

WEREWERE LIKING AND RITUAL THEATRE: HEALING THE WOUNDS OF MISOGYNY?

Elizabeth Locey

Imagine, for a moment, that you are in a different place. Imagine that you are a young African woman. Imagine being orphaned and denied of your inheritance at the age of 8. Imagine being taken in hut then impregnated by your school principal, and that your one chance at success is winning a national scholarship. Now imagine that you do win that scholarship. What do you do? Do you keep the baby whose father has disappeared, or do you abandon it, and attend school like the other thirteen-year-olds? Imagine that the school doctor discovers your secret, demands sex in exchange for his silence, and then wants to perform an abortion when he also gets you pregnant. Do you refuse? Imagine years of hard work to make your way as a woman in politics; years of solitude as well. One day, with a man who could make or break your career, you get pregnant again. You would have this child, save for one thing: you meet your one true love, and he does not want to raise another man's child. What do you do? Do you decide together to get an abortion, and have your own children right away? Imagine now that these children do not come. Imagine that in the thirteen years that you have been in your husband's village you have built schools for the children, a literacy program for the adults, the first medical dispensary, a mosque, a church, and an orphanage. You have even adopted twenty of the children yourself. Meanwhile, your career has skyrocketed, and you are Minister of Commerce. Now imagine that your best friend and adopted mother, your *belle-mère*, has betrayed you: behind your back, she has arranged for her son to take a *co-épouse*, so that she will not be left without grandchildren. What do of

you do?

This is the situation in which Singuè Mura, heroine of Cameroonian playwright Werewere Liking's extraordinary *Singuè Mura, Considérant que la femme....*, finds herself. Her decision is to swallow a vial of poison.

The central tensions of the play lie on two dimensions: creativity versus procreativity as well as tradition vs. modernity. In Liking's African village, as in the West, gender is a central axis of these dimensions. Here we see that men are not forced to choose between their personal and professional development and their desire to produce children, whereas women plainly are. Singuè Mura's is a story that pits weak men against a strong woman, but also a mother against her adopted daughter.

Even before the play begins, Liking clearly lays out her political agenda in a pair of prologues. The first, which she suppresses in her productions of the play, inspires the title. It is a lengthy citation but its quality as position statement merits that it be cited in toto:

Considérant que la femme est douée de plusieurs pouvoirs
de création/ Qui s'affrontent toujours se contrarient/ Souvent
s'annihilent/ Et qu'elle en est la première et la pire victime./
Considérant que toujours quelque part/ Tôt ou tard/ La
femme est mutilée d'un de ces pouvoirs/ Mutilée d'une partie
d'elle-même/ On peut bien dire qu'il n'existe pas d'excision
que celle du clitoris./ Considérant que ceci n'est pas un
propos féministe/ Mais tout simplement une considération
de femme qui/ Désirant s'accomplir totalement/ Exploiter
toutes ses potentialités/ Sans restriction sans mutilation/ Se
rend compte avec effarement que la mutilation/ Semble
inscrite au fer rouge dans son destin de femme./ Elle ne
donnera la vie qu'au prix de sa vie/ Et ne créera qu'au prix
d'une autre de ses créativités. (3)

Liking's rhetoric is a palpable indictment of the position of today's African woman. The association of the "mutilation" of one or the other

of woman's creative powers with the horror of clitoral excision is not gratuitous. Clearly, the reader is meant to connect the repression or suppression of one of these creative powers—in other words, sterility—with violence against women. This can be judged by the violence of Liking's choice of words: mutilation, victims, branding, excision. And whereas calling having to choose between creativity and procreativity a mutilation seems a radical position to take, Liking denies that it is a feminist one—one that could be attacked and dismissed by conservative factions. She merely affirms that it is simply the opinion of a woman who is understandably alarmed at the state of affairs.

This position statement is followed by a section entitled "L'Équation." This is the prologue of traditional francophone African theatre, and it sets out for the audience what is at stake in the play. Here, Liking illustrates this equation-which-is-not-one by tracing the trajectory of two young people with the same intellectual capacities, the same goals, and who start from the same point on the social ladder. They advance at the same pace until they hit puberty. At this point, the man can satisfy his "désirs et élans naturels" (4) without his sexual activity having any impact on his future, and even without his having to take responsibility for any eventual consequences. The woman, on the other hand, is faced with a series of choices, each one representing some form of sterility, literally or figuratively. Her first option is to repress those desires entirely, which is both unfair and unrealistic, condemning her to a bland and colorless future. Her second is to satisfy them, but this entails exposing herself to the risks involved with abortion or contraception, with sterility as a potential consequence. Her third option is to carry the child to term, risking both her life and her career, for at the very least it interrupts her progress, if it does not stop it altogether. In the end, she must accept these sterilizing "mutilations" and make her way as best she can. The story of Singuè Mura is like a fable or parable used to illustrate this "equation."

If Singuè Mura, representing modernity, has chosen to prioritize professional activity over procreation, her mother-in-law is an example of a traditional woman, all of whose hopes for the future rest in her children. Unfortunately for her she has had only one son, and with

Singuè Mura childless her line will end with him. The mother-in-law is frantic because, having given up her whole life to her son, grandchildren are her “seule possibilité de survivre” (12), and she is furious with Singuè Mura for not having any. She even goes so far as to believe the evil tongues, accusing Singuè Mura of having “fait de la magie, que pour réussir, tu aurais même sacrifié ta fécondité” (12). Ironically, Liking’s play suggests that Singuè Mura might indeed have sacrificed her fecundity to her career, but if this is the case, it is more the effect of the pressures on women trying to succeed in modern patriarchal African society than of any witchcraft. Even more cruel, however, is the fact that the mother-in-law blames Singuè Mura rather than the inequality inherent in the system: an inequality, it should be noted, that is perpetrated against her by her own son. In the same breath as she condemns her daughter-in-law’s actions, she admits that it was for her son that “j’ai dû renoncer à tout” and that it was again her son who “m’a fermé toutes les autres portes” (12). In other words, the son for whom she has “sterilized” her life (it is rumored in the village that she even had her husband killed so that her do-nothing son could take his place) has offered her nothing but suffering in return. Indeed, the mother-in-law is the avatar of sterility in this play. Hers is a double sterility, the figurative followed and underlined by the literal: after having decided to prioritize raising a family over making measurable contributions to society (the mutilation of her creative powers), she finds herself unable to bear more children. From the spectators’ point of view, the single satisfaction that the mother-in-law has received from her son is that of her association with Singuè Mura. Let us recall that their love was such that Singuè Mura became more of a daughter than a daughter-in-law to her. Yet in spite of their bond, the mother-in-law does not hesitate to sacrifice Singuè Mura’s happiness—and ultimately Singuè Mura’s very life—for the chance to live on through grandchildren.

The play itself opens in a “temps zéro” on the square, where the village is gathered for a ritual. Tara, the village sage, summons the Ngangans, “des guérisseurs-magiciens” who can see beyond our world into that of the spirits. It is only when the magical lines of force of the

gathering have been established that we discover the purpose of the ritual: to bring Singuè Mura back from the dead.

As with the Bassa¹ ritual on which it is based, Liking's play functions as a kind of inquest: in order to reach Singuè Mura, traveling to the land of the spirits, the Ngangans need to know the history of her death. In a series of flashbacks sandwiched between the present of the ritual (which is still a *temps zéro*), we learn how Singuè Mura was betrayed by her mother-in-law, and indeed the entire village. In a flashback to an earlier gathering, we discover that despite the fact that Tara considers her a village "ancêtre" and "fondatrice" (and thus deserving of respect) Singuè Mura is about to be told—publicly—that her husband will be re-married the following day. What makes this humiliating move doubly insulting is that traditionally it is the first wife who chooses her *co-épouse*. Here it is Singuè Mura's adopted mother, the woman who is ostensibly her best friend and protector, who has betrayed her. Of course, there are some in the village who look forward to witnessing the effects of what they consider Singuè Mura's comeuppance. Chief among them is Yénléwowa, leader of the band of "vilains petits sorciers." These men, who were important in the eyes of the village before the arrival of Singuè Mura, resent her presence and her power. Her initiative in bringing the amenities of the modern era into the village has highlighted the *petit sorciers'* unwillingness or inability to do the same. This ineffectuality is an *impuissance* to be taken in both senses of the word (powerlessness and impotence), and the men, feeling that their virility has been called into question, in turn question Singuè Mura's ability to conceive children. When we learn later in the play that the treacherous Yénléwowa is the new husband of the mother-in-law, we are perhaps no longer surprised at her disloyalty. Already weakened by fears of her own mortality, her heart is unable to resist Yénléwowa's venomous influence.

Singuè Mura, stunned by the universal betrayal of her love and friendship—not only by beloved husband, but also by her friend and mother-figure, and indeed the entire village—drinks poison. All of the cars in the village (incidentally, bought by Singuè Mura to transport

the sick to the nearest city in case of a medical emergency) are in the neighboring village with the new bride and groom. Hanna, Singuè Mura's friend and the dispensary nurse, stabilizes the patient, but at the moment that will decide her fate, the *petits sorciers* arrive, put a sleeping spell over Hanna, and engage in a sort of protracted *danse macabre* suggestive of rape over the sick woman. Singuè Mura, in a type of trance, refuses to succumb to, or even be afraid of them. Exasperated, they perform a "danse d'écrasement, d'anéantissement par antropophagie [sic] sorcière" (40) causing her finally to die.

Here again in this mock-rape we can see the band of *vilains petits sorciers* couching displays of power in a sexual context. This is nothing new for Singuè Mura, whose pregnancies were all the result of a man's wish to prove his power over her. Indeed, proving their sexual prowess seems the one concern of the *petits sorciers*. Three times during the initial village gathering to announce to Singuè Mura her husband's remarriage, Yénléwowa pounces on Hanna in an aggressively sexual display, and has to be pulled off of her. Each time, it is because she has questioned his manhood: after all, his late wife had never had any children. Belingome, one of his cohorts, leaps to Yénléwowa's defense by claiming that he has "beaucoup d'enfants dans d'autres villages" and asks of the assembled men: "a-t-on jamais vu un homme stérile?" (16). Singuè Mura herself is painfully aware of this double standard. Bemoaning the inequality of the reproductive situation of men and women, she cries: "Un homme peut passer pour le géniteur de n'importe quel enfant trouvé... Mais la femme, elle, doit subir n'importe quoi, simplement parce qu'on n'a pas vu son ventre gonfler!" (27). It is at this moment in the play—when the spectator realizes that perhaps it is not Singuè Mura (who has shown herself to be very fertile in the past) but her husband who is responsible for their lack of children—that our heroine swallows the vial of poison.

We the uninitiated might believe that Singuè Mura committed suicide in her grief, but according to Bassa belief, no death is ever "natural," someone is always responsible. Indeed, it is evident to the Ngangans who can see the truth which lies beyond appearances that she was killed by the other villagers: "la femme qui gît ici a été tuée par

les siens! ... Oui, tuée par les siens: sa mère, son père, sa belle-mère, son époux, son village, son pays, tous" (8-9). The function of the *djingo*—the Bassa healing ritual upon which this play is based, both in its content and in its structure—is to heal not only the individual who is sick, but also that individual's community, and this is clear when the Troisième Ngangan intones that "Nous ne soignons pas les individus mais le groupe" (9). As John Conteh-Morgan puts it, "the underlying belief that informs a *djingo* is that the sick person is only the site of a disease that is in reality collective and social" (13). This notion may seem bizarre to Westerners, but in the case of misogyny—the true cause of Singuè Mura's death—it is difficult to maintain that it is anything *but* a social disease. Indeed, bringing Singuè Mura back to life will not help her at all if the misogyny manifest in those who wanted her dead in the first place (specifically the *petits sorciers*) is not "cured." In his excellent *Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa*, Conteh-Morgan explains what he considers to be the differences between ritual proper and ritual theatre. For him, ritual proper is drama, or performance, but it is not theatre for a number of reasons. These reasons are the following: firstly, that Bassa healers are not aware of assuming a role whose identity is located outside of themselves, as actors would; secondly, that while attendance at a ritual is mandatory (the entire community must be present in order for the healing to be successful), going to the theatre is not; and most importantly, that a play is entertainment, while ritual is serious business. Werewere Liking and her long-time collaborator Marie-José Hourantier would disagree. Both of them are Bassa initiates—Liking since her adolescence, and Hourantier through her association with the playwright. They maintain that the same healing power that practitioners believe stems from rituals can be experienced by spectators in a theatre. Judith Miller writes that, for example, in their collaboratively-written play *La Rougeole arc-en-ciel*,

a Beti ritual for trials and judgements gave shape to a dramatic fable which encouraged spectators to participate in purging wasteful behaviors. The fictional crisis provided

the source of rebirth and renewal for the ‘community’ of spectators, brought into the process through constant rhythmic pummelling [sic] and an appeal to their aesthetic sense, emotional balance, and need for judgement. (231)

The same thing could be said of *Singuè Mura*, written some eight years later. On stage, both men and women are taken to task for, on the one hand, profiting from this situation (as in the case of Yénléwowa, and even Singuè Mura’s husband) and, on the other, participating in—and perpetuating—this sexual economy (as in the case of the mother-in-law). At the same time, the audience members are forced, through the energy generated in the performance space, to address these same issues within themselves. Thus it is that Liking’s play serves to help “cure” the audience of the misogynistic attitudes held by some traditionalists, at the same time as it cures Singuè Mura’s fictional village. In a fanciful and no doubt intentional twist, Liking employs an ultra-traditional art form to condemn traditional values.

But is the village indeed cured? In Bassa ritual, the triumph of good in the battle between the forces of good and evil is not a foregone conclusion. When we left our story, Singuè Mura had been stopped on her trip to the spirit world, but had not yet returned. To enable this magical return, the entire community gathered there has had to agree, after much resistance on the part of the band of *vilains petits sorciers*, that they did indeed want her back. In addition, Singuè Mura has had to heal herself of some demons by confronting her aborted fetuses. The play, however, ends on a highly equivocal note. In the final tableau, the entire village is gathered to call and welcome Singuè Mura back to life. As they sing their “chant de rappel,” voices offstage crying “youyou” are heard. At this moment, Werewere Liking speaks directly to her heroine through the stage directions, and appears to leave the decision of remaining dead or returning to life up to Singuè Mura: “*Tu es là dans ton cercueil Singuè Mura, toujours dans ta mort. Faut-il pleurer ou faut-il rire? Tu reviens à la vie en soulevant le couvercle de la litière d’osier! Mouvement de panique... Faut-il fuir, faut-il rester? Youyous plus proches: ‘vivent les mariés’*” (52). Liking at

seems ambivalent about the choice facing Singuè Mura, but then appears to rejoice at her decision to come back to life. Her excitement however is soon checked. The announcement of the arrival of the newlyweds and the villagers' celebration at seeing them, particularly at this decisive moment, throws Singuè Mura's decision into question, based, as it was, on the villagers' welcoming song. Is that welcome not tainted by their equally warm welcome of the newlyweds? Moreover, it is unclear whether or not the healing will truly take place, as the two community members who will have the most impact on Singuè Mura's life—her husband and her new *co-épouse*—were absent, and thus immune from the ritual's purging and purifying effects. Singuè Mura's "mouvement de panique" and the second-guessing of her decision to emerge from the coffin speak volumes. In the midst of her resolution to finally give birth—to herself, this time—she is threatened by the tradition of polygamy.

Perhaps we should read in Singuè Mura's struggle for survival a lesson that might be generalized. After all, in her preamble Liking insisted that it was not only Singuè Mura herself but "la femme" who was at risk. It could be that we should take Liking's fable as a lesson for Africa: as the nations struggle to reincarnate themselves in the postcolonial period, they should avoid the sterility and mutilations brought about by misogynistic traditions.

Emporia State University

NOTE

¹ The Bassa are a minority ethnic group inhabiting the coastal tropical forests of southwestern Cameroon. Werewere Liking is herself a member of the Bassa group.

WORKS CITED

Conteh-Morgan, John. *Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.

Liking, Werewere. *Singuè Mura: Considérant que la femme...* Abidjan: Editions Eyo-Ki-Yi, 1990.

Miller, Judith G. "Werewere Liking: Pan/Artist and Pan-Africanist in the Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 21.3 (1996): 229-38.