

Fall 1996

# Considering Moliere in Oyono-Mbia's 'Three Suitors, One Husband'

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## Recommended Citation

Sanko, Hélène, "Considering Moliere in Oyono-Mbia's 'Three Suitors, One Husband'" (1996). *Classical and Modern Languages and Literatures*. 1.

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# Considering Molière in Oyônô-Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*

HÉLÈNE SANKO

Ah! fille scélérate! fille indigne d'un père  
comme moi!

C'est ainsi que tu pratiques les leçons que je  
t'ai données?

Tu te laisses prendre d'amour pour un voleur  
infâme, et tu lui engages ta foi sans mon  
consentement.

(Harpagon, *L'Avare*, V, iv, 1668)

You must be out of your mind, Juliette!  
Since when do girls fall in love without  
the permission of their families?

How can you disappoint us all like that?

(Bella, Juliette's grandmother,  
*Three Suitors: One Husband*, Act III, 1959)

Juxtaposed these quotations, which are separated by three centuries and two continents, suggest that seventeenth-century classical French drama serves as a model for African theatre of the early post-colonial period. The first quotation is, of course, from Molière, the Old Regime's brilliant comic writer. The second is taken from a play by Oyônô-Mbia, a contemporary dramatist from Cameroon. Given the powerful grip France held over its colonies, it is not surprising to find residual influence of France's theatrical culture on African drama. By the end of World War One, French authority in sub-Saharan Africa extended from Cape Verde to the Congo river. The Third Republic established French schools in the larger colonial towns which attracted the children of well-to-do urban families. France therefore held strong political and cultural sway over the development of African leaders and writers.

Theatre began to flourish in French colonial Africa thanks to the efforts of Charles Béart, a teacher at two schools which drew elite students from all over West Africa. As a teacher at Bingeville in the Ivory Coast and on Gorée Island, Senegal, Béart encouraged his students to write, direct, and act in plays they adapted from their own customs, dances, social practices, legends, and historical events. The Senegalese École Normale William-Ponty was particularly successful. In 1937, students from this school performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. Although they based their plays on African

ways of life, these young playwrights and many other African dramatists who followed them modelled their plays on French drama:

The subject matter of the Ponty productions tended to be assimilationist in the sense that they presented traditional customs from the vantage point of Africans who accepted European culture as their standard value.<sup>1</sup>

Although the French colonial education system played a decisive role in moulding African theatre, it is still noteworthy that theatre of French-speaking Africa should be so strongly influenced by France since numerous indigenous theatrical elements traditionally accompany African life: oral story-tellers illustrate their tales with gestures and mimicry, and dramatized rituals and rites of passage demand a compendium of acting skills. Moreover, theatre as a performing art has a relatively broader potential audience than other forms of literary expression given the low level of literacy, particularly in rural areas.

Notwithstanding this affinity between theatre and homespun traditions, the development of a thoroughly African theatre is hampered by the choice of language. Since many of the dramatists received their education in French schools, they speak French fluently. However, most spectators feel more at home in their mother tongue. Dramatists could of course write in an African

language, but this would restrict their opportunities for production in other francophone African states. Thus a desire to address a wide audience hits a double-edged snag. Writing a play in Ewe or Oulof or Bambara may attract a broad and socially diverse public in an area where that language is spoken, but the play would have to be translated for performance in a different region or country. Hence, while a play in French will reach audiences in francophone countries and regions of Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and North America, within francophone Africa it will primarily appeal to an educated minority. Add to this the fact that the French government offers prizes, sponsorship and radio broadcasts for plays in French, and one can see why francophone African playwrights have divided linguistic loyalties.

Theatre in French-speaking Africa is therefore a hybrid form. It focuses on unmistakably African issues, but the language and theatricality owe much to cultural and educational colonial ties, and so a French vision dominates much African theatre, in particular that of the pre-colonial and early post-colonial period.<sup>2</sup> After independence, playwrights of Africa and the African diaspora began to find their own artistic and linguistic stance. Aimé Césaire, the Martiniquais playwright, poet and statesman, spoke with a very strong voice:

Et à moi mes danses  
mes danses de mauvais nègre  
à moi mes danses  
la danses brise-carcan  
la danse saute-prison  
la danse il-est-beau-et-bon-et-légitime-  
d'être-nègre  
À moi mes danses et saute le soleil sur la  
raquette de mes mains<sup>3</sup>

Alioune Diop, the founder of the journal *Présence Africaine*, portrays this period of conflicting artistic perspectives as an era of cultural dialogue in which a well-established, European colonial culture comes head to head with a revitalized and self-aware African culture. For Diop cultures do not live in isolation since they borrow from one another. However, he stresses that it is the Western world that has dominated this relationship:

As for Western civilization, it is definitely murderous—even towards itself. But it is the seat of the most powerful institutions to support democracy, justice, and love. And its voice carried far and wide.

We all need the West. We also need it to master and discipline an all too powerful appetite on its part for domination—so that we may live harmoniously and in peace with the other human civilizations.<sup>4</sup>

These intercultural, post-colonial problems are at the heart of Oyônô-Mbia's *Three Suitors: One Husband*. This comedy raises issues through the contrast and interaction between the play's African subject matter, its echoes of French classical dramaturgy, and ultimately its ability to embrace and disturb classical comedy's reassuring and predictable format.

*Three Suitors: One Husband* echoes Molière but blends classical comedy with African concerns. Its subject matter is quite Molièresque: an authoritarian father seeks financial gain by marrying his daughter to a wealthy suitor against the girl's wishes. Oyônô-Mbia's play also has the tightness of a Molière comedy, in that it adheres closely to the unities of place, time, and action. As a student at a French school in Libamaba, Cameroon, Oyônô-Mbia would undoubtedly have studied Molière's well-structured comedies. Given France's centralized educational system, it is certain that if one *lycée* in the French metropolis is studying *L'Avare*, for example, 'then a thousand are doing so at the same moment throughout the French cultural empire from Tahiti to South Kensington'.<sup>5</sup>

All the action in *Three Suitors: One Husband* takes place in the courtyard and open-air kitchen of Atangana, Juliette's father. His house is in the village of Mvoutessi which is located alongside a road whence emanates the rumble of passing motor cars. For all its classical unity of place, the play is rooted in African daily life: the men weave baskets, sculpt ebony wood, play 'songho', drink palm wine from calabashes, smoke cigarettes, chew on kola nuts and swat flies. Meanwhile, the women are busy with domestic work shelling peanuts, peeling plantain and watching their cooking pots. At nightfall, as the villagers gather around the communal fire in Atangana's courtyard, the village sorcerer appears in all his

splendour in an amusing balletic interlude. Weaving together conventional classical comedy and African folklore, Oyônô-Mbia brings on stage a pretentious, self-interested soothsayer who attempts to extort money from a naïve group of listeners. The scheme comes unstuck as the villagers realize the sorcerer's duplicity and chase him away. Though the mood is essentially comic, the action plays uncannily against the backdrop of gyrating shadows cast by dancers in the firelight.

This latent sense of disquiet within the community also surfaces in the surrealistic proportions of Atangana's alarm clock. As a symbol of twentieth-century French civilization, this clock reminds the audience of the way French culture undermined local ways and customs by imposing on them a division of time which had nothing to do with the way of life in rural Africa. At the same time, the clock evokes the desire of Africans to step in line with the rest of the world.

The clock then has a social value, but it also has dramatic significance since it stresses the role of time in a theatrical manner. As the curtain rises, it is late afternoon and Atangana looks at the clock and expresses his annoyance that his wife has not yet returned from the fields to make the midday meal. Since Oyônô-Mbia's play lasts exactly twenty-four hours, the theme of time finds an echo in the closing act which takes place the next afternoon. In the meantime, *Three Suitors: One Husband* runs as a five act play with each act representing a different moment of the day. Act One begins with Juliette's afternoon arrival. In the second act, the men talk in the late evening, and in the third some money is stolen. The sorcerer's night-time visit animates the fourth act. Finally, the fifth act closes as Juliette marries Oko, her fiancé of choice, and the comedy ends with a classical celebration of the children's matrimony and the public unmasking of the parents' vices.

Like Molière, Oyônô-Mbia pays close attention to the unity of action. *Three Suitors: One Husband* centres on the offering and taking of money. Juliette's first suitor gives 100,000 francs to buy Juliette. The sum is inflated when 200,000 francs is accepted from her second suitor. The joy occasioned by the anticipated spending of this money is short-lived when Juliette orchestrates the theft of the 300,000 francs. Left to her own

devices, Juliette considers this momentary theft as the only solution to her quandary. Whereas valets and servants help Molière's young lovers, Oyônô-Mbia's youth have to design their own scheme to outwit parents and elders.

Oyônô-Mbia introduces us to an African milieu of strong traditions. He portrays the plight of African women, and especially young ones, who have been educated but return to their village to be sold, according to ancient custom, to the highest bidder. The character of Juliette stands up against centuries-old custom and defies her destiny through cunning and craft. Hardly has she arrived home from her school in Dibamba—a play on Libamba, the town where Oyônô-Mbia was educated—when she learns that she has been promised, in exchange for 100,000 francs, to Ndi, a local farmer of her age. She also finds out that Mbia, a civil servant from town, who is of her parents' generation, is expected that very afternoon. He intends to sway Juliette's parents with many offerings, to which Juliette indignantly responds:

Quoi? je suis donc à vendre? Pourquoi faut-il que vous essayiez de me donner au plus offrant? Est-ce qu'on ne peut pas me consulter pour un mariage qui me concerne? (I, 28)

This causes general consternation among the village men and especially for her paternal grandfather who exclaims:

Te consulter? (au public:) Il faut qu'on la consulte! Depuis quand est-ce que les femmes parlent à Mvoutessi [. . .] ça ne te suffit pas que la famille ait pris une décision si sage en ta faveur? (I, 29)

The empire of ancestral tradition is such that Juliette finds herself alone. Nobody, it seems, will help her. Her mother, grandmother, and cousin think Juliette ought to be happy in procuring a better standard of living by marrying a wealthy suitor.

For family and friends who have invested in her education, Juliette's marriage to a rich man will bring them a handsome return on their investment in the form of a bride-price paid by the suitor to the girl's family. Juliette scolds their cupidity, 'Vous comptez sur moi pour vous enrichir? Est-ce que je suis une boutique ou bien un fonds quelconque?' Her mother implores her to obey

by reminding her of her upbringing, 'Est-ce que je ne t'ai pas toujours dit d'être obéissante envers ta famille?' But Juliette refuses to let herself be sold 'comme une chèvre' (I, 33). However, Mbia, the second suitor, introduces himself copiously with drinks, gifts, promises of more gifts, and the sum of 200,000 francs. Atangana accepts this generous bid. The village council of elders now has 300,000 francs. However, like in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, where Madame Jourdain precipitates the action, or in *L'Avare* where a theft unmasks parental vice and allows the young people to triumph, Juliette steals the 300,000 francs. She takes the money left by the two suitors, and gives it to Oko, her lover, so that he can 'buy' her as custom demands. 'En payant ma dot', she says to him, 'tu ne feras que rendre l'argent à ses légitimes propriétaires!' (II, 68)

Upon discovering the theft, Atangana asks Mbia to increase his bid by 100,000 francs. This would allow Atangana to reimburse the spurned farmer. Mbia refuses to pay what would be a total of 300,000 francs. He demands on the spot restitution of his 200,000 francs. When the money is not forthcoming, he threatens to call the police which sends all the villagers into a panic.

In desperation, the villagers throw in their lot with the sorcerer who promises to find the stolen loot. Accompanied by masks, bells, tam-tams, dancing, ritual chants and reading of the future in various objects, the sorcerer tries to embezzle his own booty from the villagers but fails. Finally, with the threat of police intervention hanging over their community, the villagers thankfully welcome Tchetgen, a middle-aged travelling salesman. Atangana offers to sell him Juliette for 300,000 francs, but the merchant is more interested in selling his wares to villagers who have gathered around him. Enter Oko, Juliette's chosen husband, sumptuously disguised as a civil servant, smoking a pipe bigger than that of Juliette's grandfather. Preceded by six musicians Kouma, Juliette's cousin and Oko's partner in crime, introduces Oko as one of the 'plus grands fonctionnaires'. (V, 130) This scene is reminiscent of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* where Cléonte and Covielle arrive at Monsieur Jourdain's disguised as Turks. In the same way as Cléonte wishes to marry Jourdain's daughter, so Oko wants to marry Juliette. Each suitor plays on the father's vices in order to reach his goal. However, Oko and Kouma

let their comedy play a little while longer than do Cléonte and Covielle since the African tricksters want to drive a message home to parents and grandparents in the audience. Oko calmly refuses to take Juliette's hand in marriage unless she consents to their nuptials, 'je n'épouserai votre fille que si elle y consent elle-même!' (V, 137) Of course, he pays the dowry with the 300,000 francs which Juliette had stolen. In a sense, all seems well that ends well. The young lovers win out and love rules the evening. As for the old tradition of buying the wife, this is clearly shown to be an outmoded practice, circumvented by Juliette and Oko in their passionate pursuit of true love.

Despite its classical structure and its echoes of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *L'Avare*, Oyônô-Mbia's play does not end quite so comfortably as Molière comedies. The resolution is ambivalent. The setting is clearly African. The old wooden chairs, the stools covered in antelope skin, and the hibiscus hedge evoke an almost timeless Africa, whereas the noises of the cars on the other side of the hedge are a constant reminder of the cultural clashes between old and new Africa. Similarly, the names of the characters mix African and French names indicative of the crossovers from France to the colonies. Juliette surprises her family and neighbours by demanding a future worthy of her education. In many other works of African literature, we might have seen Juliette fall victim to tradition. In *Toiles d'araignées* (1982) by Ibrahima Ly, or *Une si longue lettre* (1981) by Mariama Ba, the heroines find themselves shunned for refusing the husband that family or tradition chose for them. Nonetheless, Juliette's triumph is equally suggestive of the difficulties facing Africa caught between the ways of the ancestors and the new customs brought by long-term interaction with France through colonization, the education system, and economic ties. Paradoxically, the young lovers' victory is staged against a backdrop which incites sympathy with communal village life. The way passers-by call the name of the inhabitants of the house and the way the householders reply without hesitation indicates a high degree of intimacy and mutual respect. Furthermore, the sounds of barking dogs, bleating sheep, and crowing roosters, suggest a certain harmony between nature and life in the countryside.

Oyônô-Mbia's choice of a classical structure imbued with local African tradition gives his didactic play a multi-layered complexity. Having given himself the objective of criticizing the cruel clash of old and new values, Oyônô-Mbia is not content to present the triumph of a one-dimensional good over an obvious evil. Influenced by Western education, many young people have latched on to myriad perspectives on freedom and justice. At the same time, Oyônô-Mbia guards against throwing out all that is African in favour of Western or French ideals. The respect for one's elders, for example, is encapsulated in a misunderstanding in Act III where viper meat must be reserved for the village elders.

The strength of *Three Suitors: One Husband* lies in Oyônô-Mbia's ability to capture theatrically what is at stake. At the end of Act Two, for instance, Juliette gives Ono and Kouma the stolen 300,000 francs. They announce their intention to stage an impressive performance later on. As he exits, Kouma turns to the audience and lets them know that he will return in the fifth act. This break of dramatic illusion underlines the play's formal qualities:

Thus, although characters like Atangana, Abessolo, and Mbia display characteristics of real people, the emphasis upon their status as actors in a playfully construed fictional world enables the audience to gain a certain distance from them. This distancing in turn allows spectators to laugh at aspects of their own reality— aspects that people tend to regard as normal and natural when they encounter them in everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

Like the traditional Bulu stories which animated Oyônô-Mbia's childhood, he also seeks to penetrate false appearances. However this moment of revelation and catharsis is not totally reassuring. As the audience joins in the dancing and revelry at the end of *Three Suitors: One Husband*, the celebration does not allay anxieties raised earlier in the play. The generational clash between Juliette, Oko, Kouma and their elders is not pure tradition versus unadulterated modern vision. Take the central issue of marriage, for instance. In traditional Bulu society, a marriage was meant to strengthen the bond between two families. The price paid for the bride—home-grown fruit and vegetables, farm animals, or

labour to construct a house or clear a field—was meant to offset the expenses incurred by the woman's family in raising a child whose offspring and labour would eventually augment her husband's family's fortune. However, when colonization brought a money-based economy to Africa, the bride-price turned into a monetary deal which reduced the woman to an item to be bought and sold.

In *Three Suitors: One Husband*, when Juliette and Oko trick her father, they are not overturning a pure ancestral tradition, they circumvent a custom which has been adulterated by European economics of monetary self-interest. Equally their triumph involves the appropriation of 300,000 francs to settle the traditional bride-price transaction. Consequently, the young lovers do not unequivocally overthrow a local regime, they simply negotiate a difficult passage.

By way of conclusion, it would be useful to consider the finales of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Three Suitors: One Husband*. In Molière's play, the disguise that Covielle and Cléonte use to trick Monsieur Jourdain into giving Lucile's hand to Cléonte does not fool Jourdain in the same way as a single-minded character is duped in a traditional comedy. Rather than revealing the obsessive nature of Jourdain's pursuit of noble rank, Covielle, Cléonte, and the other characters in the play go along with Jourdain by joining him in his dream world:

In *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the lovers help the monomane to create a new world in which they ensure not only their own happiness but also that of Jourdain, since in this new world he too can realize his dreams. Covielle's and Cléonte's disguise as Turks supports Jourdain's new image of himself as Mamamouchi. Thus Jourdain becomes Mamamouchi—(a Paladin—an honoured knight at the court of Charlemagne)—Cléonte and Lucile can marry, and so can Covielle and Nicole. In this new reality where each has his or her wish, there is no need for antagonism, and so they rejoice in a carnivalesque atmosphere.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, Oyônô-Mbia's festive finale, in which audience and actors join in the wedding celebrations, captures the intricate and somewhat disturbing tension at the heart of contemporary

African society. On one hand, he shows us a culture assuming its own history, making use of its own maturity and giving expression to its own modernity, 'based upon its own experiences, the inspiration of its own environment, the talents specific to its own genius'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Oyônô-Mbia brings us back to a difficult past. His conscious borrowings from Molière evoke the cruelties of a colonial past, but not through a straightforward indictment of colonialism. As he brings to the stage a comedy with many Molièresque qualities, Oyônô-Mbia is not imitating but problematizing Molière's theatre within the context of cultural exchange between Africa and France. By staging African societal ills through a dramatic model borrowed from France, he reflects Africa's modern dynamics by intimating the complex linguistic, artistic, and performative issues confronting post-colonial African theatre. Oyônô-Mbia, takes what he needs of classical French theatre and what he gleans from his own culture in creating a vivacious and funny drama whose theatrical directness also suggests some of the complexities facing Africa today.

*Translated by Kevin Elstob*

## Notes

1. Richard Bjornson, 'Introduction' to *Faces of African Independence, Three Plays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. ix.
2. Clément Mbou, *Le Théâtre d'Aimé Césaire* (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1979), p. 7.
3. Aimé Césaire, 'Cahier d'un retour au pays natal', in *The Collected Poetry*. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Clayton Eshelman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 82.
4. Alioune Diop quoted by Christiane Yandé Diop in *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. xvi.
5. John Ardagh, *The New France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, [1977, 3rd edition]), p. 463.
6. Richard Bjornson, p. xx.
7. Kevin Elstob, 'The Love Doctor does not Dance with his Father-in-Law: an Analysis of Comedic and Balletic Elements in Molière's *L'Amour-Médecin*' in *Papers on Seventeenth Century Literature* (Vol. XV, No. 28, 1988), p. 146.
8. Alioune Diop, p. xv.