

DRAMA AS SOCIAL CRITICISM: THE CASE OF OYONO-MBIA'S
TROIS PRETENDANTS...UN MARI

by

Cyril Mokwenye

"Le théâtre est un art éminement social, qui est directement appréhendable, un art de communication essentielle. Je veux un théâtre actuel en prise directe sur nos problèmes. Le théâtre doit être une prise de conscience; il est un 'donner à voir', un 'donner à penser'."

- Aimé Césaire

Guillaume Oyono-Mbia is one of the most successful playwrights to emerge from the Camerouns,¹ a country that has produced some of Africa's most volatile critics of the colonial situation through the novel form, the best known being Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono.² The novel form dominated the literary scene in the years immediately preceding the independence of African states, in the grim struggle to rehabilitate the badly amputated African image. Modern African drama in French, with its tap-root in the William Ponty school of Drama, became also more militant and committed between 1954 and 1970³ in the area of social criticism.

If the earlier African novels from the francophone world, in essence, lashed out bitterly at the European colonialists, modern African theatre in French while complementing this anti-colonialist struggle, was also looking inwards for alternative themes within the African experience. This was all the more prominent after independence. Lilyan Kesteloot identifies three categories of themes which have captured the attention of modern contemporary African dramatists. These are the colonialist theme; the theme of conflict between traditionalism and modernism arising from the influence of western education; the political theme dealing with corruption and abuse of power among new African leaders.⁴

Oyono-Mbia's Trois Prétendants...Un Mari (hereafter Trois Prétendants), falls within the second category of thematic preoccupation described by Kesteloot. Based on the marriage theme, Oyono-Mbia's play runs a critical commentary on certain social ills and excesses common in the African society. This play, according to Kesteloot, deals with:

"le problème de la dot, celui de l'exploitation du

gendre par des beaux-parents et celui de la liberté du mariage et de la femme."⁵

Trois Prétendants seeks to satirise such ills as high bride-price demanded by greedy parents as well as the imposition of suitors on would-be brides. Oyono-Mbia, in fact, devotes his trilogy⁶ to the consequent problems deriving from parental interference in their children's marriage. For example, in Jusqu'à Nouvelle Avis, Matalina, having spent four years in France, gets married to a medical doctor with whom she settles in the Camerounian capital and refuses to yield to the pressures mounted on her by her parents to bring home her husband to meet his financial obligations to his in-laws. Of course, fully aware of the implications of such a visit to the village, Matilina and her husband put off the visit "till further notice." The same parental interference marks the third play in this trilogy, Notre Fille ne se mariera pas. This time the playwright dramatises the selfish anxiety of Charlotte's parents who do not want her to get married especially now that she has completed her education and is earning some money. Their fear, invariably, is that once married, she will no longer cater for them as all attention will now be diverted to her immediate family. Of the three plays it is Trois Prétendants⁷ however, that is most developed in terms of its thematic scope, while the other two being radio plays are highly limited in their dramatic fullness. It is for this reason that we feel that a discussion of Trois Prétendants will afford us a deeper insight into the thematic pre-occupation of this playwright as a social critic.

CHOICE OF SUITORS

Marriage, whether in the traditional setting or in the modern African society, has often been viewed as an important institution. However, like almost every other institution, marriage in Africa today is facing a number of problems not just arising from the influence of western education but also from the changing attitudes of the custodians of the African tradition. One of such attitudes is that of parents and elders over the choice of marriage partners for their adult offspring. In the past, it was the tradition for parents and elders to choose suitable partners for their children, their choice being guided by such criteria as good family background, etc., rather than by wealth alone. Unfortunately, this is no longer so among some families in Africa. Material wealth seems to have taken precedence over all other qualities which a suitor is required to possess. It is this new mentality among these families that Oyono-Mbia exposes in Trois Prétendants.

Like other African writers, Oyono-Mbia recognises this prerogative of the elders to choose partners for their children as we hear Abessolo, one of the elders reaffirm in this question to Juliette:

"Ne suffit-il pas que tes parents aient décidé de ce qui te convient?" (Acte 1 Scène 2)

The Camerounian Francis Bebey in his Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio, equally testifies to this authority which tradition has conferred on the older generation. One of the elders declares:

"Nous allons te marier. C'est notre devoir de te marier, comme cela a toujours été le devoir de la communauté de marier ses enfants."

Western education has, on the other hand, affected the attitude of the younger generation towards the choice of their marriage partners. Rarely do young Africans who have acquired the western type of education submit themselves to the imposition of marriage partners. Juliette, who is in the process of acquiring western education, can already stand up against the choice of husband for her. She does not understand why her opinion is not sought over a marriage proposal that concerns her:

"Ne puis-je donc pas être consultée pour un mariage qui me concerne?" (Acte 1 Scène 2)

At first sight we are tempted to see Juliette's stiff opposition to the elders of Mvoutessi as a flagrant revolt against the tradition of her people, as a result of her having been to school. This is even more so when Oyono-Mbia introduces a character like Madeleine, the illiterate peasant girl, who though of Juliette's age pitches her tent with the elders in the dispute that ensues. But Oyono-Mbia's criticism goes beyond Juliette's desire to be consulted over the issue. Not even Abessolo's vociferation with regard to the influence of western education on their children is strong enough to distract from the serious issue of the selfish motive of the older generation in choosing suitors for the young ones. As far as Abessolo is concerned,

"C'est la preuve de ce que je dis toujours: n'envoyez jamais vos filles à l'école! Regardez Madeleine qui n'a jamais été au collège: ne la voyons-nous pas parler comme une fille obéissante et sage?... Le monde est vraiment gâté! Les écoles ont tout gâté..."
(Acte 1 Scène 3)

Juliette's opposition to the proposal of her people, quite apart from being as a result of her not being consulted, underlines in a very serious manner the criticism Oyono-Mbia wants to level against the elders of Mvoutessi: choosing husbands for their children has become an opportunity for self-enrichment. In the end Juliette succeeds in marrying the man of her choice not because she has been able to make the elders see reason with her, but because her school-boy suitor has been able to provide the required sum of money needed to pay back the other two suitors. This is only possible, thanks to Juliette's ingenuity in stealing the money from her parents' room. The simple fact that the elders are willing to let Juliette marry Oko without asking questions as to how the school boy came about such a lump sum of money is enough evidence to prove that the elders are not acting in the best interest of their daughter. To the elders what matters is the money. This automatically leads us to examine the issue of exorbitant bride-price charged by the elders, another area that Oyono-Mbia exposes in his satiric play.

EXPLOITATIVE BRIDE-PRICE

Oyono-Mbia's criticism of the way the traditionalists handle the marriage issue extends beyond the satiric depiction of the imposition of marriage partners on their children. He also pierces his critical look into the question of exorbitant bride-price demanded by the families of the bride. Trois Prétendants assumes an unqualified immediacy in this regard, as it is no longer only a critique of die-hard traditionalism but even more curiously, a critique of certain contemporary 'enlightened' African families who still see the marriage of their daughters as an opportunity to get rich quick. This mentality borders on sheer exploitation. In Trois Prétendants we are called upon to witness how three suitors will vie, like in a bazaar, for Juliette's hand in marriage. Their only qualification is money, and Juliette is supposed to be offered to the highest bidder. Apart from the fact that Juliette does not know two of her suitors (Oko is her chosen fiancé), her father's choice will be made on the basis of the wealth possessed by each suitor. Atangana, Juliette's father, announces to Juliette that:

"...nous avons reçu un jeune homme qui venait demander ta main. Naturellement, à cause de ton instruction et de ta valeur, nous avons préféré mettre de côté les cent mille francs qu'il avait versés. En effect, nous comparerons avec ce qu'apportera le grand fonctionnaire qu'on m'a annoncé pour aujourd'hui. Il veut lui aussi t'épouser." Les deux dots décideront.
(emphasis added) (Acte 1, Scène 2)

The above passage already tells the story of the greedy African parents who see their daughters as potential money-making assets and so can afford to set aside all moral considerations while fixing the bride-price. To such parents their daughters take on material value and become 'objects' for sale to whoever can afford to pay. Oyono-Mbia sees in this attitude a debasement and commercialisation of the marriage institution. Let us listen to Juliette's plea to the elders:

"Mais comment? Suis-je donc à vendre, pour que vous vous croyez obligés de me donner au plus offrant?"
(Acte 1, Scène 2)

This exploitative aspect of marrying off daughters can assume a dimension which runs counter to traditional African values which the elders themselves are supposed to uphold. Take for example Abessolo's original stand on the candidature of Mbia, the rich civil-servant. Abessolo is opposed to his marrying Juliette on the ground of filial relationship discovered to exist between Mbia's family and Juliette's. His objection which perfectly in keeping with the tradition in most African societies, is defeated in the face of large sum of money Mbia is willing to pay as bride-price. Juliette, the 'object for sale' in this business is so appalled that she cries out:

"Mais vais-je donc accepter de me laisser vendre comme une chevre? Il me semble quand-même avoir une certaine valeur. (emphasis added) (Acte 1, Scène 3)

It is this precise lack of recognition for human value in our societies which are fast becoming too money conscious that Oyono-Mbia is bringing into sharp focus in this play. The self-centred interest on the part of the Mvoutessi match-makers is reminiscent of Moliere's plays. For example, Ondua's reason for supporting Juliette's marriage to the very rich and influential Mbia:

"Voilà une occasion ou jamais d'obtenir un fusil..."

or that of Abessolo:

"Ne laisse surtout pas échapper celle-là! Rappelle-toi les longues attentes qu'on te fait subir devant les bureaux administratifs, parce que personne ne te connaît. Or maintenant que tu auras ce grand homme pour gendre, on s'empressera de te servir!"
(Acte 1, Scène)

remind us in a very curious way of Argan's reason for marrying out his daughter to a candidate of his own choice (a medical doctor):

"Ma raison est que, me voyant infirme et malade comme je suis, je veux me faire un gendre et des allies medecins, afin de m'appuyer de bon secours contre ma maladie."

It is evident that parents might have their reasons for wanting their daughters to marry from a particular class of professionals, but when the interest of the parents override those of the daughters, then Oyono-Mbia sees these considerations as misplaced and highly selfish.

THE THEME OF THE CHARLATAN

Two characters in this play are targets of Oyono-Mbia's pungent satiric criticism of the charlatanism that has infested the African society. One of such charlatans (who reminds us once more of one of Molière's characters - Cléante - in Le Malade Imaginaire) is Sanga Titi, the diviner. For Oyono-Mbia to have devoted a whole act¹⁰ in the play to the diviner cannot be gratuitous. We have noted above that marriage in Africa is considered as an important institution. For this reason no family would want to bring disgrace to itself by incurring the distrust of would-be in-laws or suitors. Faced with such a problem as recovering the stolen bride-price deposited by one of the unsuccessful suitors, the villagers consult the diviner. In Africa the role of the diviner has often been seen as a positive one, especially as portrayed in African literature.¹¹ However in Trois Prétendants the author chooses this time to expose the exception that proves the rule.

Sanga-Titi only pretends to know what his job is all about and plays upon the naivety of his clients. His craft only depends on guess work as clearly demonstrated in the following passage:

Atangana: Les voilà: hélas, venez tous!
Qu'on s'explique sur cet argent disparu!

Sanga-Titi: Mes Fétiches m'annoncent que tu
recherches une certaine somme d'argent.
Ai-je tort?

Tous: Hi yéé! Il a deviné!

Atangana: Oui! de l'argent! Trois cent mille
francs que l'on m'a apportés ici pour

demander la main de ma fille Juliette.

Sanga-Titi: Tais-toi! Je te disais tout. Tu cherches une somme de trois cent mille francs!

Tous: Il a deviné la somme!

Sanga-Titi: Cet argent t'a été versé comme dot pour ta fille Juliette.

The diviner continues this rigmarole until it dawns on the villagers that they are dealing with a fake diviner:

Tous: (irrités) ce sorcier ment...Ce sorcier ment...chassons-le.

Oyono-Mbia, then, in satirising the role of the fake diviner in African societies seems to provide another side to the view held by Echenim:¹² if there are honest diviners there are also the dishonest ones like Sanga-Titi who thrive on charlatanism.

The second charlatan in the play comes, this time, not from the traditional setting, but from the educated class, the so-called evolve or the nouveaux-riches. It is this group that find themselves occupying top administrative positions vacated by erstwhile colonial administrators. This class constitutes itself into a very strong and pompous group who throw their weight around while seeking cheap popularity and recognition. Such charlatans in order to assert themselves often resort to misuse of power. Mbia, the civil servant is one of such Africans. We see him as the rich government official and the most prosperous of the three suitors. His arrival in Mvoutessi is self-announced, and in a rather mean style:

"C'est moi Mbia, grand fonctionnaire de Sangmelima. Je travaille dans un grand bureau." (Acte 2, Scène 1)

His vanity is still pushed further to the pleasant surprise of the greedy villagers:

"Je suis au gouvernement depuis vingt-cinq ans, et bien connu de Monsieur le ministre." (Acte 2, Scène 1)

He goes on to display more vanity:

"Mes capacités exceptionnelles m'ont valu maintes decorations, maints honneurs." (Acte 2, Scène 1)

In caricaturising the character of Mbia, Oyono-Mbia is criticising the reckless misplacement of the sense of decorum among certain public servants who see themselves as public masters. A man full of himself, we watch him over-reacting to the breakdown of his marriage plans with Juliette by threatening to put all the villagers in prison for their insolence:

Mbia: (...) Tu mettras que les gens
d'ici sont insolents à l'égard
des fonctionnaires!

CONCLUSION

Oyono-Mbia's social criticism in Trois Prétendants, while fixing its gaze on what Issa Sido¹³ has described as "la caducité de certaines valeurs africaines" (such as the problem of imposing husbands on young girls, the prohibitive sums demanded as bride-price), at the same time lashes out on the incidence of charlatanism prevalent not only among traditional professional men, but also among modern public figures.

The general effect of this play as a piece of social criticism owes its success to the various theatrical techniques Oyono-Mbia uses in this comedy. Comedy has the immediate, and foremost function of entertainment by provoking laughter.¹⁴ It is this function that Oyono-Mbia fully exploits in this play. He has, in fact, stressed the point that his main aim in writing Trois Prétendants (and of course all his plays) is, above all, to entertain:

"Mon but, en écrivant, est non de moraliser, mais de divertir (...) Ce n'est qu'en le divertissant réellement qu'on peut espérer amener le public à prendre conscience de certains aspects de notre culture ou de notre vie sociale..."¹⁵

As the author suggests, it is through laughter and fun that the people will recognise themselves in the play. And Trois Prétendants provides this fun abundantly: what with such comic scenes as in Act 2, Scene 1, where Mbia orders his driver, Engulu, to serve more drinks to the villagers each time he (Mbia) is cheered (or flattered?) by his cupid audience; Act 2, Scene 4, where Oko and Juliette are talking at cross-purposes; or the Interlude Scene where the sorcerer is almost lynched by the villagers for failing to solve their problem.

Satire, an invaluable technique in comedy, serves Oyono-Mbia's purpose in his critical commentary in the play: the satiric depiction of the villagers consumed by excessive

greed; the laying bare of the magical impotence of the fake diviner, the burlesque manner in which the boastful Mbia is portrayed - all add up to heighten the comic effect, and so sharpen the criticism. Through an efficient use of dialogue, the different levels of conflict are brought home to the reader (or the spectator).

The principal characters take on symbolic statures, each symbolising certain values, be they traditional or modern, which the author wants to ridicule or project. Consequently, Juliette represents western modernism, while Atangana is both the symbol of the dictatorial father (who imposes a suitor on his daughter) as well as the symbol of traditional authority of the father over his children; Abessolo is an incarnation of archaic traditionalism from whom the villages must draw inspiration and copy examples; Mbia is the modern African opportunist who lords it over the less advantaged, whether in terms of money or position of influence; in Madeleine, Oyono-Mbia provides us with a contrast to Juliette. She is the typical traditional girl untouched by the 'corrupt' hands of western culture.

Trois Prétendants has often been likened to Moliere's plays not only from the thematic point of view, but equally from the point of view of technique. However, if Oyono-Mbia's themes bear semblance to those of Molière's it is easy to explain his not only by the influence the French playwright and comedian had on the Camerounian Oyono-Mbia (in terms of technique) but even more pertinently, by the fact that the writer mirrors the evolution of a given civilisation at a particular moment of that evolution. It cannot be surprising therefore that three centuries after Moliere, an African is reflecting about the same realities. According to John Fletcher this bears testimony to the existence of the international community of the writer spread over time and space.¹⁶ In using the French classical dramatic techniques adapted to the African experience, Oyono-Mbia has perhaps fulfilled Bakary Traore's expectation when the latter declared in 1958 that:

"It is especially necessary for young Africans to study European theatrical art, European drama, its different categories - tragedy, comedy, farce; its¹⁷ themes, in order to adapt them to African themes."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ In her article, "Le theatre des annees 70 au Dahomey, Togo, Cameroun et en Cote d'Ivoire," in Le Français au Nigeria, vol. 9, no. 2, Michele Lurdos discusses Guillaume

Oyono-Mbia along with Patrice Ndedi-Penda and Alexandre Kum'a N'Dumbe III as the most important Camerounian playwrights.

²See Ville Cruelle (1954), Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba (1956), Mission Terminée (1957), Le Roi Miraculé (1958) by Mongo Beti; Une Vie de Boy (1956), Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille (1956), Chemin d'Europe (1960) by Ferdinand Oyono.

³B. Kotchy, "L'évolution historique et caractère du théâtre contemporain," in Le théâtre Negro-Africain, Acted du Colloque d'Abidjan, 1970, Presence Africaine, 1971, pp. 45-50.

⁴Lilyan Kesteloot, "Les thèmes principaux du théâtre africain moderne," in Le théâtre Nègro-Africain, op. cit., pp. 51-53.

⁵Ibid, p. 52.

⁶See Nicole Goisbeault's article, "Guillaume Oyono-Mbia et sa trilogie comique," in Notre Librairie, no. 41, avril-juin, 1978, pp. 37-55.

⁷Our references to the text will be taken from the George Harrap and co. edition, 1971.

⁸Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio, edition CLE, 1967, p. 67.

⁹See Molière's Le Malade Imaginaire, O.U.P., 1968, Act 1, Scene V, p. 73.

¹⁰The Interlude Scene is regarded as Act 4 in the edition CLE, Yaounde, 1971.

¹¹Echenim, K. "Le Feticheur dans le roman africain," in Présence Francophone, automne 1978, no. 17, pp. 13-29.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Issa Sido, "Le théâtre engagé en Afrique et en Europe," in Le théâtre Negro-Africain, op. cit., p. 233.

¹⁴See Marjorie Boulton, Anatomy of Drama, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Henley and Boston, 1960, pp. 150-153.

¹⁵Preface to Trois Prétendants...Un Mari, 2nd edition, 1969.

¹⁶John Fletcher, "The Criticism of comparison: The Approach through Comparative Literature and Intellectual History," in Contemporary Criticism, 12, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, eds. Malcolm Bradbury, David Palmer, Edward Arnold, 1970, pp. 107-129.

