

Narratives on Edo Women in History: Reflections on Frank Rajah Arase's *Iyore* and Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye's *Idia, The Warrior Queen of Benin*.

Emily Oghale God'spresence,
University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

A plethora of accounts about Edo people, especially concerning the Benin Kingdom, tell of women's remarkable exploits and activities that challenge stereotyped gender roles. However, the way in which these narratives are relayed or documented, and their forms deserve to be examined to ascertain how women have been written about in Edo history. The historiography and narratives on women in Benin culture, especially their place and activities within the royal palace, constitute a vital source of data for this research. This article looks at the manner in which a woman's identity and image are framed in drama and cinema. To do this, this essay uses Frank Rajah Arase's *Iyore* and Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye's *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* as reference points. Ultimately, the dimensions of women's negotiations for autonomy and power or place in society are determined from the historical documentation that is available. More so, the importance of a female-centered ideology in the writing about women in drama deserves commendation for it offers the contemporary woman self-identity and autonomy in her society through dramatic creativity and filmic representation.

Keywords: Women, Edo woman, History, Autonomy, Film

Introduction

The place and achievements of women in history have become topical in feminist discourse upon the realization that such accounts have been lost due to poor or no documentation of women's experiences. Consequently, the need has arisen for women to be put in the right perspective by having their stories told and filling the existing gaps in the male dominated fields of dramaturgy and filmic representation. Narratives on women in cinema and drama deserve attention since these serve as fertile spheres where women can comfortably exercise their creativity. This article, therefore, examines the narratives on Edo women to ascertain how history has captured their experiences, juxtaposing this with their representation in drama and film. To this end, Rajah

Arase's Nollywood film, *Iyore (The Return)*, 2015, and Salami-Agunloye play *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*, 2008, both centered on women in the royal palace of the ancient Benin kingdom, are examined in this study.

Overview: Edo Women in the Royal Palace of the Ancient Benin Kingdom

A plethora of accounts have been written about the remarkable exploits of some important female figures who have made a great impression on the image, development, and governance of the royal palace of the ancient Benin Kingdom. Such women include: Queen Iden, Emotan, and Queen Idia: **Queen Iden**, wife of Oba Ewuakpe, is remembered for her self-sacrifice as atonement for the unimaginable sacrifices demanded by her husband at the death of his mother, Queen Ewebonoza. According to one account, at the death of Queen Mother Ewebonoza, Oba Ewuakpe embarked on the traditional sacrifice of individuals during the burial of a royal with the intention of providing service to the dead even in the world beyond. Unfortunately, Oba Ewuakpe's killing of his subjects was extreme, resulting in the desertion of the palace and the city. His subjects and wives left in a mass exodus, except for Queen Iden who "refused to return home to her parents in Oka village, now part of the Upper Sokponba Road, Benin City, where she hailed from."¹

Consultation with the oracle, revealed that a human sacrifice along with other items were required to cleanse the land and mitigate the Oba's rejection by his people. Since it was difficult for him to get a human sacrifice by this time, his beloved wife, Queen Iden, offered herself, although against Oba Ewuakpe's will. He buried her alive at a site that she chose at Iwebor street near Oba's Market. However, she requested the death of any living creature stepping on her grave. Thus: "It is forbidden for anything that has life to step on Iden's Grave."²

In spite of her enormous sacrifice to salvage the throne and dignity of her husband, no Oba of Benin, has declared her Queen Iden's grave a shrine where a newly installed Chief would stop during his procession to pay homage. Ekhaguosa Aisien notes that:

At the present time the procession sweeps by the three hundred years-old grave, situated by the Oba Market Road end of the Iwebo

¹ Ekhaguosa Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, Benin City, Aisien Publishers, 2015, 67

² Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 65.

street, with a scant glance of recognition and acknowledgement of it. A few metres beyond the Grave, at the Oba Market Road Junction, the Chief in procession turns left towards the next stop-over in his route of honour, the Emotan Shrine.³

Emotan is presented in the historical account as a childless second wife of Chief Azama of Ihogbe District. She helped raise the children of her mate Arabe, and the children of market women who would place them under her care as they went about their business of trading at Oba's Market, thus giving her house the semblance of a nursery. The name Emotan metamorphosed from her nickname Emitan, meaning "Lazy Bones," given to her by her husband due to her inability to do any domestic chore beyond the expert "preparation of *evbarie*, the soup-pot seasoning prepared from fermented melon seeds. She was also a notable spinner, spinning the sheerest cotton threads from the cotton bolls which came from the farm."⁴

Emotan was notable for her trading skills at Oba's Market, where she settled and lived to continue with her business after her husband's death. Today, she is remembered for her outstanding contributions to the success of the palace as she gave shelter to Oba Ewuare (formerly Prince Ogun) as he fought to wrest his father's throne from his younger brother Oba Uwaifiokun. Thus, "it was in this house by the market that the conspiracy to topple the usurper-Oba Uwaifiokun, from power was hatched by Ogun and Emotan."⁵ Her gravesite in her dwelling place at Oba's Market "situated at the Ore-Nokhua side of the Oba Market Road, near its junction with Ibiwe street"⁶ is perceived as the "best known shrine in Benin City."⁷ This was as a result of the command by Oba Ewuare, who, having ascended the throne a short time before Emotan's

³ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 87.

⁴ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 91.

⁵ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 92.

⁶ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 90.

⁷ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 92.

death, “ordained that honour be done at the site, to her memory, by any celebratory procession in the city.”⁸ In 1954, a life-size figure of Emotan was erected at her grave site.

Queen Idia emerges in Benin historiography as a warrior and administrator, a woman of great influence and exploits in the Kingdom, known for her unwavering support of her son, the reigning king, Oba Esigie (1504-1550 CE). A woman of great prowess, powers and versatile attributes, she used her skills and wisdom to triumph over situations and circumstances. History has it that Queen Idia, as one of the wives of Oba Ozolua, gave birth to Prince Osawe who succeeded his father and took up the title of Oba Esigie. His succession resulted from Queen Idia’s understanding of palace politics. Thus she announced the birth of her son Osawe to the king (Oba Ozolua) immediately he was born, while his brother Idubor, born by Idia’s mate a few hours before the arrival of Osawe, could not be announced by his mother because he did not cry immediately after birth. This brought about the emergence of Osawe as heir apparent to the Throne, for Oba Ozolua “had performed the proclamation rites of Osawe as first son.”⁹ The loss of Prince Idubor’s birthright brought about bitter hatred for his brother, Oba Esigie. Idubor who became the Duke (Enogie) of Udo, refused to accept a subordinate role to his brother and went to war with him. Udo citizens and soldiers were defeated, causing Idubor to commit suicide. However, “before jumping into the lake, he left his ‘ivie necklace,’ the precious bead necklace symbol of authority in Benin land, dangling from a tree branch.”¹⁰ Upon donning his drowned brother’s necklace, Oba Esigie immediately became confused, resulting in his mother, Queen Idia’s consultation with a Yoruba spiritualist through whose help and healing power Oba Esigie was restored to normalcy.

Queen Idia is embedded in Benin history as a woman of great influence and exploits in the Kingdom and the royal palace; her victories at war and support for her son and the development of the ancient Benin Kingdom are worthy of documentation. It is not a surprise that her image was used as the insignia for the 1977 FESTAC celebrations. An ivory mask of her visage now

⁸ Aisien, *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*, 92.

⁹ Naiwu Osahon, *The Oba of Benin Dynasty* (https://edofolks.com/html/osahon_oba_dynasty.htm Viewed 18th May 2019) 6.

¹⁰ Osahon, *The Oba of Benin Dynasty*, 6-7.

represents the Benin Kingdom. Little wonder that she was referred to as “the power behind the throne.”¹¹ Thus:

Idia, the queen mother of Oba Esigie, commands a special place of honour in Benin History. She was a noted administrator and a great Amazon and influence on her son, Oba Esigie. She was personally involved in many of the wars of conquest by the Oba and even led some of them herself.¹²

Dramatic Narrative/Representation of Queen Idia

In her brief history of Queen Idia, in the play entitled: *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*, Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye decries the nonexistence of literature on Queen Idia except for the occasional citation as “the first Iyoba of Benin Kingdom.”¹³ She notes that Idia had been a dancer whose beauty appealed to the then Oba of Benin, Oba Ozolua, who sought to bring her into his harem upon her performance at the palace. Despite the disfiguration of Idia’s face with scars by her parents to deter the king’s emissary from marrying her on behalf of the king, she eventually married the king and gave birth to Osawe, installed as Oba Esigie when he

ascended the throne of Benin Kingdom from 1504-1555A.D. In 1507 A.D. Queen Idia was installed the Iyoba of Urelu. In 1515 A.D. she went to Idah war and returned victorious in 1516 A.D...., [and in 1520], an ivory mask of her face/head was carved [in her honour].¹⁴

¹¹ Nkiru Nzegwu, “Iyoba Idia: The hidden Oba of Benin” (<http://rainqueensof africa.com/2012/11/iyoba-idia-the-hidden-oba-of-benin/> accessed June 26, 2016)

¹² Osahon, *The Oba of Benin Dynasty*, 7.

¹³ Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye, *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin* (Jos, Saniez Publications, 2008) viii.

¹⁴ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, xi.

Perhaps, this was an attempt to immortalize Queen Idia for her exploits. Indeed:

The FESTAC Mask has not only brought great honour and glory to all black peoples of the world, but it has become the symbol of unity and identity of Africans and Africans in the Diaspora. In the light of these, Queen Idia, has no doubt in all respects attained the status of a colossus in the history of African women.¹⁵

Synopsis of *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*

The historical account of Queen Idia as evident in the play *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* tells of the bravery and exploits of this woman whose undaunted war-like spirit brought honor and dignity to the women of Benin and victory to the Royal Palace as well as the entire Benin kingdom. The play tells how Idia is first hit by the conflict between ancient traditional custom which required her to die as Queen Mother and modernity. Oba Esigie was determined to exterminate this barbaric practice in order to spare his mother's life. After a series of confrontations with his Council of Chiefs who insisted that the custom be upheld, he finally overcame them using his authority and power as King. However, his Chiefs stipulated that Esigie must establish the Queen Mother's palace outside of Benin if he must spare her life. This was to curtail her influence over him since she her personality was well-known. She had undertaken many tasks in the kingdom in support of her late husband, Oba Ozolua, father of Oba Esigie, and had won many battles.

The plot gets complicated when Oba Esigie attempts to subvert Chief Oliha's love for Imaguero, his favorite wife, in favour of Aminghen, Esigie's own daughter whom he had given to Oliha for his faithfulness and support in matters relating to the kingdom. Imaguero, having been deceived into believing in Oliha's alleged renewal of interest in Aminghen, her mate, coupled with an orchestrated proposal from Oba Esigie that targeted her fidelity. Chief Oliha accused her of harlotry and infidelity. She then abandoned her husband, and in the process of escaping, stumbled and hit her head against the door panel. As she lay dying, she asked Chief Oliha to deny

¹⁵ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, xi.

or affirm the rumor of his public confession of love for Aminghen. Knowing the source of this allegation against him, Chief Oliha angrily killed all his wives, including Aminghen (Oba Esigie's daughter), and embarked on a war against Oba Esigie with the help of the Attah of Idah (Igala).

Queen Idia, mobilized for the battle, ignoring the disapproval and resistance of the Chiefs. However, knowing her spirit of resilience, Oba Esigie reluctantly blessed her and sent her forth to the warfront, praying for the guidance of Osanobua and the ancestors to aid her triumphant return. As expected, Idia won the war, captured the Attah of Idah, and killed Chief Oliha. This act, expressed in Idia's courage and strength, defines female power and autonomy, bringing honor and dignity to the Edo woman.

Synopsis of *Iyore (The Return)*

Iyore tells the story of reincarnation, forbidden love, and human sacrifice. It reveals the sacrifices of women in the royal palace of the ancient Benin Kingdom. It tells the story of resistance and escape from a barbaric tradition of human sacrifice to salvage women, the endangered species, from indignity and extinction. This is a historical tale about a Palace Virgin Amenze (Okawa Shaznay) in a forbidden love relationship with a war captain in the palace, Edosa (Desmond Walter). They must both die for their flagrant defiance of ancient custom. Amenze, set aside as a sacred virgin wife (or Palace Virgin), is ordained to be buried along with two other virgins when the king dies. However, her unforeseen romance with Edosa complicates the plot as she sets out to break with tradition. Having been impregnated by Edosa, Amenze and her lover attempt to elope. Unfortunately, Edosa gets killed in the process but Amenze escapes to a foreign land, dying after giving birth to a female warrior Onaiwu/Edosa.

The film uses flashback techniques to link the present with past events in a cycle of forbidden love and relationships within the royal palace. "Iyore," meaning "the return" or "life after life" indicates the film's central theme, reincarnation. The historical love affair between Amenze and Edosa is replicated in the present with a forbidden love escapade between Osarugue (Rita Dominic), a married history teacher, and Prince Eweka/Azuwa (Joseph Benjamin). Their love

is forbidden because Osarugue is already married to another, and the Prince is slated to marry a Yoruba princess, Ajoke (Okawa Shaznay). Besides utilizing a parallel story, the film brings in the reincarnation theme with Ajoke arriving at the royal palace only to find a drawing of herself on the wall, suggesting that she had been Amenze, in another life, the Palace Virgin impregnated by Edosa.

Narratives of Edo Women in History: Analyses of *Iyore* and *Idia, the Warrior Queen*

The image and identity given to women in Edo history paints a picture of enslavement, self-sacrifice on one hand, determination and resilience on the other hand. In the film and play selected for this study, the narratives present women as sacrificial lambs and victims of circumstance who attempted to free themselves from obnoxious, inhumane tradition. Regrettably, when they try to resist, as in the case of Amenze, they are not spared by the “enduring patriarchal edifices in Benin society.”¹⁶ Thus, the image and identity of the Edo woman, like women in other cultures, suffer negative representations that downplay her strength, wits and abilities. Contrarily, Idia’s demonstration of her leadership in winning the war with the Attah of Idah (Igala) attests to women’s vital role in politics. Unfortunately, they are often represented in a derogatory manner as evident in *Iyore*:

The central female characters in the film, Osarugue, Amenze and Ajoke, are represented in distinctive ways. Osarugue gets married to three different husbands; Amenze, who is meant to live as a virgin and be sacrificed with two other palace virgin wives upon the king’s death, falls pregnant by Edosa; while Ajoke suffers disappointment as Prince Azuwa finds love with Osarugue, but discovers another, historic identity as Amenze, who finds love with Edosa, who is then killed.¹⁷

¹⁶ Omoera, O. S. “We have been quiet for too long: Contesting female disempowerment in *Adaze*” *The Quint: An Interdisciplinary Journal from the North* Vol. 12, No.2 (2020) 35.

¹⁷ Oghale God’spresence Emily “African cultural values and female representation in Nollywood: *Iyore*” in Phillip Drummond (ed.) *The London Film and Media Reader 5* (The London Symposium, 2017) 222.

In *Iyore*, we see a young woman, Amenze (Okawa Shaznay) who is one of the three sacred virgins in the palace being set apart to be buried with the king whenever he dies. On the other hand, Queen Idia is to die when her son is enthroned as king. This suggests the life, image, and identity of the Edo woman is less valuable than that of a man. One tends to wonder why a male would not have been sacrificed, since the king is male and would naturally require males to do most of his bidding except for sexual intimacy and culinary duties. This goes to show how little value is placed on the life of a woman as if some people are more human than others. The repugnant cultural experiences of Edo women (*Iyore*) and their exploits (*Idia, the warrior Queen of Benin*) now serve as material for Frank Rajah Arase and Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye to showcase the image and identity of the Edo woman in the traditional culture. One is compelled to ask if it is a crime to be a woman or wife, as in the case of Amenze who is a sacred entity and is forbidden to express or experience emotional attachment to a male. Queen Idia, a mother denied the opportunity of enjoying the fruits of her labor as Queen Mother to the Oba. However, the dramatic and filmic narratives give a dimension of assertiveness and resistance to the women in question.

From the film and play under study, it is evident that Edo women in history were subjected to denigrating and oppressive cultural practices that put the power and strength of the women in doubt. Such oppression compelled them to be silent due to the patriarchal nature of Edo culture that has made the journey to gender equality an uphill task today. Emmanuel Ejiofor Ebo claims that,

Women liberation is the quest for freedom from female subjugation and oppression, obnoxious traditional practices, and sexism in order to achieve their empowerment. These obnoxious practices are the wicked customs and traditions unleashed on women the world over, most especially in the African continent. These traditional practices like female

genital mutilation (FGM), widow inheritance, and widowhood rites, among others, are found within the African culture.¹⁸

He believes that the neglect of women which has been a major concern for women can only be conquered through women's involvement in the decision-making process. He affirms that attempts to achieve women's liberation and empowerment have been made over the years through drama and theatre.¹⁹ It is not surprising that female writers like Salami-Agunloye are today utilizing the tool of dramatic creativity to reposition women in culture and history as resilient and dogged leaders, as portrayed through the character of *Idia*.

From the ongoing discussion, one can infer that Edo women are subjected to one denigrating experience or another. Their crime is not known. Perhaps, it lies in their gender, as females. The women in *Iyore* are treated as outsiders and as sacrificial lambs, innocent virgins are be buried alongside a dead king. The narrative reveals the precarious state of women within the royal palace, and objectifies them because

these women are ostracized and reserved for the king's burial, to attend to him beyond the grave. Although they enjoy other royal benefits as the king's wives, they do not have sexual relationships: as the voice-over tells us, 'they live for the throne and die with the throne.'²⁰

If and when they are not sacrificed, the case with *Amenze* (in *Iyore*), or made to die like *Imaguero* and *Aminghen* (in *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*) -- their *humanity* is reduced through such denigrating practices as female genital mutilation (FGM) and barbaric widowhood rites.

Reflection on Okoh's *Our Wife Forever*

¹⁸ Emmanuel Ejiofor Ebo " Cultural challenges and women liberation in Nigeria: An analysis of Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* and Julie Okoh's *Edewede*" in Mabel Ewrierhoma, Tacie Chima and Barclays Ayakoroma (ed.) *Gender discourses in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Art* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2015), 236.

¹⁹ Ebo " Cultural challenges, 236-7.

²⁰ God'spresence "African cultural values, 233.

Writing on the rites of widowhood in Edo culture, Julie Okoh looks for ways to launder the woman's image using female dramatic creativity to empower female characters in her works. For example, in her play, *Our Wife Forever* (2010), Victoria Imodu is an educated, assertive widow who seeks liberation through her resistance to cultural practices and traditional widowhood rites that confront Edo women at the demise of their husbands. Victoria is to be inherited as a commodity by one of the family's males, Thomas Imodu, since she is assumed to be a wife of the family forever, even after the death of her husband Hector. Victoria sets out to resist her loss of independence and inheritance demanded by Benin culture with the help of Felix Tanka, a friend of her late husband who stands by her through the trials. She eventually wins the court case, takes custody of what is left of her late husband's properties (after losing almost everything to her in-laws), and finally finds solace in the arms of Felix.

This does not erase the bitter, dehumanizing experience of the widowhood rites she had to endure. For example, her head was shaved and she was not allowed to take a bath for forty days. She was required to cry at dawn, wear mourning clothes, and finally go to the forest around two in the morning to throw away the mourning items. The most appalling of the rites was the enforced drinking of water that had been used for washing the corpse to ascertain whether she was guilty of causing her husband's death. Okoh challenges these practices that humiliate the Edo woman through dramatic creativity and the creation of an assertive woman such as Victoria to negotiate her freedom and autonomy:

You know very well that in this country most people strongly believe that the life of every woman depends on the generosity of men. Besides, most men often take advantage of women once they know that the women are in need of help. No doubt, life is difficult for me right now. But, I want to prove to myself that I can make it on my own. Little by little the bird makes its nest.²¹

²¹ Julie Okoh, *Our wife forever* (Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2010) 48.

Analogous to Victoria's harrowing experiences are those of Amenze who tried to derive some pleasure for herself, only narrowly escaping the barbaric destiny carved out for her by the patriarchal dictates of the culture in which she found herself.

Women Negotiating Power and Autonomy in the Selected Texts: Feminist Perspective

Queen Mother Idia sees no reason why she should die as we hear a female character, Iyesogie (market woman), reminding her that the compulsory death stems from the cultural practice where "the entrance of a new king, demands the eternal exit of the queen mother."²² Queen Idia affirms her resolve to contest this tradition, saying: "the last of the Queen Mothers destined for death, died with the death and burial of Oba Ozolua's mother, I, Idia will not die."²³

Knowing full well that Edo women in history were meant to pay the supreme price for simply being Queen Mothers, Iyesogie questions the possibility of Idia's plan: "... other Queen Mothers before you have accepted their fate without questioning it."²⁴ Realizing the power of negotiation and the impact of resilience on the lives of women, Irene Salami Agunloye uses the character of Idia to question this tradition that wastes women's lives irrespective of their achievements in the historical past. Idia's speech demonstrates her resolve to resist this ordinance: "Iyesogie, let it be known today that I, Idia, the Queen Mother, refuse to cease shining [shining], I stand to question our tradition. I demand for my life. Why must I, a woman, stand condemned to die simply because I am the mother of the reigning king?"²⁵

Certainly, Queen Idia's negotiation for autonomy spared her life, an opportunity that eluded Amenze in *Iyore* even though she took a bold step in escaping from the palace. Perhaps, Idia's resilience and wisdom which lent force to her negotiating power within the kingdom, resulted from her personal experiences and privileged position as Queen Mother. Clearly, this was a privilege that Amenze (*Iyore*) did not have. Nevertheless, Amenze's doggedness in risking her life to subvert culture and engage in a relationship with one of the palace warriors, shows

²² Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 3.

²³ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 4.

²⁴ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 4.

²⁵ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 4.

her bravery and desire to resist a barbaric practice that sought to waste her life by sacrificing her along with two other virgins at the death of the king. Amenze is not a warrior like Queen Idia. However, her relationship with Edosa which resulted in a child speaks volumes about her, as a woman determined to continue the human race. Although she died after giving birth, she brought forth a female warrior to balance her life.

Both the warrior Edosa, and the king, Oba Esigie, contest the practices aimed at destroying beloved women. Edosa violated the ancient tradition of female sacrifice by impregnating a Palace Virgin and attempting to elope with her. Oba Esigie, symbol of power and authority in Benin, objected to the ancient tradition of killing his mother as he ascended the throne. Thus he broke with this cultural practice that his chiefs and citizens held dear in order to spare his mother's life. Then, he created for her the title of "Iyoba" and installed her in "the palace of the Iyoba, the Queen Mother of Benin kingdom."²⁶ Esigie questions the practice of killing the Queen Mother: "Do we kill a person simply because tradition demands it?"²⁷ he, therefore, issues a decree that "from today on, no king ascending the throne will lose his mother again"²⁸ and demands that the decree be documented for posterity. However, he challenged those chiefs who objected to his resolve saying: "You all should go and kill your mothers, after that we can discuss the killing of my mother. Until that is done, this case is closed."²⁹

In line with feminist ideology, Salami-Agunloye intentionally writes a female-centered drama with a major character inclined toward leadership and who is both assertive and vocal. Salami-Agunloye, pushes for women's liberation through the character of Idia. Through her play, she has created a warrior identity for the modern woman who has at her disposal the requisite knowledge to negotiate power and autonomy for social change and transformation. This affirms Ologbose's praise of Queen Mother Idia upon her return from the war: "Your majesty, you are indeed a wise warrior. Your femininity is really not a hindrance to your expertise in war. Your

²⁶Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 9.

²⁷ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 11.

²⁸ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 14.

²⁹ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 14.

expertise in conjunction with your objectivity and independence are hallmarks of your integrity.”³⁰

Little wonder that upon Idia’s victory, the Chorus pours accolades on her saying: “No woman has ever gone to war with the exception of Idia, the mother of Esigie.”³¹ Moreover, Ezomo apologizes for being among the chiefs who opposed the king for sparing her life and her installation simply because of her gender, saying he felt that “a woman was incapable of making any useful contributions to the kingdom.”³² There is, therefore, the need for the assimilation of women into the corridors of power to enable them to utilize their skills in achieving great feats for the advancement of society. The leadership of Idia in a war (which chiefs and warriors would not attempt) that won victory for the Benin Kingdom and the Royal Palace affirms Ebo’s acknowledgment that “women are important in the society.”³³

Historically, Edo women in the royal palace are represented as not having the ability to negotiate autonomy (as Palace Virgins or as Queen Mothers) but Amenze and Idia saw a need to use their skills and wisdom to attain their goals within the constraints represented by the palace. This demonstrated that women had the ability to navigate situations even within sectors dominated by males. Interestingly, men who are assumed to be custodians of power, were afraid of going to war and it took a woman, Idia, to resist the enemies and surmount them. Ultimately, women’s autonomy and ability to negotiate power in a male-dominated sphere is achievable as exhibited by Amenze and Idia who against all odds, left a legacy for other women. This attests to the fact that when women have the opportunity to use their potential, they will contribute immensely to development of society.

To attain gender equality with men, and be able to negotiate power, women need to be independent, and have a sense of self-worth and autonomy. These factors as exemplified in the character of Queen Idia through whom women’s autonomy delivered victory over patriarchal structures are essential for women’s liberation. Idia, going where men feared to tread, brought

³⁰ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 90.

³¹ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 91.

³² Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 93.

³³ Ebo “Cultural challenges, 238.

victory and peace to the Benin Kingdom. Her resolve is evident in her speech: “When the cock crows, the lazy man sighs. I will leave this battle to none other but myself. I will fight the battle myself and bring down Chief Oliha and his allies. They will drink their own urine and eat their own feces.”³⁴ True to her words, she won the battle.

Taking a feminist perspective like Salami-Agunloye, Rajah Arase uses *Iyore* to uncover the predicament of women’s lives in the Edo historical past. Though a male filmmaker, he seems to see the need to document gender relationships and women’s achievements in the ancient Benin Kingdom and to use the film text to provoke feminist discourse on the status of the contemporary Edo woman in comparison with royal women in history. The female characters in the film illustrate the historic ones, and one can see the trend of attempts to subjugate and disempower women. However, the brave acts of Amenze, Osarugue, and Princess Ajoke -- though caught in cycle of love, death, and reincarnation -- demonstrate the women’s power to navigate their situations and display their autonomy. Osarugue eloped to Lagos with Azuwa, and later marries a third husband to prevent Azuwa (reincarnated as Eweka) to undergo another cycle of death and reincarnation. Amenze eloped to have her baby, while Ajoke (a reincarnated Amenze) encourages Azuwa, whom she eventually marries, to reconcile with his father, Oba Izuwa who had earlier disowned him as a result of his forbidden love entanglement with Osarugue (a school teacher of non-royal blood). These actions “show that the ability to make conscious choices about personal relationships is central to women’s freedom because choice is integral to feminism.”³⁵ Suffice it to say that although Amenze sees it as her obligation and fate to die with the king, in *Iyore*, she seeks ways to negotiate a different outcome by becoming pregnant with Prince Edosa. Although Edosa is killed, the union produced Onaiwu/Edosa. This brave attempt by Amenze to preserve continuity of the human race, even though she died in the process, is worth remembering.

In a similar fashion, Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye realizes the need for a woman’s view on the gross discrimination against the female gender under the guise of tradition. Tradition should appreciate and protect women for their innate ability to give birth rather than exterminate them

³⁴ Salami-Agunloye, *Idia*, 66.

³⁵ Amy Kesselman, Lily D. McNair and Nancy Schniederwind, *Women images and realities: A multicultural anthology* (New York, McGraw -Hill Higher Education, 2003) 25.

when a son becomes king. Since mothers painstakingly nurture their children irrespective of their sex, Idia, knowing the custom of the Edos, did not kill her son at cradle out of fear that she might be killed when he was crowned king.

Women should intentionally write plays putting women in the correct perspective rather than succumbing to the way society perceives them. This desire is reiterated by Obi in his writings on issues relating to gender war and identity. He claims that Salami-Agunloye specifically decries women's place in historiography and makes a conscious effort to tell of women's historical exploits through drama. Thus:

Her main inspiration, as a playwright, was to write history through plays, because historians and history itself is unfair to women. She gave the example of Emotan, Queen Idia and Queen Iden, who in spite of their contributions to the making and elevation of Benin Kingdom were not given adequate mention in books written on Benin history.³⁶

On the other hand, Salami-Agunloye's commitment to reposition Edo women in history through dramaturgy brings her to confront her father, a historian, about his neglect of Edo women, in spite of his numerous "groundbreaking books on ancient Benin history."³⁷ According to her:

I always challenged him on why he did not write extensively about Emotan, since he had the privilege of writing in the 20th century. His own position was that these women just did what they did. They were used as a vehicle or a means to an end. Besides, how many women actually read history books? He would ask. History books are read by men and men make history. You make history

³⁶ Nwagbo Pat Obi "Female critics, gender war and identity: The contributions of Mabel Ewwierhoma" in Mabel Ewwierhoma, Tacie Chima and Barclays Ayakoroma (ed.) *Gender discourses in African Theatre, Literature and Visual Art*, 79.

³⁷ Obi, "Female critics, 79.

when you talk about wars and ascension of Obas. History is not about women.³⁸

It is sad to note that not much attention is given to women's history by male historians. Thus, the onus lies on women to begin to document, read, and teach women's history as a matter of importance, if their male counterparts will not bother about documenting their existence and exploits in the historical past. It is not true that women do not make history. It is evident from Irene Salami-Agunloye's observation that women were schemed out of history, hence the call for female writers to graft women back into history. It is obvious that there is a void created by scanty references to women's participation in contributing to historical narratives. With the desire to deconstruct the myopic view of society on women's identity and image, Salami-Agunloye has adopted the tool of dramaturgy to reposition the Edo woman into the history of the Benin kingdom and to give her a voice.

This explains the clamor of feminist critics for female and feminist writers to concentrate on their dramatic creativity whereby women's stories are written by women, for women, and with a woman's perspective. Thus, feminist theorists and critics such as Mabel Ewrierhoma, who are advocates of female empowerment through dramaturgy, want women to be put in the right perspective through drama just as Gbilekaa observes that Ewrierhoma's book on women's dramatic creativity is "part of a corpus of the on-going battle by female writers and critics to narrow the gap of male dominance in dramatic creativity and appreciation in Africa."³⁹

Mabel Ewrierhoma contends that in Nigeria, "dramatic history seems to have been dominated by male dramatists due to the dearth of female writers, yet the few female writers still make effort to emphasize women-centered ideologies in their writings."⁴⁰ Ewrierhoma's concern is for female writers to begin to write about women from a woman's point of view as in Irene Salami-Agunloye's work under study. Ewrierhoma, however, commends the efforts of

³⁸ Obi, *Female critics*, 79.

³⁹ Obi, *Female critics*, 83.

⁴⁰ Mabel Ewrierhoma, *Female empowerment and dramatic creativity in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Caltop Publications Nigeria Limited, 2002) 11.

female writers who “through their texts, female dignity, femininity, female protestation and feminine aesthetics are upheld.”⁴¹

She further claims that “the woman as writer and the woman as character and reader become our reference points. The woman as writer affects strongly the woman as character and reader since she mediates between the two categories of people.”⁴² It is, therefore, imperative for female writers, no matter how few there are in comparison to men, to contribute consciously to the literature that will form the records of women’s place in different historical epochs.

Importantly, the cinema is a very potent medium to tell women’s stories, just as Rajah Arase has used it. Women should explore the film medium to project their exploits because it is evident that

the video film is itself a tool in the hand of the patriarchal system to define and discuss women’s issues for women, thereby withholding their collective voice for the NOW. Yet, this does not in any way diminish the importance of women as the numerically stronger stakeholders in the video industry. It simply amplifies the ambivalent position, which they occupy, and the strong presence of the ideology of patriarchy in the scheme of things in the popular video, which has the outlook of being a democratic mouthpiece for the people.⁴³

In sum, it is imperative to state that Edo women’s bravery and achievements in history, like those of women in other cultures, deserve to be documented and read about, just as Irene Salami-Agunloye has established in the play selected for this study. She uses the voice of one of the market women who wants to immortalize Idia for her victorious exploits: “Your majesty, all generations will live to remember your great deed. Your story will become a source of

⁴¹ Ewrierhoma, *Female empowerment*, 11.

⁴² Ewrierhoma, *Female empowerment*, 4.

⁴³ Onookome Okome “Women, religion and the video film in Nigeria: Glamour girls 1&2 and End of the wicked” in Onookome Okome, Innocent Uwah and Friday Nwafor (ed.) *Nollywood nation: On the industry, practice and scholarship of cinema in Nigeria* (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press, 2019) 31.

encouragement to many women.”⁴⁴ To complement this gesture, Iyase presents a gift of her image carved from ivory which “shall become the symbol of our unity, strength and confidence in womanhood.”⁴⁵

What better way is there to situate women in the hall of the records of historical icons than to write of their achievements, bravery, and remarkable experiences through dramaturgy and filmic narrative as evident in *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*, and *Iyore*.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the place of the Edo woman in history and used narratives about the lives and experiences of Edo women as embodied in the play *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*, and the film *Iyore* to concretize its argument. The female identity question raises the issue of negative stereotypes that represent women as commodities and sacrificial objects. However, the exploits of an exceptional character, such as Idia, and the bravery of a Palace Virgin, Amenze, who engaged in a love relationship in defiance of barbaric cultural practices against women bring us to the understanding that women have played key roles in the Benin Kingdom’s historical past. Therefore, there is a need for female and feminist writers to salvage and document comparable narratives that uplift the status and role of women in Benin society and elsewhere.

⁴⁴ Salami Agunloye, *Idia*, 95.

⁴⁵ Salami Agunloye, *Idia*, 95.

References

Aisien, Ekhuogosa. *The Benin City Pilgrimage Stations*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, 2015.

Arase, Frank Rajah, Dir. *Iyore*. Lagos: Raj and Heroes Films, 2015.

Ebo, Emmanuel Ejiofor. "Cultural challenges and women liberation in Nigeria: An analysis of Zulu Sofola's wedlock of the gods and Julie Okoh's Edewede." In *Gender discourses in African theatre, literature and visual arts. A festschrift in honour of Professor Mabel Ekwierhoma*, edited by Tracie Chimah Utoh-Ezeajugh and Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, 236-248. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2015.

Ekwierhoma, Mabel. *Female empowerment and dramatic creativity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications (Nigeria) Limited, 2002.

God'spresence, Emily Oghale. "African cultural values and female representation in Nollywood: *Iyore*." In *The London Film & Media Reader 5*, edited by Phillip Drummond, 220-227. London: The London Symposium (Kindle edition), 2017.

Kesselman Amy, Lily D. McNair & Nancy Schniedewind. *Women images & realities. A multicultural anthology*. Third edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2003.

Nzegwu, Nkiru. "Iyoba Idia: The Hidden Oba of Benin," *JENDA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 9 (2006) excerpted in *Rain Queens of Africa* (Nov. 4, 2012). Accessed June 26, 2016.

Obi, Nwagbo Pat. "Female critics, gender war and identity: The contributions of Mabel Ekwierhoma." In *Gender discourses in African theatre, literature and visual arts. A festschrift in honour of Professor Mabel Ekwierhoma*, edited by Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh and Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma, 69-93. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2015.

Okoh, Julie. *Our wife forever*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2010.

Okome, Onookome. "Women, religion and the video film in Nigeria: Glamour Girls 1&2, and End of the Wicked." In *Nollywood nation (on the industry, practice & scholarship of cinema in Nigeria)*:

A festschrift in honour of Professor Femi Okiremuette Shaka, edited by Onookome Okome, Innocent Uwah & Friday Nwafor, 26-54. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press Ltd., 2019.

Omoera, O.S. "We Have Been Quiet for Too Long: Contesting Female Disempowerment in Adaze," *The Quint: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly from the North* 12, no.2 (2020): 32-63.

Available at

<https://www.ucn.ca/sites/academics/facultyarts/programofferings/arts/humanities/The%20Quint/The%20Quint%20v12.2.pdf>

Osahon, Naiwu. "The Oba of Benin Dynasty." *Edofolks.com*, 1-15. Accessed June 24, 2016.

Salami-Agunloye, Irene Isoken. *Idia, the warrior queen of Benin*. Jos: Saniez Publications, 2008.