

Aimé Césaire's Caribbean Crucible: *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*

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Jadis on nous vola nos noms!
Notre fierté!
Notre noblesse, on, je dis *On* nous les vola!
Pierre, Paul, Jacques, Toussaint! Voilà les estampilles
humiliantes dont *on* oblitéra nos noms de vérité.

...

de noms de gloire je veux couvrir vos noms d'esclaves,
de noms d'orgueil nos noms d'infamie,
de noms de rachat nos noms d'orphelins!
C'est d'une nouvelle naissance, Messieurs, qu'il s'agit! (p. 37)

These stirring words are uttered by the eponymous protagonist of Aimé Césaire's *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*. The late Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) declared: 'I am on the side of those who are oppressed.' As one of the founders of negritude, he championed black solidarity and sought to 'decolonise the mind', combatting the 'cancerous' legacy of colonialism through both politics and art. 'In Haiti,' said Aimé Césaire, 'negritude stood up for the first time and proclaimed its faith in its humanity' (1956, 44). He hailed the liberating revolution of the 'black jacobins' in Saint Domingue (as Haiti was then known) who created the first independent black state in the modern era. The redoubtable Henri Christophe was one of Toussaint-Louverture's generals. An army of former slaves had won not only their freedom, but they also defeated Napoleon's Grande Armée and an expedition of 20,000 British troops.¹

La Tragédie du Roi Christophe covers a fourteen-year period, from Christophe's accession to power in 1806 and his proclaiming himself king, through an ensuing civil war and resultant partition of the country, to his death by suicide in 1820. It focuses upon the aftermath of the successful liberation of Haiti and Christophe's descent into tyranny. He seeks to simultaneously unify, protect and ennoble the formerly enslaved people by brutally *forcing* them to build the largest citadel in the western hemisphere on top of a mountain with treacherous slopes. 'Le charmant paradoxe! En somme, le roi Christophe servirait la liberté par les moyens de la servitude!' (p. 80). Furthermore, rather than opting for peasant cultivation as in the mulatto-controlled south, Christophe – who expressed admiration for the 'enlightenment despot' Frederick the Great – adopts a version of the slave plantation system. He craves form out of chaos but whither the human content? An inflexible ideologue who betrays all too clearly the brutal conditioning of his former enslaved state, he fails to empathise with and understand the people.

Césaire was spurred to write *King Christophe* at a critical moment of history, that of French decolonisation. He said:

Il est clair que par-delà Haïti, le Roi Christophe de ma pièce s'adresse à l'Afrique (indirectement, si vous voulez). J'ai été frappé moi-même, et si j'ai choisi ce sujet, c'est pour cela, par l'intérêt que l'épisode du Roi Christophe présente, et les analogies qui existent entre les problèmes qu'il eut à résoudre et ceux auxquels doivent faire face les pays sous-développés.

¹ For an excellent conspectus on Haiti, not least the appalling conditions of slavery, see Arthur and Dash.

Aucune analogie n'est totale, mais en fait le Roi Christophe, c'est un peu l'homme d'Etat aux prises avec les problèmes de l'indépendance réalisée, quand il faut édifier l'Etat : c'est à ce moment-là que se présentent les grands problèmes. (Chraïbi 1965)

'The framework, simultaneously mythical, historical and political appears to me favourable to the introduction of the problem facing the Africa 1961, decolonisation. King Christophe has taken control of the country and his setbacks demonstrate that it is easier to seize independence than to build the world on new foundations.' (In Sieger 66)

The construction of the citadel is clearly an extended metaphor for nation-building. Also sounding a caveat against 'la mystique du chef', Césaire said the play articulated a moment of historic transition: the tragedy of flawed national development following the epic of an heroic emancipation. 'Les pays coloniaux conquièrent leur indépendance, là est l'épopée. L'indépendance conquise, ici commence la tragédie' (Chraïbi). The play recalls how fragile liberty is and how delicate its consolidation. It is a drama of consummate artistry, depth and intercultural fecundity

The director and cultural polymath Antoine Vitez hailed Aimé Césaire as 'our black Shakespeare'. The phrase is well deserved. Just as the 'upstart crow' grammar school boy and player from Stratford ruffled the feathers of the prickly university wits and shook the scene of a jealous world of power and patronage, so Césaire, the colonial scholarship student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the black activist abused as a 'sale nègre', would **'strike a mental wave against the rock of the world'**. Both were dramatic poets who spanned the universal and the local, mixing prose and verse, history and topicality, in their plays. And both were inveterate magpies in their plunder of cultural forms: just as in Shakespeare's works, an intertextual web of discourses animates *King Christophe*. Situated in the Caribbean and bound up strategically between three 'triangulating' continents due to the legacy of the slave trade, Césaire's home island of Martinique and Haiti, too, were already the homes of an enriching cultural *métissage*. To this, the internationalist playwright added his own considerable erudition. *King Christophe* has been described as 'théâtre total', integrating poetry, song, dance, folklore, French and Haitian tales, prose and verse, the destiny of a hero and his people, staging, 'à la manière d'Eschyle, un grand drame collectif, à la manière de Shakespeare une véritable tragédie politique' (Leiner, p. 82). Inspired stagecraft sees sudden switches in tone and register – from the parodic to the mythic, from lyricism to social realism. Césaire creatively engages with several European sources in his shaping of the plot and in his application of stylistic texture. The play is a radical departure from French neo-classical dramatic strictures and bears a far greater resemblance to early modern English theatre. It embraces both the intimate and the cosmic in its plot and scenography and crucially, in dramatic terms, it heralded the arrival of 'third world' cultural forms on the francophone world stage. (See Claudon, Leiner, Little, Conteh-Morgan.)

Césaire was a great admirer of Shakespeare and it is fascinating to trace an abundance of Shakespearean dramatic resonances within the play. Like Macbeth, Christophe is a national hero and a dauntless warrior. He possesses the patrician pride and aloofness of Coriolanus and the peremptory arrogance, and seeming incipient madness, of Lear. Like Richard III, he has a canny and irreverent understanding of the performance of power and shares the Crookback's indomitable will. Furthermore, his order to assassinate the recalcitrant Archbishop Corneille Brelle in secret and to immure him in his palace recalls both Richard's *penchant* for such killings (not least the murder of the princes in the Tower which becomes their tomb) and also Macbeth's

order to do away with Banquo. When Brelle's spectre later appears in front of Christophe during the public celebration of the Assumption and the king collapses, the ghost of Banquo's terrifying humiliation of Macbeth haunts the scene.

Christophe works away on the citadel building site, scornful of a thunderstorm which rages, in order to galvanise the disenchanted and fearful workforce. He is like a man possessed and when the thunder strikes, he brandishes his sword against St Peter and the heavens. This scene evokes both the cosmic fury awaiting the deranged Lear on the 'heath' ('Blow winds and crack your cheeks' etc, though Christophe does not conclude that he is a 'poor, bare forked animal'; he seeks to subdue nature throughout) and the ambitious Cassius's reckless baring of his bosom to the thunderstone in *Julius Caesar*.

As the play speeds towards its climax and Christophe in his citadel finds himself hedged about on all sides by approaching armies and defectors, Macbeth in his castle comes to mind: there is even a reference to troops attaching foliage to their headdress, recalling Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane (p. 148). Like Richard III, the king calls for his horse and delivers a withering speech against the invaders whom he dubs guttersnipes, worms and termites (p. 145) (cf Richard's 'A scum of Bretons and base lackey peasants').² He is even subjected to another hallucination in which Boyer, the new leader of the south, denounces Christophe's rod of iron and his enslavement of the north and hails an imminent providential victory (p. 146). This recalls the multiple hauntings of Richard on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth when he is repeatedly told by his many victims to 'Despair and die,' to which the Crookback defiantly ripostes, 'Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls.' Christophe, too, remains true to himself but, aware of unavoidable defeat, renounces his rule and determines upon suicide.

Elsewhere, more generally, the play mocks and interrogates Christophe's adoption of European monarchical pomp with carnivalesque glee (pp. 30-36). His courtiers, who go by such seemingly mock high-flown titles as duc de la Limonade, duc de la Marmelade and comte du Trou Bonbon – then actual colonial place names: 'il ne faut pas oublier que ces noms, ces sobriquets ce sont les Français qui les ont donnés aux Antillais' Césaire reminds us (Chraïbi) – go into '*Contorsions simiesques et ironiques*', as the stage directions (henceforth italicised) indicate, put through their paces by the pedantic and precious Master of Ceremonies who has been sent to Haiti courtesy of TESCO: the 'Technical, Educational, Scientific Cooperation Organization' – for form trumps all where civilisation is concerned. Christophe summons a few '*négresses fessues et attifées*' to join in, lubriciously '*tapotant quelques croupes*' as he greets them with such names as Madam du Petit-Trou and Madam Tape-à-l'oeil (again, colonial in origin). The satire, and Christophe's and other courtiers' detached sense of the emptiness of ceremony, recalls the contrapuntal mocks of Falstaff and Prince Hal in East Cheap in *Henry IV* 1 and 2 (as well as Henry V's specific deconstruction of 'ceremony' in the performance of power in *Henry V*). Chanlatte the royal poet's bombastic, platitudinous and ultimately vacuous versification (eg eulogizing rum as the national drink with his poem to be learned in schools, pp. 53-56) and Archbishop Corneille Brelle's ultramontane Latin, borrowed

² Post the Rwandan genocide and the dehumanising description of Tutsis as 'cockroaches', these words are chilling.

from the reactionary liturgies of Charles X, are used in similar parodic fashion (pp. 38-39). In these and similar pastiches, Césaire, the *savant*, demonstrates his mastery of a range of classical and enlightenment discourses and genres.

Another crucial Shakespeare resonance comes in the guise of Hugonin who is described in the list of characters as a '*mélange de parasite, de bouffon et d'agent politique*' (p. 7). His resemblance to Lear's fool has been widely commented upon. He is certainly fearless in his clear-sighted observations and criticisms of Christophe's misrule. He delivers his thoughts in nursery rhymes and popular songs and verses where both seeming nonsense and proverbial aphorisms are actually replete with insightful nearsense. (Little pp. 442-445.) In this, it seems to me, that he, a 'parasite', also shares an affinity with the thieving, ballad-mongering Autolycus from *The Winter's Tale* – a 'snapper-up of unconsidered trifles'. As Césaire himself has remarked, the histrionic Hugonin is a lively foil for the inflexible Christophe. In one of his creole songs, Hugonin recounts how, when Damballah, the Vodou snake-god of fertility and springs, was planting maize, some creature bit him and drew blood:

Damballa planté maïs li

Oui, li planté maïs li

Bête piqué sang li (p. 132)

These words evoke Claudius's poisoning of Old Hamlet and the rank abuse of all Denmark; what is important is the sense of the country being bled dry by an antagonist, a theme also present within *Macbeth* with poor Scotland almost afraid to know itself. Sure enough, the ditty ends plangently: '*Ah! la nation pas bon!*' Intriguingly, there is a profound French heritage for the character. Enid Welsford (1961) noted how Lear's Fool bore the traits of the French medieval fool, the *sot*. And Hugonin's *sottie* inheritance is striking. Like the *sots*, he is full of unbridled libido and instinctive improvisation. He barks like a dog for a bone and even dares to bite Christophe's leg. A transgressive jester, he speaks truth to power, not least through word-play and the popular idiom.³

By means of constant counterpointing, and juxtaposing the private with the public, Césaire dissects and examines the fabric of power in the state in a dialogic and positively Shakespearean sweep. Several other characters – eg workers, peasants, a rebel leader, salon *bourgeoises*, politicians, and a Brechtian 'presenter' – colour, comment upon, and counterpoint the action in French, African or creole, in conversation or pre-existent song, lending the play all manner of other evocative resonances. (See Leiner and Little for examples.) In further striking Shakespearean echoes, one old peasant, demurring from Christophe's back-breaking plan for delivering the Haitians from the '*la raque de l'histoire*', addresses the king as 'n'uncle' like the fool in Lear (pp. 98-99); while another peasant concludes, '*Il y a quèque chose de déglingué dans ce royaume*' (p. 111). (Cf *Hamlet's* 'There is something rotten in the state of Denmark.') Césaire said his theatre was not an individual or individualist theatre but an epic theatre '*car c'est toujours le sort d'une collectivité qui s'y joue*' (Chanda).

He declared, furthermore, in his interview with Khalid Chraïbi, that King Christophe was not a hero but a man in all his complexity. His tragedy is all too human yet he lacks 'neither pathos nor grandeur'.

³ See Crispin (forthcoming) for a comprehensive survey of *sots* and *sotties*.

Pourquoi alors la pièce est-elle un hymne à Christophe ? C'est parce que, malgré toutes ses erreurs, ses faiblesses, c'est un homme qui a voulu la grandeur de son peuple, qui a voulu réhabiliter sa race, parce qu'il était porté, dans ses actes, par une grandiose aspiration à la dignité. ...

Je ne cache pas, dans ma pièce, ses faiblesses ni ses ridicules, mais ne le condamne pas, car par-delà son ridicule, il y a l'amour qu'il porte à son « peuple » (je n'aime pas ce terme, mais il n'y en a pas d'autre !), et l'orgueil collectif qu'il veut rendre à ses concitoyens humiliés par la colonisation. ...

On s'aperçoit alors qu'il y a une démarche qui ne manque pas de pathétique ni de grandeur. En fin de compte, c'est ce côté pathétique, « grand », qui émerge le plus. (Chraïbi)

According to the playwright's own summary, Christophe combines features not only of the *bourgeois gentilhomme* and Peter the Great but also of Prometheus (Harris, p. 76). He is further characterised as the visionary *mntu*: the man who participates in the vital, universal force (the *n'golo*), the man of language (the *nommo*). Crucially, Christophe is seeking to counter the imposed cultural hegemony of the coloniser with an authentic patrimony which necessarily entails a reclamation and validation of the Haitians' African and Caribbean heritage:

Secousse, secousse, savane blanche
comme disaient mes ancêtres Bambaras
secousse puissance du dire
du faire, de construire, de bâtir,
d'être, du nommer, du lier, du refaire (p. 38)

As the quotation at the start of this article illustrates, Christophe is fuelled by the noble ideal of negritude, of giving to the people their lost sense of identity, their distinct cultural personality – a prerequisite for any authentic act of development: 'Quelque chose grace à quoi ce peuple de transplantés s'enracine, boutonne, s'épanouisse, lançant à la face du monde les parfums, les fruits de la floraison' (p. 23).

From the outset, a dominant European, specifically francophone, discourse encounters something profoundly *other* in *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* (Leiner pp. 83-85). In a metatheatrical prologue (pp. 11-13), the audience are confronted by a jostling crowd of peasants who are watching a bloody combat take place in an arena. The contest turns out to be a cockfight, '*principale réjouissance populaire de Haïti*' according to a stage direction, and it is being staged in a '*gagaire*', the Haitian word for 'cockpit'. A *mêlée* of passionate and overheated voices convey the fortunes of the fighting cocks who go by the names of Christophe and Pétion, the leaders of the rival forces in the Haitian civil war. One of the roosters – we are not told which – ends up by falling down dead as the delirium of the spectators reaches its peak. Here is a symbolical and detached exposition of the brute struggle for power going on in Haiti. It is also an ingenious and witty echo of Chorus's metatheatrical prologue in Shakespeare's *Henry V* – 'Can this cockpit hold /The vasty fields of France?' – which is also concerned with evoking warring armies in the 'little O' of the theatre through a complicit exercise of communal imagination. The prologue ambushes the audience and plunges them into an unfamiliar, provocative, liminal realm which will grow in intensity throughout the play.

At the same time, cultural exoticism is paired with an alterity in language: '*Abrogat*' (from the Spanish *abrogado*: suppressed, dismissed, said of a cock rendered unable to continue the combat); '*poulet savane*' (a common or garden chicken, not

suited to combat) ‘*carrez-le*’ (*Carrer un coq*: to place him in a fighting position).⁴ Specifically Haitian terms encounter French in what Claude Lévi-Strauss dubbed a ‘linguistic bricolage’. Throughout the play, strange words, whether Haitian, creole, African or Latin, are left undefined, allusive, suggestive, to be savoured in their otherness and in their signal integrity (see Leiner, pp. 84-94). With poetic élan, Césaire avoids both laboured pedantry and ‘folklore’ as he ‘maroons’ himself from metropolitan French, further contesting and negotiating hierarchical French language and culture with the verve of his own grammar, syntax and neologisms. This linguistic cultural otherness is crucially complemented in ritual. According to Césaire, ‘Il y a aussi le côté religieux et métaphysique, qui ne ressort pas à la lecture de la pièce, mais que j’ai accusé à la représentation sur scène: il y a l’existence d’une lutte secrète’ (Chraïbi). The complex and syncretistic African and Caribbean religion of Vodou is the wellspring of this *kulturkampf*. It haunts and frames the play and then proceeds to beat at its very heart. (See Leiner; Little pp. 441, 447-8; Wilmeth and Wilmeth)

The muted conflict between the Haitians’ own spirituality and their ambiguous adherence to a colonial-borne Christianity comes to a head at Limonade on the feast of the Assumption (pp. 125-8). Catholicism had been imposed on the slaves and many Catholic elements figured in Vodou, with Catholic prayers often becoming a *prelude* to Vodou rituals: this is the case in the play. Haitian Vodou was dedicated to serving and honouring a pantheon of nature deities and spirits, namely those of sky, earth and thunder. As the newly installed Archbishop Juan De Dios intones a Latin litany in honour of Mary the Mother of God, Christophe prays to the Haitian Vodou pantheon in antiphonal response, integrating his invocations with Latin snatches. The two belief systems seem initially to be co-existing here on parallel lines but a violent collision soon occurs. As the archbishop prays to Christ to spare and hear his people, and Christophe intones ‘*Miserere, miserere*’, the king, ‘*comme voyant un spectre*’, cries out to his wife not to be afraid: ‘Un homme qui a défié Saint-Pierre/ne craindra pas une corneille enrouée’. While punning on the name of a ‘hoarse croaking’ Corneille Brelle, the assassinated archbishop, and recalling his defiance of Saint Peter, the Haitian Vodou *loa* (spirit) of war during the storm, Christophe threatens ‘*une apparition invisible*’. Still calling for mercy, he invokes ‘Saint Toussaint mort de nos péchés’, and ‘Saint Dessalines’. Nevertheless, ‘*Le spectre de Corneille Brelle apparaît au fond de l’église*’. Christophe collapses, groaning out: ‘Tonnerre! Qui, qui a chanté sur moi le Bakulu Baka?’ (This ‘dieu maléfique du culte Petro’ is so terrifying that no-one dares invoke him.)

Within this highly wrought ritual setting, featuring esoteric incantation, the coming together of an invocation to Christ (Christianity’s ultimate scapegoat), and an apparition of a murdered archbishop, together with Christophe’s invocation of his own messianic and murdered Haitian heroes, even as he confronts the ghost of his own murder victim before fainting, makes for a moment of extraordinarily charged and mysterious theatre. At this moment of catastrophe, Christophe suffers a paralysing stroke, conquered by the nature he despises. His will is unbroken but the play soon speeds to its conclusion, revealing to the king the ‘débris de [ses] rêves’ (p. 139) and the defeat of his ambitions. Christophe may well suffer for his errors of judgement and his obduracy, but in dramatic terms this cataclysmic episode ushers in prophetic

⁴ The footnotes are Césaire’s.

renewal and spiritual resurrection. Not only is the date of the Assumption (15 August) a key Vodou feast in its own right, which honours the entire pantheon, but Boukman's ceremony, commonly regarded as one of the most seminal events in Haitian history, took place on the eve of the Assumption. On the stormy night of 14 August, 1791, the Vodou priest Boukman Dutty presided over a sacred pact which led to the slave revolt. During the highly wrought ceremony, a priestess, brandishing a cutlass, invoked the gods of the ancestors and chanted mysterious African litanies. Boukman proceeded to apostrophise God 'who makes the sea rage and the thunder roll.' He exhorted the assembled multitude: 'Cast aside the image of the God of the whites who thirsts for our tears and pay heed to the voice of liberty speaking in our hearts' (Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint L'Ouverture* (1920) cited in Arthur and Dash pp. 35-36). The details of the ceremony and the sentiments described therein chime forcibly with Césaire's own in *Roi Christophe*.

As mutinies and chaos multiply and the king's soldiers beat out the *mandoucouman* on their drums, Christophe tells his African page: 'Cela signifie qu'il est temps pour le vieux roi d'aller dormir', and he delivers an exquisite hymn to a mysterious Night, keenly anticipating their imminent encounter (p. 140). The following scene (III.7, pp. 141-147) is played out in the 'penumbra' and a stage direction stipulates: '*Atmosphère inquiétante de cérémonie vaudou*'. Madame Christophe invokes *loas* (spirits) and members of the Vodou pantheon, referring specifically to Damballah, the serpent-god, and Agaou, a terrifying god of storms, tracing *vévés* (symbolical images) on the ground as she does so. Her searing hymn expresses her own heart-sickness and longing: '*Solé, Solé-ô, moin pa moun icit/Moin cé moun l'Afric*' ['Sun, O Sun, I am not from here/I belong to the people of Africa']. Christophe, too, invokes the Vodou pantheon in a mix of African and creole:

Dieux d'Afrique
 Loas!
 Corde du sang sanglé
 père attacheur du sang
 abobo
 Afrique mon lieu de forces
 abobo (p. 143)

The ritual intensity increases as the chants continue. Christophe then launches into a further rhapsodic convulsion, his own Vodou Passion narrative: 'Afrique de ta grande corne sonne mon sang!' (p. 143) He envisions his pounding heart and coursing blood as immortalising drums and drumming birds:

Tambour-coq
 tambour-toucan
 tambour-martin-pêcheur
 tambour! mon sang audible!
 Assotor mon Coeur, battez.
 Mes hounsis! mes enfants! quand je mourrai,
 le grand tambour n'aura plus de son.
 Alors qu'il batte, qu'il batte, le grand tambour
 qu'il me batte un fleuve de sang,
 un ouragan de sang et de vie
 Mon corps! (p. 144)

He falls and undergoes the hallucination of Boyer's victory harangue. '*Revenant à la réalité*', he delivers an apostrophe to Africa ('Aide-moi à rentrer', p. 147) in which he renounces all his earthly possessions and responsibilities, asking to be washed clean.

At this point, Hugonin enters, dressed as Baron-Samedi, the Haitian god of death, in top hat and suit:

Ogoun Badagry c'est Neg politique oh
A la la li la cord'coupé cord oh!
Ogoun Badagry, c'est Neg politique oh! (p. 148)

There are felicitous resonances here with the fool as psychopomp, with the *commedia* elements in Haitian Vodou (Haitian Petro spirits such as Baron-Samedi can be laughed at), not least in terms of costume, and with Hugonin's simultaneous identification with the irreverent trickster god Eshu, the marginal god between worlds. As he clowns around, acting drunk, singing and satirically evoking misrule, treason and chaos, Christophe's suicide shot rings out. At the same time, Hugonin is invoking the powerful *loa*-protector Ogoun Badagry:

Ogoun Badagry c'est Neg politique oh!
Ou mait' allé ou mait' tourné
Ogoun Badagry c'est la li yé (p. 149)

Incarnating a sardonic, mordant spirit of irony, Hugonin the jester himself becomes mad at this climactic moment, according to Césaire: 'Or, Christophe s'est suicidé, et Hugonin devient fou. Le « bouffon » qui devient fou, c'est cela la tragédie, aussi, dans son horreur' (Chraïbi).

Night falls and rumour's many tongues – '*Échos se répercutant de voûte en voûte*' – report the king's death as distant drums beat from hillside to hillside. But as the moon rises, '*nous sommes au plus haut de la Citadelle*', a sublime location (pp. 149-53). Porters set down Christophe's body for him to be mourned and interred by Vastey, Madame Christophe and the African Page, who represent the political, human and spiritual responses to his death.⁵ Vastey commands the porters to place the dead king's body upright, facing the south (towards Africa), into the works of the citadel itself:

Et, lui ayant trouvé tout seul sa stature,
que la lune, rouge au bout de la fleche
suspende sa torche épouvantable!

The Page says:

Père, nous t'installons à Ifé
...
Ici patience et impatience
défaite et victoire
...
échangent leurs armes, leurs larmes.
Force de nuit, marée du jour,

⁵ Christophe had redeemed his African pages from the slaver. They wear 'tribal dress' but also significantly the colours of red, gold and green, the colours of anti-colonial Rastafarianism, and several de-colonising African nations.

SHANGO

Je te salue, O...quand tu
passeras par les promenoirs du ciel
monté sur les béliers enflammés de l'orage.

Father, we install you on [Mount] Ifé

...

Here, patience and impatience
defeat and victory

...

exchange their arms, their tears.

Force of night, tide of the day,

SHANGO

I salute you, O ... when you
will pass through the walkways of heaven
astride the fiery rams of the storm.

Césaire said that, apart from observing the Shakespearean resonances in the play:

'Plus profondément, il faudrait partir d'un côté africain. Christophe, l'homme dur, est la représentation du Dieu « SHANGO », le grand « Dieu du ciel » de la mythologie du Dahomey, du Brésil et de Haïti. C'est le « tonnerre », Dieu très violent, mais bienfaisant et rajeunisseur : il est l'orage, qui est violent, mais qui féconde la terre en apportant la pluie bienfaisante. Extraordinairement, Shango est le seul Dieu de la mythologie qui se tue (Chraïbi).

Christophe kills himself, too. Furthermore, just as the faithful believe in Shango's resurrection, so the Vodou ritual and the heartfelt eulogies of his mourners impel a communal belief in Christophe's mythic transfiguration here.

From the moment of his coronation, early in the play, the king is identified with Shango. The choir hail the newly crowned king, 'Henry vaillant guerrier/De la victoire ouvre-nous les portes.' At which moment '*Le chant se transforme en un hymne (dansé)*' to Shango:

Shango, Madia Elloué

Azango, Shango, Madia Elloué

...

Sava Loué

Sava Loué

Azango, Shango, Madia Elloué (p. 40)

In fact, 'Open to us the gates of victory' are the words of a Vodou ceremony even as they also evoke Christ's victorious harrowing of Hell and glorious Ascension to Heaven (Psalm 23.7). The seeming 'most Christian' King Henry already presides over an alternative cultural domain in Césaire's play which, like the seed growing secretly, will spread until it reigns supreme.⁶

⁶ *King Christophe* exemplifies, I contend, what Artaud prized in theatre: innovative 'spatial language', ritual, mystery, primordial passion, the radical urgency of the body, drumming and mesmerising incantations, an elemental approach to power. I do not have the space to develop this intriguing discussion here except to note Césaire's presence in pre-Second World War Paris, his connection with the avant-garde and his adoption of surrealism in his poetry. Furthermore, Césaire contended, surrealism had affinities with metaphorical, analogical and synthetic tendencies within African thought. (See Chraïbi.)

In the uncanny and ‘unsettling’ Vodou ceremony which precedes Christophe’s death, he undergoes a mystical possession (a crucial ritual in Vodou when a worshipper can become for a period a deity incarnate; Wilmeth and Wilmeth, p. 28) – identifying himself with Papa Sosih Baderre, another thunder god – and the African page hails in his mortal remains an immortal transformation (as well as communicating a serene understanding of mutual ying-yang coexistence). The sublime mountain location, metaphorically translated to Shango’s legendary Mount Ifé by the page, lends a fitting scenographic magnitude to this moment of apotheosis.⁷ The soldier Vastey has the last word. He evokes the memory of the Ethiopian hero Memnon who, according to the *Iliad*, died defending the great civilisation of Troy against the Hellenic imperium. Vastey directs the birds who were born from Memnon’s funeral pyre to blazon an imperishable coat of arms in the heavens for Christophe: a red phœnix crowned with gold. The fabled phœnix is eternally reborn from its funeral flames and paramount in this highly wrought legendary *mise en abîme* – which of course has Christophe as prime mover at its centre – is an homage to the eternal struggle for freedom, justice and cultural autonomy. What live on, in dramatic terms, are the enlightened ideas that Christophe, for all his faults and failings in governance, so stirringly stood for.

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⁷ The final French version of the play is analysed here. Interestingly, Mannheim’s English translation is based upon an unpublished ‘performance’ script from the Serreau production. Surviving recordings reveal certain cuts and adaptations from the published script (eg a rousing hymn to Shango ending the Dakar *mise-en-scène*).

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