

# A Guinean Antigone

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Most commentators on the literature of Equatorial Guinea mention the oral quality of its prose narrations and refer to texts recited or sung by the *griots*.<sup>1</sup> In the rather picaresque tales by Maximiliano Nkogo found in *Adja-Adjá y otros relatos*, for example, the author enriches the orality of the language with bits of “officialese” that are repeated so that everyone knows them by heart and recites them ironically. This tendency from the ancient storytelling custom leads naturally into works of the theater, where the musicality of the word is joined, in some cases, by a kind of chanting and/or specified musical instruments played with a gay or somber tone, dictated by the scene. The three plays included in the anthology by M’baré N’gom and Donato Ndongo share a common theme with the Nkogo stories as well as with many other literary works—that of corruption, the struggle of the individual to survive within a system rife with bribery, favoritism, and a hellish bureaucracy to boot.<sup>2</sup>

In Pancraccio Esono Mitogo Obono’s play, *El hombre y la costumbre*, Juan, the womanizing protagonist, is sent to town to solve various problems, but his position as an official gives him privilege and he is much more interested in using his status to attain objects and attract women than in solving anything. In fact, as he becomes more and more of a problem, his assistant Jesusa covers for him, creating an interesting contrast between the independent working woman and Michaela, who becomes Juan’s lover and who contains her fits of jealousy because she is completely dependent on Juan. Esono uses a good deal of local vocabulary in this play, rendering it difficult to put on successfully in other Spanish-

speaking regions. In the rather open end, the spectator is not sure whether Andrés, the government bureaucrat, has convinced Juan to make a clean start, or even whether the clean start Andrés recommends is anything but the sort of “buena costumbre” typical of the “Sección femenina” adapted to a masculine code of behavior. Such an interpretation would leave Juan to continue with just a bit more discretion and moderation, rendering the title quite ironic.

J. Tomás Ávila Laurel’s *Los hombres domésticos*, winner of the “Premio de Teatro 12 de Octubre” in 1993, is replete with dysfunctional families living in crowded quarters and constantly bickering over the little space they have to share. The intervention of Frantz Weber recalls one of Nkogo’s narrations as well, since they both highlight the difficult relations between the Africans and post colonial Europeans. In the story “Emigración,” Miko’s family becomes dependent on a well-intentioned Spanish doctor, who then departs to help in war-torn Kosovo, returning the family to their previous destitute condition after having gotten them used to a better life. Ávila’s play portrays Weber as a truth-seeker, whose criticism of radio news makes him an enemy of the regime, but since he is a white enemy, the black bureaucrats keep kicking him upstairs: they know not to touch the case. At the conclusion of the sixth act, the “Jefe” sums up life in his country: Not only are strikes prohibited, but also “se prohíbe la charla, la danza e incluso se prohíbe vivir” (26). Both Nkogo and Ávila display a sense of humor in spite of the harsh situations they depict.

“Antígona,” which is reproduced here, is a new interpretation of the ancient myth and play in which Trinidad Morgades Besari also portrays the struggle of the individual within a corrupt society.<sup>3</sup> Before discuss-

ing her version, set in Equatorial Guinea in the late twentieth century, perhaps a review of earlier Antigones will be helpful. In Sophocles, the struggle is focused on Antigone’s duty to her brother in conflict with state-imposed law personified by Creon. Fatalism is profound, as Antigone accepts that suicide is the only way to be mistress of her destiny. Creon represents not only power, but also the decline of heroism and the failure of high hopes, and the chorus explains that nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse. The emphasis is on restraint, limits, proportion, and moderation. In her rebellion to these restrictions, Sophocles’ Antigone proudly proclaims: “I duly performed the dues of piety” (35).

Jean Anouilh develops the characters much more in his French “Antigone” of 1946. The play begins with a “Prologue,” which constitutes a play inside the play in which the narrator describes the actors who nervously await the opening. In this meta-theatrical game, used back in the ancient Greek and Roman times, the exordium was to get the audience’s approval by introducing different devices to amuse them. Every play by Plautus, for instance, followed this path or structure. Anouilh composes his play in the classic style using the ancient patterns and structures, but from a modern perspective which creates more rounded characters, with a deeper psychological study. All Anouilh’s characters display much more personality and emotion than their Greek predecessors, and new characters such as the “nourrice” emphasize the specific time and place of the work. Stage directions are poetic and modern, as in some works by Ramón del Valle-Inclán and Federico García Lorca: Antigone bears a *sourire imperceptible* on several occasions, for example. Family roles are underlined: the two sisters be-

come rivals, and the antifeminism comes from Ismène, not from Creon as Sophocles would have it. The passion between Antigone and Hémon comes alive, and many details from everyday life humanize the protagonists, such as Antigone's dog Douce, and Polynice's little shovel which becomes Antigone's instrument of disobedience. The guards are playful on the one hand, and very serious about rank and appropriate duties, on the other. References to films and cigarettes suggest the era, but some things are timeless, such as destiny, described by the *choeur* in these terms: "Cela roule tout seul" (57). Anouilh remains faithful to the original with respect to the fates of the characters, and Créon's mediocrity is maintained; his solution is to "faire disparaître ces hommes" (69), to silence Antigone's crime. The emotional charge of the French play is enhanced at the end, when Antigone admits to fear, and Hémon sees his father for the first time as a man rather than a hero. Créon's cold description of the rivalry between Antigone's brothers and his own arbitrary choice of one of them as a hero, the other as a villain, reinforces both his power and his cynicism.

A new version of Antigone's story by Jordi Coca premiered in Barcelona in May, 2003, to mixed reviews, showing the continuing power of this myth. While in *Avui* (May 12, 2003) Francesc Massip calls it "El mite com a mirall" (Myth like a mirror), *La Vanguardia's* (May 11, 2003) Joan-Anton Benach titles his piece "Antígona y mister Bush," and one can only speculate, without having seen the work on stage, at how Coca can transform the leadership of Creon into that of the turn-of-the-century American president.

In the Morgades play that follows, the African setting introduces dance and music as new protagonists.<sup>4</sup> Here, stage directions

describe in some detail what instruments must be used, what music is to be performed, and how it should be interpreted in dance, depending on the mood of the scene. The chorus is represented by "Voces," while unnamed "hombres," the first, second, and third, reflect the antiphonal structure of the Greek classic. This Guinean Antígona confronts the same antagonists in differing forms: "la Ley Divina y la Ley Humana, el Poder, el Amor, la Sociedad, el Deber, su conciencia, la Libertad" (427). The focus of the play shifts to the elected but corrupted president who clings to his power with all the force he can muster. Nature intervenes in the surprise ending, and the final words of the "Voces" are stated in the first person singular, representing the solidarity of the people.

Each character is portrayed by a single actor-dancer who personifies various values. Those "good values" according to society go against the main character, Antígona, who represents Nature. There is an ambiguous system of values. On one hand they are positive, but they defy her aspirations. At the beginning Antígona is described as one who:

quiere vivir, quiere realizarse, quiere ser, se siente joven, inteligente y pletórica de vitalidad. Se regocija y se deleita en el baile. En ella todo es alegría de vida. (427)

This characterization is truncated by her confrontation with the old values and the struggle becomes the corpus of the tragedy. The author opens a door to multiple interpretations, so the audience is left to decide whether these values are positive or not.

We can also see a reflection of Bertold Brecht's theater in the play by Morgades. She transfers her roots, steeped in the "Epic Theater," to her Guinean perception of the

world. The author suggests that the identity of the Guinean people has finally been found, a dream pursued by many poets, novelists and playwrights; moreover, by the nation itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See page 17 of the introduction to the anthology edited by Ndongo/N'gom. All quotations as well as the text of Morgades's play are from this work.

<sup>2</sup> For a review of this collection of stories, see *World Literature Today* 75.3-4 (2001): 116-17.

<sup>3</sup> To refresh the readers' memories, in ancient Greek, Antigone means opposite, Creon power, and Hemon blood.

<sup>4</sup> Our text is based on the version in the Ndongo/ N'gom anthology (427-33), which in turn is based on the publication in *Africa 2000* (1991): 28-31.

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