Didymus Tsangue Douanla, "Entry on: The Power of Um [La Puissance de Um] by Werewere Liking", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba, Daniel A. Nkemleke and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1293. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Werewere Liking

# The Power of Um [La Puissance de Um]

*Ivory Coast (1979)*

TAGS: African Traditions Gods






*We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.*

| General information | |
|---|---|
| *Title of the work* | The Power of Um [La Puissance de Um] |
| *Country of the First Edition* | Ivory Coast |
| *Country/countries of popularity* | Ivory Coast, Cameroon |
| *Original Language* | French |
| *First Edition Date* | 1979 |
| *First Edition Details* | Werewere Liking, *La Puissance de Um*. Abidjan: CEDA, 1979, 64 pp. |
| *ISBN* | 286394004X |
| *Genre* | Drama, One-act plays |
| *Target Audience* | Young adults |
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## Creators



**Werewere Liking , b. 1950**
**(Author)**

Eddy Ngo Njock, known as a writer under her pen-name Werewere Liking was born in 1950 in a village called Bondé, eighty kilometers from Yaoundé, Cameroon. She was born to parents who were traditional artists. She got married at the age of sixteen but separated from her husband in 1978, after twelve years of marriage. Before her separation, her mother-in-law schooled her thoroughly in traditional education. She was initiated into several women's secret cults as part of her tradition. She started painting at the age of eighteen and later composed songs which were published as poems in her book *On ne raisonne pas le Vénin*. In 1977, she met French woman Marie-Josée Hourantier, with whom she travelled to Senegal. Together, they founded the Atelier de recherche en esthétiques théâtrales négro-africaines, which trained impoverished young artists. They also founded their own theatre group, the Mystique Atelier Théâtre, where they staged Liking's plays with her playing the lead role. She received the Prince Claus Award in 2000 for her contribution to culture and society, and her book *The Amputated Memory* also won the Noma Award in 2005.

As a researcher, Liking has worked in traditional pedagogy at Abidjan University (LENA) between 1979–1985. She has also been a researcher in Malian puppetry and colonial-style paintings that represent Europeans in colonial attires. In addition, she continues to carry out research that aims at explaining the roles of figures in the staging of productions. She also founded the Ki-Yi Mbock group, which she described as a movement for the birth of a contemporary Panafrican culture and unity, and the recognition of the cultures of the black world.

Source:

World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts (accessed: August 2, 2021).



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## Additional information

Summary

Ntep Iliga dies in the presence of his wife, Ngond Libii Ntep Iliga (which means slave woman of Ntep Iliga). She sets the stage for mourning while singing funeral songs and addressing a calabash of wine whose contents she likens to her own life: “[s]tatic, but coiled up, ready to overflow from the calabash like you… boiling with rage, enclosed in a much too small container” (28). She calls in her eldest son Ntep Ntep, informs him that his father is dead at last, and asks him to summon the people. Ntep Ntep displays no emotions as he beats the call drum. The crowd arrives and the mourning begins. The mourning is a semi-comical interactive performance between the widow and the people. She claims to have killed her own husband and forbids anyone from mourning him, and they insist on doing so. An old man asks for the story of Ntep to be told before he can mourn him properly. A third man begins to tell the story by blaming the slave wife for the death of her husband. She immediately interrupts and brags about killing her husband and her right to do so. She claims that it is her husband that she killed and not someone else’s, and she would kill him again if he would return. Then Hilun, the oral historian, takes over the story-telling and the woman sings funeral songs. The men blame her for his death and claim that he was a democrat, a hard worker but Ngond Libii disputes all of these, stating that her husband was a lazy man. Then a woman, known as Old Woman, arrives and chides her for talking to the people instead of mourning in silence. She dictates the rules of mourning: talking to no one and staying indoors naked and covered only with ashes. Ngond Libii insists that her husband be buried quickly but the people insist that his story be told and his death investigated first. She gets mad and launches an even harsher tirade against the people: she accuses them of praising him for their selfish reasons, vanity, and exploiting him in the name of tradition, and for wasting his inheritance. Some men jump on her and try to silence her but she continues with her accusations, calling them vampires and murderers who killed her husband. One person in the crowd complains of the unconventional way in which the mourning is being performed and another challenges him to be creative in order to join in. Ntep’s children also join in. The second son takes his mother’s side, the first claims neutrality and the first daughter criticizes the first son’s neutrality. The second daughter blames both the village folk and her mother for her father’s death. Then it’s the turn of the women in black-and-white loin-clothes who also call for Ntep to be buried. The people leave without having buried Ntep. Ngond Libii accuses them of



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greed and Ntep Ntep promises to compromise and give the people what they want in order for them to bury his father. He summons the people back and when they come this time around they announce that they will give their national hero the funeral he deserves. The Old Woman arrives and asks Ngond Libii to state her wish before the burial and to their disappointment, she says she desires money instead of respect or dignity. The children of Ntep join in again and try to tell the story of Ntep. Here they state directly that he was a political leader who was caught between the interests of the West and his own people and at the end he produced nothing. Some people blame the West for his death and ineffectiveness, while others blame the setting sun. The children of Ntep state their plans on how they intend to run the country after their father – to rid the nation of all conspirators, double-dealers and hypocrites. But their mother reminds them of their own contamination by western culture. They decide to discuss the succession of Ntep but Hilum informs them that the National Committee has seized power and is running the country. They do not conclude who actually killed Ntep. At the end, they pray for peace and love, and energy, and for the power of Um to descend upon them.

Analysis

The play falls into the category of political myths that arise out of events such as a profound cultural clash, socio-economic crises, serious political or military threat and used by states or ethnic communities to strategically communicate ideologies baggage, propaganda or other socio-cultural or political agenda (Kibris, 2019). The Bassas are depicted in this play as an African nation struggling with the challenges of neocolonialism, Western cultural imperialism and globalization. Okpewho (1998) also discusses how these political myths could be used to propagate ethno-cultural interests but also stoke inter-ethnic strife in multi-ethnic countries. That said, the Um myth can be said to be an ethno-nationalistic myth that arises from the clash of cultures in a (neo)colonial context, and the desire to reinstate a sense of cultural identity and pride. The Power of Um is based on the Bassa people's belief in the Um deity which is ranked second in the Bassa pantheon after Ngue. She is the goddess of fertility, purity and peace and is always invoked to cure mysterious diseases and resolve bitter quarrels. According to many Bassa myths and legends, she is the daughter of a water spirit who appeared to a woman named Kitchatchas at a river metamorphosed as a fish. She then asked



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Kitchatchas to go and call her husband which the latter did. When Mukumb, the husband arrived Um asked Kitchatcha to close her eyes and then she revealed herself to him as a young beautiful woman accompanied by her seven daughters. Mukumb then lured the goddess and her daughters into entering a quiver and took them to the village, hence the beginning of the Um cult. Um is also considered the goddess of culture – music, dance and theatre. This explains why in rites of bikus related to widows, it is the Um that is mostly implored.

The Bassas believe in a number of gods who differ in rank, importance and power. These gods have parents, spouses, siblings and offspring. The Bassa gods look and act like humans but also in many ways they are very different. Um for example is described as extremely beautiful. The Bassa gods sometimes appear to a group of people as they are and not in disguise. This is recurrent in other world mythologies. However as can be seen from the luring of Um into a quiver, the gods are knowledgeable but not omniscient, powerful but not omnipotent. The Bassa people also believe in the proper burial of a person, regardless of who s/he was. Without a proper burial, the tradition believes that the deceased would wander and suffer hereafter.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

African Traditions Gods

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Death Family Religious beliefs Tradition

Further Reading

Asanga, Siga, Jeanne N. Dingome, Innocent Futcha and Lyonga P. Nalova, "Introduction" in *African Ritual Theatre: "The power of Um" and "The New Earth" by Werewere Liking*, San Francisco: International Scholars Publication,1996.

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Addenda

The entry was prepared using the English translation by Siga Asanga, Jeanne N. Dingome, Innocent Futcha and Nalova P. Lyonga, under the title *African Ritual Theatre: The Power of Um and A New Earth* by Werewere Liking. San Francisco: International Scholars Publication, 1996.



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