

Jean-Louis N'Tadi: *Le Chef d'...tat*

French, play

Synopsis

Jean-Louis N'Tadi's play *Le Chef de l'...tat* (The Head of State) is a multi-layered work of political literature. Using a deceptively simple narrative structure and an exaggeratedly rhetorical style, the play addresses issues specific to the playwright's home country, the Republic of Congo (henceforth 'R.O.C.', also known as Congo-Brazzaville; not to be confused with the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire), while also raising wider questions of political injustice. The 'State' of the title is not named, and all characters are fictional. Yet as the drama unfolds, the resemblance to real events in the R.O.C. become evident, as will be discussed below. The fact that the potential field of reference is not restricted to the R.O.C. does not dilute its specific national relevance; rather, it places the country in a wider context of post-colonial African political power.

The most striking feature of *Le Chef de l'...tat* is a formal, declamatory linguistic style. This tone of voice is common to all characters, and is sustained throughout the play. Almost all the characters' speech consists of *speeches*, in the sense of formal public statements, rhetorical delivery of polemical points. Most of the action takes place in public or institutional settings. The Head of State debates constitutional law with his Grand Councillors in court, grants an audience to his priests of traditional religion, or orders musicians and dancers to perform until they drop from exhaustion in the presidential palace. Importantly, however, the same formal language register and political subject matter used in public settings dominates such 'private' conversation as does take place. Domestic interaction between members of the presidential family consists almost entirely of making speeches on policy and constitutional principle to one another. **[See excerpt 1.]** In this way, personal or family preoccupations seem to be completely subsumed in those of the State, an impression reinforced by the fact that no private or social life except that of the presidential family is seen on stage: it is only reported by the President's secret service officers. Tellingly, when the Grand Councillors want information on the private affairs of the President's son Badela, they automatically seek it from the secret service. This stylistic and narrative emphasis on the disappearance of private into political life simultaneously evokes the omnipresence of the state and its security apparatus under an authoritarian regime and satirizes certain dictators' tendency to identify the life of the nation with their own person. **[See excerpt 2.]** (R.O.C. president Denis Sassou-Nguesso styles himself 'father of the nation'. Batela, the play's Head of State, does the same, although it is clear that, like Sassou-Nguesso, he did not found the independent state but inherited it from earlier rulers. Near the end of the play, it emerges that the Republic is about to be transformed into a hereditary monarchy.) **[See excerpt 3.]**

The play tells the story of Batela, the head of a post-colonial African republic, whose dictatorial power is challenged by his son, Babela. At the urging of traditional priests and his wife Badila, Batela has Babela imprisoned and sentenced to death. In a series of long debates, the state's Grand Councillors oppose the sentence, but Batela insists on his right to over-rule them. Moutombo, daughter of Batela and Badila, also demands that Babela be freed. Badila tells her that the Republic is about to become a hereditary monarchy, making Moutombo heiress to the throne, but Moutombo refuses to accept the offer unless Babela is freed. After the secret service reveals Babela's popularity and innocence of coup-plotting, Batela goes to the prison and shoots him. In the last scene, the Grand Council imprisons Batela and his guards, and appoints Moutombo president.

The 'state' in the play is not a simple caricature of the R.O.C., and the Head of State is not identical to Sassou-Nguesso. However, attributes of the real life Head of State are recognizable in the fictional character; the play's wider political criticism is clearly intended to *apply* to him. As already mentioned, Batela, like Sassou-Nguesso, has inherited leadership of a post-colonial state from an earlier 'revolutionary' generation, but has since elevated himself to the status of 'Father of the Nation' and 'Great Man of the Republic' **[See Excerpt 4.]** Sassou-Nguesso claims international respectability as an upholder of relative stability in a region of prolonged and murderous civil wars; Batela and Badila advocate violent suppression of "chaotic" elements who "dream of coups d'État...criminals, brigands and disturbers of order in the Republic", in order to avoid "shattering the unity achieved since His Excellency came to power". Batela's opponents, like Sassou-Nguesso's, accuse him of using this defence of national unity as a pretext to justify widespread killing by state forces. **[See excerpt 5.]**

The most obvious divergence between the play's narrative and the recent history of the R.O.C. lies in the ending. Sassou-Nguesso was in power when *Le Chef d'...tat* was written and performed, and remains there now, some five years later. In the play, however, the Head of State is deposed and brought to justice as the result of killing his son against the Council's wishes, despite the earlier assertion of his exclusive sovereign right to break the law. To perform a play ending with the overthrow of a leader resembling Sassou-Nguesso would of course have been politically inflammatory in the R.O.C. Aside from any implicit provocation, however, the apparently 'happy' ending contains an ambivalence that perhaps raises more subtle political problems which, once again, may be common to many post-colonial states but are particularly pertinent to the R.O.C. The overthrow of Batela is accomplished entirely by the representatives of the existing state, the Councillors and the State Prosecutor. When Moutombo is installed in power, the monarchical succession plotted by the disgraced leader is achieved within the framework of the Republican Constitution, and popular dissent is replaced by acclaim. **[See excerpt 6.]** A pattern all too familiar in post-colonial Africa seems to have been repeated: popular unrest becomes the pretext used by one branch of a ruling elite to displace another. Scholarly research suggests that this pattern has taken a distinctive form in the R.O.C.: the 'stability' maintained by Sassou-Nguesso is said to be due in part to the 'neo-patrimonial' reintegration of elite members of former 'enemy' factions into the lucrative state sector after each outbreak of intestine fighting, an opportunity not available to rank-and-file members of the rival militias, or to the 'people' in whose name the fighting was done. Likewise, in the play, the 'sovereign people' is kept off the stage, except in secret service reports, and, finally, to cheer for the new Head of State.

The declamatory style and the layers of reference in *Le Chef d'...tat* suggest that it was intended primarily for public performance, and for an audience familiar with an audience well-informed about the recent history of the R.O.C., i.e. a local one. However, the combination of nationally-specific polemic and wider political critique make the work useful for any audience or readership interested in African and wider post-colonial politics and history.

[Excerpt 1.]

BADILA: I can read the displeasure in your face, MOUTOMBO my daughter. What is the matter now?

MOUTOMBO: (hesitates) ...I was amazed and embittered to learn of the decision of the grand

council this morning, and most of all I am horrified by the position you took regarding Babela. Dear Mother, do you think death sentences are to be handed out like quinine at the hospitals in the capital?

....

BADILA: It is not his Excellency Batela, the Head of State, who condemns Babela, nor the honourable councillors, nor your servant Badila: rather, it is the law.

MOUTOMBO: Are the children of the Head of State not protected by the law? What good then is the humility of a President of the Republic? Is that humility not embodied in his Presidential family? Justice or the law does not make an impression by killing all the time, but by changing minds. Teach the young that respect is the only weapon in life because it is reciprocal. And he or she who possesses the law, the judge, the councillor, is not necessarily the best, and nor should the Head of State be exempt from criticism. Dear Mother, honourable councillor, the work of State policy is education.

[Excerpt 2.]

(As Batela refuses to allow musicians and dancers to stop performing, even as they die from exhaustion)

BABELA: Dear Father, you are the Head of State and guarantor of our unity. Why, then, do you wish to take away the freedom of the great sovereign people?

BATELA: The people are free. They express themselves independently and objectively. And today before their supreme leader they have given their best.

[Excerpt 3.]

BADILA (smiling once more): Exactly, my daughter. The Grand Council also wants to bring the dialectic into the heart of society. That is why tomorrow the Republic will be a Kingdom. His Excellency Batela will be king, Badila queen and Moutombo princess and heir to the throne.

MOUTOMBO (kneeling before her mother): What about my older brother, then, my only brother, Babela?

BADILA: We will find out what he will be...

MOUTOMBO (weeping and falling into her mother's arms): Won't he be prince and heir, my father's successor?

(silence)

MOUTOMBO (getting up and going to sit down): I would not want to inherit your goods and your power if it were a poisoned gift. The people would reject me. There is no justice in such an

inheritance.

[Excerpt 4.]

BADILA: Your Excellency Mr. President, Head of State, Councillors, great statesmen, it must be understood that even a little rain ruins great roads. And NZENGUELE NZENGUELE KA BUTI TIO BUTI ... Understand. To return for a moment to the contents of the famous letter addressed to the Head of State, His Excellency Mr. President. Councillors, this is a terrible moment...the President of our time is regarded as a simple train ticket inspector, without exceptional, or, I would say, extraordinary powers. The others think politics is a game that everyone should be able to play. No! Then it is at once an active and a passive game of helping those who help us. What can the death of an old person, the spraining of a spinal cord or the breaking of a bone mean to a Head of State, the Great Man of our Republic? When someone agrees to do a job of any kind, they must be willing to endure the incidents and accidents – in short, the consequences – that may follow from that job. Honourable Councillors, do not be reassured by the odious words of this letter: a rebellion is being organized. We must pre-empt this highway robber Babela, whose mother was sacrificed on grounds of gluttony, adultery and theft. He wants to use politicians' methods to reach his goal, to conquer the power of His Excellency President Batela. As the wife of the President and his First Councillor and that of the Grand Council, frankly, I will fight without mercy against those who seek to intimidate the established power, to organize a coup d'État and other odious acts. And besides, the law has forbidden coups d'État since we came to power; only the Head of State may break the law. Our court will judge and condemn to death brigands, bandits and others, without pity or pardon, regardless of sex, age, family ties or former rights. President, Your Excellency, and Honourable Councillors, the law is made to be applied and not to be caressed then cast aside. It should be a lion, known to be untouchable and cruel. Thieves and rebels will meet the same fate. I have spoken.

[Excerpt 5.]

FOURTH COUNCILLOR: Is this the solution? Kill, kill, always kill! Your Excellency President and Head of State, we are marketing death. Of course the history of our Council is full of odious acts where the people are dominated, threatened with death, trampled by the law, yet still they manage to win through. This might seem like realism. Well, now this realism is part of everyday life in the Republic.

[Excerpt 6.]

STATE PROSECUTOR: Honourable councillors, Madame, Mademoiselle, Messieurs, according to the laws of the Republic, the procedure is as follows: Batela, whom we already refer to as the former President, will be tried as soon as possible under article 139, paragraph 4 of the penal code. He will be replaced as Head of State by his eldest daughter Moutombo. Moutombo must fully assume the duties of the President of the Republic with full honours, without prejudice or sympathies. She must govern until the anniversary of the revolution, when the new Council establishes that Moutombo will head the Council of State.

BATELA: At least let it be Badila rather than Moutombo. What does she know, as a woman?

STATE PROSECUTOR: Is Badila not a woman? Enough! Consequences teach better than advice...

MOUTOMBO: Honourable prosecutor, Messieurs and Councillors, Madame, this nomination of my person, we accept with humility. During our mandate, we will ensure that the ideas and the will of our people triumph. It will be our struggle, then our victory. I pay homage to my dear brother Babela, hero of the people. Long live victory! The Grand Council, the State, the Republic are always ready for a victory! And we will win across the board!

(The Prosecutor speaks again, first to Moutombo then to the new guards)

STATE PROSECUTOR: Moutombo, long live victory and long live the Republic...may the State endure...Guards, take charge of Batela and his guards. They should be imprisoned for ninety days. At once...

(applause from the Councillors...)

From this evening Moutombo is Head of State, and her protection is assured by the Great Council of State.

(Applause, cries of joy)

Commissioned by Writers in Translation, English PEN