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History as a Source of Dramaturgy: A Study of *Obaseki* and *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

Yakubu Dennis Azegbeobor
Department of Theatre Arts and Music, University of Benin

Abstract

There is a sustained interplay between history and dramaturgy that has remained central to dramatic scholarship across cultures. Playwrights have persistently turned to the past not merely to reproduce historical events but to interrogate their meanings for present and future societies. In African drama, recourse to history functions as a potent artistic and ideological strategy through which dramatists challenge colonial historiography, reclaim cultural memory, and interrogate the moral and political implications of leadership. This paper examines history as a source of dramaturgy through a comparative analysis of two historical plays, Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* and Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Although both plays draw from the same historical setting, they dramatize history in different ways. While Obaseki focuses on the controversial role of Chief Obaseki within the colonial administrative structure, Rotimi emphasizes cultural dignity through his portrayal of Oba Ovonramwen as a fallen but resilient monarch. The paper argues that these different dramaturgical strategies demonstrate how historical drama transcends mere retelling to become a site of reinterpretation, and cultural critique. Methodologically, the study adopts a close textual and comparative dramaturgical analysis, examining characterization, thematic emphasis, and performance aesthetics within the broader tradition of African historical drama. Drawing on historiographic and postcolonial theory, the paper contends that history, when appropriated as dramaturgy, becomes a dynamic and performative medium rather than a static archive. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that historical drama in African theatre functions as cultural memory work, and critical lens through which contemporary moral, political, and existential realities are examined.

Keywords: History, Dramaturgy, African Historical Drama, Colonial Encounter, Cultural Memory

Introduction

Drama has consistently engaged with historical processes, from the ritual enactments of ancient Greek theatre to the politically charged stages of modern protest drama. Across cultures and epochs, playwrights have mined the past as a source of inspiration, interpretation, and contestation, transforming historical experience into dramatic form. History, in this sense, extends beyond the documentation of past events to function as a living repository of human experience that can be reimagined and reshaped on stage. Dramaturgy, understood as the art and technique of dramatic composition, provides the creative framework through which this transformation occurs. When history and drama intersect, the result is not a neutral narrative, but an interpretive act imbued with symbolic, ideological, and ethical significance. The stage thus becomes a space where memory is performed and meaning actively negotiated.

African theatre offers a particularly fertile context for examining this interface between history and dramaturgy. Colonialism not only disrupted African political and social systems but also distorted indigenous histories through Eurocentric historiography that frequently denied Africa a meaningful past. In response, African playwrights have turned to drama as a means of historical recovery, reinterpretation, and cultural reclamation. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o observes, literature and drama function as sites of resistance in which the past is repossessed in order to contest the present and imagine alternative futures (67). Within this framework, history ceases to be a static record and becomes a dynamic process that engages performers and audiences in critical dialogue with the past. Dramatic representations of history thus serve both aesthetic and ideological purposes in African theatre.

In Nigeria, the dramatization of history has remained a dominant feature of post-independence dramatic writing. Playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ahmed Yerima, and Ola Rotimi have consistently drawn on historical and mythic materials to interrogate questions of leadership, social justice, and cultural identity. Soyinka's engagement with myth and history, particularly in *Death and the King's Horseman*, explores the complexities of cultural collision and moral responsibility under colonial rule. Osofisan frequently reworks historical events and legends to expose social injustice and political corruption, while Yerima employs historical figures to reflect on resistance and governance in Northern Nigeria. Rotimi, often described as "the people's playwright," is especially noted for his historical dramas that transform key moments in Nigerian history into accessible and ideologically resonant theatrical narratives.

It is within this tradition that this paper interrogates history as a source of dramaturgy in Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* and Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. Both plays dramatize the Benin Kingdom during the colonial encounter, yet they adopt contrasting dramaturgical perspectives. Obaseki's play examines the morally fraught figure of Chief Obaseki, whose collaboration with British colonial authorities raises enduring questions about betrayal, pragmatism, and survival, while Rotimi's play revisits the 1897 British punitive expedition against Benin, presenting Oba Ovonramwen as a tragic hero whose dignity and cultural pride persist despite defeat and exile. By juxtaposing these works, the study argues that African historical drama is inherently selective and interpretive, revealing how playwrights reshape history to engage contemporary moral and political concerns.

Conceptual Framework: History and Dramaturgy

The relationship between history and dramaturgy has long occupied scholars because both disciplines rely on narrative to represent human experience across time. While history seeks to document and interpret past events, dramaturgy reconstitutes those events through performance, symbol, and imaginative reconstruction. Neither process is neutral, as both involve acts of selection, emphasis, and interpretation shaped by ideological and aesthetic considerations. When history becomes material for drama, it

is transformed from archival record into performative meaning, capable of engaging audiences emotionally, intellectually, and politically. Historical drama therefore operates at the intersection of fact and imagination, where memory is shaped as much by narrative structure as by empirical evidence. This framework understands history not as a fixed truth but as a dynamic resource continually reinterpreted through theatrical form.

Historiography has increasingly emphasized the representational nature of historical writing. Traditional positivist approaches once treated history as an objective reconstruction of "what actually happened," but twentieth-century theorists have challenged this assumption. Hayden White argues that historical narratives are emplotted stories shaped by literary tropes, ideological choices, and narrative structures similar to those found in fiction (82). From this perspective, historians, like dramatists, construct meaning rather than simply recover it. This view aligns closely with dramatic adaptations of history, which foreground the selective and interpretive nature of historical representation. A counter-argument, often advanced by empirical historians, insists on the necessity of factual fidelity in historical narratives; however, even these positions concede that interpretation is unavoidable in the organization of historical material. Dramatic representations thus make visible what historiography often conceals: the narrative labour involved in producing meaning from the past.

Dramaturgy functions as a transformative process through which historical material is reshaped into theatrical experience. As the craft of dramatic composition, dramaturgy encompasses structure, characterization, dialogue, symbolism, and performance aesthetics. When applied to history, dramaturgy does not merely translate events from one medium to another; it reconfigures them to address contemporary concerns. Bertolt Brecht's theory of epic theatre underscores this function by insisting that historical drama should reveal the constructed nature of social reality and invite critical reflection rather than passive consumption (86). Brecht's position challenges deterministic readings of history by presenting the past as contingent and shaped by human choices. Although some critics argue that such an approach risks politicizing history at the expense of nuance, it remains influential in understanding historical drama as a space of inquiry rather than commemoration.

Globally, dramatists have long drawn on history as a source of dramaturgical innovation. William Shakespeare's history plays, such as *Richard III* and *Julius Caesar*, exemplify how historical narratives are reshaped to foreground character, moral conflict, and political intrigue rather than strict factual accuracy. In the twentieth century, playwrights such as Brecht and Jean Anouilh similarly reworked historical figures to interrogate contemporary political realities. These global examples demonstrate that history in drama functions less as documentation and more as a lens through which enduring questions of power, leadership, and morality are examined. Critics who fault such plays for historical distortion often overlook the fact that dramaturgy operates by symbolic condensation rather than comprehensive representation. Historical drama, therefore, gains its force not from completeness but from its capacity to render complex realities intelligible through performance.

In the African context, historical dramaturgy carries heightened political and cultural significance due to the legacy of colonial historiography. Colonial narratives frequently denied African societies historical depth, portraying them as static or ahistorical until European intervention. This view, famously articulated in Hegel's dismissal of Africa as "no historical part of the world" (99), has been widely challenged by African scholars and artists. African playwrights have responded by reclaiming history through drama, using the stage as a site of cultural recovery and ideological resistance. Plays such as Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Osofisan's *Morountodun*, and Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* demonstrate how history is dramatized to assert agency, critique power, and affirm cultural identity. Far from being nostalgic reconstructions, these works engage history as a living dialogue between past and

present.

African historical drama is also deeply rooted in oral performance traditions, where history has long been transmitted through ritual, song, praise poetry, and communal storytelling. As Okpewho notes, African oral forms blend factual remembrance with imaginative elaboration, collapsing the boundary between history and performance (21). This tradition renders the transition from oral history to written drama a continuation rather than a rupture. Consequently, African historical dramaturgy often integrates ritual, music, and collective participation, reinforcing the performative nature of historical memory. While some critics caution that such aesthetic strategies may romanticize the past, proponents argue that they recover indigenous epistemologies marginalized by colonial frameworks. Within this context, history on stage becomes both cultural archive and site of contestation.

Finally, any engagement with history as dramaturgy must address the politics of representation. Historical drama inevitably raises questions about whose history is told, from whose perspective, and to what ideological ends. Paul Ricoeur observes that memory and history are contested terrains shaped by acts of inclusion and exclusion (89). Dramatic representations intervene in these contests by foregrounding certain voices while marginalizing others. In African historical drama, this politics often manifests in the tension between resistance and collaboration, heroism and betrayal. By dramatizing these tensions, playwrights do not resolve historical debates but keep them open for critical reflection. History, when transformed through dramaturgy, thus becomes not a closed narrative of the past but an ongoing ethical and political conversation.

Case Study 1: Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki*

Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* dramatizes a contentious chapter in the history of the Benin Kingdom by foregrounding the figure of Chief Obaseki, a powerful indigenous intermediary whose collaboration with British colonial authorities has remained a subject of historical and moral debate. Rather than presenting a heroic narrative of resistance, the play interrogates the ambiguous space occupied by indigenous elites during colonial encounters. Chief Obaseki emerges as a figure shaped by ambition, pragmatism, and political calculation, whose actions complicate simplistic binaries of patriotism and betrayal. By centring the narrative on such a contested character, the play shifts historical dramaturgy away from celebratory nationalism toward ethical inquiry. History, in this context, becomes a medium for examining moral compromise under colonial domination. The play thus situates itself within a tradition of African historical drama that is self-critical rather than merely recuperative.

The historical backdrop of *Obaseki* is the aftermath of the 1897 British punitive expedition against Benin, which led to the exile of Oba Ovonramwen and the destabilization of indigenous political authority. In the resulting power vacuum, colonial administrators relied on select local chiefs to govern indirectly, thereby reshaping traditional hierarchies. Chief Obaseki's rise within this colonial framework forms the dramatic nucleus of the play. Pedro Obaseki does not treat this rise as a straightforward narrative of treachery but as a complex negotiation of power within an environment defined by coercion and uncertainty. This approach reflects contemporary historiographic perspectives that caution against reducing colonial subjects to moral absolutes. Instead, the play dramatizes history as a field of constrained choices rather than free moral agency.

At the thematic core of *Obaseki* lies the problem of betrayal, particularly the betrayal of communal values and traditional authority. The play portrays collaboration not simply as individual moral failure but as a structural condition produced by colonial rule. Chief Obaseki's alignment with British officials exposes the internal fractures that colonialism exploited to consolidate power. This emphasis resonates with Frantz Fanon's critique of the colonized elite, whom he identifies as mediators of colonial domination rather than its victims alone. However, the play resists reducing Obaseki to a caricature of treachery. Instead, it presents betrayal as gradual, rationalized, and

often masked as pragmatism or survival, thereby unsettling moral certainties.

> **EZOMO**: Ologbose is making the whiteman's mind sour. His war is misguided they say. And their patience runs thin.
> **OBASEKI**: Let it run thin, Ologbose can go on with his fight against the white ones . . . caution is the word. One moans a fellowman's death with caution. Least you pay with your head.
> **EZOMO**: On whose side are you, Obaseki? Ologbose's or the white One's?
> **OBASEKI:** Sure that is not what you come for, my brave friend.

Pedro Obaseki further complicates the narrative by staging Chief Obaseki's internal conflicts alongside external pressures. The protagonist's interactions with traditional leaders, colonial officials, and members of his household reveal a man caught between competing allegiances. His embrace of Western education and administrative structures symbolizes both adaptation and alienation, reflecting the broader cultural dislocation produced by colonial modernity. Critics might argue that such a portrayal risks normalizing collaboration; however, the play's sustained moral tension prevents easy justification. The audience is invited not to absolve Obaseki but to confront the uncomfortable realities of power negotiated under domination. In this sense, the play functions as ethical dramaturgy rather than historical apology.

> **OBASEKI**: You are not with your brothers at the farm. Why?
>
> **AGBONIFO**: I have not completed my school assignment for tomorrow, father.
>
> **OBASEKI**: Aa-ha. Those strange figures of the whiteones. Their art of writing, is it not? They fascinate me and I think that is where their magic and witchcraft came from.
> **AGBONIFO**: It is not magic or witchcraft father. It is a matter of having to think like them. Once you do, the rest is easy.
> **OBASEKI**: Yes. Hence I am sending you to their school along with your brothers. To learm their art. Witchcraft or not.

Dramaturgically, *Obaseki* relies heavily on dialogue-driven conflict to advance its historical inquiry. Power struggles are articulated through confrontational exchanges rather than spectacle, emphasizing psychological tension over epic grandeur. This stylistic choice distinguishes Pedro Obaseki's approach from more ritual-centered historical dramas and aligns the play with realist traditions that foreground moral psychology. At the same time, indigenous performance elements—such as proverbs, symbolic gestures, and communal commentary—anchor the play firmly within its cultural milieu. These elements counterbalance the colonial setting by reaffirming indigenous epistemologies even as they are shown to be under threat.

> **RESIDENT:** I'll go straight to the essentials. The exiled Oba is dead and a vacuum has been really created. I called you here Chief Obaseki, to first sample your opinion as to what should be done in the present circumstance.
> **OBASEKI:** I do not think that is a real problem because there might be no real problem white one. The Binis know who should be Oba.
> **DO:** Who?
> **OBASEKI:** Aiguobasimwin is heir to his father's throne.
> **RESIDENT:** I see
> **DO:** Watch, Mr. Watt. No man gives up power so easy. He is used to giving orders.
> **RESIDENT:** He is being humble and I respect that quality.
> **DO:** No! He is being tactful. A snake, that is what he is. I don't trust him.
> **RESIDENT:** I will summon a meeting of the prominent chiefts

> immediately. I advice you, Chief Obaseki to think my proposal over.
> **OBASEKI:** I tell you, I cannot be. But think about it, I will.

A significant contribution of *Obaseki* lies in its interrogation of leadership during colonial transition. The play suggests that colonial domination was facilitated not only by external military force but also by internal crises of legitimacy and authority. By dramatizing the complicity of indigenous elites, the play extends its critique beyond the colonial past to contemporary African politics, where similar patterns of elite betrayal persist. Some scholars caution against reading colonial collaboration as a direct analogue for postcolonial governance; nevertheless, the parallels drawn by the play remain compelling. Historical dramaturgy here becomes a mirror through which present political anxieties are refracted.

Ultimately, Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* expands the scope of African historical drama by centering moral ambiguity rather than heroic resistance. Its refusal to offer clear moral resolutions underscores the complexity of colonial history and challenges audiences to engage critically with the past. By transforming a controversial historical figure into a site of ethical reflection, the play demonstrates how history, when appropriated as dramaturgy, becomes a living discourse rather than a settled narrative. In doing so, *Obaseki* affirms the theatre's capacity to interrogate history not as a static archive, but as an ongoing conversation about power, responsibility, and cultural survival.

Case Study 2: Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* stands as one of the most significant works of African historical drama, dramatizing the fall of the Benin Kingdom following the British punitive expedition of 1897. First staged in 1971 and published in 1974, the play revisits a moment of profound historical rupture marked by conquest, exile, and cultural devastation. While rooted in historical events, Rotimi's play is not a documentary reconstruction but a dramaturgical reinterpretation that fuses fact with symbolic invention. Through this process, history is transformed into a tragic narrative that foregrounds leadership, cultural dignity, and the violence of imperial domination. The play exemplifies how African dramatists mobilize history not merely to remember the past but to interrogate its moral and political implications. In doing so, Rotimi situates theatre as a medium of cultural memory and ideological resistance.

The historical context of the play is the collapse of Benin's political sovereignty under British imperial expansion. Prior to colonial intervention, the Benin Kingdom possessed a complex political structure, rich ritual life, and a renowned artistic tradition. The British invasion, justified under the guise of enforcing trade treaties, resulted in the sacking of Benin City, the looting of cultural artefacts, and the exile of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar, where he later died. Rotimi dramatizes this episode as a cultural trauma rather than a civilizing mission, countering colonial narratives that framed the conquest as benevolent intervention. By returning this history to the stage, the play restores agency to African perspectives that colonial historiography systematically marginalized. History here becomes an act of remembrance infused with critique.

> Your Majesty! It is the custom that for seven days while this ceremony of Ague goes on, there must be no drumming in the land, and no visits to Benin by strangers. For two hundred years my fathers before me led this ceremony of Ague without trouble! Why, I ask your Majesty, is it in my life ime that the madness of drumming and stranger visits should break up this solemn worship and so bring eternal curse upon my ageing head?

At the centre of the play is the figure of Oba Ovonramwen, portrayed as a tragic hero whose downfall arises from both external aggression and internal limitations. Rotimi crafts a ruler who is proud, authoritative, and deeply committed to the spiritual and

cultural order of his kingdom, yet at times rigid and autocratic in his exercise of power. This ambivalence aligns Ovonramwen with the classical tragic tradition, where greatness and flaw coexist within the same figure. Unlike celebratory nationalist portrayals, Rotimi allows the Oba's weaknesses to surface, thereby humanizing him without diminishing his symbolic stature. The tragedy of Ovonramwen lies not solely in personal error but in the overwhelming force of colonial violence that renders resistance futile. The play thus frames tragedy as historically produced rather than purely individual.

> Because the moon is dim, the eyes of little stars cast a carefree glitter.
> Obaduagbon, Esasoyen, and the rest of you . . . yours stars have this day
> Consumed themselves in the heat of their own unwisdom. This night, you all die.
> In their bitter response the chiefs by way of foretelling states:
> Today is your day: Tomorrow belongs to another! Indeed the whiteman who is stronger than you will soon come!

One of the dominant thematic concerns of *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is resistance, articulated through cultural assertion rather than military triumph. Rotimi emphasizes the rituals, ceremonies, and symbolic practices that structure Benin society, presenting them as expressions of communal identity and spiritual continuity. These cultural forms stand in stark contrast to the utilitarian logic of colonial commerce and conquest. By foregrounding ritual performance, the play asserts that resistance is not only enacted through armed struggle but also through the preservation of meaning, memory, and worldview. Critics who privilege overt political resistance may view this emphasis as passive; however, Rotimi's dramaturgy insists that cultural survival itself constitutes a form of defiance. The stage thus becomes a site where cultural endurance confronts imperial erasure.

Ritual functions as a central dramaturgical device in the play, shaping both structure and meaning. Coronations, invocations of ancestral spirits, communal songs, and symbolic gestures infuse the dramatic action with sacred significance. These elements situate the play within African performance traditions where history, spirituality, and aesthetics are inseparable. At the same time, ritual acquires tragic resonance as its protective power proves insufficient against colonial violence. The collapse of ritual efficacy mirrors the collapse of political sovereignty, signaling a world turned upside down. Rather than diminishing African culture, this breakdown underscores the brutality of colonial intrusion, which disrupts not only governance but the metaphysical foundations of society. Through ritual, Rotimi dramatizes loss without surrendering dignity.

> **USO:** We say one thing to our bush traders, the whiteman gets up and commands another thing. Who owns Benin? The whiteman or we?
> **IYASE:** Your majesty our teeth have touched a bone. To break custom and so anger the gods or to break the whiteman's pride with resistance to his coming.
> **OBAYUWANA:** Gods! What is Benin coming to?
> **OLOGBOSERE:** A fierce snake sleeping.
> **OVONRAMWEN:** That may be so. But because a fierce snake sleeps, does not mean it has lost its power to kill if rudely vexed! Caution is our word, my people. Let the whiteman rudely prod us further, in spite of caution, then he will know that the way a cat walks is not the way it catches a rat!

The British characters in the play are deliberately rendered with limited psychological depth, functioning primarily as agents of imperial power. Their dialogue foregrounds

commerce, efficiency, and strategic calculation, sharply contrasting with the spiritual and communal language of the Benin characters. This dramaturgical choice has attracted criticism for oversimplifying colonial figures; however, it serves a clear ideological function. By refusing to humanize imperial aggressors, Rotimi recenters African experience and exposes the dehumanizing logic of empire. Colonial violence is thus presented not as misunderstanding but as deliberate economic and political domination. The play's moral alignment remains firmly with the colonized without descending into sentimentality.

> Commerce, Mr. Cambell! That is your answers! I get the blame from London for every blasted minute that passes without enforcement of the 1892 trade treaty with Benin. But for how long, gentlemen, Must British trade policy remain crippled by the whims and ritual taboos of a fetish priest-king? Forever? What then are we in Africa for? What object bring us here? Commence, gentlemen!
>
> Commerce brought us to Africa: and commerce determines our actions in Africa! And actions means taking risks, gentlemen!

Beyond its historical specificity, *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* engages broader questions of leadership and legitimacy. Rotimi interrogates the limits of traditional authority in moments of crisis, revealing how centralized power can both unify and endanger a community. Ovonramwen's authority is depicted as sacred yet vulnerable, sustained by ritual and belief but challenged by dissent and fear. This portrayal complicates idealized notions of precolonial governance by acknowledging internal tensions within African polities. At the same time, the play resists colonial arguments that present African leadership as inherently deficient. Instead, it locates failure within the asymmetrical power relations imposed by imperial conquest.

The play also operates as a corrective to colonial historical narratives that justified the Benin expedition as a necessary intervention. By dramatizing the destruction of Benin's cultural and political life, Rotimi reclaims historical memory as a tool of decolonization. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emphasize that the recovery of history is central to cultural liberation, as a people deprived of memory risk losing their sense of self (70). Rotimi's dramaturgy aligns with this position by transforming the stage into an archive of lived experience. The performance of history thus becomes an act of resistance against historical erasure.

> **OLOGBOSERE**: MY brother – the defence of Benin itself is in our hands!
>
> **MOOR**: Gentlemen, the City of Benin must fall within eight days!
>
> **OVORAMWEN** (to Ologbosere): I put in your hands the spirit of the empire. Let it Live, let it breathe. Child of the chameleon rarely dies young. This is the life of the nation.
> Defend it, protect it. . . let it . . . . . breathe.

Ologbosere accept the "ada" after the invocation.A distinguishing feature of *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is its communal dimension. Unlike Pedro Obaseki's psychologically centered drama, Rotimi's play foregrounds collective experience. Chiefs, priests, warriors, and commoners populate the stage, offering multiple perspectives on the unfolding catastrophe. This multiplicity of voices prevents the narrative from collapsing into heroic individualism and instead emphasizes the shared trauma of colonial conquest. The fall of the Oba is simultaneously the fall of a people, a civilization, and a worldview. Through this collective framing, Rotimi expands tragedy from personal downfall to cultural catastrophe.

Ultimately, *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* exemplifies the power of historical dramaturgy to preserve memory while provoking critical reflection. Rotimi does not present history as a closed chapter but as an ongoing conversation about power, identity, and

resistance. By dramatizing defeat without humiliation and loss without surrender, the play affirms the resilience of African culture in the face of imperial violence. History, when rendered through dramaturgy, becomes not a tale of inevitable decline but a testament to dignity under erasure. In this sense, Rotimi's play remains a foundational text in African theatre, demonstrating how the stage can transform historical trauma into enduring cultural meaning.

Comparative Analysis

Obaseki and *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* and Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* are united by a shared historical setting—the Benin Kingdom during the colonial encounter—yet they diverge significantly in dramaturgical focus, ideological orientation, and representational strategy. Together, the plays illustrate how history, when appropriated as dramaturgy, is neither singular nor stable but plural, contested, and open to reinterpretation. Each playwright selects different entry points into the same historical moment, revealing how dramatic form shapes historical meaning. While Obaseki interrogates the internal dynamics of collaboration and betrayal, Rotimi foregrounds external aggression and cultural resistance. This contrast underscores the central argument that historical drama is as much about perspective as it is about the past itself.

A fundamental distinction between the two plays lies in their treatment of historical causality. In *Obaseki*, colonial domination is presented as a process facilitated by internal fractures within Benin society. Chief Obaseki's collaboration with British authorities exposes how ambition, pragmatism, and political calculation undermined communal solidarity. History here unfolds as a tragedy of moral compromise, where domination is enabled from within rather than imposed solely from without. By contrast, *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* frames history primarily as violent external disruption. Rotimi's dramaturgy emphasizes military invasion, economic exploitation, and cultural desecration, portraying colonialism as an overwhelming force that crushes indigenous sovereignty. These divergent emphases reflect what historians such as Walter Rodney identify as the dual dynamics of colonialism: external exploitation and internal disarticulation (Rodney 244).

Characterization further reveals the ideological divergence between the two works. Chief Obaseki is rendered as an ambivalent figure whose intelligence and adaptability are inseparable from his moral failures. Pedro Obaseki resists the temptation to portray him as either hero or villain, instead constructing a character whose choices are shaped by fear, ambition, and historical constraint. This ambiguity aligns with contemporary historiographic approaches that caution against moral absolutism in evaluating colonial intermediaries (Afigbo 112). In contrast, Rotimi's Oba Ovonramwen is fashioned in the mold of the tragic hero, a ruler whose flaws are acknowledged but ultimately overshadowed by his dignity and symbolic stature. While Obaseki's protagonist invites ethical discomfort, Rotimi's commands moral sympathy and collective mourning.

The divergent portrayals of leadership in both plays further illuminate their dramaturgical intentions. *Obaseki* presents leadership as ethically unstable, shaped by proximity to power rather than communal accountability. Chief Obaseki's authority derives increasingly from colonial endorsement rather than traditional legitimacy, reflecting what Mamdani describes as the distortions produced by indirect rule (Mamdani 43). Leadership becomes transactional, contingent, and ultimately alienating. In *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, leadership is framed as sacred and communal, rooted in ritual, ancestry, and cosmological order. Even as Ovonramwen's authority collapses under colonial assault, it retains moral legitimacy. Rotimi thus preserves the symbolic integrity of traditional kingship while acknowledging its

vulnerability in the face of modern imperial forces.

Dramaturgically, the plays adopt contrasting aesthetic strategies that reinforce their thematic concerns. Pedro Obaseki's play relies heavily on dialogue-driven confrontation and psychological realism. Conflict unfolds through tense exchanges, revealing the erosion of trust and the moral isolation of the protagonist. This inward-looking dramaturgy mirrors the play's thematic emphasis on internal decay and ethical fragmentation. Rotimi's play, by contrast, is expansive and ceremonial, incorporating ritual, song, choral movement, and spectacle. These elements situate history within a communal and performative framework, transforming individual suffering into collective tragedy. Scholars such as Jeyifo have noted that Rotimi's epic dramaturgy deliberately resists psychological interiority in favor of social totality (Jeyifo 78).

The role of culture also functions differently across the two plays. In *Obaseki*, indigenous culture appears increasingly fragile, compromised by colonial proximity and elite collaboration. Traditional values persist, but they are continually undermined by the allure of Western education, administrative power, and material advancement. Culture becomes a site of negotiation rather than affirmation. In *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, culture is foregrounded as a source of resilience and resistance. Rituals, symbols, and oral performance forms assert continuity even as political structures collapse. This aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's assertion that culture remains a critical site of struggle under colonialism, capable of sustaining identity even when sovereignty is lost (Ngũgĩ 15).

Both plays also engage the politics of historical memory, albeit from different angles. *Obaseki* recovers a figure often marginalized or vilified in popular historical narratives, compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about complicity and moral failure. By dramatizing collaboration, the play disrupts nationalist historiographies that privilege resistance while silencing betrayal. Some critics argue that such representations risk diluting the violence of colonialism by shifting blame inward; however, Pedro Obaseki's dramaturgy does not absolve imperial power but exposes its reliance on internal divisions. In contrast, *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* recuperates a fallen monarch as a symbol of cultural pride, transforming historical defeat into dignified remembrance. Rotimi's play thus functions as a counter-memory to colonial narratives that framed the Benin expedition as civilizing intervention.

A key point of convergence between the plays lies in their refusal to present history as inevitable or morally settled. Although Rotimi's tragedy appears to suggest historical inevitability through overwhelming colonial force, the play's emphasis on resistance and dignity resists fatalism. Similarly, while *Obaseki* foregrounds compromise, it does not portray betrayal as natural or unavoidable. Both plays emphasize choice, constraint, and consequence, reinforcing Brecht's assertion that history must be shown as changeable rather than fixed (Brecht 87). In this sense, both dramatists use history to provoke ethical reflection rather than passive remembrance.

The plays also speak powerfully to postcolonial realities. *Obaseki* resonates with contemporary concerns about political betrayal, elite complicity, and the persistence of colonial structures in post-independence governance. The figure of Chief Obaseki anticipates modern political actors who mediate foreign interests while claiming national legitimacy. *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, on the other hand, speaks to the enduring importance of cultural memory and historical consciousness in resisting neocolonial erasure. Its emphasis on dignity in defeat offers a counter-narrative to discourses of African failure, asserting cultural endurance in the face of domination.

Critically, the two plays should not be read as opposing interpretations but as complementary historiographic interventions. Together, they present a more holistic account of colonial encounter, one that acknowledges both internal vulnerability and external violence. As Trouillot reminds us, historical narratives are always shaped by silences and emphases, and no single account can exhaust the complexity of the past (Trouillot 26). By juxtaposing *Obaseki* and *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, this study reveals how dramaturgy allows multiple histories to coexist, each illuminating different

dimensions of colonial experience.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis demonstrates that history as dramaturgy is not a matter of fidelity to facts alone but of ethical and ideological engagement. Pedro Obaseki and Ola Rotimi employ contrasting dramaturgical strategies to transform the same historical moment into distinct yet interconnected narratives. One exposes the moral cost of collaboration, the other memorializes the dignity of resistance. Together, they affirm the theatre's capacity to render history dynamic, dialogic, and relevant. In doing so, they underscore the enduring power of African historical drama to interrogate the past while speaking incisively to the present.

Conclusion

This study has examined history as a source of dramaturgy through a close and comparative reading of Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* and Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*, demonstrating how African historical drama transforms the past into a critical and performative discourse. Far from functioning as a static archive, history in both plays emerges as a dynamic resource through which questions of power, leadership, morality, and cultural identity are interrogated. By dramatizing the colonial encounter in Benin from contrasting perspectives, the playwrights reveal that history is not a singular narrative but a contested terrain shaped by ideological choice, aesthetic strategy, and ethical concern.

Pedro Obaseki's *Obaseki* foregrounds the often-silenced theme of internal complicity, dramatizing how colonial domination was facilitated not only by external force but also by indigenous elites negotiating power under constraint. Through the morally ambiguous figure of Chief Obaseki, the play resists simplistic binaries of heroism and betrayal, instead exposing the fragile ethical terrain of leadership during moments of historical rupture. This dramaturgical approach challenges nationalist historiographies that privilege resistance while marginalizing collaboration, insisting that a fuller understanding of the colonial past must confront uncomfortable truths. History, in this context, becomes a medium for moral inquiry rather than heroic affirmation.

In contrast, Ola Rotimi's *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* dramatizes the colonial encounter as a tragedy of external aggression and cultural devastation. By portraying Oba Ovonramwen as a tragic hero whose authority collapses under overwhelming imperial violence, Rotimi reclaims African dignity in the face of historical defeat. The play's emphasis on ritual, communal performance, and cultural continuity affirms history as collective memory and resistance. Even in loss, the dramatization preserves symbolic integrity, transforming historical trauma into a site of cultural remembrance rather than erasure. Rotimi's dramaturgy thus functions as a corrective to colonial narratives that framed conquest as civilizing necessity.

Taken together, the two plays illuminate the dual dynamics of colonial history: internal vulnerability and external domination. Their differences in characterization, thematic emphasis, and dramaturgical form do not represent conflicting truths but complementary perspectives that enrich historical understanding. While *Obaseki* interrogates the ethics of collaboration and elite betrayal, *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* memorializes resistance, dignity, and cultural survival. This comparative lens underscores the argument that historical drama is inherently selective and interpretive, shaped as much by present concerns as by past events.

The study also reinforces the importance of dramaturgy as a mode of historical representation distinct from historiography. Whereas historical writing often seeks coherence and closure, dramatic representation thrives on tension, ambiguity, and contradiction. By staging history, playwrights make visible the narrative labour through which meaning is produced, inviting audiences into critical engagement rather than passive consumption. In African theatre, this process is further enriched by oral performance traditions that collapse boundaries between history, ritual, and

storytelling, rendering the past a lived and communal experience.

Beyond their historical specificity, both plays speak powerfully to contemporary African realities. *Obaseki* resonates with ongoing concerns about political opportunism, elite complicity, and the persistence of colonial structures in postcolonial governance. *Oba Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* affirms the enduring relevance of cultural memory and historical consciousness in resisting neocolonial erasure. In this sense, history as dramaturgy functions not only as remembrance but as critique, offering ethical insight into present conditions.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that African historical drama does more than recover the past; it reanimates it as a space of dialogue, contestation, and reflection. By transforming history into theatre, Pedro Obaseki and Ola Rotimi ensure that the fall of Benin continues to speak across generations, reminding audiences that the past is neither settled nor silent. History, when rendered through dramaturgy, remains alive—plural, interrogative, and profoundly human.

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