

A Semiotic Analysis of Props in the Live Performance of *Basorun Gaa* by Adebayo Faleti

Professor Jide Ajidahun

Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria

jideajidahun@gmail.com

Abstract

On November 20, 2018, *Basorun Gaa* written by Adebayo Faleti and directed by Biola Fasoranti was presented by Ajasin Varsity Theatre in conjunction with the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria as the University's Convocation Play to mark the institution's 8th Convocation Ceremony. The play, which drew a large number of spectators from the University community, remains an outstanding and excellent creative work of art. The directorial and innovative skills that accompanied the theatrical performance are exemplary. The performance exhibited the rich cultural heritage of Yoruba people. The dramatic and the choreographic nature of the performance provided the audience the much needed excitement and catharsis. This paper is a semiotic analysis of the props used in the performance. The paper is anchored on semiotics as a branch of linguistics that uses signs and symbols as exemplified by Ferdinand Saussure.

Keywords: Drama, Theatre, Performance, Semiotics, Linguistics.

Introduction

The deployment of myth and history as a ferocious and truculent weapon by creative artists, especially the playwrights in pre-colonial and post-colonial African drama, to castigate and lampoon the dictatorial and the tyrannical proclivities inherent in African leadership has been a recurrent and stimulating discourse in African literature. It has also become an auspicious opportunity for African scholars and dramatists to deconstruct the Eurocentric view of African culture. History has, therefore, become a raw material which artists utilise to transform their dramaturgical and ideological ethos into reality.

The theatre thus becomes, indisputably, a veritable platform for artists to either display their angst against certain societal aberrations or to ventilate their creative energies. For instance, *Kurunmi* written by Ola Rotimi dramatises the conflict between Kurunmi, the war general of the Egba people in Ogun State, Nigeria and the new political order during the Yoruba civil wars in the 19th century. The play was performed at Ife Festival in 1969. It was also staged by the National Troupe of Nigeria at the National Theatre, Lagos between December 22, 2008 and January 1, 2009. Also, the play was staged at Alliance Francaise, Ikoyi and Terra Kulture between June 13-14 and July 20-21 2024.

Ovonramwen Nogbaisi written by Ola Rotimi depicts the fall of the Benin Kingdom and the British colonial rule under Oba Ovonramwen. The play was presented by Quebic 4 Productions and Duke of Shomolu Productions at MUSON Centre, Lagos on April 27-28 and May 4, 5, and 11, 2024 at the Agip Recital Hall. *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* by Ahmed Yerima portrays the story of Oba Ovonramwen's trial and exile after the fall of the Benin Kingdom even though Ola Rotimi introduced some dramatic perspectives to his version.

Oba Koso written by Duro Ladipo is another historical play that dramatises the myth-historical saga of Sango, the Alaafin of Oyo who was later deified as the god of thunder and lightning and retribution. The play was performed at the Mbari Mbayo Club in Osogbo, Nigeria in 1963 to coincide with Nigeria becoming a republic. The play has also been performed by the National Theatre of Nigeria and Kwara State University Festival on July 9, 2024.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a historical play that is based on the cultural practice whereby when the king dies in the Old Oyo Empire, his horseman must die with him in

order to accompany him to the world beyond. The play was performed by the final year 400-level students of the Department of Performing Arts, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria on July 24, 2025.

The 2018 Convocation Play entitled *Basorun Gaa* is a historical play that dramatises the absurdity and the despotism that characterised the reign of Basorun Gaa, the Prime Minister and the Head of the Kingmakers popularly called the *Oyo Mesi* in the Old Oyo Empire, which in history is called Oyo Ile. Basorun Gaa ruled Old Oyo Empire between 1750 and 1774 with absolute authority. His word was law, and his authority was absolute and unquestionable. He paraded himself, and boasted of his mystical and metaphysical powers that engendered his invincibility and unassailability.

He was said to have authorised and supervised the death of four Alaafins including Alaafin Osinyago, Alaafin Ajagbo and Alaafin Odarawu the last of which was Alaafin Majeogbe. According to the Oyo mythology, all the Alaafins were reported to be tyrannical. Hence, their removal and eventual death became inevitable. Basorun Gaa must have, therefore, been influenced by the despotic tendencies in these Alaafins that he became a terror to the entire Oyo Empire. His sons and slaves such as Obe and Olayiitan had the support of Basorun to kill the innocent and unleash terror on the land without being called to question. While his slaves and sons were celebrated for these inanities, and their controllable serial killings, those who dared to report them were sent to their early graves. Basorun instilled fear and terror upon the land. Also, he usurped the power of the Alaafin, and legitimised lawlessness and rebellion.

Synopsis of the Play

With the death of Alaafin Majeogbe, the young Adegolu was installed by Basorun Gaa as the next Alaafin in the hope that his reign would make a difference because of his youthfulness. Unfortunately, Alaafin Adegolu was overcome by the fear of Basorun Gaa, as he submitted his authority to Basorun Gaa. In order to curry the favour of Basorun Gaa so that he could have a peaceful reign, he was counselled by Kudeefu, one of the most reliable elders in the palace, to visit Basorun Gaa and pay him homage from time to time. The idea was accepted by him, and he often visited Basorun Gaa to seek his support. The visit, in Yoruba tradition, is considered a taboo, but it was inevitable for Adegolu.

Due to lack of discretion and the fear of the unknown, Adegolu became Basorun Gaa's trampling pad, and asked that his daughter, Agbonyin should become the next Alaafin after his death. This information was leaked to Basorun Gaa, who saw it as an assault on the collective sensibilities of Oyo Mesi and the entire Oyo Empire. Basorun Gaa thus became edgy and uncomfortable with Adegolu's position. In an unmitigated display of his perfidious, treacherous and bestial personality, surreptitiously, Basorun Gaa offered Agbonyin as sacrifice to his *Ifa* under the pretext that there was no difference between the phonemic and phonetic configuration of Agbonrin (deer) and Agbonyin (the name of Adegolu's daughter).

With the gruesome murder of Agbonyin, Alaafin Adegolu was heartbroken and distraught. He secretly sought the help and support of Oyaabi, the Are Onakankanfo in Ajase land for vengeance and for the overthrown of his despotic regime.

In 1774, Aare Onakankanfo mobilised his soldiers and attacked the compound of Basorun Gaa, and killed his entire households. Apparently, Basorun Gaa's power had failed him because the witches who had been empowering him had withdrawn their support from him. Basorun Gaa was overpowered and taken to Akesan market where his body was dismembered. This then brought an end to Basorun Gaa's reign of terror. The moral lesson that is drawn from the story and the play is in the popular saying "Boo laya o sika, boo ranti iku Gaa ki o sooto." The meaning of this is that, "The wicked might change their ways if they remember the sad end of Gaa."

Wole Soyinka, in *Kongi's Harvest*, is correct therefore when he says

Imprecations then, curses on all inventors of agonies, on all Messiahs of pain and false burdens... On all who fashion chains, on farmers of terror, on builders of walls, on all who guard against the night but breed darkness by day, on all whose feet are heavy and yet stand upon the world... On all who see, not with eyes of the dead, but with the eyes of Death... (45).

The Significance of Semiotics in Analysing Props in Theatre

Props as used in theatrical performances have visual, cultural and symbolic significances. Semiotics which is concerned with the study of sounds and symbols enables one to analyse how these props convey deeper meaning beyond their functional roles. With the lens of semiotics, props are turned into tools of communication to help to decode their role in the analysis of

character and thematic development. Props have both denotative and connotative meanings. An ordinary object according to Chandler (2007) may have a deeper meaning. For instance, a crown on stage may denote royalty, but semiotics helps us to see power as its connotative meaning.

Also, props according to Barthes (1972) have cultural and mythological significance. In Yoruba theatre, *gangan* (talking drum) is not an ordinary musical instrument, it symbolises communication and ancestral bond while *bata* may be seen as just a drum whereas semiotically, it is used in honouring Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder. *Bata* is also used symbolically by Sango's devotees to connect to Sango.

Semiotics also shows how props can signify the identity or status of the character according to Eco (1976). For instance, the traditional mat serves as a material on which people sit or spread their objects, but in semiotics, it may indicate traditionalism or spiritualism. Besides, props in the theatre can enhance thematic depth by serving as metaphors. According to Elam (1980), in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the horseman's girdle symbolises duty, ancestral continuity and tragic failure. Props can also semiotically foreshadow events or arouse previous occurrences in the play (Bal, 2009). For instance, a blood-stained dagger or a skull on stage may foreshadow death while a wedding veil or wedding dress may foreshadow wedding in a live performance.

Semiotic Analysis of the Props

Prop 1: Caskets.

Twelve caskets were positioned on the stage at the beginning of the play as planting devices to represent the burial grounds of the twelve kings that were murdered untimely by Basorun because they were tyrannical and despotic during their reigns as Alaafin of Oyo. Some of the kings are: Oba Labisi (1750), Oba Awonbioju (1750), Oba Agboluaje (1750-1770) and Oba Majeogbe (1770-1772). They also show the wickedness and despotism of Basorun who exercised the power to install and dethrone any Alaafin. The casket scene, which serves as the exposition of the play, is a foreshadow of the mood of the play. The audience is presented with a sense of horror and with a tragic message that the play envisions. Caskets are ritual symbols of death. Where many caskets are placed symbolizes the cemetery, and the cemetery as depicted on

stage is the physical symbol and the ritual scene of the dead. The caskets are, therefore, the semiotic signs of the cemetery of the dead.

Prop 2: Kolanuts

In the play, Agbonyin, the daughter of Alaafin Adegolu is seen hawking kolanuts by carrying on her head a basket of kolanuts. This is the practice in the traditional Yoruba communities. When Basorun Gaa hears Agboyin's voice, she sends for her to buy kolanuts even though the purchase is done to trap her. However, the play highlights the cultural and the spiritual significance of kolanuts. They are used in traditional ceremonies such as naming ceremonies to pray for the baby because it is believed, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), that eating kolanuts prolongs life. Hence the popular saying by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* "He who brings kola brings life" (5).

Kolanuts are also used for rituals and social gatherings. In Ifa divination, kolanuts are used to offer prayers to the deities either to invoke or appease them. It is also used as a mode of communication with the ancestors. Kolanuts are primarily the nuts of the elders; hence the proverb "Enu agba lobi ti ngbo" (The final word or ruling must come from the elders.) In this play, kolanuts signify the rich Yoruba cultural heritage. That is why kolanuts are shared to promote social bonding, unity and respect. That explains why kolanuts are sent to Basorun Gaa as gifts when his palace is burnt. So, kolanuts in the performance are the semiotic signs of the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba people in the Southwest Nigeria.

Prop 3: Mortar and Pestle

In the performance, mortar and pestle constitute parts of the props used. In the Yoruba traditional societies, mortar and pestle have culinary significance because they are essential tools for preparing traditional foods such as *Iyan*. They are also used to prepare traditional medicine such as herbal remedies and concoctions. For instance, some barks and roots are pounded to powder to form herbal remedies for some ailments. In addition, these props can symbolize unity, hard work and diligence. They are also reflections of the cherished Yoruba cultural practices. In the play, mortar and pestle are semiotic signs of the Yoruba culture and the significant role that they play in the daily lives of the traditional Yoruba women. The props also enhance the setting of the

play as an old indigenous play as against the contemporary time when modern pounding machines are used.

Prop 4: Clay Pot

Local clay pots are used traditionally in African societies for cultural and spiritual purposes. First, clay pots are used as water storage for drinking. It is believed that it preserves the natural essence of the water and also chills it which the modern refrigerator performs today. Besides, clay pots are believed to be some of the cultic objects used by witches and wizards in their covens to store their charms or mysterious birds according to Elebuibon (2019). In the witchcraft parlance, it is called “ikoko aye” (the pot of the mysterious women or the pot of witches). In the play, the mystical powers of *Basorun Gaa* are kept inside the black clay pot to protect him against his enemies as instructed by the witches that endowed him with mystic powers.

In many traditional festivals in Africa, especially in Ondo and Ekiti States of Nigeria, women place clay pots on their heads with fire burning inside them while they continue to dance. Mysteriously, the fire does not go off during the performance unless there is interference by some higher negative energy. In the play under discussion, clay pots are used by the women cast to exhibit the rich Yoruba culture. Clay pots are semiotic signs that evoke the themes of home, family and daily life. They are also semiotic signs of the traditional Yoruba craftsmanship and aesthetics and cultural authenticity, especially in this modern age where the traditional African culture is being eroded by the agents of globalization, acculturation and neo-colonialism which Chinua Achebe tackles in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The wanton display of local clay pots in the live performance of *Basorun Gaa* enhances the richness of the Yoruba cultural heritage. More importantly, the clay pots are portrayed as mystic tools of witches for concealing their mysterious powers from the neophytes.

Prop 5: Traditional Mats

Traditional mats are also parts of the props used in the play. The traditional Yoruba local mat is a rich semiotic object. It is far more than a locally woven object. In the traditional Yoruba word view, it encodes the deep meaning of sacredness, transition, humility and identity and life continuity. In the play, the elders and chiefs sit on the mats for very serious discussion. Literally, the mat levels the ground for everybody. The semiotic interpretation of this is that the mat

symbolizes classless dialogue, community unanimity and self-effacement before the Yoruba tradition. Metaphorically, the mat becomes a sacred space for communal dialogue and a social signifier of social equality whereas in the modern society fashionable chairs of various types are signifiers of social inequality. In other words, chairs are arranged according to the social class of the people.

Prop 6: Cow's Horn

Cow's horns are some of the insignia that show the bravery of hunters in the traditional African societies; as they reveal the type of animals that the hunters have killed during their hunting expeditions. Hunters with the horns of wild animals such as markhor, pronghorn, addax and impala show that such hunters are courageous and ferocious, while hunters with the horns of non-wild or lesser animals such as cattle (longhorn) or deer show their status also. Besides, animal horns symbolise strength and power. They also reflect the Yoruba's deep connection with nature, spirituality and their rich symbolic language. In various ceremonies and rituals as seen in the play under discussion, animals' horns are used for divine invocation and also as art forms of cultural identity. In the cross invocation between Akinkumi and Basorun Gaa who killed Agbonyin, the fiancée of Akinkumi, horns were used to invoke curses and cast spells. Horns as props, therefore, are semiotically significant as tools of invocation.

Prop 7: Ayo Olopon (Yoruba Board Game)

Ayo Olopon, a traditional Yoruba board game is an important part of Yoruba cultural identity, as it promotes social cohesion, intellectual growth and competition, strategic thinking, problem-solving, cultural heritage and preservation. It is very common in a typical Yoruba society to see men playing this game. It is a meeting point for men to interact and discuss public issues that affect their society as seen in this play. It is also a forum for gathering of secret information about individuals in society. In this play, it is during *Ayo Olopon* game that the wrangling and the power struggle between Basorun Gaa and Adegolu were discussed. It was there that people gossip about the tragic flaw of Adegolu who had publicly said that his daughter would succeed him instead of keeping quiet without which, Basorun Gaa his rival, would not have known. This board game signifies a social interaction medium that gives opportunity for men in the community to be informed surreptitiously about what is going on.

Prop 8: Horse Whisk (Irukere)

Horse whisk (Irukere) is very rich in symbolism and holds significant semiotic meaning in Yoruba culture. It is an emblem of royalty and nobility, authority and power, status and prestige. It is usually associated with the traditional kings and chiefs and held in their hands. It is often used in royal ceremonies and rituals as they constitute part of the traditional attire and regalia symbolising office or position. In this play, Alaaḥin Adegolu holds the horse whisk in his hands and sits upon the throne of Alaaḥin. Nobody can hold the horse whisk in the traditional society if he is not a traditional ruler or else he will be spiritually sanctioned. The horse whisk, as used in this live performance, reflects the Yoruba cultural tradition and recognition for authority and leadership. Horse whisks are therefore semiotic signifiers of positions of authority.

Prop 9: Royal Coral Beads (Ileke/Iyun)

Just as the horse whisks are significant for royalty and nobility, authority and power, royal coral beads (Ileke) as royal regalia and adornment also symbolise royalty and nobility. In addition, they connect man to the divine. They are worn by traditional rulers and those that hold traditional and cultic positions. In this live performance, royal coral beads are worn on the necks of Alaaḥin Adegolu and the chiefs in Oyo Alaaḥin although the royal beads worn by Alaaḥin Adegolu are significantly more elegant than the ones used by his other chiefs. Royal beads project the richness of the Yoruba cultural heritage and also signify traditional offices occupied by individuals.

Prop 10: A Gourd of Palm Wine

The gourd of palm wine as used as a prop in this live performance represents the rich cultural tradition and communal spirit of the Yoruba people. It symbolises hospitality, celebration of joy, community and social bonding. In some occasions, palm wine is offered to ancestors and the deities either to placate them or to seek for their favour. In this live performance, the community members sit and drink palm wine to communicate and share their joys with one another. So, the gourd of palm wine signifies community's expression and promotion of conviviality and geniality.

Conclusion

The dramatisation of the play calls to remembrance the place of tyrants in the trajectories of Yoruba history. It demonstrates and celebrates the bravery of the Yoruba people in its conquests and acquisition of territories during the pre-colonial days that were characterised by wars, rebellion, despotism and betrayal. It was a tumultuous celebration of lawlessness and absolutism with impunity.

For postcolonial critics and scholars, the play is significant for it is a warning for emerging political leaders against descent to fascism and totalitarianism which are viewed globally, especially in post-independence nations as a form of internal colonisation. This is because according to Niyi Osundare, “the tyrant’s will and the wheel of the world are different lots, a different mould, the door once locked by the tyrant’s whims are thrown ajar by History’s fumes.”

Besides, the play is a humongous and wanton display of the richness of Yoruba cultural heritage for it reminds us of the linguistic repertoire of Oyo dialect. It also countenances the cultural essence of Oyo people through the appropriate props that hold significant semiotic meanings. Lastly, it is the tapestry of African cultural and historical heritage. Adebayo Faleti must, therefore, be commended for his creative ingenuity, literary sagacity and dramatic perspicacity.

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