

RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND IDEOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN AHMED YERIMA'S *ATTAHIRU* AND *ODENIGBO*

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of religious fundamentalism as dramatized in Ahmed Yerima's plays *Attahiru* and *Odenigbo*. These plays foreground how religion is manipulated by characters as a tool for oppression, resistance, and identity formation. Drawing on New Historicism and supported by recent scholarship, this study shows how Yerima presents religious fundamentalism as both a social affliction and a vehicle for political ambition. Through close textual analysis, it is demonstrated that religious dogma, when absolutised, can result in the erosion of communal harmony and personal agency. The study concludes by advocating a reimagining of religion as a pluralistic and human-centred force and suggests further inquiry into religion's evolving role in postcolonial African drama. Also, focusing on immediate environment, the paper further concludes that in a time when religious zealotry and fanaticism have constituted potent challenges in Nigeria and around, Yerima's *Attahiru* and *Odenigbo* encourage audience to ponder on the historical origins of religious conflict and to seek measures that balance faith with reason, tradition with progress, and belief with critical thought.

Keywords: Ideological Conflict, New Historicism, Postcolonial, Religious Absolutism, Religious Fundamentalism, Theological Absolutism

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Introduction

Religious fundamentalism continues to dominate social and political discourses in postcolonial Africa, particularly in Nigeria, where the legacies of colonial imposition, Islamic and Christian missionary activity, and indigenous spirituality intersect in historically and culturally complex ways. The continent's postcolonial experience is deeply entangled with competing religious ideologies, each jostling for dominance, legitimacy, and socio-political relevance. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous and religiously diverse country, this tension has often erupted into sectarian violence, communal unrest, and political manipulation of faith, contributing to national instability and identity crises. As Rosalind Hackett aptly notes, "Religion in Nigeria is never a private affair; it is a public matter, deeply politicised and heavily implicated in the country's socio-political trajectory" (316). Religion has so far and often been used world-wide as a tool for the manipulation of the masses by the political and social elites. In addition to this, in Nigeria, it has been employed for the fragmentation of the fragile harmony that was left behind by the colonial master. Aided by other considerations, such as tribal sentiments, Nigeria of today has been reduced to a theatre of war where blood flows unabated, and wailings are heard across the length and breadth of what ought to be a great and tranquil nation. Here, therefore, efforts have been made to examine the concepts of Religious Fundamentalism and Ideological Conflict, and their applications in Ahmed Yerima's *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru*. The investigation shall be through the lens of Postcolonialism, featuring New Historicism.

Religious Fundamentalism

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Fundamentalism could be said to refer to staunch belief in the reliability of the religious and/or philosophical documents in all matters of religion, faith and philosophy. The acceptance is such that the believer sometimes takes a combative stand. Fundamentalists believe in the superiority

of their philosophical or religious teachings. The assumption of the believer is that their own philosophy or religion is beyond fault, and as such is incontrovertible and must be forced on every other person or people. In Fundamentalism, strict adherence to a set of basic principles is

advocated and amplified. Such principles, which are doctrinal in nature, must not be compromised.

Fundamentalism is most often in response to threat generally occasioned by responses to democratic principles and ideals. It negates liberalism in favour of authoritarianism. According to Nikolaos Dimitriadis et al, "Fundamentalism" is a term which nowadays has predominantly religious connotations (86)," although they move on to assert that "the concept of fundamentalism specifies a social phenomenon, a clear expression of a political, cultural and social totalitarianism,"(86) since there has not been a universally accepted placement of the phenomenon. A very critical position held by Dimitriadis et al is that Religious Fundamentalism is a threat to "the exercise to religious freedom" (86). According to Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman,

... fundamentalism is such a commonly and loosely used term, thrown around like a baseball in the media, backyard arguments, and political arenas. Sometimes the term fundamentalist is used to describe any group that takes religion seriously or that views religion's role in public life to be greater than the labeller would wish it to be. (128)

This attests to the fluidity of the concept with respect to its definition. This state of fluidity could be anchored on the reliability of the phenomenon on the spiritual and deified authority, denying any form of interference by "mere" mortal. According to Rik Peels,

... religious fundamentalism is a communal mind-set steeped in a revealed Word-vision, corroborated by a definitive ethical system of world-ways for human living, and calibrated by an aggressive movement that labours towards the goal that such a global order will govern the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious lives of all human beings. (738)

One principal characteristic of religious fundamentalism that is discernible is that it operates on the principle of exclusion. According to Keith Suter,

Religious fundamentalism defines people by what divides them. It focuses on the differences in humankind, rather than what unites them. It is often partly motivated by a form of xenophobia....

But the chain of causation is not quite clear; there may be other motives involved, which enable leaders to exploit the fear of globalization for their own purposes, (3)

and according to Joseph Fernando “Religious fundamentalism entails “a denial of diversity, plurality, multiplicity, history and culture. Religious fundamentalism rejects an ethics of recognition. An ethics of recognition calls for the perception of other groups and their right to exist” (82). The exclusion discussed above is usually on the principles as provided by the canons of the faith and as perceived and interpreted by the fundamentalist. According to Orav, “Religious fundamentalism, [is] a belief in an absolute religious ideology with no tolerance for differing interpretations” (1).

Religious fundamentalism, in its present fiery fashion, is one of the ideologies that surfaces during the opening phase of the 20th century. Discussing the emergence of Religious fundamentalism, Krishna Kumar avers thus:

Religious fundamentalism has appeared at the turn of the century as a prominent tendency, a habit of mind found within religious communities and paradigmatically embodied in certain representative individuals and movements. It manifests itself as a strategy by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive group identity. Feeling this identity to be at risk in the contemporary era, the believers fortify it by selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past. (17)

Fundamentalism is generally adjudged a religious phenomenon birthed in the 20th century in North America by groups of Presbyterians and Baptists belonging to the World's Christian Fundamentals Association.

The enduring nature of religious conflict in Nigeria can be traced back to colonial policies that reified ethnic and religious divisions. The British colonial administration, through its policy of indirect rule, reinforced the Islamic institutions of the Northern emirates while encouraging Christian missionary activities in the South. This dual policy not only deepened regional religious divides but also ensured that religion became entangled with political and cultural identity. The result, as Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton contend, was a “tripartite heritage of religious discord, ethnic competition, and colonial subjugation” (112). This inherited complexity has shaped the way contemporary Nigerian writers engage with religion in their works, especially in portraying religious fundamentalism as both a cause and a symptom of national crises. Religious conflicts in Nigeria are not merely about theology; they are deeply rooted in socio-economic, political, and historical inequalities. The emergence of extremist groups like

Boko Haram in the North-East, the persistence of ethno-religious riots in Kaduna, Jos, and Kano, and the growing radicalisation of religious discourse across the country attest to the dangers of uncritical religious absolutism. These developments have inspired many Nigerian writers to explore the interface between religion and power, particularly the ways in which religion is manipulated to sustain hierarchical structures, suppress dissent, and mobilise collective violence.

The Nigerian literary tradition has long been interested in examining the socio-political implications of religious ideologies. Playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, and Femi Osofisan have variously critiqued the misuse of religion for personal or political gain. In Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1964), for example, the character Eman is sacrificed to appease communal fears, revealing how religious rituals can be co-opted as tools of scapegoating and social control. Soyinka's work often critiques dogmatic belief systems and champions humanism over institutionalised religion. As Wright observes, “Soyinka situates the tragic consequences of religious orthodoxy within larger questions of freedom, responsibility, and the human condition” (88).

Similarly, Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (1971) reinterprets Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* within a Yoruba cosmological framework, thereby exploring the tension between divine will and human agency. The play interrogates how oracles and religious pronouncements shape communal destiny and individual identity, often with tragic consequences. Although the play is not strictly about fundamentalism, it lays bare the psychological and social weight of religious authority in African societies.

Femi Osofisan, another major voice in Nigerian drama, has repeatedly challenged religious and cultural dogmas. His play *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982) is a direct response to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, offering a feminist and anti-elitist critique of sacrificial ideologies. Osofisan's works advocate for rationalism, secularism, and democratic participation as antidotes to religious and political oppression. According to Adeoti, "Osofisan's dramaturgy is informed by a radical humanist philosophy that seeks to dismantle the mystification of power, especially that legitimated through religious tradition" (59)

Nigerian novelists, too, have contributed significantly to this discourse. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) explores religious authoritarianism through the character of Eugene Achike, a devout Catholic whose piety justifies emotional and physical abuse of his family. The novel critiques the blind acceptance of Western religious orthodoxy at the expense of indigenous values and family

cohesion. Likewise, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) touches on the divisive role of religion in Nigeria's patriarchal society, highlighting how women's bodies and choices are policed through religious norms. Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) and Elnathan John's *Born on a Tuesday* (2015) delve into the complexities of Islamic fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria. John, in particular, offers an intimate portrait of a young boy's indoctrination into jihadist ideology, revealing how economic marginalisation, poor education, and charismatic religious leaders combine to produce extremist worldviews. These novels underscore the human cost of fundamentalist ideologies and the failures of both religious and secular institutions in preventing radicalisation.

Within this rich literary tradition, Ahmed Yerima's dramaturgy stands out for its historical depth, cultural specificity, and incisive critique of religious absolutism. Yerima, a prolific playwright

and former director of the Nigerian National Theatre, is renowned for blending historical material with contemporary concerns to dramatize the intersection of power, belief, and identity. His plays often draw on real historical figures and events, allowing him to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of religious and political authority in postcolonial Nigeria. Yerima's engagement with religious fundamentalism is particularly visible in *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru*, two plays that examine how religious belief is manipulated by elites to consolidate power or resist oppression. This paper, drawing from a New Historicist perspective and recent critical literature, examines how these plays dramatize the manipulation of religion for personal gain and socio-political influence.

Theoretical Framework: New Historicism and Marxism

New Historicism, first formally articulated by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s, remains a pivotal framework for the interpretation of literature as historically situated discourse. It challenges the formalist tradition of treating literary texts as self-contained artefacts and insists instead on reading them in relation to the socio-political, economic, and ideological circumstances that shaped their production and reception (Greenblatt 3). Central to this approach is the view that literature does not merely reflect history but actively participates in the shaping of historical consciousness and the negotiation of power.

Greenblatt's seminal work, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), advanced the idea that literary works are embedded within the power structures and discursive regimes of their time. For Greenblatt, texts are

not autonomous creations but are part of a network of cultural practices and political tensions. In this regard, the plays of Ahmed Yerima—particularly *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru*—can be read not only as artistic expressions but as cultural artefacts deeply engaged with Nigeria's colonial legacy, religious multiplicity, and contemporary struggles with religious fundamentalism. Another leading figure in New Historicism is Louis Montrose, who coined the phrase “the

historicity of texts and the textuality of history” to emphasise the reciprocal relationship between literature and history (Montrose 20).

One of the most celebrated strengths of New Historicism is its insistence on the interconnectedness of literature and history. It foregrounds the ideological functions of texts and how they either reinforce or resist dominant cultural narratives. This is especially relevant for postcolonial societies like Nigeria, where literature often serves as a medium for contesting colonial historiography and reasserting indigenous voices. New Historicism also democratises textual interpretation by valuing non-literary texts—such as archival documents, religious treatises, and colonial reports—as equally important sources for contextual analysis. Furthermore, the theory's reliance on intertextuality enables richer, more layered readings of literary works. It allows scholars to excavate how canonical and non-canonical texts interact within a broader socio-political matrix. This feature makes New Historicism especially well-suited to analysing historical drama, such as *Yerima's*, where text and context are tightly interwoven. Despite its analytical utility, New Historicism has attracted significant criticism. A primary concern is its tendency toward ideological determinism - that is, its presumption that texts are primarily the products of hegemonic power structures, often neglecting individual authorial agency and aesthetic value. As Veesser points out, New Historicists sometimes “reduce literature to the mere reflection of power” (Montrose 9), thus sidelining its imaginative, subversive, or emancipatory capacities.

Another criticism concerns the theory’s presentism - the projection of contemporary concerns onto historical texts. Critics argue that by interpreting past works through the lens of modern ideologies, New Historicists risk distorting historical realities (Belsey 118). Furthermore, while claiming to democratise literary criticism, some detractors contend that the theory tends to focus disproportionately on elite discourse, thereby replicating the very power structures it seeks to expose.

One challenge facing New Historicism is the tendency to prioritise cultural context over literary merit. The consequence of this is the propensity of the approach to overlook the aesthetic distinctiveness of texts in favour of sociological examination. This may inadvertently weaken the literary capacity of the text in shaping historical awareness.

Despite these limitations, New Historicism remains a fitting framework for this study. Yerima's plays are deeply enmeshed in Nigeria's socio-political and religious history, making them ripe for contextual exploration. In a bid to clinically interrogate socio-political situations projected in the texts, in way that it enthrones an ideal society for all, the study equally employs the Marxist theory. Marxism is a political and social theory that argues that social change comes about through economic class struggle. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed the theory in the 19th century. The theory views literary constructs as forms of social-consciousness which reflect and refract the social struggles in society. It also perceives literature as a 'weapon' in the ideological contests between the antagonistic classes in society. It practically unravels the revolutionary inclination inherent in literature. Eagleton in his book, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), puts this graphically:

Literary works are not mysteriously inspired or explicable simply in terms of their authors' psychology. They are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world, which is the 'social mentality' or ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way those class relation are experienced, legitimized and perpetuated. Moreover, men are not free to choose their social relations; they are constrained into them by material necessity-by the nature and shape of development of their mode of economic production (p.6)

The above clearly shows that Marxism has a sociological underpinning which reveals the class status and interest of its author and social consciousness manifest in society. The two texts selected for this study aptly illustrate the Marxist ideologies.

While *Odenigbo* interrogates how traditional religion can be manipulated to reinforce autocratic power, *Attahiru* examines how Islamic belief systems were mobilised in resistance to British colonialism. These themes are inseparable from their historical and ideological contexts -

colonial encounter, religious pluralism, and the crises of national identity - which New Historicism and Marxism are uniquely equipped to interrogate. Moreover, the theory's interdisciplinary nature allows for the incorporation of historical, anthropological, and political perspectives - essential for a comprehensive understanding of Yerima's dramaturgy. Given that Nigerian literature is often politically charged and context-driven, New Historicism and Marxism offer a robust analytic lens through which we can explore how literary texts engage with, and critique their socio-political milieus. Thus, in applying New Historicism and Marxism to this study, the aim is not to reduce literature to historical artefact but to illuminate the dynamic interplay between text and context, belief and power, tradition and transformation.

Religious Manipulation and Resistance in *Odenigbo*

In *Odenigbo*, Ahmed Yerima offers a Marxist critique of religious institutions by exposing how religion can be manipulated as an instrument of class oppression and political control. The play's central antagonist, Ubanta, the Chief Priest, exemplifies the opportunistic elite who weaponise spirituality to sustain their hegemony. By situating the action within the precolonial Obodoije kingdom, Yerima evokes a socio-political structure where power is supposedly mediated by the gods, but which in reality is controlled by unscrupulous men who cloak ambition in sacred authority. Ubanta's exploitation of his religious office to unseat Ezeidu, the king, and ascend the throne is a textbook case of ideological manipulation, resonating strongly with Karl Marx's assertion that "religion is the opium of the people".

Ubanta's manipulation of divine authority to command the king's ritual suicide illustrates how religious structures serve the interests of the ruling class. His declaration – "Odenigbo has a message for you... the days of Ezeidu are over... follow me to the shrine where you shall dance on the tethering rope with death" - is not a divine revelation but a calculated political move (Yerima 46–47). The god Odenigbo, in this context, becomes a symbolic mask worn by the elite to instil fear and submission. This appropriation of religion to preserve class dominance aligns with the Marxist critique of ideology, in which dominant ideas - here, religious decrees - are portrayed as universal truths while concealing the material interests of the elite (Eagleton 9).

Yerima's characterisation of Ubanta echoes what Louis Althusser terms the "Ideological State Apparatus," where institutions such as religion perpetuate conditions of subjugation by

presenting exploitation as divine will (Althusser 85). Ubanta's unilateral control over the oracle and religious rites gives him the power to dictate political succession, thus fusing spiritual and temporal authority in a manner that favours elite consolidation. His rhetoric, cloaked in spiritual absolutism, suppresses dissent

and renders even the king powerless. Ezeidu's passivity - motivated by fear of divine wrath - further illustrates how ideology functions through internalisation, as subjects come to police themselves under the illusion of divine observance.

However, Yerima subverts this ideological apparatus through Ukatu and Chika, who embody resistance against religious tyranny. Ukatu's early suspicion - "I fear Ubanta may want to become the Eze" - signals her ideological awakening and forms the basis for the revolutionary arc of the play (Yerima 15). Her decision to lead a rebellion, desecrate the shrine, and destroy Ubanta dramatizes Marx's call for the "ruthless criticism of all that exists." Chika's anguished realisation that "Odenigbo has lied" marks a crucial moment of class consciousness, wherein the masses begin to see through the illusions that bind them (Yerima 39).

This Marxist trajectory - false consciousness, ideological unmasking, and revolutionary action - forms the structural backbone of the play. As Odugbemi argues, "Yerima's dramaturgy often critiques systems of power that disguise exploitation in spiritual or cultural legitimacy" (36). In *Odenigbo*, the shrine becomes a metaphor for the state: once venerated but now corrupt and deserving of destruction. The popular revolt that follows is thus not only a political reordering but a symbolic reclaiming of agency by the oppressed.

Furthermore, Yerima's treatment of the common people's shifting loyalty - from blind obedience to radical rejection - demonstrates literature's capacity to enact what Bertolt Brecht describes as the "Verfremdungseffekt" or alienation effect, which forces audiences to critically examine familiar ideologies (Brecht 91). The masses' initial reverence for Odenigbo, followed by their disillusionment, challenges the sacrosanct aura of religious authority and urges collective action.

As Njoku notes, “contemporary Nigerian drama, especially in Yerima’s hands, often interrogates the complicity of religion in the perpetuation of authoritarianism” (213).

Thus, *Odenigbo* is not merely a play about divine betrayal or political ambition. It is a radical call to demystify religious orthodoxy and expose its function as a tool of class domination.

Yerima stages a proletarian awakening through the character arcs of Ukatu and Chika, suggesting that liberation lies in the rejection of false gods and the courage to reclaim self-determination. In doing so, the play serves as a

compelling literary intervention in contemporary debates about religion, power, and emancipation in postcolonial African society.

Religious Fundamentalism and Martyrdom in *Attahiru*

In *Attahiru*, Ahmed Yerima pivots the discourse on religious fundamentalism from internal clerical manipulation - as seen in *Odenigbo* - to external resistance against colonial domination. Yerima draws upon a real historical figure, Sultan Muhammadu Attahiru I, the twelfth and final independent Caliph of the Sokoto Caliphate, to explore the tensions between colonial power and Islamic theocracy in early 20th-century Nigeria. Attahiru is presented not only as a devout Muslim leader but also as a spiritual figure who frames his resistance to British imperialism as a religious obligation, a Jihad. Yerima’s dramatization positions the Caliph as both a political actor and a martyr, revealing the paradoxical potency and limitation of religious absolutism in moments of national crisis.

From his very first speech following his ascension to the Caliphate, Attahiru establishes his leadership on a foundation of divine sanction: “Let us pray for the growth of our lives and position in the Islamic world” (21). This invocation sets the tone for his reign and his response to colonial encroachment. The personal is rendered political, and the political is sanctified through religion. Yerima makes clear that Attahiru sees no distinction between his roles as political leader

and spiritual guardian - a fusion that becomes central to his approach to governance and resistance.

The British, personified through the Colonial Administrator Frederick Lugard, extend a diplomatic overture by proposing indirect rule that would nominally preserve Islamic institutions while consolidating colonial control. Yerima portrays Lugard as rational and pragmatic, aiming to avoid outright conflict. However, Attahiru refuses these overtures on doctrinal grounds. His rhetorical question - "Can there be friendship between an infidel and a believer?" (33) - is laden with theological finality. The rejection of diplomacy in favour of a holy war transforms what is essentially a political confrontation into a religious crusade. In so doing, Attahiru blurs the line between divine will and national strategy, mirroring what Eagleton describes as the fusion of "theological ideology and social practice" (115).

Attahiru's absolutist stance galvanises the population. Thousands of followers accompany him on his hijra - a spiritual migration framed as a holy duty in anticipation of the Mahdi. This act

evokes religious martyrdom and messianic anticipation, making Attahiru a rallying point for anti-colonial sentiment. However, Yerima's characterisation is far from hagiographic. Although the Caliph's motivations are sincere, they are depicted as strategically flawed. His refusal to adapt, negotiate, or reconsider the viability of militarised resistance against a technologically superior British force leads ultimately to catastrophe.

His final act of martyrdom - screaming "Allahu-akbar!" (63), as he falls in battle - cements his position as a symbol of religious fidelity and sacrifice. Yet, as Falola argues, this moment also "signalled a transition in the nature of Islamic resistance in Nigeria, from militant defiance to institutional accommodation" (Falola 284). In other words, Attahiru's death marked not only the end of an era but also the beginning of a new, more nuanced engagement between Islam and colonial power, one grounded in negotiation rather than absolutism.

Yerima's critique is therefore layered. While he honours Attahiru's courage and integrity, he also critiques the rigidity of religious leadership that refuses to engage with political complexity. The dramatist does not vilify religion per se but interrogates its fundamentalist application when it

becomes blind to context and consequence. As Njoku argues, “Yerima’s historical drama exposes how religious idealism, when un-tempered by realism, can lead to unnecessary sacrifice and communal disillusionment” (217). Thus, *Attahiru* becomes a cautionary tale about the limits of martyrdom, and the dangers of religious absolutism in an era demanding diplomatic tact and ideological flexibility. Yerima urges a rethinking of leadership - one that honours faith without succumbing to its most inflexible dictates. In a contemporary Nigerian context, where religious extremism continues to threaten national unity, *Attahiru* remains a potent exploration of faith, power, and resistance.

The Dualistic Nature of Religious Ideology: A Comparative Analysis

A comparative reading of Ahmed Yerima’s *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru* reveals a profound exploration of the dualistic nature of religious ideology - its potential to both oppress and liberate. Across these two plays, religion emerges not as a neutral or purely spiritual force, but as a deeply politicised institution that reflects and reinforces historical tensions, socio-political

ambitions, and class struggles. Drawing from the twin lenses of New Historicism and Marxism, this study finds that Yerima’s dramaturgy critically engages with the ideological manipulations of religion in specific historical moments of Nigerian society.

In *Odenigbo*, Ubanta’s manipulation of spiritual authority illustrates the Marxist notion of religion as an instrument of class domination. As the Chief Priest, he exploits the people's fear of the gods to orchestrate a political coup against the king, thereby using divine pronouncements to legitimise personal ambition. This aligns with Althusser’s concept of the Ideological State Apparatus, where religious institutions perpetuate the dominant ideology under the guise of moral or divine order. In this context, religion serves as a tool of the elite to preserve hierarchical control. Yerima’s portrayal reflects the New Historicist concern with how texts are embedded in power relations and how institutions shape - and are shaped by - historical and cultural forces.

Conversely, in *Attahiru*, religion is not corrupted from within, but idealised and weaponised in the face of foreign invasion. Sultan Attahiru I is portrayed as a devout Muslim whose resistance against British imperialism is framed as a jihad. While noble in intention, his rejection of diplomatic negotiation in favour of absolute theological resistance becomes strategically self-defeating. Through this, Yerima critiques the inflexibility of religious leadership that fails to accommodate historical change. As New Historicism emphasises, the play must be read in relation to the colonial context in which it is set - a time when Islamic leadership was grappling with the political disruptions of imperial conquest.

Ukatu in *Odenigbo* and Attahiru in *Attahiru* represent two divergent responses to religious conflict. Ukatu adopts a secular and revolutionary stance, recognising religion's complicity in oppression and leading a popular revolt. Her actions echo Marx's call for the oppressed to reject ideological illusions and take control of their destiny. In contrast, Attahiru's martyrdom, though honourable, is bound by theological absolutism and results in communal loss. As Bukola Adeyemi Oyeniyi notes, Nigerian drama frequently interrogates the "instrumentalization of religion in the service of hegemonic interests." This is a theme which Yerima foregrounds in both texts. Together, these findings suggest an urgent need to rethink religious authority through pluralistic, adaptive, and context-sensitive lenses. Yerima's plays do not reject religion

wholesale, but they challenge its uncritical application - whether used to sustain tyranny or resist domination.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the theme of religious fundamentalism in Ahmed Yerima's *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru*, using New Historicism and Marxism as its theoretical lenses. Through a comparative textual analysis, it has demonstrated how Yerima engages with religion not as a static or sacred institution, but as a dynamic and often contested site of ideological negotiation, power struggle, and historical transformation.

In *Odenigbo*, religion is portrayed as a corruptible institution manipulated by an ambitious clerical elite to suppress dissent and usurp political power. The character of Ubanta reveals how religious dogma, when unchallenged, becomes a vehicle for tyranny. Conversely, in *Attahiru*, religious devotion is presented as a response to foreign domination. Sultan Attahiru I's spiritual absolutism inspires resistance, but it also leads to strategic failure due to his unwillingness to adapt to new historical realities. These contrasting portrayals reveal religion's dual capacity to both liberate and enslave, depending on who wields it and to what end.

Aligned with New Historicist principles, Yerima's plays underscore that religious ideologies are not ahistorical or divine absolutes but are instead shaped by and embedded within specific cultural, political, and historical contexts. At the same time, the Marxist critique in both plays exposes religion's potential as a tool of class oppression, particularly when it legitimises the status quo or masks economic and political interests.

Ultimately, Yerima does not advocate for the abolition of religion, but for a critical engagement with its structures and claims to authority. His dramatic vision urges contemporary Nigerian society to question religious orthodoxy, to resist its exploitation by political actors, and to embrace pluralism, dialogue, and reform. By presenting both secular resistance and religious martyrdom, Yerima calls for a reimagining of religious leadership - one grounded in justice, adaptability, and collective well-being. In a time where religious extremism and intolerance

remain potent challenges in Nigeria and beyond, Yerima's *Odenigbo* and *Attahiru* remain powerfully relevant. They encourage audience to reflect on the historical roots of religious conflict and to seek paths that balance faith with reason, tradition with progress, and belief with critical thought.

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