

International Journal of Advanced Research

Publisher's Name: Jana Publication and Research LLP

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REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-58181

Title: LA RESTITUTION DES BIENS CULTURELS AFRICAINS DANS LA PIECE INCINERES DE JEROME TOSSAVI ET D ALOUGBINE DINE,

Recommendation:

Accept after minor revision

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality			✓	
Techn. Quality		✓		
Clarity		✓		
Significance	✓			

Reviewer's ID: JPR-Abdul Haseeb Mir

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The submitted manuscript offers a meticulous, multi-layered dramaturgical and semiotic evaluation of the theatrical production *Incinérés*, written by Jérôme Tossavi and directed by the veteran Beninese theater practitioner Alougbine Dine in 2022. The text operates within a highly relevant geopolitical and cultural matrix, explicitly anchored in contemporary global discourses surrounding the repatriation of African cultural heritage looted during the colonial era. The author constructs a firm contextual bridge by citing milestone events that catalyzed this discourse, including French President Emmanuel Macron's landmark 2017 speech in Ouagadougou, the subsequent publication of the critical Sarr-Savoy report, and the high-profile return of twenty-six royal treasures to the Republic of Benin in November 2021, which drew immense public engagement at the Presidential Palace in Cotonou. It is within this societal momentum that the play *Incinérés* was commissioned by the French Embassy, serving as an artistic and youth-driven intervention into an otherwise elitist diplomatic debate.

The core theoretical objective of the study is to explore, theorize, and operationalize the concept of a staging vision, specifically analyzing the significant creative deviations that occur between the playwright's textually encoded intentions and the director's actualized scenic production. Utilizing a methodology that blends structural dramaturgical analysis, theatrical semiotics, and participant observation—justified by the co-authorship of the playwright himself—the manuscript seeks to validate the hypothesis that Dine's staging altogether reframes the narrative of repatriation. Rather than presenting a passive, administrative restitution, the scenic choices elevate the stolen artifacts to the status of living, rebellious actants who orchestrate their own voluntary, supernatural return from France to the land of their ancestors.

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The author systematically unfolds this thesis across several distinct thematic axes. First, the paper establishes a conceptual typology of staging visions, categorizing them into framed or closed systems, suggested frameworks, and open or free structures. It places Tossavi's text within the suggested category, where modest stage directions leave deliberate voids for directional interpretation. The analysis then proceeds to map out how the text's structural lack of explicit character identifiers before dialogues forces a deeper reliance on textual cues to reconstruct the underlying fable. The narrative arc tracks the historical downfall of King Béhanzin of Danxomé in 1894, the subsequent looting by French General Alfred Dodds, the occult resistance of the items within a private collection and a European museum space, and the ultimate triumphed return.

The paper further distinguishes itself by analyzing the spatial architecture of the performance executed at the open-air esplanade of the Palais des Congrès in Cotonou. The author details how the physical stage was semiotized into a vertical, ideological conflict, where the upper balcony representing General Dodds's domain of colonial dominance is systematically subverted by the lower museum space colonized by the rebelling artifacts. Finally, the manuscript delves into the somatic and vocal expressions of the actors, noting major directional interventions such as the somatic personification of *La Voix* and the integration of traditional Voodoo elements like the Sakpata deity. The study concludes by documenting the divisive critical reception of the play, noting complaints regarding its dense scenography and linguistic barriers, before validating the primary hypothesis.

Improvements

While the manuscript presents a compelling narrative and addresses a timely topic in African performance studies, several significant methodological, analytical, and structural areas require comprehensive refinement to elevate the work to standard international journal criteria.

The primary area requiring improvement concerns the theoretical stabilization and operationalization of the core concept, the vision of staging. While the author provides a basic threefold typology of closed, suggested, and open visions, the theoretical framework remains somewhat superficial. The transition from the dictionary definitions of vision and *mise en scène* to a rigorous analytical tool is rushed. The manuscript would benefit significantly from a deeper engagement with contemporary theatrical semioticians and performance theorists who have interrogated the text-performance dichotomy. Explaining exactly *how* a researcher separates the implicit textual architecture from the director's subjective reading requires a more transparent, step-by-step analytical protocol. Currently, the lines between what is uniquely Tossavi's vision and what is Dine's intervention occasionally blur, threatening the critical distance necessary for participant observation.

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Furthermore, the methodological application of participant observation requires greater critical reflexivity. The author casually mentions that because Jérôme Tossavi is a co-author of the study, vigilance was increased to avoid bias. However, the text does not adequately demonstrate how this vigilance was operationalized. Co-authoring a critical academic evaluation of one's own creative work presents an inherent paradox. The paper needs an explicit, self-reflective section discussing how the co-authors negotiated this subjectivity. It must clarify whether the playwright's insights are treated as primary empirical data or as an objective critical lens, and how the team guarded against defensive or overly charitable interpretations of the performance's reception.

The analysis of the dramatic and scenic space also demands an upgrade in terms of semiotic depth. The author correctly identifies a series of spatial binary oppositions, such as large versus enclosed, and high versus low, noting a value reversal as the play progresses. However, this architectural reading should be tied more firmly to post-colonial spatial theory. The physical transition from the Institut Français du Bénin—perceived by some as a monument to cultural neo-colonialism—to the Chinese-built Palais des Congrès represents an ideological shift that deserves a far more robust socio-political critique rather than a brief historical footnote. The semiotic reading of the scenic objects, such as the yellow plastic cans and rolling puppet structures, should be unpacked to explain their specific symbolic weight within contemporary Beninese visual culture.

In terms of performance analysis, the section dealing with the actors' somatic movements, based on Michel Bernard's categories, is somewhat fragmented. The author lists various attributes such as verticality, obliquity, and facial expressions, but treats them as a checklist rather than a fluid, unified expressive system. The analysis needs to better connect these bodily postures to the overarching theme of metaphysical revolt. For instance, the dynamic acrobatics of the Sakpata initiate should not merely be described; the author must theorize how this specific bodily expenditure represents a rupture of western museum containment strategies.

Additionally, the treatment of the play's acoustic landscape requires serious adjustment. The manuscript notes that music occupies a central position in the live performance despite being largely absent or minor in the source text. Yet, the critical engagement with this soundscape is uneven. The inclusion of French pop culture artifacts, such as Jacques Dutronc's song or Joséphine Baker's classic melody, is observed but not deeply interrogated. The author must explicitly analyze the ironic or subversive juxtaposition of utilizing these specific French nationalist and metropolitan melodies within a performance centered on anti-colonial revolt and cultural reclamation.

Finally, the manuscript's handling of the negative critical reception requires a more balanced and scholarly integration. The text recounts the abrupt departure of playwright José Pliya due to the deafening

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volume of the orchestra, the alienation felt by French Ambassador Marc Vizy regarding un-translated local languages, and the sharp financial criticisms leveled by Fabienne Bidou. Currently, these fascinating empirical reactions are presented almost as historical gossip at the end of the text. The paper would be significantly strengthened if these reactions were integrated into the core semiotic analysis, using them as evidence of the friction that occurs when an anti-colonial artistic vision collides with institutional, diplomatic funding bodies.

Recommendations

To enhance the academic rigour, clarity, and analytical impact of this manuscript for final publication, the following strategic transformations should be meticulously implemented.

First, the authors must fortify the theoretical introduction by expanding the literature review beyond basic dictionary definitions. It is highly recommended to integrate advanced performance theories regarding the relationship between page and stage. The threefold typology should be explicitly linked to these scholars to justify why *Incinérés* fits the profile of a suggested staging vision, demonstrating how the script's specific syntactic density leaves structural gaps that invite directorial subversion.

Second, the methodology section must be rewritten to include a transparent disclosure regarding the dual role of the playwright-author. The narrative should outline the specific critical parameters used during the participant observation phase to decouple the playwright's personal memory of creation from the systematic semiotic logging of the recorded performances. This will eliminate any perception of analytical bias and frame the co-authorship as a methodological strength rather than a liability.

Third, the spatial and scenic analysis must be theoretically upgraded. It is recommended to use conceptual frameworks from post-colonial geography and spatial semiotics to better unpack the transition between the performance venues. The text must explicitly articulate how the vertical stage design functions as a visual metaphor for colonial hierarchy, and how the degradation of the upper balcony space by the end of the performance visually signals the collapse of colonial authority.

Fourth, the systemic analysis of the actors' performances must be tightened by synthesizing the listed bodily expressions into a cohesive discussion of actantial transformation. The author should systematically contrast the rigid, text-based acting styles of the human characters representing the colonial structure against the fluid, improvisational, and rhythm-driven physical vocabularies of the performers portraying the animated cultural artifacts.

Fifth, the analysis of the musical interludes and the integrated oral folk tales must be significantly deepened. The author needs to offer a rigorous textual and auditory analysis of the *Fon* language segments, explaining how these local linguistic choices and the story of the tiny bird defeating the

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elephant function as internal mirrors to the overarching plot, purposefully excluding monolingual colonial spectators from the complete metaphysical experience.

Sixth, the section addressing the play's reception must be re-architected. Rather than treating the criticisms of the French embassy officials and local dramaturgs as an afterthought, the author should frame these responses as a live ideological conflict. The paper should argue that the criticisms regarding the play being too expensive, too loud, or linguistically inaccessible are proof that Alougbine Dine's staging successfully ruptured the safe, sanitized expectations of diplomatic cultural exchange.

Seventh, the conclusion should be expanded to more clearly articulate the broader implications of this research for the wider field of African performance studies. The proposed comparative look toward the Congolese performance creation *Nkishi a Nkolomonyi* from October 2023 should be elevated from a passing suggestion to a firm conceptual signpost. The author should explicitly map out how a comparative framework between Beninese and Congolese performance strategies regarding ancestral prosopopoeia could provide a localized, performance-based methodology for studying cultural decolonization without relying purely on Western academic paradigms.

Finally, the entire text must undergo a thorough editorial review to smooth out abrupt transitions between sections, ensuring that the theoretical vocabulary established in the opening pages remains consistently active throughout the spatial, somatic, and musical critiques.