Religion, Security and Politics in Northern Nigeria: A Public Intellectual Reading of Ahmed Yerima's *Pari*

Albert Olatunde Oloruntoba
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6173-1761
University of Pretoria, South Africa
albertolatunde@gmail.com

Abstract

Nigeria boasts of some of the world's biggest worship centres, as the vast majority of its population attend religious services and pray regularly. However, this nation remains one of the most religiously divisive nations across the world. Critical and literary studies have shown the role of religion in the creation and aggravation of conflict in this nation. This article analyses the ways in which Ahmed Yerima's play, *Pari* (2016), examines this burning subject of religious violence in Nigeria, and most specifically, northern Nigeria. Classifying this contemporary playwright as an active public intellectual, this article engages in a close reading of how the play speaks to the controversial subject of religion. The latter part of the article explores *Pari*'s handling of the subject of conflict resolution, positing that confession, remorse, and forgiveness are important requirements if lasting peace is to be restored after any crisis. These subjects are constructed around the 2014 abduction of the 275 Chibok schoolgirls in northeastern Nigeria by the Islamic terror group, Boko Haram.

Keywords: public intellectual; *Pari*; atheism; security; God; Boko Haram; *aljana*; Ahmed Yerima; reconciliation

The Public Intellectual

Ahmed Yerima engages in public activities and debates through the insights of his many social realist plays. The themes of his writings are generated from the public space and are immediately put back to the public with the specific aim of influencing this public by ways of raising various questions and recommending possible resolutions. By so doing, he assumes the status of a public intellectual and social critic. In *Writers as Public Intellectuals* (2016, 3), Odile Heynders describes the public intellectual as someone who

> intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a controversial and committed and sometimes compromised stance from a sideline position. He has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion, and offers alternative scenarios regarding topics of political, social, and ethical nature.

Heynders (2016) also asserts that the writer, by the virtue of his/her writing and engagement with public issues, is a public intellectual. Through their ideas, which entail almost the entirety of the product that they "sell" to the public, public intellectuals work on the minds and consciousness of the people, thereby influencing them to behave in certain ways. Their ability to influence the public is pointed out by Edward Said (1996, 10–11), who argued that "there has been no revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely there has been no major counterrevolutionary movement without intellectuals." Intellectuals flourish most especially when they perceive that a group of people are being politically, socially, religiously, and economically misled or oppressed. They, therefore, stand against ideas that are presumed to be harmful to the masses. Said (1996, 184) puts it this way:

> [T]he role of the intellectual is that of testifying: he/she testifies against the misuses of history or against the injustices that befall the oppressed. I should add that he/she must be a rebel against power and against prevailing ideas. The intellectual must raise doubts about the illusions of the status quo, all that is tyrannical in society, especially for the sake of the deprived and the oppressed.

These are the kinds of public intellectuals that the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1971) calls "organic intellectuals," and that Michel Foucault (1979) terms "universal intellectuals," while Said (1996) calls them "amateur intellectuals." The common feature of these intellectuals is their concern for the well-being of the masses—the oppressed and suppressed minority/majority—and their desire to stand against hegemonic authority by speaking truth to power, unlike the traditional intellectual, modern intellectual, and professional intellectual, respectively, who mostly represent the continuity of hegemonic political and social systems. This allows for public intellectuals to write and speak against governments, institutions, and groups or individuals whose ideologies they believe are not in the interest of the masses. In addition, public intellectuals could come from any field of study; ultimately, they use their voice and ideas to get the attention of the masses, their colleagues, and those in power. They use various media such as the arts, journalism, critical writings, public

speaking, activism, and recently, the new media of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and similar platforms to reach their publics.

This article focuses on a prolific Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima, who can be described as a "public intellectual with a certain artistic prestige and writing career, who tries to convince an audience beyond his main readers or followers, and in doing so deliberately uses various media platforms, styles and genres" (Heynders 2016, 7). Writing about the writer/artist and the public intellectual, Carol Becker (1997, 18) posits that the artist/writer "may well be understood as a public intellectual who believes in and takes seriously the importance of the public space." As such an artist, Yerima uses the serious subject of religion to reach out to the minds of the masses in his play *Pari* (2016). As a prolific and influential playwright and theatre maker, Yerima is a public intellectual whose status within the literary, theatrical, and public spaces in Nigeria has become prominent in recent years. Following in the footsteps of earlier writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Zulu Sofola, classified as first-generation writers, and the likes of Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi and Wale Ogunyemi, classified as the second generation of writers (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005), Yerima continues to perform his expected role as a writer by re-educating the masses on issues of historical and contemporary significance. In *The Novelist as Teacher* (1965, 45), Achebe demands that African writers should not "expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration … from complex years of denigration and self-abasement." Yerima's *Pari* re-educates the Nigerian public, especially those who have allowed foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam to continue to cause division amongst them, to redefine themselves in relation to foreign religions. In its capacity as an instrument of the state and a weapon in the hands of politicians, religion has become an agent of repression of freedom and a persistent instigator of gratuitous animosity.

In this religion-conscious nation, most of the people believe that everything and every human action has a supernatural or spiritual connotation. Scholars such as Oluduro (2010), and Çancı and Odukoya (2016) have reported that the average Nigerian is deeply religious. Writing specifically about the Yoruba people, Wole Soyinka (1976, xxi) points out that "essentially everything according to the Yoruba thought is imbued with a spirit." In a similar vein, this time focusing on the association of spiritual relevance to things as natural as a piece of land, Patrick Nmah (2011) points out that the Igbo people consider land ownership as a type of link between the living, the dead and the unborn.

Due to this belief system, extreme religious fanatics take it upon themselves to defend their God, sometimes through violence, against what they consider as blasphemous. According to Kamal-deen Olawale Sulaiman in "Religious Violence in Contemporary Nigeria: Implications and Options for Peace and Stability Order" (2016), in the year 2000 alone, from 21 to 22 February, an estimated 3,000 people lost their lives in a clash between Muslims and Christians in Kaduna, the capital of Kaduna State. There was another attack in Aba, Abia State, where about 450 people lost their lives. Sulaiman (2016) further reports that, from 22 to 23 May 2000, Kaduna city witnessed another

clash between Muslims and Christians, which resulted in the death of about 300 people. In the year 2001, the religious clash between Muslims and Christians in the Tafawa Balewa local government area of Bauchi State, which began on 19 June and ended on 4 July, claimed the lives of 100 persons (Sulaiman 2016). Idahosa Osaretin and Emmanuel Akov (2013) also give a record of ethno-religious crises between 1999 and 2012 in Plateau State. Dozens of other ethno-religious crises have happened in Nigeria in the last 10 years that have resulted in the loss of lives and properties.

The above statistics, which do not include religious crises after the year 2001, are scanty details of incidents that are near impossible to record accurately. The Boko Haram insurgency, which started in the early 2000s, has aggravated this concern. The Islamic group was founded by Muhammed Yusuf in 2002 as an Islamic organisation with the ideology of the Salafi movement, a branch of Sunni Islam, with the initial aim of establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state in the northern part of Nigeria, and then in the entire nation. Ahmed Murtada (2012, 4) explains in the book *The Boko Haram: Its Beginning, Principles and Actions in Nigeria*, the term "Boko Haram" can be translated as a "Western system of education is haram [forbidden]." To perpetuate this belief, therefore, extremists have constantly employed the use of violence and force.

Since the start of the millennium, the activities of Boko Haram have taken more human lives than any other form of violent activities in Nigeria. Pisa and Hume (2015) report that since 2009, Boko Haram has killed tens of thousands and displaced 2.3 million people from their homes and that the group was at one time the world's deadliest terror group. John Campbell and Asch Harwood (2018, 2) also report that within a period of seven years, "from June 2011 through June 2018, the NST [Nigeria Security Tracker] documented 2,021 incidents involving Boko Haram, in which 37,530 people were killed." Reporting the loss of lives in Borno State alone, the governor of the state, Kashim Shettima, according to a report by Sani Tukur published on *Premium Times* on 17 February 2017, reported that "the Boko Haram insurgency has led to deaths of almost 100,000 persons … over the years" (Shettima in Tukur 2017). These records are merely sectional, representing only certain places and periods, as it is almost impossible to gather accurate figures of the number of deaths all over the country since 2000. However, the available scanty records prove that the activities of this group have taken more lives than records could accurately show.

One of the many atrocities carried out by this sect is the now infamous abduction of 275 secondary school girls from Chibok on 14 April 2014. The abduction, rape and killing of some of these girls garnered not only local commentaries and condemnations but international criticism of the government's inefficiency in preventing it, retrieving the girls, and returning them to their parents. Reactions from the then United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, UNICEF, protests in cities such as London and Los Angeles, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, and many other human rights campaigns also brought global attention to the abduction. Following this incident, various books, both fictional and non-fictional, have been published, including the following: Mike

Smith's *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (2015), Virginia Comolli's *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (2015), Helon Habila's non-fiction, *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria* (2016), and Isha Sesay's *Beneath the Tamarind Tree: A Story of Courage, Family, and the Lost Schoolgirls of Boko Haram* (2019). In *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria* (2018), edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2018, 167) suggests that Boko Haram gained its converts from people who "needed peace of mind" from the political, economic, and religious instability ravaging the country.

However, most of the literary works written about this incident have been in the genres of prose and poetry. Some examples include the following: James Tar Tsaaior's anthology of poems, *I Am Chibok: #BringBackOurGirls* (2017), Wole Oguntokun's *The Chibok Girls: Our Story* (2019), performed at the CrossCurrents Festival in Washington, DC, where performers re-enacted monologues and scenes collected from interviews with survivors, and Wole Soyinka's poem, *A Humanist's Ode for Chibok, Leah* (2019), a part of which pays tribute to the abducted Chibok girls as well as to Leah Sharibu, one of the victims of the 110 schoolgirls kidnapped in Dapchi, Yobe State in February 2018. Leah's release is now dependent on her willingness to renounce her religion, Christianity. Leah has refused to renounce Christianity and has remained under the custody of the abductors. Recent rumours have it that she has been married off to one of the Boko Haram members with whom she now has a child. In the later part of Soyinka's poem, he suggests that since the Boko Haram group is willing to negotiate with the government of the nation, it would save the nation a lot of trouble if two of the past Nigerian presidents, Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan, with the addition of the current president, Muhammadu Buhari, under whose leaderships Boko Haram has thrived, were given to Boko Haram in exchange for Leah and the other girls.

These literary works have focused almost exclusively on the abduction incident. However, Yerima's *Pari* (2016) remains one of the few, if there are any other, published plays to focus on the abduction incident and its aftermath. Having won the Nigeria Prize for Literature in 2006 for his play *Hard Ground*, with some of his plays as the first and second runners-up in the following years, Yerima is not only known for his proficiency in writing but also for his desire to engage complex and contentious political and sociocultural subjects. It is no surprise then that once again he has adapted a popular incident to speak to the nation about its failings, just as he did with many other of his social realist plays such as *The Sisters* (2001) and *Little Drops* (2011). In dealing with topics such as security, religion, and politics, which Toyin Falola (1998, 1) refers to as "bedfellows," the play *Pari* suggests that there might be no heaven or hell anywhere but where humans live: the earth. Considering this, using the burning subject of insecurity and its intersection with Boko Haram, this article analyses the themes of the (ir)relevance of God, the effect of religion on security, and the dynamics of the Nigerian political landscape and looks at how public intellectual Yerima handles them. The later

part of the article is equally important as it explores Yerima's resolution for reconciliation and peace.

Pari was published in 2016, two years after the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls. Although with a specific focus on the abduction of the schoolgirls, the play also touches on other victims of Boko Haram: "People, dressed for church or parties … whose bodies were suddenly found laid still, and charred … people utterly unprepared for death" (Yerima 2016, 6). These are ordinary people who suddenly become victims of religious violence as they grapple with their daily lives. Set in the northeastern part of Nigeria, a part of the nation that has suffered most of the impact of Boko Haram's activities, the play is centred on the pain and anguish of a mother—Ama—whose daughter Pari and many other girls were abducted by Boko Haram militias from a secondary school. The play spotlights the pain of a family whose child is one of the victims. By doing this, Yerima uses this family as a synecdoche for other families and the entirety of the nation as people continually living under the constant threat of Boko Haram.

The play opens at Ama's house. She is sitting on a mat and praying in the manner of a Muslim even though she is a Christian. Her husband, Tada, who is a church deacon, is bemused by this, but Ama is not moved. She argues that the God of the Muslims is the superior God since he could oversee his people—Boko Haram—to successfully kidnap the girls. After over two years, the abducted Pari returns home after being raped, impregnated, and made a mother of a set of twins, one of whom—the female of the children—was murdered by herself to prevent the child from suffering similar experiences as hers when she grows up. With a desire for a new life and willingness to father his child, her rapist and a member of the Boko Haram group, Ibrahim, follows Pari, leaving the forest where he lived with the abducted girls and many other Boko Haram members. Ibrahim searches and locates Pari's house where he bravely enters. After a long argument, Pari's parents allow Pari and Ibrahim to live as a couple, but decide that they must be moved to a different village for Ibrahim's safety. Like the perspectives presented by Habila's, Sesay's and Soyinka's books, Yerima's play links the problem of insecurity and religious extremism with political failure and economic despair in the country. By adapting the actual incident to a dramatic form, Yerima speaks of and to the society in his capacity as a public intellectual.

The Role of Fiction: Speaking of and to the Nation in *Pari*

According to Heynders (2016, 161–63), fiction

> provide[s] alternative stories and points of view. Its politics … leads inevitably to the political conjuncture outside fiction, and that means that politics and literature are inextricably linked. … [T]he roles of literary writer and public intellectual are intricately connected, since politics permeates the novel, and literary characters can influence the audience with regard to certain political issues.

Fiction and politics feed off and influence each other. As an aspect of fiction, drama plays a crucial instructive role. According to American theatre scholars Oscar Brockett and Robert Ball (2004, 16), "drama has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanizing force," as it harmonises actors with the real-life experience of humans whom they imitate. It also physically allows for audiences to see themselves through the lives of the performers. Yerima's *Pari* spotlights the delicate and volatile subject of religion as a way of entering people's lives in order to understand how it has caused and fostered division in the country. In this way, his play sees religion as an institution or system used in atomising the society.

Since "religion is a political tool" (Rennie 2008, 275), political and religious leaders use the beliefs and misunderstanding of devotees as leverage for the passage and enactment of their greedy agendas. An example of this is visible in the Nigeria of today where politicians use "hungry thugs"—those described by Pérouse de Montclos (2018, 167) as needing "peace of mind" from the economic disappointment of their nation—to disrupt their adversaries' political gatherings. In *Pari*, after Ibrahim has left Boko Haram's camp to return to town in search of Pari, he locates her home where he meets her parents. The short dialogue between Ibrahim and Tada below explains how Ibrahim found himself among the Boko Haram members:

> **Tada**: And the government? They deny knowing about you. The former local government chairman says you even killed four of his brothers.
>
> **Ibrahim**: (*Gives a wild laugh*.) Did he really say that? Well, this is a different story from what really happened. The irony is that *they created us, nurtured us for their own good at first ... and after, dumped us.* Where did we get the arms? From them, the military and the black market. Where did we get the money we spend? Who fuelled our anger? Who? (*Chuckles*) See how well they lie now that they do not know how to quench the fire they selfishly lit. (Yerima 2016, 48; emphasis added)

Ibrahim's confessional statement evidently alludes to what Philip Tite (2008, 5) calls "government's rhetoric to support a political policy of violence [and] more significantly, in public and private acts of griefs." Yerima references the failure of political policies due to lawmakers' rash and misguided decisions. One such misguided approach is pointed out by Ibrahim. Now that the metaphorical small fire that the selfish politicians lit has become wild, the government and politicians find their thugs' careless actions uncontrollable. These "thugs" are vulnerable youths whose poor economic situation was caused by their leaders' failure and who are now pushed into violence and terrorism.

Writing about terrorism, violence, and Islam globally, Jawaid Quddus (2005, 21) argues that "socio-economic circumstances lead to this phenomenon [violence] and not religion *per se*." Quddus links terrorism and violence in some parts of the global South to colonialism and socio-economic oppression. In the same vein, Gerrie Ter Haar (2005, 15) posits that "religion should not be mistaken for the real issue. The real issue is the pressure to share resources with others." The views shared by these different scholars

in terms of what constitutes the basis of religious violence are also shared in *Pari*. The frustration, helplessness, desperation, and bitterness of the poor and downtrodden often relegate them to political pawns in the hands of political and economic superpowers.

Narrating his ordeal to Tada and Ama, Ibrahim laments that he was pushed to become a Boko Haram member because of the desperate situation he found himself in. His mother was sick and dying: "She needed food and medicine and none was within [his] reach … so [he] watched her … with tear-filled eyes, [he] watched life ebb out of her veins, then her eyes closed, her heart stopped beating, and she was gone" (Yerima 2016, 46). In his depressed state, his friends, Zaki and Yakubu, asked him to join them:

> **Tada**: Join who? … Boko Haram?
>
> **Ibrahim**: Yes.
>
> **Ama**: Who?
>
> **Ibrahim**: Young men living in hopelessness, angry at nothing in particular.
>
> **Tada**: What about options? You could have refused to join.
>
> **Ibrahim:** What options? The poor and the forgotten do not have much options. You either die poor or you live poor. No matter how darkened our acts may be, we lived for the moments before we died happy still poor. (Yerima 2016, 46–47)

The conversation that transpires among these characters is put in place for the purpose of contextualisation: to show what poverty and economic inequality force the poor into. Mustapha (2018) alludes to this as he contends that when economic crises conflate with religion, violence is often the result. Similarly, Lamido Sanusi (2007, 183) observes that increased poverty in northern Nigeria since 1986 is a "major factor contributing to religious crisis." For Ibrahim and many youths like him in the play, poverty incites anger and rage; circumstances beyond their control leave them with no option but to indulge in activities they know are injurious to their lives and those of others. By holding out religious fundamentalism as a means of survival, political and religious leaders deceive desperate youths into joining violent movements.

In order to discuss the subject of God and theism, the social critic uses *Pari* to address the leitmotifs of faith, religion, security, and most importantly, to problematise Godness and judgment of death. The didactic component of the play suggests that Yerima might consider it his duty as a public intellectual to "aid the ordinary person's self-awareness of his or her situation by teaching people to teach themselves" (Bellamy 1994, xvi). From this point of view, it can be argued that Yerima aims to teach the audience to teach themselves about the implications of their sociopolitical and religious thoughts and actions. According to Innocent Chiluwa (2008, 371), "Nigeria is the most religious country in the world, with about 91 percent of the population attending religious services

and 95 percent praying regularly." Also noteworthy is the BBC News report "Nigeria Leads in Religious Belief" (BBC News 2004). This means that one of the most potent ways of reaching the Nigerian public is through religion.

However, through a remarkably different method to the ways religion in Nigeria has been treated in critical and literary works, where religious tolerance manifests as the centre of their writings, Yerima seems to take an atheist stand in his play, thereby dismissing the imperativeness of religion as a social force. This subject will be analysed first through the debate about which God is superior between Tada's and Ama's—the Christian and Muslim Gods, respectively. This question is raised right at the beginning of the play when an emotionally beaten Ama, the mother of Pari, converts from Christianity to Islam because of the abduction of her daughter. When Tada sees his wife praying on the mat the way Muslims do, the dialogue below ensues:

> **Tada**: Jesus! Agnes, what is it?
>
> **Ama**: … You can see that I am praying to Almighty Allah!
>
> **Tada**: Almighty who? We are Christians, remember? (Yerima 2016, 7)

This conversation ushers in the subject of theism and the contestation for superiority among God(s), a trope that continues throughout the play. Both characters seem to posit that there is a difference between the God of the Muslims and that of the Christians. For clarity, I will be using the terms God and God(s) as I progress with this analysis. While God will stand for the single universal supreme being, God(s) will represent the different Gods of the Muslims and that of the Christians as suggested in the play.

What the play highlights here is similar to Mustapha and Ehrhardt's (2018) observation about Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. They argue that "Muslims and Christians adopt an 'exclusivist approach' to issues of religion, seeing salvation as only possible through their particular faiths while at the same time denying any divine content in the opposing faith" (Mustapha, Ehrhardt, and Diprose 2018, 114). Both Christians and Muslims believe in the supremacy of their God over the other. Tada accuses his wife of walking away "from the light" (Yerima 2016, 8), which he believes is found in the Christian God. To buttress his claim, he accuses Ama of being "dressed up in dark clothes [and] speaking in their forceful tongue" (8). From his accusation, Tada implicitly declares that the God served in Ama's newfound faith is dark, forceful, and unholy, but his own God is inferred as the exact opposite of Ama's, representing light, peace, and holiness. However, to justify her choice of conversion and praying to Almighty Allah instead of Jesus, whom she had been worshipping before their daughter's abduction, Ama contends that their Muslim God is the superior God "because He must have been alive and well when He guided them [Boko Haram members] to where they took those girls. So, I figured it out. I just need to reach Him; speak His language like they do [and] wear His hijab like their women do" (14–15). In this statement, Ama counters Tada's initial claim of the superiority of his God by stating that the superior God is the one who guided

his worshippers to succeed with the abduction of the girls, while the God who could not prevent the kidnappers from doing so is less powerful. To get her daughter back, Ama reasons that she must pray, dress, and speak like the worshippers of this "superior" God.

Coincidently, Tada follows his wife's thought process after hearing the news of another Boko Haram bombing of a church in the town Uba. When Hanna, one of Tada's church members tries to encourage them by saying that "God is our [Christians'] strength," Tada quickly asks, "which one? The one that allows people to kill? Or the one that smites the meek with a muteness to die? Which one?" (19–20). The ideological similarity displayed by this couple is found in their shared pain of loss; their plight does not only drive them to question the supremacy between Gods worshipped in their respective religions, but it also means that they have to question the willingness of this Christian God to help His worshippers. For Tada to ask Hanna such a question about the God he has been previously arguing for shows that he is now reasoning like his wife, doubting the might and benevolence of the Christian God. This sudden change of heart implies that humans' reverence for a supreme being is dependent on His ability and willingness to help and save them during their times of desperation.

In other words, the conversations between Ama, Tada and Ibrahim are a reminder of the problem of theodicy. Theodicy attempts to answer the age-old question: Why does a good God permit or allow the manifestation of evil in the world He created? According to Alvin Plantinga (1974, 10), theodicy "answer[s] the question of why God permits evil." Whether one believes in God's existence or not makes no difference in Ama's and Tada's views. From this perspective, people's devotion to God is irrelevant since if God is believed to be responsible for humans' fortunes, He is equally to blame for human losses because of His unwillingness to prevent it. Vivid in both characters' dilemma is a picture of Mikhail Bakunin's argument when writing about religious anarchism. To Bakunin, if we say "God exists, therefore man is a slave. [If we say] Man is free, therefore there is no God" (Bakunin cited in Paul McLaughlin 2002, 27). For Bakunin, God is God because human beings perceive their powerlessness in the world around them. As soon as man conquers this world, God ceases to exist as a force in the universe. Yerima's play thus makes two interventions into the discourse of theism. First, the play suggests that humans are only religious for their selfish gain and not because God represents what is ethically right. Ama's sudden switch of faith from being a Christian deaconess to a praying Muslim because of her child's abduction depicts the idea that what is ethically right is dependent on what is profitable from such practice. Second, Yerima's play suggests that God retains His status and supremacy as God due to His ability to allow fear and disaster, which constantly allows for humans' reliance on Him. Again, the play suggests that since the Muslim God was able to create and mastermind the successful abduction of Pari, her mother should bow before Him if she is to get her daughter back.

Interestingly, Ibrahim also weighs in on Allah's existence and compassion. Ama questions his decision to join the terrorist group instead of calling on Allah to help

during a time of desperation and anger. Ibrahim's response undermines God's compassionate nature: "What about him? We had predicament strewn all over … and God stood silent by. We were ready to burn and blow up the sky where we believed He lived in smugness and allowed life to pass us by" (Yerima 2016, 47). Ibrahim, who had fought and killed to defend Allah, later confesses that Allah either did not care about them or was too arrogant to consider their situation. This contradicts his initial belief that God was somewhere and that he and his friends were rightly fighting for Him. Just like Tada and Ama, Ibrahim believes that God's rejection and abandonment of humans during their desperate time of need imply that He either does not exist or is conceited. Through addressing the topic of God and His (non-)existence, Yerima's play addresses one of the most sensitive aspects in Nigerian society.

The play argues that "heaven" is a state of mind, an ideology, a rhetoric of power and oppression created by humans for human manipulation. This Ibrahim discloses when he narrates his ordeal to Tada and Ama. When asked why he joined the deadly group, Ibrahim says that poverty was one of the reasons and the fact that God neglected him and other suffering youths. This makes him question the realness of a place called heaven, a place that has been promised to true Muslims: "after a while, the promise that we would go to *aljana* [heaven] faded. With time, the *aljana* we believed was what we created. It was nowhere but where we stood. We were the gods in the *aljana* we created" (Yerima 2016, 47). This powerful conclusion by Ibrahim once again projects the idea that humans, whose religions have been politicised and used as a political tool for dominance and oppression (Afolabi 2015; Asaju 1990), can create heaven on earth through political and social actions. Yerima uses Ibrahim's statement to affirm Jesus's declaration in Luke 17:21 that "the kingdom of God is within us," a comment that was philosophised by the great philosopher, Leo Tolstoy, in 1894. Yerima uses his play to rebel against power and against prevailing ideas of the afterlife, a religious belief that continues to enhance religious violence. It casts doubt on the belief in *aljana* (heaven). Through unpacking the intersection of religion, politics, and poverty in Nigeria, the play fundamentally suggests that factors such as economic collapse, political quests for power and status, and religious ignorance are the elements that create and encourage violence. Therefore, for the restoration of peace and harmony, the latter part of the play suggests that secular political and ethical engagement such as confession, dialogue, and reconciliation rather than religious faith are the keys to a better world.

Conflict Resolution in *Pari*

For the play's resolution, important concepts required for the accomplishment of peace and unity—truth, confession, resolution, and forgiveness—are encouraged by the playwright. It would have been easier and justified for Tada and Ama to blame, convict, and take revenge on Ibrahim for once being a killer and for abducting and impregnating their daughter who was underage at the time of her abduction and rape, but they choose to forgive and rehabilitate him. At first, an audience/reader would question the ethical logic in their decision as Ibrahim is a rapist and a murderer who lawfully deserves

prosecution and equivalent punishment, but the play upholds forgiveness and reconciliation through the actions of Tada and Ama. What the play suggests through this dramatic twist of plot is that some crimes that took place during periods of conflict or war might have to be forgiven if reconciliation is to be attained. However, Ibrahim's forgiveness and reconciliation happen only after he has confessed his part in the abduction of the schoolgirls, pleaded for forgiveness, and promised to become a better member of the society. The play recommends a form of roundtable talk, similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of post-apartheid South Africa, Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and Congo's La Commission de Verité et de la Réconciliation, all of which were aimed at restoring long-lasting peace. Ibrahim, Tada, Ama and Pari have a "sit-down" moment where Ibrahim tells what is considered the truth, the cause of his and other terrorists' anger, his participation in the violation of girls, and the number of killings he committed, and then begs for forgiveness from the people he offended by continually saying "I am sorry." This act of confession leads to his forgiveness as he receives a "big hug" (Yerima 2016, 71) at the end of the play.

In *Religion, Violence, and the Pursuit of Truth* (2008), Bryan Rennie posits that until the root and causes of violence are traced and tackled, there can be no lasting resolution. While consequences of conflict might be corrected, the major cause of such conflict would remain unattended. Contending that understanding the truth behind conflict is the way forward, Rennie (2008, 281) goes further to declare that "the truth may not be comfortable but it is the *raison d'etre* of the academy that the truth is worthy of pursuit and finally instrumental in the promotion of human peace." The idea of "truth" in this context has to do with verifiable facts gathered from people's experiences as the causes of their grievances that ultimately lead to conflicts. In *Pari*, the truth is poverty, leadership failure, illiteracy, religious intolerance, and all the societal ills that propel conflict. Clearly establishing these causes of conflict is a prerequisite for identifying pathways to conflict resolution. These factors are rightly pointed out by Allan et al. (2006, 87) who, while exploring the link between apology and forgiveness, with a special study on 134 victims of gross human rights violations who were either actual or potential participants in the proceedings of Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, posit that "four restorative situations: excuse, admission of guilt, apology, and true sorriness" are vital elements in forgiveness and subsequent improvement in mental health. The four restorative conditions these authors highlight are played out in Yerima's play. Ibrahim's initial excuse for joining Boko Haram—his state of abject poverty and the death of his mother—is followed by his admission of guilt, an apology, and sincere remorse, which ultimately lead to his forgiveness. This can be interpreted as a recognition of the validity of the South African commission's view of reconciliation, that if this strategy of confession and remorse is adopted by perpetrators of violence, it will lead to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Conclusion

Through *Pari*, Yerima has been able to use his status as an artist and public intellectual to speak to the serious matter of religion in an unpopular and controversial but effective way. To problematise God's existence in an extremely religious society such as Nigeria is an audacious and controversial venture. Considering Becker's remark that the public intellectual negotiates "the public realm—often ignored, unheard, and misunderstood" (Becker 1997, 18), Yerima's play has indirectly demystified the concept of God, heaven, and hell in a pious society like Nigeria. As a Christian and professor working in a university owned by a church, it is difficult to reconcile Yerima's Christian beliefs with this concept; yet he is an artist who is exploring his artistic license by suggesting an alternative perspective to the issue of religious intolerance in Nigeria. In the play, heaven is reconceptualised and given a secular meaning as political and social harmony. And to rightly pursue and establish this heaven on earth is to disregard religious ideologies which enforce the need to jeopardise peace on earth for a place in heaven. The article has also suggested that to balance religious problems and correct past failures and destructions, there should be an acknowledgment of guilt by perpetrators of discord and violence, including religious bodies, religious extremists, and politicians, followed by confession and true sorriness, which should consequently allow for forgiveness and reconciliation. Yerima proposes these ideas in *Pari* with the authority of a public intellectual.

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1965. "The Novelist as Teacher." *New Statesman*, January 29, 161–62.

Adesanmi, Pius, and Chris Dunton. 2005. "Nigeria's Third Generation Writing: Historiography and Preliminary Theoretical Considerations." *English in Africa* 32 (1): 7–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40239026.

Allan, Alfred, Mariam Allan, Debra Kaminer, and Dan Stein. 2006. "Exploration of the Association between Apology and Forgiveness amongst Victims of Human Rights Violations." *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* 24 (1): 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.689.

BBC News. 2004. "Nigeria Leads in Religious Belief." BBC News, February 26, 2004. Accessed February 3, 2022. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/wtwtgod/3490490.stm.

Bellamy, Richard, ed. 1994. *Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writing*. Translated by Virginia Cox. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Becker, Carol. 1997. "The Artist as Public Intellectual." In *Education and Cultural Studies: Toward a Performative Practice*, edited by Henry Giroux and Shannon Patrick, 13–24. London: Routledge.

Brockett, Oscar, and Robert Ball. 2004. *The Essential Theatre*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.

Campbell, John, and Asch Harwood. 2018. "Boko Haram's Deadly Impact." Council on Foreign Relations, August 20, 2018. Accessed November 15, 2019. https://www.cfr.org/article/boko-harams-deadly-impact.

Çancı, Haldun, and Opeyemi Adedoyin Odukoya. 2016. "Ethnic and Religious Crises in Nigeria: A Specific Analysis upon Identities (1999–2013)." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 16 (1): 87–110. https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/144735.

Chiluwa, Innocent. 2008. "Religious Vehicle Stickers in Nigeria: A Discourse of Identity, Faith and Social Vision." *Discourse and Communication* 2 (4): 371–87. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481308091909.

Comolli, Virginia. 2015. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. London: Hurst and Co.

Falola, Toyin. 1998. *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies*. Rochester, NY: University Rochester Press.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Habila, Helon. 2016. *The Chibok Girls: The Boko Haram Kidnappings and Islamist Militancy in Nigeria*. London: Penguin.

Heynders, Odile. 2016. *Writers as Public Intellectuals: Literature, Celebrity, Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137467645.

McLaughlin, Paul. 2002. *Mikhail Bakunin: The Philosophical Basis of His Theory of Anarchism.* Baltimore, MD: Algora Publishing.

Murtada, Ahmed. 2012. *Boko Haram in Nigeria: Its Beginning, Principles and Actions in Nigeria*. Translated and Appended by AbdulHaq al-Ashanti. SalafiManhaj. Accessed February 7, 2022. https://www.academia.edu/19658730/Boko_Haram_in_Nigeria_its_beginnings_principles_and_activities_in_Nigeria.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu. 2018. "Introduction: Religious Encounters in Northern Nigeria." In *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, 1–34. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787442375.004.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu, and David Ehrhardt, eds. 2018. *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787442375.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu, and David Ehrhardt, and Rachael Diprose. 2018. “Historical Context of Muslim-Cristian Encounters in Northern Nigeria.” In *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, 108–36. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer.

Nmah, Patrick. 2011. “Spiritual Dimension of Land Identity Crisis in Igboland of Nigeria: An Ethical Reflection.” *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 12 (2): 136–51. https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v12i2.6.

Oguntokun, Wole. 2019. *The Chibok Girls: Our Story*. Independently published.

Oluduro, Olubayo. 2010. “The Role of Religious Leaders in Curbing the Spread of HIV/AIDS in Nigeria.” *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal/Potchefstroomse Elektroniese Regsblad* 13 (3): 208–36. https://doi.org/10.4314/pelj.v13i3.63673.

Osaretin, Idahosa, and Emmanuel Akov. “Ethno-Religious Conflict and Peace Building in Nigeria: The Case of Jos, Plateau State.” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2 (1): 349–49.

Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine. 2018. “Boko Haram, Youth Mobilization, and Jihadism.” In *Creed and Grievance: Muslim-Christian Relations and Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria*, edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt, 165–83. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781787442375.009.

Pisa, Katie, and Tim Hume. 2015. “Boko Haram Overtakes ISIS as World’s Deadliest Terror Group, Report Says.” Cable News Networks, November 19, 2022. Accessed October 21, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/17/world/global-terror-report/index.html.

Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. *God, Freedom, and Evil.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Quddus, Jawaid. 2005. “Islam, Terrorism and the New World Order.” In *Religion, Power and Violence: Expression of Politics in Contemporary Times*, edited by Ram Puniyani. 91–107, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9788132102069.n5.

Rennie, Bryan. 2008. “Religion, Violence, and the Pursuit of Truth.” In *Religion, Terror, and Violence: Religious Studies Perspectives*, edited by Bryan Rennie and Philip Tite, 273–83, New York, NY: Routledge.

Said, Edward. 1996. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Sanusi, Lamido Sanusi. 2007. “Politics and Sharia in Northern Nigeria.” In *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, edited by Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, 177–88. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230607101_10.

Sesay, Isha. 2019. *Beneath the Tamarind Tree: A Story of Courage, Family, and the Lost Schoolgirls of Boko Haram*. New York, NY: Dey Street Books.

Smith, Mike. 2015. *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War*. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755619085.

Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Soyinka, Wole. 2019. *A Humanist's Ode for Chibok, Leah*. Ibadan: Bookcraft.

Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. 2016. "Religious Violence in Contemporary Nigeria: Implications and Options for Peace and Stability Order." *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 29 (1): 85–103.

Ter Haar, Gerrie. 2005. "Religion: Source of Conflict or Resource for Peace?" In *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace*, edited by Gerrie Ter Haar and James Busuttil, 3–34. Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405733.

Tite, Philip, 2008. "Sacred Violence and Scholar of Religion as Public Intellectual." In *Religion, Terror, and Violence: Religious Studies Perspectives*, edited by Bryan Rennie and Philip Tite, 3–10, New York, NY: Routledge.

Tsaaior, James Tar. 2017. *I Am Chibok: #BringBackOurGirls*. Lagos: Zuma Harvest.

Tukur, Sani. 2017. "Shocking Revelation: 100,000 Killed, Two Million Displaced by Boko Haram Insurgency, Borno Governor Says." *Premium Times*, February 13, 2018. Accessed January 26, 2022. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/223399-shocking-revelation-100000-killed-two-million-displaced-boko-haram-insurgency-borno-governor-says.html.

Yerima, Ahmed. 2001. *The Sisters*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.

Yerima, Ahmed. 2011. *Three Plays: Hard Ground, Little Drops, and Ipomu*. Ibadan: Kraft Books.

Yerima, Ahmed. 2016. *Pari*. Ibadan: Kraftgriots.