin, and before the subsequent introduction of Islam. In traditional Yoruba societies, when elders pass away, they do not simply go to heaven and remain idle, but go to heaven to protect the living. Some are revered as ancestors, while others are deified. Igatibi has transcended the status of a mere ancestor to become a god; this aligns with the African philosophical view of cyclical existence. The dead do not vanish into oblivion but die to attain higher roles, including the protection and continuity of the clan. This is reflected in the poetry of Kofi Awoonor, titled “Songs of Sorrow I and II.” In the poem, the poet laments the neglect of the living by the dead, which leads to the colonisation of African lands by outsiders. Awoonor mourns that:

Agosi if you go tell them,
Tell Nyidevu, Kpeti and Kovi
That they have done us evil;
Tell them their house is falling
And the trees in the fence
Have been eaten by termites
That the martels curse them.
Ask them why they idle there
While we suffer, and eat sand.
And the crow and the vulture
Hover always above our broken fences
And strangers walk over our portion. (Poetry Foundation)

Igatibi is angry with Arogunsa's family for abandoning it for over a century while adopting a new culture and a foreign religion. This is clear from the excerpt below:

... Igatibi is angered by the neglect of his blood... the children who now answer new names. A father locked up over for over a hundred years trapped in the darkness of a box. The father that does not recognize his own anymore...their tongue...their food... the rhythm of the drums, their music ... their dances and worse still the tone of their supplication, incantations and chants rendered in strange languages. (p. 35)

The playwright explores why African people are abandoning their culture while foreigners impose a new way of life on them. The author satirises how the entire household is trapped in the new religion, while their ancestors' cherished cultural traditions are cast into the depths of history. According to Kamal: “I never knew that Setani could get me that cheaply. I thought I was fortified ... Where was Allah? Where is He in my moments of need? Where were the Angels sent to protect me?” (p. 36). From Kamal's perspective, Igatibi is an agent of darkness, “Setani”, which has afflicted him and his family with various illnesses. He also questions Allah and why He has not come to save him and his household.

Nga condemns Kamal for sending one of his students to Sokoto after introducing his fiancée to him. Before the student returned, Kamal had impregnated the lady (p. 37). Nga also condemns Kamal for going around to marry a second wife without considering his first wife's feelings. Nga condemns Kamal for now complaining about the old wife as: “...dirty, disrespectful

and ugly..." (p. 17). Kamal condemns his first wife just to satisfy his "...male ego..." (p. 37), with its consequences. To solve the pestilence affecting Kamal and his family, the box housing Igatibi must be brought to Kamal, who is terrified because he thinks that Igatibi can become uncontrollable if the box is opened. Nga must appease Igatibi to bring relief to the family by saying: "Egun baami je gbure" (p. 38), meaning: "the masquerade of my forefathers, please be lenient with us."

The place currently used for grinding pepper was once Igatibi's residence. The pouring of libation, which includes a bottle of oil at this site, awakens the spirit of Igatibi. Unlocking the box containing the Igatibi masquerade has rekindled a significant chapter of Ilorin's history, as the story of Igatibi rightly links the people of Ilorin with Afonja and Alaafin — an old, forgotten history that continues to haunt the present. The connection between the past and the present is a key aspect of New Historicism. Nga connects the story of Igatibi with the history of the Ilorin people. According to her:

I shall call on you Baba. Leader of the people. Fierce warrior of Ilorin. See how he leads them to war. See how we trample on our enemies... See! The Alaafin will be proud of you. Afonja Ilorin will be proud of you, Ajagbe Arogunmasa is proud of you! Eegun ba mi do de. (p. 40)

Nga provides a brief history of the Ilorin people. Alaafin Maku succeeds Aole. The Aare Ona Kakanfo of the time, Afonja, sees his power usurped by Mallam Alimi with the help of an army led by Solagberu. This event shifts the course of the Ilorin people's history. The writer challenges the claim that there is no Egungun in Ilorin: "Ilu to gbayi ti ko le Egun/ Esin le gun won" (p. 41), translated as "Ilorin, a beautiful town without Egungun (Masquerade)/ Horse riding is their Egungun." It is a misrepresentation of history to assert that Ilorin has no Egungun, especially now that we know that one of the ancestral Egunguns of the Ilorin people is Igatibi, as showcased in the play. Islam overtook Ilorin forcibly, and those who resisted, such as Oluawo Ekun, the Olori Ebi of the Arogunmasa family, were stoned to death by the Jihadists (p. 41) while they carried the sacred masquerade of Igatibi. The writer observes: "That day, they killed only the body in the masque, and not its soul" (p. 42). It was Nga who took the mask of Igatibi, kept it in a box, and carried it into the bush. That is why the masquerade of Igatibi still exists today. This act also signifies that the people's culture cannot be wiped out, despite the overwhelming influence of foreign cultures. Although Ilorin is now a community dominated by Muslims, the history of Ilorin would be incomplete without proper recognition of the history of Igatibi as one of the deified ancestors of the Ilorin people.

The story centres on the stoning of Igatibi and the roles played by Nga, who is portrayed as a superwoman who fought the Muslim mob like a man. She states in her narration: "I ran to the shrine, carried the box, put the masque in it, and locked it up as my father had taught me. He never had a male child, so I was a male child to him. I ran into a bush with Igatibi on my head" (p. 42). What the playwright demonstrates in his argument, as reflected in the above quotation, is that both female and male children are valuable and can be beneficial to the family, society and its development. When Kamal asks Nga why the family house still remains standing despite the incursion of the Jihadists, she replies that:

No one knows. Some people said each time they came, the house disappeared. Some said they took pity on me. They knew I was the only other person who stayed with my father apart from the two handlers, Kaki and Igobi, who had been killed. (p. 42)

The quotation above exemplifies a myth used in oral tradition to explain the inexplicable; it is through such myths that society's history is preserved and transmitted. Nga later enters a trance, and after touching both Lemomu (her son) and Kamal (her grandson), they are healed. The healing of Lemomu and Kamal underscores the author's call for African people to return to traditional ways of life for their therapeutic power. Our land will continue to suffer from pestilence unless we embrace traditional life. The encounter between Lemomu and Igatibi signifies the reunion of traditional beliefs with modern religions. Lemomu agrees to dance for Igatibi but is reluctant to dance at the central mosque for fear of being lynched by overzealous Muslim youth. Lemomu is now the new Ologbojo (Head of the Masquerade Cult) and the rightful custodian of Igatibi. This research has therefore challenged the previously held belief that Ilorin has no masquerade. Literature has not only helped uncover this history but has also further clarified it.

The play's mythological import is enhanced by the use of song, dance and traditional proverbs. Ahmed Yerima's texts are always enriched by proverbs, and Igatibi is no exception. According to Nga: "...the Yoruba say that a hunter who comes home with empty hands will be taught how to shoot at preys without missing by his wives" (p. 19). This proverb is favourable to women. It simply means that a man whose responsibilities are abandoned will have them carried out by a woman. That is, what a man has failed to do, a woman can do better. Elsewhere, the playwright says: "It is the ignorance of death, that makes a child say with a smile on his face that his dead mother is fast asleep..." (p. 39). This proverb is used by Nga during an altercation with Kamal, whom she dismisses as an ignoramus of their people's tradition. Moreover, the eulogy of Igatibi is rendered through song and dance. The song is led by Nga, as can be found on pages 50-51.

Conclusion

This research explores the intersection of gender, myth, and history through Ahmed Yerima's Igatibi. It also examines gender issues and their historical connections within African dramaturgy. The central contributions of this study to the body of knowledge lie in its attention to women's agency in African dramaturgy, particularly in Ahmed Yerima's *Igabiti*. The paper contends that while sex is the biological makeup of humans, gender results from the societal classification of the roles assigned to and expected of, both males and females. Often, these roles are defined by patriarchal and patrilineal African societies. The study highlights the importance of women in the history and development of African society, a subject that previous literature has overlooked. Many writers, both men and women, are now attempting to revive and acknowledge this significance, as evidenced in the works of numerous African writers, particularly Ahmed Yerima's Igatibi. Yerima effectively depicts the history of the Ilorin people through myth and gender discourse, emphasizing women's contributions to societal development. The research also explores the distorted history of the traditional religion of the Ilorin people before the Fulani Jihadists' incursion and the subsequent establishment of Islam. This work offers a fresh perspective on the historiography of the Ilorin people, affirming that the indigenous inhabitants were genuine traditional worshippers, with Igatibi as one of their gods — a masquerade guardian of the land before and after the Jihadists' invasion.

The work also discusses how the playwright deploys proverbs, song, and dance to lend the play a traditional flavor. Thus, this paper provides a strong foundation for future research into the historiography of the Ilorin people, the realities of traditional religions in the pre-Jihadist era, and the roles women played in traditional Ilorin society. In conclusion, the findings of this research will prove useful to historians, offering insights into the authentic history of the Ilorin people and the place of women within it during the pre-Jihadist period.

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AI Statement

This document has been enhanced with Grammarly, which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the authors.

Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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