Traditional Themes and Techniques in African Theatre and ‘Francophonie’

Mineke Schipper

‘Francophonie’ arrived relatively recently in Africa; it has only been systematically nurtured since the colonial occupation. The French have often even believed that the French language was ‘the best solution’ for Africa. Was there not, after all, only one culture, the French culture? And therefore it must, as far as possible, be spread throughout the world. A commission set up to formulate France’s aid policy to developing

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countries confirmed the necessity ever to extend the influence of the French language as follows:

La France désire, plus que toute autre nation, diffuser au loin sa langue et sa culture. Son besoin de rayonnement intellectuel trouve bon emploi auprès de peuples dont la langue convient mal aux idées et aux techniques modernes (...): elle leur apporte un mode d'expression et une méthode de pensée.¹

In an article supporting this recommendation, J. P. Dannaud dreams of a French-speaking Latin-Africa that would be comparable to a Spanish or Portuguese-speaking Latin-America.²

Comparable reveries and ideas can be found in the way in which African theatre in French is sometimes presented. In Cornevin’s book Le Théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar, Charles Béart (Director of the Ecole Primaire Supérieure, Bingerville) is referred to as the father of African theatre. In the same book theatre is, for the most part, compared with theatrical practices introduced since French colonization. Within this perspective a religious play such as Les Trois Mages, La Farce de Maître Patelin and Le Malade imaginaire are merely seen as useful breeding grounds in which the real African theatre can begin to flourish.³

Leaving aside the Eurocentric nature of such thinking, it remains important to ask what the influence of French culture on African theatre is, or has been. Béart compares the French role in the creation of African theatre with the role the Greeks and Romans played in the creation of theatre in Europe and Cornevin refers to Béart with great approval.⁴

French colonial influence has permeated culture to such an extent that French-educated Africans sometimes looked down on their own culture. Missionaries also often attempted to discourage African traditions and ceremonies or to forbid them as ‘heathen’. At the same time the occupier’s culture was presented as the culture in an educational system aimed at integrating pupils into the colonial system. Many of the pupils influenced in this way often viewed their own traditions more critically than Western traditions, for a time at least. The chief example of this is the École William Ponty in Senegal, of which Charles Béart was the director: there the African lower forms were prepared for the colonial administration of the whole of French West Africa. The cultural approach excluded discussion of the colonial system and any condescending consideration of African tradition was primarily intended to distract attention from contemporary politics. In many instances this worked without problems, even where it concerned the conception of the history of their own people. A number of French-speaking West African writers attended the École William Ponty, were influenced by it, and sometimes later dissociated themselves from it.
Bakary Traoré has researched into the use of historical sources in William Ponty theatre and came to the conclusion that no trace of African nationalism was to be found, but rather that writers of this school presented the old African rulers in precisely the same way as official colonial history, namely as barbarous and blood-thirsty despots.\(^5\)

Even the presentation of ‘Ponty’ plays was heavily influenced by ‘imported’ French ideas. Acting in a closed, covered space on a stage with backdrops marked this theatre out as different, while the curtain further emphasized the divide between actors and audience. Moreover, in the western *mise en scène*, both the verbal element and the French language were dominant. Theatre tickets had to be bought and the public was therefore limited to a small French-speaking élite, a symptom of the new relationships which were beginning to appear.\(^6\)

Naturally, these developments did not go entirely unnoticed. In general, French-speaking writers reacted more strongly to the obligatory culture of the occupier, at least in West Africa, perhaps because, culturally, the English proceeded with less missionary zeal. Reactions to the French produced on the one hand a powerful protest literature beginning with the négritude movement, and on the other a *retour aux sources*. This return to the roots of one’s own culture was always advocated by Senghor, notwithstanding the fact that he defended French culture unconditionally, as can be seen (in connection with a number of other points) in the following passage:

> Le français, ce sont les grandes orgues qui se prêtent à tous les timbres et à tous les effets, des douceurs les plus suaves aux fulgurances de l’orage. Il est, tour à tour ou en même temps, flûte, hautbois, trompette, tam-tam et même canon. (…) Les mots français rayonnent de mille feux, comme des diamants. Des fusées qui éclairent notre nuit.\(^7\)

Naturally, for writers of protest literature, French was also seen as one of the *armes miraculeuses* in the struggle for independence. Moreover, the return to their roots can be seen as a form of resistance against the culture of the occupier who so often either ignored or denied the existence of these roots.

One could, in a negative sense, ask the question whether French culture does not, or did not, in fact stand in the way of African theatre as it had traditionally existed. Perhaps this sounds like polarization, but when we think of the overwhelming role which the verbal element plays in traditional classical French theatre, while in most traditional forms of African theatre the word played a rather subservient role, then the question of what has been sacrificed to what in French African theatre is not without importance.

I would like to approach the question much more positively by asking
how far elements from the oral tradition have been integrated and absorbed into French-language theatre in Africa. I will turn my attention to the traditional themes and techniques which have inspired playwrights, and also to the way in which they have assimilated them into new contemporary work in French. As regards themes, there are those which are borrowed directly from literary genres, for example myth or epic; others are based on traditional cultural practice, such as the dowry, fetishism, the authority of age over youth, rituals, etc. As far as techniques and attributes are concerned, here I consider formal attributes such as presentation by a singer or story-teller, inclusion of songs, singing by turns or in refrains, the use of choirs or a group response, the use of music and musical instruments, dance, mime, costumes, masks and so on. It is naturally impossible within the scope of this brief study to consider all these aspects. In the following pages I will show, on the basis of examples from plays, how certain elements from traditional African culture have continued to play an independent role within the new French-language theatrical context.

Themes

It is dangerous to impose a division of genres in oral literature. The existing European-orientated distinction is, as far as African material is concerned, both inadequate and inaccurate. In Africa, where does myth end and epic begin? What is a legend and what is an historical chronicle? Often all these genres are presented as ‘actual happenings’. The terms ‘myth’, ‘legend’, ‘folk tale’, ‘fairy-tale’, cannot be strictly distinguished in oral literature, they often merge into one another. The proverb is a genre in itself. A story is sometimes based on a proverb, and conversely a proverb is sometimes distilled from a popular story. I cannot pursue this problem further, but it is clear that if classification is already problematical for the whole of oral literature, then in the case of borrowings from this literature, the characteristics of the original can dominate the characteristics of the genre to an even greater extent within the new literary context. This is no disaster and it can indeed lead to an exciting and enriching new literature, or, in this case, new theatre. Playwrights borrow in numerous ways from the oral genres, and most of them feel absolutely free in their own creative transformation of the original material. Nevertheless, I think that in the sphere of the theatre, it can generally be said that the oral genres to which playwrights return for their inspiration are above all myth and epic history. Plays are also, but less commonly, based on fairy-tales and animal stories. Here I limit myself primarily to themes from myths, epics, and history.8

Myths are told everywhere in Africa. They are stories of creation which
explain why the world has become as it is. Real myths always have a
deeper and more serious aim than merely telling a story. The myth
comprises the 'truth', has authority and is accepted as such within the
group in which it is told. Myths explain not only the origins of the world
but also the relations between God or the gods and the original ancestors,
The same myths are sometimes told and/or interpreted very differently
in different places and at different times. The way in which the myth is
told is closely bound up with the social situation in which it is told. The
current situation has an influence on the mythical text which moreover
be manipulated by those in power. Ideology always plays a part. If
writers concern themselves with material from the oral tradition, they also
always consider the public they have in mind. The best authors know that
returning to the roots of their culture does not of itself guarantee artistic
success. They also know that simply transcribing the material without
relating it to contemporary society may render it sterile. Just as oral
literature is itself living and developing with the public for which it is
intended, the same holds true for the authors who are inspired by the oral
tradition. The art is to give the material a new contemporary reference.
Naturally this holds not only for the use of themes, but also of techniques.
A relatively recent appearance in African theatre is the Cameroonian
writer Werewere Liking. She was conscious of how rich in possibilities
African theatre itself was and was amazed that, despite this, French-
language theatre in Africa remained so strongly orientated to the old-style
European theatre where classical dramaturgy sets the tone. In Du rituel à
la scène chez les Bassa du Cameroun, Liking, collaborating with Marie-José
Hourantier, revealed the results of research on the ritual theatre of the
Bassa people of Cameroon:

Il était temps d'en finir avec le théâtre de pure contemplation où l'on
était condamné à l'inaction, au rôle de voyeur, d'où l'on sortait pressé
de s'étirer et de 'se retirer', énervés d'avoir dû seulement regarder les
autres agir et jouir d'une action qui ne nous concernait pas, ne nous
marquait pas, et que l'on oubliait après les faux rires et les applaudisse-
ments de rigueur.  

She includes many traditional elements in her theatre: myths and rituals,
music, rhythm, songs, etc. Also, as in the tradition, she wants to draw the
whole group (including the audience) into the action. Yet it is not merely
a return to tradition:

Mais que l'on ne s'y trompe pas: s'il a recours aux mythes, le théâtre
rituel ne se veut pas une anthologie des traditions. Il s'en inspire
seulement pour mener plus loin l’interrogation, et élargir l’imagination créatrice qui répondra aux questions vitales. Ce théâtre est un appel à l’intériorisation de la conscience dans sa source profonde où réside la vraie Connaissance. C’est une incitation à la libération des énergies divines en l’homme.  

Actors and audiences alike are confronted with the myth re-enacted on the stage. In connection with this she speaks of the aesthetic of the théâtre rituel, in which everyone questions his own existence and each seeks in himself the explanation for what has gone wrong. The group as a whole takes active part, it becomes a co-operative search for the origin of the evil forces which threaten unity.

The myth on which one of her plays, La Nouvelle Terre, is based answers the question of the origin of the Bassa in the Cameroon: what were the beginnings of this people, how did they establish themselves in the Cameroon? Bassa tradition sings of two brothers Koba and Kwan, their courage and tenacity and their arduous, testing journey. Leaving their original home territory, they cross, miraculously, the mythical White River (the Nile?) on a ‘Likogui leaf’. Eventually, they arrive at the ‘Stone with the Hole’, Ngok Lituba, in the central southern area of the Cameroon. Here was the birthplace of the Bassa, in the impenetrable cave. Here ‘la nouvelle terre’ (‘the new land’) began. They developed into a powerful and prosperous people. With the passage of time things did not go well for them. Because of this a ritual was needed through which they could rediscover the purity of the myth, the uncorrupted mythical setting in which the original powers acted positively on the society. That purity can only be re-created through catharsis. The cause of the destruction of good in the society had first to be found. That must happen through group activity and for that an old Bassa ritual is used in La Nouvelle Terre, to which we shall return later. It is thanks to the ritual that the people, who adopt a role, became aware:

Le peuple: Mais c’est fini maintenant. Tout va changer. Que peut-on emporter d’ici? (...). Désormais, nous choisisrons sciemment nos contenus (...). Il arrache violemment ses lunettes noires et les écrase au sol. Finie, la vue filtrée par les puissants. A bas les bandeaux! Pleins feux sur les choses et les gens! Le bien et le mal reprendront leurs propres couleurs, leur grandeur nature. (Il tend ses mains vides vers l’Est.)

Courage, je te ramasse comme le firent Koba et Kwan: Ils traversèrent le Fleuve Blanc sur une feuille de ‘Likogui’.

Leurs mains pagayèrent. Leurs mains nagèrent. Et ils aboutirent à la Pierre au Trou, au seuil d’une nouvelle terre.
It is evident from this quotation how the original myth, which was meant to explain the origin and bond of the Bassa with their tribal lands, is linked by the author with the complex problems of modern society. She achieves this by means of an entirely different element of Bassa tradition, namely the initiation rite of the Ngué masked figure, which works as a theatrical process.

Myth is often closely related to history and the epic contains both mythical and/or historical elements. The writer always interprets in his or her own way. In *Abraha Pokou on Une grande africaine*, Charles Nokan of the Ivory Coast follows a line from myth and ancestors, via history, through to the present. Cornevin\(^2\) cites the story of Pokou in written history, but the source has been orally transmitted. It is about the earliest times of the Baoulé. An oppressed people leaves its homeland and goes elsewhere to be free of foreign domination. Pursued by the hostile Ashanti, they arrive at a river. To avoid being massacred, the queen offers her young child to the water gods who make the crossing possible. According to the legend, a kapok tree bends over from the opposite bank and the people cross on it, after which the tree stands up straight again before the enemy reaches the spot. The queen is the last to cross to the other bank, where the people kneel before her. She can only say ‘Baouli’ which means ‘the child is dead’. Therefore the people have taken the name Baoulé. It is from this mythical explanation that Nokan proceeds. In his interpretation, Pokou is not only the queen who sacrifices everything for the welfare of her people, she also symbolizes the ideal of a future Africa in which exploitation and oppression have been purged, in which slaves no longer exist, and women have the same rights as her. In this imaginary new reign of Abraha Pokou, the enemy of the people also appears but is defeated. Nokan opens with a quotation from Mao Tse-tung and he dedicates the play to the women of Africa who, according to him, must become like their Vietnamese sisters. He also considers that the African artist has a clear task. He must

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\text{lutter contre l’impérialisme culturel, le colonialisme, le néo-colonialisme et leurs agents noirs. Il lui faut défendre sa culture nationale, l’enrichir, la rendre révolutionnaire, consacrer ses œuvres à la lutte de tous les exploités pour une vie meilleure.}^{13}\]

The tenor is all too clear and this also holds true for the text, written in the same style. The epilogue, for example, is very emphatically connected with the message the author wishes to communicate. The postscript is said by the ‘Poet of Today’ together with the audience, as a creed of the Revolution with a capital R.

In this way, Nokan strives to change society, but his approach is hardly subtle. His political jargon does not suit the Baoulé characters who have been borrowed from the myth. In my opinion, Werewere Liking is much...
more successful in combining her traditional elements with present reality through a search for her own style and solution instead of allowing herself to be led by external dogmatic precepts. However, like Nokan, she believes that society, that is, individuals, must be changed, but her solution is suggested and not dictated by the plot.

In the epic, a mythical and an historical branch can be distinguished. The Mwindo epic of the Nyanga of Zaïre, for example, is a myth-orientated text which contains little in the way of historical elements: Mwindo appears neither in the genealogies of the first ancestors of the Nyanga nor in those of the grandparents or great-grandparents of the chiefs. However, a few aspects point to ‘the beginning’, such as living in holes, the origin of fire, the first hunting dog and the way in which other practices were introduced into their culture.

The other branch of the epic is more historically determined. The hero actually lived and played a role in the history of his people. The epic is by no means always strictly distinguished from the historical chronicle. Where that is the case, the historian restricts himself more to recalling the family tree of the ruler, the migrations, wars, conquests, defeats and victories of his own people; these ‘facts’ he passes on to his contemporaries. The epic has another function. It devotes more attention to the artistic form; it is more than a presentation of the historical facts. In the first place, the reciter of the epic wishes to captivate the public. As author and artist, he subordinates history to his own artistic conception, but a foundation of truth always remains if it concerns historical characters whose famous deeds live on in the memories of later generations. A hallmark of the ‘historical’ branch of the epic is that the hero concerned actually existed: battles, conquests and such like are then authentic, but the figure of the hero is more heroic and his deeds more marvellous than they ever were in reality. Miracles and magical feats appear frequently and gods and spirits often play an important role. The hero has become more than an ‘ordinary’ ancestor, and often becomes revered almost as a god. An example of this is Chaka, the Zulu hero. There are many plays based on this epic, and a remarkable number are written in French by West Africans. Mostly, they only know Chaka through the French translation, itself based on the English translation of the original by Thomas Mofolo, who sketched out the story in Sotho. The many dramatic versions attest to the great variety of treatment which the original theme can receive. One of the writers, Abdou Anta Ka formulates his own vision in the introduction to his Chaka play, Amazoulous:

D’autres poètes, écrivains, tels le Poète-Président Léopold Sédar Senghor, le Dr. Seydou Badian Kouyaté, ex-ministre du Mali, ont été également inspirés par Chaka. Mais comme j’aime à le dire à mes amis:
Another well-known epic that has inspired French-language authors is Sundiata, for example in Sory Konaké's *Le grand destin de Soundjata*. It is remarkable the extent to which well-known heroes' deeds play a role in French-language plays. In many the historical heroes receive epic treatment in the theatre, even if no oral tradition about them exists. Against the background of the existing colonial versions, recreated externally, history had to be re-written, again via literature. History is concerned with facts; imagination triumphs over historical facts in literature. Its concern was to re-establish the self-confidence of the people, the belief in their own cultural inheritance, in their own tradition, their own identity. In *L'Exil d'Alboury* Cheik Ndao sketches the noble character of Alboury N'Diaye. As far as the relationship between reality and imagination is concerned, the author says that in addition to Alboury and a few historical characters, he has invented a number of others:

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 PORTENT EN AVANT!16

Ndao’s play represents Alboury as something other than the barbaric minor king depicted by colonial history: he is a worthy ruler who refuses to allow himself to be dominated. Its concern is with the honour of the past, crushed by the colonizer. The heroes do not have a merely historical function, they stand above historical reality and are glorified, sometimes even deified and thus come very close to myth once more. It is significant that Ndao also uses this term in the above quotation. With the glory of history, faith must also be restored in the future.17
Sometimes the eulogizing of history, the renown of the hero, even within the framework of a play, is presented directly in the form of praise poetry, exactly as in oral literature by means of the traditional troubadour or griot who appears as narrator. A good example of this is *Le grand destin de Soundjata* by Sory Konaké of Mali, which received the Prix des auditeurs du Concours Théâtral Interafricain in 1971. The author presents the play as a village performance: the griot Djeli Madi accompanies himself on the N'goni (four-stringed guitar) while he presents the characters and events to the public. This griot, too, emphasizes the importance of their ‘own’ history from the perspective of the Africans:

l’histoire, l’histoire de l’Afrique n’est pas celle qu’écrivent les étrangers mais celle que nous chantons accompagnés de nos guitares africaines, supports indispensables du récit. Cette histoire de l’Afrique a ses héros. La vie de chacun d’eux est un exemple d’abnégation, de bravoure, de patriotisme. La veillée d’aujourd’hui est une évocation du grand destin de Soundjata Kéita, le plus brillant des rois du Manding. Oui, écoutez ce que fut ce héros national qui a inscrit l’une des plus belles et plus célèbres pages de l’histoire de l’Afrique.  

The heroic life of Sundiata unfolds before the audience in a single scene in the form of a presentation through retrospective interventions by the griot Djeli Madi.

Apart from themes from oral tradition such as myths, epics and history, there are also themes which authors borrow from traditional customs and rules – respected, denied or rejected. For example, the plot in Oyônô-Mbia’s well-known *Trois prétendants ... un mari* was inspired by the dowry custom; *La Marmite de Koka Mbala* by the old custom that elders demanded unconditional obedience from the young. This latter rule led to excesses and abuses of power in the kingdom of Koka-Mbala. In this play, it is not the elders’ authority that the younger generation wishes to attack; that remains accepted as is apparent in the Kikongo saying which one of the younger characters quotes with approval: ‘However big they are, their ears never stick up above their heads’. It was only what followed from the exercise of authority that sparked off their opposition. It is the fetish priest who embodies the dictatorial lust for power and his attitude is rejected in the traditional society in which this play takes place. Here there is no question of a link with the contemporary situation, it occurs within the limits of a closed traditional society.

In an interview I asked the Zaïrean writer Clémentine Nzuji about the theatre in her country. She, too, made it clear how traditional customs are readily used in today’s theatre:
Dans la société traditionnelle, le théâtre fait partie de la vie des gens, fait partie de l’art oral. Le théâtre ‘moderne’ est présenté dans les villes et dans les écoles. Il y a aussi une troisième forme qui s’inspire directement de la tradition. Je vais te donner un exemple. Il y a une troupe zaïroise qui adapte des scènes de la vie traditionnelle au théâtre. C’est une sorte de théâtre improvisé avec danses et musique, très intéressant. On improvise. Dernièrement, j’ai assisté à une pièce sur les jumeaux que cette troupe donnait. J’avais travaillé avec eux – ce sont des amis. Ils se sont basés sur des enquêtes concernant l’importance des jumeaux dans la société traditionnelle. A l’aide de cette information, ils ont fait un squelette d’histoire – rien qu’un squelette. Les acteurs, eux, improvisent alors le reste, même les paroles et tout. Ainsi ils font entrer la vie courante là-dedans, un peu comme au Moyen Age européen. Cela a un grand succès et on le comprend encore parfaitement dans tous les milieux. A la fin, quand les acteurs dansent la danse des jumeaux, il y a tout le public qui se lève et qui se met à danser avec la troupe.20

Indeed, there exist very diverse traditions, offering a wealth of material which the good researcher can use as the basis for plays. In the dramatic works of Werewere Liking, written in French, rituals and other old customs occur which are clearly the product of thorough preliminary research. Researched material has thus been used in different and new ways in the theatre. In the previously cited play, La Nouvelle Terre, a ritual based on one of the three existing initiation rites of the Bassa is used. Here an important role is played by the masked Ngué figure:

l’initiation complète du Ngué (…) rendait un homme capable d’assurer la justice de son village. Il faut préciser que chez les Bassa, un homme ne pouvait mener seul une action punitive; le groupe des initiés en prenait la responsabilité. Si la loi était transgressée, le Ngué, invoqué, devenait implacable, utilisant tous les moyens occultes mis à sa disposition: la mort, la destruction d’un champ ou une maladie signalaien sa réaction. L’aveu public ne suscitait parfois qu’une compensation matérielle. L’initié du Ngué conduisait ainsi son groupe vers une meilleure exploitation des possibilités.21

In La Nouvelle Terre the artist, the ‘Ndinga’, initiates the restoration of harmony, along with the child, carried by the masked Ngué figure and in whose name he speaks. The accompanying rhythm is always recognizable because it returns each time the Ngué speaks. Finally, thanks to the ritual, harmony is restored. The village receives new hope, a new ideal, new energy, a new future. Symbols play an important role in the play:

(ils) s’imposent dans le corps du texte, deviennent les moteurs de
l'action. Les deux morceaux de percale, la noire évoquant l'épreuve et la blanche, l'élevation et la pureté, défendront l'équilibre, la justice. La racine de yamb qui découvre la vérité, la clef qui ouvre les portes de la Connaissance, la bougie et la poudre de kaolin qui éclairent le sentier de l'idéal, sont autant de guides sûrs qui soutiennent les pas des néophytes.  

Thus, contact with the other world is re-established; the initiation ritual constitutes the most essential element, enriched with the positive achievements of the present. A new village comes into being, thanks to the creative word of the Ndinga. The oral ‘text’ of the myth and the use of the traditional Ngué initiation ceremony both contribute to the thematic coherence of this modern French-language play, about which there is much more to say than is possible here.

**Techniques and Attributes**

In the best plays, just as in all good literature, form and content cannot be discussed or handled separately from each other. This is also the case here. In connection with the themes, mention of formal characteristics and use of attributes was sometimes unavoidable. In the Ngué ritual the masked figure plays an indispensable role: the whole ritual is a part of the thematic structure and the development of Werewere Liking's *La Nouvelle Terre*, but it also contributes to the *form*. Likewise in her other plays, such as *La Puissance de Um* and *Du Sommeil d'injuste*, traditional rituals play an important role as part of the theatrical procedure: they are the formal technical lines along which developments are brought to a conclusion. These formal aspects are of real importance for the performance. In *La Nouvelle Terre*, the ritual gradually carries the characters and events towards a positive conclusion.  

Another important dramatic procedure is borrowed from the tradition of the character *sine qua non* in oral literature, the griot or the singer of the tale as presenter of the performance. This character is frequently used in French-language theatre. An example has already been given in the treatment of themes: the griot Djeli Madi in Sory Konaké’s play about Sundiata. The Congolese Sylvain Bemba also makes use of this formal aspect in different ways in two of his plays. In *Un foutu monde pour un blanchisseur trop honnête* the griot’s function is limited to providing a framework and an opening comment, and a linking element between two acts of the play, a biting satire of the corruption that seems to have infected the whole population. The *blanchisseur*, Raphaël, embodies goodness and respectability, and is therefore alienated, since all the others are corrupt. The introductory passage ends thus:
Tel est le cas de Raphaël, blanchisseur de son état, qui a le tort de voir
la propreté partout et les taches nulle part. Allez vous étonner, après ça,
que cet homme marche sur un tapis de peaux de bananes en tenant
dans une de ses mains l’œuf de la naïveté. Qui va se casser la figure le
premier, l’œuf ou son porteur? Mesdames, mesdemoiselles et messieurs,
les paris sont ouverts.²⁴

We do not encounter the presenter again until the end of the first act. He
remains outside developments on the stage. In another play by Bemba
this role does not remain restricted to that of providing a framework. In
the character of the amuseur public, the story-teller is integrated within the
action and he plays a considerable role. He continually comments on the
action, followed by reactions from the public, in this case the other
characters on the stage. The amuseur public, here Bemba himself, is

un personnage qui joue dans la société congolaise un rôle de bouffon, de
chroniqueur, de philosophe et d’informateur à la fois.²⁵

In L’Homme qui tua le crocodile, it is the rich N’Gandou, whose name means
‘crocodile’, who as a businessman tyrannizes and exploits a whole district
until a teacher from the local school rebels and the crocodile receives his
just deserts. In this tragi-comedy, as Bemba calls it, the amuseur public of
the district where N’Gandou lives tells the people the fable of the crocodile
who wants the river all to himself. It is clear to whom he is referring and
the other characters, the people of the district, enthusiastically repeat
certain sentences from the story-teller’s tale at every turn, exactly as in a
performance in the oral tradition. Here all this happens in French. At the
end of his story about the crocodile the amuseur public says:

Je n’aime pas beaucoup raconter cette histoire mais je suis content que
vous en ayez saisi le sens. Il faudra un jour que notre quartier sorte de
son sommeil. Mais vous connaissez ce proverbe des anciens, réveiller
trop brutalement un dormeur dérange les esprits.²⁶

In the ensuing scenes the actual struggle against N’Gandou unfolds. Here
the teacher plays an important part. The amuseur public keeps the people
(on stage and in the audience) informed about developments, and
following the arrest of N’Gandou, warns them to remain alert because –
and this is the moral – new N’Gandous can always appear, each
exploiting the people in his own particular way.²⁷

In Bemba’s play the amuseur public acts precisely as he has from time
immemorial in Congolese ‘reality’. It begins with a death vigil (veillée
mortuaire) at which a great number of people are present. The amuseur
public is also there, as is customary. Cards or draughts are being played.
The *amuseur* is the first character to speak; the group answers and already responds to his jokes and commentary:

L'amuseur public: Rita!  
Le groupe: Ta!  
L'amuseur public: Rita!  
Le groupe: Ta!  
L'amuseur public: Histoire!  
Le groupe: Alors!  
L'amuseur public: Histoire!  
Le groupe: Alors!  
L'amuseur public: *(le groupe éclatera de rire à chacun de ses bons mots).* Bon!  
Je viens de faire pleurer de rire ou de faire rire jusqu'à en pleurer les bonnes femmes qui sont derrière la maison. Elles se sont tues. Les pleureuses se sont tues.²⁸

Thus his role is clear from the beginning. He introduces the play, but does not stand outside the action: he functions on the same level as the other characters.

Mime also occurs in his story within the play. He finishes his introduction as follows:

Les autres: *(chantent en chœur)* Liwa li poni e tata ee mawa *(bis)*. Tata akeyi tata e mawa *(bis)* *(plusieurs fois)*  
L'amuseur public: Histoire!  
Le groupe: Alors!  
L'amuseur public: Histoire!  
Le groupe: Alors!  
L'amuseur public: Ah! Les femmes! Que ne vont-elles pas chercher?²⁹

There follows a whole story about ‘the woman’ and constant new subjects, interrupted by comments from the other characters present on the stage. The *amuseur public* always sets the tone for a song with refrain. The songs are current ‘hits’ sung in the African language, and the refrains are sung or repeated by those present. Often one or two sentences said by the *amuseur public* in prose are repeated in chorus. This plays an important part in the whole of this work. Here they are absolutely indispensable.

Often in West African plays a griot appears as a character who sings the praises of another character, often the protagonist, a chief or ruler, as for example Maliba, the griot who sings in honour of his *patron* Samori Touré in Cheik Ndao’s *Le Fils de l’Almamy*.³⁰ Such a character remains within the framework of the text. In Elebe Lisembe’s *Simon Kimbangu ou le Messie*
noir, a singer-story-teller, plays a role, equivalent to a character, as a subordinate of the village chief Mbemba, at whose feet he sits by the throne. The chief has just received a visit from the colonial administrator for whom Kimbangu had been looking in vain in the village. The conteur gears his song to the contemporary colonial situation, but he calls upon the forefathers for help:

_Le conteur se secoue et, après quelques gestes, s’apprête à tirer quelques accords de son instrument._

Conteur: E, e, e, e, iyaleeh!

Il est venu du lointain,
l’homme blanc
transportant
le fusil,
le crucifix . . .
E, e, e, e, Iyaleeh!
l’homme blanc,
l’homme aux neuf malices
a fait de nous des créatures sans vie.
E, e, e, e, Iyaleeh!
Depuis le premier chant du coq,
sans cesse,
la chicotte de l’homme blanc
suce notre sang.
E, e, e, e, Iyaleeh!
Mânes des ancêtres,
punissez l’homme blanc,
l’homme aux neuf malices.
Faites tomber la foudre sur sa maison!
Iyaleeh o, o, o, . . .

Just as with the function of the griot or story-teller, dance is used in very different ways. A relatively high proportion of French-language plays include dance and other stylized forms of movement, such as mime, either as ornament or in order to achieve a smooth transition from one act to another. Dance can also form an integral part of a feast celebrated in a particular scene. Dancers can be brought in to amuse the king, as for example in _La Marmite de Koka-Mbala_, where the king and his three wives enjoy watching the two best young dancers from the entire kingdom. One of the dancers appears again later in the play to give the king important information for the further development of the play. In _Pas de feu pour les antilopes_, however, the dance is an essential part of the plot. In a conflict between two chiefs a wise bard suggests a settlement not by fighting, but
by means of a competition in dance. This is accepted, and while the drums sound and the people encourage the chiefs with song, Mukoko and Manga dance, first to a slow rhythm and then gradually speeding up, until Manga falls exhausted in the dust and Mukoko is applauded as the winner. Dance and drums are indispensable in this play, which ends with another formal feature borrowed from tradition, namely the enthronement ceremony of a chief in which the dance element is equally important. It ends in a 'grand unity, in which the whole people dance the final dance'. Such an ending is not exceptional. Another well-known example is Oyônô-Mbia's popular Trois prétendants... un mari, which culminates in a great feast. In that, actors and audience dance together. Of this, Oyônô-Mbia says in his introduction that his intention is to include the audience as much as possible in the action: the people must be induced to join in the singing spontaneously and where possible to dance. It has naturally given him great pleasure that he has achieved these results in Europe, and even in England!

Instead of drawing up an extensive inventory of as many traditional forms as possible in modern French-language literature, it seemed more useful to conclude with a few remarks and recommendations. In the first place, the question of whether oral tradition remains an operative element in French-language African theatre must be answered in the affirmative. In the themes and formal procedures treated above a number of examples have been given, but much more research needs to be done on the way in which traditional literary themes and techniques function in contemporary theatre. The same applies for research into the function of language in 'total theatre'. A global rule might be that the role which the word plays in theatre is inversely proportionate to the role of other elements occupying varying amounts of space; here I am thinking specifically of music, dance and mime. In French-language theatre the word plays a relatively important role, whereas in theatre that makes use of African languages its role is often more restricted, entirely in line with the tradition.

It would be interesting to compare the above-mentioned themes, procedures, and attributes of French-language theatre with similar or differing plays written in English or in African languages. What similarities and differences are there? Another question which has remained outside this study concerns the kind of French used by writers in the theatre. Often 'French French' is used but, in the words of Sylvain Bemba, the author may also replace the 'langue du maître, langue de prestige, de promotion sociale et, plus tard, de combat contre la domination' with 'African French', a language that has its own rules: Bemba made use of this in Un foutu monde. The action of the play is located in what he calls 'le monde des bas-fonds':
De là est née la présente pièce qui, comme il faut s’y attendre, tord le cou à toutes les règles syntaxiques. Les puristes se voileront la face et se boucherez les oreilles, ce qui n’empêche pas l’existence d’une langue qui a ses règles propres.

Bemba’s social realism finds expression in the language of the characters, a wilful kind of French that would go very much against the ideas of the Académie Française. Over and above these are the writers who use more than one language in their drama in order to lend extra meaning to certain characters or passages. Such a device is immediately understood by the audience for whom such a play is intended. So besides French, use can be made of one or more African languages.

The more common it becomes to find African languages alongside French within one play, and the more a ‘pure’ French gives way to ‘African French’, the less likely it becomes that such a play will find a publisher. On the other hand, it also holds that as the use of African languages and African French increases, so will these plays become increasingly accessible to an African public. It is specifically with the French language that this large public has difficulty. So the French-speaking Latin-Africa exists only in the dreams of a hexagone non-réaliste.

Notes

4. Ibid., p. 68.

Barthélémy Kotchy

Since 1970, the young generation of dramatists in the Ivory Coast has questioned the approach to the theatre represented by the tradition of the École William Ponty and even by the new writing of Bernard Dadié, with his Monsieur Thogó-gnini and, especially, Béatrice du Congo. Following Aimé Césaire’s example, Dadié began writing political plays after 1966, but did, at the same time, incorporate some features of the traditional theatre. The founders of La Griotique, discussed below, thought these reforms too