

REVIEW ARTICLES

Faces of African Independence: Three Plays, by Guillaume Oyono-Mbia and Seydou Badian. Introduction by Richard Bjornson. Published by University of Virginia Press, Caraf Books, 1988 pp. 127.

Faces of African Independence: Three Plays is a collection of three plays of two African playwrights published originally in French. The collection is presented with a long but very informative introduction by Richard Bjornson of Ohio State University and published under the CARAF Books series by the University of Virginia Press. CARAF Books is committed to the translation into English of literary works of African and Caribbean writers published in French and who are, therefore, normally unavailable to readers in English in the United States.

Two of the plays in the collection, Three Suitors: One Husband and Until Further Notice, are by the Cameroonian playwright, Guillaume Oyono-Mbia while the third, The Death of Chaka, is by Seydou Badian of Mali. Oyono-Mbia who writes in French and English published the French version of Three Suitors in 1964 and the English edition in 1968, the same year that Until Further Notice was first published in English. Badian's Chaka was published in French in 1962 and in English in 1968, translated by Clive Wake for the present publication. The three plays are therefor available in French and English through French and British publishers but not so in the United States where the English edition is being presented for the first time by CARAF Books.

The title, Faces of African Independence, is very appropriate as an organizational as well as philosophical framework for presenting the three plays despite their differing generic and technical approaches. Oyono-Mbia's two plays are satiric comedies written after the style of that seventeenth century comic playwright, Jean Baptiste Pouguelin popularly known as Moliere, who excelled in exposing the ridiculous or ludicrous aspects of life, in order to draw attention to the serious. Badian, on the other hand, presents, in The Death of Chaka, a tragedy of human nature unrelieved by any comic interludes and revealing the shattering interplay of self-confidence and jealousy on a patriot and nation-builder.

African independence in these two comedies and a tragedy reveals a variety of interpretative strands. In the first place, the title suggests the coming of age of independence in African playwriting which the plays of Badian and Oyono-Mbia represent. Secondly, the period following political independence in which the plays were written makes the title symbolic of Africa's historical development. Thirdly, the themes exploited by the playwrights deal with issues arising from the political independence of Africa which includes domestic, economic, cultural and leadership problems. The exploitative and consumption-

oriented legacy bequeathed to African leaders and public servants by the colonial administration led them and, indeed, the people closely related to them, to look upon independence as the big opportunity to wield political and economic power over their countrymen and women. It also made the new African leaders see themselves as the new masters, not servants of the people. Education, the whiteman's ultimate source of power and cultural domination, came to be seen by the African who received it and the extended families which contributed to that education as the ultimate tool for filling the vacated seats of the colonial administrators. These and other readings may be legitimately applied to the three plays in The Faces of African Independence.

The marriage custom in a Cameroonian village provides Oyono-Mbia the opportunity to expose the new values of the villages, especially the price they place on the education of their maidens in Three Suitors: One Husband. Juliette, (the name and her love commitments, though in the comic mode, parallel Shakespeare's heroine in *Romeo and Juliet*) is about to graduate from high school and has had marriage arrangements made for her by her parents according to the cultural tradition of the Bulu people. Her suitors include Ndi, a village farmer who has paid one hundred thousand francs; Mbia, a wealthy and influential senior civil servant from the capital who pays double the original amount; and the itinerant trader Tchétgen who is reluctant to pay what the civil servant, paid for any woman no matter her education. Juliette is however in love with a college student whom her cousin, Matalina calls 'a mere schoolboy.' She contrives with him to steal the three hundred thousand francs paid by both the farmer and civil servant which causes great panic and distress among her people who must find the money to pay back their owners. It is at this point that the trader enters into the negotiations only to leave the villagers even more helpless and hopeless. Oko, Juliette's fiancé comes to save the situation disguised as a wealthy educated man and to pay the money stolen from Juliette's father. The play thus ends happily, amidst general merriment and dancing.

The senior civil servant, Mbia, is the dramatic medium through which Juliette's father, grandfather, brother village headman and other villagers project their selfish desires to have a piece of the government wealth or influence to themselves. Through him they could have much money, drinks, food, be closer to the police to avoid harassment, have gun permits and have their sons and daughters work in government offices. Until Further Notice, Oyono-Mbia's second play in the collection, furthers the plot of the Three Suitors. In it we see actual material benefits to a top civil servant, in this case an African Secretary of State. The setting is indeed the same Bulu village of Mvoutessi. Matalina, their daughter, an overseas-educated nurse, has married a medical doctor with whom she lives in the capital, Yaounde. The village is waiting to receive the couple whose visit would be the first

since they returned from France three months earlier. Through Mezoë, Matalina's mother, who visits them in Yaounde, we are able to learn a great deal about how Matalina's and her husband's standard of living has changed for the better and how their socio-economic and political influences are on the rise. He returns to Mvoutessi with Matalina's motorcycle because she deserves a big car, judging from the combined economic position of herself and her husband. After all, she is now an emancipated woman employing a majordomo in charge of their food. Mezoë explains: "You can't expect a girl who's studied in Europe to cook! Africa must change!"(p.77) Matalina shops at the supermarkets and, to cap it all, the family's doctor son-in-law, her husband, is about to be appointed Secretary of State!

Unlike the situation in Three Suitors, Matalina and her husband met and got married overseas and as such no bride price was paid to her family. But the family will "demand money, cattle, anything we like" without feeling any sense of guilt. Matalina is a good investment after all, and as Meka says, "our kilogrammes of cocoa weren't in vain." Although the expected visit does not come through as anticipated, the new Secretary of State, Matalina's husband, sends a note postponing it until further notice. He also sent many other things: two cases of wine, four demijohns of red wine, three case of beer, meat, fresh and dried fish (p.89) which the family accepts as a prelude to the expected future visit. As a follow-up on Three Suitors, Oyono-Mbia clearly paints the picture of better things coming from the educated and in spite of the comic exaggeration by Mezoë of the rosy life Matalina and her husband enjoy in Yaounde, there is an absence of the frivolity exhibited by Mbia, the civil servant suitor in the earlier play. The failure of Matalina's husband to pay a scheduled visit symbolizes a certain seriousness with state matters and a distancing that will gradually begin to impress on the people that independence also means national responsibility and hard work which must be placed above social ceremonies and extended family loyalty.

Employing that typical Molièresque style which reduces important social situations to the level of the farcical and slapstick, Oyono-Mbia is able to laugh at and also with the villagers of Mvoutessi who people the two plays. The naked concern for materialism and nepotism through the marriage contract becomes an issue which is both trivialized and elevated by the playwright. He uses the bride price issue as the instrument whereby the greed of families and the frivolous exhibition of material consumption may be exposed and discouraged in the marriage contract. Traditionally the bride price is an instrument which serves to strengthen and unite the families in the contract, not as a sale fee from the highest bidder. The fact that the family that receives it pays it back if the marriage fails to work well due to serious and irreconcilable differences would work against the new sale tendency.

Oyono-Mbia shows how ridiculous the sale syndrome could become when Juliette's grandfather, who is supposed to protect his people's custom as an elder, allows Mbia to conclude an initial marriage ceremony for his granddaughter with whom he has blood ties. He abandons his cultural responsibility in favor of his favorite addiction, alcohol.

The resolution of Three Suitors is idealistic. Oko marries Juliette who loves him more than anybody else for paying no money at all as bride price-by which the playwright also suggests that the old custom should be done away with. In Until Further Notice the couple marries abroad with no prior bride-price negotiations at all. Nor, as we have seen, is there likely to be any in the near future, considering the degree of socio-political responsibility Matalina's husband, the Secretary of State, shoulders. The positive fallouts of the negative attitude to bride-price and the marriage contract are love and education which Oyono-Mbia puts above other factors. Juliette marries for love because her education has equipped her to resist family pressure and even to apply her native intelligence in the solution of her dilemma. Also, Matalina's professional education equips her to take care of her family's basic problems without undue pressure on her husband's resources. Education, therefore, makes the woman both knowledgeable and independent, emancipating her to play her utmost role in society. This is the point the playwright makes through Juliette and Matalina respectively in spite of the rather ignorant views which he puts in the mouths of the villagers about the economic benefits and cultural disadvantages of educating women to achieve a hilarious comic effect.

Seydou Badian's Chaka explores a subject of epic proportions, the life and death of Shaka the great South African military genius. The action of the play which is divided into five tableaux takes place in what is now Natal, South Africa. In the First Tableaux or scene, Dingana, half-brother of Chaka, meets with the other generals of the Zulu army in his kraal to find a way of either eliminating Chaka or else of convincing him to call off an impending military expedition to the north in the region of the Red Mountains. It is clear from their protests against Chaka's leadership that they want time to enjoy their acquired military booties and as such they did not want to risk another war. To accuse Chaka of being a blood-thirsty war-monger, they thought, would alienate the generals and the soldiers from Chaka. By the end of this tableaux a warrior comes and announces the red alert and the distribution of command among the major generals. In the Second tableaux which takes place in a wild part of the mountains, the generals, now away from home, finalize their plans for a rebellion. Only Ndabe is on Chaka's side. He accuses the other generals of being unjust to the Zulu king and asks them to choose between "indolence and pleasure or greatness" (p.110). He is the playwright's mouthpiece for arguing in

favor of the fact that the greatness of a nation must be won at great costs and personal inconveniences.

We meet Chaka in the Third tableaux. He is confiding in Isamisi about how he feels "strangely weary and sick at heart." Isamisi's reply adds to the premonition about Chaka's death:

A new people has been born thanks, thanks to your genius - Amazulu, the children of the sky. It was to achieve this that Nkulunkulu, the Almighty, sent you. Your work has been accomplished, and so too, has your destiny. Meanwhile Ndlebe brings news of the generals' rebellion. He transfers control to a new generation, the Manchaka, and wins the support of the warriors.

In the Fourth tableaux the generals meet with Chaka who refuses to listen to their lame excuses not to go to battle, and decides to lead one of the divisions of impis himself while Ndlebe and Samisi lead the other two. The Fifth tableaux witnesses the death of Chaka after a victorious battle and the symbolic transfer of power to the younger generation. Chaka pronounces a prophetic curse on his murderers, Mblangana, Dingana and Mapo:

You are murdering me so as to take my place. You are too late. Umlungu, the white man, is on his way. You will be his subjects.

Badian's Chaka is a patriot who is single-minded about the need to establish his people over other peoples in the area. He is conceived as gentle but very powerful, whether present or absent from the scene. Thus Badian does not deal with the controversial historical Shaka on whom many writers are so divided. The patriotism and commitment of Chaka is for Badian like the Biblical Charity which "covereth a multitude of sins." "Hard" realism indicates that empires, civilization and colonies have always been established at the cost of human lives and that the benefits of having them have invariably been reaped by the future generations. The play and its characters are hardly well developed but its message is unmistakably sympathetic to Chaka's patriotic leadership.

The Death of Chaka is a people's tragedy as much as it is that of the individual. The Zulu nation has lost the chance to political greatness and the struggle to regain it will never be easy for the descendants of Chaka. The voice of the people in the play is represented by that of a lone Zulu maiden, Notibel, who denounces her fiancé, Dingana and pledges total allegiance to Chaka. As it were she is the ear of the people. In the First tableaux, when the mutiny against Chaka is being

hatched, she enters uninvited. "I have overheard everything. There has been talk of bloodshed," (p.101) she says and warns the generals not to desert Chaka no matter what happens. Also in the Second tableaux she comes in under similar circumstances saying, "Ndlebe, I overheard everything. I am disappointed," (p.113) and thereafter she resolves: "I was Mapo's sister. I was Dingana's fiancée. Now I am neither Mapo's sister nor Dingana's fiancée. I am Chaka's daughter. Like everyone else, I am a Zulu" (p.114). Following this declaration of loyalty which is supposed to be that of other Zulus, Ntiobe's political commitment becomes complete. Like Ebrahim's Kinjekitile, the hero of the play of that name, the future now belongs to the people.

Faces of African Independence: Three Plays is adequately introduced by Richard Bjornson. His thirty page commentary on the plays and their historical backgrounds makes delightful and informative reading. Indeed the danger of such elaborate critical introduction to the plays is that the lazy student could find it just sufficient and may not read the plays at all. Faces of African Independence should be a required reading in African literature, but more so in African drama and theater. Where possible the performance demands of the plays to be discussed along with their literary effectiveness. The collection widens our appreciation of African drama here in the United States and narrows the dichotomy of Anglophone and Francophone African literature. The University of Virginia Press deserves praise for publishing the CARAF series.

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