

Guillaume OYONO-MBIA,  
Cameroun Playwright, Interviewed

By COSMO PIETERSE

PIETERSE: Mr. Oyono-Mbia, I notice on the back cover of your book, *Three Suitors, One Husband/Until Further Notice*, that you speak at least three European languages, including English, French, and German. It struck me as strange that you should have German as one of these languages?

OYONO-MBIA: You know Cameroun and Togo were German colonies before the first world war. My Grandfather studied German at a very high level, like many other Cameroonians of his generation. When I was a child, being born in a village instead of a city, I had a lot of contact with my family so I was taught German by my Grandfather. At one time I was speaking it like my native language, Bulu, which is one of the most widely-spoken languages in the Cameroun. French I learnt at school and English at about 16 mostly by myself through magazines collected by my mother who was a sort of Women's Christian Group Organizer, and she got them from missionaries. I had an old English Dictionary which started with the letter E, so I only learnt the words from E to Z!

PIETERSE: Was there a kind of contact through your grandfather with the folklore of your area?

OYONO-MBIA: Yes, he used to tell me lots of stories in German; some of the stories he told us and which he, himself, thought came from Bulu folklore, turned out to have German background.

PIETERSE: I see. Now I was wondering whether there has been a lot of translating of plays or stories from French to German, or English, or from Bulu, in your early literary career?

OYONO-MBIA: I never did translate anything because I came to playwrighting by mere accident. I was preparing for the French baccalaureat and this in fact, led me to write in dramatic dialogue.

experience with theatre, I thought I had to «bribe» them into staying in. You see, nobody ever goes to the theatre in my country so I wanted to introduce that new form of entertainment to them. I do believe in a theatre of ideas but it all depends how one presents them. People would rather not think most of the time, you know.

**PIETERSE:** It does strike me also that of the published African playwrights most have started with fairly heavy, tragic themes and tragic depiction of events. Do you, on the other hand, feel that you are going to, can one say, plough the humorous and the comic furrow, rather than the tragic?

**OYONO-MBIA:** Yes, because I think people everywhere are getting rather distorted images of Africa. I take into account those who write in tragic terms because, after all, this is one aspect of Africa. But let this not be through to be the only aspect of Africa, or any continent. Even at a funeral you can see people laughing here and there because life has many facets.

**PIETERSE:** But at the same time I feel that under the fun there's a serious element. Do you then, regard humour as the great corrosive; perhaps as a greater satirical and didactic or educative element?

**OYONO-MBIA:** I'd agree with you there... I said I «bribed» people into coming to see my plays—they would laugh at them and then stay through. But usually the letters I receive afterwards deal less with the fact that they had been laughing than with the serious elements they had noticed. We also need entertainment. After all, life can be very boring, especially as we in Africa haven't got some of the means one has in Europe—television and so on. I want something that can be performed spontaneously,—that even those who feel satirized would be laughing at. I once took some of my relatives to attend performances in Yaounde; they were able to identify the people who were being portrayed on stage, because all the names are names of my uncles and other people who live in my own village. And if I had any trouble at all it was with those I had left out!

**PIETERSE:** It seems that your plays don't even try to be formal, in the sense that if something is not absolutely necessary for the structure of the play it is excluded. In *Three Suitors, One Husband*, the witchdoctor scene seems to be a kind of interlude, an excuse

I had never seen any plays on stage because we didn't have any theatre in our country and I never intended it to be performed because I didn't think it was of any real interest. Then one of my teachers discovered it and had it performed. The story stems from something that happened to one of my cousins, who got married in almost exactly the same way as is described in «*Three Suitors*». I just happened to attend the palava where they decided all of this, and I was interested in the fact that nobody had consulted her at all. When she came back everybody was smiling and saying «well, here's your husband». Of course she protested and in this case she had to marry that fellow. I tried to argue with my relatives, saying that my cousin ought to have been consulted, and they were really amazed at the thought that a woman should be consulted about her marriage. After all, they were only doing it for her own good. So my first play started as a sort of taking-down of everything which was being said during the palava.

**PIETERSE:** And it has been performed widely?

**OYONO-MBIA:** Very widely in Cameroon. In fact it has come to be the play to perform at the end of each school year, in almost any school you want to think of in Cameroon. In fact a member of our Educational Authority who gets invited for prize givings at many schools complained to me that before the prize giving speech he always has to sit through...

**PIETERSE:** *Three Suitors, One Husband!* And now that it has been translated into English do you know what kind of reception it's had?

**OYONO-MBIA:** In fact I wouldn't even call it a translation; if you read both versions you'll find that I tried to rewrite the play in English instead of translating it because in many ways the original work owed a lot to the use of the French language. I tried to make equivalents in English because of the different mentalities between French-speaking and English-speaking audiences. It has just been performed in English-speaking West Cameroon and seems to have been successful there.

**PIETERSE:** One finds that in your plays, the two that I've read, there is a lot of humour, rollicking fun.

**OYONO-MBIA:** I can't bear tragedies—great tragedies, perhaps, one at a time, but I don't really like tragedies. Also, since my plays were to be for most Cameroonian audiences, their very first

building; it's small but it's somewhere to go when we want to perform a play. Young people are beginning to like acting enough to perform without necessarily wanting to be paid.

PIETERSE: The audiences you have come across and that you hope to draw on. Which layers of society, would they come from, if one can use the term? Literate, illiterate?

OYONO-MBIA: Obviously we must start with the literate, because we have to start in the city. But we can only reach the illiterate if we have a travelling theatre, which is what I'd rather have. I don't like an established theatre with «theatregoers»—I would rather have the sort of theatre where people can just walk in without necessarily dressing up.

PIETERSE: I was thinking at one stage of doing a production of *Three Suits, One Husband* and I wondered about genuineness and authenticity—you have a number of songs and dances. How insistent would you be on authenticity in a production?

OYONO-MBIA: In the forthcoming edition in French I've made the point specifically that if one doesn't know any of the songs—which most people don't anyway—I leave the producers free to adapt any song they wish to. I never like to stand as an authority on my works—once a play is written it has to go on by itself. I have learned a lot from people who have read my works—people interpreting what I had said differently, and many of these things give me an insight into my plays. Sometimes I've put down things without necessarily thinking about them—just because they seem to fit in. Then I hear someone using them in a context I had never thought of. I think one learns a lot from the way people react to one's works.

PIETERSE: Your parental and grand-parental influences you have indicated. I was wondering: has Shakespeare or Molière had any influence on you? I thought I saw a Molière touch in the lightness in the humour, the wit?

OYONO-MBIA: I think this is quite true. We had to study and be examined on plays by Molière, and I could say confidently that I knew at least 12 of Molière's plays backwards, without having seen them on the stage; and I never really went to the theatre before seeing my own play on stage. So I learned about theatre from my teachers... and French teachers can be a bit con-

for dancing and entertainment. Is this a field you're going to explore?

OYONO-MBIA: I think it's going to be one of my specialities. If people go out of their homes to a play they ought to be allowed to take part in it. In fact I was very flattered during a performance at Keele when some of the Professors, with their students, joined spontaneously in the dance. And you know how cold an English audience can be! In Cameroon members of the audience are always jumping up and joining in. When the Chief asks questions he often gets replies not only from his fellow actors, but also from the audience. People jump up to drive the witchdoctor away, very indignant that he should be trying to fool the villagers!

PIETERSE: I see. So, to a large extent your style of writing derives from what happens in theatres. I was wondering whether a part might derive from a local aesthetic—the way in which certain entertainments, if not plays, would be performed in Cameroon?

OYONO-MBIA: Well, I hope to explore this more fully. I am fascinated by some of our entertainers who go around playing acts. The difficulty is that the actors who perform my plays might not be able to play the instruments I am thinking of, like our African harp. It won't be until the Government of Cameroon is willing to give us funds to train people that this will be able to happen. But I do intend to write something in that vein.

PIETERSE: Forgive my painful ignorance, but what have you written apart from the two plays we've mentioned?

OYONO-MBIA: These are the only ones that have been published in English. I've just finished a short script for the B. B. C. and a full-length play for the French radio. I have written some short stories which I hesitate to publish because I think they would be more effective as plays.

PIETERSE: So your main field is going to be playwriting?

OYONO-MBIA: Yes, because I think this is the best means to reach illiterate as well as literate people.

PIETERSE: Doesn't this mean you need a company to translate the play into a means of communication with an audience?

OYONO-MBIA: Yes, but I think it is worth trying and I'm going home to try and build up a company. We have a national theatre

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ventional. In fact my play was first cut into acts like Molière's plays. This had to be done because most of my schoolfellows weren't prepared to take a liberal view of certain things.

PIETERSE: But I see in your play this liberal view where not only the happy couples get married at the end, but there's a happy wedding of the kind of Molière touch with this almost organic but extremely useful entertainment—dancing and singing. Do you see your future writing developing in this direction? A fusion of France and Africa.

OYONO-MBIA: I think I still have to consider notions of theatre in England and France. I'm not sure an European audience is ready to let an African be himself. And I must take this into account if I want to be published in Europe, at least until I am sure that people are going to buy a play because it is a play by me and not because it is a well-written play according to how they've been trained to judge them.

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