

**Far from Divinity and Malevolence: Agency in Afi Gbegbi's Life and Drama  
*Soeurs d'ange*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

In Afi Gbegbi's drama, female characters are portrayed in a multifaceted way. Depicted as heroines, they challenge stereotypes that have long dominated theatre productions and (oral) literature. This article explores agency in Gbegbi's *Soeurs d'ange* and focuses on how the concept is articulated through her female characters. In discussing agency, the article looks at the formation of hierarchies and the social status of the characters. The discussion in the article further demonstrates how her drama connects with her life as a Togolese female dramatist. Specifically, the article examines Gbegbi's drama from a gender perspective and relates it to the life of women in Togo. The theory of semiotics according to Erika Fischer-Lichte and the exploration of agency according to Heiko Hoffmann will be relevant in the article.

Afi Gbegbi is a Togolese dramatist who is little known in the non-francophone world. That is probably because her drama *Soeurs d'Ange* is written in French and it has only recently been published (in 2019) by the Belgian publishing house

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Lansman Editeur. What is special about her is that she is one of very few Togolese female dramatists and it is even rarer that her play is published. Additionally, she is an artist who writes drama with almost solely female characters. By using female characters, the problems of women and societal mechanisms of suppression laid on them, but also those that they lay on others, can become clear. Gbegbi gives her characters freedom of action, lets them find solutions to their problems, and portrays them in a spectrum that is barely seen in the plays of her male colleagues. The potential of the characters, heroines or otherwise, as well as their flaws, become visible.

This study breaks relatively new ground. Heather J. Denyer is the only scholar who has worked on Afi Gbegbi's *Après Gomorrhe, Une histoire de frontière* (co-authored with Michel Beretti) and *Soeurs d'ange* in her dissertation *Re-Defining Gender and Sexuality in West African Theatre: Women Artists, Feminist Representations, and Same-Sex Desire in the Twenty-First Century Theatre of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo* (2019). Denyer's study not only provides a panoramic view of the dramatists in the named countries, but she also carves out the images of women that are transmitted in their drama. She asserts that women do more and increasingly arrive on stage and play leading parts, which enables a redefinition of the female gender. Furthermore, Denyer illustrates the historic and sociocultural process of the participation of women and female roles in the theatre.

Just as Denyer's study, this work is in the field of the feminist research tradition. The aim of it is to examine the agency that the person Afi Gbegbi displays, and that of the characters in her drama. Just as the branch of Feminist Theatre Studies in the beginning of the 1980s was split in literary examinations of the dramatic text and empirical scholarship on under- and nondocumented work of women in the theatre (cf. Aston 1995: 1ff.), different sides of a coin need to be looked at. The ground-breaking work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) on semiotics, the study of sign processes and the

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communication of meaning, made it possible to see what is shown on stage as 'sign' with intentional meaning. The theory of semiotics is essential in analysing the meaning transmitted through theatre and the liveness of the performance. Through semiotic approaches, it was possible in feminist studies to see the woman as 'sign' that is represented in a certain manner on stage or in the dramatic text. Unfortunately, during the time that this work was in progress, no official performance of the drama *Soeurs d'ange* has ever been staged. There had been staged readings, for example at the festival *Ça va, ça va le monde!* in Avignon<sup>2</sup>, that I have partially consulted in the analysis. But the semiotic work that can be done on the dramatic text is mainly limited to what is written. The "plurimedial event" (Schößler 2012:10) of the performance is restricted to what is said by the characters and described by the author in stage directions or, for example, the introduction.

Often, in epic literature and theatre of the west African region, we find certain topoi for female characters. They are commonly minor characters as wives or mothers, capable of acting and being influential behind the scenes. In Gbegbi's drama, they are either wise, respectable and live an almost supernatural existence, which will allow them to bear anything, or they are egoistic and diabolical antagonists. Frequently, the second or third wife is the antagonist. In addition to other critics, Susanne Gehrmann (2000) finds those topoi in novels of the Senegalese Aminata Sow Fall. Pepetual Chiangong (2011) finds similar topoi in the plays of three Cameroon dramatists. From that observation, this study follows the hypothesis that Gbegbi portrays women without stereotyping. They are put in the foreground, with their actions contextual to their existence. Her heroines are hence portrayed as "far from divinity and malevolence"; rather they are portrayed as humans in their environment, with a complex of problems they see themselves

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<sup>2</sup> Staged reading of the drama *Soeurs d'ange* during the festival *Ça va, ça va le monde!* 2018 in Avignon in cooperation with the radio station rfi: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20180826-afi-gbegbi-togo-soeurs-ange-ca-va-le-monde-rfi> (Retrieved 26.02.2025)

confronted with. It turns out also that Afi Gbegbi herself must struggle with role assignments for the female gender and her drama responds to her experience and the experience of others in her surroundings.

To grasp this form of resistance or capacity to do things different from what is commonly known or thought as normal for the female gender, whether as a real person or as a character in a drama, this study employs the theory of agency by Heiko Hoffmann. But to read the signs that are transmitted through theatre, it is imperative to apply the theory of semiotics to *Soeurs d'Ange*, using a methodology developed by Erika Fischer-Lichte to catalogue semiotic signs.

The research question that guides my study is: 'How is agency visible in the life and drama of Afi Gbegbi?' The methodological approach derived from this question is split: first, I conduct a qualitative analysis of a personal interview that I had with Afi Gbegbi in Lomé and other interviews with her that can be found online.<sup>3</sup> Passages of the text are set in their context. For this, it is crucial to understand her living environment. Scholarship that analyses Togolese/West African sociocultural and religious life serves as a hermeneutic foundation. Secondly, the drama *Soeurs d'ange* is analysed with the help of Fischer-Lichte's "theatrical code" ('theatralen Code', 1994: 20ff.) that is based upon the work of Prague structuralists such as Otakar Zich and Jan Mukařovský. She categorises four groups of signs: 1. The kinetic refers to the movement by the actor. Subcategories here are mimic, gesture and proxemics, the movement on stage. 2. If actors themselves generate signs, linguistic or paralinguistic (such as pitch of the voice, pronouncement, volume, and so on), they are a sign group. 3. Another level is the appearance, whereby the mask, hairdo and costume form the next sign group. 4. The final sign group is the stage whereby the conception of the room ('Raumkonzeption'), decoration, props and illumination are examined. Basically, the signs can be subdivided into acoustic/visual, transitory/enduring and signs

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<sup>3</sup> <https://actu-togo.com/culture/togo-culture-lartiste-togolaise-afi-gbegbi-nous-raconte-son-parcours> (Retrieved 09.03.2022)

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relating to actor/space. The semiotician Keir Elam has criticised this methodology as being too intuitive (2002: 204) and focused only on the micro-level of a drama. Elam's criticism helps to understand the limits of the *theatrical code* and the consequence is to have the whole picture of a drama in mind and to question the categories of the code. Notwithstanding, Fischer-Lichte's method has been a helpful tool to fully understand the different, sometimes overlapping, or contradictory, signs in drama, and in particular in *Soeurs d'ange*.

The theories I use to frame my analysis of female agency include the identity and the social standing of a person. The Western gender theory of Judith Butler, for example, needs to be adjusted to the understanding of gender that exists in the society of the dramatist. Many academics like Mugambi (2007), Mbah (2019), Uchendu (2008), Steady (2005), and Boris (2007) describe the various and complex understandings of gender in different areas of the African continent. The Togolese sociologist Svetlana Roubailo Koudolo (2008), who researches on masculinity in the south of Togo, asserts that men play a superordinate role in the patrilineal society of the Ewe, but she also questions western classifications of male and female according to biological sex. Sometimes, the sex is referentially negotiated; a woman can marry a woman and can be accepted as a man.

The theory of hegemonic masculinity and femininity by Connell & Messerschmidt is another jigsaw piece in the puzzle of hierarchies and agency among identities. The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (2005: 832) describes patterns of practices which allow the dominance of men over women. That means concretely, male dominance is consistently renegotiated and is not only justified by role assignments. Through daily practices, the hegemony of a male individual is strengthened and underpinned. There are several criticisms of this theory, particularly that masculinity is being essentialized and homogenized. Masculinity can for example be played out by a female body and it is much more multi-layered. What is additionally criticised is that the body is marginalised and the biological sex naturalized. The body is profoundly integrated in social processes where power struggles are fought. Gender is also a social product, not only a

biological product and there is more than just a binary dichotomy of gender. People who do not want to belong to one or the other gender fall through the cracks.

As a counterpart to the masculine side, Connell & Messerschmidt present the “hegemonic femininity” that was later renamed “emphasized femininity” (2005: 848). She invigorates the manly side in what a society thinks is appropriate. Women play a central role in the construction of the male gender as mothers, schoolmates, girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives. Women who are feminine agree to the concept of patriarchy and reinforce the concept. The term ‘hegemonic’, on the other hand, can describe violent “compliance” (ibid.) that women can exert on other women to subordinate them. Nfah-Abbenyi writes that many African women find power in being a mother or the first wife in a polygamous marriage (1997: 24). It elevates their status and gives them the authority to decide for others.

The core of this study is the theory of agency by Heiko Hoffmann. He has defined agency based on Harrison White’s sociological work about identity and control. For White, agency is an “achievement of identities [...] to reproduce social structure and also to mould it creatively [...]”<sup>4</sup> (White, qtd. in Hoffmann 2012: 154f.). The determining factor here is if an identity can have an impact on its living environment. Hoffmann differentiates four cases of agency. The first is when an identity acts according to its social position. In this case, the identity can also *not* act as expected by others. This is referred to as “fresh action” (2012: 165). This *fresh action* will probably not be accepted by others, but it creates new scope. The second case of agency is when an identity can regularly exercise *fresh action* in a “netdom” (2012: 163). A *netdom* is a collection of social ties and culture. This is called “fresh control” (2012: 165). In the third case, an identity can change *netdoms*, which is called switching, and can therefore exercise more control. The fourth case

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<sup>4</sup> ‚Leistung von Identitäten [...] soziale Struktur zu reproduzieren und auch kreativ zu gestalten [...]‘

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examines the agency that an identity can exercise by creating a biography in which the self is portrayed as powerful and successful. Hoffmann's theory of agency is first applied to Afi Gbegbi as a social agent and in a second step to the characters in the drama.



**Figure 1: Afi Gbegbi**

Afi Gbegbi is a Togolese dramatist based in the country's capital, Lomé. She identifies herself as Wati, a people located in the northeast of Togo although she grew up in the south with religious parents. Her full name is Afi Marie-Josée Woetomenyui Gbegbi, also known as Marie-Jo. She is 39 years old (1984) mother to a daughter. In addition to being a dramatist, she performs slams and writes poetry, short stories and screenplays. In the past, she has exercised *fresh action* to determine her career path, against the will of her family and the society. She studied law but decided to quit because she did not feel it was the right career for her. In her personal life, things happened that shocked her. She did not want to go

into details with me, but she later found fulfilment through an association with *UNCESO Theatre Club* at the University of Lomé. Gbegbi later trained as a theatre director. Regarding the role that women play in her society, she told me in a personal interview:

Dans notre culture on ne nous inculque pas le fait que la femme peut être complètement indépendante et décider de faire ceci ou cela parce qu'elle en a envie. On voudrait que la femme écoute, et fasse comme on lui demande de faire. Et ce qu'on lui demande habituellement [...] qu'elle soit une bonne épouse, une bonne mère, une bonne consolatrice ... qu'elle soit celle qui porte le monde.<sup>5</sup>

In our culture, we are not taught the fact that the woman can be completely independent and decide to do this or that because she wants to. We would like women to listen and do as they are told. And what she is usually asked is [...] that she is a good wife, a good mother, a good comforter ... to be the one who carries the world. (translation mine)

Here we find the theme of a woman who must be almost supernatural in her goodness. Also, we find the notion that a woman must put herself in the background to do things in a way that benefits her surroundings. Her personal desires and needs must not impede her responsibilities to the community. Gbegbi says that this assigned role of a woman is culturally transmitted. Because of the gender associations where women and girls are brought up to follow the general construction of women according to patriarchy instead of independently following their wishes, the implication is that few women are in any position of agency or authority in Togolese theatre. For instance, Afi Gbegbi is one of the few female dramatists in Togo.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she is the only published female

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<sup>5</sup> Personal interview held on 13 September 2021 in Lomé, Togo.

<sup>6</sup> According to an interview with Pascale Poirer, theatre director:  
<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20190612-afi-gbegbi-une-autrice-togolaise-residence>  
(Retrieved 12.12.2022: 19:30 - 20:10 min.)

dramatist in Togo. Dobila and Kodjo-Atsun describe the theatre scene in Togo as hierarchical and sometimes sexist, where women are seen as visitors until they have children. It would be hard for a woman to take care of the household, the children and the demanding work at the theatre, they explain. Care work is still the prevailing duty of women, and they are “enormously underrepresented in different occupational areas of theatre” (Dobila & Kodjo-Atsun 2020: 96). Interestingly, Afi Gbegbi says that she has been supported in theatre, *because* she is a woman.

It is important not to draw a one-sided picture of women as victims because that does not necessarily represent the complex relations among women, men and the state. “[...] [T]he important ways in which women have constituted themselves in arenas of power” (Achebe & Teboh 2007: 75) shall not be obscured. Gbegbi for example draws strength from the remembrance of the “Ahoši female warriors” (Denyer 2021: 92) regiment of the Dahomey kingdom before it was defeated by colonizers. The regiment served as bodyguards, soldiers and hunters. In my interview with Gbegbi, she informed me about remote areas in Togo where women keep the secrets of health and medicine and pass them only to other women.<sup>7</sup> She regrets that the practice of knowledge transmission that strengthens women, equips them for their world, and creates a bond among them is slowly dying despite it being part of the popular and prevalent Vodún<sup>8</sup> religion, particularly in the south of the country.

In Gbegbi's plays, we often see an amalgamation of Christian and Vodún religion and beliefs, informed probably by her religious upbringing. In Vodún, people believe in spiritual powers, in the dead, and in the ancestors (Rush 2013: 2ff.). They also believe that nature possesses power. In the Vodún liturgy, past, present and future merge in a non-linear way during the interaction with spirits, whereby

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<sup>7</sup> Personal Interview held on the 13.09.2021 in Lomé, Togo.

<sup>8</sup> Vodún or vodúnsínse is an African traditional religion practiced by the Aja, Ewe, and Fon peoples of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria. Practitioners are referred to as vodúnsentó or Vodúnísants.

participants are enabled to form their own narratives and implement solutions as new parts in the process. Women are believed to have a deep connection with supernatural powers, and they can act as mediators between the worlds of the living and that of the spirits (Ricard 1997: 141).

Nowadays, women play an important role as merchants or traders in the economy of West African countries (cf. Lindsay 2007; Ebron 2007). In their economic network, they use social exchange and support to build political power. Denyer reports of the prestigious “Nana Benz” (2012: 135f.) who are successful entrepreneurs, have political influence and the needed means to buy a Mercedes Benz car. These examples show that there are strong, powerful and successful women in the West African region. Nevertheless, there are also institutional, cultural and familiar structures of discrimination towards women on the African continent (Arndt 2000: 104; Chiangong 2011: 179f.). Gbegbi answers to some of the structures of discrimination in her plays *Soeurs d’ange*, *Après Gomorrhe*, *Sur le quai vers MONREVE* and *Une histoire de la frontière*.

With all that in mind, it is plausible to hold that Afi Gbegbi actively resists a restricted notion of gender identity and understanding that exists in her society on both a professional and social level. In a recently published anthology, *Nigerian Female Dramatists: Expression, Resistance, Agency* (2021), Bosede Funke Afolayan describes it as a “radical act” (ibid., leaning on Ewwierhoma: 4) when women write drama in a region of the world where there are many obstacles like poverty, and where women are underrepresented and marginalized. Gbegbi’s agency becomes even clearer, when we look at her professional behaviour: She is cooperating with institutions that enable her work, such as the *Institut Français Togo* or the *Goethe-Institut Togo*, because she could not be financially supported by the Togolese state. In 2018, she received the Prize “*inédits d’Afrique et Outremer*” by the Lansman publishing house. Writing in French extends her audience and gives her a widely recognizable public voice. The issues that she raises cannot therefore be easily dismissed.

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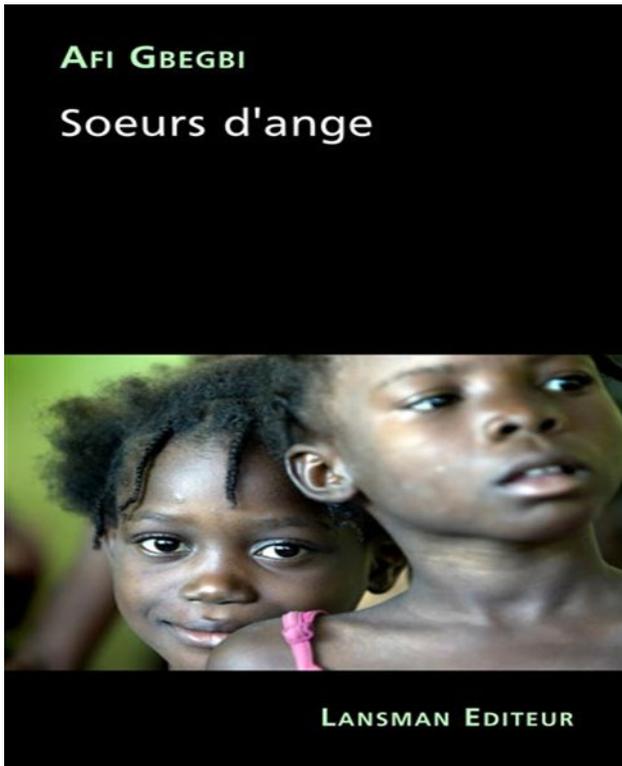
Regarding the second case of agency, we see that the *fresh control* is initially difficult. Her family did not understand her decision to become a director. But she says that this is accepted by her family now, and her mother has gradually begun to support her.<sup>9</sup> Despite the support from her mother, Gbegbi describes being a female artist tough as the views of many in the society are still negative about the fact.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, on agency, Afi Gbegbi is a multifaceted artist who uses different art forms to express herself; she runs workshops, participates in international residencies for authors, and conducts theatre courses at schools in Lomé. Despite her visibility and active participation in multiple *netdoms* where she implements her perspectives, the agency for her to lead or be accepted as a leader is limited because of her gender.

“Semiotic agency” defines the idea that acting can ‘carry’ meanings (Kockelman 2017: 25) and the behaviour of an agent can change the ontological worldview of the recipient through performance. This operates in a dual sense with Afi Gbegbi because her behaviour in real life can initiate changes in the perception of women in her society whereas also on stage, she invents characters in plays that behave in a certain way. Her plays are “alienable media” (Kockelman 2017: 36) that can enhance her range to reach a broader public and enable her spread ideas for a better and more just world for women.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20190612-afi-gbegbi-une-autrice-togolaise-residence> (Retrieved 12.12.2022: 21:30 - 22:40 min.)

<sup>10</sup> Personal Interview held on the 13 September.2021 in Lomé, Togo.



**Figure 2: Cover of Soeurs d'ange**

*Soeurs d'ange* ('Angel sisters', translation mine, 2019) is the story of three women who want to free themselves from the horrible experiences they have endured with the death of their husband. The title gives us a hint that supernatural forces play a big part in the story. It is like the expression 'soeurs d'armes' (Sisters-in-arms) that is derived from the common French expression "frère d'armes" (brother-in-arms). A certain fighting spirit and solidarity between the characters is perceptible throughout the plot. Still, the title is ironic because it suggests that the women are innocent and angel-like. The cover is black with a close-up picture of two children on a green background. Why this photo was chosen to represent the drama remains an open-ended question. It underlines the title because the children could be sisters. Additionally, like the title, children symbolize

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innocence, but just like they are not guiltless, the three characters are not guiltless either.

At the beginning of the play, the three women gather around the grave of their dead husband in a spooky graveyard. They meet to disturb his eternal peace but also for their piece of mind. They start a ritual with the aim of relieving themselves of the bad memories they share. Throughout the play, the ritual fails multiple times, putting their mutual trust and relations to the test. But they know that acting in unison is the only way to overcome their dilemma. At the climax, they fail again as the graveyard turns into a labyrinth with no exit, thwarting their joint efforts. As they dig, an explosion opens a fairy tale-like, seductive cave where everything appears magical. But the sparkling room is deceptive; an invisible wall hinders their progress. Woman 2 wants them to stop by calling out, "Halt!" but the other two do not heed her call, with Woman 3 declaring Woman 2 mad. Nonetheless, as they sing together, the wall starts to crack. The play ends with a hint that the women will succeed in the ritual.

Gbegbi dramatizes the plight of females, using only female characters who triumph in the end. The women are named Woman 1, Woman 2, and Woman 3. This naming is interesting for several reasons, least of all the interchangeability of the roles, and the understanding that the women are replaceable, leaving us with the criticism that the play is not about individual characters, but about women and their fate. It can be assumed that Gbegbi uses these identifiers to highlight that the fates of the women are not isolated, but a universal problem affecting many women in Togo. In this drama, Gbegbi addresses structures that disadvantage the female gender: child marriage, domestic violence, forced prostitution, the hierarchy in a polygamous marriage, and homophobia. All three women were married to the same man by their families when they each turned nine years old. They were mentally and physically abused by their husband who forced the women to sleep with the women's friends as well as with other men. In the same situation, only Woman 1 had agency to decide for herself and the other women; Woman 3 was powerless, and Woman 2 is denied her desires and dreams

because of the homophobia in the society. She is not even accorded recognition for her astuteness by the other women whilst digging the grave in the ritual. In essence, there are different stages of lack or recognition or ‘unnaming’.

This unnaming also applied to the husband. The shared husband is nameless and is only called “le...” (Gbegbi 2019: 10). In the staged reading, which was performed during the festival *Ça va, ça va le monde!* 2018 in Avignon, France, the readers used a deep and loud sigh to fill the ellipsis.<sup>11</sup> It sounded like a mixture of disgust, aversion and disavowal. This namelessness was important to the dramatist, as she revealed in a radio station interview: “Il me serrait vraiment difficile de le nommer, puisque l’oppression est aussi vaste, ce n’est pas forcément un homme personne physique [...]”<sup>12</sup>. Both the husband and the people who take advantage of the women are accused.

How is the agency of the *dramatis personae* visible in *Soeurs d’ange*? Mainly through verbal and linguistic signs. Baumbach & Nünning assume that “[I]t is largely through language that meaning in drama is communicated.” (2009: 46). However, in Gbegbi’s drama, the kinetic signs are also essential tools that carry meaning. As Gbegbi’s stage directions are rather simple regarding the appearance of the actors and the decor of the stage, there is a focus on the words, expressions and movements of the actors and the use of the stage props. For instance, at the beginning of the play, Woman 1 starts the ritual by placing candles on the grave, saying: “Le briquet” (‘the lighter’, Gbegbi 2019: 7) whereupon the other two women start to search for it. This short passage gives us a hint that Woman 1

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<sup>11</sup> Staged reading of the drama *Soeurs d’ange* during the festival *Ça va, ça va le monde!* 2018 in Avignon in cooperation with the radio station RFI: <https://www.rfi.fr/emission/20180826-afi-gbegbi-togo-soeurs-ange-ca-va-le-monde-rfi> (Retrieved 26.02.2025)

<sup>12</sup> My translation: ‘It would be really difficult for me to name him, since oppression is so vast, it’s not necessarily a man or a physical person.’ Interview with Afi Gbegbi by radio station rfi: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20190612-afi-gbegbi-une-autrice-togolaise-residence> (Retrieved 12 December 2022: 17:23 - 17:35 min.)

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wields power over the other two women. Only by uttering two words, the others follow her instructions. It becomes also clear that she is the facilitator of the ritual because she walks on stage towards the grave (proxemic sign) and places candles on it (kinetic sign and candles as symbols for the ritual). Further, the signs can be decoded on a micro level. However, we also need to look at a macro-level of the drama and recognise recurrent signs and the actions of the characters to get the full picture of their agency. Sometimes the signs can be contradictory; for example when Woman 1 shows signs of weakness, but that is due to their representation as a 'round', multidimensional and complex character.<sup>13</sup> Due to a predominance of the signs of power, we can conclude that she is a mighty person. Having stated that, this paper shall engage more closely with the agency of the characters.

There is Woman 1, who is the eldest and the first wife. That gives her the power and authority to rule over the others, but also the responsibility to care for them. In the list of characters, only the age of the characters is noted (Gbegbi 2019: Registers of Persons). That gives us a hint that age is an important verifier and personal characteristic. That is consistent with the importance of age in a stratified society like Togo (cf. Boris 2007: 197). She has traits of a hegemonic femininity, but she generally uses her power in a way that will have a positive impact on the little community. Throughout the play, she makes fun of the other women (Gbegbi 2019: 8, 14, 17, 36) or answers ironically to their statements. In doing so, she keeps control over their behaviour. Woman 1 knows how to use her femininity to manipulate men according to her will, in addition to the control she has over her co-wives. She distracts a cemetery watchman as he almost interrupts the ritual (27); she repeatedly appeals to the fighting spirit of the women (11,15,18); and she admonishes Woman 3 to consider her own benefit and not that of their little group, when she acts egoistically (19). As the idea to not let the ghost of the dead husband rest in peace came from her (14f.), the understanding arises that Woman

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'round' character is used in this work to describe a multidimensional and complex representation of a personality. The opposite therefore is a 'flat' character, a one-dimensional one-sided representation of a personality.

1 must ensure that their endeavour is successful. Her agency is high, and she acts according to her social position. But that also involves the disadvantages of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Close to the end, she exerts *fresh action* when she decides to live out her romantic feelings with Woman 2, contrary to the homophobic notions that she herself held.

Then there is the third wife, Woman 3, who is the opposite of Woman 1. She is the youngest and does not have much 'legal' agency to decide anything; her life is determined by others. It seems as if she must compensate for this, because on an acoustic and kinetic level, she gets attention by being violent. To the puppet, which represents the husband, she says: "Le son de ta voix m'exaspère. Tais-toi, sinon je te coupe la langue, je t'arrache la mâchoire et je l'accroche à la porte ou je te décapite"<sup>14</sup>. (Gbegbi 2019: 11). The puppet is later torn into pieces by her (13). She however is the only one to be openly expressive when she kicks the grave (25). She also has the largest number of monologues in the play, and the playwright presents her as a tragic hero. In the past, she has tried to gain agency and to shape the world as she wants to but fails because she is dependent on her husband and her environment. She has exerted *fresh action* in acting how it is not expected in her social position: She blackmailed the men that she had to sleep with to get a healthy bank account. She has also cheated on the other wives. But this *fresh action* does not change the societal structures for the female gender despite gaining some control in her netdom (*fresh control*). Woman 3 wins back some power for herself. Woman 3 has antagonistic traits; sometimes her pessimism and lack of a feeling for solidarity with the other women threatens to scupper their endeavour. Ironically, it is hardest for her to free herself of the influence of the husband. She loudly opposes the idea of Woman 2 digging up the corpse (19) and refuses to take that last step that, as Woman 2 says, will end the

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<sup>14</sup> My translation: 'The sound of your voice maddens me. Shut your trap, if not I will cut off your tongue, I will rip out your jaw and hang it on the door where I will decapitate you.'

dependence on that man (cf. 21). As Women 1 and 2 go off as a couple, Woman 3 realizes that she needs the others even if she wants to liberate herself. Earlier, she had termed their feelings 'game against nature' (cf. 31) but now she wonders whether it is not a better option than being alone in what she considers 'liberation'.

Woman 2 seems a little more marginal than Woman 1 and Woman 3 and projects an understanding of a more equal and peaceful world. In the play, she presents the idea that leads to the cave, a magical phenomenon that serves as a representation of the dead husband. Throughout the play, the love that Woman 2 feels for Woman 1 is apparent through transitory, repeated signs. On the verbal level: "Ma chérie, tu ne prends pas soin de moi, tu ne me regardes même pas. [...]"<sup>15</sup> (Gbegbi 2019: 10). But also, on a physical level when she wants to hold her hand during the ritual (ibid.) or hangs her arm to hold Woman 1 when she is frightened. She encourages Woman 3 not to give up and fight against the attachment to the representation of the husband (11). As Woman 1 threatens to fall back and remains a heterosexual and supportive wife (widow), Woman 2 stands by her and holds her hand to motivate her (36). On a verbal, kinetic and symbolic level of the props, her support of the others and the ritual is visible. Woman 2 thinks outside the box. Her idea to desecrate the grave first evokes resistance (18) but finally helps the women to move forward. Woman 2 dreams of a society without violence (31) and ponders about human capacity to live together in peace. For her, the acceptance of homosexual partnerships is crucially connected with her visions of a better world. An interesting connection between the resistance against patriarchal structures and the acceptance of homosexual partnerships is made, because "heteronormativity" (Tamale 2007: 19) suppresses homosexual partnerships and imagines them as 'abnormal'. Alone, Woman 2 is unable to change the structures in her *netdom* leading to the initial failure of her *fresh action*. She needs the others so that her ideas can have more importance,

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<sup>15</sup> „My sweetheart, you don't take care of me, you don't even look at me [...]"

more urgency, but they also need her ideas and point of view. All in all, the women want to attain the third case of agency, where structures in different *netdoms* can be changed for the better for the female gender. But first, they want to change the structure in their netdom in the form of *fresh control*.

he antagonist in this play is the ghost of the husband. In the past, before death, he was supported by an inviolable patriarchal sphere. This patriarchal sphere represents the society, the families and men who have taken advantage of the women. The husband has had a high negative agency, which was reinforced by these structures. In the drama, the objects that personify him have no agency. They are exposed to the verbal and physical attacks by the women. To draw the whole picture, it should be noted that demonstrations of love and affection are also revealed to these objects in a dramatic act by Gbegbi to demonstrate the human capability to feel affection towards somebody who is outwardly abusive. The ritual helps the women to organize themselves and to be in contact with the past. Stage props are at the same time the ritual objects. Just as the ritual in Vodun liturgy, the characters of the play participate in a process whereby they are in contact with their past, find solutions, and try to implement them in their present life. The chants and songs that the women sing help to create the atmosphere of the ritual (9, 12, 20). The ritual empowers the women because now they can decide its course and content. Both individual agency and group agency are foregrounded in the play. Each woman participates with her individual strength and weakness for the common goal to create better conditions for them and the female gender. They form a community whereby the members mutually support one another to become more powerful and connect their “agential features” (Witzel 2020: 24) to reach higher goals. It is also visible that the agency of the characters is interwoven with intersectional traits – next to gender are age, hierarchy in a polygamous marriage, sexuality, and wealth status.

Finally, if we look at the agency of the dramatist and of the *dramatis personae*, we see that both must struggle with perceptions and structures that hinder the female

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gender to participate in different aspects of life like men. On the side of the dramatist, it was clear that Gbegbi has used *fresh action* in the past to break out of role patterns that did not agree with her position; she overcame rejection in her family and in her environment. Her *fresh control* becomes visible, because slowly the opinions on the decisions of her path of life change for the better. She has the potential to influence contexts in different *netdoms* between which she *switches*. She explicitly implements her female point of view. This is especially by being a female dramatist in Togo, where this is regarded as a masculine area. *Soeurs d'ange* pillories societal grievances. The forms of hierarchy supported by patriarchy and heteronormativity are explored in their negative and harmful intent. Her female characters are complex. They have strong and weak attributes. The solidarity that they display can stimulate thoughts about the reader's or audience's own behaviour towards others. 'The women' as sign shifts to the foreground and can be elaborated because there are only female characters.

In conclusion, the artist Afi Gbegbi has the potential to spread her ideas of powerful women and her conception of a just and more equal world through her drama. While this study was being finalized, a theatre company toured with *Soeurs d'ange* through Niger, Benin and Togo. The play premiered on 26 November 2022 in Niamey (Niger) and the four-month tour ended on 10 March 2023 at the *Institut Français Togo* in Lomé. The company was led by director Mariam Darra Traoré and the stage director was Yasmine Rouquaiya Yerima. It would be interesting to find out what effect it had on the audience, possibly in form of a quantitative analysis. Another interesting question would be how the theatre scene in Togo develops with committed female theatre artists like Afi Gbegbi and Yasmine Yerima.

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