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EUROPEAN-LANGUAGE WRITING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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are well sustained and the language has a strength derived from the poet's ability to choose a precise and expressive vocabulary.

It must be admitted, however, that many francophone poets remain content to combine the celebration of African tradition with the conventional rhetoric of protest. Examples are Lamine Niang from Senegal, Jean-Baptiste Tiémélé (b. 1933) from the Ivory Coast,¹⁴⁵ both of whom remained silent throughout the seventies, or more recently, Pacéré Titinga (b. 1943) from Upper Volta.¹⁴⁶ There is a pleasant lyrical quality about many of Tiémélé's poems, and a good sense of verbal and rhythmic control in some of Niang's poems, but they really belong to the pre-independence period. The combination works most successfully in the case of Titinga, perhaps because he very precisely localizes the setting of his poems in his own home village and its history. But if a revival is to occur in African poetry in French, it will have to come from the new generation of younger poets, some of whose works, published mostly in little magazines, exhibit a promising vigour and sense of actuality. It is perhaps significant that one of those who stand out, Jean-Blaise Bilombo-Samba, is also a Congolese.¹⁴⁷

MINEKE SCHIPPER-DE LEEUW

DRAMA

One of the first truly significant episodes in the history of African writing in French had been the growth of William-Ponty drama in the thirties. But contrary to what might have been expected, drama became a very minor genre during the quarter century that followed the end of the war. The Ponty tradition, it is true, was preserved locally in several areas of West Africa, as can be seen from Amon d'Aby's anthology of 1965. But among the writers whose talent and fame were demonstrated by their achieving publication in Paris, only a very few—chief among them, Amadou Cissé Dia from Sénégal, a William-Ponty alumnus, and Seydou Badian from Mali—seemed to be attracted to the theatre as a suitable medium for expressing the experiences and needs of the new Africa. This fading out of dramatic writing is probably to be ascribed to a variety of causes: as far as the rehabilitation of African culture was concerned, William-Ponty drama had been a conspicuous failure, most of its writers—with the significant exception of Bernard Dadié—slavishly trying to gratify what they imagined to be the expectations of their French teachers; furthermore, drama needs an audience, and drama in French could only address the happy few who had truly mastered the demanding rules of the language. At a time when Nigeria was producing Wole Soyinka and John Pepper Clark, and when the Yoruba opera was acquiring international fame, it is likely that a modicum of

¹⁴⁵ Jean-Baptiste Tiémélé, *Chansons païennes* (Honfleur: Oswald, 1969).

¹⁴⁶ Titinga's three collections—*Refrains sous le Sahel*, *Ça tire sous le Sahel* and *Quand s'envolent les grues*—were all published by Oswald in 1976.

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Blaise Bilombo-Samba, *Témoignages* (Paris: Oswald, 1976) and *La Fraternité différentielle* (Paris: Editions Saint-Germain-des-Prés, 1977).

theatrical activity was taking place in France's former colonies, but as far as actual publication was concerned, they lagged behind sadly.

In 1967, however, the French broadcasting system (O.R.T.F.) launched its Concours Théâtral Interafricain. As Alain Ricard was to put it five years later, "The response to this competition has been overwhelming. More than 1600 texts, have been sent to Paris by the various national radio networks."¹⁴⁸ This success prompted the French Office de Coopération Radiophonique (OCORA), set up in 1965 and already known as "the producer of a most remarkable collection of African music," to start publishing its series "Répertoire Théâtral Africain," which was inaugurated by Guy Menga's *L'Oracle* in 1969. During the years immediately following, three other important drama series were launched: by *Présence Africaine* in Paris, by the Centre de Littérature Evangélique (C.L.E.) in Cameroon, and by the French publisher Pierre-Jean Oswald, who had already published much African poetry in French, albeit generally at the authors' expense.

The opening of such new outlets for the printing of dramatic works led to the publication of a considerable amount of theatrical writing in French throughout the seventies. But the most important single event was undoubtedly Bernard Dadié's return to the stage. As a Ponty student in the thirties, he had written *Assémien Déhylé, roi du Sanwi*, which dramatized an episode in the history of the Agni people; this play, which was performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris as part of the cultural events of the 1937 Colonial Exhibition, is perhaps the only one of the Ponty plays to have shown any real pride in the African past and culture; first printed locally in 1935, it was to be re-issued in Paris thirty years later.¹⁴⁹

During the intervening decades, Dadié had achieved fame by experimenting with poetry, prose fiction and the journalistic chronicle. Then, in 1966, he wrote *Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini*, which was first performed at the Panafrican Cultural Festival held in Algiers in 1967, although it was not printed until 1970.¹⁵⁰ The play emphasizes the consequences of assimilation. The main character's Malinke name refers to somebody who wants to become famous at any price. The action takes place somewhere on the Guinea Coast. Thôgô-Gnini is a freed slave who has returned from America to his country, where he becomes a middleman between the white merchants and the local inhabitants. While the majority of the latter are compelled to earn their miserable wages on plantations owned by white settlers, Thôgô-Gnini becomes rich in a short time. He rejects everything African and, in his boundless admiration for the white man, he exerts himself ceaselessly to become more and more thoroughly westernized. His efforts reach truly comic proportions when he tries to have a French street named after him and to

¹⁴⁸ Alain Ricard, "The ORTF and African Literature", *Research in African Literatures*, 4 (1973), 189-191.

¹⁴⁹ See *Education Africaine*, 24 (1935), No. 90-91, 188-193, and *L'Avant-Scène*, No. 343 (15 Oct. 1969), 37-43.

¹⁵⁰ On this particular play, see Joseph Okpaku, "Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini, comedy by Bernard B. Dadié," *Journal of the New African Literature and the Arts*, 7/8 (1969), 102-107, and Richard Bonneau, "Un Tournant dans l'œuvre de Bernard Dadié: Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini," *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan, série D*, 5 (1972), 127-144.

have a mass read in Europe for his dead father. The purpose of the play is of course to illustrate how, already in the mid-nineteenth century, a handful of assimilated Africans conspired with the Europeans in order to exploit and despoil the common people. At the end, however, Thôgô-Gnini is assaulted by some of his victims who bind him hand and foot, paint his hands and face white and his lips red, put jewels around his neck and earrings in his ears, after which they force him to do a grotesque dance, and ultimately compel him to smell his own money before they take it away with them, leaving him behind bearing a placard with the inscription "Chacun pour soi", a French saying which, Dadié undoubtedly feels, is of increasingly topical relevance among the new African bourgeoisie.

Between the writing and the publication of *Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini*, Dadié had written several other plays. While *Sidi, Maître escroc* (1969) is little more than a farce,¹⁵¹ *Les Voix dans le vent* (1970), which he has described as "a tragedy," handles the theme of the moral decay brought about by the exercise of power. It tells the story of one Nahoubou, who is tracked down and humiliated by the local king's civil servants; in his fury, he manages to organize a rebellion and to usurp the throne. The play begins as Nahoubou's authority is already on the wane: he had dreamed of a reign of peace and prosperity, but—and this is recorded in the rest of the play as flashback—he soon finds himself intoxicated by his own ambition and the temptations of power: he thus goes the same way as his predecessor until, alone and powerless, he is called to account by "the voices in the wind", the phantom voices of his victims and the stern voice of his own bad conscience.

Dadié's most ambitious attempt on the stage is a historical play, *Béatrice du Congo* (1970),¹⁵² the action of which is located in the Kongo kingdom in the early decades of the eighteenth century, when a 22-year old local girl was converted and baptized by the missionaries. Under her Christian name of Béatrice, she teaches the new religion and calls upon the native population to give up their traditional pagan beliefs and customs, to turn to the new faith and practise the virtues taught by the Gospel. But as she proclaims that a new kingdom is about to come to Africa, that Kongo is the new holy land, that Jesus Christ was black, she comes into conflict with Portuguese interests: she is burnt at the stake, an African Joan of Arc, less than two years after her baptism. The story of Béatrice is only the core of a chronicle play or dramatic epic which ranges widely in time. It enables Dadié to illustrate the excesses of Western colonialism, which plunders the conquered countries and subjugates their traditional authorities. Béatrice stands for the conscience of the king, the Manikongo, who finally realizes that the decorations and jingling medals the Portuguese have given him are just a cheap way to corrupt him. But the realization comes too late: as soon as the king begins to protest, he is killed on the spot.

¹⁵¹ For a brief discussion see Gérard Lézou, "Papa Sidi, maître escroc," *Eburnéa*, No. 97 (1976), 36-37.

¹⁵² The play has been discussed locally in Richard Bonneau, "Béatrice du Congo, de Bernard Dadié," *Eburnéa*, No. 47 (1971), 22-24, and Bienvenu Néba, "Béatrice du Congo," *ibid.*, No. 95 (1975), 29-31; see especially M. Mudimbe-Mboyi, "Béatrice du Congo de Bernard Dadié, signe du temps ou pièce à clé?", *Afrique Littéraire et Artistique*, No. 35 (1975), 19-26. On Dadié's drama in general, see B. Kotchky-N'Guessan, "Sémiologie du temps et de l'espace dans le théâtre de Bernard B. Dadié," *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan*, série D, 9 (1976), 427-434.

In a couple of years, Dadié had thus established himself as the foremost African dramatist in French. *Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini* and *Béatrice du Congo* also set a pattern of a sort, which the younger playwrights who came to the fore at the turn of the seventies seem to have found congenial: in compliance with the precepts of French classical theory, most of this dramatic output falls neatly into the two main categories of the tragic (or at any rate the serious), and the comic. While African comedies are usually devoted to the humorous criticism of the new, hybrid, society that is taking shape on the continent, a considerable proportion of serious drama turns for inspiration to Africa's past and thus consists of historical or chronicle plays.

The most popular theme in Africa's contemporary drama in French derives from the writers' determination to re-assess the continent's historical past by bringing on stage the heroic figures whose memory had so far been preserved in the oral tradition and in French narrative prose. This orientation, represented by *Béatrice du Congo*, was bound to run counter to the usual Ponty trend, whose Euro-centred outlook consistently presented black leaders as barbarous and/or cowardly rascals. The dramatic reaction, initiated in the mid-sixties by Amadou Cissé Dia, soon gathered considerable momentum as other, younger writers from a variety of African countries began to emerge. One of the first plays was *L'Exil d'Albouri* (Paris, 1967) in which Sheikh Aliou Ndao (b. 1933) from Senegal, drawing on characters and situations from nineteenth-century history, dramatizes the problems with which local leaders were faced as the French, led by Faidherbe, were swiftly conquering their share of West Africa. In spite of the historical background, the author admits that he has fused "reality and imagination," even some of the main characters being of his own invention: "Qu'importe? Une pièce historique n'est pas une thèse d'histoire. Mon but est d'aider à la création de mythes qui galvanisent le peuple et [le] portent en avant."¹⁵³ Albouri himself is no longer the barbarian chieftain usually described by colonial historians. It is Ndao's purpose to extol his noble qualities, especially his courageous refusal to bow to the superior power of the European invaders.

Like many of the historical folk tales published in French in the fifties, such plays are intended to glorify the past, transcending reality and giving their African heroes mythical dimensions. They testify to a strong reaction against the mentality with which William-Ponty students had been imbued; as Christophe Dailly put it, "l'homme noir ne sort plus du néant historique. La découverte et la reconstruction du passé deviennent l'histoire du peuple, sa confiance en l'avenir, jadis ébranlée par le néant historique consciemment créé et entretenu par la colonisation."¹⁵⁴

Ndao had many followers, one of the first being Eugène Dervain (b. 1928), a Martinican lawyer who is now an Ivoirian citizen; his first two plays *La Reine scélérate* and *La Langue et le scorpion* (1968) recount episodes from the semi-historical epic of Da Monzon, the ruler of the Bambara kingdom of Ségou, which was destroyed by al-Hajj

¹⁵³ Cheik A. Ndao, *L'Exil d'Albouri, suivi de la décision* (Honfleur: Oswald, 1967), "Prologue," p. 17.

¹⁵⁴ Christophe Dailly, "L'Histoire et la politique comme sources d'inspiration: l'Histoire," in *Le Théâtre Négro-africain. Actes du Colloque d'Abidjan, 1970*, ed. Bernard Mouralis (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), pp. 87-93.

Umar in 1861.¹⁵⁵ Charles Nokan (b. 1936), a genuine Ivoirian whose poetic-prose narratives of the sixties had not received the attention they deserved, also turned to the stage with a dramatization of an extremely popular Baule legend which had first been retold in *Légendes africaines: Côte d'Ivoire, Soudan, Dahomey* (1946) by Maximilien B. Quenum (b. 1911) from Benin under the title "La Légende des Baoulés." This was the story of Queen Abra Pokou who was supposed to have led her people to their present territory by crossing the Comoé river; as the gods had demanded the sacrifice of a male child for the salvation of the tribe, the heroic queen did not hesitate to sacrifice her own son.¹⁵⁶ Bernard Dadié, in his own *Légendes Africaines* (1953), was later to record the additional detail that after the crossing Abra exclaimed "Baouli"—"The child is dead"—thus giving the tribe the name it was to keep during the ensuing centuries. Obviously an aetiological tale designed to account for the name of a society, the story also inspired a one-act play by Dervain, *Abra Pokou*, which is little more than a stage adaptation of the Dadié version. But Charles Nokan tried to actualize the story by investing it with topical significance for present-day Africa. In *Abraha Pokou, ou une grande africaine* (1970), the heroine is simply only the queen who is willing to sacrifice even her own child to ensure the survival of her people: she also stands for the ideal future of a democratic Africa, where there will be no exploitation or oppression, and where women will have the same rights as men. Instead of concentrating on the heroic sacrifice and the mythical miracle, Nokan gives a series of scenes which takes the story to the death of the queen and the subsequent establishment of democratic elections in compliance with her own will. In this play, as in his earlier works, Nokan obviously sets out to change the new African society that is being born in the midst of suffering and corruption. It is dedicated to the women of Africa, who should be, he pronounces, "like their sisters in Vietnam"; he quotes Mao Tse-Tung to the effect that "La littérature et l'art doivent aider les masses à faire avancer l'histoire"; and he asserts that "les sociétés africaines n'ignorent pas l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme. Leurs cultures, comme celle de l'Occident, sont réactionnaires. Il faut détruire le vieil ordre."¹⁵⁷ While thus confirming Nokan's earlier dictum that it is the task and the fundamental duty of the visionary mind to "mener le combat jusqu'à ce que la théorie saisisse et influence la pratique,"¹⁵⁸ *Abraha Pokou* was not likely to prove more efficient than the earlier works in promoting the laudable democratic views of Nokan, who was living in exile after having been imprisoned for a while in 1964: the political sloganizing that marks the style of the play hardly fits in with the context of the Baule characters, who are supposed to be the bearers of the writer's message.

Throughout West Africa, dramatic interest in the reassessment of local rulers of the

¹⁵⁵ François Xavier Cuche, "Un dramaturge ivoirien: Eugène Dervain" in *Négritude africaine, Négritude caraïbe*, ed. Jeanne-Lydie Goré (Paris: Centre d'Études Francophones, 1973), pp. 62-66. For a French version of the original chronicle with an important discussion of Da Monzon's significance in history and legend, see Lilyan Kesteloot et al., *Da Monzon de Ségou, épopée bambara* (Paris: Nathan, 1972), 3 vols.

¹⁵⁶ See Robert Cornevin, *Histoire des peuples de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1960), p. 444.

¹⁵⁷ Charles Nokan, *Abraha Pokou ou une grande Africaine, suivi de la voix grave d'Ophimoï* (Honfleur: Oswald, 1970), pp. 11-13.

¹⁵⁸ Charles Nokan, *Les Malheurs de Tchakô* (Honfleur: Oswald, 1968), p. 68.

st was given impetus by Amadou Cissé Dia's plays about Wolof history: after twenty years *La Mort du Damel* (1947) was reprinted with his next play, *Les Derniers jours de Lat-Dior* (1965). The Wolof ruler also inspired a younger Senegalese writer, Mamadou Yni Mbengue (b. 1925) to write his *Le Procès de Lat Dior*, which was printed in Dakar in 1971 before being reissued by the O.R.T.F. in 1972. The great religious warrior-leader of the late nineteenth century, al-Hajj Umar Tall is the hero of *El Hadj Omar* (1969) by a Haitian writer living in Senegal, Gérard Chenet (b. 1929). The rivalries that set Sudanic rulers against each other at the end of the nineteenth century and proved so helpful to European conquest have also provided the subjects for a number of dramatic works. One of these is *Sikasso ou la dernière citadelle* (1976), by the Guinean historian Djibril Tamsiriane (b. 1932), who had reached fame at an early date with his historical work, *Siaka Ndjata ou l'Épopée mandingue* (1960), and had since become a Senegalese citizen. In *Une si belle leçon de patience* (1972), Massa M. Diabate (b. 1938) from Mali, already well known for his traditional stories, dramatized an episode connected with the Samory empire. So did Sheikh Ndao in his second play, *Le Fils de l'Almamy* (1973), which contrasts most favourably with the majority of historical plays because, as Dorothy Blair puts it, "it has classic concision, a disturbing complexity of personalities caught in a critical moment of history, which makes them victims of circumstance, of interested well-wishers, and of the clash of their own inflexible characters."¹⁵⁹

In Benin, the historical inspiration which had prompted one of the first African novels in French, Hazoumé's *Doguiçimi*, also provided Jean Pliya (b. 1931) with suitable material for his first play, *Kondo le Requin*, which was first printed locally (1966) before winning a prize from and being reissued by, the O.R.T.F. (1969): the shark of the title is the famous king of Abomey, Behanzin who surrendered to the French in 1893. In Cameroon, the hero of *Les Dieux trancheront* (1971) by Frank Kayor (b. 1945) is the historical leader of the Bamum, Sultan Njoya Moluh, at the time of his quarrels with the neighbouring Bamileke and the conquering Germans. It must be admitted that almost every one of these chronicle plays is little more than a slice of history, in which the majority of the characters are just schematic *dramatis personae* utterly lacking in depth. The only characters that are at all memorable are the central heroes, who usually appear as new embodiments of their traditional selves as preserved in the oral tales and ancient chronicles. Unlike their William-Ponty predecessors, these heroes of the seventies are uniformly dignified and wise; they stir their people to resistance with lofty oratory; their defeat is not the righteous triumph of modern civilization: it simply seals their tragic fate, albeit only temporarily.

A large number of plays take place in the late nineteenth century, at the time of the fiercest clashes between Africa and the West. This is not specific to French-language drama but is also exemplified in such English works as *Kinjeketile* (1970) by Ebrahim Hussein from Tanzania, *My Son for My Freedom* (1973) by Kenneth Watene from Kenya, *The Rendez-vous* and *Revolution* (1972) by Bob Leshoai from Lesotho, and many others. Nor were francophone writers concerned with the past experiences of their nation or of their region only. Indeed, it can be said that the most popular hero among

¹⁵⁹ Dorothy B. Blair, *African Literature in French* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), p. 113.

francophone playwrights had no connection whatever with French colonization: Chaka, the Zulu monarch of the early nineteenth century, had entered the field of literature in 1925, when Thomas Mofolo's masterly narrative in Southern Sotho, composed around 1910, was printed in Lesotho, which was then known as Basutoland. It was soon translated into English (1931), but was brought to the attention of francophone writers through the French version by Victor Ellenberger (1940). The Zulu warrior first appeared in a dramatic poem which Senghor included in *Ethiopiennes* (1956). While this very free adaptation turned Chaka into a Cornelian hero trapped between his love for a woman and his duty to his nation, Seydou Badian's *La Mort de Chaka* (1962) concentrated on the death of the protagonist, who was presented on the stage as a militant black leader and fighter. In *Amazoulou* (1970) by the Guinean poet Condetto Nénékhaly-Camara (1930-1972) the Zulu king was extolled for his skill in forging his people into a unified nation: the writer's main purpose may have been to flatter the president of Guinea, Ahmed Sékou Touré, to whom the play is dedicated, by somewhat departing from the tradition, idealizing Chaka's character, obliterating some of his mistakes and vices, and providing a positive ending which was certainly absent from Mofolo's original story. After leaving Guinea, Djibril Tamsir Niane composed his own *Chaka* (1971): although it does not exhibit any great dramatic talent, this play nevertheless provides further evidence of the truth in Mphahlele's statement that the "Tshaka-figure has always excited the most heroic instincts in the African, in spite of the array of white historians who have always represented Tshaka, the Zulu King, as nothing more than a barbarian; a sadistic savage without a drop of mercy."¹⁶⁰ The following year, a collection of plays by Abdou Anta Ka (b. 1931) from Senegal contained *Les Amazoulous* (1972), in which Chaka is praised for his visionary powers, which enabled him to foresee the arrival of the white Boers.

While the importance of the Chaka motif in French writing is a token of the persistence of the Panafrican strain among many black intellectuals and artists, the general purpose of these plays, most of which are of mediocre quality, is to restore the African audience and readership to a sense of pride in their own history, their own values, their own customs and way of life. In this respect, it is probably significant that little attention was paid in the former French colonies to a phenomenon of paramount importance throughout black Africa: the emergence of religious leaders and syncretic cults providing an African interpretation of Christianity. Indeed, only one significant work in French deals with this: *Simon Kimbangu ou le messie noir* (1973) by the Zaïrian author Elébé Lisembe (b. 1937). Kimbangu (1889-1951) was one of the many "prophets" that arose in Black Africa as the European missionaries intensified their efforts to eradicate customs and beliefs dear to African hearts: the need was felt for a reinterpretation, indeed an africanization, of the Christian message. A pupil of the Protestant

¹⁶⁰ Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 169. On some of these French Chaka plays, see Barthélémy Kotchy, "Le personnage de Chaka chez Mofolo, S. Badian et Senghor" and Mario de Andrade, "Antar et Chaka ou vers un théâtre épique pour les peuples africains," both in *Le Théâtre négro-africain*, ed B. Mouralis, pp. 113-121. For a more detailed discussion of Badian, Niane and Nénékhaly, see Donald Burgess, *Shaka, King of the Zulus*, in *African Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1976), pp. 71-90.

sion established near the estuary of the Congo river, Kimbangu availed himself of Bakongo People's indignant reaction to the missionaries' ban on traditional dances to the wholesale destruction of so-called pagan fetishes. He gained authority as a healer, and was believed to be able to resuscitate the dead. As he was gathering a quite massive following, often echoing the life of Jesus in his words and behaviour, he died fear and incurred hostility among the trinity that ruled over the Belgian Congo whom Elébé accuses of conspiring to have Kimbangu arrested. In the early 1920s, Kimbangu was sentenced to life deportation in faraway Katanga; many of his followers were likewise persecuted on the grounds that they were a danger to law and order.

It is probably a result of their authors' academic education that the vast majority of the chronicle plays that have been dealt with so far centre round "historical" characters, men and, in a few cases women, who can be claimed to have played an important part in Black Africa's resistance to the superior power of the Western conquerors, or heroes, who had left a lasting impression, because of their warlike prowess or their practical wisdom, in folk memories of the pre-colonial past. It is interesting to note that religious myths, which figure so prominently in Yoruba drama, whether in English or Yoruba, are conspicuously absent from the themes of francophone drama. Another element is also missing: the common man, even though an attempt had been made to remedy this by Keita Fodeba (1921-1969) from Guinea in his musical play, *Aube africaine* (1965), an extended stage version of an earlier prose poem printed in *Présence africaine* (1951). The central character is just an ordinary villager, Naman, who is called on to serve in the French colonial army. In his innocent pride, he is determined to show his white officers how courageous a black African can be: his praiseworthy conduct earns him first a medal, and then capture and detention in a German P.O.W. camp. Only later does Naman realize that he will never become free by fighting the white man's wars. This is the *prise de conscience* which justifies the title of the play: although Naman is killed before his country has achieved freedom, it has dawned upon the African soldier that only by releasing his own people from colonial bondage that he will truly earn the privilege of dancing the traditional heroes' dance. *Aube africaine* was approvingly mentioned by Frantz Fanon as an outstanding example of the kind of *littérature engagée* which Africa needed during those pre-independence years, a work characterized by "un tant souci de préciser le moment historique de la lutte, de délimiter le champ où se déroulera l'action, les idées autour desquelles se cristallisera la volonté populaire."¹⁶¹ If there was little follow-up in francophone drama to this type of work, this was presumably because by the time Fodeba's work became available in book form, most African countries had gained their independence. They had also acquired authoritarian regimes and it was advisable for writers to exert considerable caution in their choice of subject. Fodeba himself, after occupying high office in Guinea for a number of years, was accused of plotting against President Sékou Touré and was executed in prison in 1968. In its concentration on the past, serious francophone drama of the seventies is not

¹⁶¹ See Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Maspéro, 1961; 2nd ed., 1968), pp. 157-162.

without ambiguity: while it undoubtedly seeks to restore the African's pride in his culture and his history, it also has a definitely escapist function. Whereas several plays do not focus on specific historical figures, it is quite obvious that, as was stated as early as 1968 in a report from the French Office de Coopération Radiophonique (OCORA), listeners "semblent opter résolument pour le théâtre-tribune au détriment du théâtre-fiction".¹⁶² Although the same report adds that "à l'intérieur de cette option, la plupart des auditeurs demeurent très sensible à la valeur intrinsèque de l'œuvre et en particulier à la construction dramatique et à la limpidité du texte", the theatrical output of the following years shows that many playwrights chose to fulfil their audience's apparent expectations by means of hollow but flamboyant rhetoric directed against the cruder forms of colonialism that had almost totally vanished to make room for the more subtle methods of neocolonialism. During the half-dozen years that led to the Portuguese revolution of 1974, Portuguese colonialism was a favourite target of several francophone authors such as Sylvain Bemba (b. 1934) from the Congo Republic, who wrote *L'enfer, c'est Orfeo* (1970) under the pseudonym of Martial Malinda, or Jean-Baptiste Obama (b. 1925) from Cameroon, with his *Assimilados* (1972), or Malian writer Kaba Alkaly, whose *Nègres, qu'avez vous fait?* (1972) was published in Bamako. Simultaneously, *Sansoa* (1969) by Pierre Dabiré (b. 1935) from Upper Volta was still exploiting the moving but slightly outdated theme of the young African who is compelled to enlist in a European army and meets his death on an alien battlefield. And Antoine Letembet-Ambily (b. 1929) from Congo succeeded in having the O.R.T.F. publish *L'Europe inculpée* (1970), a rather bewildering biblical and allegorical morality play in utterly irregular alexandrines. Although Albert Gérard probably went a little too far when he asserted in 1974 that such series as the O.R.T.F.'s "Théâtre africain" had chiefly made it possible to print "un nombre affligeant de 'navets'",¹⁶³ it must be admitted, with Dorothy Blair, that none of these plays "has very great merit if judged by objective literary standards; some are frankly simplistic in subject and elementary in structure... The aspiring playwrights doubtless felt that an anti-colonial subject was a sure formula for success among their compatriots."¹⁶⁴

The various trends in serious African drama in French may perhaps best be traced in the works of a prolific Cameroonian author who writes in French and in German, Alexandre Kum'a N'dumbe III (b. 1938): his *Amilcar Cabral, ou la tempête en Guinée-Bissao* (1976), which he describes as a "pièce-document" is of course a denunciation of Portuguese colonialism; *Kafra-Biatanga* (1973), originally written in German, is an attack on Western neocolonialism and its black puppets; *Le Soleil de l'aurore* (1976) is significantly reminiscent of Fodeba's *Aube africaine*, not only in its title, but also in its theme, since it deals with a twofold awakening and revolution: of an imaginary African people first against their European masters, and then against the African exploiters who have seized power.

The disillusionment that followed upon independence may perhaps give a new twist

¹⁶² OCORA report, 8 October 1968, quoted in Robert Cornevin, *Le Théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar* (Paris: Le Livre Africain, 1970), p. 159.

¹⁶³ Albert Gérard, "La Francophonie dans les lettres africaines," *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 48, 3/4 (1974), 372-386, reprinted in his *Etudes de littérature africaine francophone* (Dakar, 1977), p. 74.

¹⁶⁴ Dorothy B. Blair, op. cit., p. 124.

to the dramatic presentation of African history as younger writers start searching the continent's past for characters and situations that can be used as *exempla*, not in the service of some obsolete anti-colonialist obsession, but in order to teach necessary lessons to the African ruling class of the present day. It is in this new, mildly unorthodox spirit that André Salifou (b. 1942) from Niger wrote *Tanimoune* (1973), which deals with Damagaram, a flourishing kingdom in nineteenth-century Sudan, and its ruler Tanimoune, whose story is still told and whose name is still praised by traditional *griots* in the Niger republic. While this is one more chronicle play in the conventional manner, it is noteworthy that Salifou should have emphasized his desire to "faire entendre la voix sage des anciens aux fantaisistes rois nègres du XXe siècle. Des questions aussi fondamentales que la notion des droits et de la liberté d'un peuple y sont abordées, en même temps d'ailleurs que la question de la légitimité du pouvoir que détiennent, aujourd'hui encore, les grands de ce monde et dont ils abusent."¹⁶⁵

The very youth and enthusiasm of these writers may perhaps account, at least in part, for the obvious fact that nothing in francophone drama corresponds in depth and subtlety and sheer poetic power to the English plays of Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clark, or even Ngugi wa Thiong'o. While it is natural that the many historical plays that keep on being produced should put vehement rhetoric in the service of clear-cut issues, even though some of these may have become obsolete and irrelevant, it is a pity that in their laudable endeavour to reassess and rehabilitate the values and events of the African past, even younger dramatists should slavishly follow the academic models with which the school system has imbued them. A recent example is *Les Sofas* (1975) by Bernard Zadi Zaourou (b. 1938) from the Ivory Coast. The title does not refer to drawing-room furniture but to the terrible soldiers of the Mandingo emperor Samory, who managed to hold the French army in check for many years, until he was finally captured and deported in 1898. The play broaches the old problem of the antinomy between honour and destruction on the one hand, compromise and survival on the other—a problem which had been discussed with greater depth and acumen in Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* some fifteen years earlier. In Zadi's play, it takes a concrete form in the opposing views of Samory, the indomitable warrior, and of his son Karamoko, who has acquired some first-hand knowledge of France: could there be a difference between the French at home and the French in Africa? To Samory's anguished question, "Comment peux-tu croire à seul instant à la bonne foi de nos plus mortels ennemis?" the young prince is made to reply: "J'ai compris depuis qu'un monde sépare les vrais Français de ces égorgeurs qui nous arrivent ici sur les ailes du diable."¹⁶⁶

If the exploration of the continent's past has obviously presented African playwrights with plenty of material for an abundance of eloquent, well-meant sermonizing, a morose observation of the present has provided them with many opportunities for exercising their sense of comedy. Comic writing in French chiefly aims at social, moral and political criticism fed by the frequently ludicrous situations that are bound to arise

¹⁶⁵ André Salifou, *Tanimoune* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973), p. 13.

¹⁶⁶ Bernard Zadi Zaourou, *Les Sofas, suivi de l'œil* (Paris: Oswald, 1975), p. 29.

in a society whose traditional criteria have been shattered, though not entirely destroyed, by the impact of a different world-view that is uncontroversibly more powerful and, for many, more attractive. Already during the first World War, *The Blinkards* (1915) by Kobina Sekyi from the then Gold Coast, had poked fun at the *parvenu* middle class that was arising as a result of economic development. Not until half a century later did francophone drama follow suit, first with Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia (b. 1939) from Cameroon, who received part of his education in Britain, graduating from the University of Keele in 1969. A native speaker of Bulu, he writes both in French and in English. Whereas historical drama is usually intended to re-appraise and glorify the African past, Oyônô-Mbia's plays make fun of traditional customs, especially in the degraded forms which they have acquired under the impact of the West.¹⁶⁷

His very first play, *Trois prétendants... un mari* which he wrote in the late fifties did not reach print until 1964; the English version, *Three Suitors: One Husband* (1968) prepared by the author himself, was hugely successful in English-speaking West Cameroon. It deals with the time-honoured African custom of the bride-price. Like the European dowry, the African custom of having the bridegroom's family offer an allegedly symbolic gift to the bride's family, is open to a great variety of exercises in rapaciousness, of which both novelists and playwrights have abundantly availed themselves. Oyônô-Mbia's heroine, Juliette, is especially valuable because she had a secondary education; the motif of the young people's rebellion against parental authoritarianism is grafted on to the main plot; and the fact that Juliette's boy-friend comes from a quite different part of the country is of course an aggravating circumstance. There was nothing new about the bride-price motif and the preoccupation it implies concerning the condition of woman in modern African society: it had been the mainspring of the William-Ponty comedy *Les Prétendants rivaux* in the thirties, and it had inspired the angry pathos of Joseph Owono's lengthy novel, *Tante Bella*, at the time when the younger playwright was composing his comedy. Oyônô-Mbia insists in his introduction that he has no intention to moralize: this makes for excellent comedy and there is little doubt that this hilarious play has done more for the emancipation of women than the thunderous or lachrymose sermonizing in Owono's novel.

With *Until Further Notice* (1968), originally composed, performed and printed in English and then turned into French as *Jusqu'à nouvel avis* (1970), Oyônô-Mbia gave himself ampler scope although the plot itself is a mere thread on which to string several comic episodes. There is some similarity between this and the ironic poetry which Okot p'Bitek had been writing recently in Uganda, for the Cameroonian playwright is also adept at double-barrelled satire, ridiculing both the village yokels who have no understanding or even knowledge of civilized ways, and the city snobs intent on slavishly aping Western manners. But the laughing audience may not be quite aware of the underlying pessimism: obeying the greedy requests of his wife and her family, the physician who

¹⁶⁷ See Jacques Bédé, "Le théâtre de Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia," *Revue Canadienne des Etudes Africaines*, 9 (1975), 531-536, and "L'œuvre dramatique de Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia," *Etudes Anglaises*, No. 65 (1976), 343-352. More information can be found in "Conversation with African Writer Oyônô-Mbia," (Washington, D.C.: African Field Service, tape No. 22.)

is the protagonist of this play agrees to give up his profession in exchange for a much better paid but completely useless job as a civil servant.

Likewise in the radio play *Notre fille ne se mariera pas* (1969), Charlotte is forbidden to marry because her family eagerly expect hefty returns on the expenses they have incurred for her university education; she does marry, however, but if she gets away with it, it is only because her husband is a wealthy civil servant. And in *His Excellency's Special Train*, which appeared in the local literary journal *Ozila* in 1970 and does not seem to have reached print in French, the comic element lies in the idea of a rural stationmaster making extensive preparations for the departure of a high official's special train, only to discover that the departing man is just a common traveller, whereas His Excellency's train will pass nonstop through his station: but again, there are sinister undertones in the gullibility and the servility of the plebeian African and in the ease with which he is duped by anyone who is, or seems to be, or claims to be, in authority.

In substance, this little play appeared also in prose form as a short story entitled "La petite gare" in the first volume of Oyônô-Mbia's *Chroniques de Mvoutessi* (1971), a work of peculiar interest and importance because in spite of the hectic growth of large cities in black Africa, most people still live in villages and it is important that the realities of rural life should be reflected in literature. That African authors do realize this is further exemplified in *Le Fusil* (1970), a comedy by another Cameroonian, Patrice Ndedi-Penda (b. 1945): here as in Oyônô-Mbia's plays we find ambivalent satire as both village fools and city tricksters become targets of blame and ridicule when a prosperous cocoa farmer is relieved of his money as he comes to the city with the futile ambition of buying a gun.

Whether it is treated in a comic or a tragic vein, the indictment of traditional beliefs and customs is as frequent a theme in francophone drama as the condemnation of their degradation under European influence. In his two-act play, *La Marmite de Koka-Mbala*, which was first published in Monaco (1966) before being reissued by the O.R.T.F. (1969), a gifted Congolese writer, Guy Menga (b. 1935), brings on stage an imaginary but prototypical kingdom, Koka-Mbala, which is the quintessence of what younger people fight against most strenuously in modern Africa: power is entirely in the hands of the elders, a privileged gerontocratic class which exercises rigorous control over the whole society and especially over the younger generation through a variety of superstitious devices such as the pot of the title, which is supposed to contain the spirits of the ancestors. It is a harsh society, where even slight misbehaviour can lead to the passing of a death sentence by the fetish priest. In this play the latter's authority is shattered after the king has had a dream which makes him realize that such bloodshed is not quite necessary, or even agreeable to the ancestral spirits. As a result, a young man who has committed the frightful crime of looking at a bathing woman is mercifully sent into exile instead of being condemned to death. During his stay abroad he becomes aware that different societies have different beliefs and different laws, and this destroys the blind faith with which he had been inoculated. When he returns to Koka-Mbala, he enlightens other youngsters and together they organize a rebellious conspiracy which reaches its climax in the smashing of the pot, thus ushering in an era of tolerance and humaneness, or so they hope.

It is symptomatic of the living dialectics of African literature that while the historical plays extol the wisdom of elders and ancestors, other plays, many of them comic, should expose the superstitious conservatism of traditional societies where the individual remains oppressed by gerontocratic control. The extreme harshness which in many cases characterizes judicial punishment is only one example of what is at stake in the conflict of generations that is raging throughout Africa. But on the other hand, a number of customs which did have their own rationale in the traditional, pre-urban, pre-industrial society, are now completely distorted under the influence of the new economic system and the new world-views which the West has imposed upon Africa in the course of recent history. In his next play, *L'Oracle* (1969),¹⁶⁸ Menga turned to Oyônô-Mbia's favourite motif: the alteration of the traditional meaning of the bride-price and the ugly emergence of a real marriage market, a form of business in which woman is a mere commodity. Menga's heroine wants to marry the local school-teacher; her father's preference is for a rich suitor who will pay him a handsome bride-price; the corrupt witch-doctor sides with the father; but the girl's grandfather, who has preserved the original meaning of marriage customs, helps the girl have her own way. In a different, yet not entirely unrelated, field, Abdou Anta Ka's *Pinthioum Fann* (1972) attempts to show that the Western approach to mental illness regardless of the African's own psychology more often than not hinders the full recovery of the patient; it is of some interest to know that Ka himself underwent treatment in a psychiatric hospital in Dakar.

While the bride-price question is certainly one of the most pressing, perhaps even tragic, problems for the younger generations in Black Africa, giving rise to an extraordinary number of plays, novels and short stories, several francophone playwrights have chosen to follow in the wake of Dadié's *Monsieur Thôgô-Gnini*, concentrating on the unavoidable evil aspects of assimilation and on the disruption that modernization has inflicted on the fabric of African society, as the redistribution of power attendant upon independence created enormous political corruption, which itself goes hand in hand with the most repellent manifestations of overt lust for power and money. In fact, *L'Homme qui tua le crocodile* (1972), a "tragi-comedy" by Sylvain Bemba, depicts a Congolese Thôgô-Gnini named N'Gandou, a wealthy businessman who tyrannically controls and exploits a whole township before he gets his due. Two characters play important parts in the struggle against N'Gandou: one is the *amuseur-public*, a well-known figure in the Congolese community, something between a traditional story-teller, a clown and a town-crier; he is the man who astutely calls public attention to N'Gandou's exactions by telling the story of the crocodile who wanted to have the whole river for himself; he also performs the part of a chorus as he comments on the struggle that pits N'Gandou against the other main character; the latter is the local school-teacher, who appears as a symbol of the duty of the educated to be aware of corruption, fight against it, and maintain moral standards in the life of the community.

One peculiar form of corruption is the target of Jean Pliya's *La Secrétaire particulière* (1972) which exposes the by no means surprising fact that the "africanisation des

¹⁶⁸ Yves-Marie Choupaut, "L'Oracle, une farce représentative du théâtre africain contemporain," *Afrique Littéraire et Artistique*, No. 3 (1969), 73-77.

cadres," the emergence of a powerful and moneyed class of indigenous civil servants, has introduced abuses which were presumably unknown in traditional Africa, the new bosses regarding their female secretaries as natural and even legitimate outlets for their personal basic urges.¹⁶⁹ Many other plays also denounce the shameless exploitation of women's physical weaknesses and social subjugation, but Bernard Zadi Zaourou has given it a new, symbolic dimension in *L'Oeil* (1975), the story of Djédjé, who compels his wife Amani to give her eye for a transplant to a powerful politician's wife who has lost hers in a car accident. Amani dies as a result and Djédjé is richly rewarded, being appointed to the chairmanship of an important company. But the eye is a symbol. As the author says in one of the few clear sentences of his wordy preface, "il s'agit d'y voir clair"¹⁷⁰ and as the story of the eye gets around, students and workers begin to *see* how blind they have been, how meekly they have played into the hands of the men in power. Significantly, in Zadi's play as in Sembène's *Xala*, the budding rebellion is crushed by the army, so that "law and order", established for the benefit of the wealthy, are duly restored.

The innumerable abuses and misuses of power by the various crooks, self-promoted generals, life-presidents and emperors that seized power in many African countries after independence are also the theme of *Le Président* (1970), a fierce, many-faceted satirical comedy by the Congolese writer Maxime N' Debeke (b. 1944) which appeared almost at the same time as Dadié's tragedy, *Les Voix dans le vent*. Here, too, the story is cautiously set in a fictional African state, but recent history abounds in evidence that it could have happened in any of about a dozen actual countries plagued by fake elections, dictatorships, military coups and the emergence of new, equally vicious potentates, much to the detriment of the common population. Observing in his preface that the population is conspicuously absent from the play, Henri Lopès, himself a noted Congolese novelist, shrewdly seeks the reason for this apparent lack in the fact "dans la plupart des Etats africains, le peuple reste effectivement dans les coulisses. Même quand il est mécontent, il attend qu'un colonel Ossé vienne, tel le Messie, changer la situation. Parfois le colonel Ossé est un progressiste. Plus souvent un réactionnaire, ou pour le moins un conservateur, partisan de l'ordre. Dans tous les cas la foule se satisfait. Elle demandait le changement. Quelqu'un l'a opéré à sa place. Tout effort lui a été épargné... La foule peut ainsi se reposer. Mais se reposera-t-elle toujours?"¹⁷¹ This is of course the fundamental question. In the late seventies, the eviction of a few among the more bloodthirsty dictators seemed to suggest that the intellectuals' and especially the creative writers' struggle for a modicum of political honesty and social justice was at last beginning to bear fruit.

André Gide used to say: "ce n'est pas avec les bons sentiments qu'on fait de la bonne littérature." The limitations of francophone drama must be recognized. First, it has a

¹⁶⁹ On this writer, see Alain Ricard, "Jean Pliya, écrivain dahoméen," *Afrique Littéraire et Artistique*, No. 27 (1973), 2-9, and Unionmwan Edebiri, "L'espérance tacite de Jean Pliya, écrivain dahoméen," *ibid.*, No. 37 (1975), 9-13.

¹⁷⁰ Bernard Zadi Zaourou, *Les Sofas, suivi de L'œil*, p. 68.

¹⁷¹ Maxime N' Debeke, *Le Président* (Honfleur: Oswald, 1970), p. 9.

rather narrow spectrum of motifs: chronicle plays try to counteract the usual Eurocentred view of Africa as a savage land deprived of any history and historical figures. On the other hand, present-day African society is portrayed in farcical comedies or bourgeois dramas focusing on the same range of problems as are discussed in prose fiction: the bride-price and parental authoritarianism in marriage matters, the parallel dangers of irrational superstitions and hasty westernization, the emancipation of women, the corruption of businessmen, civil servants and politicians, the career problems of the students. Such topics have not made for great drama and, in their concentration on the anecdotal, such plays do little to probe, preserve or actualize the deeper layers of African culture and the African mind. It may well be that French-educated dramatists feel it to be beneath their dignity and harmful to their intellectual reputation to handle the great myths that once gave meaning and colour to their own cultures. It is disquietingly significant that the only play based on the story of a mythical god-king of Africa is *Shango* (1968), by the Nigerian author Ola Balogun (b. 1945) whose writings in French testify chiefly to the incomparable versatility of Yoruba culture.

(Adapted from the Dutch by)
Albert S. Gérard

NICOLE MEDJIGBODO

THE NOVEL

While Sembène's *L'Harmattan* was the only novel of any significance to reach publication in Paris between Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961) and the late sixties, a revival of the African novel in French was in the offing. It was first heralded by the appearance of *La plaie* (1967) by the Senegalese poet Malick Fall (b. 1920). Next came *Le Devoir de violence* (1968) by a much younger writer from Mali, Yambo Ouologuem (b. 1940), who was awarded the much coveted Prix Théophraste-Renaudot. In the same year, a Malinke novelist from the Ivory Coast, Ahmadou Kourouma (b. 1938) won the Prix de la Francité for *Les Soleils des indépendances*, which was first published in Montreal and was re-issued in Paris in 1970. By 1980, none of them had produced another novel. But the seventies had been marked by two interesting phenomena. After Mongo Beti had made his come-back in 1974 with the two novels mentioned earlier, his near-contemporary Seydou Badian from Mali, who had become a minister under Modibo Keita after writing a political pamphlet, *Les Dirigeants africains face à leur peuple* (Paris, 1964), also published two novels in quick succession: *Le Sang des masques* (1976) and *Noces sacrées* (1977). Meanwhile, several talented younger writers had emerged, showing that the novel was alive again in former French Africa: Mohamed-Alioum Fantouré (b. 1938) from Guinea issued *Le Cercle des tropiques* (1972) and *Le Récit du cirque... de la vallée des morts* (1975), while his fellow-countryman Williams Sassine (b. 1944) reached print with *Saint Monsieur Baly* (1973) and *Wirriyamu* (1976). Two Congolese novelists made their names at the same time: Emmanuel Dongala (b. 1941) with *Un fusil dans la main un poème dans la poche* (1973) and Henri Lopès (b. 1937), the short-story writer of *Tribaliques*, whose two important novels, *La Nouvelle romance* (1976) and *Sans tam-tam* (1977), were published in Yaunde. [Ed.]