

# *Another Oedipus: Leloup's Guéidô*

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Another Oedipus: Leloup's *Guéidô*

Barbara Goff

University of Reading

Which is it – ‘another Oedipus’ as in a completely different Oedipus who escapes the constraints of tradition, or ‘yet another’, the same old Oedipus whose obsessions are merely moved to a different context? To ‘translate’ a ‘myth’ involves a plurality of languages, but often also of genres and cultures, and in the process of ‘translation’ there are numerous possibilities for the shifting relationships between what changes and what remains the same. A myth from classical antiquity may pose questions about change and continuity in particularly acute ways, because classical ‘myths’ are very likely to have been preserved primarily in lasting literary form, for example in epic or drama, and also because they have wielded overwhelming cultural authority throughout the history of Europe. Inasmuch as European culture has been imposed by imperialism on other societies too, numerous parts of the world have developed their own responses to classical myths. These may bear the marks of their imperial origins, as well as signs of the struggle to escape them.<sup>1</sup> One of the more prominent myths revisited in this way is that of Oedipus, and in the particular dramatic ‘translation’ of Oedipus which I examine here, the two possibilities suggested by my title unfold simultaneously. The drama departs emphatically from the tradition generated by the Sophoclean antecedent, but becomes embroiled in a very oedipal debate about origins.

The play which offers this bifurcated version of itself is *Guéidô*, by Jacqueline Leloup, which was first performed in Cameroon in 1983, and published in 1986. The drama reworks the myth of Oedipus to set it within Cameroonian village society, and elaborates on the figure of the son who, outcast at birth, returns to save his community, marry incestuously, kill his father unknowingly, and end in shame and horror. Where it is strikingly different from numerous other Oedipuses is that the play directly indicts patriarchal modes of authority and transmission, making explicit what many have read as implicit in the Sophoclean drama.<sup>2</sup> The male characters of *Guéidô* are almost all represented as violent, transgressive, and unworthy of respect, and what is more, they are deliberately criticised as such by prominent female characters. But there is an alternative to this alternative. Where the drama strikingly rehearses the familiar anxieties of the oedipal conflicts is in the arguments that are conducted

in the secondary literature about the authenticity of the play – whether it counts as indigenous, because of Leloup’s long residence in Africa, or is, instead, imported as a sign of cultural domination by a neo-colonial France. Along with these anxieties go concerns over whether the play is the work of a single author or a collective, and thus whether its authorship is fundamentally male or female.

Such concerns with origin are stereotypically oedipal, and I have argued elsewhere, with my co-author, that they can be read in other adaptations of the Sophoclean play written by playwrights of African descent, such as Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods are Not to Blame* and Rita Dove’s *The Darker Face of the Earth* (Goff and Simpson 2007). We suggested that the figure and plot of Oedipus offer playwrights material on identity, the nature of civilisation, and the process of cultural transmission, which they have used to critique European colonialism by turning the prized works of European culture against itself. We did not include *Guéidô* in the earlier study because we confined ourselves there to Anglophone adaptations. If we approach *Guéidô* in an analogous fashion, however, it produces more differences than simply that of language, because it does not lend itself so readily to postcolonial interpretations.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, its critique is directed more towards indigenous patriarchy than colonial domination, and it has also been read to indict the internal Cameroonian politics of the post-independence period. Postcolonial anxieties about identity and cultural transmission emerge more clearly in the secondary discourses which the play does not cease to generate.

Leloup worked in the University Theatre of Yaoundé, which she instituted in 1980, having previously founded the Dramatic Art Club in 1975, as her colleague Gilbert Doho records (2013: p. 327). Her associates in these enterprises included Professor Louis-Marie Ongoum, who wrote an introduction to the published version of *Guéidô*, and several African students who collaborated with her on the play. She was also responsible for a number of other dramas but none of these, to my knowledge, was based on Greek tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Since the play *Guéidô* is not particularly well known or widely available, a brief description and synopsis are in order. The play bears very evident marks of its Cameroonian heritage in that, for instance, the chorus is made up of nine named characters, who can be directly compared to the ‘Nine Nobles’ or ‘nkam be’e’ who traditionally counsel the King (Doho 2006: p. 201). It does not proceed via acts and scenes but via fifteen ‘sequences’, which involve prolonged rituals of dance and song as well as spoken exchanges. The drama also includes tableaux; the very first page gives a full flavour of its procedures when the stage is invaded by ‘chief,

notables, village men and women' who sing and dance, then abruptly fall silent and maintain their positions in tableau while three named characters declaim. Then there are 'cries – dance – sudden stop – fixed tableau' (p. 13) before the next short verbal exchange. The play thus draws on the resources of Cameroonian oral culture in striking ways, so that the texture it presents is much more elaborately varied than most of Greek tragedy.<sup>5</sup>

The play starts with the birth of Guéidô, the Oedipus-figure, who bears a strange mark on his wrist; when a prophet is summoned to explain it, he delivers the prophecy that the child will grow to be blessed with extraordinary powers and qualities, but also cursed to kill his father, the current chief (pp. 20-21).<sup>6</sup> We should note that no prophecy is made about an incestuous marriage, and that some commentators have been misled on this point by the play's other resemblances to Sophocles' *Oedipus* and to *The Gods Are Not to Blame* (Timothy-Asobele 1993: p. 73). The male leaders of the village, including the chorus of the Nine, rejoice at first that the birth of a son has proved the chief's virility (p. 13), but once they hear the dreadful prophecy, they condemn the baby to death by drowning. Even though the baby is thus removed from the scene, in the subsequent years nothing goes well for the village; no more sons are born to the chief, the harvests fail, the neighbouring villages attack. Meanwhile, Guéidô has in fact been saved from the river by the female water-spirit, the Mamywata; he has grown up and has met the woman he marries, who is one of the many daughters of the chief, and thus his sister. Guéidô has, moreover, become a young man of astonishing powers, able to heal as well as to fight, to drive away swarms of locusts, and to command the weather. Even though many people are at first suspicious of him as an outsider, he is adopted by his the village, which of course is his real point of origin, so that he can help them in their struggles. He shines in all his enterprises, wins the trust of the nobles and the chief, and ends up by leading one war party while the chief leads the other. During this period he kills a panther, and the chief dies. This bald account conceals the tragedy; what has in fact happened is that the chief had taken the form of the panther,<sup>7</sup> and so his son has indeed killed him.

Installed as chief by acclamation, rather than by inheritance, Guéidô continues to preside over a successful village until his own son is born. This baby is a terrifying creature, who can walk well before normal babies do, and can eat raw meat. Sometimes he goes even further, as his mother recounts (p. 95):<sup>8</sup>

Tout à coup, j'ai senti une brûlante douleur me dévorer: il avait planté sa mâchoire d'hyène dans ma chair. [...] j'ai entendu [...] sortant de sa petite bouche de bébé tordue par la haine, le ricanement d'un homme mûr.

All at once, I felt a burning pain devour me; he had planted his hyena's jaw in my flesh [...] I heard [...] coming from his little baby's mouth, twisted by hate, the sneering laughter of a grown man.

When the Nine send for the prophet to guide their decisions about the baby, who seems to be an evil spirit sent as a punishment, the truth of Guéidô's birth and patricide emerges, and the chorus of the Nine devise a death for Guéidô which this time, he does not escape.

Although the contours of the Sophoclean play can be discerned within this adaptation, some of the plot is very different, and many of the characters. Some of the major differences include that Guéidô helps his community in war, rather than with a Sphinx, making this adaptation more like Rotimi's play than that of Sophocles; he marries his sister rather than his mother; he is saved by the Mamywata, the water spirit, rather than by human adoptive parents; his own monstrous son is a major figure in the plot and precipitates the final reversal. Moreover, the gender dynamics of the Greek antecedent are altered dramatically. Guéidô's mother is not of much interest to the play, but his wife, who is also his sister, has an important role which involves finding Guéidô, helping to bring him to the village, and giving birth to the frightful baby. The Mafo, the mother of Guéidô's father the chief, is an even more impressive figure.<sup>9</sup> In particular, she has a lot to say about the relative importance of the male and female in the production of children, and confronts the male leaders, the Nine and her son the chief, over the infanticide. Once the prophet explains the threat from the baby, the chief makes clear how he perceives his son. Enraged by the prophet's warning, he calls the baby a miserable earthworm (p. 21), assassin (p. 22) and monster (p. 27), consigning him to death without the slightest qualm. When the Mafo intervenes to remind the chief that 'a son is a blessing from the gods', he bursts into laughter and replies 'Where have you seen, woman, that a father had a duty towards his son? In what custom have you found such stupidity?' ('Où as-tu vu, femme, qu'un père avait un devoir envers son fils? Dans quelle coutume as-tu trouvé pareille ineptie?' p. 22). The male claim to the son's obedience and duty is absolute and explicitly recognised as such by the named members of the Nine (p. 22):

Epwa Epwa: Toute sa vie l'enfant doit louer son père, pour avoir bien voulu planter sa semence dans le ventre de sa mère.

Goum Goum: Toute sa vie l'enfant doit respect.

Bouma: Obéissance

Tassa: Soumission aveugle

Simassi: Et totale

Kabakaba: Au père

Epwa Epwa: All his life the son must praise the father, for having consented to plant his seed in his mother's womb.

Goum Goum: All his life the child owes respect.

Bouma: Obedience

Tassa: Blind submission

Simassi: Total submission

Kabakaba: To the father.

This exorbitant claim rests on the fact that men initiate boys and teach them warfare and hunting, but the Mafo counters with a different history (p. 25):

Mais c'est moi qui jour après jour ai arraché la peur de son coeur d'enfant; c'est moi qui l'ai rendu ferme dans la douleur, qui lui ai appris les secrets de la terre et des arbres, le feulement de la panthère and l'odeur du serpent. C'est moi sa mère qui lui ai enseigné la puissance redoutable de la parole qu'on profère.

It is I who day after day drew out the fear from his childish heart; it is I who made him strong against pain, who taught him the secrets of the earth and of the trees, the growl of the panther and the scent of the serpent. It is I his mother who taught him the redoubtable power of the word which one utters.

The claim she makes for the mother's importance is dismissed by the chorus of the Nine, who go on to agree that 'Everyone among us knows that from the moment of his birth, a son is the rival of his father' ('Nul n'ignore chez nous que, dès sa naissance, un fils est le rival de son

père', p. 26). Thus, the threat of patricide must be definitively met with the deed of infanticide.

The exchanges between the Mafo and the men indicate how deeply the play divides along gender lines. From the very beginning the men, the chief and the chorus, exult in a proud, aggressive masculinity that sees not only women as chattels but also children, including sons. They are not troubled by the contradiction between the joy at the birth of a son, which confirms the father's virility and safeguards the village's succession, and the admission that sons are rivals and so must be kept in abject obedience. The play thus confronts head-on the oedipal bind in which the transmission of male patriarchal power from father to son is both necessary and impossible.

In line with this destructive politics, neither the chief nor the chorus presents an attractive or positive figure. Here is another major difference from the Sophoclean play, in which it is possible to respect the chorus and its concern for the polity, and where the leading male figure, Oedipus, is distinguished by his care for his people. Throughout *Guéidô*, by contrast, although the chorus does discuss the fate of the village and its leadership, its members also regularly meet together to congratulate each other on their sexual escapades, their adultery – apparently indispensable despite the practice of polygamy – and their wife-beating. These scenes are often humorous, with the Nine teasing each other, vying sexually, and making jokes at each other's expense. But the content sometimes rankles, as when discussing a man who beats his wives too enthusiastically (p. 54):

Epwa Epwa: Battre ses femmes c'est bien naturel. (Tous approuvent)

Polo: Mais il ne faut pas abuser des plaisirs.

Epwa Epwa: To beat one's wives is perfectly natural. (All approve).

Polo: But one should not abuse one's pleasures.

At other times they express themselves about women very crudely (p. 56):

Polo: Allons, allons. Une femme est une femme et pour ce que nous lui demandons l'une peut remplacer l'autre.



Polo: Come come. A woman is a woman, and for what we ask of her, one can replace another.

Although Guéidô is not represented as equally brutal and blinkered in his attitudes, and is endowed with plenty of endearing qualities, after his alarming son is born he is described as wearing the same costume and accomplishing the same gestures as his predecessor (p. 95). To this extent it appears that conformity to patriarchal norms is inescapable. Guéidô too fears his son, and sends for the prophet to explain the situation, in a repetition of his father's action.

At this point in the play, in another significant departure from the Greek, the prophet does not deliver any answers himself but goes to find and question the Mamywata, the benign female river spirit. It transpires that she rescued Guéidô from drowning when a baby and fostered him to adulthood. In her knowledge of past and future she reprimands the men of the village: 'Guéidô will die: but not victim of gods or of ancestral shades. Guéidô will die, victim of the egoism and lack of love of his fathers' ('Guéidô va mourir; mais non pas victime des dieux ou des mânes ancestrales, Guéidô va mourir, victime de l'égoïsme et du manque d'amour de ses pères', p. 103). The prophet protests that Guéidô had committed the gravest of crimes, but the Mamywata dismisses this claim in terms that have probably occurred to many readers of the Sophoclean play: 'Can you speak of 'crime' when the act was accomplished in purest innocence?' ('Peut-on parler de crime lorsqu'un acte est accompli dans l'innocence la plus pure?' p. 103). When the prophet invokes the gods, the Mamywata is scornful (pp. 103-4):

Les dieux! [...] En réalité vous avez eu peur de cet enfant et c'est en l'écartant avec une telle cruauté que vous l'avez livré à ce que, commodément, vous appelez son 'destin' [...] Laissez les dieux et dis-moi: quand, mais quand cesserez-vous de voir un rival en l'enfant qui naît? Pour affirmer votre pouvoir et vous grandir vous étouffez vos fils sous votre autorité absolue et vos interdictions.

The gods! [...] In reality you were afraid of this infant and it is in rejecting him with such cruelty that you delivered him to what, conveniently, you call his 'destiny' [...] Leave the gods alone and tell me: when, but when will you cease to see a rival in a newborn child? To affirm your power and enlarge yourselves you suffocate your sons beneath your absolute authority and your prohibitions.

The Mamywata thus indicts the society via its men, but her revelations do not circumvent death. She concludes by saying that Guéidô will die, but not in vain; 'A profound failure will

overturn irreversibly the edifice of [the villagers'] ancestral certainty' ('Une faille profonde ébranlera irréversiblement l'édifice de leur ancestrale certitude', pp. 104-5). Yet the scene of Guéidô's death can be construed in a way that departs from her prophecy, and leaves the village fundamentally unchanged. The chorus are arguably responsible for Guéidô's death; they speak the word that will kill him and then with him, drink the wine which will, in his mouth, turn into poison (p. 110):

Epwa Epwa: Aucun bourreau ne touchera à un seul de tes cheveux: plus noblement que le poison, aussi sûrement que le fer, chez nous, la parole tue [...] tu mourras de la parole qui tue.

Polo: Que ce vin, objet de convoitise de nos ennemis, doux au palais des purs, devienne amer à la bouche de celui qui fut souillé, qu'il l'embrace et le dévore.

Epwa Epwa: No executioner will touch a hair of your head; more nobly than poison, as surely as iron, with us, the word kills [...] you will die of the word that kills.

Polo: May this wine, object of envy to our enemies, sweet in the palace of the pure, become bitter in the mouth of him who is defiled; may it embrace and devour him.

They are implicated in his death as an adult, as they were in his planned death as a baby, suggesting a circularity that is ultimately unproductive. Although the chorus claim to respect Guéidô, the attitudes of the society as a whole are, arguably, so degraded that it is not clear how his death will save them.

The play's discourse about the inequality between men and women, and the hostility attending it, is so emphatic, and the tension between older and younger men so vivid, that it is quite difficult to explain why no previous commentator has remarked on it.<sup>10</sup> Other explanations for this dimension of the play are possible, for instance that it produces very strongly-drawn characters, and lots of humour. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Leloup, as a woman writer, here indicts the patriarchal society within which she works. The woman characters are made more significant than in the Greek, and the males are made far less laudable, so that the major modifications between the Greek and the Cameroonian versions work to reject patriarchal structures and expose their weaknesses.

Yet there is considerably more to say about Leloup's cultural location, which proves itself to have borne marks of an oedipal identity. As a Frenchwoman living in Cameroon and

working at the university theatre, she was to some extent a product of the neo-colonial relationship that France has with Cameroon.<sup>11</sup> This has given rise to some serious critique of her work in the secondary literature, starting with a conference on theatre in 1987 at which the question was raised of the relationship between African theatre and a French writer-director. Hugely successful in performance, according to Jean-Paul Badet, Leloup's work was nonetheless criticised as not African, or even Franco-African. So alien was it, apparently, that a new word was coined to describe it: 'A professor asked to speak and took up the polemic, stating that, as far as he was concerned, he had the impression of dealing with "an enterprise strictly Franco-French"' ('Un professeur demanda la parole et reprit la polémique en précisant que, pour ce qui le concernait, il avait l'impression d'avoir affaire à "une entreprise strictement franco-française"', Badet 1988: p. 92). At which point, according to Badet, the professor was treated as a racist and the debate fell into such confusion as to render it inaudible. Subsequently, other writers concur with the unnamed professor. S. J. Timothy-Asobele finds that *Guéidô* is 'heavily indebted still to the French conception of theatre [...] How could it be otherwise when the director of the neo-French enterprise that is *Guéidô* is Jacqueline Leloup, a European woman of French nationality?' ('lourdement endetté à l'égard du concept français du théâtre [...] Comment pourrait-il en être autrement lorsque la directrice de l'entreprise néo-française qu'est *Guéidô* est Jacqueline Leloup, une Européenne de nationalité française?' 1993: p. 76).<sup>12</sup> Godfrey Tangwa complains that the *Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre*, in its article on Cameroon, is 'worse than useless' because it 'spends most of its space and time talking about a French woman called Jacqueline Leloup and a Cameroonian lady, Nicole Werewere Liking, who lives and does her theatre work in Côte d'Ivoire' (1999: p. 156). Such critique obviously constructs Leloup as an outsider, but it derives some paradoxical force from the fact that Leloup was domiciled in Cameroon and thus partly an insider too. This is of course the contradiction that Oedipus must manage.

Most recently, Jacques Raymond Fofié excludes Leloup's plays from his consideration of drama by Cameroonian women, because she is French, and also because he claims that *Guéidô* in particular is the product of a collective enterprise rather than a single woman author. 'The first reason is that Jacqueline Leloup is a Frenchwoman. The second reason is that these are collective works; Wolfgang Zimmer presents *Guéidô* as a "collective creation". Jacqueline Leloup does not deny it.' ('La première raison est que Jacqueline Leloup est une Française. La deuxième raison est que ce sont des oeuvres collectives: Wolfgang Zimmer

présente *Guéidô* comme une “creation collective”. Jacqueline Leloup ne s’en defend pas’, 2011: p. 74.) Leloup in fact acknowledges enthusiastically that she learned from her African students and used their contributions in her play, in the Avertissement (Foreword) to the published text. She explicitly thanks them for ‘the rich documentation, both written and oral, which they furnished for the dramatic writing of *Guéidô*’ (‘la riche documentation écrite et orale qu’ils ont fournie à l’écriture dramatique de *Guéidô*’, p. 9). The published version is illustrated with numerous photographs of the actors both male and female. In this strand of the critique, Leloup’s female identity, which would have included her in Fofié’s volume, is trumped by her Frenchness, which keeps her out; she is also problematic because she combines the figure of the solitary (woman) author with that of the collaborator, dependent on the work of men.

The play thus comes laden with a discourse about gender and identity, which is also one of neo-coloniality and authenticity. This discourse pits the writer-director as a lone, French, female voice against the collective, male, African identity of her students. Even those who are not hostile to Leloup employ the same kinds of terms to analyse the work. Thus in 1986, in his introduction to the published play, Professor Louis-Marie Ongoum of the Department of Black African Literature (Département de Littérature Négro-Africaine) also deploys the signs of individual and community, male and female, African and French. He insists that ‘Written literature does not have profound and lasting value unless it plunges its roots into the nourishing soil of myths, that is to say the beliefs of the people from which it takes subjects and motifs, themes and characters, forms and procedure’ (‘La littérature écrite n’a de valeur profonde et pérenne qu’autant qu’elle plonge ses racines dans la terre nourricière des mythes, c’est-à-dire des croyances des peuples dont elle tire sujets et motifs, thèmes et personnages, formes et procédés’). He goes on to claim that literature ‘is not interesting and effective unless each member of the community believes himself the author because he finds himself there in his need for harmony with his fellows’ (‘n’est intéressante et efficace qu’autant que chaque membre de la communauté s’en croit l’auteur parce que s’y retrouvant dans ses besoins d’harmonie avec ses semblables’, 1986: p. 5). The written and the oral, the individual and the collective are thus not in conflict with one another, although in each pair there is arguably a more and less positive term.

According to Ongoum’s 1986 account, the fruits of his creative pedagogy are currently two, the play *Le Fils d’autre* by Gilbert Doho and *Guéidô* by Leloup. Doho is Cameroonian and a member of the Bamiléké ethnic group, and Ongoum suggests that he thus presents a ‘terrain’ that is ‘propitious’ to the germination of the favoured literature that

combines oral and written characteristics (1986: p. 7). Since Leloup is French, she presents a very different terrain, but this renders her achievement the more compelling: ‘She has, without atavistic attachments, but by empathy alone, the love alone which comprehends and animates everything, penetrated and assimilated the traditional givens which she exploits, as no native of indigenous education would have known how to do’ (‘Elle a sans attaches ataviques, mais par la seule empathie, le seul amour qui comprend and anime tout, pénétré et assimilé les données traditionnelles qu’elle exploite, comme aucun aborigène à formation endogène n’aurait su le faire’, 1986: p. 7). Thus the play takes its place among the ‘masterpieces of the oral tradition which [...] are so integrated into the common patrimony that, belonging to all, they no longer belong to anyone’ (‘[les] chefs d’oeuvre de la tradition orale qui [...] s’intègrent à ce point dans le patrimoine commun qu’appartenant à tous ils n’appartiennent plus à personne’, 1986: p. 8).

Others of Leloup’s collaborators respond in terms which also foreground questions of identity, authenticity, and ownership. At the 1987 conference discussed above, which accompanied the performance of *Guéidô* at Benin, an unidentified actress, who may have been Elise Mballa Meka, ‘demanded the floor to reply, in quite a violent fashion, that she found this type of question altogether out of place, that Jacqueline Leloup had lived many years in Africa and that she thought and reacted as an African woman and therefore that the debate was closed’ (‘demanda la parole pour répondre, de façon assez violente, qu’elle trouvait ce genre de question tout à fait déplacée, que Jacqueline Leloup avait vécu de nombreuses années en Afrique, qu’elle pensait et réagissait en Africaine et donc que le débat était clos’, Badet 1988: p. 92). In an interview from 2008, Meka claims that ‘*Guéidô* is a drama of the Cameroonian patrimony’ (‘Guéidô est une pièce du patrimoine camerounais’) and repeats that Leloup’s work had been conditioned by her long residence in Africa. She goes further to assert that only envy and jealousy, stemming from the play’s success, led people to question its ‘authenticity’ by emphasising the collective contribution of the male students. She says that ‘This success moreover pushed ill-disposed voices to question her paternity of the work. Which is not right, insofar as, as a result of having stayed for a long time in Africa, she was impregnated with its realities’ (‘Ce succès a d’ailleurs poussé les mauvaises langues à remettre en question sa paternité de l’oeuvre. Ce qui n’est pas vrai dans la mesure où du fait d’avoir longtemps séjourné en Afrique, elle s’était imprégnée de ses réalités’, Charles 2008). While Meka freely acknowledges the collaborating students by name, she also insists that it is possible to discern who is responsible for what part of the

play: ‘as for those who would dispute Mme Leloup’s paternity of the play, I must say that a subtle reading of the play permits one to disclose the parts written by her and those inspired by the members of the University Theatre’ (‘quant à ceux qui contesteraient la paternité de l’oeuvre à Mme Leloup, je dois dire qu’une lecture subtile de la pièce permet d’en déceler les parties écrites par elle et celles inspirées par les membres du Théâtre universitaire’, Charles 2008). Meka does not go on to analyse the play in these terms, but it seems clear enough that overall, she assigns authorship to Leloup rather than to the students.

It cannot escape our notice that the oedipal play is caught up in an oedipal dynamic of paternity and identity, insider and outsider, individual and collective, male and female. The French word ‘paternité’ can be translated ‘authorship’, but given the other elements of the dispute around Leloup’s ownership of the drama, ‘paternity’ itself seems to be at stake; the patriarchal tendencies of the French language compound the questions posed by the ancient play as it migrates to the postcolony, asking who its parents were and what its sources of power. The figure of Leloup generates quite opposed descriptions of itself, which are not enlightening if we read them in terms of an individual’s biography, but which do shed light on the politics of gender and of neo-coloniality. Thus Leloup’s gender position, as an authority figure who is anomalously female, is complicated by her location in Cameroon, where the history of French colonial rule compromises her authority. Gender and neo-coloniality are, moreover, mutually implicated, so that even the critique of patriarchy which I have read here could be understood not simply as the emancipatory gesture of a female playwright but also as French neo-colonial condescension to African tradition. Within these complex politics, Leloup’s identity is available for construal as either French or African, with corresponding dimensions of either individual or group creativity, and either authenticity gained from long immersion in Africa, or outsider status which is symbolised in the choice of Oedipus, the canonical European play. The difficulty that Leloup presents is summed up in the fact that Meka has no other word than ‘paternité’ with which to refer to her work on the play, thereby rehearsing exactly the anxieties about male, female, and transmission of cultural power that the drama itself has foregrounded. Is her play the heroic saviour or the monster baby – and can she be a mother, or do only fathers count?

Gilbert Doho has a further take on the politics of the play and of Leloup’s cultural positioning. He claims that *Guéidô* is an overtly political play, escaping its mythical Greek identity to describe instead the actual patricidal coup of 1982 which toppled the Cameroonian autocrat Ahmadou Ahidjo, who had ruled since independence in 1960.<sup>13</sup> The new ruler, Paul

Biya, is accused of using censorship to quash dissent, particularly in the theatre. Thus, Doho writes (2006: p. 16),

The crime was to have translated on to the stage the father and son battle with which Cameroon was familiar. Biya appears in the guise of a cursed child, Guéidô in the Bandjoun language. Guéidô/Biya is cursed because after several years of prosperity on the throne the king/president plunges his people into economic crisis, calamity and unspeakable misery. When people beg him to abandon power, Guéidô chooses death over disgrace. He rejects a collective suicide that would give him eternal power and chooses death by poison before his elders/councillors. By contrast, Biya desperately clung to power; he chose collective suicide (that is, the ruin of the country) over his people's freedom.

Doho is thus quite emphatic that *Guéidô* responds to and indeed recounts contemporary Cameroonian events, its disguise as 'Greek myth' perilously transparent.

So, how did Biya react to Leloup's play? According to Doho, Biya threw her out of the country: 'the expatriate Jacqueline Leloup, who created *Guéidô* with the collaboration of Louis-Marie Ongoum, myself and the University Theater actors (among others Emile Abossolo, Tadie Tuena, Vincent Tsamo, Francois Bingono) was asked to leave Cameroon after seventeen years of work and collaboration' (2006: p. 16).<sup>14</sup> This reaction paradoxically reinforces Leloup's Africanness and participation in the collective identity; the French playwright is so embedded in the culture of Cameroon that her subversive comments on it result in exile, and the work's identity is shown to be utterly African by its fate at the hands of the dictator. That Leloup's move from Cameroon rehearses the movement of Oedipus is yet another irony.

Doho makes an intriguing case for *Guéidô*'s political alignment, but it is arguable that his retelling has to modify aspects of the play, in order to make it fit with Cameroon politics as they unfolded in the early 1980s. This is evident not least in the description of Guéidô's sacrificial death, with which my own account above clearly disagrees. Even though the new Oedipus may offer a suitable way to address the patricidal moment of the coup, the potential significance of the play is not exhausted in the address to internal Cameroon politics. Instead, the play's intervention in gender politics, and its vulnerability to a range of oedipal criticisms, mean that it invites interpretation on several levels. This is partly at least because in translating the myth of Oedipus to an African setting, *Guéidô* necessarily engages with the

extraordinarily tangled cultural inheritances of postcolonialism. *Guéidô* dramatises one struggle over origins, when the male and female characters of the play confront each other over the fate of the baby, but becomes caught up in a series of related struggles that devolve onto questions of authenticity and cultural power, made more acute by the neo-colonial presence of France within Cameroon. The figure of Oedipus does not cease to provide compelling metaphors for cultural and political tensions, not least when the very identity of the play itself is at stake.<sup>15</sup>



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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Such responses, along with others, are currently investigated under the name of ‘classical reception’. See for instance Hardwick and Gillespie 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Pucci 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Dove’s play revolves around the slave trade, so empire is obviously implicated; and while Rotimi’s play is often interpreted as about the Nigerian civil war, its scenes of territorial conflict, and conflict over language, have clear postcolonial resonances. See further Goff and Simpson 2007.

<sup>4</sup> It may be relevant to the critical reception of Leloup, and the charges of neo-colonialism, that one such play was based on the novel *Le Regard du Roi* by Camara Laye, the Caribbean writer, and another was about Toussaint L’Ouverture, who led the slave revolt on Haiti. She also produced *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*, by Aimé Césaire, which also concerns the Haitian revolution; see Doho 2013: p. 329.

<sup>5</sup> The skills of Leloup’s actors have attracted different evaluations. Tangwa 1999: p. 160 is suspicious of their organisation: ‘They concentrate on choreography, flawless rendition of language and comic humour. The actors and actresses in Leloup’s troupe gave me the impression of people reciting La Fontaine’s poetry. And when I watched a scene of village elders who were choreographed to cough and yawn in unison and shout ‘oui’ or ‘non’ in unison, I was strongly reminded of CPDM parliamentarians of our one-party National Assembly’. Badet, however, suggests that part of the success of the 1987 production in Benin was due to the precision of movements, rigorous control of exits and entrances, and harmonious choreography (1988: p. 90). On the University Theatre and its audiences see

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Doho 2013: p. 334; he considers the university troupes to be in the vanguard of political criticism in Cameroon.

<sup>6</sup> In this organisation of the plot, with the birth of the baby fully explored rather than simply ‘background’, the play is not unlike Rotimi 1968.

<sup>7</sup> The chief in traditional society has the ability to transform into a panther bestowed on him by the rites of his investiture. See Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> All quotations are taken from Leloup 1986. All translation from the French is mine, and I have settled for a more or less literal translation rather than aiming for elegance.

<sup>9</sup> On the mother of the chief in the structures of traditional society see Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy-Asobele 1993 does not mention gender as a theme, although he investigates many other aspects of the play. Dominik 2007: p. 123 offers a plot summary which states erroneously that the incest is predicted, and that Guéidô confronts and kills his father before marrying the daughter. I have been unable to unearth any other work on the play by a classicist.

<sup>11</sup> In its strictest sense, ‘neo-colonial’ refers to a situation whereby the erstwhile colony remains economically dependent on the colonising country, e.g. when the economy is dominated and driven by multinationals based in the West (Njemanze 2005). Reid 2012: 308-9 suggests that such neo-colonialism is especially visible in the former colonies of France. However, many critics extend the meaning to indicate cultural forms of dependency, as when the educational system remains dominated by European specialists.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy-Asobele 1993 draws a contrast with Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, which he says follows the conventions of Yoruba popular theatre where actors and spectators

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make up the chorus; Rotimi's play has neither acts nor curtains, nor the actors taking a bow at the end (1993: p. 76). He claims that *Guéidô* has all these things, but it does not have three acts, because its structure is conveyed by 'sequences', as I note above.

<sup>13</sup> See also Doho 2013. Doho claims in the later text (2013: p. 327-8) that Leloup had previously managed to evade any hostile scrutiny from the government by her circumspect, even self-censoring, choices of uncontroversial works. This reticence changes, Doho suggests, with the turbulence of 1982, which was registered in Leloup's theatre.

<sup>14</sup> Doho 2013: p. 332 further notes that Leloup was offered a position in Congo, and now works in France.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to thank audiences at the CASA annual conference at University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, in July 2013, and at the 'Translating Myth' conference, University of Essex, in September 2013, for their thoughtful discussions of this material. I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement of Elke Steinmeyer, who rightly noted in a private communication that classicists have only rarely addressed reception in Francophone Africa.