



## Exploring Cultural Aesthetics and Identity Formation in African Literature: A Study of Ahmed Yerima's *Agudua* and *Owiwi*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explored the cultural aesthetics and their intersection with identity formation in Ahmed Yerima's *Agudua* and *Owiwi*: how the plays have artfully articulated the tensions between tradition and modernity in African societies. Rich symbolisms, ritualistic practices, and dynamic characterization explore the gender, generation, and communal identity roles in the maintenance and transformation of cultural heritage. It views tradition as an anchor and ground for negotiation, and modernity as uncomfortable and promising at the same time. Yerima proves how well African cultures bend and resist modern realities. This study locates postcolonial and sociological frameworks where it calls for dialogue and hybridization to delineate African identity in a globalizing world. The findings reveal that Yerima's works are also part of larger discourses on the sustenance and transformation of culture, to be visionary for African societies, in valuing heritage yet opening their arms to the winds of change.

### Introduction

African literature has been a vehicle for examining and conserving the continent's many cultural traditions, with issues of cultural aesthetics and identity construction at its core. African authors have long explored the difficulties of self-definition and cultural continuity in the face of swift social change through their literary works, reflecting their societies (Onwatuogwu, 2024). African literature is intrinsically linked to the socio-cultural settings in which it is produced, serving as a reflection and a critique of the community, as stated by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986).

One of Nigeria's most renowned playwrights, Ahmed Yerima, embodies this heritage in his provocative plays, *Agudua* and *Owiwi*. Yerima's plays explore the intricacies of identity construction in a postcolonial, globalized setting and are anchored in Nigeria's cultural and historical background, especially Yoruba traditions (Oludolapo et al., 2024). The conflicts between modernity and tradition, personal goals and group obligations—difficulties that characterize contemporary African societies—are reflected in these works.

In *Agudua*, Yerima examines the claims of tradition and the community about individuals. In such a world, one can be bothered, especially when Western influence claims or supersedes some of these norms. In a similar way, *Owiwi* allegorizes and symbolically represents the duality of self-and-society struggles by using the fragility of cultural identity in the face of social evolution. Cultural elements such as language, folklore, and rituals were the most potent weapons enlisted by African literature to penetrate deep into African identity, as remembered by scholars such as Ojaide (2004) and Okpewho (1992). Yerima epitomizes this in his own works by very smoothly melding thereof into his narratives.

However, what primarily drives his exploration of identity formation is gender. Female representations of referent tradition show how similar African societies create an intersectional way of negotiating the roles of men and women in cultural preservation, Decatur (Cheriet, 2015) argues, which aligns much of African literature's scrutiny and restructuring of gender roles within the frame of cultural identity.

This paper seeks to discover the cultural aesthetics of Yerima and the way it investigates the construction of identity through a close reading of the two plays *Agudua* and *Owiwi*, within larger issues of African literature. By citing scholars such as Achebe (1975) or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), who pointed to the importance of literature for the conservation of culture and for the navigation of identity in an ever-changing world, this study becomes a part of the critical discourse.

### Cultural Aesthetics in Yerima's *Agudua* and *Owiwi*

In *Agudua* and *Owiwi*, Ahmed Yerima skillfully uses cultural aesthetics to honor African customs and offer a true portrayal of Yoruba ancestry. According to Okpewho (1992), cultural aesthetics include the linguistic, artistic, and ceremonial components that define a community's way of life. Yerima uses these components to create gripping stories that appeal to African audiences and inform readers around the world about the depth of Yoruba culture.

Yerima presents aesthetic culturalities in *Agudua* with traditional songs, proverbs, and rituals reflected in the spiritual and collective identity of the Yoruba people. For example, the symbolic conduct of rituals in the play portrays the recognition of the community in terms of spiritual continuity and ancestry (Adeoye, 2013). Besides creating a lively atmosphere in the theatre, songs and chants become a medium for transferring culture while keeping indigenous knowledge systems lively and accessible. Ojaide (2004) states that incorporating oral traditions into African literature serves the dual purpose of teaching and storing history and values for future generations.

Owiwi adds an equally immersive aesthetic fraternity to African oral literature. Ahmed depicts the dynamics of Yoruba heritage through allegorical storytelling and symbolic dances and chants. The metaphor pervades the narrative structure of "Owiwi": the owl - this serves not only as the title but also as wisdom and mystery and the inevitability of change. Deeply embedding this is Yoruba mythology, making the owl a cultural milestone that roots action within its indigenous landscape (Ojediran et al., 2024). This befits the use of regional symbols and stories to make African literature's cultural identity, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o endorsed (1986). His choice of diction further regulates cultural parameters in the plays of Yerima. The postcolonial dualism of African society is depicted in his use of code-switching between Yoruba and English; he can carry African cultural authenticity while localizing and internationalizing audiences via this duality of language. According to Smith (2008), African epistemologies become significant in a globalized realm; he proves this by explaining how indigenous languages and proverbs in African literature embody forms of resistance even to cultural oblivion.

*Agudua* and *Owiwi* have so much cultural beauty in their symbolic and physical environments. The common areas used by the community, the shrines, and the ancestral sites in *Agudua* are parts of the spiritual interdependence of the Yoruba people. They are part of the story since the places embody the concept that the environment would be laden with spiritual and cultural value and are more than backdrops (Hakima, 2023). Similarly, the forest in *Owiwi* plays its role as the transitional zone where a character defines their identity and adjusts to the newly evolving social ethics in his immediate vicinity. The forest is a metaphorical representation common in most African literature, signifying a period of reflection and transformation where the individual reconciles with his past (Okpewho, 1992).

Yerima's depiction of cultural aesthetics incorporates both performative and textual elements. His plays are created with a deep awareness of theater as a social event in which the audience takes part in the performance of cultural customs (Rantimi, 2013). African communities, where storytelling, music, and dance are essential forms of cultural expression, are in line with this participatory aspect (Achebe, 1975). Yerima makes sure that his plays stay true to their cultural origins while still appealing to modern audiences by resurrecting these theatrical practices.

Yerima's narrative relies heavily on the cultural aesthetics of *Agudua* and *Owiwi*, which are more than just artistic gimmicks. In addition to celebrating Yoruba culture, Yerima highlights its adaptation and tenacity by fusing language, rituals, symbols, and performative components. His writings are prime examples of how African literature can be both a storehouse of cultural memory and a tool for navigating one's identity in a world that is changing quickly.

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## Identity Formation and Conflict

In *Agudua* and *Owiwi* by Ahmed Yerima, identity development is a major issue as characters negotiate cultural, social, and personal aspects. Reflecting larger postcolonial tensions in African nations, these plays eloquently portray the conflict between preserving cultural identity and adjusting to contemporary society pressures. According to Olufunwa (2015), identity is a recurrent theme in the examination of both individual and collective experiences in African literature since it is greatly impacted by historical, cultural, and social factors.

Yerima depicts identity creation in *Agudua* as a dynamic between individual aspirations and social norms. The protagonist, who is caught between the demands of traditional Yoruba society and the ambition for personal achievement, is a prime example of the difficulties that many people in modern-day Africa encounter. According to Ngūgī wa Thiong'o (1986), this struggle stems from the duality of African identity in the postcolonial age, where traditional values frequently battle with the forces of modernization and globalization. Social constraints exacerbate the character's psychological conflict as the community struggles with the attraction of Western ideology and demands adherence to cultural norms. This is a reflection of what Fanon (1967) refers to as the "colonized psyche," in which people are torn between the values of colonial modernity and their ancestral cultural identity.

Similar to this, *Owiwi* emphasizes the importance of tradition in forming both individual and collective identities as it examines identity development as a collective effort. Characters in the play must balance their ancestry with the changing reality of their environment, highlighting the brittleness of cultural traditions in the face of swift societal change (Ojediran et al., 2024). Yerima presents identity as a dynamic process that is impacted by external forces, intergenerational transmission, and historical continuity rather than as a fixed construct. This viewpoint is emphasized by Okpewho (1992), who contends that African literature frequently places personal identification within the broader context of communal belonging, where the "self" is inseparable from the "other."

The study of identity development by Yerima is almost entirely centered on gender. Female characters play an important role in negotiating and preserving cultural identity in both plays. As custodians of tradition in *Agudua*, women defy patriarchal conventions while revealing their firmness and continuity in culture (Adoka, 2021). Similarly, *Owiwi*'s female characters demonstrate how gender determines the processes of identity formation in different African countries by balancing community expectations and personal identity. Such a claim on women in African literature is made by Nnaemeka (2004), asserting that most of the time, they become the carriers of culture dislodged by such greater issues within the society through people's gender-laden experiences.

Most of these segments consider the conflict in identity development, whose further manifestation can be viewed from the space and rituals symbolically used by Yerima. For example, the sights that the protagonists behold in *Agudua*, having to do shrines and places hallow, by and large, indicate the opposition between the spiritual heritage, on the one hand, and the secular goals of modernity, on the other (Ojediran et al., 2024). These areas serve as metaphors for the intersection of the past and present at the crossroads of identity. Similar to this, *Owiwi* characters are able to negotiate their identities through rituals like cleansing ceremonies and symbolic dances, which help them re-establish a connection to their heritage while preparing them for social change. According to Achebe (1975), rituals frequently act as means of resolving internal and external problems in African literature, giving characters a chance to work through the difficulties of self-discovery.

Also highlighted in Yerima's works is the importance of intergenerational dynamics in identity formation. Elders and younger characters in both plays represent opposing perspectives on tradition and advancement and this opposition manifests in the generation's different perceptions of cultural values (Adeoye, 2013). On one end, the younger generation faces challenges from the emergence of modernization, while the older ones who have strong roots in historical customs at times, are against any form of change. Ojaide observes (2004) this as a continual theme of African literature; a theme that is most observed in the storyline where the conflict between holding on to tradition and creating a space for change are core to the dilemma of African identity.

Identity creation in *Agudua* and *Owiwi* is portrayed as a complex process influenced by cultural heritage, societal expectations, and individual goals. A deep examination of the African experience is provided by Yerima's nuanced depiction of these conflicts, which shows how people and communities deal with the difficulties of maintaining their identities in a world that is changing quickly.

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### **The Role of Gender in Identity and Aesthetics**

Gender roles are presented in crucial intervention for negotiation and preservation of the African identity, as demonstrated in *Agudua* and *Owiwi* by Ahmed Yerima, who delves into deeper connections between gender, identity, and cultural aesthetic (Edum, 2020). These works interrogate the old patriarchal frameworks and reimagine them as they emphasize the roles that women play in the development of a sense of identity, community dynamics, and cultural continuity.

In *Agudua*, women are depicted as keepers of cultural heritage, charged with the responsibility of guarding against the onslaught of modernity. Their behaviors in oral storytelling, ritual participation, and transmission of cultural information exemplify their active roles in the maintenance of Yoruba customs (Bankola, 2021). Yerima situates their activities in a broader African context where contributions women make to cultural preservation are often underrepresented or ignored in popular narratives (Nnaemeka, 2004). Yerima, therefore, subverts patriarchal ideas that minimize women through his emphasis and solidification of these contributions as part of the broader African narrative.

Similarly, the women of *Owiwi* stand out as great cultural and moral heroes amid social change. In the play, the women act as the past and the present, negotiating between the generations. Yerima brings African women to prominence through their adaptability and endurance while participating in rituals and group decision-making. These women often carry the burden of keeping cultural identity while renegotiating with societal changes (Adeoye, 2013).

Furthermore, the gender factor examined by Yerima used to shape and reflect earlier identity development within patriarchal cultures. Female characters in *Agudua* usually raise their voices to protest against gender stereotyping in public areas that men dominate. This is one significant step towards women redefining their positions in African civilizations vis-a-vis the breakdown of patriarchal traditions. According to Ojaide (2004), African literature has increasingly taken the stride toward depicting women as engaged participants in societies' cultural and political lives because they are refuting stereotypes and reclaiming agency.

Gendered tensions arise in *Owiwi* as modernity and tradition are negotiated. The younger female characters represent the dual challenge of maintaining cultural identity and pursuing autonomy as they fight to balance their personal goals with those of society. This conflict is a reflection of what Nnaemeka (2004) refers to as "nego-feminism," an African feminist paradigm that prioritizes cooperation and negotiation above conflict when tackling gendered inequality.

He employs metaphors and symbolic imagery in his plays to filter the gender issues in the plays. For instance, the owl, the title character in *Owiwi*, is associated with wisdom and foresight and is usually regarded as the exclusive preserve of female elders in the Yoruba culture (Adeleke, 2022). Thus, this makes women societal keepers of knowledge and mentors during moral and spiritual activities in the community. Such rituals are further complemented by women in *Agudua*, which portray a cycle of existence, the interdependence of self and society, and the topmost focus of the social fabric as the enabler of communal life.

Another expression of the gendered dynamics that is strongly evident in Yerima's stories is language selection. Notably, many of the proverbs and songs, which are very often considered by many African cultures as having powerful female orientation, are presented through female characters trying to express their problems but, more importantly, aims. Oral literature becomes the mode where voices such as women, who are usually marginalized, can be heard and celebrated, as maintained by Okpewho (1992).

Yerima's works are theatrical, which permits the performative subversion of patriarchal conventions. Yerima challenges established hierarchies and presents a reconstructed picture of gender relations in African countries by putting women in prominent, active positions on stage. Smith (2008) asserts

that African theater is a powerful tool for examining and combating gender inequality because of its exceptional ability to enact societal systems through interrogation. Yerima's plays take advantage of this possibility by employing female characters as platforms for social and cultural criticism.

It is through the element of gender in his work that one would understand the perception of identity and cultural aesthetics from an *agudua* and *owiwi* lens. His subtle presentation of women characterizes such duality as change makers and tradition keepers. He also begins redefining the place of gender in his writing against the backdrop of African literature where patriarchal conventions are questioned, and women's contributions to cultural as well as communal life are revealed. Most importantly, it calls for inclusivity and partnership in identity formations and culture preservations.

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### The Intersection of Tradition and Modernity

The conflict between traditional African ideals and the forces of modernization is explored in Ahmed Yerima's *Agudua* and *Owiwi*. The plays' core themes revolve around this intersection, which illustrates how people and communities deal with the difficulties of cultural adaptation and preservation in a world that is changing quickly (Adeoye, 2013). Yerima examines this contradiction through his settings, characters, and storylines, mirroring the larger postcolonial effort to balance inherited customs with the needs of modern society.

*Agudua* depicts tradition as the mainstay in both personal identity and collective identity. This is tied down by institutions that link individuals to ancestors—they may be storytelling, spiritual activities, and holy rites. Such are the mainstay of the protagonist's community (Olaiwola et al., 2021). They are valued by Yerima, who gives them symbolic meaning as instruments of stability, continuity, and modes of cultural expression. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) holds, African traditions are collective memory and identity archives that keep intact the core of people's heritage from outside intrusions.

As much as this, *Owiwi* captures the essence of tradition as a healing touch during attempts to prevent human contact in times of social discontent. The title owl, which in Yoruba mythology is one of the more recurring motifs, thus reminds characters of the perennial importance of knowledge handed over from generation to generation, standing where wisdom meets continuity (Ezenwanebe, 2019). According to Yerima's representation of traditions and public discussions, tradition has effectively formed conventions for the resolution of conflicts while also promoting social cohesion. But the drama also recognizes the dangers in itself of rigid traditionalism, particularly when it comes to new practicalities.

Both plays portray modernity as a disruptive yet unavoidable force, while tradition serves as a basis. The protagonist of *Agudua* struggles to strike a balance between traditional beliefs and contemporary goals, which is a problem that many African communities encounter (Adeoye, 2013). Yerima utilizes this battle to examine the effects of globalization and colonialism, which brought new economic structures, government models, and ideologies that frequently weakened indigenous customs. Fanon (1967) asserts that the colonized subject has a shattered identity because they are caught between the imposed standards of modernity and the cultural values they have received.

Modernity is represented in the younger generation of *Owiwi*, who speculates on the values of some old customs. Their skepticism directs attention to the challenges of adjusting to a world with ever-lowering cultural barriers (Joseph & Bankola, 2023). It is a contradiction against which the characters aspire for social and economic standings that often require utterly contemporary conventions. Yerima's explication of this dichotomy portrays perceived modernity as a possibility for growth and creativity while posing a threat to tradition.

Yerima's plays imply that compromise, as opposed to a categorical rejection of modernity or tradition, is the way to resolve this conflict. The protagonist in *Agudua* demonstrates the possibilities of a peaceful coexistence by figuring out how to combine traditional values with contemporary goals. This strategy is consistent with the idea of "cultural hybridity" as defined by Homi Bhabha (1994), which stresses the blending of cultural components to produce new, flexible forms of identity.

Yerima presents the meeting point of tradition and modernity with a great deal of symbolism. In *Agudua*, modern environments such as schools and cities symbolize the inevitability of progressive advances; shrines and venues for social gatherings, in contrast, epitomize continuity in culture. These areas are deemed to portray a dual loyalty of characters with respect to the past and the future (Perhach, 2024). The owl serves as a very great symbol of equilibrium in *Owiwi*, urging the characters to embrace their ancestry while also embracing the possibility of progress. These symbols will strengthen the argument of the play: flexibility with regard to changing social conditions.

The greater postcolonial battle to balance African history with the pressures of a globalized society is reflected in *Agudua* and *Owiwi*'s intersection of tradition and modernity (Oyewumi, 2023). Yerima promotes a compromise that acknowledges the inevitable nature of change while valuing tradition as a source of identity and wisdom through his complex characters and abundant symbolism. His writings demonstrate how resilient African civilizations are, adapting to the demands of modernity without losing their core characteristics.

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### Conclusion

Ahmed Yerima undertakes a compelling exploration of the man between tradition and modernity in *Agudu* and *Owiwi* with their nuances on the identity formation and cultural viability of African societies. It shows that although there seems to be a continuous strife between them, one is dependent upon the other— that is, tradition could not completely be devoid of modernity and vice versa. For this, Yerima juxtaposes both as interdependent with the thought of a possible but harmonious synthesis that enriches individual and public life.

Yerima's tales reflect tradition as a cultural pillar preserving the knowledge and history of society, illuminating its dynamism and weakness. He argues that both opportunities and challenges are there in modernity, rendering the society to need change with it. The younger generation in Yerima's characters, especially "as portrayed," is adjusting to cultural alienation.

Yerima's stories, which have their roots in postcolonial African literature, highlight how crucial it is to adapt one's cultural identity to the modern world. He supports cultural hybridity and the reclaiming of African identity in the face of globalization, in line with the views of thinkers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Homi Bhabha. Agudua and Owiwi stress how African civilizations can endure by accepting modernity while preserving their distinctive customs.

Yerima adds to the larger conversation on postcolonial transition, cultural aesthetics, and identity formation by analyzing these interconnections. His plays are educational as well as entertaining, providing insightful perspectives on how African nations can successfully negotiate the difficulties of conserving their rich cultural legacy while actively participating in the contemporary world.

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