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The war veteran in Jean-Pierre Guingané's drama: between social activism and intellectualism

The war veteran in Jean-Pierre Guingané's drama

This paper looks at how Francophone literature and art in general have reflected the subject of the war veteran. It focuses on Jean Pierre Guingané, a Burkinabè playwright and theatre director, and argues that he has used the war veteran in two chief directions following his classification of drama in two categories: development (or social action) drama and intellectual drama. Fundamentally, the war veteran plays the same role of social critic and agent of social change in these two types of drama. Yet, in each of them, Guingané gives the war veteran a peculiar treatment that perfectly tallies with the dramaturgy of the category of plays concerned. In his social action drama, the war veteran is an illiterate and comic character, who, through spectacle and humour, drives home the playwright's social development message. In his elite drama, this is achieved through a loftier approach in compliance with the target audience. **Key words:** Drama, war veteran, development, criticism.

Introduction

Advocating theatre for development, Jean-Pierre Guingané conceives drama as an awareness-raising tool, *un moyen de communication sociale privilégié* ("a privileged social communication medium", Guingané 1990b: 8). As a result, he has concerned himself with finding the most appropriate dramatic language – one that taps the cultural, social and historical resources of his society. He resorts to traditional African art forms, especially folktales, and uses stage forms, language, and characters of significance to his audience (see Bissiri 2003). For instance, the artist-figure, the intellectual, the Koranic teacher, the Hajji, and the war veteran dominate in his drama.

The war veteran has become a very well known social figure in Francophone West Africa, following the first and second world wars, as well as the French colonial wars (especially in Indochina and Algeria). Key actors in the struggle for self-determination in many countries, many of them returned home with minds forever seared by the war experience. Some entered politics and even became presidents. In Burkina Faso, the second president, General Sangoulé Lamizana (1916-2005), was a former officer of the colonial French army. So were the late president of Togo, General Gnassingbé Eyadema, and the current president of Benin, General Mathieu Kérékou. Some others became court interpreters or held various civil service positions. The majority, however,

simply returned to their villages and met various fates, including madness. In most countries of the sub-region, war veterans have organized themselves into associations, and they hold significant positions in state protocols during official ceremonies such as Independence Day celebrations. During the past few years, they have been in the news because, firstly, there is an increasing recognition of their role in the various European wars, and secondly, after decades of resistance against their legitimate claims, the French government has finally decided to increase their pension benefits.

A patent social reality, the war veteran has concerned most artists, especially filmmakers, musicians, singers, and writers. The Congolese music star, Zao, has a song called "Ancien combattant" ("War veteran"), which is well known through Franco-phone Africa and beyond. *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), a film by the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, is based on the historical massacre of the famous *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* who dared claim their dues from the colonial authority (de Benoist 1982: 151-153).¹ Sanou Kollo, a Burkinabe filmmaker, has taken up the issue of pension in his beautiful Fespaco award-winning movie *Tassouman* ("Fire", 2003). In literature, the Congolese writer Henri Lopes has a short story entitled "Ancien combattant" (1971). The subject here is the involvement of the war veteran in politics through coups d'état. In his novel, *Monnè, Outrages et défis* ("Shame, Outrages and Challenges", 1990), the late Ivorian writer, Ahmadou Kourouma, portrays the war veteran as a court interpreter who seeks to use his position to reconcile the colonial authority and local populations. The Senegalese writers Ousmane Sembène (*Véhi-Ciosane*, ["Traditions"], 1965), Birago Diop (*Contes et lavanes*, ["Tales and Lavanes" = a ritual after honeymoon celebrations], 1963), and Cheick Hamidou Kane (*L'aventure ambiguë*, ["Ambiguous Adventure"], 1961), etc., have portrayed the war veteran as an enlightened madman who fights for the preservation of his native culture (see Dieng).

Jean-Pierre Guingané therefore ploughs a field already widely explored; yet his portraiture of the war veteran has more than a touch of originality. The war veteran appears in two of his plays, *Papa, oublie-moi* ("Daddy, forget me", 1990) and *Le cri de l'espoir* ("Cry of hope", 1991), each representing two categories of drama according to his own classification: development (or social action) drama and intellectual drama (Guingané 1988: 368-372). Fundamentally, the war veteran plays the same role in these plays: a social critic, an awareness raiser, an educator, and an agent of social change. Yet, in each of his two categories of drama, Guingané gives the war veteran a peculiar treatment, a specific image that perfectly tallies with the dramaturgy of the category of plays concerned.

What image of the war veteran?

In Guingané's drama, the war veteran presents two contrasting faces appropriate for the kind of drama in which the character appears and operates as a dramatic strategy

for achieving the playwright's sensitization objective. Of social action drama, Guingané (1997: 13) maintains that "the skill of the organizers lies in getting the audience to identify with the characters before going on to achieve critical detachment from its own behaviour."

Papa, oublie-moi is a play sponsored by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) about women and children's rights. Ladj, the protagonist, is a rich trader who has no consideration for women and refuses to provide his children with the bare minimum to help them start life: the first part of the play focuses on his refusal to give medical care to his latest baby girl, who is suffering from diarrhoea. He forbids Bintou, the mother, to take the child to hospital. The second part of the action concentrates on Mahamoudou, Ladj's 18-year-old boy, whom the police have arrested for drug use. When Mahamoudou was age two, Ladj divorced his mother and henceforth completely ignored the child who grew up motherless. Deprived of care and adequate education, Mahamoudou has now turned a thief and a drug addict. Confronting his father in the last scene, he spells out Ladj's various failings as a father, and asks him to forget him forever. Melodramatically, Ladj burst into tears and suffers for his inappropriate choices. Sarzan, the war veteran, intervenes in the action in defence of the children and the mother.

Papa, oublie-moi is a forum theatre play (social action drama), and Guingané portrays the war veteran in a classic manner. Mad-like, the war veteran is a public character who is bold and undaunted in his actions and behaviour. From Ladj's household, Sarzan, a corruption of Sergeant, is heard off-stage. Ladj's reaction in scene 4 on hearing him is typical,² and speaks to Sarzan's public image: "Ah! I almost forgot today is Sunday. This fellow is certainly dead drunk again. Fortunately he is not malicious" (56).³ Like the legendary madman/woman in literature, Sarzan is known and tolerated by all. Public opinion attributes his eccentricities to drunkenness or madness and justifies them as such. It does not take him seriously – until the truth of his action becomes obvious.

Fearlessly, Sarzan treads all spheres of society, unmindful of conventions. He enters Ladj's household not only drunk, but also asking for millet beer! What sacrilege! That Ladj himself is not worthier does not make a difference. Given his religious status, a Hajji, one who has visited Mecca, it would not occur to a "normal" individual in Ladj's society to behave in such a manner. Sarzan's status is a guarantee of immunity; he can be an iconoclast without any consequences.

Sarzan may even use violence, physical or verbal, yet he is tolerated because he enjoys a peculiar social status. Violence is part of his military identity, which transpires in his very name. He brutalizes Ladj, forcing him to take the child to hospital.

Using unconventional manners and straightforward language, Sarzan speaks his truths heedless of consequences. Arriving in Ladj's household in scene 5, he spits out his truth about Ladj's practice of child trafficking: "People talk say you look

pickin sell Marabout Moulaye. Me I no like am at all.” (58).⁴ Marginality generates a space of freedom, making Sarzan a genuine socially representative character.

Sarzan indeed represents public opinion. The truth he voices publicly is what everyone around Ladji thinks but dares not express. More than a mouthpiece, Sarzan is a liberating force for the community. He is a medium through which the community experiences freedom of speech and action (Guigané 1988: 365). In other words, the audience of social action drama would easily identify with him.

Guigané argues that the griot is a model for the actor of Forum Theatre. “From a formal point of view, social action theatre achieves very close contact with its audience by adopting the acting technique of traditional artists such as the West African griot” (Guigané 1997: 13-14). Like the griot, a traditional bard, historian, social critic, praise singer, and entertainer, the war veteran enjoys total immunity as well as the admiration and respect of populations.

Le cri de l'espoir belongs to Jean-Pierre Guigané's intellectual plays. A highly political play, it seeks to sensitize people and mobilize them for the purposes of development. Specifically targeting the ruling elite, it advocates “social change and the advent of a fairer society, less prone to material difficulties” (Guigané 1988: 369) through a process different from that of social action drama.⁵

The protagonist, Zida, is a brilliant and politically committed filmmaker, but he needs a producer to turn his script into movies. The state-owned film company has rejected his last script on dubious grounds. Luckily, Zida meets a foreign private agency, which helps him produce his film. By the end of the action, his film wins a prize at an international festival. In the meantime, Zida is badly beaten up by thugs working for Zouari, the State protocol director who has vainly tried to seduce his wife. On hearing about the success of Zida's film, the head of State insists on meeting the filmmaker immediately. The protocol director is in trouble: Zida is not fit to be introduced to the head of state, having been too severely beaten up.

In the course of the action, Zida takes a trip to his wife's village. Adou, his wife's father, is a veteran of the Second World War – but a veteran of a different kind. He has been subdued and become peace seeking. He dreads and abhors violence. Adou has remained tuned in to the world's affairs through the radio and he is troubled by its current state. Using the opportunity of the couple's trip, Adou comes to get help to understand a phenomenon that has been going on in the country. Something that fearfully “stirs up ghosts” of the war: “I want to know why people shout so much on the radio,” (47-48) he explains to Zida, who then goes on to give his interpretation of the phenomenon.⁶ Adou's is an inquiring mind, but one forever scorched by the violence of war.

The village where he has retired is a place of exile and asylum for Adou. It provides him the distance necessary for reflection. He enjoys the status of an intellectual, perfectly subsuming the definition proposed by Noureini Tidjani-Serpos (1989: 65):

“Involved in a permanent dialogue, ceaselessly comparing his own national and international experience with that of others, a little tormented and agitated, he (the intellectual) is always on the move. He is continuously questioning received ideas, stereotypes, and established habits.”⁷

The war veteran of Guingané’s intellectual play uses, not extravagance or eccentricities, but an intellectual process, which a grassroots audience would have difficulties understanding. In other words, characterization here nicely matches the kind of audience expected for *Le cri de l’espoir*: the elite.

Ultimately, the war veteran projects the image of an unconventional figure, a marginal even. As such, whatever the face he presents, whether he is called Sarzan or Adou, he offers a perspective and space for addressing the centre (society), its values and supposed normalcy.

The war veteran and social change

The war veteran is a figure of marginality, a leitmotiv of post-independence Francophone literature (see Dieng, also Paré 1997: 47), and he serves as a vehicle for asking fundamental societal questions – questioning the centre, its values and practices. Amady Aly Dieng, argues that more than a space of exile or asylum, marginality expresses freedom, radicalism, truth, and revolution. In Guingané’s drama, marginality is also a space for characters other than the war veteran, namely the artist and the intellectual, all of whom reject social injustice, and care about community development and welfare.

The war veteran offers Guingané two fundamental ways for reaching his audience: a playful way and a serious one. In both cases, the action of the war veteran always appears to be related to the protagonist’s, helping the latter achieve his goal (*Le cri de l’espoir*) or opposing him because he upholds values unacceptable to him (*Papa, oublie-moi*).

In *Papa, oublie-moi*, Ladjì the protagonist is an unworthy husband and father. The war veteran opposes him as such. In *Le cri de l’espoir*, he is an adjunct to the protagonist; he supports and helps Zida to achieve his objectives of fighting against injustice, changing the elite’s mind.

Transcending the theatrical modes that frame their individual existences, the two categories of veterans often use similar approaches in which their war experience appears as a trope for sensitization and for action, through invocation of the past (bridging the past and the present).

Thus, for instance, before scolding and forcing Ladjì to behave, Sarzan turns to his own war experience to try to sensitize him – and the public too. Sarzan castigates the type of religious education that Ladjì’s mentor – Moulaye, the one for whom he traffics children – offers, and goes on to assert and expound in scene 5 the importance

of modern education as well as the role of children for the future of the nation: "Pickin e mus go school. E mus read book for become dockta. E mus read for fly plane. E mus read so he go be sargeant, colonel, general. Moulaye im school na for make garibou, beggar. Shit! And what also? Pickin na pickin. E no be vagabond. Na him e go make tomorrow. Na him e be nation future." (*Papa*, 59)⁸ Sarzan becomes emotional as he admonishes Ladjı about his attitude to children. Ladjı's carelessness projects Sarzan back to the past, reminding him of the tragic fate of his own while he was at war: "When I come home I no de find notting. All my pickin done die finish. (*He cries then stops and resumes more calmly.*)" (*Papa*, 60)⁹

Sarzan draws his wisdom and knowledge from his personal experience, his experience of the war and its consequences. And he exploits them altruistically by sensitizing people around him, and forcing the reluctant ones to comply.

When he returns home from the war and finds all his six children "in the graveyard," he seeks explanation, answers. Neither the juju man nor the marabout (Koranic master) is able to satisfy his curiosity. Only the white doctor, General Laforet, is able to provide the rational explanation required by social action drama: the children were not immunized. "Ladjı, Moussa, when I go Indochina make soja, my bloody fucking wife and my stupid old broda no understand notting. Six pickin: dey no get vaccination. Now dey done die. Now, me na disabled war veteran. I no get no pickin again, my wife self no get pickin. (*Papa*, 60)¹⁰

Guingané's drama has a modern and developmental thrust: it castigates certain African traditional and religious practices and beliefs while upholding beneficial modern ones. Spelling out the different vaccines that could have saved the children, Sarzan uses his five fingers to simulate Unicef's sensitization technique employed in Extended Program of Immunization (EPI) campaigns. Convinced by General Laforet's explanation, and publicizing it, Sarzan has since decided to bandage his five fingers "so everybody go see na five time dey mus make vaccination" (*Papa*, 62).¹¹ Sarzan's graphic and moving narration has immediate effects on Bintou, who begins to sob. After she explains her current predicament, Sarzan changes tactics and marches Ladjı, to the delight of the public, to the hospital with the sick baby.

That Sarzan's technique of mixing persuasion and force is efficient may also be seen in the change in Moussa, Ladjı's companion. Finally siding with Sarzan, Moussa encourages Ladjı to take the baby to hospital and not to discriminate between boys and girls because they are all "God's gifts" (*Papa*, 65).¹² Also, on leaving Ladjı, Moussa has moral pangs: he regrets that they have eaten a whole chicken without giving a piece to Bintou, who, all the while, was crouching by their side carrying her sick baby.

The individual specificities of Guingané's two kinds of plays affect the portrayal of the war veteran and his methods of action. While in *Papa, oublie-moi*, he uses spectacle (showing), in *Le cri de l'espoir* he prefers reasoning, a more intellectual approach. In addition, while *Papa, oublie-moi* relies on humour, comedy, *Le cri de l'espoir*

operates more earnestly. Sarzan carries much of the comic dimension of the play through his language, behaviour, and appearance, which at the beginning of scene 5 are designed for characterization and comic effect. But this is not gratuitous comedy. As Guingané (1988: 371) puts it, "Through the comic mode, these dramas raise serious issues."¹³ On learning that Ladjí's wife is holding a sick baby that her husband refuses to take to the hospital, Sarzan grabs the baby and orders Ladjí to march like a soldier toward the hospital (*Papa*, 63-64). Humour here dominates seriousness; and this is how the playwright hopes to reach his audience. As he marches Ladjí to the hospital, he provokes laughter, but he also shows Ladjí and the audience what they must do. As he tells the pathetic story of his children in his peculiar language – known and expected by the audience – he entertains and educates them.

Guingané extensively exploits the public's perception of the war veteran; and this is a relevant choice for forum drama, which is fundamentally interactive. "The goal of each performance is to create an atmosphere that will encourage communication between the different groups in the audience" (Guingané 1997: 13-14). Having a powerful communicative and action potential, the war veteran is appropriate for producing entertainment, laughter, and beyond that, didacticism. He is perfectly adapted for the audience of social action drama, principally an illiterate audience in rural and/or urban areas.

In *Le cri de l'espoir*, the war veteran asks for an appointment to discuss with the young urban couple about *une affaire de temps* ("an issue of the times") (*Le cri*, 47). The formality of the approach speaks both to the seriousness of the matter and the nature of Adou's method. Fatou inquires whether she should retire, thinking his desire to confer with Zida may have to do with *une affaire d'hommes* ("men's talk") (*Le cri*, 47). Adou invites her to stay, for it may require more than one mind to elucidate his problem. He explains that people's tone and diction on the radio, his only companion these days, trouble him. Why such violence, which only raises ghosts of the war? Is it that history is about to repeat itself, that people have already forgotten about the big war (*Le cri*, 49-50). Adou is deeply troubled and genuinely afraid. In so raising his concern, he allows Zida to underscore the didactic function of his (Adou's) questions and narrative about the consequences of the war (*Le cri*, 51), and especially, to warn us against it. After Adou's departure, Zida asks, Socrates-like, to his spouse: "What about if he were right? Don't you have the feeling that repression is increasing in the country?" (*Le cri*, 51).¹⁴ By the end of the action, Zida is indeed a victim of this brewing violence.¹⁵ Through his artistic endeavour, Zida, the intellectual and filmmaker, hopes "to contribute to the emergence of a national conscience" (*Le cri*, 117).¹⁶ Adou not only justifies Zida's struggle, but also helps advance his cause.

Though both types of plays are concerned with society and developmental issues, the war veteran of forum theatre is concerned with immediacy, the tangible, while his counterpart in the elite theatre tackles the more intangible, abstract, and intellectual

ones. In *Papa, oublie-moi*, the key issues at stake are health, education, and other such existence concerns.

The playwright indicates how these existence preoccupations may be solved. The war veteran of social action drama is involved "in action", proposing or seeking solutions. Before the end of the play's action, Moussa, Ladji's companion, changes positively after listening to Sarzan. As to Ladji, he adopts a healthy behaviour, though unwillingly, by taking the baby to hospital and repenting for his neglect of his older child, Mahamoudou.

Not so in *Le cri de l'espoir* where Zida's struggle is more indirect and as a result perhaps more daunting. It takes time to change people's minds, especially the minds of those who are knowledgeable and who wittingly choose injustice and violence. At the end of the play's action, though Zouari (Director of State Protocol) is in trouble, there is no indication that the system is about to change. Zouari's fate is exclusively individual. The system's recognition of Zida simply adumbrates its intrinsic desire to exploit the situation to foster its own image and to perpetuate itself.

The types of questions raised in the two plays also indicate something about the interlocutors of the war veteran – and beyond them, the type of target audience expected for each of them. In *Papa, oublie-moi*, Sarzan opposes Ladji, a typical social character known for his conservatism. The target audience here is the grassroots who face the kind of problems confronting Ladji or stemming from his behaviour and choices. In *Le cri de l'espoir*, Adou talks to filmmaker Zida. That Adou has to wait until Zida offers him an opportunity to speak indicates the nature of both his concern and his expected audience. His target audience is the elite – those evolving in the decision-making sphere.

Setting in Guingané's drama is often deceptively simple. In the plays that concern us, it lacks a clearly specified toponymy: just a town, for *Papa, oublie-moi*, and a village, for *Le cri de l'espoir*. The absence of specified place names may be a sign of Guingané's desire to give a symbolic, universal dimension to his drama. The playwright wants to indicate that the issues he raises are valid and relevant anywhere in Burkina Faso, and perhaps West Africa. There also seems to be a paradox in the fact that Sarzan evolves in an urban centre, while Adou lives in a village. But the war veteran may not be determined by, or confined in, a single space. He belongs wherever his mission leads him. The issues facing Sarzan are not space specific, at least, not in the West African context. Both rural and urban audiences may find *Papa, oublie-moi* relevant. As to the village setting in *Le cri de l'espoir*, I have already argued that it acts as an exile or asylum, providing both Adou and Zida the necessary distance or detachment for their intellectual postures.

Accounting for the function of tales in francophone drama, Guingané maintains that it is a strategy to avoid censorship (Guingané 1990b: 11). It seems that because of his acknowledged social status as explained earlier, the war veteran serves the same

purpose in Guingané's drama. Just as no one would think of forbidding the telling of tales, it would occur to none to seek to censor the war veteran – a madman – unless, perhaps, one is also mad!

In exploring the theme of the war veteran in his drama, Guingané gives it a peculiar and original twist. He adapts him to his dramaturgy, both in outlook and in purpose. In his social action drama, the war veteran is an illiterate and conspicuous character, who, through spectacle and humour, drives home the social development message of the playwright. In his elite drama, this is achieved through a loftier approach in compliance with the target audience. A key dramatic device, the war veteran therefore allows the dramatist to reach two types of audiences: the grassroots and the elite. The war veteran seeks to exorcise violence and injustice for a better society. Whether he opposes or supports the protagonists, he ultimately instructs him, and us – the audience.

Notes

1. The term *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* literally means "Senegalese riflemen," but it is actually a generic term applying to all African soldiers during the world wars and the French colonial wars.
2. This is reminiscent of the situation of marginal characters like Okolo in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* or Orukore in John P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*.
3. "Ah! Oui, j'oublie qu'aujourd'hui c'est dimanche. Ce bougre doit être encore ivre-mort. Heureusement qu'il n'est pas méchant" (Guingané 1990a: 56). All translations are mine.
4. "Vous sarsé zenfant pour vendi Marabou Moulaye. Moi pas content ça di tout" (Guingané 1990a: 58).
5. "le changement social et l'avènement d'une société plus juste et moins soumise aux difficultés matérielles" (Guingané 1988: 369).
6. "Je voulais savoir pourquoi les gens crient tant à la radio" (Guingané 1991: 48).
7. "Dialoguant en permanence, comparant sans cesse sa propre expérience nationale et continentale avec celle des autres, un peu tourmenté et agité, il est toujours en mouvement. Il est interrogation permanente des idées reçues, des clichés, des poncifs et des habitudes établies" (Tidjani-Serpos 1989: 65).
8. "Zenfant i doit toudié pour devenir doctair. I doit toudié pour devenir Sarzan, colonel, général. Moulaye son lacole, si pour devenir garibou, mendiant, merde alors! Et pi quoi zencore? Zenfant si zenfant. Zenfant si pas vagabon. Zenfant si demain. Zenfant si navenir de son la patrie." (Guingané 1990a: 59)
9. "Quand si veni à cé moi ça n'a rien trouvé ; Tout mon le zenfant si déjà mort. (*Il pleure puis se calme un peu avant de reprendre plus posément.*)" (Guingané 1990a: 60)
10. "Ladji, Moussa, quand j'étais larmé Indochine, mon femme de badissalo, mon grand frère de zimbécile n'a rien compris. Six nenfant: ce n'a pas vacciné leur. Voici leur maintenant dans tombeau. Wala moi aujourd'hui, mitilé de guerre. Si posé sans zenfant; mon femme aussi si posé sans zenfant." (Guingané 1990a: 60)
11. "pour que tout le monde vi qu'il faut faire cinq fois la vaccination" (Guingané 1990a: 62).
12. "un don de Dieu" (Guingané 1990a: 65).
13. "A travers le comique du jeu, ce sont des sujets graves qui sont traits dans ces pièces." (Guingané 1988: 371)
14. "Et s'il avait raison? Tu n'as pas l'impression que la repression s'accroît dans le pays?" (Guingané 1991: 51).
15. Guingané takes up this theme in his *Le fou* ("The Madman", 1986); the cynicism and violence of the authorities lead poor citizens to madness, revolt and revenge.
16. "contribuer à l'éclosion d'une conscience nationale véritable" (Guingané 1991: 117).

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