

"A REVOLTA DA CASA DOS IDOLOS" BY PEPETELÁ AND "KONGI'S HARVEST" BY SOYINKA": TWO PLAYS

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In the opening dedication of the novel *Mayombe* by Pepetela we read these lines: "To the guerrillas of Mayombe/Who dared to challenge the gods/clearing a path through the dark forest/I shall tell the story of Ogun/the African Prometheus". It is common knowledge that Ogun, God of creativity and of metal, is significant both in Soyinka's "Weltanschauung" and as a fixed reference point in his works. Pepetela's dedication shows how much affinity there is between the mythical and literary horizons of the two writers.

The two plays deal with common African problem. So while then dissimilar in terms of geographical setting, language, culture and colonial background, have in fact points in common and deal with analogous situations. Among the first of these are the stripping of African heads of their royal power and a failed revolt, calling to mind the ill-fated role of elites and heads in the government of the colonies and of the new nation states.

Both writers also reject traditional forms of power and suggest trying out new forms of government and of politics. Moreover, both the texts reveal a direct political commitment, not only through the writing itself, but also through the personal political activism of the authors. The fact that Soyinka was imprisoned (August '67- October '69) for his political activity and that Pepetela fought as a guerrilla with the MPLA (Movimento Popular para Libertação Angola), shows a shared moral sensibility based on the social commitment of the intellectual (and the writer).

A reading of the texts reveals two further elements in common: the first, involving the plot, is the role of death in annihilating a moment of political creativity; the second, involving the writers' diction, is their shared interest in revisiting their cultural roots.

One of the interesting aspects that emerges when comparing the two texts by Pepetela and Soyinka is that through the narrative technique, the progress of the story and the situations presented, there is indirect evidence of the different types of colonization, the Portuguese and the British, symbolized respectively by the cross and the flag.

Pepetela's play', *A revolta da casa dos idolos*, (The Revolt of the House of

the Idols) was inspired by an event that really took place in 1514 in the old kingdom of the Congo, part of present-day Angola. It tells the story of an attempted revolt by a group led by a simple blacksmith who reaches awareness of his own political identity in opposition to Portuguese power, represented in the play by a Catholic priest (the imported religions) and a captain (the military power).

The use of violence in compelling people to adhere to the Portuguese religion becomes the symbol of a colonization based on cultural imposition. So, the act of refusing the cross serves as a moment of awakening also to the futility of the old social system based fundamentally on traditional religion and on a fossilized system of values. The real point is a radical political change. In the words of Nanga, one of the two main characters (it is no coincidence that he has the same name as the hero of Pepetela's popular guerrilla-propaganda novel *As aventuras de Nanga*) "Amulets have no significance, charm or cross it's all the same... Our strength lies here, in ourselves [...] If we are united, nobody will be able to harm us. The strength is in our arms, on one side, and in the Portuguese cannons on the other". (*A revolta da casa dos idolos*, in *Teatro africano*, ed. Egi Volterrani, Roma, Bulzoni 1988 p. 34) And so Nanga goes through his "apprenticeship" learning the dialectics of reality.

While Pepetela's play is a straightforward, linear text, *Kongi's Harvest*² by Soyinka is a cryptic, made difficult to penetrate by its wealth of suggestion and allusion. Using Dan Izevbaye's terms the first text develops "through explication", the second "by implication". This is due to several factors: firstly, in this play the king is on the stage and Soyinka has him speak in the traditional language, that is, through symbols, metaphors and proverbs; secondly, it is a play which is rounded out in production, where what is merely mentioned in the written text becomes explicit in performance; thirdly, Soyinka's style is always based on suggestion and never on explanation. This becomes clearer if we consider his concept of literature, in which traditional culture is to be exploited actively and the literary technique adopted is akin to the esoteric language of the secret societies that were a vital element in the framework of archaic life. In this way modern writing is fused with the foundations of the past.

This play tells the story of a harvest celebration where a prize will be given to the best crop of the year. Celebrations marking the end of an agricultural cycle have always existed in traditional culture but in this case there are signs of a different social tendency already underway, that is, the prize-giving: this points to the choice of new values and to the encouragement of competitiveness.

In the celebration, the traditional king or Oba has to present the New Yam to the dictator Kongi, who represents the new forces in power: this is an act of submission to the new head. It is a symbolic gesture ratifying a situation which is actually already well established.

As the plot unravels we are presented with a traditional society (the Aweri, the elders) which has been reduced and manipulated by the new leadership and

a dictatorial form of political power with all the relevant trappings: personality cult, public displays of glorification, the lack of any democratic rights, and adulation. This is opposed by the attempted overthrow led by the heir to the throne and his mistress.

A comment which has been made about the novels, but which can also be applied to the plays, is that here there is some affinity with Jacobean theatre.

It is interesting to notice that the female figure in Soyinka's work has always been associated with renewal or at least with a stabilizing influence (see the role of the old women in *Madmen and Specialists*, that of the girl in *The Lion and the Jewel*, that of the movement of political dissent represented by the women in *Aké-The Years of Childhood*, and also the positive role of the wife of the man who represents colonial power in *Death and the King's horse-man*). This, then, is another point on which Soyinka emblematically revisits his traditional culture: in all African art the woman is seen as the symbol of life and fertility, and therefore as the embodiment of the Life Force, inseparable from the concept of Mother-Goddess.

The comparison between the two plays brings out the similarity in the way the stage is exploited. In both cases the stage is divided into two sections representing the two scenes in which the action takes place, lit up alternately, as in the first two acts of *A revolta* and the first part of *Kongi's Harvest*. The last part of both plays (the last act of *A revolta* and the second part and epilogue "Hangover" of *Kongi's Harvest*) exploits the whole stage.

Looking at this in more detail, we see that in the first act of *A revolta* the conversation between one of the main characters and the uncle takes place on the right-hand side, while the story told by the protagonist Nanga unfolds on the left. Later, on the right we see the conversation between the captain and the catholic priest, and on the left the discussion between the revolutionaries, Nanga and Masala. In the second act the stage areas are inverted: first, the blacksmith's forge is on the left, then the whole stage is used to represent a street in which the characters come and go, then at the end of the act, the left hand section is used for the discussion between the captain and the priest. In the third act, when the whole stage represents a public square, a caption on a board is used to indicate the place.

In *Kongi's Harvest* at the beginning of the prologue, "Hemlock", there is no indication of exactly where the scene takes place, but at the end this is made clear by the reference to the prison bars coming down. The first part alternates between the two areas of the stage, representing Kongi's retreat where the Reformed Aweri Fraternity is in session and Segi's nightclub ("Coloured lights, and the sustained chord of a juju band guitar gone typically mad brings on the night club scene the band itself offstage." The second part is set in Oba Danlola's palace until the scene changes in full view of the audience as the Carpenters' Brigade set up the stage for the Harvest Festival. The epilogue "Hangover" takes place in the town square.

Another point in common that the two plays have, returning to similarities,

is their link with Brecht. First of all, the narrative quality of Brechtian epic theatre corresponds to the favouring of story-telling at the expense of action in traditional theatre; secondly, song and dance are used as a means of interruption.

These theatrical techniques, which were inspired by Brecht but which have grown to be the actual means of creating plays in Africa, are particularly evident in Wole Soyinka, who freely uses proverbs and traditional language (not just the local tongue itself, but also the expressiveness peculiar to the local tongue) along with songs, dances and masks. This represents a Brechtian approach and at the same time a traditional African approach to the theatre.

In *Pepetela*, too, Brecht's influence is strongly felt in the epic form and its didactic aspect, but also in the use of the stage. Dividing the stage into sections, making scene-changes in full view of the audience, using captions on boards to indicate the place are all techniques deriving from Brecht.

Let us now take a closer look at the two plays.

The author of *A revolta* literally, *Pepetela*, whose real name is Artur Carlos Mauricio Pestana dos Santos, was born at Benguela in south Angola in 1941. His work as a writer is closely linked to his political activity: "All through its history, my country has always been in need of writers who represent the conscience of a society in search of itself."

He began to participate in the struggle for liberation as a journalist and then became directly involved as a guerrilla and teacher. *Mayombe*, was written in the early 1970s, but he refused to publish it until 1980, in a more mature political climate¹. The same period produced *As aventuras de Nanga*, a sort of introduction to guerrilla's life. More recent novels are *Yaka*, and *O caô e os caluandas*, the latest being *Lueji*, where the writer's linguistic experimentation is inspired by the oral tradition.

Today the basic issue for the writer is the affirmation of a national identity which is to be found in myths and oral culture. "My cultural aim is that of providing food for thought about the cultural identity of a country undergoing a transformation [...] a sense of unity that comes from the people identifying with a national culture. "One of the factors in achieving awareness of one's identity is a knowledge of one's past, of one's myths and one's history. The choice of an historical event which is firmly fixed in the memory of all as a means of recovering one's roots creates what *Pepetela* calls the unifying "shelter-effect" of *A revolta*

The play opens in the workshop of a blacksmith (a significant figure in traditional African society) with a conversation between uncle and nephew, to the rhythm of iron being beaten. In theatrical terms the scene is linked to the traditional dramatic device of the voice accompanied rhythmically by sound. The world of tradition is effectively conveyed on stage by this simple aesthetic choice. The two figures recall how the real king was assassinated and the throne given to another, who was willing to please the Portuguese. It is here that the political birth of the protagonist, *Nanga*, begins, with his desire to know

his own history. The terms of the problem begin to emerge more clearly: the local political leadership divested of power, the slave trade, the heads divided between supporting the Portuguese and upholding the principles of the past, and lastly cultural pressure through the compulsory adherence to Christianity.

Meanwhile the Portuguese are preparing to use force in the confiscation of all the amulets and symbolic objects of the traditional religion which are to be taken to a collection point and burnt. At this point another figure makes his entrance: Masala, Nanga's friend and adviser, who claims to be an escaped slave and who turns out later to be the nephew of a Mani, a head.

As far as the Christian religion is concerned, it is worth reading an interesting exchange which underlines the differences of the two unreconcilable world views, the western and the African:

Husband: "The priest gave us a great talking to, half of which we didn't understand. But from what we did understand, he said we were pagans, which is a disease that is cured with fire. I was amazed because fire burns but it doesn't heal. And he said the fire at the stake is nothing compared to the fire of Hell. And that our souls will suffer eternally in fire.

Temona: "It just doesn't make sense to us. When there's a fire in the forest, the spirits that live in the trees don't burn. When the fire is over, the spirits are as strong as before, or they change forests. And he says that in Hell the spirits burn. Can it be true?" (Act I p. 30-31 P.T.)

As a result of the confiscation of the amulets, the people begin to rebel: this unrest is channelled by Masala towards a more political awareness of the issues. This marks the beginning of the most didactic part of the play, where Pepetela's guerrilla spirit is revealed: the arms of theory (Cabral), armed warfare and revolt are the sole means of attaining deliverance and indemnity.

After having presented the adversary, that is, the Portuguese, through the cynical conversation between the priest and the captain, the first act ends with a monologue by Nanga, which is almost an act of faith in the reasoning power of man.

The second act opens with the dialogue of the two 'Manis', whom we can consider the villains of the piece. One is the senior Mani with the most power, who has become a puppet in the hands of the colonizers and the other is the ambiguous Mani Muxuebata, who seeks power by forming alliances on the one hand with those of the elite who oppose the Portuguese, and on the other hand by trying to turn the discontent and subsequent popular revolt to his advantage. Most of this act is very didactic and is based on Nanga's intellectual journey towards a political understanding of the events and on his subsequent attempt to awaken the masses to consciousness.

Nanga: "We are... Who? The Mani with their army? Masala would say no. I don't know, oh, I don't know. Uncle Nimi, Masala, even Kuntuala, Temona, Temona's husband, Ntumitangua, Lukeba, we all talk, we all say it's wrong. Is this group all we are? But where's our strength? What arms have we got apart from those of the Mani's troops? What reasons apart

from the Mani's reasons? Uncle Nimi, I need to understand". (Act II p. 62 P. T.)

As the play goes on, it takes on more and more the style and traits of an agit-prop text. Through Nanga, Pepetela expresses the rejection of traditional values, not as a body of knowledge representing an identity, but as signs of fossilization and political elitism.

Nanga: "I am no longer a child and I know what I'm saying. It's with these old customs that we've always been tricked. The King can do what he likes, but as he's king we have to respect him. The Mani impose more and more taxes on us, but as they're Mani we have to respect them. There are medicin-man that don't heal us, and yet expect a goat and who knows what else for their pains. Everybody realises they're cheats, but as they're medicin-man and work with the spirits we have to respect them, That's why nothing changes." (Act II p. 72 P. T.)

In the meantime, here is the beginning of the action which will have a tragic outcome in the third act. Here the two protagonists meet the two heads, Mani Vunda and Muxuebata, and try to convince them of their vision of the future social order: after the destitution of the old puppet king, there will be no more traditional heads, no more taxes. However, the old leadership has more devious methods and conspires behind the scenes to defeat the revolt: Nanga is stabbed and Masala kidnapped.

Having lost their leaders, the people gathered in the square are at the mercy of the two Mani, who took part in the elimination of the younger men. With the help of their troops and after having killed their most stubborn opponents, the Mani restore the status quo. The work ends with an emotionally-charged monologue by Kuntuala, Nanga's secret lover. At this point the author's didactic tone is replaced by an intense lyricism and pathos as he calls up all the suffering and pain of centuries of oppression.

Kuntuala: "... I see nothing but shadows. Everywhere, shadows of mourning, of slavery, of pain [...] The sons of my sons and their grandsons will live in the realm of shadows, of ignorance, of the most brutal slavery. I know that. And meanwhile I shall be forced to have children, so that the shadows can feed on their strength [...]

In the distance, far far away, I see a light, a faint flicker of light, so shy, as if it were one of the last stars that hide behind the moon... Can it be Nanga's light? One day someone will wipe out the shadows [...]

I feel it. I know." (A. III p. 150 T. P.)

This play cannot be fully justified unless it is considered in terms of the political climate of Portuguese-speaking countries. Angola, like all the other Portuguese colonies, obtained its independence after a struggle imbued with the philosophy of Amilcare Cabral, who championed political revolution by means of cultural revolution. It is not surprising that in these countries most of the intelligentsia have always been personally involved in the liberation movement. One of many examples is Jose Luandino Vieira, who spent 14 years in prison for this reason.

Kongi's Harvest opens with a prologue, "Hemlock", which is a very effective piece of theatre. We learn that the Oba (the King) is in prison with his brother and that the old social order has been eliminated.

Danlola: "... you merely stopped
My drums. But they were silenced
On the day when Kongi cast aside
My props of wisdom, the day he
Drove the old Aweri from their seats.
What is a king without a clan
Of elders?"

A new order, bombastic and dictatorial, has been established. It is represented by Kongi.

This introduction to the play can be considered a swan-song: the dances and sacred chants of the king and his followers mark the end of a world. "This is the last/That we shall dance together", says the drummer; "This is the last our feet/Shall speak to feet of the dead/And the unborn cling/To the hem of our robes," says the king's brother; "This is the last/Our feet shall touch together... Once more/with the left alone, for disaster/Is the only certainty we know," says Danlola, the king.

The first part of the play begins with the council of elders, a body which has been reformed by Kongi into a tool for his own use. We also see the pressure that the Secretary exerts on Daodu, Oba Danlola's nephew and heir, to get him to convince his uncle to participate in the Harvest Festival and to present Kongi, the leader, with the New Yam. Daodu promises to try and persuade his uncle in exchange for a pardon for the five men condemned to death. Among them is the father of Segi, his lover, who owns the nightclub where a revolt is in fact being organized. This first part of the play is filled with scathing sarcasm and a sharply mocking tone. One of the scenes where the satire works to great effect is the one in which the dictator receives a photographer "in spite of himself".

Secretary: Leave it all to me. I er... oh yes, I ought to mention
one other matter. I... have reason to believe that a press
photographer might find his way into your retreat in spite of all our pre-
cautions for your privacy.

[*Enter photographer.*]

Kongi: Oh dear, you know I Wouldn't like that at all.
[*He strikes a pose of anguish, camera clicks.*]

Secretary: The Leader's place of
meditation should be sacrosanct.

[*Kongi moves to an opening, and poses his best profile.*]

Kongi: Twilight gives the best effect-of course I speak as an amateur.
[*Click.*]

Kongi: I don't like being photographed.

Secretary: I'll ensure it never happens again.

Kongi: Take care of it and let me hear no more on the subject.
 Some of these journalists are remarkably enterprising. Nothing you do
 can stop them.
[Returns to his table and goes through a series of 'Last Supper'
poses-'iyan' (pounded yam) serving variation-while the
photographer takes picture after picture].

Secretary: It's all part of one and same harmonious idea my Leader. A Leader's
 Temptation... Agony on the Mountains
 ...The Loneliness of the Pure... The Uneasy Head ...A
 Saint at Twilight... The Spirit of the Harvest... The Face
 of Benevolence... The Giver of Life... who knows how
 many other titles will accompany such pictures round the
 world. And then my Leader, this is the Year of Kongi's
 Harvest! The Presiding Spirit as a life-giving spirit-we could
 project that image into every heart and head, no matter how stubborn.
[As the Secretary calls each shot, Kongi poses it and the photographer
shoots, bows, and departs.]

The second part begins in Oba Danlola's palace, where the great prepara-
 tions which seem to be underway are actually just a pretence. Oba Danlola, in
 fact, says to his nephew Daodu: "When the dog hides a bone does he
 not/Throw up sand?" Daodu, however, who has a secret plan to carry out
 during the festival, wants to convince his uncle to participate. When the Oba
 understands that there is a plot being organized and that his presence can faci-
 litate it, he decides to go to the festival after all. This whole scene hinges on
 the contrast between two worlds: on the one hand, Oba Danlola's nostalgic atti-
 tude, recalling the pomp of the past and the sacred rites through dances and
 songs - all in Yoruba - and on the other, Daodu's direct, immediate approach.
 This contrast is vividly expressed in the stage directions:

[Danlola, totally swelled, steps down from his throne and falls in
step with Sarumi. The two Obas cavort round the chamber in sedate,
regal steps and the bugles blast a steady refrain. Danlola's wives
emerge and join in; the atmosphere is full of the ecstasy of the
dance. At its height Daodu moves with sudden decision, pulls out
the ceremonial whisk of Danlola and hits the lead drum with the
heavy handle. It bursts. There is a dead silence. Danlola and
Daodu face each other in a long, terrible silence.]

With a scene-change in full view, we move to the Festival, with a typical
 flag-waving display: the Carpenters' parade, the arrival of the Aweri, and the
 entrance of the group of farm-workers and the Women's Auxiliary Corps. It is
 at this point that the Secretary starts to have a nagging feeling that something
 is amiss. He therefore wisely finds a vantage point some distance away, from
 which he can observe the proceedings.

With the arrival of Kongi, the dictator, it is finally time for Daodu's speech.
 This is couched in metaphorical, symbolic terms: in this case he uses the tradi-

tional language - as befits a head - and a stylistic register that contrasts sharply with the language surrounding him.

Daodu: (looking straight at Kongi) "An impotent man will swear he feels the pangs of labour; when the maniac finally looks over the wall, he finds that there, agony is the raw commodity which he has spent lives to invent. (Stretches out his arms suddenly, full length)

Where I have chosen to return in joy, only fools still insist that my fate must be to suffer...

...(Handing over the Yam to Danlola)

So let him, the Jesus of Isma, let him, who has assumed the mantle of a Messiah, accept from my farming settlement this gift of soil and remember that a human life once buried cannot, like this yam, sprout anew. Let him take from the palm only its wine and not crucify lives upon it."

Just as the celebration is reaching its peak, a burst of gunfire is heard. The man assassinated is Segi's father, who was supposedly preparing to kill the dictator. This marks the build-up to the climax, sustained also by the rhythm of the music, which becomes more and more compelling, culminating in Segi presenting Kongi with a tray holding her old father's head, as a sample of the "new harvest".

The epilogue, "Hangover", shows the Secretary and Oba Danlola ready to flee across the border.

This text, which is one of Soyinka's most politicized, dates from a period in which the writer's great commitment was also expressed through his literary works. The play *The Road* (1965) and the novel *Interpreters* (1965) are the two best-known works of this period.

At that time Nigeria was going through one of the worst moments of its history, culminating in the Biafran war. As we have already said, Soyinka was arrested for his political and cultural activity. However even in prison he wrote several works, which can be considered a trilogy: the play *Madmen and Specialists*, the poems of the collection *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, and the novel *Season of Anomy*, along with an autobiographical work *A Man Died*.

The establishment of a cultural identity is one of the ways Soyinka expresses his political vision of reality: for him, this identity lies in the revisiting of one's own traditions in new artistic forms.

This idea of conserving tradition through an evolutive process in contemporary forms is extremely clear in his essay "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns" (*Art, Dialogue and Outrage*, Ibadan 1988), in which he analyses the survival of ancient rites in traditional dramatic performances and examines how these forms of entertainment have been translated into contemporary drama or theatre.

The concert-party is one of these forms that Soyinka knows very well, not least because of the work of Ogunde, the famous Nigerian concert-party author. *Kongi's Harvest* is heavily indebted to this genre, being characterized by a deep social and political commitment, and involving comedy, dance, song and

improvisation (the stage directions show that the action in many scenes is to be improvised).

On the subject of the concert-party, Soyinka writes: "Bob Johnson's innovations must be credited with having given birth to the tradition of the 'concert-party' of Ghana, groups which specialise in variety routine: songs, jokes, dances, impersonations, comic scenes. However, the most notable achievement in the sense of cultural continuity was their thrusting onto the fore-stage of contemporary repertoire a stock character from traditional lore... This quickly developed into a vehicle for social and political commentary, apart from its popularity in comic situations". (p. 200)

(translation by Joan Mc Mullen)

NOTE

1. Pepetela's play was performed for the first time in Messina, Italy on 21st September, 1988.
2. W. Soyinka, *Collected plays*, 2 Oxford, University Press, 1976.
3. Interview with Emilia Perassi in *Saggi e ricerche sulle Culture Extraeuropee*, A cura di G. Bellini, Roma, Bulzoni, 1989.
4. Statement in an interview with Giuliano Soria in "L'Indice" n° 7 July 1989.