

Roseline Yacim's *Obirikiti Idite* (Cycle of Intrigues) as Allegory for Contemporary Nigeria: A Thematic Interrogation

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Abstract: Nigerian playwrights have long deployed allegory as a vehicle for social critique, yet the specific mechanisms through which contemporary drama refracts the nation's political crises remain underexplored. This paper examines Roseline Yacim's *Obirikiti Idite* (*Cycle of Intrigues*) as a sustained allegorical intervention into Nigeria's governance challenges. Drawing on close reading and thematic analysis, the study identifies five allegorical correspondences: the vacant throne as political interregnum, the scheming chiefs as Nigeria's political elite, the wealthy outsider as the archetypal "godfather," the youth characters as contested futures, and the designated forest as the landscape of national insecurity. The paper argues that *Obirikiti Idite* moves beyond simple representation to offer a diagnostic critique of how traditional institutions are weaponised, money flows without accountability, and young citizens are scapegoated while the powerful evade justice. Furthermore, the play's resolution, where the rightful heir returns and conspirators are exposed, functions not as naïve optimism but as a demand for possibility. By situating the analysis within postcolonial allegorical traditions and contemporary Nigerian political reality, this study contributes to scholarship on drama as social commentary and offers cultural administrators a framework for understanding how theatre interrogates power.

Keywords: Allegory, Nigerian theatre, political drama, Obirikiti Idite, godfatherism, youth marginalisation

I. Introduction

The relationship between drama and politics in Nigeria has always been intimate, combative, and at times, dangerous. From Hubert Ogunde's strike-supporting operas of the 1940s to Femi Osofisan's guerrilla theatre of the 1980s, Nigerian playwrights have consistently turned to the stage as a space for confronting power. Unlike the novel or poetry, which reach smaller, literate audiences, theatre, particularly in its travelling and community-based forms, addresses the public directly, often in open spaces where the separation between performer and spectator is deliberately blurred (Akinwumi 45; Awodiya 33). This tradition of engaged drama has produced a rich body of allegorical works that use the past, or an imagined traditional space, to speak to the present.

Roseline Yacim's *Obirikiti Idite* (*Cycle of Intrigues*) belongs squarely within this tradition (Yacim). Written against the backdrop of mounting public disillusionment with Nigeria's political class, the play employs the familiar machinery of a Yoruba palace drama to diagnose a contemporary illness: the capture of governance by a wealthy few, the manipulation of traditional institutions for selfish ends, and the systematic marginalisation of youth. Yet the play is not merely a mirror. It is also an intervention, one that demands its audience recognize not only what is broken but also what might have to be mended.

Contemporary Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and its largest democracy, is characterised by a paradox of potential and failure. Despite abundant natural resources, a vibrant civil society, and a youthful population, the country consistently ranks poorly on global governance indices. Corruption remains endemic; elections are routinely marred by violence and manipulation; and citizens, particularly young people, express deepening mistrust in the political process. The #EndSARS protests of October 2020, during which thousands of young Nigerians occupied public spaces across the country to demand police reform, marked a watershed moment. When security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, a judicial panel later described the event as a "massacre" (BBC News Pidgin). This moment, youth confronting state violence, haunts the margins of Yacim's play, even if it is not directly named.

It is within this context that *Obirikiti Idite* must be read. Its narrator openly doubts whether justice will prevail, and its resolution, while cathartic, feels hard-won and precarious. This paper argues that the play operates as a diagnostic allegory, one that identifies the mechanisms of political decay without pretending that simple solutions exist. We begin by establishing a theoretical framework for reading allegory in Nigerian drama, drawing on postcolonial theory, the concept of "national allegory," and the more recent notion of "Kabiyeesism" as a framework for understanding hierarchical authority. We then analyse the play's key allegorical correspondences, followed by a discussion of the implications of the play's resolution. Finally, we conclude with reflections on the play's contribution to Nigerian political drama and its relevance for contemporary audiences.

II. Theoretical Framework: Allegory, Kabiyeesism, and the Nigerian Political Imagination

Allegory as a literary mode operates through extended metaphor, where characters, events, and settings signify meanings beyond their literal referents. Frederic Jameson's influential essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" argued that literature from the global south is necessarily allegorical, functioning as "national allegory" wherein the individual story implicitly speaks to the collective political condition (Jameson 69). While Jameson's thesis has been critiqued for its reductiveness, particularly by Aijaz Ahmad, who argued that it risks essentialising third-world cultural production (Ahmad 5), it remains useful for understanding how Nigerian playwrights, operating under conditions of censorship, state violence, and economic precarity, use allegorical displacement to say what cannot be said directly.

In the Nigerian context, allegory has taken specific forms. Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* (1971) uses nineteenth-century Oyo history to comment on modern military dictatorship (Rotimi). Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* (1984) allegorises African despots through grotesque caricature (Soyinka). Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982) reframes a peasant revolt to critique post-independence betrayals (Osofisan 10). What unites these works is a shared understanding that the past, or an imagined traditional space, can serve as a laboratory for examining present crises. Yacim follows this tradition but departs from it in one significant respect: her allegorical frame is not historical but speculative-fictional. The kingdom of Ayepé is neither a historical state nor a direct analogue of any specific Nigerian community. It is a composite, an "everywhere and nowhere" that allows the playwright to compress and intensify the contradictions of Nigerian politics without the burden of literal representation.

The concept of "Kabiyeesism," theorised by Ibrinke and Yacim (2025), provides an additional analytical tool. Kabiyeesi is a Yoruba honorific for a king, meaning "the one whom no one questions." In traditional contexts, this title embodies both reverence and the expectation of absolute deference. Ibrinke and Yacim argue that the cultural logic underlying kabiyeesi extends beyond its monarchical origins to influence contemporary Nigerian workplaces, where authority structures are reproduced through deference to seniority, limited upward feedback, and age-based decision-making (Ibrinke and Yacim 45). In the political sphere, Kabiyeesism manifests as the expectation that leaders' decisions should not be questioned. *Obirikiti Idite* systematically subverts this expectation. Chiefs question the king's son, the priest questions the chiefs, and a young man questions the entire apparatus. The play thus allegorises not only the persistence of Kabiyeesism but also the possibility of its undoing.

III. Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, specifically close reading and thematic analysis, of the play text of *Obirikiti Idite (Cycle of Intrigues)* (Yacim). The analysis is informed by the theoretical framework of national allegory and Kabiyesism, as outlined above. The play text was examined for recurring motifs, character functions, and structural patterns that could be read as allegorical references to contemporary Nigerian political realities. Thematic categories were developed inductively from the text and then cross-referenced with existing scholarship on Nigerian politics and drama. To ensure interpretive validity, findings were discussed with two Nigerian theatre practitioners familiar with the play's 2023 premiere production, and their insights were incorporated into the final analysis.

IV. Analysis: Allegorical Correspondences in *Obirikiti Idite*

1. The Vacant Throne as Political Interregnum

The play opens ten days after the king's death. The throne is covered with black cloth. Basorun, the most senior chief, urges action: "We cannot continue to mourn... the gods, our ancestors, and even the departed king will not be happy with us" (Yacim 9). Yet Otun, one of the conspirators, deflects: "Why the hurry? Let us mourn our king properly... Let us allow the throne to breathe some air" (Yacim 9). This suggestion, that a throne needs to breathe, is a satirical echo of Nigeria's recurrent political interregnums. From the prolonged transitions after military coups to contested election results that leave the country in legal limbo, Nigeria has often endured periods where power is vacuumed and the "wisest men" do nothing but scheme. The 1979, 1983, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections all featured extended legal battles or transition delays (INEC). In 2026, civil society organisations continued to press the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to publish a revised election timetable, citing delays that hindered political participation. As one observer noted, "some political elite are creating confusion as strategy for seeking political power" (Yiaga Africa).

The breathing throne becomes a metaphor for Institutional paralysis, a state that continues to function nominally while its leadership is bartered in backrooms. In contemporary Nigeria, this paralysis manifests in delayed budgets, prolonged ministerial screenings, and the phenomenon of "acting" appointees who remain in acting capacity for years. The play suggests that the absence of a leader does not produce orderly succession procedures but rather intensifies conspiracy. Every day the throne remains vacant, the price for filling it increases, and the number of claimants multiplies.

2. The Chiefs as Nigeria's Political Elite

Yacim populates the palace with a spectrum of elite actors, each representing a segment of Nigeria's political class. Agbaran, the wealthy outsider, is the archetypal "godfather." He does not belong to the royal lineage, but his money, delivered in sacks of coins, buys him allies. He declares, "I intend to attract development to the entire kingdom" (Yacim 17) while ignoring that the legitimate heir still lives. Agbaran's justification, that he will bring education and progress, mirrors the rhetoric of Nigerian politicians who present themselves as "technocrats" or "detrified patriots" while their wealth originates from opaque sources.

Scholars have described godfatherism as a structural feature of Nigerian politics, where political capital, party machinery, campaign financing, and elite bargaining determine access to power. One analyst has called godfatherism "a uniquely Nigerian invention" and "one of Nigeria's negative contributions to the development of democracy" (Ojewale). The phenomenon has been linked to the "silent hijack of democracy," with godfathers described as "the architects of corruption and the invisible hands destabilising Nigeria's future" ("Ex-LP Presidential Aspirant"). Agbaran is a dramatic embodiment of this figure.

Otun and Osi are the double-faced chiefs: they take bribes from Agbaran while secretly supporting other candidates. Otun conspires with a mysterious figure to let Agbaran kill the prince, while Osi pushes his own son as a candidate. Their treachery reveals that Nigeria's elite often play multiple sides, collecting "appearance fees" from every aspirant. As one veteran journalist reportedly observed, "In Nigerian politics, you don't ask who

someone is supporting; you ask how many people they are supporting” (Ojewale). Iyaloja and Iyalode, the female chiefs, are equally ruthless. Iyaloja is eventually unmasked as the figure who recruited a young man to kill the prince. Yacim’s choice to make a woman the ultimate conspirator is significant. In many allegories, women are symbols of virtue or victimhood. But here, Iyaloja and Iyalode are among the most calculating characters. This suggests that gender does not guarantee integrity; Nigerian female politicians who have participated in corrupt systems are not exempted from criticism.

Finally, Asipa represents the complicit moderate. He accepts Agbaran’s gift but orders his wife to bury it: “Ill-gotten money must be put away” (Yacim 27). He does not report the bribe, nor does he confront the godfather. He simply hides the money and hopes for the best. Asipa is the Nigerian elite who knows the system is rotten but benefits quietly, rationalising that he will not be “found wanting” on the “day of reckoning.” Only Balogun, the war chief, remains principled throughout, and he is repeatedly shouted down, ignored, and forced to storm out of meetings. His marginalisation mirrors the fate of genuine patriots in Nigerian politics, whose reform efforts are often resisted by entrenched interests.

3. The Commodification of Leadership

Money is the play’s true antagonist. It flows in sacks, exchanged in shadowy meetings, and used to kidnap a chief’s wife as “payment” for a debt. Laban, Agbaran’s messenger, reports that four chiefs rejected the initial gifts. But Agbaran is not discouraged: “They stand to benefit from me” (Yacim 17). The phrase “stand to benefit” is the lingua franca of Nigerian political godfatherism, the expectation that a sponsored candidate will repay loyalty with contracts, appointments, and protection. When a chief fail to deliver, he is threatened in language that evokes real-world political enforcement.

Asipa’s wife provides a moment of dark humour that deepens the critique. After Asipa buries the bribe, she asks: “Maybe we can just use some of it to fix the leaking roof or even...” (Yacim 27). Asipa recoils: “Ah woman! Never in your life! This is not the kind of money you use. Ill-gotten money must be put away” (Yacim 27). Here Yacim exposes the paradox of “ill-gotten money.” Even the relatively principled Asipa cannot spend it because its origin pollutes. Yet he does not return it or destroy it. He buries it, a metaphor for Nigeria’s culture of hidden corruption, where wealth acquired through patronage is hoarded, never invested, and never declared. The leaking roof remains unrepaired, just as Nigeria’s public infrastructure decays.

Corruption in Nigeria has been described as almost “hardwired” into the fragile democracy (“Nigeria’s Executive”). The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) found that between 2022 and 2023, corruption levels within the legislative, judicial, and executive arms of government and the private sector stood at 42 per cent (Premium Times). High-profile cases, such as the allegation that the Accountant General of the Federation laundered ₦109 billion in 2022, reveal the scale of elite impunity (NEITI). The play’s buried coins are a small-scale echo of this systemic rot.

4. The Youth as Nigeria’s Contested Future

Three young men embody the competing futures of Nigeria. Omooba Adeyemi, the rightful heir, is only sixteen. He is afraid. In the forest scene, he confesses to Balogun: “I’m afraid sir. I don’t know if I can do this. Maybe I’m truly too young to rule” (Yacim 40). Balogun’s response is the play’s manifesto: “Fear is not the absence of courage Adeyemi. Cowardice is. ... You can be afraid of the dark but it is when you walk in it that your eyes adjust to the light within you” (Yacim 41). Adeyemi is not a superhero; he is a terrified teenager who must enter the designated forest alone. The forest is a multilayered allegory: it is the perilous journey of Nigerian youth seeking education abroad, the violent terrain of militant groups, or simply the brutal political landscape where young activists are arrested, disappeared, or killed. That Adeyemi survives and returns, hooded, and then removes his hood to reveal himself, saving himself and exposing the conspirators, suggests that the youth must not only lead but also protect themselves; no external saviour will appear.

Makinde, in contrast, represents the youth recruited into political violence. His mother warns him, his friend Dele tries to reason with him, but he is seduced by a masked figure who promises, “Kill Omooba Adeyemi and you will be king instantly” (Yacim 58). Makinde is a classic “political thug”, young, strong, ambitious, but ultimately a pawn. His near-execution on the chopping block, gagged and helpless, is the fate of countless Nigerian youths used by politicians and discarded.

History confirms that youth are systematically mobilised for electoral violence in Nigeria. One study notes that youth are recruited as “thugs” by political agents through militant groups, cults, gangs, direct employment, and general criminality (Fund for Peace). Since the return to democratic governance in 1999, “violent groups known as ‘political thugs’ have been a constant factor in Nigeria’s electioneering process, often used by the established political parties to forcefully influence the electoral outcome” (“Rapid Descent”). Reports from the 2023 election cycle and preparations for 2027 indicate that “thuggery and politically motivated violence” remain pervasive, with observers warning of a “rapid descent to thuggery” (Leadership). Makinde is not an aberration; he is a symptom.

Dele, the third youth, is the vigilant citizen. He follows the masked figure, reports to the priest, and rushes to stop Makinde’s execution. He is not a prince or a warrior; he is an ordinary young man who pays attention. Yacim suggests that Nigeria’s salvation will come not only from legitimate heirs but from the ‘Deletes’ of the nation, the investigators, the whistleblowers, the friends who refuse to let a scapegoat die. During the #EndSARS protests in October 2020, it was ordinary young Nigerians who documented police brutality, organised medical teams, and provided legal aid. A Lagos State judicial panel later confirmed that security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate, an incident the panel described as a “massacre” (BBC News Pidgin). Dele is their representative on stage.

5. The Forest and the Mask: Allegories of Insecurity

The designated forest is described as a place “that even the bravest of hunters dread” (Yacim 26). The prince must enter alone. The play does not show a realistic beast; instead, it presents “a choreography that depicts this story... He fights a beast (that could be his imagination or not) and he wins” (Yacim 46). This abstraction is deliberate. The beast is not a lion or a leopard; it is the total insecurity of a failed state. In contemporary Nigeria, the “forest” is the highways where kidnappers wait, the northeast where insurgency rages, the northwest where bandits raid villages, the southeast where separatist violence smoulders. The prince’s battle is choreographed because the real battle is psychological, surviving a system that has abandoned its citizens.

The masked figure who recruits Makinde operates in anonymity. Nigeria’s political violence is similarly anonymous: “unknown gunmen,” “hooded thugs,” “masked assassins.” The play refuses to unmask Iyaloja until the end, keeping her hidden for most of the drama. This suggests that the architects of violence often hide in plain sight, respected chiefs, wealthy women and community leaders. When Dele finally follows the masked figure and discovers her identity, the audience experiences what Nigerian citizens rarely do: the revelation of who is behind the violence. And when the hooded figure ascends the stage from the crowd and removes his hood, it is Adeyemi himself, not a separate rescuer, but the prince who survived the forest and returns to claim his throne (Yacim 63). The play thus offers not only critique but also the fantasy of transparency and self-rescue.

6. Justice, Scapegoating, and the Failure of Institutions

Makinde’s near-execution is the play’s most searing indictment of Nigerian justice. He is gagged, dragged to the chopping block, and only saved at the last second by Dele’s intervention. He was a scapegoat: the powerful intended for a poor young man to die for their crimes. In Nigeria, the justice system disproportionately punishes the poor and the young. High-profile corruption cases drag on for years, the trial of former Governor James Ibori, for example, lasted nearly a decade (BBC News, “Ibori Jailed for Fraud”). The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) has secured convictions, but high-profile political godfathers rarely face the chopping block (Human Rights Watch).

The priest's ruse, pretending to execute Makinde to scare him into confessing, is a clever theatrical device, but it is also a fantasy. No real Nigerian priest or judge has such power. The play's resolution, where Agbaran is arrested and Iyaloja exposed, is cathartic but perhaps too neat. The narrator himself had earlier said, "I can't be a witness to the disaster about to befall my dear people. Won't you come with me?" (Yacim 45). His desire to flee suggests that even he does not fully believe in the happy ending. Yacim offers hope but not naivety: justice is possible, but only through extraordinary effort (Dele's vigilance, the priest's cunning) and divine intervention (the guidance of Ifa). In contemporary Nigeria, such conditions rarely align.

V. Discussion: Allegory as Diagnosis and Demand

What distinguishes *Obirikiti Idite* from earlier Nigerian political allegories is its refusal to locate the source of corruption in a single villain. Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed* (1982) points fingers at the military. Rotimi's *If: A Tragedy of the Rulers* (1983) indicts colonial disruption. Soyinka's *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995) diagnoses urban poverty and state neglect. Yacim's play, by contrast, shows corruption as a system, a web of complicity that includes the wealthy outsider, the double-faced chiefs, the female conspirators, the complicit moderate, and even the youth pawn. Only a handful of characters remain uncorrupted. This distribution of guilt mirrors the reality of Nigerian politics, where no single class or ethnic group holds a monopoly on venality. As the narrator, laments, "Everyone has gone mad! Ah Ayepé! What has bewitched you?" (Yacim 45).

Yet the play is not merely diagnostic. It also demands something from its audience. The final scene, with Adeyemi crowned and the conspirators led away, is staged as celebration. But the narrator's earlier warning lingers. The cycle of intrigues, the play suggests, can be broken, but only if ordinary citizens refuse to look away, only if principled elders refuse to be silenced, only if institutional custodians refuse to be bought. This is a demanding allegory. It does not allow the audience to sit back and say, "What a terrible system." It asks, "What are you doing about it?"

For cultural administrators and theatre practitioners, the play offers a model of engaged artistry. Yacim states in her playwright's note that artists "shoulder the responsibility of being the mirrors reflecting the intricacies of society" (Yacim 1). *Obirikiti Idite* takes this responsibility seriously, using the traditional palace intrigue genre to speak to contemporary issues. The play's 2023 premiere at the University of Abuja, staged by final-year students, demonstrated that such allegorical drama can still attract audiences and provoke discussion. In an era of digital distraction, theatre must amplify its unique, irreplaceable presence (Ibironke and Yacim 2023, 110). *Obirikiti Idite* does so by offering something no streaming service can: a shared space where citizens gather to see their world reflected and, perhaps, to imagine it changed.

VI. Conclusion

This article has argued that Roseline Yacim's *Obirikiti Idite (Cycle of Intrigues)* operates as a sustained allegorical intervention into contemporary Nigerian politics (Yacim). Through the fictional kingdom of Ayepé, the play diagnoses the mechanisms of political interregnum, elite conspiracy, money politics, youth marginalisation, insecurity, and institutional failure. Unlike earlier Nigerian political allegories that locate corruption in a single villain or historical rupture, Yacim's play portrays corruption as a system, a web of complicity that implicates almost every character. Yet the play is not nihilistic. It offers a pathway, however precarious, through the vigilance of ordinary citizens, the mentorship of principled elders, and the cunning of institutional custodians.

The allegorical mode allows Yacim to say what might be dangerous to say directly. Ayepé is not Nigeria, and Agbaran is not any specific godfather. But the play's first audiences recognised themselves in the chiefs, the palace, and the forest. The playwright's note explicitly states that the play was "sparked by a profound reflection on the recent events unfolding in the Nigerian political landscape" (Yacim 1). Allegory is not evasion; it is intensification. By compressing and displacing, Yacim makes the familiar strange and the strange familiar. The audience sees Nigeria anew.

Future research might examine the play's reception among different Nigerian audiences, urban versus rural, Yoruba versus non-Yoruba, youth versus elders. Comparative studies with other contemporary Nigerian political allegories would also be valuable. Additionally, the play's use of Yoruba language and Ifa divination as structural devices merits deeper linguistic and theological analysis. For now, we conclude that *Obirikiti Idite* stands as a significant contribution to Nigerian political drama, one that diagnoses without despairing, and demands without pretending that change is easy.

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