

Meta-choreographic rituals and sub-textualities in directing Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama

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Abstract

In this study, we examine the multiple layers of choreographic elements and their subtextual undercurrents in directing the stage movements of Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama. We argue against the background that the stage directions of the dance sequence in Agbonifo-Obaseki's dramaturgy convey a troika of subtexts anchored in the verbalization of *Yan* (noun) or *Oyan* (verb) – the cosmogenic acts of affirmations or confessional declarations. We use *Azagidi* – *When Gods Die* and *Idia*, two of Agbonifo-Obaseki's most performed plays, to contend that Edo cosmogenic energy is released after every performance of *Yan*. The study draws on ethnopoetics to put forward Edo quintessential acts of foretelling and forth-telling. It reveals that the performance acts evident in Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama offer insights into understanding the theorization of meta-choreographic texts. We conclude that Agbonifo-Obaseki's traditional dramas deploy Edo movement semiotics in ways that contribute to his plots.

Keywords: Meta-choreographic elements, ritual, sub-textuality, Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki,
semiotics

Introduction

Dance is believed to be the stylized and rhythmic bodily movements that serve as a form of communication or expression within a given space and time. In Africa, dance is an essential aspect of human interaction. From birth through death, dance serves as navigator of man's way of life and the directional signs towards a better, peaceful and purposeful human existence (Uji & Awuawuer 251). The most basic motive of dance is the physical expression of inner emotion. This typifies the functions of dance for the Edo people of Nigeria (South-South). Beyond its entertainment value, dance for the Edo is a way of releasing powerful feelings such as sudden bouts of high spirits, joy, impatience, or anger. It reflects the cosmic reality of the Edo people vis-à-vis their experience in *Agbon* (life or the world). It is a form of praise, worship, or veneration of *Osanobua* (the Supreme Being), *Ebo* (gods), the *erinmwin* (spirits), the *edion* (elders), the Oba (King), as well as other prominent figures in the Edo pantheon.

Although dance has a prime place in Edo theatrical art, movement outside the scope of dance is even more essential. This essay takes a detour from a monolithic perception of dance within the framework of Benin or Edoid studies, focusing instead on movement as an art form within Edo cultural studies. The Edo people not only perform dance; they also practice and perform movement as a form of controlled emotional passage. For them, it is a creative way of knowing or experiencing *agbon*, the natural world, in a condensation of language and gesture that appends deeper levels of meaning to identity, class, and formal occasions. Charles Uji and Justin Awuawuer put it thus:

It is a strategy for orchestrating the climax of a successful exchange; as a challenge to the power of authorities that generates an alternative reality; as a communal response to crisis that recreates order out of confusion; and as a

sequence of transformations that periodically resolves an inherent social dilemma.
(251)

Uji and Awuawuera's above affirmation bespeaks the regenerative power of movement, especially the meta-choreographic movements evident in the drama of Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki. In plays such as *Azagidi - When Gods Die* and *Idia: The Epic of an African Queen*, the stage directions used to describe the diverse dance performances are more like "movement writings" than dance. They are mostly meta-choreographic in that they convey many subtexts and help the audience/reader to apprehend certain aspects of being an Edo person. Thus, this study considers meta-choreographic elements as "movement writing" or "movement text" describing the navigation or connection of peripatetic structures in space and time. It is the act of symbolically enlivening an identity within the cause or course of dramatic in/action or performance. Although used mainly in dance, choreography is also used in stage combat (action or fight choreography) and many other activities involving human movement. In the context of this paper, the focal point is the choreographic text and sub-texts in the movement art in Agbonifo-Obaseki's dramaturgy. To begin with, it is imperative to provide conceptual clarifications of the keywords used in this study.

Conceptual Clarifications

Meta-choreography is a coined phrase used by these researchers to refer to multilayered texts in movement arts. It refers to the veiled or concealed meaning which, knowingly or unknowingly, governs the movement writings of a choreographer. It can be understood in two ways: as choreography *about* choreography or as choreography *above* choreography.

Choreography describes the composition and arrangement of movements, sequences, and other rudiments of dance composition. It is a narrative that describes the dance writings of events in the context of dancers. The content and structure of choreography are deliberately (although sometimes unconscious) selected to support or encourage a particular interpretation. The analysis

of choreography—that is, the choreographies constructed in the course of thinking about or above choreography—creates meta-choreography. The argument that presents itself here is that the cosmogenic force of *Oyan* practice which the audience/readers see in the dramas of Agbonifo-Obaseki is meta-choreographic and establishes the theatrical and dramatic currents of Edo theatre. The core of meta-choreography is eurhythmy, that is, speech conditioned by movement. It is enigmatic and relatable primarily to enthusiasts engaged in art or performance. Finally, it superimposes itself on the movement intended either by a choreographer, movement instructor, or director. Meta-choreographic movement text is generally ritualized and accompanied by choral chants. It is particularly efficacious with ritual or ritualized performance.

The word “ritual” is used to refer to a repeated sequence of actions carried out in order to achieve a certain effect by an individual or group. Although ritual is, arguably, invented to explain man’s failure to understand certain natural phenomena, it works by way of the synergy between man and potent animist forces. It is an ordered union of cause and action to produce an effect that benefits or harms humanity. Ritual is spiritually rigged, and it is an artistically decorated supplication of man that is strengthened by spiritual powers. It is an animist gift to humanity born out of the collaboration between the corporeal and incorporeal universes to restore social order and to sustain man’s optimism through receiving the benediction of the community’s pantheon. According to Ben Binebai, “the natural production of ritual is plotted to generate social consequences beyond its performance limit” (55). This means that the Edo affirmative movement ritual known as *Oyan* (*yan*) is functional; it is expected to produce results in the future of the context within which it is performed. Both the *oyan* and the performers of this act are the cause of social effects to take place outside the performance. Thus, the *oyan* ritual is

performed to result in the restoration of order in the context of disordered social order (Edobor, 2); and as Binebai notes, “there is therefore no separation between ritual and art in the African universe of performance” (56). As a result, Edo acts of prognostic affirmation fulfill three characteristics of performative aesthetics evident in the confrontational events and bits in Agbonifo-Obaseki’s drama. These are conceptive visualization, meditative practice, and forth-telling. The three are tied together by ritualization accompanied with choreographic stage directions, producing meta-texts that bear on what may be conceptualized as meta-choreography.

Within the universe of Edo theatrical arts, Harrison Edobor notes that the concept of *Oyan* is different from *rhuo* or *kpoota* (boasting) and *o rhuo* (s/he is boasting). It operates more within the arcane language of *Imiato* or *Imiaro* (prophecy, insight, divination) (4), hence, the Edo words “*imiario rue se gbe* (your prophecy has always come to pass). This concept sits well in *Idia*, *Obaseki* and *Azagidi – When Gods Die*, three plays by Agbonifo-Obaseki. In these plays, the philosophy of *Yan* (verb) as contained in the acts of *Imiato* (prophecy) is activated to bring about harmony within the chaotic universe of the play. The philosophy of harmony anchored in understanding *Ododo* – the (often bloody) path to freedom – also sits well in Edo theatre. Dramatic characters in diverse Edo dramas like *Idia*, *Iden*, *Emotan*, *Imaguero*, all female characters, convey the currents of *Ododo* in Edo theater. The pursuit of these female dramatic characters within the literary genre of Edo theater lends credence to the regenerative sacrifice or ritual in order to restore order in a turbulent or chaotic world. Their actions are Promethean in that their in/actions bring about new order in the respective dramas in which they feature. The speeches of such characters as *Idia* in *Idia...* and *Igbaghon* in *Azagidi...* provide units for analyzing the directing of the diverse choreographic movements in Agbonifo-Obaseki’s drama.

Like text, meta-choreography within Edo theatrical arts can be read vis-à-vis cultural symbolism, philosophy, magical-mystical-spiritual expression within given spaces. Within the magico-spiritual space in Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama, the movements are directed, albeit un/intentionally, by the efficacy of the words being uttered. Each word or pronouncement is backed by forces as well as accompanying movements so that the weight of each word conveys meaning beyond what is said. As a result, it can be argued that Agbonifo-Obaseki places the burden on his reader/audience to dig deeper into the worlds of his drama: its ritual, movements, speech acts, music, choreography, the Edo body and sense of *being in* the world, and above all, Edo epistemology. Within that epistemic world in his drama, diverse subtexts exist.

Subtexts are interlocking meanings in drama. It is the unspoken thoughts of a character, or a playwright, that might be implied by their actions or inaction. Put another way, subtexts are what is meant but not what is said. Bringing subtext into drama or playwriting can reveal deeper motivations. For example, Agbonifo-Obaseki's *Azagidi...* is often perceived by drama critics as an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. However, what such critics fail to see is the originality of the playwright's thoughts in considering the Edo nature of the spirituality in the plot, spirituality being less considered in Euripides' *Medea*. The text and subtexts in Agbonifo-Obaseki's plays are often not given sufficient attention. Thus, this study examines the meta-choreographic subtexts in the performance of Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama.

Synoptic Exploration of the Plays

Idia: The Epic of an African Queen narrates the story of the legendary Queen Idia, the mother of Esigie, the Oba (King) of Benin who ruled Benin from 1504-1550. Oba Ozolua is killed at Uzia where he passed the night after a battle. His death throws open the throne to his three warrior sons: Ogidigbo, the weak one; Prince Aruanran, a powerful but senseless giant and the duke of Udo; and Prince Osawe (later Esigie), the son of Queen Idia. Given birth to on the

same day, Aruanran and Osawe are made to compete for the throne by going through the “Osuan,” a traditional contest consisting of jumping across a great pond. Ogidigbo fails to make it to the other side of the pond and loses his limbs in the attempt. Aruanran, the powerful but senseless giant, succeeds. However, Osawe, cunningly and with the help of his mother Queen Idia, fastens himself to Aruanran’s waist and so lands on the other side of the lake before the giant. Osawe is crowned king as the people demand not only a warrior but a wise warlord. As Oba Esigie, he conquers many territories and expands Benin’s boundaries, but he is soon bored with conquests and desires greater challenges.

He is advised by his mother, Queen Idia and Uke, the royal jester, to sleep with Imaguero, the wife of the boastful Chief Oliha. He tempts her with gifts of rich coral beads into his royal bed. Oba Esigie then mocks Chief Oliha over the fidelity of his wife. Chief Oliha gets angry with the palace as Benin goes to war with the people of Idah. Chief Oliha conspires with the Attah (the leader of Idah) against Benin. As Idah warriors advance towards Benin, Oba Esigie consults Ohen Osa, the oracle, and through divination it is revealed that only a woman can win the war. Queen Idia, dressed for war, leads the slave warriors of Benin against the army of Idah. As the Attah of Idah is captured and Chief Oliha killed, the Queen Mother returns to Benin victorious.

Azagidi..., on the other hand, tells the story of the passion of Azagidi and Igbahon. Azagidi, the invincible great warrior, embarked on a journey to the spiritual world in search of new challenges and eventually falls in love with the river goddess, Igbahon. She forfeits her position, her rights and privileges in the spiritual world against the advice of Olokun, god of the oceans, and Orhue, her sister. She takes human form and follows Azagidi to the human world. Azagidi's quest to become King of Udo makes him abandon Igbahon for whom he has

professed love and who has borne him two sons. Azagidi marries Uvbi, the princess of Udo, with the ambition of taking over the kingship after Ogie, Uvbi's father. To gain the king's trust, Azagidi orders the banishment of Igbaghon from the land and deprives her of her two sons. Mocked and with nowhere to turn, Igbaghon kills Uvbi, Ogie, and the two sons she bore for Azagidi – an act of vengeance that serves as perpetual torture for Azagidi.

Central in the two plays is man's quest for new challenges, ambition, and betrayal as well as two strong female characters, Idia and Igbaghon. Although their stories follow different paths, their activation of the Edo rituals of *yan* and *imiato* comes to bear fully in the respective dramas under consideration. An analysis of the playtexts suggests that the end of the villains (Attah of Idah and Chief Oliha; and Azagidi) in the two plays has been foretold through the choreographic movements that attend the ritual acts of foretelling and forth-telling. Within the context of Edo religion, foretelling could mean prognostication, prefiguration, forecasting, or even divination. Nevertheless, forth-telling is different. It is the calling forth of things to happen in the future to the present by words of affirmation released to the cosmogenic environment. It comes with its own attendant ritual where the individual, priest or priestess, who has accumulated much mystical power releases words into the atmosphere to achieve certain desired results. The ritual practice is rooted in the belief that words have energy and that nature has the intelligence to hear words that have been spoken. The efficacy of the ritual stems from the practices of conceptive visualization, meditative practice, and the ritual communication of calling forth future realities to the present. To proceed, it is imperative to consider the currency of these ritual acts in the playtexts and how they play out in Agbonifo-Obaseki's drama.

Meta-choreographic Rituals and their Sub-texts in Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki's Drama

Aspects of meta-choreographic ritual text course through the plots of *Idia: the Epic of an African Queen* and *Azagidi – When Gods Die*. In the two plays, there are diverse deep-seated motifs linked to Edo sign systems buried in the speeches and stage directing of the principal characters. For example, the first opening of eurhythmic movements in *Idia* is seen in Act Four Scene Two where Ohen Osa prognosticates about the crisis besetting Benin. He sings, “Okhuo ma ghi y’okhuo ede, So kpin Idia mwen ni ly’Esigie n’Oba,” loosely translated to mean “No woman has never gone to war except Idia, Mother of Esigie” (45). This enchanted rendition, accompanied by ritualized movement, prepares Idia to follow a path taken only by brave men. Her success at the end of the play earns her the title, *Idia n’ Okpo khuo* (Idia, the Warrior) Nonetheless, before achieving the feats she accomplishes in the world of the play, she activates the mystery in Edo acts of *yan* and/or *Imiaro*, --boasting, proclamation, and forth-telling. This is manifested in the war scenes of Act Five in the play. The manners and ways Agbonifo-Obaseki introduces Idia in the act is suggestive of a woman with mystical powers who has succeeded in compressing time. The scene opens with the stage direction:

[*The battle front, song rises. Warriors dance in bearing the form of Idia on a throne stool. They set her down while the warriors dance round her*]. (*Idia...* Agbonifo-Obaseki, 49)

The appearance of Idia in the first sequence of the war scenes is ritualistic. She is carried in on a throne stool as the warriors dance around her. In as much as her introduction in this scene is performative, the meta-choreographic text here is that she has gone through all the preparatory

ritual for war along with her slave warriors. To prove the level of the ritual's efficacy, the warriors embarks on a choral chant rendered in esoteric ancient Edo. They chant:

Urho kie me ye mwen – o [*Open door for me, my mother*]

Kie me ye [*Open for me, mother*]

Urho miw me yemwen – o [*Praise remembers my mother*]

(The warriors wrestle and throw one another proving their prowess. As the show of strength ends, a new group enters, preceding the Portuguese, Afonso D'Aveiro).

(Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 49)

The choral chants are sung to create a spark at Idia's altar; to keep her bowl boiling for the battle that is to come for it is in the fanning of the embers beneath Idia's bowl that her victory or failure rests. As they chant, wrestle, and throw each other on the ground, the fire burns inviting Ogun, the god of war, to emerge. This is manifest in their transition to singing praise chants for Ogun as the needed guns and ammunitions to prosecute the war are supplied.

Ovbiogun no we! *The child of Ogun*

Wa ghe re –o *See her*

Ovbi Ogun no – we *The child of Ogun*

Wa ghe re – o *See her*

(D'Aveiro proffers guns and ammunition to Idia. She signals that the guns be distributed among the warriors. They fire the guns into the air in an excitement).

(Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 50)

Although all the aforementioned sequences have been represented literarily in the performance of *Idia*, the meta-choreographic text that often is not given attention is the importance of Idia's cosmic destiny. She is the alpha-female who must protect her son, and by extension, the kingdom.

In the play, her breast becomes a metaphor or a symbol for asserting her power. She uses her breasts as a tool to exercise both physical and spiritual control, not only over her son, Oba Esigie, but also over his detractors. In the first instance where she deploys the acts of visualization, one of the principles of *Imiaro*, she plunges into the depths of foretelling thus: “Esigie n’Oba. Your sun has risen. Moonlight comes and twilight draws near, it only heralds the rising of a new sun for the day must break. May your sun keep rising” (40). She goes further: “As long as there’s breath left in the breast of Idia n’Iye Esigie, Oliha will remain a subject of the Omon-Oba. The pygmies of Idah shall grovel at my feet and pay homage to Oba Esigie! Tell him Idia said so!” (*Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 49*).

The above speech presages the first act of *yan* or *Imiaro* which manifests in the concluding part of the play. She foretells what will happen to both Oliha and the Attah of Idah by performing the forth-telling ritual. She achieves the result of her proclamation at the end of the play as the Attah is seen paying obeisance to Oba Esigie. She starts:

(Rises) Ro gho okhuo	Come, see war
Edo nu zo’mo	Proud to be Edo
Eghele fiangbe ra eghale	Able-bodied men, blessings
Ni ko ko mi	Together we soar
Eghele fiangbe ra – eghele!	Able-bodied men, blessings

(*Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 50*)

Before embarking on her war, she fights with words, calling forth things to be and they happen. Her words are accompanied by movements that convey deep meanings. For example, in the dance sequence mentioned above, as well as her appearance throughout the play, she courts war using the mystical power inherent in her breasts—an Edo metaphor for controlling machismo.

She meditates on her intentions and creates the outcome she wants to see for her adversaries.

One example of this is found in her affirmative words for Chief Oliha. She says:

(Laughs haughtily) I shall place the head of the Attah at the end of my sword. A woman he calls me! Let him know that all men are born of a woman. Tell him that this woman surpasses all women who birthed his uncircumcised sons and also his barren daughters. He will squat before slaves and swim in his own urine. He will lick clean his anus with his own tongue! *(Struts around triumphantly, working the warriors into a frenzy)*. (*Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 50*)

The performance of the acts of “Imiaro” is seen in this stage direction. As she releases words of affirmation to the cosmogeny, her attending audience, mostly slave-warriors, shouts “Iyare Iyare”—an Edo demonstrative response meaning “safe journey/landing.” The response reinforces Idia’s prayers, demanding that the cosmic forces attend to her wishes. Idia goes further:

Idah will do the masquerade dance, naked, Yes naked!! Tell him that Idia n’Okpo okhuo wishes him well. He will be borne in chains and dragged through the streets of Benin at the tail of Idia’s horse! Covered in horse dung and mocked by children yet unborn.

ALL: Iyare! Iyare!!

IDIA: Oka khuo I hear the drums of war (The men do the dance of war)

Egbe e yo!

Egbe e yo!! (*Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 51*)

The movement that comes with Idia’s strutting is sacred. The meta-choreographic text conveyed by the strutting is that words spoken under a charged meditative atmosphere carry power. The words spoken and movements accompanying such charged words are propelled by magico-

spiritual skills. The dance of war performed in the previously described scene evokes that which was proclaimed. All that the words have spoken is accomplished, not because Idia, the heroine, possesses super powers but because the playwright has imbued her character with magico-spiritual components and understanding of the Edo cosmic quintessence. The stage direction in the concluding part of the play reads:

(Enter the Oba and his retinue. He does a brief dance and sits on his throne. The body of Oliha is brought and laid by his feet, followed by the bowed figure of the Attah of Idah. He kneels and pays homage to the Oba). (Idia... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 57)

The above direction points the reader/audience back to Idia's previous proclamations. It points to the accomplishment of all that Idia has predicted at the beginning of the war between Benin and Idah. The end of Chief Oliha in the play also affirms Idia's spirituality. Her successes are achieved because of her understanding of the Edo cosmic world. Agbonifo-Obaseki's Idia negotiates her existence and that of her son, Osawe (later Oba Esigie), within the domain of Edo traditional belief, not external influences as is the case in Irene Salami-Agunloye's Idia. As a legendary character, she attains one of the highest statuses possible for a woman—Idia no'kpo Okhuo, the "woman-god of war."

Her achievement differs from that of Igbaghon in *Azagidi*.... In contrast with the deification of Idia, the story of Igbaghon takes another course. Igbaghon, a water goddess, falls in love with the human Azagidi, and follows him to the earth against the advice of Olokun. She takes a human body and promises never to return to the spirit world. She gives up her position and godly powers, journeying with Azagidi to the earthly world. However, Azagidi, craving more

power and glory, abandons her and his two sons for Princess Uvbi, the only child of the King of Udo. Embittered by the actions of Azagidi, Igbaghon moves to immolate their sons, Uvbi, and herself in order to cause Azagidi eternal pain. Her pursuit of retributive justice is evident in the play's three sequences of lamentations. Indeed, the injustice she suffers in the hands of Azagidi forces her into reverie where she can only think of the death and destruction of Azagidi, Uvbi, Ogie, the King, and the entire community. The depth of her performance of acts of *imiaro* accompanied by the vocalization of her meditations gives credence to the tragic destruction that grips the reader/audience at the end of the play. In the first lamentation where she enters into trance, she calls on death:

(From within) Death! Death! To all monsters in hell, beneath the sea, on earth and in heaven, death! To husband, death. Destruction. Esu, I call your name. Lay your cold hands on me, my enemies and my children sad reminders of a husband's betrayal. Death! Fate, play your dice... Death! To husband, death! To self, death! To children, death! Hai! (*Azagidi... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 16*)

Igbaghon's prophetic invocation is different from Idia's on two levels; firstly, she speaks from the penumbra of "placelessness" or what Victor Turner referred to as a liminal space. In the world of the play, she leaves the water world for the human world. While there, she is betrayed by human desires, acts that make her retire into a separate world, a world of her own. Caught in the in-between, she can neither go back to the water world nor remain in the human world. She is "neither here nor there." She enters into a state of double-liminality as she can not live in either world. She is compelled to remain in her own world where all she dreams of is death. Within her meditative world, she calls on *Ogiuwu* (the angel of death in Benin cosmology) and Esu to fill

the world of her tormentors, characterized by Azagidi, Uvbi, and Ogie. The place where she finds herself deepens her meditation and makes her premeditated affirmation more potent and caustic.

Secondly, Igbaghon is a former spirit and as a result possesses residual knowledge and power that she capitalizes upon in making her performance of *yan* more efficacious. The tragedy that the reader/audience experiences at the end of the play goes to show the toxicity of her acts of *imiaro*. When she speaks of death [to all], she rallies all the powers to give mobility to her speech. One thing the playwright succeeds in doing with the cosmic dis/placement of Igbaghon is to open up the portals of the spirit world [*ikhimwin agbon*] in her transitory agony. A point of reference is evident in Igbaghon's second lamentation:

(Laughs haughtily). Death! Hate! Death! Oh how I hate you, earthly husband. To hate is to crave a bottomless pit. They will fall, and fall. Azagidi, Ogie, Uvbi, a bottomless pit. They will never stop falling *(laughs. The light dims to achieve a surreal effect and she begins to speak in her wandering reverie)*. I shall shake the pillars of the earth to their very foundations. *(Azagidi... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 34)*

The stage direction points the mind of the reader/audience to a deep world whence Igbaghon speaks. Unlike Idia, who requires specialized effort to fan the furnace beneath her bowl, Igbaghon's furnace keeps burning with little or no effort. Her affirmations are cooked deep in the pit of hell and she intends to spread death to humanity. Her hate is propelled by a betrayed love for which she's sacrificed all. Noticeable in the stage direction is that she embarks on what the playwright refers to as "wandering reverie." This implies movement and as a result, some kind of Edo eurhythmic choreographic text performed from a slow to fast paced swirling, depending on the state of possession. It is from this position that she vents her desires to the attending powers:

Great gods! Olokun, father-god of justice and the lord of the deep sea. Ogun, god of war and patron of male children. Ohunmila, god of wise counsel and divination. Isango, angry god of the lightning skies. Eziza, lord of the trading winds. Esu, trickster, afflicter, and god of vengeance. I kneel before you, a broken forsaken deity. I swear to you this day. I pay for my foolishness. I ask for nothing. I ask to die. Death to the five of us. One must live to bury the dead. Death to Ogie, living symbol of tyranny. Death to Uvbi, the shameless. Death to my twin sons; sad reminders of the calumny and pain of betrayal. Both products of a monstrous blissful passion. Death to them, and I will gladly take my life. But he must live. Azagidi must live to bury father-in-law, concubine, sons and wife. And he shall forever roam, a destitute. With none to care for him, and none to pity him. He must live forever! (*Her speech reaches a crashing crescendo. Thunders clap lighting flash, the earth rumbles. All is calm*) (Azagidi... Agbonifo-Obaseki, 38)

All of the subjects of her affirmations are brought to pass only that Azagidi dies first. Orhue her spritely sister says: “death is on the loose; it stalks the street and walks the night. Death. Queen sister, mermaid goddess of the deep seas.”(44). She fails to achieve in totality her will in the world of the play because of her dis/placement in the body of spirit-human interaction. The vortex she occupies is such that it limits her influence both in the natural world and the extraterrestrial world. What Olokun does in the play is to cleanse Udo of its transgression by purging the malevolent spirit which Ogie, Uvbi and Azagidi represent. As in *Idia*, order is restored at the end of the play as Benin reemerges to be the center of life.

Conclusion

This study has examined Pedro Agbonifo-Obaseki’s plays *Idia* and *Azagidi – When Gods Die*, with a focus on the multiple layers of choreographic elements and their subtextual

undercurrents. His dramaturgy conveys a troika of subtexts anchored in the verbalization of *Yan* (noun) or *Oyan* (verb) – cosmogenic acts of affirmation or confessional declaration, meditative practice, and *Imiario* – foretelling and forth-telling. These elements recur in many Edo-related dramas, whether written by Edo-speaking playwrights or those who are non-Edo speaking, and are examples of the many semiotic attributes that make theater or drama of Edo stock distinct from other types of Nigerian performance.

Two of the layers considered in this essay are the acts of *imiario* and *yan* which the playwright uses as dramatic techniques in the two plays discussed. Although these acts, and many more, exist in many Edo related dramas, it requires deeper knowledge to root out the diverse epistemes and their meanings in dramas set in the Edo cultural milieu. Moreover, it poses a challenge for Nigerian theater directors who are not deep into Edo cultural studies or semiotics. Agbonifo-Obaseki not only tenders a soft landing for directors by providing explicit stage directions to help stage directors understand the import of the in/action of the characters, but also opens up depths in apprehending what may be referred to as Edo theater studies.

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