WEREWERE LIKING, SONY LABOU TANSI, AND TCHICAYA U TAM’SI:
PIONEERS OF “NEW THEATER” IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

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This dissertation is an analysis of “new African theater” as illustrated in the works of three francophone African writers: the late Congolese Sony Labou Tansi (formerly known as Marcel Ntsony), the late Congolese Félix Tchicaya, who wrote under the pseudonym Tchicaya U Tam’si, and the Cameroonian Werewere Liking. The dissertation examines plays by these authors and illustrates how the plays clearly stand apart from mainstream modern French-language African theater.

The introduction, in Chapter 1 provides an explanation of the meaning that has been assigned to the term “new African theater.” It presents an overview of the various innovative structural and linguistic techniques new theater playwrights use that render their work avant-garde. The chapter also studies how new theater playwrights differ from mainstream ones, especially in the way they address and present their concerns regarding the themes of oppression, rebellion, and the outcome of rebellion. The information provided in this chapter serves as a springboard to the primary focus of the dissertation, which is a detailed theoretical and textual analysis of experimental strategies used by the three playwrights in the areas of theme, form, and language.

Chapter 2 shows how Liking experiments with indigenous ritual form, symbolic ritual language, and body language while presenting concerns about the oppression of women in La puissance de Um (1979) and Les mains veulent dire (1987). Chapter 3
demonstrates how oppressive leadership is presented by Labou Tansi in his ritualistic, yet grotesque, *La parenthèse de sang* (1979) and the grotesque in *Je soussigné cardiaque* (1981). Chapter 4 explores U Tam’si concerns with oppression in modern Africa illustrated through the indigenous funeral dirge in *Le bal de Ndinga* (1979), and the grotesque and the absurd in *Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku* (1979). Chapter 5 provides a commentary on the revolutionary nature of the three playwrights’ works and discusses the accessibility of these works to the audience for whom they are intended.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................i

Dedication ...................................................................................................................................iv

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................v

Vita ................................................................................................................................................vi

Chapters:

1. Introduction
   1.1 The “New” French-Language African Theater ................................................................. 1
   1.2 The Form and Language of the “New” Theater ................................................................. 4
   1.3 Oppression, Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in the “New” Theater .......................... 16
   1.4 Why the Theater of Labou Tansi, U Tam’si and Liking? .................................................. 25

2. Werewere Liking: Rebellion, Ritual and Healing
   2.1 Introducing Liking .............................................................................................................. 29
   2.2 La puissance de Um: A Brief Overview .............................................................................. 33
   2.3 Les mains veulent dire: A Brief Overview .......................................................................... 35
   2.4 Oppression in Liking’s Experimental Theater ................................................................. 37
   2.5 Rebellion and Outcome in Liking’s Experimental Theater .............................................. 45
   2.6 The Ritual Form in Liking’s Experimental Theater ......................................................... 49
   2.7 The Symbolic Language of Liking’s Experimental Theater ........................................... 55
   2.8 The Body Language of Liking’s Experimental Theater .................................................. 67

3. Sony Labou Tansi: Oppression, Ritual and Absurdity
   3.1 Introducing Labou Tansi ................................................................................................... 75
   3.2 La parenthèse de sang: A Brief Overview ......................................................................... 78
3.3 *Je soussigné cardiaque*: A Brief Overview .................................................... 79
3.4 Oppression in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater...................................... 81
3.5 Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater..................................................................................... 87
3.6 The Ritual Form of Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater.............................. 88
3.7 Fantasy and the Grotesque in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater ............. 92
3.8 The Language of Labou Tansi’s Experimental theater.................................. 101

4 Tchicaya U Tam’si: Oppression, Chaos and Futility
4.1 Introducing U Tam’si ....................................................................................106
4.2 *Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku: Prince qu’on sort:* A Brief Overview...........................................................................................109
4.3 *Le Bal de Ndinga*: A Brief Overview.............................................................111
4.4 Oppression in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater ..........................................112
4.5 Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater .....................................................................................115
4.6 The Funeral Dirge in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater ...............................115
4.7 The Grotesque and the Absurd in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater............120
4.8 The Language of U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater......................................126

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................130

Works Cited...............................................................................................................134
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 The “New” French-Language African Theater

Over the past twenty to twenty-five years, a new generation of francophone African dramatists has emerged that has been pre-occupied with renewing both the mainstream structures and concerns of modern African theater. Although differing in their individual approaches to theater, playwrights such as the Cameroonian Werewere Liking, the late Congolese Sony Labou Tansi, the late Congolese Tchicaya U Tam’si, the Togolese Sénouvo Agbota Zinsou and the Ivorian Bernard Zadi Zaourou, have been recognized as leading figures of this “new theater” because of their attempts to break away from the traditions that characterized earlier post-independence plays of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In this introductory chapter I propose to give an overview of the general characteristics of the “new” African theater. This chapter sets the stage for the primary focus of the dissertation, which is a detailed analysis of new francophone African theater as it is practiced by Liking, Labou Tansi and U Tam’si in particular. However, before the specific characteristics of the new theater are explored, it seems most appropriate at this juncture to begin the analysis by initially posing the following questions: What in specific terms is “new” about the theater of these writers? Also, if
there is indeed a new francophone African theater, what type of theater makes up the “old” or “conventional” theater against which the new theater is a reaction? Because there are several explanations and no definitive answers to these questions, it is imperative to specify the meaning that has been ascribed to the term “new theater” so that the reader might understand the specific, novel elements of Liking’s, Labou Tansi’s and U Tamsi’s, theater.

The subject at hand is complex because there are several definitions of the expression “new African theater.” In the “Introduction” to New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa Ann Fuchs remarks, for example, that in theater “‘[n]ew’ may be novel or different, the latest in time (which may be merely a continuation of the ‘old’) or ‘new’ may mean a whole period or movement which constitutes a definitive break with the ‘ancient.’” If one considers the element of Fuchs’s definition that refers to new theater being “the latest in time,” this is a more trivial definition because the newness would merely be determined by when one play is written in relation to another. In this case Protais Asseng’s Trop c’est trop (1981) and Moussa Konaté’s L’or du diable (1985) would be new in a temporal sense when studied in relation to plays written earlier on in the 1960s such as Guillaume Oyono-Mbia’s Trois prétendants… un mari (1963) or even Cheikh Ndao’s L’exil d’Albouri (1967). On the other hand, the part of Fuchs’s definition that describes theater that is “novel or different” or one that makes a definitive break from the “ancient,” especially when it represents a change in form, is more relevant to this dissertation.
Before delving into the innovative features of new French-Language African theater, I need to explain what is considered to be “conventional” modern African theater. “Conventional” theater in this dissertation is African literary theater that surfaced as a result of the influence of formal Western colonial education in Africa. The conventional theater alluded to here is what O. R Dathorne describes as “new staged” theater in Africa; one that has a dual identity; one that consists of an amalgamation of indigenous oral performance forms and Western scripted drama (407). Although this dissertation acknowledges the fact that the conventional modern French-language theater in Africa is made up of a marriage of traditions (both African/indigenous and Western/textual) it argues that for the most part, this theater that includes the plays of the first wave of francophone African dramatists who began writing plays as early as the 1930s, tends to mimic more the patterns of mainstream French theater. While these earlier plays often borrow certain elements from the performance-oriented traditions of pre-colonial indigenous African forms, their basic structures and language are closely adapted to fit conventional Western theatrical traditions.

The “New theater” described in this dissertation is French-language theater that takes a major leap in its attempt to make a revolutionary move to subvert the theatrical patterns of conventional African theater. Unlike conventional theater, the new theater is largely influenced by models from indigenous oral African performance forms. Not only is the new theater made up of novel forms, it also addresses social and political concerns pertaining to Africa in a manner that greatly differs from that of the
conventional modern African theater. In order to provide a clearer understanding of the experimental aspects of the new theater, I will first describe the general characteristics of the conventional theater and then present the contrasting characteristics of the new theater that subvert the traditions of the old. I will carry out this analysis in the proceeding sub-chapters entitled “New Forms and Language in ‘New’ Theater” and “Oppression, Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in ‘New’ Theater.” The former, as the title indicates, presents a study of the specific structural and linguistic techniques of the dramatists while the latter focuses primarily on different ways the dramatists tackle social and political issues revolving around the subject of oppression and the ensuing forms of rebellion and outcomes.

1.2 The Form and Language of the “New” Theater

Generally speaking, conventional modern African dramatists have often been inspired in some way by the action and vibrancy of certain indigenous oral performances of their cultures. With the exception of a few plays such as Seydou Badian’s La mort de Chaka (1973), U Tam’si’s Le zulu (1977), Protai Asseng’s Trop c’est trop (1981) or even Moussa Konaté’s L’or du diable (1985) which present African concerns but present no aspects borrowed from indigenous oral performances, the larger portion of conventional French-language theater has attempted to incorporate a few elements taken from indigenous oral performance forms.

Conventional modern African theater is created by a marriage of traditions. This union attempts to weave in the text certain dramatic aspects of everyday life, such
as scenes from religious or social life, with which indigenous Africans are familiar (Bakary Traoré 114). However, as previously mentioned, the basic structures/forms of the conventional theater remain primarily grounded in Western mainstream theater models even though the plays include some elements from indigenous sources such as songs, dances, proverbs, miming, improvisation, or vernacular language idioms.

In the area of form, a play such as Oyono-Mbia’s *Trois prétendants… un mari* falls into the category of conventional modern French-language theater because it contains elements taken from indigenous performances although its structure is based on a mainstream European model. For example, this play contains a scene involving the ritual act that Sanga-Titi, the village witchdoctor performs for the family in crisis. However, the ritual scene is a mere episode in the play; the rest of the play is primarily structured in a form reminiscent of Molière’s drama.

Like *Trois prétendants… un mari*, Aimé Césaire’s *Une saison au Congo* (1973) also falls into this category of conventional modern French-language African theater. Although Césaire is not a native of Africa, his publications are usually grouped under modern francophone African literary works. While *Une saison au Congo* is written in the European scripted tradition, it also contains some elements borrowed from the oral griotic indigenous performance traditions of pre-colonial West Africa. *Une saison au Congo* depicts the fusion of Western and traditional African cultures especially in the way Césaire uses the *joueur de sanza* to carry out a role similar to that of a traditional griot’s duties. In West Africa *griots* had multiple roles. They were storytellers, praisesingers, poets, musicians, actors, dancers etc. Besides providing entertainment,
they were also responsible for orally passing down important aspects of the people’s history, genealogy, customs, beliefs and societal expectations. The *joueur de sanza* in *Une saison au Congo* makes commentaries on the people and the events in the play by using songs and a language involving riddles that are typical of the ancient West African griotic tradition.

In “African Theatre in a Global Context” Don Rubin describes some differences between modern African theater and other theaters around the world such as conventional mainstream Western theater. He explains how modern francophone African playwrights have experimented with the role of the traditional African *griot* in their theater: “Sub-Saharan Africa—Black Africa, if you will—has a multitude of its own traditions and has evolved its own contemporary forms based on those traditions. In francophone Africa much of it is based on the griotic tradition rooted in each community’s oral history” (14). However, contrary to Rubin’s claim above that much of contemporary francophone African theater is “based on the griotic tradition” this dissertation argues that much of the modern French-language theater that has used the griotic traditions has not been “rooted” in indigenous oral forms. Most conventional French language African plays remain more loyal to classical Western textual forms. In the Introduction to Liking’s *La puissance de Um* Marie-José Hourantier comments about the conventional French-language theater that greatly remains influenced by mainstream Western models.

Le théâtre en Afrique est trop axé sur la théâtralité occidentale. Il est difficile de lui trouver une originalité quand il s’attache à reprendre les mécanismes éculés des boulevards parisiens ou la dramaturgie classique qui ne devrait plus être qu’un objet de musée. Pourquoi se tourner encore
vers l’Occident quand la brousse africaine regorge de ces multiples théâtralisations de la vie quotidienne où la guérison, les deuils, les initiations révèlent à l’observateur attentive, un spectacle de haute tenue artistique? (La puissance de Um 5)

Hourantier considers the conventional theater a betrayal to indigenous African drama because it does not fully take advantage of the rich resources that the indigenous forms have to offer. Other literary critics such as Dorothy Blair refer to this type of theater as “unexperimental, conservative, original in theme, but unexciting in form” (85).

The new theater is revolutionary because it breaks away from the forms of the conventional modern African theater. “New theater” is for the most part radical in that first it seeks to “nativize,” “Africanize” or even “ritualize” contemporary francophone African theater by giving it a format grounded primarily in indigenous oral performance modes. New theater is created when traditional indigenous forms or urban popular forms based on indigenous oral forms are adapted as basic foundations or models for modern plays.

Instead of borrowing particular elements or sequences from indigenous oral performances, new theater experiments with entire indigenous performance formats. In new theater, entire healing, death or initiation rituals or other indigenous day-to-day African performances are the essential fabric of the plays instead of being mere elements of decor within the plays. Moreover, when new theater is performed, it is sometimes performed in stage settings similar to those of the spatial arrangements in the indigenous contexts; stages on which new theater plays are performed are not limited to modern raised platforms in theater buildings. For instance, Liking’s La puissance de Um is not performed on a conventional raised stage where audience and actors are rigidly separated.
Instead, the scenic space for the play is a shed constructed in the form of a semi-circle, arranged as it would be in the traditional indigenous ritual setting.

The types of indigenous theater that inspire new theater fall in the category of performances that Anthony Graham-White describes as “traditional drama” in the African context. This is a type of theater that was being performed before the colonial era, and is still performed especially in the rural areas. The indigenous theater is performed in the vernacular, it is not written down, and it is generally performed by a special society or age-group at gatherings such as festivals (Graham-White 2). The new theater forms are also taken from indigenous performances in Africa that Victor Witter Turner refers to as social dramas when he discusses the theatrical potential of social life in indigenous African societies (From Ritual to Theatre 9).

While carrying out an expansive three-year study of what he calls “social drama” in African villages of Ndembu, Lamba, Kosa and Gisu people, Turner observed that “something like ‘drama’ was constantly emerging, even erupting, from the otherwise fairly even surfaces of daily life” (9). Although Jean Duvignaud does not focus on studying social dramas in African villages like Turner does, he explains how various day to day ceremonies in the lives of people from all over the world involve role playing or dramatizations. Duvigaud says that when members in societies communally engage in ceremonies such as those for restoring order in the society (by punishing, condemning or pardoning group members), these ceremonies are often theatrical (Duvignaud 8-9). In the types of social/ceremonial performances described above, aspects of daily social life are not omitted from the drama but are part and parcel of the drama. “Collective life itself in
its very rhythms (agrarian and seasonal), social processes (birth puberty, circumcision, nuptials, enthronement) and responses to life crises (sickness, death, social conflict, misfortune or natural disaster” are also included in these types of day to day ceremonial performances in the society (Conteh-Morgan, *Theatre and Drama* 11).

When social dramas from indigenous contexts are adapted as plays by modern African dramatists the result is the new theater that is described in this dissertation. The types of indigenous theater performances adapted for the new theater can either be secular, religious or contain both religious and secular elements. Religious indigenous theater performances include healing rituals of the Bassa of Cameroon like the Likaa, a ritual ceremony performed to heal victims of incest, or even the Mbak used to treat illness that come about as a result of crime. The Mbak and the Likaa provide the basic foundation for two of Liking’s ritual plays: *Le rituel du ‘Mbak’ de Nsondo Sagbegue* (1979) and *La queue du diable* (1979). Secular indigenous performances inspire Eugène Dervain’s *Saran ou la reine scélérate* (1968) and *La langue et le scorpion* (1968). The basic structures of these plays by Dervain are taken from epic oral forms transcribed and translated by Amadou Hampâté Ba. In the anglophone theatrical sector, new theater would include Efua T. Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) derived from a story-telling tradition of the Akan people of Ghana and Wole Soyinka’s *The Road* (1965) taken from an indigenous West African masquerade performance.

The play by the Ghanaian Sutherland, the *Marriage of Anansewa* for instance is an adaptation of a storytelling art known as Anansesem by the Akan. In the traditional context the Anansesem performances are inspired by several stories about the main
character known as Ananse, a trickster character representing “Everyman.” In her adaptation of this indigenous form, Sutherland follows closely the style of the traditional storyteller and creatively transforms this usually domestic storytelling activity into a modern theatrical performance. She uses techniques such as audience participation in The Marriage of Anansewa that are practiced in the indigenous oral performances and even begins and ends her play in song just like the typical traditional singing of Mboguo songs at the beginning and end of the musical Anansesem.

At times the oral sources for new theater may be indigenous but not pre-colonial. A good example of this is Zinsou’s On joue la comédie (1975) which is not directly adapted from a pre-colonial or rural form, yet it is subversive with regard to the traditions of other modern francophone African theater in that it takes its entire format from the oral indigenous tradition reflected in Togolese concert parties. The concert parties are an urban theater form that started in the 1960s, comprising a blend of rural African traditional performances and the popular culture of urban settings. The performances are oral, unscripted and the actors/performers improvise as they go along often incorporating music and dance in the performance. Concert parties are generally secular rather than religious forms, inspired by real life situations in the community.

Like the Togolese concert party performance, Zinsou’s On joue la comédie includes audience participation, singing and dancing, and allows room for improvisation for both the actors and spectators. Zinsou’s On joue la comédie greatly encourages the interplay between actors and spectators to a point that it even becomes difficult for the spectator/reader to distinguish what is really part of the play from what is part of real life.
This is made evident especially in the scene where the stage directions describe two policemen who jump on the set, stop the play and ask the présentauteur to show his identification papers: “…deux policiers sortis du parterre montent sur la scène et sifflent pour arrêter le jeu. Premier policier: ‘qu’est-ce que vous fabriquez là’” (7)? The présentauteur explains that the troupe is merely staging a play but spectateurs may be totally thrown off guard since it is not clear whether the policemen are part of the act or not.

On a more superficial level, the role of the présentauteur in Zinsou’s On joue la comédie may appear similar to that of the joueur de sanza presented in Une saison au Congo (a conventional play). The joueur de sanza announces the major issues of the play and he is simultaneously ringleader, actor, director and producer. But the manner in which the joueur de sanza solicits communication with the audience differs from that of the présentauteur in Zinsou’s play. The joueur de sanza only makes commentaries and does not actively interact with the spectators. The spectators always know that he is playing a part in a play. On the other hand, the présentauteur, like the meneur de rite in the indigenous context actively engages the spectateurs in a life-like performance.

Second, besides drawing inspiration from indigenous oral performances, the new theater in Africa often breaks away from the realist traditions of earlier modern African theater. The forms of the earlier playwrights closely resemble mainstream Western realist theater that tends to rely on elements such as linear narratives, coherent dialogue, the authority of the director, and characters/performers with which the spectators can identify. The new French-language theater in Africa is much like the French avant-garde
theater of the twentieth-century (such as the theater of the absurd by Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco) in that it does not require cleverly constructed linear narratives or storylines of realist traditions. The new theater also does not seek to represent realistic historic events or characters with which spectators can easily identify. In fact, some of the creators of the new theater such as Labou Tansi or U Tam’si use cartoon-like characters or caricatures in order to reject realist representations of people and the world in plays like *La parenthèse de sang* and *Le destin glorieux*: “[C]haracters presuppose that human nature, the diversity of personality and individuality, is real and matter” (Esslin 53). But these notions of reality are ones that the new theater generally seeks to subvert.

In accentuating the subversion of realist forms the new theater often involves fantasy (especially when its is drawn from epics, folktales or legendary tales for example) or mystic phenomena (when it is taken from rituals involving moments of highly ritualized trance, dream-like states). For example, the dream-like world of Labou Tansi’s *La parenthèse de sang* presents the experience of the chaos prevailing in Africa today through an expanded vision that imagination (with its larger than life images), is able to provide. The form of the play (inspired by the *kingizila* healing ritual of Congo) is intended to provide a means of escape from the way we usually perceive the realities of modern African life. As shown in Chapter 3, in *La parenthèse de sang* Labou Tansi is able to create a world of fantasy that provides a dimension that is liberating and limitless because the writer is no longer restrained by the conventions of historic reproductions or factual or realist representations.
Liking, on the other hand, seeks to heighten the mystic or supernatural aspect of her ritual theater and she borrows techniques from indigenous healing rituals such as trance or spirit possession. In Liking’s ritual theater (like in the psychodrama of the traditional African context) the realm of trance evoked by the ritual performance is used to provide an avenue by which individuals gain a deeper understanding of themselves and of community members.

As we will see in Chapter 2, Liking’s ritual plays apply the notion of the potential power of creativity in liminality described by Turner in From Ritual to Theatre. Liminal phenomena are collective experiences that generally take place during ritual processes of people in tribal, agrarian, or non-industrialized societies. During this period the ritual participants go through a period of “anti-structure” which represents the “latent system of a potentially creative phase” (28). The phase involves various ordeals, myths, maskings, mumming, secret languages and even the presentation of secret icons to the novices. All these factors create a strange domain in the seclusion camp where

[t]he bizarre becomes the normal and where through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining a monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes the novices are induced to think, and think hard about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted. (Turner, From Ritual to Theatre 42)

Liking’s ritual plays (like other new theater based on ritual forms) often depict such bizarre happenings or bizarre “anti-structured”/absurd worlds where even the characters use strange or even symbolic language. It is also this experimentation with unconventional language structures that further demonstrates the third way in which the
new theater goes against the grain of conventions used by traditional francophone African
dramatists.

The new theater subverts the language of conventional francophone African
theater that was mainly a theater of discussion. Conventional French-language theater
conformed to a Western mainstream model described below by Richard Schechner in

Essays in Performance Theory.

In the West the active sense of script was forgotten, entirely displaced by
drama; and the doings of a particular production became the way to
present a drama in a new way. Thus the script no longer functioned as a
code for transmitting action through time; instead the doings of each
production became the code for representing the words-of-the-drama.
(Schechner 38)

Conventional modern African playwrights were encouraged by colonial education
to establish a purely spoken drama where gestures or body movements were discouraged.
And even when the body is used to communicate messages in the conventional modern
African plays this only occurs during short segments of the plays. Oyono-Mbia for
instance, attempts to incorporate a few gestures in Trois prétendants… un mari in a scene
of practically circus comedy when Mbia, one of the suitors, attempts to shake the village
headman’s hand:

Et il s’avance pour serrer la main à Mbarga. Or Engulu, qui revenait de la
route, chargé de plusieurs bouteilles de vin, essaie de faire brusquement
volte-face. Mais il s’empêtre dans son pantalon bouffant, et s’étale de tout
son long sur la scène, au moment historique où les deux grands hommes
allaient se serrer la main. (51)

Oyono-Mbia uses body movements during this short incident for the comical effect, but
the body movements themselves do not contain a symbolic communicative language.
Unlike the conventional theater, the new theater generally attempts to use body movements instead of words for communication. In this way it resembles French avant-garde theater of the twentieth-century such as Antonin Artaud’s that attempted to take the focus back to the doing aspects of script in the model of theater/performance emphasized in Asian, Oceanic and African cultures. Because the indigenous forms that inspire the new theater often contain various forms of non-verbal communication it is no wonder that the new theater experiments with these elements of language. “[E]lements such as the voice and the body (greatly prized in traditional African society) also now intervene actively in their plastic materiality (inflections, facial expressions, gestures, movement) to concretize, to complement, and sometimes even to replace speech” (Conteh-Morgan, “African Traditional Drama” 5).

These are the same elements that Turner observed during his study of the quotidian social dramas of certain African villages. “Each culture, each person within it, uses the entire sensory repertoire to convey messages: manual gesticulations, facial expressions, bodily postures, rapid heavy, or light breathing, tears, at the individual level; stylized gestures, dance patterns, prescribed silences, synchronized movements such as marching, the moves and “plays” of games, sports and rituals, at the cultural level” (From Ritual to Theatre 9). Furthermore, besides the language of the body, the new theater, seeks to explore the use of other non-verbal sounds. Labou Tansi for instance, experiments with nonsensical sounds such as barks and grunts emitted by the crazy character, Mallot. Liking on the other hand seeks to create a symbolic language of
communication using sounds such as screams, shouts, or shrieks which will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

This sub-chapter has provided an overview of specific innovations in the area of form and language that the creators of new theater exploit to produce a theater that goes against the grain of conventional francophone African theater. The following sub-chapter will address the concerns of new theater in the areas of oppression, rebellion and ensuing outcome of rebellion.

1.3 Oppression, Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in the “New” Theater

First, conventional French-language theater, concerned mainly with realities of Africa’s past, primarily portrays the oppression of Africans by European colonial invaders. Several plays of the 1960s and early 1970s often referred to as historical plays such as Cheikh Ndao’s L’Exil d’Albouri (1967) or Bernard Dadié’s Beatrice du Congo (1970) are pre-occupied with denouncing the colonial order. Historical plays generally focus more on validating the cultural values of pre-colonial Africa and presenting stories of a glorious and rich African past with great heroic leaders in order to counteract the hegemonic colonial discourse of the West. In their preoccupation with criticizing the colonial order, the creators of this earlier theater tend to emulate the role of the traditional griot as praise-singers and chroniclers of the people’s history. In the historical plays, dramatists such as Ndao, Dadié, Seydou Badian, or Zadi Zaourou laud an idealized image of Africa and present strong mythical heroes in order to galvanize the people in a spirit of Negritude. “Historical plays stress the glories of the African past in order to
discredit colonialism, and are frequently set in the period of the first confrontation in the nineteenth century between African kingdoms and French colonial armies” (Wake and Banham 63).

The leaders depicted in historical plays are admirable role models who courageously attempt to ward off attacks by colonial invaders. “The historical and legendary heroes of the theater become symbols of a people’s resistance against colonial rule; they also become a source of pride and self-esteem” (Spronk 3). Some of the exemplary models in this conventional historical theater are: the eighteenth-century heroine Maman Kimpa Vita (Doña Béatrice) depicted in Dadié’s Beatrice du Congo; the nineteenth-century gallant fighter Emperor Samory Touré and his soldiers in Zaourou’s Les sofás (1975); or the nineteenth-century warrior hero Chaka in Badian’s La mort de Chaka (1973). Moreover, in these historical plays aggressive rebellion or violence against the colonial invaders or other enemies such as that displayed in Badian’s La mort de Chaka or Zaourou’s Les sofás are justifiable or honorable if they are used as a means to acquire freedom, peace or prosperity for the people. In La mort de Chaka, the great Zulu warrior Chaka not only kills his enemies but also sheds the blood of his own people. His primary goal as a tireless leader in the play is to fight the last battle that will ensure peace and happiness for his people, even though his plans are strongly opposed by his generals. Chaka’s killings are justified by his intentions: the pride, prosperity, and security that the warrior’s battles bring to his people.

While they capitalized on issues regarding oppression by colonial rulers, historical plays were not concerned with the theme of the oppression of women. The
female characters in these earlier plays are idealized and do not show discontent about their roles in society: “most women in historical plays are of a traditional mentality. They are usually royal women with very strong characters, and they command authority” (Edem 265). This group of female characters with romanticized roles in conventional francophone African theater includes: Doña Béatrice in Dadié’s *Beatrice du Congo*; the king’s sister, Linguère Madjiguene, and the queen mother Yây Diop in Cheikh Ndão’s *L’exil d’Albouri* (1967); and even to a certain extent Notibé in Badian’s *La mort de Chaka*. These women in the historical French-language African plays are depicted as strong admirable and dutiful women who faithfully satisfy their traditional roles within the society.

There is however, another group of conventional francophone playwrights who address gender issues. These are playwrights whose focus is mainly social and not historical. These dramatists wrote from the late 1950s through the 1970s and their work generally presents social satires that demonstrate concerns about various problems arising from the conflicts between African culture and the modernity of Western culture. This group of modern social theater (often social satires) includes plays such as Guillaume Oyono-Mbia’s *Notre fille ne se mariera pas* (1973) and *Trois prétendants…un mari* (1963) which address gender topics such as bride price, the oppression of women and the need for emancipation. *Trois prétendants…un mari* in particular criticizes the notion that African women are simply economic commodities within the society. The play presents the complications of tradition versus modernity through the story of Juliette, who returns from school to find that her father has accepted bride price for her from a suitor without
her knowledge. The oppression of women in these social plays is presented in comical plots that resemble those of Molière’s theater such as *Le malade imaginaire*.

Generally speaking, conventional plays intend to raise the consciousness of the readers/spectators and provide lessons to help ameliorate their conditions. In his comments about the earlier plays David Kerr states that “[o]ne common technique for making history plays relevant to modern audiences is that of allowing the historical plots to act as loose allegories for modern situations” (117). In introductory remarks to Zaourou’s *Les sofas* J. Favarel also remarks that the play is intended to push Africans to reflect on their conditions: “Ce n’est pas une reconstitution historique. C’est une approche plus intuitive, un élément de réflexion” (9).

*Les sofas*, for instance, is geared towards teaching Africans a moral lesson. Samory, the courageous leader in the play wants to fight against the colonial invaders; however, he ignores the fact that the French are technologically superior in their combat arms. The king’s defeat the end of the play seems to suggest that practicality should reign over valor. In Badian’s *La mort de Chaka* like in Zaourou’s *Les sofas*, the dramatist also uses his hero to provide lessons and a model for leadership in modern Africa. Even though Chaka’s victories in *La mort de Chaka* come with a bloody price, sacrifices have to be made since Badian seeks to demonstrate that a great leader is one who is willing to sacrifice his life and the life of his soldiers for the success of his people: “Chaka’s ruthless suppression of entire peoples and his imposition of a harsh discipline upon his followers are the necessary price that must be paid” (Bjornson xxii).
When he is assassinated at the end of the play Chaka is depicted as an exemplary model for political leadership in contemporary Africa while the generals who tried to oppose him end up looking like self-serving plotters working against the legitimate authority of a strong and worthy leader. “He [Chaka] dies, but like Christ, he leaves behind him an idea that will germinate in the minds of others and ultimately will triumph over the legacy of those who killed him” (Bjornson xxxii). Even though the tragic characters of the historical plays fail in their quests, they still remains quite admirable in their fortitude and pursuit of valor. Although Chaka dies for his cause “Chaka’s murder at the hands of his generals, one of whom is his own brother, is implicitly seen by Badian as reflecting the modern conflict between messianic like Nkrumah and those who resent him and his policies” (Wake and Banham 66). Chaka’s role and experiences are used as a model to emphasize the importance of unity and loyalty in the cause of contemporary Africa’s nation building.

The creators of new theater take on a different approach regarding the subject of oppression, and because their approaches are not homogeneous, the subject of oppression or its presentation differs from playwright to playwright. What all the playwrights of the new theater have in common, however, is that they are not consumed by the realities of Africa’s past.

As has been noted, The French theater of Black Africa was concerned with the restoration and glorification of Africa’s past. Before independence the hero, historical or legendary, symbolized a people’s resistance to colonial rule, and thus established a link between the past and the present. Once independence has been achieved, the Africans were confronted by new and often local realities. (Spronk 7)
The post-independence dramatists are mainly pre-occupied with issues pertaining to the here and now (the social, political and economic concerns of modern Africa especially during the latter part of the twentieth-century and also the early part of the millennium). Instead of addressing concerns about conflicts between Africans and colonial invaders new theater playwrights shift their focus and begin addressing concerns about various struggles Africans are experiencing among themselves. For example, in discussing the dictatorial figure in U tam’si’s *Le destin glorieux* Adriana Moro says that “[l]e théâtre considéré comme le miroir de la société devient pour beaucoup d’écrivains africains l’espace imaginaire où ils peuvent dénoncer le pouvoir politique absolu et la souffrance du people qui le subit” (21). Besides U Tam’si, other new theater dramatists are also engaged in presenting struggles between the Africans themselves, and are principally concerned with exposing the horrors of exploitative and tyrannical African regimes.

Contemporary African drama, in its exploration of both social and existential themes, is a vigorous response to the crippling vagaries and frustrations of what some of the most prominent social theorists of the twentieth century, taking a deep, sober measure of the broken promises of independence in much of the developing world, have aptly termed ‘the development of underdevelopment. (Jeyifo xii)

The creators of the new theater address concerns about the lack of democracy and African disillusionment during the post-independence era, and for them “the development of underdevelopment” described by Jeyifo is a crucial preoccupation since corrupt leadership is driving the continent to political, economic and social ruin.

Furthermore, the new theater dramatists present a negative image of African leadership that greatly contrasts with the heroic leadership image that had formerly been
embraced by their predecessors. The new theater tends to criticize tyrannical, bloodthirsty leaders and the greed and corruption among contemporary politicians. It also criticizes the great disparity that exists between the haves (the elite city dwellers) and the have-nots (the rural masses). The new theater is largely pre-occupied with addressing matters associated with the common man in contemporary Africa. It takes into account the grassroots population, the segment of society that was generally ignored in the conventional historic plays.

For example, in opposition to the idea of a heroic Chaka in Badian’s historic play, Zinsou’s new theater presents a parody that deflates the ancient Zulu warrior’s position. Zinsou’s play *On joue la comédie*, denounces not only Apartheid but also other forms of dictatorial leadership including that of the great Zulu leader Chaka. In *On joue la comédie*, Zinsou parodies Chaka’s role as “Liberateur,” “Sauveur,” or “Berger” who leads his people to paradise. And, as he lowers the role of the heroic leader, Zinsou inversely elevates the position of the masses, which is typical of new theater because in new theater the main characters are not heroic figures from the past; they are everyday people struggling through day-to-day issues in their societies.

The plays in the new theater body generally demonstrate that the dreams of emancipation after independence have now become nightmares and the liberty that was expected to follow the independence of African nations from the grasp of colonial rule has ironically become a death trap. Furthermore, in the new theater, the ideal of allegiance or a sense of fraternity based on race or a common African ancestry is not emphasized since the oppressors are primarily Africans and not the European colonizers.
The new theater also attacks issues of co-dependency on the West. It primarily targets corrupt African agents who drive their societies to ruin by perpetuating the state of political, social and economic dependency on the West.

In regards to the subject of the oppression of women, the new theater (notably Liking’s) is different because it provides a space where female characters can seriously air their concerns about their inferior roles in society. As Chapter 2 will describe in more detail, Liking’s experimental theater is quite unique even within the corpus of new theater, because, while her experimental plays carry underlying messages of co-dependency and the oppression caused by corrupt officials, her plays are primarily concerned with exposing the shocking injustices committed toward women. Liking’s theater is also unique in that its humor is not derived from the predicaments of its female characters, as in the conventional social dramas. Moreover, Liking’s new theater breaks away from the conventional theater by dramatists such as Oyono-Mbia because it does not present the dilemmas of female characters through narrations by male characters. The women have ample space to speak for themselves and about their conditions.

Moreover, whereas conventional theater presented realist models to teach moral lessons in order to improve conditions in African society, the new theater often does not present models that need to be emulated. The new theater by Labou Tansi and U Tam’si for instance, is geared to stir up the readers/audience into coming up with their own solutions in order to effect change. With the exception of Liking’s ritual plays, the majority of plays that fall into the category of new theater present no clear-cut solutions. Ironically, this goes against the efficacious roles of some of the indigenous forms that
inspire new theater. Turner says that through genres such as theater, puppetry, dance shadow-theater, or even professional storytelling, the people were able to probe into the group’s weaknesses and call its leaders to account. This could desacralize its most cherished values and beliefs and portray characteristic conflicts and suggest solutions or remedies for them (From Ritual to Theater 11). Liking’s new theater is exceptional because it is the only new theater that presents the possibility of a positive outcome for the oppressed with the assistance of traditional healing rituals.

Now that the major characteristics of the new theater have been described in this Introduction, the following chapters will demonstrate how Liking, Labou Tansi, and U Tam’si illustrate these characteristics in their plays. In order to explore the innovative techniques and also the new messages of the three dramatists, the following plays have been chosen to lay the groundwork for the discussion: La puissance de Um (1979) and Les mains veulent dire (1987) by Liking, Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku (1979) and Le bal de Ndinga (1987) by U Tam’si, and La parenthèse de sang (1979) and Je soussigné cardiaque (1981) by Labou Tansi.

It is important to note again, however, that studying Liking’s, U Tam’si’s and Labou Tansi’s plays as part of “new” francophone African theater does not mean that the group constitutes a particular school of theater. On the contrary, while the dramatists under consideration explore innovative forms and ideas, the subsequent chapters will further demonstrate that the group is not homogenous even though there are points of intersection in their approaches. Each playwright conserves his/her particular style or originality in the use of innovative theatrical strategies. But perhaps before delving into
the detailed analysis of the plays it will be appropriate to explain why I chose to particularly study the new theater of Liking, Labou Tansi and U Tam’si.

1.4 Why the Theater of Liking, Labou Tansi and U Tam’si?

For this dissertation, I focus primarily on Liking, Labou Tansi and U tam’si, because in the first place the volume of their literary publications (novels, poetry and plays) greatly outnumber those of Zaourou and Zinsou: Liking, Labou Tansi and U Tam’si have each published a minimum of 20 works. Second, although there have been several critical analyses of Labou Tansi’s, U Tam’si’s and Liking’s publications, to date there are no book-length studies pre-occupied with the innovative forms that all these three dramatists present in the plays that have been selected for this research.

In Labou Tansi’s case, much of the existing literary criticism revolves around his life, personality, and controversial concerns. Published essays or interviews by reporters or critics such as Arlette Chemain (1988), Jean-Michel Devésa (1996), Mahamat Saleh Haroun (1989), Louise Fiber Luce (1991), Mukala Kadima-Nzuji (1991), Pius Ngandu Nkashama (1990), Hubert Mayassi (1988), Mattiu Nnoruka (2000) and Joachim Mayama (1988), or the special issue of Research in African Literatures (2000) dedicated to Labou Tansi do not probe very deeply into the subject of the innovative techniques he uses in some of his plays, such as the fantasy/dream-like existences drawn from the indigenous performance forms that inspire some of his work.

Cécile Lebon has written an essay entitled “Sony Labou Tansi: rêver un autre rêve” which describes a grotesque and carnivalesque universe, and a new type of language
by Labou Tansi. However, Lebon’s essay focuses only on Labou Tansi’s novels rather than his plays. Even Eileen Julien’s essay “The Emperor’s New Clothes: The Lens of Fable in La vie et Demie” studies only the non-realist elements of Labou Tansi’s novel La vie et demie. Although Julien acknowledges that Labou Tansi is a playwright and director and shows how certain scenes in La vie et demie are conceived theatrically, she does not refer to the techniques Labou Tansi demonstrates in his plays.

Furthermore, book-length studies that have been dedicated to Labou Tansi after his death, such as Jean-Michel Devésa’s Sony Labou Tansi: Ecrivain de la honte et des rives magiques du Kongo (1996), Les Procédés de création dans l’œuvre de Sony Labou Tansi a monograph published in his honor by Editions L’Harmattan (1996) and Alain Kounzilat and Ange-Séverin Malanda’s compilation of published papers Colloque Sony Labou Tansi et Sylvain Ntari Bemba (1996) also tend to be homages to the author, his work, and messages. These publications do not study closely the subject of the innovative structures of Labou Tansi’s plays.

While Labou Tansi has received more acclaim for his fiction than his plays, U Tam’si has received more attention for his poetry than for his plays. Several reviewers, including critics such as Clive Wake have studied innovative elements often associated with surrealism in U Tam’si’s poetry, such as fantasy, exaggerated expressions, characters and symbols. But the focus of these critics has been generally limited to U Tam’si’s poetry. There have also been over 65 published articles and book chapters on U Tam’si, but again no book-length study focuses on his plays. In “Tradition et modernité dans le théâtre négro-africain francophone,” Moro discusses the world of illusions in U Tam’si’s poetry.
Le destin glorieux and also explains to some extent the irony and grotesque farce behind the character and bizarre policies of the leader, the Maréchal Nnikon Nniku. However, her study is limited by its brevity. This dissertation therefore makes an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge by expanding the study of U Tam’si’s new theater and unveiling creative techniques in his drama.

In Liking’s case, interviews have been conducted and articles written on her work by literary critics such as Bernard Magnier (1985), Peter Hawkins (1991), Judith G. Miller (1996), Christine Pillot (1990), David Ndachi Tagne (1989), Katheryn Wright (1995), and a book chapter by John Conteh-Morgan (1994). Only one book-length study, by Hourantier Du Rituel au théâtre-Rituel gives a detailed study of the Bassa rituals and an in-depth analysis of the ritual elements in Liking’s plays. From a thematic perspective, Liking’s plays are significant in that they privilege the role of women who are often marginal characters in French-language African theater. Critical analyses of the portrayal of women in these plays are also rare:

The few critics who study Francophone African theatre have said astoundingly little about female characterization. If the African woman happens to be cast as the main protagonist and, as such, needs to be acknowledged by virtue of her importance to the plot, discussions about her are generally sketchy and superficial, virtually ignoring her role, but rather emphasizing the flaws in her representation. (Edem 264)

This dissertation commits itself to acknowledge the importance of women in Liking’s plays. Chapter 2 makes it a primary focus in analyzing Liking’s theater by examining the role of the women in her plays in the sub-sections that discuss oppression, rebellion and the outcome of rebellion.
To better comprehend the extent to which the theater of Liking, Labou Tansi, and U Tam’si is regarded as new theater, a deeper reflection on the actual texts is imperative. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are therefore dedicated to the detailed analysis of the selected plays by Liking, Labou Tansi, and U Tam’si respectively. Moreover, each chapter begins with a few brief comments about the authors and their vision followed by a brief synopsis of the plays in order to provide some background information on the dramatists and their works.
CHAPTER 2
WEREWERE LIKING: REBELLION, RITUAL AND HEALING

2.1 Introducing Liking

Although Liking currently resides in Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa, she is Cameroonian by birth. Liking was born on May 1, 1950 in the village of Bonde in Bassaland, located about eighty miles from Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon. Given her numerous accomplishments and publications, it is interesting to note that Liking received a minimal formal education. Jeanne N. Dingome remarks that Liking’s education in a conventional primary school lasted only a few years, although she received a thorough but informal education in the ways and traditions of her indigenous Bassa culture. She also was initiated into women’s secret societies such as the Koo and Ndīng (Dingome, African Ritual Theatre 7).

These secret societies that Dingome refers to as “cults” are actually ritual/spiritual based associations in which newly-weds (mimbom) and betrothed girls (biyegna) are initiated into womanhood by a group of highly esteemed older women in the community. Liking in particular “had reached the farthest level of initiation in these cults. This traditional education being basically the only one she was deeply exposed to, it was unavoidable that in writing her works she
would draw from it” (Dingome, *African Ritual Theatre* 7). While some other African playwrights missed out on these traditional rituals as they were attending school, it is precisely these rituals that gave Liking a sound foundation for her work. Katheryn Wright notes: “Liking experienced her people’s rituals of healing, initiation and death, and it is this framework which serves as a theoretical base for her writing and personal philosophy” (56).

Besides her traditional upbringing, Liking was influenced by her alliance with the French scholar, Marie-José Hourantier whom she met in 1977. Liking helped Hourantier gain greater insight into Bassa culture while Hourantier helped Liking transform traditional Bassa rituals into literary works. Prior to this, in the course of her 1976 visit to France, Liking had observed new changing forms in Western theater. “In Cameroon, boulevard conventions still determined production values, while in Europe traditional cultures from Africa and elsewhere were helping create new theatrical forms” (Miller 230). The exposure to this experimental European theater also motivated Liking to explore forms inspired by indigenous African performances; to “delve more thoroughly into representational modes from ‘home’” (Miller 230).

Liking has authored a substantial number of plays, most of which were greatly inspired by the forms of the traditional ritual ceremonies of her ethnic group. Her innovative ritual drama includes plays such as *La queue du diable*, *Le rituel du “Mbak” de Nsondo Sagbegue*, and *Une nouvelle terre*. Nevertheless, she has also written other plays in which she does not use the ritual form, such as
Singué mura: Considérant que la femme... (1990), Un Touareg s’est marié à une pygmée (1992), and La veuve dylemme (1994). Liking has received numerous awards for her plays. In 1986 she was awarded the Radio France International Prize for Interafrican Theater; the French Prix Arletty for women in theater in 1991, the Fonlon Nichols Prize of the African Literature Association, and Les Palmes D’or from the French Ministry of Culture in 1993 (Miller 237).

She has published three works of cultural and literary criticism: Du rituel à la scène chez les bassa du Cameroun, in conjunction with Hourantier and Jacques Scherer (1979), an essay entitled Une vision de Kaydara on the Malian Hampaté Bâ (1984), and Marionnettes du Mali, a book on Malian puppetry (1987). As an artist she studies and practices traditional art forms such as sculpture and Malian marionette performances and has published an illustrated ethnographic study entitled Statues colons (1985). Liking has also published four novels and three volumes of poetry. In 1977, she produced a collection of 20 poems entitled On ne raisonne pas le vénin. She is also the author of prose narratives such as Les vestiges d’un kotéba (1981) in which she and Hourantier analyze the traditional Bambara (Bamanan) kotèba and Orphée-Dafric (1981). She also authored Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: Journal d’un misovire (1983) and L’amour-cent-vies (1988) which both contain a fusion of genres (poetry/novel).

Because of her abundant works in the areas of literature, art and theater, Wright refers to Liking as a “prolific” and “multifaceted artist,” also remarking that “Werewere Liking has earned the attention of much of the francophone world.
over the past seven or eight years for her novels and plays (56). Liking’s greatest merit, however, is her creation of ritual theater that had never before been attempted by other francophone African playwrights.

Liking chooses ritual drama because she sees it as a useful avenue for affecting change in her society. She remarks: “En faisant cette théâtralité on est obligé d’aborder les problèmes du quotidien: l’histoire de l’Afrique, la politique, l’économie, les rapports sociaux, entre gens. À partir de notre théâtralité nous avons quand même pu poser des questions fondamentales” (“Entretien avec Werewere Liking”). However, in spite of her accomplishments in the area of theater, there has still been a general lack of attention given to her work especially in the United States. Conteh-Morgan suggests that Liking’s theater may be unappealing to audiences because of a style that employs an “esoteric and highly ritualized language; of dream, trance, and spirit possession techniques, of an intricate symbolism of gestures, colours, costumes and sounds, and the repetition of songs, dances and movements” (Theatre and Drama 211).

Nevertheless, the elements Conteh-Morgan suggests as providing a possible hindrance to Liking’s success are also the same ones this dissertation will examine as an integral part of Liking’s innovative language in order to accentuate the ingenuity of her ritual theater. The next section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the two plays La puissance de Um and Les Mains veulent dire. The play synopses are followed by the analytic portion of the chapter that will
seek to demonstrate how the general principles of new theater are embodied in Liking’s texts.

2.2 La puissance de Um: A Brief Overview

When Ntep Iliga dies, his wife Ngond Libii takes on a new burden as the villagers in her community automatically accuse her of having caused her husband’s death. Since the general belief is that people do not simply expire, and someone or something is presumed responsible for death, Ngond Libii initially accepts the blame for her husband’s death, as tradition would dictate. However, as the healing ritual of the Um progresses, the widow changes her submissive stance and begins to show her resentment for the treatment she has to face as a woman in mourning and even for the treatment she faced when her husband, Ntep Iliga was alive. While Ntep Iliga was alive he exploited her physically and economically, and Ngond Libii laments also that while she practiced self-denial and sought dignity, respect and love in her marriage, Ntep Iliga did not respond favorably to her needs.

Ngond Libii begins to attack the villagers who were initially accusing her of having caused her husband’s death. She now blames them for his death and for having created the person he had become because they condoned his bad behavior. Whereas she draws inspiration from the form of Bassa religious ritual Liking does not remain blind to certain flaws in her people’s ways. She returns to an indigenous form, but rejects certain oppressive aspects of the culture from
which she draws her form. She also uses the ritual form to revolt against certain aspects celebrated in the rituals themselves when she vehemently opposes some oppressive funeral rites to which the villagers want to subject Ngond Libii. These are funeral rites the Bassa perform for the deceased generally beginning on the fifth day following the burial of a man, or on the fourth day following that of a woman (as Dingome explains on in the notes at the beginning of the English translation of the play in African Ritual Theatre). The funeral rituals are intended to restore peace and order in the community after someone has passed on, and they are also enacted to give the deceased a smooth send off to the land of the dead. However, even though the rituals are intended to restore harmony within the community, some of the customs, especially those in the traditional context, are particularly inhumane. For instance, when high-ranking members of the society (bikiñe) died, they were often buried with their belongings such as animals, numerous slaves (minkòl), and even their favorite wife (kindak) (Dingome, African Ritual Theatre, 9). These are some of the rites against which Ngong Libii furiously revolts in La puissance de Um.

Furthermore, though not quite as harsh as the scenarios in the traditional context, contemporary Bassa society also obligates surviving widows to undergo certain burdensome experiences during death rituals. Right after the death of the spouse, the widow is ex-communicated from the rest of the society. The widow is not permitted to communicate with others except via the aid of older widows who are her initiators into widow-hood: “she is stripped naked and her body is
covered in ash; a clod of kneaded clay is plugged into each ear; and hence on, she lies on the bare floor. Her nakedness is a sign of the vacuum left by the death of her sole provider” (Dingome, *African Ritual Theatre*, 9). As Dingome explains, the widow’s ears are plugged so that she will not hear the calls of her dead husband who might be longing for her even in death. On the day of the burial, the widow as well as other mourners, wear mourning ropes on their wrists that are only removed on the fifth day during the *lissò mòo* ceremony that involves a hand-washing procedure (*African Ritual Theatre*, 9).

The stubborn widow in *La puissance de Um* is unwilling to go through the rites mentioned above even though she initially is harshly criticized by the other villagers. But the ritual process obligates all the participants to reflect on their shortcomings and responsibilities in establishing order as a united group. At the end of the play, harmony is restored and Ntep Iliga who is resurrected from the dead is reconciled with his wife and community.

### 2.3 *Les mains veulent dire*: A Brief Overview

In *Les mains veulent dire* the protagonist, *La Malade*, is a woman who has gone insane and her community seeks to gain healing for her from a healing ritual ceremony. And if insanity has different levels of intensity, then *La Malade’s* madness takes an extreme form: “Notre fille souffre de folie furieuse” remarks the *Porte-Parole* who directs the healing ritual for the affected woman (23). But what has driven *La Malade* so furiously insane? The people wonder whether it is
the outcome of a sudden illness or a disease *La Malade* inherited. After a period in which accusations are hurled about within the group, various group members make confessions that indicate that each of them has problems and a part to play in what has caused the woman’s folly and in the disharmony prevailing in the community.

During the ritual *La Malade* also gets an opportunity to make her confessions and admits that she is tired of living a meaningless life in her role as a wife. Her account of the subjugation under her husband’s domination also serves as a backdrop to illustrate the corruption of high-ranking officials who take advantage of their positions to exploit those who are under their authority.

The first attempt to achieve healing through ritual for the modern society depicted in *Les mains veulent dire* is not successful because the group is unable to establish the sacred/mystical atmosphere for the ritual that is found in the traditional settings. So with the help of *La Grande Prêtresse* the group makes a second attempt to enact the ritual. This time however, the dependency on sacred or external spiritual forces is minimized and the group takes on the task of restoring order in the community in its own hands. The second attempt is successful and at the end of the ritual the group reunites and peace is restored for the mad woman, her spouse and the community at large.
2.4 Oppression in Liking’s Experimental Theater

“The woman is at the core of Liking’s drama; she is the archetype of the oppressed” (Dingome, African Ritual Theatre 19). Ngond Libii, the central character of La puissance de Um, is oppressed in her role as Ntep Illiga’s wife, and even in her position as his widow. The name “Ngond Libii” literally means “the slave girl,” or “fille esclave,” of Ntep Illiga (9). First, the term “girl” is degrading because it does not acknowledge Ngond Libii as an adult woman partnering with Ntep Illiga in marriage. Second, the term “slave girl” is derogatory in that it is used to refer to Ngond Libii’s humble/low class ancestry that the villagers such as Le 3e homme repeatedly scorn: “Ntep c’est toute une histoire qui ne méritait pas une esclave” (13). As if to add insult to the injury to which she has already been subjected, Le 3e homme deems Ngond Libii unworthy of the alliance with her husband, who comes from a noble clan that he describes as: “une race de seigneurs” (13).

Third, the term “slave girl” is abusive but also a propos in that it describes the kind of life that Ngond Libii actually lives: a slave girl’s life, due to the tiresome but thankless work she does for her husband. Ironically, even as Ngond Libii rebels against her husband’s dominance over her and tries to defend her own origin, she continues to unwittingly affirm her subservient position as a slave by repeatedly referring to herself as a slave girl: “Eh oui! Moi, fille esclave, femme de Ntep, j’ai tué mon mari” (11); “La fille esclave a commis la bêtise d’aimer un homme que l’on appelait: le lion. La fille esclave a tué le lion…” (12).
Ngond Libii complains about the unfair distribution of work between her and her spouse while they were married. Even though one of the villagers (*Le 3e homme*) credits Ntep Iliga for having had abundant harvests, it is not Ntep Iliga who did the work that yielded the bountiful crops. His wife, Ngond Libii, is the one who cleared the farms and climbed up palm trees while her husband remained idle. *Le Hilun*, who leads the ritual and takes on the role akin to that of the traditional *griot* or *meneur de rite*, remarks that Ntep Iliga had been nicknamed “le beau lion” because he was frightening although he did nothing: “Ses mains étaient aussi blanches que celles d’un mort par noyade. Ses pieds n’ont pas connu la rugosité d’un tronc de palmier (19). Ntep Iliga’s unscathed hands and feet prove his lack of industry.

Not only was Ntep Iliga lazy, he also took advantage of his wife physically and economically. Physically, he forced Ngond Libii into multiple pregnancies. She had ten children within a period of ten years, and during this time he offered her no help in clearing her farmland. Economically, he was not a provider (as some of the villagers try to make him out to be), but a parasite who robbed Ngond Libii of her prized possessions given to her by her father, and who also destroyed her furniture: “Ntep a distribué mon bétail et cassé mes meubles. De plus, il a exploité ma santé et moi…” (21). He was also unfaithful to her; he slept with her friends in her bed.

Before the villagers arrive at the ritual scene, Ngong Libii spends a few moments alone lamenting her predicament as Ntep Iliga’s spouse. With
outstretched hands over her husband’s corpse she reflects remorously on what she perceives to be a stifled, wasted, and unfulfilled life. As she caresses and speaks to a calabash of palm-wine, she compares her sullen existence to the stagnant wine trapped in the gourd in her hands: “C’est ici que je vis ma vie. Statique mais lovée, prête à déborder du vase comme toi, vin de palme bouillant de rage, dans une outre trop petite, enfermé” (10).

Ntep Iliga did not attend to his wife’s emotional needs and would not even reciprocate her love because he argued that love fosters loneliness and a need to be loved. This in turn creates a desire for protection, and this desire for protection ultimately leads to weakness, with which he did not wish to identify. As Ngond Libii explains, her husband preferred to use force rather than love which he believed would keep him in a compromised position: “Et il m’a convaincue que ce n’est point l’amour mais la force qui combat et vainc” (21).

During the phase of the ritual that obligates the participants to go through a period of introspection, Ngond Libii is able to see that she is not the only person responsible for her husband’s death as her community would like her to believe. Other members of the community are also guilty because they had an impact on what Ntep Iliga had become. Ngond Libii sees that Ntep Iliga’s negative behavior came as a result of the customs that had been endorsed by his society, and this society that molded Ntep Iliga personality is the same society that murdered him:

Assassins! Vampires! C’est vous qui l’avez tué. Vous l’avez condamné dans une carcasse qu’il a traînée toute sa vie pour vous protéger, vous et votre satanée tribu, vos fichues traditions, vos monstrueuses conventions, toutes sortes de choses dont vous-
mêmes vous avez perdu la clé depuis longtemps à cause de la paresse et de la nuisance. (25)

Even *Le Hilun* confirms the source of Ntep Iliga’s problems in his metaphoric remark: “Le lionceau devient crapaud s’il vit dans la mare” (21). Ntep Iliga is polluted by the society that raised him, and he does not live up to his full potential as a man, husband, or father. The same traditional customs he embraced also suppressed his potential for personal development. Conteh-Morgan remarks: “But in reality, [Ntep Iliga] was a victim. Ngond Libii is convinced that in his efforts to conform to the traditional image of a man which his community had created for him for their selfish motives, he destroyed his own creative potential and brought misery on himself and his family” (217). And although Ntep Iliga lived his life as a prestigious villager, his position of power was a myth because he did not realize that he too was a slave to tradition.

In *Les mains veulent dire* like in *La puissance de Um*, the principal female character has the privilege of telling her story (again the main story), to the other members of her society. *La Malade*, like Ngond Libii, is oppressed by her spouse. She confesses that she never learned to love her husband as a man, but instead regarded him a superior being. She bitterly tells her husband that “[l]a vérité, c’est que je n’ai jamais su t’aimer. T’aider comme on aime un homme et non pas un dieu” (25). She expresses remorse because she feels that no one seems to work towards her well-being or to provide for her best interest. She is weary of living a senseless life in her role as wife, as *L’Enfant* who plays the role of her double also reveals: “Ah, je n’aime pas cette vie où rien ne vit pour moi” (27).
Furthermore, there is an indication of a lack of intimacy in her sexual 
rapports with her husband. *La Malade* complains: “Je n’aime pas ces mains 
inconnues qui portent ton visage quand tu n’es pas là” (27). Could this statement 
mean that her husband is so emotionally distant from her that his hands feel like a 
stranger’s hands on her? Her experience in bed leaves her with a sense of 
disappointment and dissatisfaction: “Je n’aime pas ces lits d’où je tombe toujours 
de haut, et pourtant…” (27). Her double, *L’Enfant*, adds:

Pourtant, plusieurs mains m’ont caressé, massé,  
Etendue sur des lits où des draps louches sentaient le 
fauve et la sudation.  
Le matin elles m’avaient oubliée  
Et je tombais de plus haut, chaque matin 
Ah, je n’aime pas cette vie où rien ne vit pour moi! (27)

Has *La Malade* been disappointed by many a lover? Or are the 
experiences she has with her alienated husband so intense that she feels as if she 
is sleeping with other people instead of him? The text does not really specify, but 
what is clear is that she is unfulfilled in her sexual life, which has been reduced to 
a mere degrading physical act that leaves her feeling empty every morning. *La 
Malade* is also tired of such meaningless words of affection she utters as: “Mon 
chéri,” “Mon cher amour,” “Mon petit lapin,” “Ma cocotte minute,” “Mon Coeur 
de palmier” (29). These are expressions that she admits she says mechanically 
(out of habit), even when there seems to be so much dissatisfaction in her 
relationship with her spouse. The terms seem inherently hypocritical considering 
the way he generally treats her.
In the first case, *La Malade*'s experience with her husband, *Le Mari*, illustrates certain oppressive notions generally perpetuated by phallocentric or phallogocentric traditions. In the phallocentric view, men are at the center (primary focus of attention), and their position is privileged over that of women. Phallogocentrism, on the other hand, refers to the belief in “universal” ideologies that male thinkers have structured in areas of language, reason, identity etc., that deny women access to their conceptualization (Carlson 532). And, denying his wife’s access to her conceptualization of herself is precisely what *Le Mari* in *Les mains veulent dire* attempts to do at the beginning of the ritual.

*Le Mari* accomplishes this initially by disregarding his wife’s complaints and trivializing her illness. He tries to steal her voice and her privileged position as the leading character of the play. He does this by claiming that *La Malade*’s discourse is invalid. He states that his wife is not the crazy one (in need of the healing ritual), but that it is he who is becoming insane (and he who therefore needs the ritual). He attempts to displace her from the position (as the main speaking character in the play) which presents her as the main focus of attention: “Et le fou, le vrai fou, c’est moi qui le deviens” (24).

Secondly, before the intervention of *La Grande Prêtresse* who directs the ritual, *Le Mari* ignores his wife’s pleas and chooses to tell her what he believes she should be saying. He attempts to discredit her claims by stating that she is a liar and that she is faking her situation. He tries to undercut his wife’s credibility by arguing that she is a phony pretending to be a revolutionary while actually
trying to shrug off her responsibilities: “une révolutionnaire qui s’esquive pour fuir des obligations dans un maquis” (24). At the same time, he reveals himself to be an egotistical man who believes that everything is right with him and everything is wrong with his wife. How could he fathom his wife’s dissatisfaction in their marriage when in his narcissistic and materialistic perspective, he has provided all that she needs to make her well and happy? He has provided her with a solid relationship, a beautiful home, and a new car. What else does she need? *Le Mari* would rather believe that his wife is ill because she is an ingrate who cannot accept all the wonderful advantages he has provided for in her: “Et on deviendrait fou, quand tout va bien et promet d’aller de mieux en mieux” (28).

*La Malade*’s critique of the hypocrisy and abusiveness of the husband also provides Liking with the opportunity to make a general critique of contemporary African society: “Le personage du Mari propose tout au long de la pièce l’image de la société coupable” (Hourantier, *Spectacles rituels* 77). *La Malade* exposes the corruption and incompetence of high-ranking officials in the society. “On occupait des postes importants sans compétence…” (30). There is financial skullduggery and the corruption of the affluent seem to provide them with the luxuries of French champaign and foie gras, and Russian caviar. An indication of their greed and violence is also present in the metaphoric imagery provided (and repeatedly stated) by the *L’Enfant* and *La Malade*. The child discusses the shame of civets that battle for walnuts that do not belong to them. *La Malade* describes
the nature of the violence that is used to grab the nuts: “Des dents féroces, des lames de couteau, des éclairs meutriers” (31).

With the help of her double, *L’Enfant, La Malade* exposes the people who are responsible for the social decay. After they present the problem, other members of the society chime in to support what they have stated. *Le Porte-Parole* remarks that government safes are depleted, the hospital will never be built, harvest will rot because of lack of transportation, young girls are prostituted, student scholarships are used to pay entertainment tabs, and corruption reigns as unmerited diplomas are given to the affluent (40-1).

And who is to blame for this disorder? Like other new theater, Liking’s plays do not depict the Western invaders as the culprits. She seeks to show that government officials need to take some responsibility for the societal decay in Africa. *Le Porte Parole* in Les mains veulent dire sarcastically says: “Le responsable c’est le colon, n’est-ce pas?” (40) and “[c]’est la faute du Blanc, pas vrai?” (41). Her depiction of the new form of oppression by corrupt officials obliges the reader/audience to take heed of the chaos that has come about as a result of poor leadership in Africa. It also compels her readers/audience to pay attention to certain injustices to which women are subjected in society.
2.5 Rebellion and the Outcome of Rebellion in Liking’s Experimental Theater

La puissance de Um is new theater that provides an opportune occasion to hear the normally stifled voice of a woman in a public forum, especially at a funeral where silent confessions are the norm and wild outbursts against the dead are inconceivable; as Dingome points out, “sensitive information need not be voiced out” (African Ritual Theater 10). The content of Liking’s play is revolutionary in that the main character, Ngond Libii, is able to openly denounce some ancient beliefs of her people and challenge the group to acknowledge its shortcomings regarding the oppressive traditional practices of society. “It [Ntep’s death] gives the widow, in particular, the opportunity to assess the frustration and sterility of her past marriage and to enjoy newfound freedom” (Dingome, “Ritual and Modern Dramatic Expression” 319). Ngond Libii realizes that she does not have to carry the burden of guilt on her own because she happens to be Ntep Iliga’s widow and so she is able to rejects the status quo and to begin threatening the society that was initially threatening her: “En fait, ce n’est pas lui que je veux tuer. Mais ce qui le rend esclave. Il n’est pas possible qu’un homme ayant autant de possibilités que lui, perde toute une vie à ne rien créer, à ne rien réaliser, au nom de je ne sais quelle tradition” (43).

Ngond Libii refuses to cave in to the outrageous suggestions made by the villagers in an effort to seal her fate such as the one made by Le 3e Homme that she needed to be buried along with her husband according to tradition: “Notre très
Ngond Libii also rebels against the Bassa custom of ex-communicating a widow from the rest of society.

Ironically, such traditions illustrated in *La puissance de Um* are not only perpetuated by Bassa men, but also by Bassa women (particularly the older generation of women). It is *La vieille femme* who suggests this ritual in *La puissance de Um*. The old woman orders the old man, *Le vieillard* (playing the role of Ngond Libii’s double) to carry out nine days of traditional mourning rites for widows. She also asks *Le vieillard* (again symbolizing Ngond Libii) to block his ears with clay and cover his body in ashes while he mourns the death of his “lord and master.” The old woman’s comments indicate that the privileged role of “master” is one that a husband can benefit from even in death:

> Tu ne répondras à aucun appel. Si quel’un insiste, tu lui répondras: ‘que me veux-tu?’ Et c’est pour entendre le moins d’appels possible que tu auras de l’argile aux oreilles. Pendant cette même période, tu te couvriras de cendres uniquement, car tu es en deuil de ton seigneur et maître qui ne t’offrira plus d’habits pendant longtemps. La cordelette de deuil te retiendra auprès de tes enfants. (20)

The rebellious Ngond Libii is infuriated by these degrading and oppressive impositions, especially when she recalls all the sacrifices she made for her husband. Unlike the compliant female characters in historical plays, she vehemently refuses to comply with the calls of traditional regulations.
Like Ngond Libii in *La puissance de Um*, *La Malade* in *Les mains veulent dire* also rebels against the status quo although she initially faces resistance from her community members. At the beginning of the ritual, the people are not ready to acknowledge or validate *La Malade*’s grievances. In both of Liking’s plays, the people prefer to defend the oppressors, the husbands, and/or the traditions that condone their actions. The crowd in *Les mains veulent dire* accuses *La Malade* for her rebellious attitude which is manifested even in the way she slaps her husband for addressing her as: “Ma puce, mon bijou, ma bonne étoile…” (29). The people consider *La Malade* a public menace and blame her for her folly: “Elle est folle à gâter le bonheur…. Débarasser le peuple de ce danger public” (29-30); they are initially not ready for revolutionaries or rebels who have the potential to change societal conventions: “Le peuple dit non à la complication. Non. Non au movement—Non” (30). The crowd is even willing to put *La Malade* to death for her confessions: “Pendez-la! Assassin, tyran, esclaviste, exploiter, exploiteur…” (30). However, towards the end of the ritual the group is able to see the validity of her claims.

In both of Liking’s plays, ritual is used to help the women better their condition in their societies. In *La puissance de Um*, as a result of the ritual, the attitude of the group changes at the end of the play as the power of *Um* descends upon them. *Um* is the Bassa goddess of fertility, purity and peace responsible for protecting the people against misfortunes such as illness, sterility, quarrels and calamities etc. (Dingome 10). In the play, Ntep IIliga who is resurrected from the
dead calls for peace, to which the assembly of villagers responds in unison: “Que vienne la paix qui annihile la haine [.] Que la paix descende sur nos coeurs.” Then he calls for love and the villagers reply: “Que vienne l’amour qui enfante le beau [.] Que l’Amour investisse nos bouches” (52). In Les mains veulent dire, harmony is also restored for La Malade and the entire community, and the ritual ends on a positive note with La Grande Prêtresse encouraging the participants to stay united: “Plus que nous-mêmes… Les mains veulent dire, mes frères, qu’il faut se donner la main” (67).

In the indigenous setting, the ritual participants were encouraged to unite as a group and reflect on the crisis at hand. During the ritual they all had to come to terms with the fact that each of them had a part to play in the crisis and that each of them had a part to play in the process of problem solving. Thus the “theater of Werewere Liking, while presenting the sociopolitical and spiritual trials of contemporary Africa, is one that attempts to go beyond presentation, protest and criticism with the purpose of forging a new vision of the African world” (Wright 56). Liking’s vision is that the outcome is favorable if the members of the community collectively use rituals to deal with their crises since the rituals encourage them to reflect on their circumstances and to take measures to restore harmony in society.
2.6 The Ritual Form in Liking’s Experimental Theater

On the structural level, Liking’s *La puissance de Um* follows the general format of traditional Bassa healing rituals including phases such as the presentation of the crisis, the accusatory stage, the confessional stage and the period of introspection that promotes healing. The crisis at hand in *La puissance de Um* is Ntep Illiga’s death, and after his death is announced, the main question is: Who killed Ntep Illiga? During the accusatory stage, fingers are initially pointed at the dead man’s wife. Ngond Libii, is accused of murdering her husband but then she turns around and starts accusing the villagers of his death. After Ngond Libii and the villagers have pointed accusative fingers at one another the participants are transported to a state in which they are obligated to reflect on the situations they face. The goal of this part of the ritual is to help the people find solutions to the crisis at hand. In this phase, all the participants learn more about themselves and about the other community members, and realize that they are all guilty of having caused the crisis. At the end of the ritual, peace is restored in the community.

While *La puissance Um* adheres to the format of the ritual in the indigenous setting, there is an indication that Liking’s creation contains some elements that deviate from what is generally practiced in a healing ritual. During the play, a voice in the crowd indicates it is befuddled by all the events that have been included in the ritual. It is unclear as to whether the ritual is a ritual for the deceased, whether it is a mourning rite typically carried out on the ninth day or
whether it is a memorial celebration. However, another voice in the crowd, La deuxième voix, seems to respond in Liking’s defense, explaining that the incorporation of novel components within the main framework of the ritual adds a dimension of personal creativity to the play. La deuxième voix remarks that the novelty adds an element of surprise to the new aesthetic creation and obliges participants to react:

Il faut créer… Cherche à mettre tout seul un message sur les expressions qui te sont offertes. Regarde cette nouvelle esthétique du rituel: la répétition qui agace et force à réagir, l’incantation qui éveille les forces supérieures, la progression circulaire qui affranchit du temps et de l’espace, le geste qui ranime les connaissances enfouies et recréé un langage… Et puis, quel spectacle, n’est-ce pas? (25-6)

But even though there is artistic creativity involved in Liking’s plays, the ritual dramas are not solely intended to be forms of entertainment. There is a presumed healing in the ritual, as Hourantier explains: “Le rituel garantit ainsi l’équilibre et donne la réponse ou la guérison à qui sait l’attendre” (La puissance de Um 61).

Through her ritual theater, Liking intends to engage both the actors and readers of her theater through an experience that will enlighten them and help them gain a better understanding of themselves.

The world of La puissance de Um is not limited to the realist representations of conventional modern theater. On the contrary, the play explores a spiritual/metaphysical realm where extraordinary things happen such as the resurrection of Ntep Iliga during the course of the ritual. However, even the extraordinary events appear normal in the ritual setting that Liking provides.
Liking’s playwriting confounds the minds of the reader/audience because she makes it unclear what elements in the scenes are real and which are not. Ntep Iliga’s first words after he is resurrected the first time are: “Bigre… Quelle histoire! Qui l’eût cru?” (35). The events that have transpired between his wife and the villagers seem unbelievable to Ntep Iliga. Have the events really transpired or are they mere elements of his wife’s dream?

On the one hand, one may argue that although Ntep Iliga’s return to life from the dead may be far-fetched from the perspective of a modern reader (in the realistic/logical/conventional sense), Liking presents it as a possibility. It may be a probable and meaningful scene to Liking simply by virtue of her upbringing in the traditional and mystic ways of her people who believe that death does not connote finality. Death is simply the beginning of a journey to another state of existence (Dingome, African Ritual Theatre 15). One may choose to interpret the death and the return of Ntep Iliga as a possible real supernatural movement in and out of two dimensions, or the resurrection may be regarded as an event that Ngond Libii and other members of the community have experienced in their dreams. “Liking’s drama throws the reader as it were in a dream-world where time is fluid, all the levels of reality fuse, and no cleat-cut distinctions exist between the probable and the improbable” (Dingome, African Ritual Theatre 15).

For Dingome, Liking merely uses a dream technique whereby Ntep’s death becomes a symbolic murder committed by Ngond Libii, and other members of society, in a dream. This view is supported by Ntep’s comments that his wife
has killed him in a dream: “Et ma femme... ma parole! Elle est devenue folle. Elle n’en pouvait plus et voici qu’elle me tue en rêve” (35). Nevertheless, regardless of the interpretation one chooses, the conclusion remains the same: the new theater by Liking subverts the realist forms of conventional French-language theater. Liking is able to create a dimension in which one can hardly distinguish between what is real and what is dream (or imaginary), by fusing what appears to be reality with what appears to be fantasy in order to give more liberty to the interpretations/responses of the reader/audience.

The non-realist realm of Les mains veulent dire, however, does not contain surreal events such as the resurrection of Ntep Iliga from the dead in La puissance de Um. The non-realist dimension in Les mains veulent dire is evoked by the state of trance in which the characters are perpetually locked. L’Enfant communicates only in a state of trance: “…il ne parle qu’en transe” (17), and only moves in a trance-induced state: “L’enfant en transe tournoie de plus en plus vite et tombe sur la malade qui le repousse brutalement, presque en criant” (27). La Grande Prêtresse also directs the ritual in a state of trance in which the assembled crowd is drawn: “Dans la transe très stylisée de la dernière séquence, elle jouera enfin le rôle de meneur de rite…” (17). Le Porte-Parole staggers about with his eyes closed in deep trance as he attempts to involve the spectators in the ritual: “Il est mandaté pour apporter la transe chez le spectateur; il a la démarche titubante des possédés allant chercher des médicines en brousse” (38).
The trance state of the actors and audience is a fundamental element accounting for the success of the psychodrama of Liking’s ritual theater. Trance, like the liminal state described by Turner, enables individuals to perceive what they normally would not be able to see or experience in everyday human living (outside a ritual setting). The introspection through trance is not limited to cerebral or logical capacities because it taps into a reservoir of perception that resides deep in the recesses of the mind (the unconscious) or spirit far removed from the everyday conscious state.

In Les mains veulent dire the ritual initially fails because of various reasons. First, it is because the approach of the people towards ritual in the modern society is not appropriate. For three days and two nights the people have done what they think it takes to provide healing according to ancient traditional models; they have beaten drums and they have vigorously danced in an attempt to invoke help from healing spirits. But their calls for help from the supernatural world have been in vain since they have depended so much on healing spirits and have not made much effort to reform situations on their own (Hourantier Du rituel 91). The ritual fails initially because the ritual participants have not made a collective effort to see what part they had to play in the crisis; the ritual can only be effective if all the participants accept responsibility for their own actions. Second, the people have beaten their drums out of habit, and the dancers have danced not out of true passion, but as a result of the frenzy generated by the wine and the noise. Third, as La Grande Prêtresse tells Le Porte-Parole who
supervised the failed ritual: “Le geste a perdu sa raison d’être, il n’est plus action. L’acte a perdu de son efficacité, il n’est plus création” (23). By this she points out that the ritual appears to have lost its meaning for the new generation because people cannot relate to elements of the ancient traditional society and so actions like the invocation of the spirits no longer makes sense to them.

The failure of the initial ritual of in Les mains veulent dire shows that although Liking draws inspiration from traditional Bassa healing rituals, she wants to demonstrate in this play also that there are instances in which the rituals have to be modified to cater to the needs and character of the changing modern society. In her case, she adapts the ritual form for her theater in an attempt to transform her society by using a performance mode grounded in an indigenous form. In her adaptation of the indigenous ritual form, she encourages the modern spectators to actively engage in the ritual process she has adapted for them in her new theater. She anticipates that the modern spectators will experience the same therapeutic function of the traditional rituals if they use the ritual form she has recreated to re-examine themselves and see what part they have to play in societal ills.

Les mains veulent dire differs slightly from La puissance de Um, because although Ngond Libii called on the ritual on her own and the ritual displayed the people’s empowerment and ability to solve problems on their own after the phase of introspection, there are still elements that suggest the intervention of spirits. At the end of the ritual in La puissance de Um the villagers still invoke the power of
the spirit *Um* to descend on them and bring peace and harmony: “Que la force
evhisse nos mains [.] Que sur nous descende la puissance de UM” (52).

In *Les mains veulent dire*, on the other hand, *La Grande Prêtresse* does
not call on the spirits for help. Instead, she continually pleads with the people
assembled for the ritual to come together and solve their own problems. Even
after the end of the ritual she remarks that there are no longer spirits residing
among them: “Les esprits sont rentrés chez eux. Il ne reste plus que nous pour
nous délivrer” (67). Given this, the people in the modern society of *Les mains
veulent dire* have to rely on each other and not on spirits that have departed. She
repeats yet again: “Plus que nous-mêmes… Les mains veulent dire, mes frères,
qu’il faut se donner la main” (67). Even without the intervention of the
supernatural, the ritual form is still applicable to the modern society; the ritual is
successful as peace is restored in the community.

### 2.7 The Symbolic Language of Liking’s Experimental Theater

Like the form of Liking’s theater, its language is unique in relation to the
language of her predecessors’ theater. Liking deconstructs the conventional
language structures of traditional francophone dramatists because, first, she takes
away the privilege of communication with the spoken word, and second, she
experiments with various non-verbal forms of communication. In the first case,
when the semantic power of the spoken word is minimized, verbal language in
Liking’s new theater is used to invoke, to chant, or to pray: “Enfin la parole perd
son allure habituelle pour devenir objet sacré” (Hourantier, La puissance de Um 7). When the power of the spoken word is minimized, words are not used to relay important information between the characters in the plays. Conteh-Morgan has studied this aspect of Liking’s language in La puissance de Um and says that the language is a ritualized poetic one that “is not a vehicle for the communication of everyday factual information” (Theatre and Drama 219).

The non-communicative aspect of language typical of other new theater language is demonstrated in the poetic exchange between La Malade, Une Femme, Le Mari and Les Enfants during the accusation phase of Les mains veulent dire. When the Grande Prêtresse reminds the people to hold hands and stay calm, she adds that there is nothing serious about the situation. This is how the four individuals respond:

**LA MALADE**
Si, c’est très grave.

**UNE FEMME**
(dans la foule)
Et dangereux. Plus libre que la liberté, c’est fou, ça tue!

**LE MARI**
Ah moi! Ce n’est pas mon problème, je ne suis pas Responsable!

**LES ENFANTS**
Pas responsable! Pas responsable! Pas responsable! (33)

These chants are commentaries rather than communicative dialogues between the four people.
The second case that involves the exploration of language that uses non-verbal modes of communication is significant because it is unique. It is unique since it is a language that has not been used by any other new theater playwright in francophone Africa. Dingome notes that in Liking’s ritual theater there is a constant dialogue with colors and objects that serves several purposes, such as reinforcing characterization, underscoring a number of sensitive themes, and multiplying meaning (16). Liking’s symbolic language includes the language of objects (that may or not be tangible) such as: colors, music, costumes, masks, silence, drumbeats, props and traditional spatial arrangements. It also includes sounds, such as shrieks and groans, or the language of the body that includes body movements or gestures. This portion of Chapter 2 focuses particularly on object symbolism in Liking’s innovative language while the following sub-chapter will address body symbolism.

Although Liking does stand out among her francophone African counterparts in the way she uses symbolic language intended to stimulate emotions or other body senses, her type of theater does not stand alone in the world. Dingome remarks that because of the way she uses ritual, masks, colors, and smells, Liking’s theater resembles certain Asian theaters such as the Oriental symbolist drama practiced by classical Japanese and Indian dramatists (African Ritual Theatre 24). She also observes a resemblance between Liking’s expressive style and that of Yeats and Synge (African Ritual Theatre 24). Peter Arnott also remarks that in the French avant-garde theater between the wars, the text became
a mere starting point and non-verbal elements such as physical gestures, mime, 
dance and gymnastic patterns began to take precedence over speech (431).
Liking’s theater resembles this type of avant-garde theater embodied in the works
of dramatists such as Artaud.

Liking’s innovations in the area of language particularly resemble those
that Artaud had envisioned decades before. Like Liking, Artaud wanted to
explore other modes of expression that would not only appeal to logic or intellect,
but would appeal to all the senses of individuals as well as the mind. In the First
Manifesto of The Theater of Cruelty, Artaud proposes the addition of certain
dramatic techniques such as lighting, costume, music, and theatrical architecture.
He also wanted to create a new alphabet of signs that would complement an
expanded audible language of noise, music, and screams, as well as words: “By
means of a theatre based on myths, symbols and gestures, the play, for Artaud,
become a weapon to be used to whip up man’s irrational forces, so that a
collective theatrical event could be turned into a personal living experience…”
(Knapp 78).

In explaining aspects of another healing ritual known as the Mbak, Liking
underscores the significance of her use of symbolic ritual language in her drama:
“Pour nous, les Africains qui avons à lutter à tout instant, parce que tout est à
créer dans nos pays, et à cause de toute l’acculturation qui est désormais nôtre, ce
théâtre de la couleur vive et du symbole, ce théâtre angoissant et concret, voilà, je
crois, ce que demanderait notre nature actuelle” (Du rituel 98). For Liking, the very nature of Africans demands this symbolic language.

Turner, who has studied the aspect of symbolism in the ritual ceremonies of the Ndembu people of Zambia, sheds some light on the understanding of symbolism and its significance in traditional African rituals. The symbols Turner studies are objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures, and spatial units in a ritual situation (Turner, Forest of Symbols 19). He says that there is a belief in anthropological literature that ritual symbols are generally emotional stimuli (Turner, Forest of Symbols 29). The impact of the various symbols may vary from performance to performance as different emotions or feelings are aroused. In Liking’s ritual plays symbols serve various purposes. In some cases she uses specific symbolic stimuli with which the audience is already familiar in that context to produce a desired effect. These are symbols that Edward Sapir refers to as referential symbols in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. For Sapir, referential symbolism “embraces such forms as oral speech, writing, the telegraph code, national flags, flag signaling and other organizations of symbols which are agreed upon as economical devices for purposes of reference” (Sapir 493).

In other situations, the symbols Liking uses are less obvious or direct since they are often associated with emotions that cannot always be specified (ones that do not stem from formal elaboration in the conscious). These types of symbols illustrate what Sapir refers to as “condensation” symbols. Condensation symbolism is “a highly condensed form of substitutive behavior for direct
expression, allowing for the ready release of emotional tension in conscious or unconscious form” (Sapir 493). An example of condensation symbolism would be demonstrated by the apparently meaningless washing ritual of an obsessive neurotic person, as observed and interpreted by a psychoanalyst (Sapir 493). Because condensation symbols stimulate areas deep in the unconscious they are able to elicit emotional responses that may make someone impulsively react to a symbol in a way that is not usually associated with the symbol.

Hourantier also discusses the role of symbolism in ritual theater:

Le théâtre rituel utilise le symbole pour donner une impulsion à la pensée, pour faire jaillir l’idée sans la limiter. Cette idée fait appel au symbole, c’est à dire à sa représentation imagée pour devenir ‘idée force.’ La force et la beauté du symbole viennent du fait que, partant d’une idée commune qui donne l’impulsion, chaque individu l’interprète à sa façon, lui donne la force qui lui convient et pousse le développement de sa pensée aussi loin qu’il peut.” (Du rituel au théâtre rituel 157)

She also talks about the effect of these signs in relation to the unconscious:

“Il [the effect of the sign] touchera d’abord l’inconscient par la puissance qu’il porte en lui” (159). In saying this, Hourantier acknowledges the multiplicity of meanings and connotations that symbols evoke, and confirms that ritual symbols accord a certain liberty to participants to come up with their own individual interpretations or responses. However, she only seems to put into consideration the referential aspect of the symbols and not the condensation aspect that often goes hand in hand with the first. “In actual behavior both types are generally blended” (Sapir 493).
In only talking about “thoughts,” “ideas,” “images,” and “meditation” in regard to symbols, Hourantier suggests that the responses to symbols are operated only in or by the rational mind. She does not make any reference to responses to symbols that may be produced by emotions. Even when she discusses the importance of intuition in responding to ritual symbols, she considers it a mental or thinking process: “Le spectateur peut, par exemple développer sa faculté intuitive, s’il l’utilise comme support de méditation” (158). She adds that: “Tout accessoire, toute couleur, tout geste est symbole et matière à méditation si l’on cherche à percevoir ce que reflètent ces choses concrètes dans une réalité plus subtile” (159). However, as explained above, there are instances where Liking uses symbols that can be viewed as “condensation” ones, such as shrieks, lighting effects or silence that can trigger diverse kinds of emotions of which participants may or may not be conscious, especially in the phases of trance.

Liking uses both referential and condensation symbols in her new theater to elicit both rational and emotional responses. A pestle and mortar at the beginning of La puissance de Um make up part of the stage décor. Ngond Libii begins to furiously pound the pestle in the mortar, and the pounding creates a rhythm that punctuates the singing and to which the villagers rock their heads. The movement and rhythm they generate are not for mere entertainment, for the pestle and mortar are symbolic objects that have a referential role relayed by the connotations of their shape and rhythm. The pestle (penis) furiously pounds while the mortar (the womb) receives the impact. According to Dingome the pestle and
mortar “are meant to objectify eternal female subjugation in the Power of Um, for they bespeak more than the simple words can do Ngond Libii’s social status as well as her failed marriage relationship, a failure that is conveyed by her inharmonious pounding which symbolises a monstrous sexual intercourse” (African Ritual Theatre 16-17). Moreover, as Hourantier also remarks in the commentary at the end of the play, these objects further signify Ngond Libii’s submissive and difficult position as a child-bearing machine: “Le mortier et le pilon symbolisent la dure condition de Ngond Libii. Le mortier représente son asservissement, cette machine à produire qu’est devenue la femme” (56). Like the mortar, the gourd that Ngond Libii caresses symbolizes a womb that further accentuates her limited role of wife and mother.

When Liking uses symbolic sounds such as groans, moans, and shrieks they can be considered condensation symbols. For instance, when someone utters the word “fear,” a listener quickly draws upon an image or the signified associated with this word. And, if a red light flashes, one’s mind responds with caution to this color that often symbolizes a danger alert or a command to stop. On the other hand, sounds may carry a wider register of meanings some of which people might not be consciously aware. When an individual screams for instance, the scream may leave room for a variety of interpretations; a scream can indicate extreme fear or extreme happiness depending on the context, or the state of mind of the person who hears the scream. The various sounds Liking uses are intended to elicit different emotions from different individuals. These sounds can also be
studied as condensation symbols, because very often the emphasis of dramatic action in Liking’s plays is placed on emotions and more unconscious, primitive bodily urges rather than on the intellect, and in these cases it is difficult to decipher all the meanings implied by them.

Often, even the colors of the costumes Liking’s characters wear have both a referential and condensation symbolic language encoded in them. In *La puissance de Um*, the second daughter of Ntep Iliga provides the basic code of the language of color that Liking uses: red symbolizes life; black, test and trial; and white, mourning (30). Hourantier explains that the colors of the wrappers that the actors wear are what distinguish them from each other (Notes *La Puissance de Um*, 55). Dingome gives more explanation and meaning to the color-coded language Liking employs:

All these colours are not fortuitously chosen. The red cloth known as *kumul* in Bassa is always used in healing rites, for it symbolises the strenghth and recovery which the patient is seeking; by extension, it signifies life’s resilience to all forms of annihilation. The black colour or *hinda* symbolises hardship that individuals of the groups encounter and which must always lead to self-questioning and ultimately to new self-awareness. The white colour called the *puba*, is a sign of bereavement; it also stands for purity and the beyond. (16)

*Le 3e homme* and *La vieille femme* wear white since they represent African tradition, and more specifically, ancient Bassa culture. They are firm in their ways and are not flexible in their attitudes in the face of the changing society in a manner reminiscent of that celebrated figure of rigid habit in African literature—Ousmane Sembène’s Niakoro in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*. The white
lappas the old people carry and wear also represent the old age traditions they defend. *Le Hilun* who directs the ritual and is in charge of restoring harmony among the villagers wears black, an appropriate color for him because it is a symbol of enlightenment or a “prise de conscience.” The black color in *Le Hilun*’s case is also appropriate because it signifies the trial that the ritual participants must endure before they are led to the phase of introspection where they will understand the nature of their problems.

If the red cloth symbolizes the strength and recovery that the patient is seeking, life and life’s resilience to all forms of annihilation, then it is no wonder that the rebellious Ngond Libii in *La puissance de Um* wraps a red lappa around her waist, after she has presented her problem (as an unjustly treated wife) to the audience. Ngo, Ntep Iliga, Ntep Iliga’s first daughter, is the only woman besides Ngond Libii who wears red. Wrapped in her red lappa Ngo Ntep Iliga passionately cries out against the other women. She speaks of the life, rather than the death of her father: “Il ne mourra pas! Mon père n’est pas mort! Il est là, il est ici.” She tells the crowd to look at her stomach: “Voyez son sang sur mon corps.” Then she spreads out the red loin-cloth and says: “Voyez son sang qui vit, qui bout! In ne mourra pas, mon père n’est pas mort!”(16).

The color symbolism becomes condensation in the case of the white and black clothing that some the female mourners wear during the accusation and confession phase of *La puissance de Um*. While black represents test and trial, and white represents mourning, the words and actions of the women do not
always directly correspond to the symbolic garments that they wear. The women wearing black (representing test and trial) mourn after Ntep Iliga’s death:

“Portons son deuil! Portons son deuil! C’est notre épreuve! Portons son deuil et qu’on en finisse.” (15), and then later “Portons son deuil et finissons-en. Il est mort, il ne vivra plus” (31). The women wearing white (symbolizing mourning) also mourn: “Nous sommes pures de lui! Ntep est mort! Il est fini! Nous sommes pures de lui! Que les hommes l’enterrent! Enterrez-le qu’on en finisse!” (16).

Both groups of women mourn Ntep’s death, and both groups want to get done with the funeral rites, so they can move on with their lives. The color-coding does not seem to make sense here, because there seems to be no fixed reference in the language of the two colors—there is no clear-cut distinction between the attitudes of the women who wear black and those who wear white.

While Liking uses more of the symbolic language of colors in _La puissance de Um_, this role is somewhat de-emphasized in _Les mains veulent dire_. In _Les mains veulent dire_, like in _La puissance de Um_, color symbolism is limited to three main colors: red, black and white. The referential ritual code that is provided for the black, red, and white in _Les mains veulent dire_ is consistent with the one provided in _La puissance de Um_. In _Les mains veulent dire_, all the women wear black, the men and _La malade_ wear red, and the children wear white. The musicians wear wrappers that have a combination of colors to symbolize the abundance of their creative potential: “Les intrumentalists sont revêtus de pagnes tricolors, signes de la plénitude inhérente à la créativité” (19).
While some of the color-coding is consistent in some cases, sometime it is not. The meaning may change from situation to situation and from ritual to ritual. While Dingome says that red represents strength and recovery, Hourantier says that red signifies life, strong blood and today. Thus, there is no specific meaning given to the color red. Rather there are a variety of interpretations that gives the spectator a range of choice to select the meaning that comes most readily to him or her. Maybe without being consciously aware of it Liking with her new theater attempts to give up the “power position” of mastering or creating a new inflexible, “dominant discourse” in the place of the conventional discourse she is actually trying to subvert. By using poetic, metaphoric language, or mystic symbolic language that readers cannot always clearly define, Liking gives liberty to words by expanding their possibilities and meanings. Dingome, who translated Liking’s plays *La puissance de Um* and *Une nouvelle terre*, recognizes the difficulty involved in grasping specific meaning in the symbolic and poetic style of Liking’s plays:

> The highly modernistic technique she uses in these poetic moments makes her plays very difficult to translate. In addition, the speech of the traditional figures is always couched in sayings and proverbs or in esoteric jargon whose meaning can be grasped and restituted faithfully only by initiates or those who are conversant with these rituals. (18)

The experimental symbolic language of Liking’s ritual plays emphasizes the complexities and limitations of language. Since the meaning in her language is not presented as fixed or absolute, it confirms that language has no intrinsic or original meaning since the connection between her signifiers and signifieds is
presented as arbitrary. Because her meanings are not fixed Liking gives her readers/spectators the liberty to be producers of meaning as they go through her plays. And even the constructed meanings are not constant since they may change with each reading of the play or with each experience in watching the play and/or participating in it.

2.8 The Body Language of Liking’s Experimental Theater

Liking’s new theater differs from that of her francophone African counterparts in that in her theater the body is a tool that is used to relay messages. Words tend to lose their importance and the body movements (mimes, gesticulations, dances, etc.), take precedence over speech. Hourantier comments about the importance of physical action in Liking’s plays in the introduction to La puissance de Um: “La geste est codifié, il guérit, purifie, accuse, nomme, construit et détruit. Chaque fois, son édification, l’intention qu’on lui donne prennent le relais de la parole et transforment l’ordre établi” (7).

Although Liking does not claim to draw any inspiration or have any connection with the French feminist movement, her “theater of the body” contains elements that have often been associated with feminist theater such as that of Hélène Cixous. Cixous’s “écriture feminine,” “with its emphasis upon transformation and profusion and its reference to the corporeal, provides a clarifying perspective through which to view performance and the relationship between performance and the written theatrical text” (Running-Johnson 179). In
trying to subvert classical logocentric patterns that privilege words over actions, feminist theater like Cixous’s tends to focus more on the corporeal rather than the mental or rational. In feminist plays, the experience is more of self-expression, and body language takes precedence over verbal recitation or narration. The actors draw attention to the body, and do not simply focus on illustrating a text, or depicting a character. In this theater, feelings, emotions and the vital instincts are embraced.

There is a general assumption that it is the brain that controls all body functions, and essentially the brain that relays all sensations that people feel within their bodies. However, Liking goes against this common belief when she takes the emphasis away from the cerebral and places it on the corporeal and the senses. In her commentary on the ritual of the Mbak she remarks:

Et si j’ai parlé de peau, c’est parce que je suis consciente du fait que ‘la peur donne des ailes.’ Et notre peur, nous la sentons d’abord sur notre peau, avant même que nous n’en prenions conscience. Pourquoi devrions-nous avoir honte de notre peau alors qu’elle nous transmet infailliblement les réactions de notre cerveau et de notre être intime. (98)

Liking’s claim about the skin is a direct admission that she privileges the senses, which subverts the Cartesian philosophy of the seventeenth-century that many of her predecessors inherited through their education. Susan Bordo explains that what is important in the Cartesian model is the possibility of pure thought or of pure perception: “Descartes suggests a new model of knowledge, grounded in objectivity” (75-6). Descartes’ belief is that the body is a primary obstacle to human objectivity: “The ontological distinctness of mind and body and the
exclusion of body from the human essence, are finally, what makes the Cartesian reconstruction of knowledge possible” (Bordo 26).

But Liking’s trust in the body’s capacities is not as bizarre as the general public might believe. While one may not think of her theory as being scientifically grounded, there exists today, ample scientific evidence proving Liking’s instincts to have been correct. The scientific research presented by Antonio R. Damasio in Decartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain, reveals that emotions, reasoning or discernment are not solely limited to brain activity; the brain (mind) and the body work hand in hand in responding to various stimuli in the environment (224).

While other new theater dramatists such as Labou Tansi and U Tam’si steer away from the sensory or the tactile in favor of the imaginary, Liking steers towards it. The skin in Liking’s new theater becomes important especially in the manner in which it senses fear, and it is the skin that ultimately gives access to some of the deeper feelings that will then be detected by the brain. Liking anticipates that it is what the spectator will feel or experience physically that will affect his/her interpretations or responses during the plays.

In her first appearance on stage, La Malade in Les mains veulent dire utters nothing but acts in a manner quite bizarre. Her illness is illustrated by her gestures: “Elle joue la folie à fond, du comique au tragique, sans transition, sans commentaire” (17). Her movements range from subtly lethargic to clumsy (including falls to the ground), to even more forceful ones such as somersaults or
the act of pushing away L’Enfant when he accidentally falls on her. La Malade is initially weak and literally collapses during the “warm up” phase as the set is being prepared for the ritual (21). As her energy picks up, she becomes agile and performs more forceful actions such as the somersault at the sound of the drums during the confessional stage. While some of the actions of La Malade appear comical, others take on a violent aspect; for example, she strikes her husband after he tries to use words of endearment with her (actually sweet nothings), and approaches her with open arms ready for embrace: “Un gifle lui coupe le soufflé. La malade semble décidée à lui donner plusieurs mais elle tombe” (29). Like La Malade, L’Enfant also uses a variety of movements in his body language and these are often quite impulsive and dramatic. When the child and the mad woman are presented in the same scene, the awkwardness or comedy of their joint actions is further accentuated. For example, “[l]’enfant en transe tournoie de plus en plus vite et tombe sur la malade qui le repousse brutalment, Presque en criant” (27); “L’enfant s’effondre à genoux face contre terre. Une femme entonne un chant qui est repris par la foule. La malade se bouche les oreilles et les yeux avec des gestes violents et désordonnés” (27). As one reflects on the general actions of La Malade and L’Enfant it is difficult not to think about the physical antics of the slapstick comedy of the “Three Stooges” or even mechanical movements of Estragon and Vladimir’s pratfalls in Beckett’s En attendant Godot.

But it is not only actions or gestures that have a dramatic effect in the play. Immobility or frozen stances are used also. As La Malade falls, she suddenly
cries out: “Attention je tombe! Ah… Ah… Ah…” and in parentheses the following actions are given: “Elle se fige—personne ne bouge. Le silence est insoutenable” (41). Along with the silence, the stillness of La Malade’s body enhances the dramatic effect. The combination of silence and physical actions is employed by Liking, not only to emphasize the dramatic effect, but to also accentuate the mysticism of the ritual ceremony.

The language of the body (generally associated with feminine theater) seems to be “spoken” more by female characters and children rather than by men in Les mains veulent dire. Besides La Malade and L’Enfant, a woman in the group and La Grande Prêtresse engage in mystic actions. During the sacrificial phase of the ritual, the woman rips a chicken apart with her hands and then throws it in the fire. These gestures have referential symbolism, for the sacrificial bird is supposed to take away the blame of the group’s mistakes or sins: “Que son sang nous lave de toute impureté de corps et d’esprit.” (34). Also when Le Porte Parole incites the spectators to participate in some sacrificial rites while chanting symbolic sacrificial words, a woman from the crowd approaches the fire with some fruit. She explains that the beautiful pieces of acidic fruit are the products of her labor and their spherical shapes represent the vicious cycle of her life (another case of referential symbolism).

While Liking offers explanations for some of the gestures used by her characters, there are other situations in which stage directions do not provide ample information about the symbolism of the ritual actions. These gestures tend
to be condensation symbolic actions. In Les mains veulent dire, for instance, there are some mystic actions that are not clearly explained to the spectator, as for example those carried out by La Grande Prêtresse as she stretches out her hands to the ritual symbol of the north, east, south etc. Her hands speak (as the title of the play Les mains veulent dire suggests) but the actual message of those gestures and movements (the talking hands) is not explained, although there are comments in the Lecture du spectacle that indicate that the actions are important elements of the ritual performance: “Le personage de la Grande Prêtresse domine le rituel par sa simple présence et par l’intentionalité de toutes ses gestes. Son jeu reste très détaché et toute son attitude tranche par rapport à son environnement: sobriété des gestes, fermeté de la parole, dignité, simplicité” (69).

Furthermore, Liking remarks that gestures or actions in her plays vary from play to play: “Ce théâtre-là est ‘geste consacré’ et jamais le même parce que renaissant chaque fois avec un visage nouveau, multiplié par le nombre des visages, geste discordant et choquant qui invite à faire mieux. (Du rituel à la scène chez les Bassa du Cameroun” 98). Unlike the fixed words of a written script that would always be the same in different productions of the same play, the reproduction of the same exact gesture or expression with the body is impossible. Because there is versatility on the part of the actor, the spectator is also given more freedom in the process of interpretation. Again, since Liking does not always explain what the actions of the actors necessarily mean, she gives more liberty to spectators to create a personal experience as they watch the action.
In the situations where meanings are not provided for the symbolic objects and gestures within the play, the spectators who are not familiar with Bassa ritual traditions are left to draw their own conclusions about the symbolism used. This aspect is perhaps best emphasized in Liking’s *La queue du diable* when the *Meneur de Rite* performs mystical gestures with white stones: “Le meneur du rite retire de son sac, neuf cailloux blancs et les jette dans le récipient. Ensuite, il contourne le récipient en question neuf fois en disant des formules” (99-100). In this case, one is left to wonder whether the number *nine* of the stones and the *nine* twists of the container have a symbolic meaning attached to them. What does it really mean when the *Meneur de Rite* soaks his fly-whisk in the medicine receptacle and then sprinkles the old woman before pulling out a stone from the bottom of the receptacle and then rubbing it against her face and heart? Liking does not provide answers to these questions in the course of the play.

When actors draw attention to the body without using particular referential symbols (that the readers/audience can analyze), it is not always necessarily a rational or logical experience. It is not a totally rational experience since the spectator has not totally grasped everything with “the head,” most of the responses may simply be impulsive emotional reactions triggered by the visual stimuli in the gestures accentuated by the sound or color techniques. The effect of the dramatic action may stimulate more emotional or primitive bodily urges rather than those controlled by intellect. Because every spectator responds to the stimuli in a unique way, each one will leave the play with an experience totally unique to
him/her. Liking’s new theater is unique in francophone Africa in the way it capitalizes on a body language that is able to stir up a different experiences for every spectator.
3.1 Introducing Labou Tansi

Sony Labou Tansi was born on July 5, 1947 in Kimwanza in the Central African country known as the Democratic Republic of Congo (formally known as Zaïre), to a Zairean father and a Congolese mother. When he was twelve years old, Labou Tansi moved to Brazzaville where he completed his secondary education at the École Normale Supérieure d’Afrique Centrale. In 1971, he was hired to teach French and English at a school in Kindamba. This was the same year that he started writing seriously (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/Labou Tansi.htm). He went on to teach English at the Collège Tchicaya-Pierre in Pointe Noire and then moved on to work in Brazzaville as an administrator in several government ministries, before finally dedicating his time to writing and to the theater.

Labou Tansi is well known for his literary accomplishments. He is the author of a group of poems entitled Poèmes et vents lisses (1995) and also of six novels including La vie et demie (1979), Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez (1985), and Le commencement des douleurs (1995). His achievement in drama is no less impressive. Besides La parenthèse de sang and Je soussigné cardiaque that are studied in this dissertation Labou Tansi wrote seven other plays including Conscience de tracteur (1979) and Antoine m’a
vendu son destin (1986). He was well known as the founding father of a theater company called the Rocardo Zulu that he started in 1979.

Labou Tansi’s publications that criticized the corruption and dictatorship in his country and the continent as a whole caused him problems in his home country since those who criticized dictatorial regimes were detained, imprisoned or even murdered. Labou Tansi, like other critics, was imprisoned for voicing his concerns. A pamphlet for the University of Wisconsin’s Department of French and Italian’s production of La parenthèse de sang notes Labou Tansi’s experience: “His work, ferociously satirical, committed to denouncing the injustices and absurdities of dictatorial powers in place in Africa, earned the enmity of powerful government officials and, consequently, several ‘sojourns’ in prison” (1).

He briefly flirted with politics and became a deputy for the Makélékélé region in Brazzaville. However, because of his political alliances, and also because of the controversial nature of his political opinions and his image as a rabble-rouser, Labou Tansi’s passport was revoked. Due to this, he was unable to get immediate medical attention abroad for his HIV infection. On June 14, 1995, in Foufoudou, Congo, the francophone African literary world lost one of its most valuable members as a result of AIDS related illness.

In the “avant-propos” to a colloquium dedicated to Labou Tansi, and also to the late Congolese Sylvain Ntari Bemba, Alain Kounzilat honors and glorifies the deceased writers:

Leur foi dans la justice était assez profonde pour combattre sans apprehension un groupuscule de dictateurs impitoyables qui font la honte
de notre Nation. L’enchantement de leurs voix nous a encouragé de simuler leurs trajectoires paraboliques. Leur divines espérances ont soutenu ceux qui s’abandonnaient au désespoir. (3)

Labou Tansi saw his creations as a viable medium to influence his society

Sony, avant d’être un écrivain, était peut-être un diseur, un homme du verbe. Il était celui qui, en refusant de penser exclusivement à lui et en assumant le risqué d’exposer sa personne, informe (au sens de ‘mettre en forme’) les joies et les douleurs, les attentes et les colères, les rêves et les tourments des siens. (Devésa, “Le Kongo mental de Sony Labou Tansi” 5)

He not only attempted to experiment with new forms of writing but he was also passionately involved in the subject matter he presented. His sense of service for his people was clearly reflected in his writings.

Labou Tansi told Pierette Herzberger-Fofana that he deliberately set out to break away from the conventional writing styles of his predecessors who generally conformed to European models they had inherited via colonial education. He remarks: “Il est vrai que les premiers écrivains Africains avaient tendance à imiter les modèles français dont ils étaient imprégnés par leur lecture: Par respect pour une langue qu’ils ne maniaient pas” (www.arts.uwa.edu.au/Mots Pluriels/MP1099slt.html). Labou Tansi goes on to say he intended to create an element of originality in his language, even while using French. He also sought to use indigenous forms of performance, like Liking, as a source of inspiration for his plays. One such form that he uses for La parenthèse de sang is the healing ceremony known as Kingizila. In this play, as we shall see in more detail shortly, he ignores conventional rules of grammar, syntax and logic and subverts the traditions of conventional French-language theater in Africa. His innovations in this play and also in
Je soussigné cardiaque are described in more detail through this chapter. But first a brief overview of the plays we will study will be appropriate.

### 3.2 *La parenthèse de sang*: A Brief Overview

In an imaginary country, family members of a rebel appropriately named Libertashio mourn his death while a mad man, *Le Fou*, rambles on and eats leaves as he guards Libertashio’s tomb. Libertashio’s family’s activities are interrupted by the commotion caused by a group of soldiers that has been dispatched on a mission to find Libertashio. Although his family explains to the military men that Libertashio is dead, the platoon leaders refuse to believe this. They do not accept that Libertashio is dead because their bizarre mission from “the Capital” is to frantically look for Libertashio but not to find him: “… la loi interdit de croire à la mort de Libertashio: donc il n’est pas mort” (17).

Even after they have found a hundred men whom they irrationally presume to be all Libertashios, the soldiers are not allowed to stop their search: “Nous ne cherchons pas pour trouver: nous cherchons pour chercher” (21). Consequently, they torture and make arrests of several innocent victims. If a squad leader waivers and suggests or accepts that Libertashio is dead, he is promptly shot by another soldier who takes his place as leader of the platoon. This pattern of killing and taking over occurs over and over again. The stage of the play becomes a bloody arena, “a parenthesis of blood,” as the soldiers butcher each other causing death without any remorse.
Amid the chaos, one of the Sergeants, Chavacha, offers Libertshio’s captured family members an opportunity to make last wishes before they are put to death for their association with the rebel Libertashio. Libertashio’s daughter Aleyo asks for Chavacha’s hand in marriage and he grants her last wish. Plans are made to proceed with the wedding that is attended by several guests. But more commotion erupts during the already bizarre ceremony when the soldiers begin to massacre the group of guests who rise up and chant forbidden freedom tunes at the wedding. The assembled civilians all end up splattered with each other’s blood in another interminable gory scenario of a “parenthesis of blood” from which they cannot escape.

3.3 *Je soussigné cardiaque*: A Brief Overview

*Je soussigné cardiaque* is set in an imaginary country called Lebango. Mallot Bayenda, the principal character in the play has lost his job, his family and is on death row because he failed to obey orders from Perono, a high ranking official in Lebango. Ever since the death of his father Mallot has never had to answer to anybody and does not know how to obey. Unlike Perono’s submissive servant, Karibou, who blindly follows Perono’s orders, Mallot does not heed Perono’s commands nor does he acknowledge Perono’s power and authority in Perono’s presence. After he loses his job, the rebel-spirited Mallot, tired of oppression from Perono and his cronies wants to oppose the system that is crushing him down: “En sortant volontairement de la merde, je casse le néant; je refuse d’exister sur commande” (80). Mallot wants to live his life to the fullest.
and to also have some control over his destiny by being able to “[e]xister à cent pour cent. Fonctionner. Choisir ma taille et mes dimensions” (111).

Before his arrest, he searches for meaning in his life and aspires for a sense of personal freedom and self-respect. But even as he lies in his prison cell awaiting execution he continues to wonder how he can get out of his quandary: “Il faut que j’arrive à accoucher de moi pour les vaincre. Mais comment? Mais quand?” (78). Although Mallot knows that the sentence has been made and that any struggle is futile, he still remarks that he would like to be alive just long enough to convince the authorities about his rights although he does not know how to make this happen.

In an attempt to outsmart his oppressors before his imprisonment, Mallot obtains a fake piece of documentation from Manissa, the doctor. He hopes the fake letter will provide him access into the high government offices where he will find the person who betrayed him, in order carry out his revenge. But his venture for revenge is not as easy as he anticipated for the oppressive system he is fighting is too strong to overcome. When he eventually meets his foe Béla Ébara, a important African official, Mallot threatens him with death for having destroyed his life since Béla Ébara is the one who gave Perono leads about Mallot. But the twist in the story is that it is Mallot and not Béla Ébara who ends up having to face death: Mallot’s efforts to gain respect and personal liberty ironically lead him to shackles in prison and a sentence to death.
3.4 Oppression in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater

In La parenthèse de sang and Je soussigné cardiaque, Labou Tansi reveals the oppression and chaos caused by tyrannical African leadership in the post-independence era. His tyrants, especially in La parenthèse de sang, are primarily military men: “[Labou Tansi] is undoubtedly anti-military and he demonstrates this hatred by creating military anti-heroes and their likes” (Matthiu Nnoruka 197). Although Nnoruka refers specifically to Labou Tansi’s characters in the novel La vie et demie, the fact is applicable to the ones in La parenthèse de sang.

The ruthless soldiers in La parenthèse de sang not only destroy each other but also torture civilians. The sergeant Chavacha orders his men to kill Libertashio’s nephew, Martial, by cutting him up piece by piece. He also sentences the rest of Libertashio’s family to death for obstructing justice by harboring a living Libertashio even after the family has truthfully informed him that Libertashio’s mutilated corpse lies buried in a nearby grave. The soldiers assert their power and control over the defenseless civilians because they believe they have the legal right to behave the way they do. The soldiers carry out the searches because they have been given the right to do so in their capacity as military officials: “Ici, c’est le pays de soldats” (10). The country depicted in La parenthèse de sang is not one in which soldiers serve civilians, but one in which soldiers rule. And, under subjugation to this type of government, the common people’s lives have seriously degenerated. In the prologue to the play, Labou Tansi likens the lives of the people under oppression to a chaotic soccer game where the referee has lost control because he is actually indulging in foul play by arbitrarily blowing his whistle during the
game; he even blows the whistle when the players have not committed any errors. Like the referee who has lost control, the leadership in La parenthèse de sang has also lost a sense of order.

The civilians in La parenthèse de sang are alive but feel dead due to the oppression that they have endured under the hand of the soldiers they know have been dispatched by authorities in the Capital. Liberty (“Libertashio,” an intended pun) for them is dead! Libertashio’s agitated daughter, Aleyo, remarks: “Vivant! Vivant! (Un temps) Non. Moi je suis morte. Nous sommes dans la terre des morts. Pas de vivants! Ici, c’est interdit. (Un temps) Interdit d’être vivant. Nous sommes en interdiction d’existence” (41). They live a thwarted life appropriately described by the oxymoron of a “dead existence.”

Sergeant Marc further depicts the warped mentality that propels the soldiers to perpetuate the arbitrary abuse on the citizens and even among themselves. Marc says that he chooses to be oppressive and unjust because he does not care about justice. His attitude is illustrated in the dialogue he has with Martial:

MARTIAL. Attendez. Je vais vous prouver que je ne suis pas Libertashio. Je…
MARC. Mettez!
MARTIAL. C’est injuste.
MARC. Mettez!
MARTIAL. C’est injuste. C’est injuste.
MARC. Nous le savons
MARTIAL. Alors pourquoi le faites-vous?
MARC. Pour être injuste (20)

Marc deliberately chooses to be unjust when he carries out an accusation that he knows is false and remains oblivious to Martial’s pleas for innocence: “Moi, je fais ce que la loi me demande. (Un temps.) Je suis soldat et ma conscience de soldat commence

82
par la conscience des lois. (Un temps.) Est-ce ma faute si les lois n’ont plus de conscience?” (22). He simply follows laws that have been put into place by his superiors regardless whether they are fair or not or regardless of the consequences they may have on the people. Marc’s disregard for human life resembles that of the Sergeant Pueblo who relishes in acts of violence. Pueblo smugly tells Libertashio’s daughter, Ramana, that he deserves several bottles of local brew for his accomplishments after he assassinates one of his colleagues: “J’ai mis la balle entre les deux yeux. Il présente son chapeau. J’ai droit à quatre bouteilles dekoutou-méchang” (25). The soldiers are able to oppress their own people without having a guilty conscience.

While La parenthèse de sang illustrates the theme of corruption or oppression within a large society, Je soussigné cardiaque focusses on the inner struggles of a particular individual. In a scene in the countryside, Mallot vents his frustration about what he has had to endure under oppression. He crushes dirt in his hands and draws a parallel between what is happening to the dust in his hands with what is happening in his homeland. Like the crumbling earth in his fingers, his country, Lebango, has disintegrated due to poor leadership. In this play, tyrants such as the Spanish Perono have led Lebango to ruin, and Perono works in collaboration with the local leadership of Lebango. Perono survives by drawing energy or sustenance from those under his control: “Cette soif de puissance, j’en ai besoin pour fabriquer ma propre manière de respirer; j’en ai besoin pour fonctionner. Oui! Toute ma chair et tout mon sang me prient de suffoquer les autres” (96). His overall demeanor towards Mallot illustrates the compulsive psychology of authoritarianism that exists within dictatorial leadership: “Ici, monsieur
l’instituteur, je suis tout. Absolument tout” (93). Perono stands for all symbols that represent power in the society: “Je suis le drapeau, la loi, la liberté, le droit, la prison, le diable et le bon Dieu, enfin. Vous voyez bien—tout.” (93)

The child that Mallot encounters says that Perono is “ministéri eux,” and Mallot in his teacher mode attempts to correct the child by saying that the word should have been “mystérieux” instead of “ministéri eux” (87). The irony is that although Perono does not have the best interests of all the people of Lebango at heart, he is still “ministerial” in that he is supported by (or is a significant part of) the elite governing system in Lebango. The influence of Perono and his African associates on Mallot’s life is almost like a cancerous tumor that sets out to kill Mallot. Mallot tells the doctor, Manissa: “Je souffre d’un saligaud. Une espèce de tumeur qui s’appelle Perono et sa clique” (123).

Perono clearly demonstrates his disregard for marginalized minority groups when he forces the Italian M. Ottelini to close down his store because Ottelini allows Pygmies to buy salted fish that was almost going bad at very low prices. He also has a Rwandese abbey shredded to death by gorillas because of the man’s involvement with Pygmies. While common people represented by minorities such as the Pygmies are destroyed, a minority of elite and privileged groups progress and prosper. The notion of commitment to the development of all Africans has been bought out by money since Perono simply pays off certain privileged groups to destroy marginalized ones. Because Mallot refuses to support Perono’s policies, Perono threatens Mallot that he will pay off someone who will make him suffer for the rest of his life if Mallot does not obey his orders or change
his negative attitude towards him: “Regardez ce chèque. Vous l’avez vu? Je l’envoie à quelqu’un que je connais, là-bas, au large du régime. En contrepartie, il devra vous torturer pendant tout le reste de vos jours…. Pour dix millions, il acceptera de vous donner à boire toute la merde du Lebango” (103). And because Mallot does not give in to Perono, Perono does end up carrying out his threats by using Béla Ébara.

The disillusioned Mallot also regretfully remarks to the dust he is handling: “poussière fatigue qui poudroie qui hésite. (Un temps.) Que tu me fais souffrir, ô pays” (83). Not only is he disappointed about the decay within the leadership of his country, but he remarks to the Secrétaire that he is also resentful about having had to suffer under the hand of his fellow Africans: “Quel pays! Avant l’indépendence ça sentait le Blanc. Aujourd’hui, ça sent encore. Le Noir. Dans tous les bureaux. Les autres nous jouaient avec la peau seulement. Aujourd’hui, les ‘notres’ nous jouent avec le cœur. Ils nous maltraitent comme avec notre permission. C’est plus dur” (138). Mallot is beaten almost to pulp and is left lying bloody with mice crawling all over him in his prison cell. He cries: “Aah! Ils savant bien que je vais crever. (Un temps.) Mais ils m’ont battu comme du foin” (77). The policemen do not give Mallot any leeway for being a “fellow African.” The thrashing he receives seems to be no lighter than the flogging Toundi received in Ferdinand Oyono’s anti-colonial novel, Une vie de boy. The irony is that although Mallot’s torture by authorities transpires during the post-independence era in Lebango, the brutality he experiences uncannily mirrors Oyono’s Toundi during the colonial era. Furthermore, Mallot’s regretful tone at the end of his life also seems to echo that of Toundi when Toundi was found dying in Spanish Guinea.
Like Toundi, Mallot does not deserve the king of treatment that he receives, but it does not matter to his oppressors that Mallot is innocent. Mallot remarks that his oppressors have a total disregard for justice and innocent or not, he will always be guilty in their eyes: “Tu pouvais être innocent. Hé ben non! Tu est coupable, coupable de toi: Oui Mallot de toi” (79). The oppressive system that has Lebango under its clasp, and also crushes Mallot, does not put Mallot’s dependants into consideration. Mallot’s oppressors do not care that he needs to remain alive in order to support his wife and daughter, Nelly. Mallot laments: “Tu pouvais dire: ‘Je ne veux pas crever maintenant. A cause de Nelly et sa mère.’ Mais Nelly et sa mère sont coupables sur rendez-vous” (79) Mallot’s wife and daughter are not exempt from oppression because they are already rendered guilty by their association with Mallot. Even before the final assault by the police, Mallot realizes that his life is not worth anything to his oppressors.


Not only does he feel alienated and dejected because his life is like a piece of insignificant dust, he also feels like a mere puppet on a string whose life and actions are controlled by pupetteers:
3.5 Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater

In *La parenthèse de sang*, the people are not able to carry out a successful rebellion because rebellion only leads to death or torture. Marc says that all those who rebel against the army are not allowed to live: “On tue les déserteurs: c’est la loi des armes” (17). In *Je soussigné cardiaque* also, while Mallot is able to reflect on his predicament, he is unable to rise above the adverse circumstances. Even though Mallot refuses to acknowledge Perono’s supremacy in his presence, he secretly admits to his wife Mwanda that Perono’s power is absolute in Lebango. He tells her that Perono is: “La loi d’ici’ (108), and admits defeat in his struggle for freedom when he says: “Perono m’a déviergé” (108). Later in the prison cell Mallot shows more resignation in his quest: “Ils finiront par m’avoir. Je le sens, là dans toute ma chair” (111).

The characters in Labou Tansi’s new theater (like Mallot or even the transformed rebel Martial in *La parenthèse de sang*) are ordinary people who rebel against oppressive leadership but cannot and do not succeed against their enemies. These characters are not lauded or elevated as the heroic figures of the conventional theater even when they lose their lives in struggles against their foes. “Sony Labou Tansi’s main characters lack generally the much-desired ‘noble qualities’ associated with heroes; their portraits are uninspiring and their adventures are short of ‘tragic dignity’” (Nnoruka 195). Again, Nnoruka’s remark is primarily directed toward the characters in Labou Tansi’s novel *La vie et demie*, but it can still be appropriately applied to Labou Tansi’s theater. The stories of Labou Tansi’s anti-heroes are disturbing, for their experiences give a grim picture of
the conditions prevailing in contemporary Africa. The audience/readers are presented with disturbing scenarios in these plays that jolt them into thinking seriously about what is going on within the despotic regimes on the continent today.

3.6 The Ritual Form of Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater

Unlike Liking’s new theater, Labou Tansi’s ritual theater embodied in La parenthèse de sang does not capitalize on the use of traditional ritual spatial arrangements, audience participation, improvisation, songs, dance, musical instruments, or bodily movements and gestures often associated with new theater. Nevertheless, despite the lack of these aspects, La parenthèse de sang is still considered new theater because, first, its basic structure is adapted from a Congolese healing ritual called the Kingizila. In the indigenous setting the Kingizila ritual is characterized primarily by the fact that it features the speech of a madman as a fundamental part of the healing ceremony. Labou Tansi’s recreation of the indigenous ritual La parenthèse de sang takes over the function of the Kingizila to serve as a ritual to readers/spectators in a modern setting. Second, La parenthèse de sang, along with Je soussigné cardiaque, are also regarded as new theater because they experiment with non-realist forms such as fantasy and the grotesque. This part of chapter 3 discusses the ritual form of La parenthèse de sang. The following section “Fantasy and the Grotesque in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater” explores the non-realist elements of both La parenthèse de sang and Je soussigné cardiaque.
Generally speaking in Africa, the discourse of mad people is often ignored and considered incredible or foolish. However, in particular ritual settings, such as that of *Kingizila* ritual depicted in *La parenthèse de sang*, mad people bring enlightenment to the “normal” people, and in these settings, the speech of mad people is also privileged. Abel Kouvoouama says that in the indigenous context, the form of the *Kingizila* healing ritual “est élaboré autour d’une histoire ayant pour personnage central le fou” (98). During the ritual the usually ignored madman becomes a prominent part of the healing ritual that is often directed by a traditional spiritual healer (sometimes referred to as a *meneur de rite*).

[C]’est à partir du personnage du fou que la société invente une histoire à l’intérieur de laquelle se déroule une autre histoire normale de la guérison dont la dramaturgie est rendue dynamique par un second personnage plus lucide qui vient changer le sens de l’histoire. (Kouvoouama 98)

In Labou Tansi’s adaptation of the *Kingizila* healing ritual *Le Fou* is an important contributor in the ritual, but there is no secondary or lucid character that directs or changes the course of the ritual as in the indigenous context. This exclusion of a ritual director consequently accentuates the role of the madman in Labou Tansi’s version of the ritual. The ritual form of the *Kingizila* provides *Le Fou* in *La parenthèse de sang* with a space where he can be heard even though he is crazy. One can also reasonably argue that *Le Fou* symbolizes a sector of society (made up of despotic leaders) that has gone “mad” and that needs to be cured. In this sense, the play can be seen as an attempt to be a ceremony of healing for this type of insane society by bringing its absurdities, fears and irrationalities to the fore. However, I choose to go by the first argument that focuses on the madman, *Le Fou* as a principal part of the healing process because it seems more...
directly applicable to the indigenous *Kingizila* ritual that privileges the role of a madman in the healing ceremony.

Because he is crazy, *Le Fou* in Labou Tansi’s play is able to bring various taboo subjects to the fore. He is oblivious to the laws from the “Capital” that the soldiers have imposed on the people and he continues to ramble on without fear even in the presence of the vicious soldiers. *Le Fou* differs from the crazy Mallot in *Le soussigné cardiaque* because *Le Fou* is unmindful of the oppression around him while Mallot (like the other individuals in *La parenthèse de sang*) live in constant fear of it.

The soldiers ignore most of *Le Fou’s* utterances, even when *Le Fou* says that he is watching Libertashio’s tomb. The madman even gets away with shouting “Pas sur la tombe de Libertashio” in Sergeant Pueblo’s presence, for example (25), but Pueblo takes no action against him probably because he considers the madman’s words to be meaningless. Until he is murdered during the wedding at the end of the play, *Le Fou* is the only character in the play that is allowed to speak without condemnation in the oppressive atmosphere of *La parenthèse de sang*; his words are not censored and therefore his speech is the only free speech. Furthermore, as the guardian of Libertashio’s tomb, *Le Fou* can also symbolically be perceived as the guardian of liberty; the liberty that all those who are oppressed are seeking.

In the ritual form of *La parenthèse de sang*, like in the indigenous ritual context, the madman is made wise and his words are therapeutic. The illness/crisis in *La parenthèse de sang* is caused by the fact that the people cannot freely express themselves because they are afraid of the consequences of their words. The words of *Le Fou* in *La*
parenthèse de sang are healing (or liberating), for only the madman is able to speak freely. Yavilla, one of Libertashio’s daughters suggests that Le Fou has supernatural powers: “c’est un grand-sorcier” (10). And actually, Le Fou’s uncensored speech can be likened to the speech that traditional spiritual healers/medicine-men/witchdoctors/magicians utter during various stages of African healing ritual ceremonies. Often, the speech of spiritual healers is sometimes expressed in the form of requests for healing from the ancestors or even from other spiritual beings. Other times, the words of the healers are expressed in the form of incantations they utter while in a state of trance. These incantations (forms of free/unpremeditated speech) by the healers are believed to contain messages that give direction for those seeking healing. These incantations are also believed to contain healing properties (metaphysical medicinal values) that cure disease, calamity or misfortune for families in crises. In La parenthèse de sang, Le Fou, like the traditional spiritual healer, is given the power to provide healing via utterances that are not conditioned by fear or societal norms.

But whereas the traditional healer and the fool in the Kingizila generally focus on bringing healing in a familial context, Labou Lansi extends the role of Le Fou in La parenthèse de sang to provide a universal message of enlightenment and healing for the society at large (the reader/audience). Kouvoouama discusses Labou Tansi’s quest for liberty through free speech:

La réinvention du monde libre, par le biais de la guérison collective de la peur, est faite par Sony Labou Tansi sur le mode symbolique du principe du sacrifice de soi qui est à la fois principe du renoncement à la vie terrestre et principe d’élévation par délestation à une humanité spirituelle. (101)
However, Labou Tansi’s ideal for acquiring liberty through self-sacrifice is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand his ritual play suggests that the members of the African society need to be as free and unrestrained as the madman in the ritual; they need to transcend the fear that has been imposed on them in order to be elevated to a higher level of consciousness or spiritual awareness. But the flip side of this is that free speech in Africa also equals certain death or suicide. Individuals would have to sacrifice themselves (a sense of ritual also) in order to express what they truly believe before the society can be healed. For even Le Fou (the bearer of free speech), is eventually murdered in the play and one has to wonder whether Labou Tansi’s notion of liberating free speech is practical in the chaos of contemporary African society.

3.7 Fantasy and the Grotesque in Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater

In his experimentation with the non-realist realm, Labou Tansi uses the grotesque and fantasy. The grotesque generally involves images that are distorted, incongruous, ridiculous, absurd, ugly and even comical. In The Spirit of Carnival David K. Danow remarks that the broad concept of the term grotesque may include other elements such as: “exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness, “ and also a drive toward “ the breaking up of the established order,”—“A reliance on excess as the measure of a new (but not yet accepted) standard” (Danow 35). These elements of the grotesque described by Danow are quite apparent especially in La parenthèse de sang.

The excessive physical violence in La parenthèse de sang is manifest in the brutality of the soldiers as they shoot each other down, and also in the way that they
torture Martial. It is also demonstrated in the way Libertashio is mutilated and buried by soldiers without his limbs or stomach. There is an excessive display of untamed sexual urges as well, such as those of Dr. Portès, one of the wedding guests who seems unable to control his sexual appetite, for he overtly tries to seduce Libertashio’s daughter, Aleyo, in front of his wife. And even in Je soussigné cardiaque, like in La parenthèse de sang, Labou Tansi also creates characters with excessive behavior: Perono has an unquenchable thirst for power and the insane Mallot also has extreme uncontrollable crazy actions. Because Labou Tansi does not claim that his work seeks to reproduce a slice of reality or documented historic facts, he is able to exaggerate and stretch events beyond the limits of realism. Perono and his henchmen can be as ruthless as Labou Tansi wishes them to be, and Mallot can be as insane as Labou Tansi wants him to be in a world that is not limited by the constraints of the regulations of “real life,” or “normal” behavior.

In the grotesque and fantastic world of La parenthèse de sang, the Sergeant Chavacha is able to sentence Martial to “30 deaths.” Again, without claiming to be realistic news documentations, these episodes shock the reader/audience because they seem to too monstrous to be true. The grotesque form used to depict the actions of the leadership in La parenthèse de sang and even in Je soussigné cardiaque is unsettling in and it assists in debunking the myth of heroic leadership that had previously given Africans a sense of pride and security. John R. Clark notes that besides breaking down normative language structures and harmonious plots in their creation of satire, authors of the grotesque novels also depict the decay of conventional hero-protagonists. Clark
explains that “[b]y such means, the authors of the grotesque capture attention, keep the reader off balance, and call into question the basic clichés and assumed paraphernalia of writing and of fiction-making, thereby upsetting the habitual lassitude and passivity of typical readers (27).

Besides debunking the image of mythical heroic leadership, Labou Tansi’s new theater also shows that it is impossible to transform the nature of bad leaders within the play. David McNeil says that, whereas satire generally refers to a work that ridicules particular human folly or vice with the intent to reform, the same is not true of grotesque farce that tends to highlight the unalterably fallen nature of the human world. When the grotesque contains a satiric element, the brunt of the satiric attack is, “incorrigible human folly, and so the object of the ridicule or attack is either punitive or purely instructional” (21). This form is a propos in Labou Tansi’s plays, for the folly of the oppressors seems incorrigible in the play itself, and even Labou Tansi’s protagonists like U Tam’si’s are presented more like anti-heroes who are trapped in a system that they cannot correct and from which they cannot escape.

Furthermore, through the non-realist realm that Labou Tansi presents in the new theater, the readers/audience can expand their perception and reflection regarding the “established order” of African dictatorial regimes Africa, and they also have the freedom to interpret several parts of the play however they wish. For instance, in La parenthèse de sang, Libertashio’s mutilated body is not exhumed at the Sergeant’s request and so Labou Tansi does not provide a horrifying image of a decayed mutilated body like the news media generally uses to reveal “reality.” Ramana informs the Sergeant that her father is
dead and that his clothes and head are the only remnants in his grave (Libertashio was buried without his hands, without his stomach and without his legs). Sergeant Sarkana says that he will exhume Libertashio’s remains so that he can take the dead man’s head back to the Capital, but Sarkana never gets to complete this mission because he is shot dead by Sergeant Marc. Hence, Libertashio’s body is not revealed in a manner that would oblige Labou Tansi’s to depict a “concrete” image of the decayed limbless body. With this technique Labou Tansi liberates his readers/audience in that they are able to make up their own images of Libertahio’s remains in their own minds; with their own power of imagination.

Labou Tansi’s fantasy realm also tends to blur the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary (since fantasy in itself is a blend of the real world and the imaginary. In exploring the fantasy world of Labou Tansi’s theater, it is often difficult for the reader/audience to concretely determine what aspects of the play are derived from reality and what aspects are parts of fantasy. The reader’s/audience’s interpretations of the play cannot even remain static since the fantasy world is one in which meanings cannot be fixed and responses to the play may change with each reading or with each viewing. In La parenthèse de sang, even the characters in the play are not sure whether their lives are real or part of their imagination; they are not sure of who is really dead or alive. Kalahashio, Libertashio’s widow says: “Tout devient ombre. Et l’ombre ne pardonne pas. Dans cet enchevêtrement des morts et des vivants. On ne saura jamais plus qui. Qui est dans la lumière et qui est dans l’ombre. Jamais plus!” (29).
The characters’ inability to locate or fix their lives in a concrete, clearly defined “real” world is made even more evident in *Je soussigné cardiaque*. In this play, Mallot is caught up in a bad dream from which he cannot awake. In the scene of the prison cell in particular, the badly injured Mallot does not appear to be completely awake. He operates in a state of semi-consciousness that releases uncensored images from his subconscious. In this state, as repressed impulses float to the surface of Mallot’s mind, they are manifest in his bizarre thoughts and actions. Mallot behaves as though he has gone mad. Madness, like dreams, comes as a result of uncontrolled and seemingly irrational images erupting from the unconscious. Like a mad man Mallot’s speech and deeds are not always sensible or logical. He utters disjointed and meaningless phrases accompanied by actions that are not lucid. His speech is consistently punctuated by intervals of silence and head tics, and he performs strange actions such as throwing himself onto the ground and acting dead, after making the sound of a burst of gunfire. Moreover, as he lies on the ground Mallot talks aloud to himself about his impending execution while shifting back and forth from both the first and second person tenses: “Je crève de ma tête, de mon odeur, de ma façon de pisser. *(Il imite une rafale et tombe.*) Quelle belle vie meurt avec moi! Il y aura du sang, une odeur, des mouches, puis rien. Aaah! T’embête pas, Mallot. Tu est le milliard de Dieu” (79). Here, the oscillation in the speaking voice indicates that Mallot’s mind, like his world is an area where the distinctions between “self” and “other,” “madness” and “sanity,” “dream” and “reality,” are not very evident.

In his state of delusion, Mallot not only talks to himself in the first and second person voice, but he also communicates with himself by pretending to be different
animals and by making the various sounds those animal make: “Je suis le chien. (Il aboie.) Du chien. Mais on dirait que ça ne prends pas. (Il aboie encore. Tête d’une sentinelle aux barreaux.) …. Je suis le cochon. (Il grogne.) Oui, du cochon. (Il grogne encore.)…. Je suis le chacal. (Il aboie.) La vipère. (Il siffle.) Le hibou. (Il hulule)”(77-8).  In his world of fantasy Mallot can be anything he wants to be: himself, a dog, a pig, etc. This ability for Mallot to take on the different identities he chooses is again provided by the form of fantasy in the dream world of Labou Tansi. It is, however, important to note that even though Mallot is responding and behaving insanely, many of the issues he is pre-occupied with are valid and justifiable. Mallot has gone crazy because forces beyond his control have destroyed his life. There is no other outlet for Mallot to express himself amid the craziness that has already been generated by the oppressive authorities. Moreover, Labou Tansi’s stage directions specifically indicate that all the events that take place after the first prison scene take place in Mallot’s dream: “Le reste de cette pièce se déroule sous forme de rêve et le réveil intervient seulement à l’aube avec l’arrivée du peloton” (81). The fluidity of the dream form also allows Mallot to go back and forth in time (through flashbacks and flashforwards) against the linearity that a realist form would demand.

The non-realist world that Labou Tansi creates in his new theater provides him with moments of escape from the limitations of the exterior reality into an inner reality that has no boundaries: one that he is able to visualize and fabricate in his mind’s eye: “We frequently absent ourselves from confrontation with our surroundings, and retreat into the inner realm of our own consciousness, where we attend primarily to the creations
of our minds: memories; thoughts framed in words; images; fictions and fantasies” (Stableford 334).

Brian Stableford suggests that people do not live by sensory information alone. The sensory knowledge humans have is influenced by what goes on in their imagination. Also, what goes on in a people’s imagination can broaden their view and understanding of reality. This “private world” (the imaginary world), is just as significant as the sensory, and it needs to be developed through education, training and exercise, and this is obtainable via fantasy. Donald E. Morse also notes the important role of fantasy for humans when he remarks that humans have always required the fantastic as a means of illustrating, understanding and planning their inner and outer worlds (1). Fantasy becomes a powerful tool that not only affects the creator of the fantasy but also opens up the scope for the readers of the work of fantasy. It promotes the condensation of images which enable it to touch or affect readers at various levels—helping readers to envision possibilities that go way beyond the mundane: the material world which is conventionally accepted as reality (Hume 196).

The dream worlds of La parenthèse de sang and Je soussigné cardiaque encourage Labou Tansi’s readers/audience to face the experience of the chaos prevailing in Africa today through an expanded vision that imagination (with its larger than life images), is able to provide. Labou Tansi himself suggests that La parenthèse de sang is intended to provide a means of escape from the realities of life. He remarks on the commentary of the dedication page of the play: “C’était donc cela sortir de la ‘vie brute’ pour aller croire en tous ces coeurs qui font chœur en nous.” Fantasy provides a dimension that is
liberating and limitless because the writer is no longer restrained by the regulations of historic reproductions or factual or realist representations.

An internet article by an unspecified author states that Labou Tansi’s writing style “provocatively breaks common Western literary models, styles, and genres, switched point of views, employed carnivallike [sic] exaggeration, dismembered language, and antinaturalistic aesthetics” (www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tansi.htm). But this dissertation argues that although Labou Tansi’s theater can be studied as grotesque, it does not seem very appropriate to call it carnivalesque because it does not seem to embody the spirit of Carnival. Carnival is the festive period that precedes Lent. “In its most general sense carnival celebrates the senses, and the unofficial, uncanonized relations among human beings that nonetheless exist as Bakhtin affirms in his acclaimed study of medieval folk culture, Rabelais and His World (1965)” (Danow 3).

Labou Tansi’s theater is not written in a festive carnival spirit nor is it intended to celebrate the body or the senses. On the contrary, the focus is taken away from the senses. Furthermore, unlike the carnival attitude that promises merry renewal, but may consequently deliver something undesirable, Labou Tansi’s theater presents something undesirable or grotesque which in turn sometimes delivers a certain type of humor, albeit “dark.” In Je soussigné cardiaque this dark humor is demonstrated when Mallots talks to the dirt in his hands: “poussière fatiguée qui poudroie, qui hésite. (Un temps.) Que tu me fais souffrir, ô pays. Pays ou seulement putainerie. Tu falsifies le rythme de mes reins. (Tic.) Tu compliques mes petits tours de viande” (83). While the act of speaking to an inanimate object and the use of sexual words may appear comical, there also a sense
of dreariness that quickly dampens the humor, because Mallot’s utterances are also disturbing. What is disturbing is that Mallot addresses the dirt as if it were a perverted sexual being raping him and drawing his strength from him just as his country has literally done to him. This type of humor that carries a sense of dis-ease is also presented in La parenthèse de sang.

The article in the pamphlet about the 1996 production of La parenthèse de sang by the University of Wisconsin’s Department of French and Italian states that the play is a grotesque farce that incites what the French refer to as “le rire jaune”—a forced laugh that covers up an underlying sense of discomfort. The article states that La parenthèse de sang depends on the techniques of farce (redundancies and repetitions, world play, and lexical deformations, illogical and nonsensical actions, refusal of cause and effect reasoning or use of such reasoning to prove an absurdity, characters who act like automons—mechanical in behavior and speech) to relieve the intense horror of its ‘story.’ (1)

Labou Tansi uses the above techniques to elicit a sense of humor that will take the edge off the horror of the chaotic scenario of the gory “parentheses of blood.” It is a type of humor evoked by word play (such as the nonsensical, repetitious comments by Le Fou) or by the mechanical, irrational and crude actions of the soldiers during the raid. A Sergeant orders his soldiers to “[v]érifiez les mains et la racine des cuisses.... Vérifiez si les hommes sont des hommes et si les femmes sont des femmes.” He then goes on to touch Ramana and remarks: “Vous êtes chaude. Vous avez des vraies lèvres de fille. Mais dans ce pays les lèvres ne font pas le moine” (13). He reaches for her breasts under
her shirt before he confirms that they are real. The sergeant’s actions and remarks in the
quest to protect national security may be construed as funny. However, while some
comic relief exists, one cannot laugh for long at the scene since the lewd remarks toward
Ramana are also disturbing.

The spectators of Labou Tansi’s La parenthèse de sang might laugh for a while at
elements of the grotesque farce, but their laugh will be a nervous one. This is because
even the humorous parts of the play carry with them a grim underlying message of
oppression that is disturbing. Because Labou Tansi’s grotesque farce is disturbing or
shocking, it compels spectators to reflecting on the sense of chaos and confusion in
modern Africa. The excessively monstrous events in the play oblige the audience to
think about calamities (such as those in Rwanda, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, etc.) that
modern Africa has experienced within the last two decades. Unlike the earlier theater
that used realist forms to propagate a myth of heroic African leadership Labou Tansi’s
new theater uses a non-realist form to debunk this myth. The fantasy and grotesque farce
of the plays, described above, provide an avenue for Labou Tansi to express his
disapproval of the insanity and absurdity of despotic leadership in modern Africa in a
revolutionary manner.

3.8 The Language of Labou Tansi’s Experimental Theater

The language Labou Tansi uses in La parenthèse de sang is innovative because it
breaks away from conventional “proper” language structures and also involves some
symbolic ritual language that Kouvoouama briefly describes. Kouvoouama explains for
instance in *La parenthèse de sang* that when *Le Fou* says “Libertashio! Douze qui ne vont plus manger. Douze qu’on est dans ton corps. Libertashio! Douze dans ton corps” (67), the number twelve on the one hand symbolizes the twelve Kongo clans. On the other hand, the number twelve symbolizes the twelve steps individuals need to take in the initiation process of another initiative ritual called the *Lemba* that enables the ritual participants to be wise or illuminated about their condition (105). Kouvouma gives this brief explanation of ritual language in *La parenthèse de sang* but there are no notes in the Labou Tansi’s play that give insight into ritual symbolic language that Labou Tansi may have used. While the ritual symbolism in the language is not that apparent in the play, there are other innovative elements of Labou Tansi’s ritual language that are very obvious.

What is clear is that Labou Tansi’s language is innovative because there is often no dialogue or communicative language between the characters. The play also contains the utterances of *Le Fou* who madly rambles on to himself. The *Fou* calls out names (made by combining Spanish and various Bantu languages) and also makes incomprehensible sentence structures: “Eh! Obramoussando! Pas sur la tombe de Libertashio…. Arrière! Arrière! Lessayino! Arrière! Arrière, Agoustano. Laissez-lui la paix à ce pauvre Libertashio.” (6). The doctor’s wife, Madame Portès also breaks off in an incomprehensible gibberish at the end of the play when she goes crazy: “Voueza nazo dashé cala mani Libertana. Okom pourassé akari brouma. Soum! Soum soumpra, soumprana mani manouméni” (54). This nonsensical language that Madame Portès utters seems to be a collection of words from various languages from different parts of the
world. In the same way, the language of barks, grunts and hissing that Mallot makes in *Je soussigné cardique* is also nonsensical, deliberately adding to the general hodgepodge of words in the texts so as to create disorder to subvert the notion of “order” found in the language of the conventional plays.

In *Je soussigné cardiaque* Labou Tansi also puts more emphasis in breaking the conventions of what is generally construed as “proper syntax.” This is illustrated first in Mallot’s sporadic changes in his speaking voice as he addresses himself shifting from the first to the second person as indicated above, and also in the following example: “Non. Tu entends, Mallot, c’est non. (Silence.) J’aurais dû le tuer. J’en avais le temps” (78).

Second, when Mallot changes his speaking voice, appropriate punctuation is not used; there are no inverted commas to indicate the direct speech. Third, Labou Tansi’s reluctance to conform to language norms is apparent in Mallot’s fragmented sentence formations. Mallot shifts his tenses back and forth in his verb conjugations within choppy incomplete sentences: “J’ai voulu, je veux. L’homme n’a jamais eu lieu, je l’invente” (80) or “Mallot! Je réponds: present. Oh! J’ai accouché de ce moi métaphysique qui bouscule ma viande et mes os” (81). Furthermore, Labou Tansi uses slang or familiar language within the text: “Non, ça ne prend pas” (77); “Les salauds. Le lit aussi. Ils l’ont achevé” (82); “Quel vie! Quel boulot” (82). The familiar language of the country people is transcribed as it is spoken: “m’sieur,” “m’son,” “bonziour,” and “bonjour” (84-5).

However, what is unique about Labou Tansi is that he does not seek to re-center the discourse he has already de-constructed. He refuses to conform to specific spellings
even for the familiar usage of the words of the country folk, so he refuses mastery of language even with the broken French of the country since wrongly pronounced words are not spelled the same every time they occur in the text even when spoken by the same person within the same scene. For example, *L’Enfant* pronounces the word monsieur as “m’sieur” on pages 84, 85 and part of 86, but then begins pronouncing the word correctly “monsieur” half way through page 86 through the end of the scene on page 88.

Besides breaking grammar conventions, Tabou Lansi’s plays also contain vulgar language. In *La parenthèse de sang* this language is apparent especially in one of the soldiers’ comments to Libertashio’s daughter Ramana: “Éloignez-vous. Pas de votre odeur dans mes narines: j’ai trois semaines d’eau dans les reins. Trois semaines d’eau dans les gestes” (14), but it is used more extensively in *Je soussigné cardiaque*. The language of *Je soussigné cardiaque* is often pornographic, illustrated especially in the exchange of insults between Perono and Mallot. Mallot says to Perono: “Je suis le sexe endolori de la putain” (78); “Je vous défais le nombril et l’anus, je vous mets des bulles de merde dans le cerveau” (102); “J’ai forniqué avec vous” (102). Perono’s rebuttals include phrases such as: “Je vous déviergerai” (103) or “Vous puez un peu. Vous respirez le caca…” (106). This kind of language excessive in its celebration of the naming of private body parts is often quite shocking.

The crude and shocking language of the monstrous leaders in Labou Tansi’s new theater greatly differs from the refined language of the heroic leaders in earlier plays by dramatists such as Badian, Zaourou or Dadié. It is also a language that does not adhere to
rules of “proper” grammar and syntax as the language of conventional French-language theater does. However, the incorrectness and vulgarity of Labou Tansi’s language is a propos in presenting Labou Tansi’s political concerns. The crude and fragmented language seems to accentuate the image of the chaos and the absurd existence of the people under oppression in both *La parenthèse de sang* and *Je soussigné cardiaque*. And, because of its intensity in crudity, this language (like the form described in the previous section) is also effective in that it heightens the assault on the reader/audience and forces the reader/audience to think hard about the conditions prevailing in societies ruined by poor leadership.
CHAPTER 4

TCHICAYA U TAM’SI: OPPRESSION, CHAOS AND FUTILITY

4.1 Introducing U Tam’si

U Tam’si is a multi-talented writer who has explored various genres but is best known for his poetry. He is considered one of the most dynamic poets francophone Africa has produced. In 1971, Donald Herdeck noted that U Tam’si was “considered to be, with Senghor, Bernard Dadié, and Birago Diop, one of the major poets from francophone Africa” (450), while Norbert Brockman lauds U Tam’si in 1994 as “one of the leading poets of French speaking Africa” (361).

Tchicaya U Tam’si (nom de plume of Félix Tchicaya) was born in Mpili, in the Middle Congo (Brazzaville) in 1931. U Tam’si was a name that he later took to distinguish himself from his father. He spent most of his life in France where he arrived in 1946 with his father, a deputy in the French National Assembly for his country. After high school at the Lycée Janson de Sailly in Paris, he did various unskilled jobs as he began writing.

U Tam’si has several personal accomplishments. Between 1957 and 1960, he was employed in Paris as a producer for French radio, for which he adapted over a hundred stories and legends (Lang 358). At that time he also made many contributions to the Paris journal Vie africaine and then became chief editor for a daily journal called Congo (Leopoldville) in 1960. In the 1960s he was also the
Cultural Attaché at the Congo Brazzaville Embassy in Paris. In the 1970s he served as an official for UNESCO, and belonged to several French literary societies and committees. By the early 1970s extracts of U Tam’si’s work had already been translated into Polish, Czech and Hungarian and were appearing in English in the Atlantic Monthly magazine (Lang 358).

As we saw earlier, U Tamsi is best known as a poet. Between 1955 and 1971 he published seven volumes of poetry including Feu de brousse (1957), À triche-coeur (1958), and Épitôme (1962), which won the grand prize for poetry in 1966 at the Festival of African Arts in Dakar. It was much later that he turned to the theatre, writing his first play, Le zulu in 1977. He later published Le destin glorieux and Le bal de Ndinga in 1987. Although they are few, U Tam’si’s plays are important because they all belong to the corpus of new theater.

U Tam’si’s earlier poems included in the À triche-coeur and Feu de brousse volumes were generally preoccupied with the poet’s search for self. They depicted aspects of colonial influence, and his quest for identity and ancestry. Later however, like those of Labou Tansi, his literary endeavors were not indifferent to politics. Beginning with Épitôme and emphasized more in Le ventre U Tam’si’s message started being more overtly political when he began to openly criticize the chaos that had erupted in his country after independence.

U Tam’si’s passion for and involvement in African politics was also apparent in a message he gave in June of 1986, during a ceremony where black African writers reunited at Gorée, to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the
massacre of Soweto. In an open letter to Mandela published in Joël Planque’s *Le Rimbaud noir*, U Tam’si encouraged Mandela to continue striving towards his vision for a liberated South Africa, and also expressed concern about political instability on the continent. In the same letter, even though U Tam’si expressed optimism about Africa’s future, he also expressed some concerns about the fact that there are certain troublesome aspects in society that make it seem as if independence had brought no positive changes for Africa:

> il y a des moments où il semble que nous sommes devenus esclaves de l’Indépendance, qu’elle ne nous a pas libérés. Malédiction disent certains.... Non, nous ne sommes pas maudits. Nous cesserons d’êtres esclaves. Il y a peut-être intérêt à ne pas utiliser le sel gemme tel quel, il faut séparer le sel gemme de la gangue. Nous aussi, il nous faut nous séparer d’une certaine gangue pour que nous soyons le sel de la terre. Le sel de la terre, c’est ce que nous sommes aussi et que nous n’avons jamais cessé d’être. Il y a peut-être eu oubli de notre part, rien de plus. (133)

What U Tam’si was saying here is that at a certain level it may appear that independence did not bring about the changes that the people had hoped for. But on another level, independence had in fact opened doors for the liberation of the people. Independence was not a curse as he remarks when he says that “[n]on, nous ne sommes pas maudits.” He does suggest that Africa’s contemporary turmoil comes about as a result of the activities of corrupt Africans (*la gangue*) who betray the cause for liberation after independence. Not all Africans are dishonest, however. There are others like him (*le sel gemme*) who have a positive vision for Africa and are committed to struggling continuously and selflessly to
effect changes within the society. And, this part of the society that is committed
to the African cause for liberty needs to separate itself from corruption.

U Tam’si’s concerns about the problems caused by the activities of
oppressive/corrupt agents in modern African society are made apparent in the two
plays that have been selected for this study: Le bal de Ndinga and Le destin
glorieux. For example, visionaries like Ndinga in Le bal de Ndinga are crushed
by corrupt forces and the play illustrates the disillusionment of the common
people in the post-independence era. Le destin glorieux also depicts corrupt
leadership through the character of the despotic head of state, the Maréchal
Nnikon Nniku.

4.2 Le destin glorieux du Maréchal Nnikon Nniku Prince qu’on sort: A
Brief Overview

At the beginning of the play, a radio transmission announces a coup d’état
by a new military leader in an unspecified African country. The ruthless new
leader Nnikon Nniku gains power as head of state after he forcefully overthrows
the existing government, takes over the radio station, and then arbitrarily gives
himself the title of Maréchal.

The civilian leader who has been ousted by Nnikon Nniku was not an
exemplary one either. Ebolobo had exploited his citizens, tortured his enemies
and had led the nation to catastrophic ruin: “Devant l’échec catastrophique du
gouvernement civil, incapable de maintenir l’ordre public, de maîtriser la machine
économique, un quarteron de sous-officiers et de soldats a renversé l’inepte Ebolobo” (35). After the new leader, Nnikon Nniku takes over the country, he promises to provide stability to the country through dictatorship that he refers to as “progress” and “discipline” in a military nation.

Nnikon Nniku appears to believe that his governing techniques have a positive effect on the people, even though the reader clearly perceives him to be a dictator who behaves like a lunatic and makes empty promises to his people: “Je vais faire un meeting. Je vais expliquer que ce pays n’est pas totalitaire, que les usines vont rouvrir… Nous serons libéraux à notre manière adaptée à notre régressité (85) or “[n]otre révolution a avancé la revolution du monde libre!” (90). As he makes these claims, he does not realize that he too (like Ebolobo) leads his people to their downfall. Nnikon Nniku does not provide progress and prosperity for his people as he professes to do. In fact, his excessive acts of tyranny are much worse than Ebolobo’s, for the Maréchal is extremely cruel even to those who are loyal to him, or those who work very closely with him.

But there is no respite for the people who are caught up under the tyrannical rule. The cycle of dictatorship does not cease; at the end of the play another radio announcement states that yet another soldier, Shese, has toppled Nnikon Nniku’s government and Shese has now become the new self-appointed leader.
4.3 **Le bal de Ndinga: A Brief Overview**

Before the disillusionment under Mobutu’s dictatorship, the Congolese people had rejoiced at the advent of independence, and their spirit of happiness and celebration was captured in the words a popular Lingala song, “Indépenda! Cha cha tozuwiye!” [Independence! Cha cha we got it!]. In *Le Bal de Ndinga*, while he was alive, the young Ndinga who was a custodian at a hotel embodied the aspirations of the common people for liberation after independence. Ndinga’s intense passion for this idea of freedom obsessed him like a drug making him continually dance in a state of frenzy to the words of the same independence song: “Indépenda cha cha to sombi-hé! Ce qu’il avait l’air buté à le chanter, cet air… une drogue dont il ne s’est pas lassé de toute une journée…” (171). But the notion of independence embraced by Ndinga appears to dissipate into a mere myth after the occurrence of a tragic event. Ndinga is shot to death by a governmental security force during a period of commotion that ensues after a political meeting celebrating independence. When Ndinga dies, one of the professional mourners, Angelique Nkoba, sorrowfully cries that the dreams of independence have also died: “Ah! Indépenda ya mawa! Mawaééé!” (171). The play takes on the form of a funeral cry to mourn and honor Ndinga after his death. U Tam’si’s dirge seems to simultaneously exalt and mourn the death of the passionate dreams of independence that Ndinga embodies.
4.4 Oppression in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater

While Libertashio’s daughter, Aleyo in Labou Tansi’s *La parenthèse de sang* compares the misery of the people’s lives under oppression to death, Nniyra a young anti-reactionary hippy in *Le destin glorieux* compares the lives of the oppressed citizens to a “sinister parody.” Under oppression, life is so horrible and distorted that it seems quite unreal and ridiculous. In a conversation with her lover, Lheki, Nniyra says: “… [N]ous croyons constraints de vivre une cruelle parodie de notre vie... de notre independence? Une sinistre parodie. La liberté devient synonyme de crime … (54).

U Tam’si uses sinister parody to ridicule Nnikon Nniku’s governing tactics that have led to the state of despair among the people. While Nnikon Nniku confidently states that he intends to rectify the chaos and corruption that his predecessor left behind, his absurd policies do not reflect the intentions he states. He makes insane policies that pop off the top of his head. For instance, he wants to fully engage his citizens, in his already corrupt military dictatorship, in order to foster a sense of discipline among them: “priorité à la discipline, incorporer tout le people dans l’armée pour apprendre la discipline” (36).

Nnikon Nniku mentions that he was a toilet cleaner before he came to power: “Je sors de l’ombre. Je suis assis sur les os des ancêtres et je porte un costume moderne, tout cela pour sauver ce pays…. J’étais cureur de latrines. Militaire, j’ai eu à me perfectionner dans ma spécialité” (35-6). This experience
provides some explanation for his ridiculous policies since he obviously did not receive adequate or relevant preparation for the position he assumes as leader of the state. Nnikon Nniku’s character and social status greatly differs from that of the leaders in the earlier French-language modern theater. While Badian presented the story of a leader who was a great warrior in La mort de Chaka and Zaourou presented the story of a leader who was a great emperor in Les sofas, U Tam’si’s leader (a former toilet cleaner) does not carry the same stature as the leaders depicted by his predecessors.

Le bal de Ndinga, on the other hand does not emphasize the flaws of a particular leader but presents the general theme of disillusionment and brutality inflicted on the people by governmental forces. In this play, a government security force that is dispatched to end the commotion of civilians following a meeting celebrating independence only worsens the situation by using arms. The Force Publique does not fire shots in the air to frighten and disperse the rioters but instead shoots directly at the people: “A coups de fusil, ils ont fait vider la place” (169). Their shooting exacerbates the riot scene and also kills the young anti-hero Ndinga.

U Tam’si’s new theater not only depicts the direct oppression of ordinary citizens by their civilian and military leadership, it also presents concerns about African dependency on the West. In Le destin glorieux, the Maréchal Nnikon Nniku wants the West to supply him with products that will enrich the West, but will not boost his own economy, such as the “self-planting peanuts.” This is a
parody in itself because no such peanut crops exist. And in Le bal de Ndinga, Van Bilsen, representing Belgian imperialism, still tries to assert the power of European presence: “Il y aura toujours des boys et le Congo aura toujours besoin de nous, les Blancs! Indépendence ou pas, c’est la même chose” (173). Van Bilsen’s comments indicate that control of Africa by the West still exists in the Congo depicted in Le bal de Ndinga, even after independence. Yet U Tamsi does not focus on the neo-colonialists; he focuses on the agents of neo-colonialism, the post-independence African leaders (like Mobutu) who not only govern by dictatorship, but also perpetrate Western-style exploitation of Africa even after independence.

Even though Le destin glorieux, like Labou Tansi’s La parenthèse de sang, presents the horrors of oppression and the absurdity of military dictatorship, there is an important difference in the playwrights’ approaches. While Labou Tansi’s new theater presents oppression as a result of a deliberately unjust law that has been put in place by leaders and is followed blindly by the people in La parenthèse de sang, U Tam’si gives the concept a different twist. In Le destin glorieux, the law is presented to the people as something that promises to create freedom and democracy. Ironically, the same law that promises to provide freedom for everyone is the same law that represses the privileges of the people.
4.5 Rebellion and Outcome of Rebellion in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater

Rebellion against ruling governments is outlawed in Le destin glorieux, and those who violate these laws are brutally punished. There are individuals, however, who still attempt to criticize or resist the oppressive leadership. Shese, a prison guard, questions the system for which he works and makes sarcastic remarks in an attempt to reveal the inadequacies of the government:

On a le pouvoir, on va gouverner. Qui nous a appris à faire ça? (Il se présente derrière Mheme et lui fiche le canon de son arme dans le dos.) Laisse tomber ton arme. (Mheme lui obéit) C’est bien. On va faire quelques exercises de gouvernment. A mon commandement, garde à vous, fixe! A mon commandement, à droite, droite! A gauche, gauche! Présentez, arme. Fais comme si. Repos. En avant, marche. Une, deux, une, deux. Halte… Très bien!…. Et parce que tu sais faire ça, tu crois que tu vas pouvoir commander, gouverner? (21)

But like Labou Tansi, U Tam’si does not provide solutions in the face of oppression, nor does he equip his oppressed characters with clear-cut formulas for survival.

4.6 The Funeral Dirge in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater

The form of U Tam’si’s Le bal de Ndinga is derived from a Central African funeral dirge. This form, taken from an indigenous social drama, is one that no other francophone African playwright has used prior to U Tam’si. In the indigenous context, dirges play an important role in the lives of the people. They are sung in reverence of the deceased or the deceased’s ancestors: “and most
important of all, the dirge is sung in honor of a deceased person, to mourn him, to elevate him, to adore him, to cherish his name” (Nketia 18). Funeral rites for the deceased are mandatory except in special circumstances that may require certain restrictions (for example, the death of a first born child or a suicide).

Funeral dirges are also performed regardless of the deceased’s stature in the society “The celebration of funerals is obligatory and dirges are sung at the mourning of a dead prince or even a common man” (Nketia 17). Nketia’s study, as well as the ones by Ode S. Ogede and Bade Ajuwon, provide information that can be used to analyze the form of U Tam’si’s play in a general manner. Although these studies are a detailed analysis of the intricate procedures involved in the funeral ceremonies of specific ethnic groups of West Africa, many of the general phases and elements described are applicable to dirges in other African groups.

In most cases, dirges are considered a part of a religious or spiritual ritual. Ajuwon, who studies funeral dirges of Yoruba hunters, says that the dirge songs are religiously grounded: “These songs are credited with divine origin, and are demanded by the god Ogun to be performed by his follower as part off a rite of passage for deceased hunters from earth to heaven” (Ajuwon 66). The observance of the ritual of dirge singing (the ìrèmòjé) is considered to be an act of worship with their god, and communication with the hunters who have passed on to the spirit world. However, here too the dirges are intended to laud the deceased hunter. “They praise his fine character, his kind heart, his professional skills and
techniques, comment his memorable deeds as a hunter, or at least the courage with which he faced ordeals in life” (Ajuwon 66). Dirge performers are able to honor the dead by addressing them by their names. In most African cultures, such as the Kiganda culture, it is inappropriate to call out a deceased person’s name out of the context of a dirge. If individuals call upon a deceased person’s name they must follow it by saying “si kwogedeko bubì” (I have not spoken ill of you) in order to appease the deceased who they believe can still hear them in death.

The funeral ceremony usually begins with preparing the body for viewing. The body is bathed, dressed, and then laid in state. Once the body is ready for viewing, the second phase of the funeral begins. At this point, the doors of the home are opened and the women of the household gather around the deceased expressing their grief as they begin the funeral wail. Because crying is not considered a manly act, the singing of the funeral dirge is considered to be the function of women (Nketia 8).

*Le bal de Ndinga* confirms this mourning role of women. While Jean-Pierre Mpenje describes the order of events during the mourning for Ndinga, Angelique Nkoba leads the singing of the dirge accompanied by a group of women from the neighborhood. She laments the loss of her loved one: “Ndinga, avec qui danses-tu? C’est mal de danser avec la mort” (180) and asks him when he has gone: “Wapi Ndinga-hé?” (170). Like the professional traditional mourner, she is responsible for employing sorrowful words and a sorrowful attitude in order to emphasize the impact of the bereavement. Although U Tam’si
does not situate Ndinga’s body on stage during the performance, he still creates a setting where the events that led to the young man’s death can be narrated. The dramatist presents the dirge as a remembrance of Ndinga’s life and accomplishments, and as a tribute to honor him in death.

Like the dirge performer in the indigenous context Angelique Nkoba also uses various kinship terms with Ndinga in her laments such as when Ndinga is referred to as both father and son in Kikongo: “Ah, tata Ndinga! Ah, tata Ndinga. Wapi Ndinga-hé? Mwana yango-hé?” [Ah, father Ndinga! Ah father Ndinga. Where is Ndinga-hé? My child-hé]. She uses these relationship terms and even terms of endearment to address the deceased during the dirge as they are used in a traditional performance since the dead person may be referred to as father, mother, or uncle (Nketia 33). In Le bal de Ndinga, U Tam’si extends these kinship affiliations to include political ties such as those he had with the first president of Congo, Kasavubu. Kasavubu is referred to as “Tata [father] SAKA-BOUVOU” (170). Unlike the performers of a traditional dirge, however, Angelique Nkoba, and the other mourners in U Tam’si’s adaptation take on a secular tone rather than a spiritual one. While some of Ndinga’s singing in praise and glory of independence was done in a certain mystical or spirit manner; “[p]lus il faisait d’efforts pour le chasser de son esprit, plus cet air prenait les accents triomphants d’un hymne de gloire” (172); the songs of the dirge performers in the play are not presented as spiritual chants.
While U Tam’si borrows from the form of the indigenous dirge, he chooses to omit certain elements of the indigenous performance in his creation of Le bal de Ndinga. He elects to exclude directions of specific traditional mourning clothing, accompanying musical instruments, or even the use of gestures. In the case of gestures, for example, U Tam’si’s adaptation does not emphasize the use of dramatic actions during the singing of the dirge in the stage directions even though gestures are a critical part of demonstrating grief or sorrow in African tradition. In Kiganda tradition, mourners walk around with their hands on their heads, bend their bodies, or even throw themselves to the ground in sorrow while singing the mourning songs. Ajuwon remarks that even in the Yoruba hunter context, “[t]he dramatic essence of ìèmòjé however, lies in the extensive use of gestures to act out the ideas” (69) — U Tam’si chooses not to include this aspect in his play. Even though we are told that Ndinga danced, his dances were not part of the dirge, and furthermore, his dances were not enacted; Ndinga’s dancing was only spoken about in the narrations by Jean-Pierre Mpendje.

Whereas U Tam’si is innovative in borrowing from a indigenous performance form, he differs from Liking in that he does not aim at creating a theater where all the actors and participants are actively engaged/involved in the performance as they would be in the indigenous context. Le bal de Ndinga appears to be more of a stylized adaptation rather than a live animated traditional dirge performance.
4.7 The Grotesque and the Absurd in U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater

While U Tam’si does not directly take the form of *Le destin glorieux* from an indigenous source, this play is still innovative because its structure subverts the realist representations of modern conventional French-language drama. U Tam’si’s play is particularly subversive in two ways. First, U Tam’si uses a non-realist form of the grotesque to demonstrate the brutality and horrors of Nnikon Nniku’s world in *Le destin glorieux*. Second, in order to emphasize the folly and absurdity of the human condition under dictatorial rule, he also chooses to use a form that shares certain qualities with absurd theater of Western avant-garde playwrights such as Jarry, Ionesco and Beckett. In this section of Chapter 4, we will first look at the grotesque form of U Tam’si’s *Le destin glorieux*, and then we will go on to observe the absurd form in this play.

In the first case U Tam’si, like Labou Tansi, experiments with violent, or gory images often associated with the grotesque in order to depict the horror of the human condition under despotic leadership. There are indications of gory activities during Ebolobo’s rule because the prison walls are tainted with evidence of the torture. But the grotesque is made more evident through Nnikon Nniku’s excessively brutal leadership strategies. When two girls who entertain Nnikon Nniku in his quarters make signs of the cross between themselves as they leave his presence, Nnikon Nniku responds to their actions with psychotic, irrational rage. He orders his men to have the girls’ breasts cut off, screaming: “Vous vous signez, vous vous condamnez. Désolé, crime de lèseregéssité! Serez amputées...
Their relationship with him and their well-being does not matter to him at all for later on in the play, the girls’ bodies, with their breasts cut off, are discovered floating on a river. The reader is left stunned by the senselessness and the brutality of the affair. It is even noted that Nnikon Nniku’s soldiers are ordered to wear grenades around their testicles, and that his staunch supporters have to remove one eye (either left or right depending on their office or position) in order to show their allegiance to him.

*Le destin glorieux*, however, does not limit excessive violence to governmental forces. In this play U Tam’si demonstrates that the venom that makes people cause senseless bloodshed and death has seeped into society and even poisoned the common man, since the revolutionary working class also picks up arms to fight against the oppressive governing system. For example, the bartender, a civilian, empties his cartridge on a crowd of soldiers, after which a soldier turns around and shoots the barman then imprisons the barman’s son who is just a small boy. However, while civilians use arms in *Le destin glorieux*, their use of aggression still cannot be compared to that of the soldiers, especially soldiers who are supported by a military regime headed by an insane leader like Nnikon Nniku. This is further reinforced by Lheki’s horrified reaction when he learns that the civilian government of Ebolobo has been overthrown by Nnikon Nniku’s military regime: “C’est écoerant! C’est pas juste! Avec ceux-là, on ne plaisante pas…” (34). For while Ebolobo’s regime was horrible it is not considered to be as monstrous as the military one.
In this play U Tam’si often fuses comical farce with the grotesque in order to create a satire that mocks the insanity of Nnikon Nniku’s world. In this case, even situations that would otherwise seem too gory to be presented as reality on stage are presented in a comical, ridiculous, or unbelievable manner. For example, Nnikon Nniku makes so many crazy orders to amputate various parts of his subjects’ bodies (eyes, testicles) that the repetition of these orders becomes quite comical. In what kind of world would a leader order the amputations of parts of the bodies of his henchmen and then confidently remark to them: “Je ne suis pas violent. Je n’aime pas la violence tu sais” (59). Like the “dark” humor described in the section on Labou Tansi’s grotesque form, the dim humor of U Tam’si’s play can induce laughter but it also ironically stifles any sense of gaiety. It leaves the reader nervous and perplexed much like a critical adult reader of the The Emperor’s New Clothes may feel after revisiting the popular children’s tale.

U Tam’si uses the grotesque as well as an absurd form in Le destin glorieux to depict the bizarre state of the people’s lives under tyrannical leadership. Generally speaking “the theater of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought (Esslin xix-xx). The theater of the Absurd rejects rational representations of the world and also presents the human experience as futile, meaningless and fragmented by using ridiculous or satirical elements to accentuate its absurdity. It uses mechanical or unrealistic characters and also de-emphasizes the development
of a storyline or plot that would demonstrate a potential to provide solutions to the crisis/dilemma of the human state. Some of these aspects noted of the Absurd above are also present in U Tam’si’s new theater embodied in Le destin glorieux.

While playwrights associated and preoccupied with absurd forms in the West usually emphasize the absurdity of life as being part of the human condition, U Tam’si takes on a different approach. He is not concerned with showing the absurdity and futility of the human existence in general; he specifically wants to show that life is absurd when people are subjected to the adverse conditions under bad leadership. In Le destin glorieux the absurdity of life is heightened by the fact that no one can escape from it. Even the perpetrators of the violence (like the Maréchal) are not able to stop the monstrous cycle of destruction that they themselves perpetuate.

Nnikon Nniku, an unrealistic/caricature-like character is intoxicated with the power he thinks he possesses which makes him delusional and irrational; unable to see the reality of his bizarre existence and atrocious actions. Moro comments on his governing strategies:

Il veut gouverner en appliquant la loi du ‘tout est possible’: l’irrationel peut devenir rationnel, la moralité est une loi créée sur mesure pour lui, la cruauté est une distraction excitante. Le désir aveugle de dominer crée le masque grotesque du personage et du pouvoir politique auquel il s’identifie. Masque qui ne lui permet plus d’avoir un contact avec le monde extérieur, masque qui ne fait voir que les idées qui naissent et alimentent l’idolâtrie du pouvoir. (Moro 23)

But Nnikon Nniku is not wearing a mask that he is able to don and remove as he wishes. He is actually caught up in his delusions, totally unable to control the
thinking patterns that appear obviously irrational and unorganized to the spectator or reader. He is also unable to reflect on and analyze his monstrous actions because he appears to be living in a nightmare. And just as human beings are not able to regulate the contents of their dreams (because dreams are a result of the unconscious activity of the mind), Nnikon Nniku is unable to control the extent of his nightmare. Worse still, all his subjects are also caught up in the nightmare he has created.

None of the characters (except for the jailer) is aware of being trapped in the bizarre existence set up by U Tam’si in *Le destin glorieux*. Contrary to what he would like, the jailer is forced to take on the role of a traditional witchdoctor (even though he is not one), in order to please Nnikon Nniku during the phony ceremonies preceding Nnikon Nniku’s inauguration. The jailer knows that he is living a lie when he says: “[J]e ne suis plus sorcier que sa mère n’est hyène” (60), and that he is not permitted to be himself.

Il vit à l’abri de son masque de ‘sorcier’ pour réaliser son plan et il est le symbole de l’homme blessé dans sa dignité. Le monde qui l’entoure (la société voulue par Nnikon Nniku) l’oblige à refouler sa douleur dans la profondeur de son âme est à vivre avec le masque de sorcier. (Moro 24)

The jailer, like the other characters in the play is a prisoner of Nnikon Nniku’s oppressive system, but he is also a prisoner within himself since he is unable to express the pain he has within himself, nor the hatred he has for what he sees going on in the world around him.
Like the jailer who sees the flaws of Nnikon Nniku’s system of government, Shese, the soldier at the prison, initially undermines the competence of the leaders and reveals his doubts about the genuineness of the democracy the leaders profess to provide: “Ils nous ont expliqué la loi qui fait du soldat le rampart de la démocratie—de la liberté—nous interdit la démocratie et la liberté” (15). For Shese the supposed leadership exemplifies everything but liberty. But, Mheme (Shese’s colleague), who characterizes blind obedience does not like the fact that Shese questions Ebolobo’s leadership of the country, and is irritated by Shese’s suspicions: “Voilà! Tout de suite, les suspicions. Il faut pas penser, se questioner, réfléchir” (17). Because of the continuous suppression of his ideas by Mheme, Shese cannot develop his thoughts any further, because he is so overwhelmed by Mheme’s comments and presence and he is forced to repress his true thoughts and feelings. Ironically, at the end of the play Shese is drawn into the same mentality that consumes Nnikon Nniku’s and it is he who overthrows Nnikon Nniku’s government and takes on the new position as the new military leader.

In _Le destin glorieux_ the people are compelled to take on personalities or traits that they initially opposed. Nniyra takes on a devious and violent character that she initially opposed when she has to pretend to be compliant with Nnikon Nniku’s regulations. Since Nnikon Nniku discourages the anti-revolutionary position that Nniyra believes in, she has to suppress her own ideals in order to survive in his crazy world: “La question de Nniyra révèle l’angoissante recherche..."
d’une raison de vivre dans une société où le pouvoir absolu a effacé toute possibilité de s’exprimer” (Moro 24).

The absurd world depicted in *Le destin glorieux* forces one to think twice about the absurdity of the delusions of tyrannical leaders and the absurdity it perpetuates in the existences of those they control. It also prompts the reader/audience to reflect on what reality may be verses the delusion of reality (fame, grandeur, power), one might have. The prestige of the dictator in *Le destin glorieux* is a myth. His idea of glory is portrayed like an empty dream.

U Tam’si uses this play to portray the trap that Africans have been caught up in under absurd tyrannical regimes but does not indicate how individuals should free themselves from this trap in this play. In his new theater, U Tam’si like Labou Tansi provides no clear-cut solutions or moral lessons for the oppressed like the ones his predecessors offered; he simply presents the conditions prevailing in Africa as he perceives them to be and then he leaves it up to readers to come up with viable solutions, or strategies that they can adapt themselves in order to effect change.

### 4.8 The Language of U Tam’si’s Experimental Theater

In his language U Tam’si experiments with repetitions, puns and word games. He plays with nonsensical arrangements of words such as in the case of the General Mphi Ssan Po’s repetitive coded message on the walkie-talkie: “CRAPAUD LOUCHE—ASPIC FACE AU PACTOLE—PARÉ—ESSAI
PREMIER—JE RÉPÈTE: CRAPAUD LOUCHE—ASPIC FACE AU
PACTOLE—PARÉ—ESSAI PREMIER” (23). He also shocks the
reader/audience by craftily using words or terms that are generally considered to
be dirty, vulgar or offensive in the script. He is not shy about using “cuss words”
or about creating names that have vulgar, references. The Maréchal “Nnikon
Nniku” may be “un con” or “un cul,” and not the grandiose character he thinks he
is. His generals’ names also have nasty undertones-- Mphi Ssann Po (Pi pi sans
pot) and Nkha Nkha Dou (Ka Ka Dou). It is U Tam’si’s wit in using these word
games that accentuates the comic and even the disgusting characters of Nnikon
Nniku and his associates.

Tchicaya emploie l’ironie, la farce, le grotesque pour façonner la
figure du dictateur Nnikon Nniku. Déjà dans le titre il le définit:
‘Prince consort,’ il renverse le titre honorifique de ‘Prince
Consort’ grâce à un jeu de mots. Son ironie crée un contraste entre
une signification hypothétique de la phrase et la signification réelle
que l’écrivain veut lui donner. Tchicaya se propose de dédoubler la
valeur sémantique des mots pour créer un personage d’apparat qui
en réalité n’a aucune valeur humaine. Il développe cette technique
littéraire jusqu’à faire la caricature de son personnage.” (Moro 22)

In Le Bal de Ndinga, U Tam’si does innovate with some word games,
such as anagrams, when he calls Kasavubu, the first president of the Congo,
“SAKA-BOUVOU.” The language of U Tam’si’s play is still creative even
though it differs from the poetic, metaphoric language of the indigenous funeral
dirge that inspires the dramatist’s form. Ogede who studies various aspects of
funeral dirges of the Igede people of Benue State closely examines the
significance of the poetic artistry involved in the creation of indigenous funeral
dirges. He refers to this artistry as “the expressive power with which dirge composers stimulate their listeners emotionally and intellectually” (80).

Like Ogede, Ajuwon also studies the importance of words and how they are uttered in the indigenous dirge context. Ajuwon remarks that in its traditional style, dirge performance “is characterized by strong competition in verbal art among the alternating artists” (69). Ogede goes on to say that Igede dirges in particular contain many layers of condensed poetic material (80) and gives an example of this through a dirge sung by a woman lamenting her brother’s death. Ogede says that the woman conveyed her message by carefully choosing her words and placed “emphasis on the poetic content of her composition” (89):

Anxiety gnaws in me as if I am a sun child  
I am unable to say much, I can’t say much.  
The fire on the feet, it burns the soul to ashes.  
The home has fallen apart,  
the heart is decayed,  
the fire on twigs,  
the hear has decayed today. (89)

This type of poetic language described by Ogege is not used by U Tam’si in Le bal de Ndinga. Moreover, his adaptation from the indigenous source does not contain other non-verbal communicative sounds like sobs, or wailing that often accompany the singing of dirges in traditional funeral performances. Instead, U Tamsi uses devices such as the creative words games mentioned above.

However, these commentaries on the language of U Tam’si’s dirge have not been made to demonstrate a lack of expertise on the part of the playwright. Actually the remarks have been made to underscore the point made earlier on that
new theater dramatists do not conform to a particular style. They have the liberty to include or omit aspects of the indigenous oral forms at their will and that is how each new theater dramatist maintains his/her own originality. So while Liking may opt to use symbolic language forms typically used in Bassa ritual for her new theater, and U Tam’si (like Labou Tansi) experiment with word games, anagrams or puns that are not necessarily indigenous, all of them are innovative in the way they subvert the language patterns of their predecessors.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have discussed selected plays by Labou Tansi, U Tam’si and Liking in a bid to prove that these three dramatists are pioneers of a new type of theater in francophone Africa. I have elaborated on various innovative aspects of their plays (notably in the areas of theme, form and language) in order to demonstrate that the work of these playwrights clearly breaks from the conventions of mainstream modern French-language theater in Africa. In addition, I have demonstrated that of the three, Liking removes herself most from these conventions.

What is particularly significant about the work of these new theater dramatists is that it is steeped in performance traditions derived from indigenous African oral forms. One can assume that because the new theater is grounded in these indigenous forms, and because it involves everyday people in everyday scenarios, then it would be one with which the common people might better relate. One can also presuppose that it would be a theater that would reach out to a wider audience and include the non-elite African spectator that was frequently ignored by earlier writers.

If new theater generally seeks to “Africanize” or “nativize” modern theater, I began to ask myself whether I was convinced that Labou Tansi and U Tam’si, as opposed to Liking, had succeeded in “nativizing” their plays so that they would be appreciated and
understood by the common people? I conclude at the end of the study that although the theater of these two dramatists attempts to be non-elitist, elements remain that distance it from the vast number of Africans who are not literate or who do not fluently speak or understand French.

First, the language of the new theater they practice is still French. Even though Labou Tansi and U Tam’si strive to break away from many of the regulations governing the use of “proper” or “standard” French, their plays remain written in the language of the colonizer and not the language of Africans or local pidgins. Although they have made changes in the conventional language structures, they are still trying to deconstruct the language and forms of the colonizer by using the very language of the colonizer. Moreover, they do not experiment with alternative non-verbal symbolic language forms such as those described in the chapter on Liking that are typically used in the oral performances that inspire their work. Second, and probably more significant, is that even though much of the new theater is drawn from indigenous performances, there are many fundamental aspects of the indigenous forms (traditional spatial arrangements, music, dance, costumes, body movements, gestures etc.) that have not been included in the contemporary renditions.

These two areas, language and form, is where Liking’s ritual theater stands apart from the new theater of Labou Tansi and U Tam’si. First, while Liking also uses French in her plays, her new theater is more accessible to the common man primarily because she does not limit herself to spoken language. As explained in the sub-chapters “The Symbolic Language of Liking’s Experimental Theater” and “The Body Language of
Liking’s Experimental Theater,” words in Liking’s ritual plays are not the only keys to effective communication. Liking’s work is unique because she extensively experiments with the vast array of non-spoken language modes used in indigenous rituals. These alternative modes of communication consequently make her theater accessible to those who do not speak French. Those who do not fluently speak the language of the colonizer can still grasp meaning from the symbolic language of the spatial arrangements, the drumming, the various colored wraps worn, and even by the gestures and body movements of the actors. Even without spoken words, spectators can still respond physically or emotionally to other audio or visual stimuli. Without dialogue, the frenzy of the music, dance, drumming, and body movements in the ritual theater have the potential to transport the participants (both actors and audience) to another level of consciousness or state of trance where real healing is anticipated.

Secondly, Liking’s ritual theater demonstrates a greater commitment to adhering to the oral forms that inspired her work. This is because she desires her adaptation to serve the same role healing rituals served in the indigenous context. She closely follows the format of the original forms and attempts to make the plays reproduce the experiences that are typical of these oral forms (experiences with which the audience is already familiar). This is in strong contrast to Labou Tansi and U Tam’si. Plays, such as La parenthèse de sang and Le bal de Ndinga, intend to entertain, shock, and illuminate the audience, but do not encourage the spectator to live the experience as was in the indigenous context.
Liking differs because her intention is not limited to entertaining, shocking or instructing her audience through an aesthetic production. On the contrary, she wants to provide a sacred occasion on stage for individuals in crisis to reflect on their situations and ultimately find possible solutions to their problems. Ritual in her theater is not intended to be mere play-acting. She actually wants to use the rituals in her plays as restorative measures to nurse a “dis-eased” society back to health: “to lead the audience and participants to overcome their traumatic experience, as successful ritual ceremonies allegedly do: to ‘heal’ and restore them” (Conteh-Morgan Theatre and Drama, 213).

Whether her goal is truly realizable is another issue. There are questions that must first be addressed. Can the modern spectator, or the modern actor, truly reproduce ritual experience, or do the limitations of theater forever strip the efficacy from traditional rituals? To what extent must the spectators believe in the ritual in order for it to be efficacious? Are Liking’s symbolic techniques too dependent on prior experience with Bassa culture? These issues are worth further exploration.
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