

Blessed or bloody? Antigone in Sylvain Bemba's *Noces Posthumes de Santigone*

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Abstract

Dans sa pièce de théâtre Noces Posthumes de Santigone, l'écrivain congolais Sylvain Bemba a produit une adaptation africaine de la tragédie Antigone de Sophocle. Il se sert du mythe ancien pour illustrer la situation politique dans de nombreux pays d'Afrique pendant les années 1980. En utilisant un pays fictif, la République d'Amandla, il décrit le rêve et l'échec d'une utopie postcoloniale. Ses trois protagonistes, Melissa (Antigone), Titus Saint-Just Bund (Polynice/Hémon) et le conteur (Griot), vont préserver la mémoire de cette utopie. Melissa, comme Antigone, est chargée de l'enterrement et de la garde du tombeau du président Titus Saint-Just Bund, qui a été assassiné par ses ennemis, mais elle meurt dans un accident d'avion. Le conteur va préserver leur histoire pour le peuple. Il semble que dans cette pièce de théâtre Bemba voulait créer une mémoire éternelle pour le personnage historique Thomas Sankara, président du Burkina Faso, qui représente pour lui l'incarnation d'une vision africaine à la fois sainte et sanglante (blessée), exprimée par le nom de «Santigone».

Keywords: reception studies; postcolonial literature; Sylvain Bemba; Sophocles; Antigone

Mots clés: réception; littérature postcoloniale; Sylvain Bemba; Sophocle; Antigone

Sylvain Bemba is one of the most celebrated writers from the Republic of Congo, a country whose postcolonial period was characterised by political instability, a rapid succession of presidents, assassinations, organized coups d'état, corruption and fraudulent elections. All of this culminated in 1997 in a full-blown civil war which has erupted time and again since then and has not yet ceased. Like many other Francophone African writers, Bemba was able to draw on his own knowledge and experience of the cultural traditions and history of both his native country as well as those of its former coloniser in order to develop the hybridity of outlook that characterises postcolonial writing. As will be shown in this essay, Bemba thematises this hybridity in the play under discussion. In 1988 he received a bursary, sponsored by the *Centre National du Livre* in Paris, for a stay at the *Maison des Auteurs* in Limoges in France. During his residence, which happened at the same time as the 5th international *Festival des Francophonies* in Limousin, Bemba completed his play *Noces Posthumes de Santigone* on 28 August 1988. The play was translated into English in 1990, under the title *Black Wedding Candles for Blessed Antigone*, by the Ubu Repertory Theatre in New York¹.

The subtitle of the play states that it was inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone*. Bemba's drama is subdivided into three acts and fourteen tableaux or scenes; act I comprises three, act II seven, and act III four tableaux. It is a very complex play with a multi-layered plot; therefore it is impossible to cover all aspects within a single essay. In the following I will focus on the postcolonial themes of assimilation, hybridity and the situation of expatriates; the intertextual references to Sophocles' play; the use of music in the plot, and the three key concepts which, in my opinion, are crucial for an understanding of the work: the distinctively African elements in the play, the use of metatheatre, and the question of memory, which operates as a *leitmotif* in the play.

The play is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, both spoken by a griot, the African term used in the English translation for the French word *conteur*, which literally means “storyteller”. The figure of the griot plays an important role in mainly West African cultures. A griot has been described as a “poet, singer, and genealogist” (Frindéthié 2008: 38; see also Hoffman 2000: 87), who stands very much in the tradition of oral poetry. One of the griot’s traditional functions consists in transmitting messages and in mediating between an audience and anybody who wants to address the audience. A traditional griot also communicates messages from the king to the people or villagers; they act as counselors and confidantes of the kings. In all these functions, the griot resembles to a certain extent the South African *imbongi*, a Zulu or Xhosa praise singer, who performs similar tasks. Kevin Wetmore also finds some resemblances with the traditional ancient Greek bards called *aoidos* and later *rhapsodos* (Wetmore 2002: 29).

The role of mediator and translator is particularly interesting for Bemba’s play. It is the griot who speaks to the audience, who provides additional information, who comments on events, and who therefore also bears some similarities to the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy, all of which make him the first metatheatrical device in Bemba’s play. Ringer, in his study of metatheatre in Sophocles, has observed:

Another feature of metatheatricity is the presence of characters who serve as ‘internal audience’ or audiences-within-the-play. This occurs when characters are positioned within the tragedy so as to encourage the theater audience to view the play’s actions through their eyes [...] The chorus in each tragedy serves as an obvious internal audience. (Ringer 1998 : 8–9)

The figure of the griot keeps Bemba’s African adaptation of a European myth within a traditional African framework and gives

the play an element of oral storytelling. The griot will also play an important role in connection with the theme of memory.

The action of Bemba's play takes place in two different locations: in Birmingham and in Vangu, the capital of the fictional Democratic Republic of Amandla. The word *amandla* means "power" or "strength" in the Nguni languages Zulu and Xhosa. It has been used as a freedom cry and call to arms during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, especially by the African National Congress (ANC), and it still symbolises the struggle against any kind of oppression. During a political meeting, the leader would call *amandla* and the crowd would respond with *ngawethu*, which means "it is ours". So the expression stands for the concept of "power to the people". But in the context of Bemba's play, as Kevin Wetmore has observed, "the name is ironic as the regime is corrupt, and freedom and justice, while given lip service, are nonexistent" (Wetmore 2002: 204). Bemba's fictive African country was formerly called "Golden Nugget" and has been renamed Amandla only two years prior to the action in the play. It is described as a former English colony (Bemba 1990: 44), whose name "Golden Nugget" recalls the Gold Coast which later became Ghana, the first African country to gain independence from Britain in 1957, a milestone in the history of postcolonial Africa. The Ghanaian vision of democracy was shortlived, however, as the first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was ousted in a coup in 1966.

Bemba gives clear indications about the different characters in his list of characters, which he divides into two groups: the five main characters, who should be played by the same actors throughout the play, and another group with secondary anonymous characters who are interchangeable. Four of the main characters are expatriates from Amandla who are now living in Birmingham. Three of them are female drama students, Margaret

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Bintu, Dorothy Mela and Melissa Yadé. There is a great deal of rivalry and jealousy among them about who will play the role of Antigone in a forthcoming production of Sophocles' play. Dorothy, who has at the age of 25 already played four leading roles in European plays, is rejected by the producer in favor of Melissa, who is three years younger, and consequently Dorothy is full of resentment – not without reason, since one learns later that Melissa has robbed her of everything, including her former boyfriend, who is now Melissa's fiancé. Dorothy goes so far as to perform a sort of black magic ritual in order to destroy her rival and sends her an anonymous bouquet of red roses with a card displaying the queen of spades (act II, tableau 2). It will take Dorothy almost to the end of the play to shed her animosity towards Melissa for the greater good of their native country, when Margaret and Dorothy return to Amandla together with Melissa to give her moral support (act III, tableau 2). Upon their arrival there, Margaret, as an expatriate, has raised suspicion and is subjected to cross-examination by an official of the new regime, but during the whole interrogation she expresses solidarity with Melissa (*Ibid.*), whom she has earlier called “un peu notre sœur cadette” (*Noces*, 18)². In Birmingham Dorothy had already regretted her earlier hostility and apologised to Melissa by means of anonymous letters signed “la grande sœur inconnue” (*Noces*, 67). So both Margaret and Dorothy may be regarded as combining into a sort of Ismene figure, who in Sophocles' play supports Antigone not actively, but morally. Margaret expresses this when she says to Dorothy after her interrogation in Amandla: “On se battra pour elle quoi qu'il arrive” (*Noces*, 77).

The fourth expatriate, John Abiola, is a man in his forties who has a white English wife and a child. He does not seem to be very committed to his wife and family, since he courts his young black female fellow expatriates. In act I, tableau 1 there is a significant

exchange between Abiola and Margaret about assimilation into the white English community. Despite his marriage, Abiola distances himself from the impression the black girls have of him; he does not consider himself as a white-skinned black, to which Margaret retorts by asking whether he would be rather a black-skinned white (*Noces*, 6).

This question of assimilation is a very important topic in postcolonial literature and has been discussed extensively by Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and Albert Memmi in *Portrait du colonisé précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957). Both theorists analyse the psychological condition of the black colonized who rejects his own culture, considering it to be inferior, and tries to adopt the culture of the white colonizer. This will eventually result in a shock when he realizes that, no matter what he tries, the whites will never accept him, since after all, he will always be black. It will also lead to a profound crisis of self identity: he is rejected by the whites, because he is black, and he is rejected by his own black people, because they consider him as a traitor to his own race and culture.

This phenomenon is illustrated in Bemba's play by Abiola, who does not seem to be fully accepted by his English wife and thus seeks consolation among his own countrywomen in Birmingham, who rebuff him as well. Ultimately, he will not go back to Amandla, but he stays behind in England. He is out of touch with the time, still using the old colonial name of the country, and represents a sort of neocolonialism: after independence, he still regards himself as a colonized being and behaves accordingly. On the other hand, Margaret and Dorothy, who share a room that displays an intercultural décor (a British flag, a photograph of Michael Jackson, a collection of African dolls, a piece of batik artwork) and who themselves wear hybrid outfits consisting of Afro wigs and European negligees (*Noces*, 15), represent a

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younger generation of proud Africans who are able to incorporate elements of other cultures into their own identity without renouncing it.

This hybridity can be found also in other instances in the play, as has been pointed out by Wetmore (2002: 205). One is the fact that all four expatriates have English first names. Secondly, the four roles which Dorothy Mela has played so far are all European stage characters: “Jeanne d’Arc, Phèdre, Juliette, et Mère Courage” (*Noces*, 18). Finally, the use of music in Bemba’s play also bears some hybrid traits. Bemba uses music on four occasions during the play in order to illustrate or emphasise the words and atmosphere of the action. On all of these four occasions, he uses examples of European music, but there are no traditional African music forms or musical instruments; the sound of drums in act I, tableau 3 (“tambours militaires... grosses caisses” (*Noces*, 31), and act II, tableau 2 (“le claquement des cymbales” (*Noces*, 47) derives from European instruments. In act I, tableau 3, the opening of the *Danse Macabre* by the French composer Camille de Saint-Saëns is played to illustrate the entrance of the Figure with the Scythe or Death and the Second figure in Black and to increase the sombre atmosphere of the scene. The second time, an unidentified piece by the German composer Richard Wagner is used to introduce the audience at the end of act II, tableau 2 to the events which are to follow in the next tableau: the violent coup d’état in Amandla. Wagner’s powerful music is very suitable to underpin a critical, tense and explosive situation. The third and fourth time, Bemba uses different parts from the Mozart *Requiem*: at the end of act II, tableau 3, just before the president and his men are killed, “le ‘Confutatis’ ou le ‘Dolorosa’ du ‘Requiem’ de Mozart, version instrumentale” (*Noces*, 54) and in the next tableau, just after the epiphany of the dead president in Melissa’s dressing room, the *Lachrymosa*. These three parts from the *Mass for the Dead* from

the 13th century BCE describe the final judgement of the souls and their destiny, the pains and tears, influenced by the myths of the Underworld by the Greek philosopher Plato. Especially the *Lacrymosa*, with the resurrection of man to be judged, underpins the apparition of the ghost of the president very impressively.

Bemba's selection of famous pieces from the European musical repertoire for his African adaptation of the Antigone myth can certainly be considered as another example of hybridization, but it still leaves the question why Bemba has omitted African music and African instruments completely. On the one hand, one might be tempted to go so far as to conclude that the griot, the voice of Africa, is silenced by the music of Europe in another form of neocolonialism; on the other hand, however, this Western music might equally be seen to be contained by the voice of the griot in the prologue and epilogue to the play.

Melissa Yadé is the protagonist of Bemba's play and the fiancée of the current president of Amandla, Titus Saint-Just Bund, who is assassinated by the opposition in his country just before Melissa's special performance³. Melissa will gradually identify herself with the stage character she is performing, Sophocles' Antigone. When her compatriot John Abiola tells her: "Vous êtes Antigone", she replies "Pas tout à fait, des siècles me séparent encore d'elle. Depuis des mois j'ai entrepris un long voyage pour aller à sa rencontre. Aller vers elle ne suffit pas. Il faut le déclic" (*Noces*, 43-44)⁴. The phenomenon "when characters within a play assume roles in addition to their main assignments" (Ringer 1998: 8) is another instance of metatheatre. Ringer explains: "I call this kind of metatheatrical occurrence role-playing-within-the-role, wherein a character becomes an 'internal actor', a doubly theatrical figure enacting a deceptive role as part of the 'actual' role" (*Ibid.*). Melissa embarks on a gradual process of merging with her stage character. In this scene, there are still two

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separate *personae*, the modern character Melissa and the classical character Antigone. The next phase occurs after she has had a vision of the dead Titus in her dressing room while preparing for her performance (act II, tableau 4). She says: "Polynice va mourir deux fois aujourd'hui. La première à Vangu depuis cet après-midi, la seconde avant même le début de la pièce" (*Noces*, 56). This remark is the first intertextual reference to Sophocles' play, since in the ancient myth Polyneices is Antigone's brother, while Antigone's fiancé is Haemon; but here brother and boyfriend merge into one; Melissa herself combines the roles of sister and girlfriend. Wetmore has pointed out the similarities between Polyneices and Titus: "both were killed in a battle attempting to hold onto power, and both lie in the battlefield, unmourned" (Wetmore 2002: 208). Despite her grief, Melissa wants to go ahead with the evening performance; she feels that she must go on in order to preserve Titus's memory in the minds of the people and also to speak on his behalf (*Noces*, 56).

The next tableau (act II, tableau 5) is a typical example of metatheatre as a play within a play, the classical example of the trope of metatheatre (Ringer 1998: 7): it is a performance of the climactic moment in Sophocles' drama, the dialogue between Antigone, the guard and Creon⁵. This is probably the most explicit intertextual reference to Sophocles in Bemba's play. It is not a *verbatim* translation of Sophocles' dialogue, however, but a condensed version of the main arguments of both parties, covering roughly lines 384-525 in the Greek original. Bemba uses the same metatheatrical device once again in act III, tableau 2, when Margaret re-enacts her cross-examination with the officer in a sort of flashback. It seems that through these two instances of metatheatre Bemba wants to illustrate the complex relationship between history and drama, between contemporary political reality and fiction. When a character in a play about an allegorical African country self-reflexively draws attention to the nature of

theatrical performance, a mutual interrogation of the truth of drama and the theatricality of history is perhaps set into motion.

After this metatheatrical performance, Melissa is still on stage in the next scene. She is now dressed completely in black and wears a black veil – the stage direction indicates her as Melissa / Antigone. She has obtained special permission from the church to marry “celui qui l’aimait et qu’elle aime” (*Noces*, 63) posthumously in order to be his legal wife. The griot announces her first as “Madame Melissa Yadé Bund” and then as “Madame Melissa Antigone Bund” (*Noces*, 63). She asks her friends (or audience): “Aidez-moi, aidez votre Antigone à réaliser la sienne [liberté] dans son propre pays” (*Noces*, 64). Melissa now incorporates both identities, her own and the one of her stage character. When she flies back to Amandla, the griot says: “Antigone, l’une des sorcières de la scène, a pris son manche à balai et s’envole en direction du continent mystérieux, l’Afrique” (*Noces*, 69). He does not mention the name Melissa, but refers to her as Antigone.

During Melissa’s encounter with the new leader of Amandla (act III, tableau 3), which mirrors the scene between Antigone and Creon from Sophocles’ *Antigone* just mentioned, the process of fusion of identities is completed. Melissa refers to herself as Antigone when she warns the guards of the new leader: “Bas les pattes. On ne touche pas à Antigone” (*Noces*, 89). She has taken over Antigone’s identity and calls herself by this very name. An additional link is the information that upon her return, her family was imprisoned, which resulted in the death of her brother, whose funeral she was forbidden to attend – all of which brings her even closer to her alter ego, Antigone. Her last words to the new leader, who had collapsed when she pronounced the name Titus Saint-Just Bund, and his henchmen before she exits are a reprise

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of what probably are Antigone's most famous words in her dispute with Creon:

A propos, quand il reviendra à lui, n'oubliez pas de lui transmettre ce message. Dites-lui de la part d'Antigone que ma force est tout entière dans les mots que voici: 'Je suis faite pour partager l'amour, non la haine'". (*Noces*, 89)⁶

This is followed by another metatheatrical device in the final tableau. When Melissa and the griot are boarding the aircraft in order to return to London, an official checks the griot's hand luggage and takes out a number of characters in puppet form from his suitcase. Here Bemba uses another aspect of metatheatre with "the rupturing of dramatic illusion" (Ringer 1998: 8). The actual stage characters have become like puppets which can be carried in a suitcase. The last of these puppet-characters is Antigone, "Antigone, notre grande dame à tous, qui garde sa robe et son voile noirs de mariée en deuil" (*Noces*, 91), the same clothes that Melissa wore during her performance as Antigone in Birmingham. This scene might best illustrate James Calderwood's definition of metatheatre as "a kind of anti-form in which boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved" (quoted in Ringer 1998: 12). On the aircraft, the griot asks Antigone – and not Melissa – to come forward to the business class section (*Noces*, 92). But in her last speech in the play – heard on the tape played by the griot – Melissa distances herself completely from her stage character. She introduces herself by her maiden name as Melissa Yadé, not Melissa Bund or Antigone. And she says about herself: "j'ai joué mon rôle" (*Noces*, 93). It seems that after Melissa has performed Antigone's deed of burying the dead, she no longer needs to identify with the stage character, but can strive towards a new identity – unfortunately in vain. The aircraft crashes into the sea and she is buried alive in her "sarcophage d'acier [...] du fond de

l'océan-nécropole" (*Noces*, 93). So she dies, still being Melissa / Antigone.

The reason for Melissa's return to Amandla is to ensure that her husband receives a proper burial. Wetmore points out that Bemba refers here to "events in recent African history, in which the body of an overthrown ruler or rebel leader is defiled and mutilated by those who defeated him" (Wetmore 2002: 207). This is hinted at twice before in the play. The president's last words on stage are: "Je me fiche pas mal de ce qu'ils feront à ma carcasse. Au moins ils pourront jamais chier sur mon esprit" (*Noces*, 53). And Melissa says after his death: "Les vainqueurs vont certainement insulter sa mémoire et le couvrir de boue [...]. Le corps d'un ennemi mort flatte leur odorat" (*Noces*, 57) – an additional hint that the body remains unburied. The stench of the rotten body is mentioned already in Sophocles by the sentry who reports that he and the other guards sat at the top of the hill in order to avoid the smell (line 412). These concerns prove to be correct: the new regime in Amandla practices a *damnatio memoriae*, a process in which every trace of memory is eradicated. This phenomenon, already practiced by the ancient Egyptian pharaohs in order to obliterate the existence of their predecessors, is practiced in Amandla: it is forbidden to speak or even allude to the name of Titus Saint-Just Bund or Chief Justice. The authorities go even so far as to forbid any English printed material, Sophocles' works and all books on Greek tragedy, the books by Thomas More which mention the word "utopia", Thomas De Quincy's essay "De l'assassinat considéré comme un des beaux-arts" and various other accessories typical for English-American culture (*Noces*, 70-71). People who bear one of the former president's names are expected to undergo a name change. One learns that Titus' "existence étant officiellement rayée des archives administratives de ce pays [...] on prétend effacer son nom de la mémoire du peuple" (*Ibid.*). In this context a burial gets another connotation.

It is not only a matter of the last respects of religious ritual, but it becomes a question of memory. A burial results in a tomb or grave, in which the body or its remains lie, and where people can commemorate the dead; it is a memorial to the dead person. The new leaders of Amandla therefore have to ensure that nothing is left of the former president, no corpse, no tomb, no place where he can be remembered. By ensuring his burial, Melissa ensures at the same time that his memory survives. She has stated before that she wants to keep her husband's memory alive. In act II, tableau 6 the griot says about her: "celle qui revendique à haute voix le droit de monter une garde vigilante autour de ce qu'elle appelle la mémoire blessée de son héros de mari. Cette Africaine originaire d'Amandla [...] incarne la conscience meurtrie de son pays" (*Noces*, 62-63). In order for his memory to be completely erased, Melissa, as the embodiment of memory and conscience, also has to be eliminated. She knows too much and will perpetuate this memory; so, like her husband, she too has to die, through a violent and organized plane crash and buried in an anonymous grave in the sea.

The notion of memory frames the play. In both the prologue and the epilogue, spoken by the griot, memory is the central topic. The final words of Bemba's play are: "aucun surhomme plongeur pour faire remonter à la surface nos souvenirs éparpillés en étoiles de mer tordues. Mais, je vous le dis, la mémoire du peuple, un jour, rebondira" (*Noces*, 93). But the prologue already deals with memory and remembrance. The griot speaks about the pain of remembering the man he himself once was. He says: "J'ai mal à ma mémoire, en mémoire de lui. [...] J'ai mal à ma mémoire parce qu'on me la trouée à coups de canon. Pour me faire oublier son souvenir [...] J'ai mal à ma mémoire parce qu'elle saigne. [...] Voici la chronique de ma... de sa... de votre... de notre mémoire blessée" (*Noces*, 14)⁷. In this context, one should remember that "[t]he griot's primary function is to

preserve history” and that griots are known to be “the chroniclers of every event” (www.geocities.com) and that the griot is “the community’s historian” (Frindéthié 2008: 38; see also Hoffman 2000: 127). As with other traditional bards in other cultures, the griot represents the collective and cultural memory of the people. As Frindéthié points out: “the particular histories of individuals, families, clans and tribes were mainly preserved and transmitted to succeeding generations through repetitive tellings by the griot” (*Ibid.*). In Bemba’s play, the griot survives, since he leaves the plane before takeoff. He will ensure that the memories of the events in Amandla will be preserved for posterity – as it had been predicted already before by the Second Figure in Black (*Noces*, 34) – as part of a larger act of recollection in the narrative of Africa.

In his foreword to the play, Sylvain Bemba says: “S’il faut en croire André Malraux [...] l’œuvre immortelle de Sophocle avait disparu des mémoires mille ans durant [...] j’ai tenté [...] de la ramasser dans une obscure fiction théâtrale. Celle-ci porte au flanc la plaie encore ouverte du souvenir de celui que l’ensemble de la jeunesse d’Afrique et même du monde a pleuré comme le second Lumumba de cette fin de siècle” (*Noces*, 9-10). In the French original, there is an explanatory note⁸. Bemba refers here to Thomas Sankara, the leader of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) from 1983 to 1987. Sankara was born on 21 December 1949 and was assassinated at the age of 38 on 15 October 1987 through a violent coup d’état, one year before Bemba wrote his play. Sankara is described as follows: “With a potent combination of personal charisma and Leninist social organization, his government undertook major initiatives to fight corruption and improve education, agriculture, and the status of women. His revolutionary program provoked strong opposition from traditional leaders and the country’s numerically small but powerful middle class. Added to friction between radical and

Blessed or bloody? Antigone in S. Bemba's Noces Posthumes de Santigone more conservative members of the ruling junta, these factors led to his downfall and assassination" (wikipedia.org; see also Banégas 1993: 5-6, 70-76, 101-109 and McFarland & Rupley 1998: 122-123). This coup d'état was organized by a former colleague of his, Blaise Compaoré, who had previously helped him to become president, again by plotting a coup d'état. After his death, "Sankara was quickly buried in an unmarked grave. A week prior to his death Sankara addressed people and said that 'while revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas'" (*Ibid.*; Sankara 1990: 1)⁹.

Thomas Sankara bears many similarities to the president of Amandla in Bemba's play, Titus Saint-Just Bund, who has the nickname "Chief Justice". His name is a very interesting combination of words: the Roman emperor Titus, the French "archangel of the Revolution" Saint-Just and the German word for "union" or "federation" *Bund*. Titus, son of Vespasian and brother of Domitian, was Roman emperor from 79-81 AD. According to Suetonius, he was a popular person, well liked by his soldiers and by the senate, fought corruption and cared for the people (*De Vita Caesarum Libri, Divus Titus*). Louis Antoine de Saint-Just was among the leading members of the French Revolution; he was partially responsible for the death of Georges Danton and was himself executed together with Maximilien Robespierre in 1794 (www.saint-just.net). Amandla's president is not uncontroversial among the people; some distrust him because of his charm. His motto is "essayer de faire une politique juste avec des moyens justes" (*Noces*, 29)¹⁰. According to Melissa "il veut tout pour les autres" (*Noces*, 30). He lives on a modest salary only and does not grant himself special privileges (*Noces*, 46). He has two models: one is Lawrence of Arabia, whom Melissa characterizes as "une figure de l'exigence. Il a redonné une âme, une terre et une souveraineté nationale à des peuples jadis dispersés" (*Noces*, 30). The other model is the humanist Thomas

More, the famous author of *Utopia* and representative of Utopianism. While T. E. Lawrence died in a motorcycle accident in 1935, Thomas More was executed in 1535 for his beliefs.

In tableau 3 of act I Death and another figure in black resembling death are debating about an ailing patient, who is in fact Titus Saint-Just Bund. The Second Figure in Black looks into a multicolored glass ball and predicts the future: “Je vois trois hommes qui se trouveront au sommet d’une montagne. Ils porteront les tablettes de Nouvelle Loi en Afrique. Deux d’entre eux finiront par abandonner leurs tablettes. Un seul continuera à porter ces fardeaux. Les deux autres se précipiteront de haut d’une falaise” (*Noces*, 36)¹¹. He is shocked by the vision he has seen of the man chosen to lead his people out of the bondage of colonialism¹². This image reminds the reader of the biblical story of Moses who received the Ten Commandments from God engraved on stone tablets on a mountaintop and smashed them upon his descent when he saw his people worshipping the golden calf. It seems that by introducing the Second Figure in Black, Bemba creates an additional intertextual link to one of Sophocles’ characters, to the blind seer Teiresias, who is able to predict the future and who is always right. In Sophocles’ play Teiresias warns Creon that the gods are upset with him for withholding the dead from the underworld while burying the living alive and that he will have to pay back in exchange with one of his own family (lines 988–1090). At the end of Sophocles’ and Bemba’s plays respectively, the audience realize that both prophecies have become true.

The same scene also illustrates the above-mentioned struggle of African countries after independence, since the ailing patient is Amandla’s new president, who fought for months against a terminal illness and always managed so far to escape Death. But it is intimated that something crucial will happen on 23 June,

Blessed or bloody? Antigone in S. Bemba's Noces Posthumes de Santigone which will be the day of the coup in Amandla and the death of the president. The setting of the scene moves from a public park into a supernatural and surrealistic dimension, where the boundaries of time and space are blurred. Hal Wylie calls this "marvelous realism" (Wylie 1990: 20)¹³. He says: "The supernatural aspects of African tradition are crossed with modern fantasy and science fiction in the manner of Third World 'marvelous realism' to dig deeper into the double identity of the colonized person" (*Ibid.*). The doubling is also a characteristic of others works by Bemba, but the double identity becomes very prominent in this particular scene, not only with the patient, alias Titus Saint-Just Bund, as a *pars pro toto* for his colonized African country in a desperate and futile struggle, but also in Melissa's process of merging with Antigone.

In the French edition of Bemba's play, a fellow writer from the Congo, Caya Makele, relates an interesting comment made by another Congolese writer, Labou Tansi, about Bemba, by saying that "cet homme est notre mémoire à tous" (*Noces*, 6). And he adds: "Mémoire de qualité, homme de parole et donneur d'énergie, de confiance et d'espoir". It seems that Bemba, who is considered by his countrymen as a sort of father figure and representative of the collective memory of the Congo, wants with his play to establish a memorial for a man who represented in his eyes the principle of justice as an example for future generations.

In conclusion, I would like to consider the meaning of the name "Santigone". Bemba loves to play with words and to combine them into new ones, a phenomenon which Bokiba describes as follows:

La création verbale est également marquée par les mots-valises, c'est-à-dire des mots résultant d'un amalgame de deux mots sur la base d'une homophonie partielle de sorte que

chacun conserve de sa physionomie de quoi être reconnu
(Bokiba 1997: 57).

Bokiba lists eight examples, among them the word “Santigone”. There are two possible meanings: one would be a combination of *Saint(e)* + Antigone, which is reflected in the English translation of the play as “blessed Antigone”. Bemba himself suggests another possibility. The French word for blood is *sang*; so it would be *Sang* + Antigone. Bemba concludes his preface with the words “Les noces de sang d’Antigone sont devenues, par contraction et au nom des droits imprescriptibles de l’imagination, *Noces posthumes de Santigone*” (*Noces*, 10) and therefore explicitly makes the link to the notion of blood. In addition the etymology of the English word “bless” has been defined as: “mark so as to hallow with blood” (Hoad 1986: 43) which indicates that the original meaning of the English word “blessed” also contains a link to blood. There is an interesting resemblance between the English word “bless” and the French word “blesser” which means “to injure” or “to wound”. Although the etymology of the French word does not imply a specific connotation to blood (albeit to kill)¹⁴, the griot in the prologue links the word “blessée” with blood via the concept of memory. He says: “J’ai mal à ma mémoire parce qu’elle saigne” (*Noces*, 14)¹⁵, and his final words in the prologue in French are: “notre mémoire blessée” (*Ibid.*)¹⁶; memory is wounded and is bleeding. He repeats this juncture once again in act II, tableau 6 speaking about Melissa and “la mémoire blessée de son héros de mari” (*Noces*, 62-63).

Bemba is neither the first nor the only one to note the importance of blood in the Antigone myth. Already in the ancient Greek myth, it is prominent in the name of Antigone’s fiancé, Haemon, whose name in ancient Greek means “bloody”. Perhaps in Bemba’s play, the one interpretation of the name “Santigone”

Blessed or bloody? Antigone in S. Bemba's Noces Posthumes de Santigone does not necessarily exclude the other. When Melissa announces to the new leader of Amandla that she will leave the country after having arranged the burial of her husband, she says that she will not go empty-handed. She will take with her a copy of Thomas More's book, which she has rescued from the destroyed palace. It is for her a "holy relic", because it is stained with the blood of Titus Saint-Just Bund (*Noces*, 88), martyr of Amandla, Bemba's blessed and bloody vision of a postcolonial African Utopia.

Notes

1. For details on Bemba's life and career see Decalo, Samuel, Thompson, Virginia & Adloff, Richard. 1996. *Historical Dictionary of Congo. African Historical Dictionaries, no. 69*. Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press. 50-51.
2. The metatheatrical significance of this cross-examination will be discussed below.
3. Already at the beginning of the play the audience learns that there is unrest in the country, but it seems at first that the president has it under control. His death is not shown on stage, but he appears in Melissa's dressing room as a white silhouette and transforms himself into a young soldier. Melissa recognizes him, knows that he is dead and proclaims his death (1995: 56).
4. The English translation uses here the expression "to intermesh".
5. Another famous example for using a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone* as a play-within-a-play can be found in Athol Fugard's play *The Island* (1973).
6. Sophocles, line 523. The English translation twice uses exactly the same words, while the French original renders the Greek quotation in two different ways. In act II, tableau 5, Antigone says : "Je suis faite pour aider l'amour et non la haine" (*Noces*, 61), while in act III, tableau 3, she uses a slightly different expression: "Je suis faite pour partager l'amour, non la haine" (*Noces*, 89).
7. I will come back to this passage later.
8. *Noces*, 10. See also Banégas 1993: 101 and notes 253 and 254.
9. Another African author who mentions Thomas Sankara is the South African writer Breyten Breytenbach. In his autobiographical novel *Return to Paradise* (1993) he describes his encounter with "Captain Thomas Sankara, head of state of the Land of Irreproachable People (Burkina Faso)" (1993: 63). For a fuller discussion see J. Jacobs. 2004. "Writing Africa". In: J. L. Coullie and J.

U. Jacobs (eds). *a.k.a. Breyten Breytenbach. Critical Approaches to his Writings and Paintings*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. 2004. 151–180.

10. In the English translation of this sentence “Strive for justice through just means” (1990: 12), he unites two parts of his names: “justice” from his nickname “Chief Justice” and “just” from Saint-Just in English pronunciation.

11. The last sentence of the French original has been translated incorrectly into English: in French they throw themselves (“se”) from the cliff, not him (“le”).

12. This is already hinted at in tableau 3 in act II, when five silhouettes of an armed man try to defend themselves in the final countdown in Amadla. The first silhouette is the president. His two friends have betrayed him and are plotting his downfall.

13. In another article Wylie mentions: “Bemba admet qu’il avait été influence par la théorie de Réalisme Merveilleux de Jacques – Stephen Alexis” (Wylie 1997: 26).

14. “‘amollir en frappant’, du francique ‘blettjan, meurtrir’ (Dauzat, Dubois et Mitterand 1964: 92).

15. The official English translation here “I remember forgotten pain because it bleeds” (1990: 1) is a bit free; a more literal translation would be: “My memory hurts”.

16. The English translation leaves out the word for “blessée” completely, which could be rendered by “injured” or “wounded” and therefore misses an important point.

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