

Stories from social and cultural odonatology:
How the Madagascan libellulid
Trithemis selika (Selys, 1869) got its name

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As is to be expected for a member of a wealthy, noble family, Baron Edmond de Selys Longchamps (1813–1900) had refined tastes. He regularly visited the theatre, orchestral concerts and opera. From his diaries, which he kept almost daily from 27 August 1823 to 26 November 1900, Caulier-Mathy and Haesenne-Peremans (2008, pp. 1688–1696) indexed over 500 visits to the theatre, concerts, opera, ballet and revues, mainly in Liège (his home town) and in Brussels. His political duties as a senator and his activities in academic circles necessitated his visiting Brussels regularly for a few days at a time, which gave him ample opportunities to satisfy his desire for the delights of high culture. Selys was especially fond of opera and he saw at least 130, many several times.

On 12 December 1865 Selys went to Brussels to participate, as a Member of the Senate, in the funeral of King Leopold I, who had died on 10 December, and to attend the coronation of his successor King Leopold II. The funeral took place on 16 December and the coronation the next day. Further sessions of the Senate kept Selys in Brussels until 23 December. On Friday 22 December he and his wife Sophie, who had accompanied him in Brussels, and Sophie's mother Mrs Marie d'Omalius d'Halloy went to watch the opera *L'Africaine*.

L'Africaine (*The African Woman*) was the last work of the German opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864). The French libretto was written by the French dramatist Eugène Scribe (1791–1861). The grand opera had its premier in Paris on 28 April 1865 (Fig. 1). It became very popular and successful in Europe, the USA and Australia. The opera in five acts depicts fictional events in the life of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama in the late 15th century. The heroine is Sélika (soprano), a young slave woman, supposedly from Madagascar. Sélika, actually a queen, is in love with da Gama and later she saves his life by pretending to be da Gama's wife. After realizing that da Gama is still in love with Inès (soprano), a Portuguese woman, Sélika commits suicide by inhaling the perfume of the blossoms of a poisonous tree.

Selys must have especially enjoyed this opera, as later he saw it four more times, in 1866, 1876, 1877 and 1888. His enthusiasm for it is further reflected in odonotological nomenclature.

On 12 February 1867 Selys wrote in his diary (translated): "Received Madagascan libellulids from Mr Pollen, Leiden." François Paul Louis Pollen (1842–1886), a Dutch naturalist, had collected a small number of libellulid specimens during his expedition to Madagascar from November 1863 to July 1866. Selys studied them without delay and recognized six species in the material. By 5 June 1867 he had written a manuscript for the series of publications *Recherches sur la faune de Madagascar et de ses dépendances, D'après les découvertes de François P. L. Pollen et D. C. van Dam* (Selys Longchamps 1869). Three new species were described: *Libellula selika*, *Libellula coronata* and *Neophlebia polleni*. The latter species he placed in a new genus, but currently it is known as *Tetrathemis polleni* (Selys, 1869). The specific epithet was a dedication to the collector. *Libellula coronata* was a homonym; this species is presently known as *Chalcostephia flavifrons* Kirby, 1889. *Libellula selika*, presently known as *Trithemis*

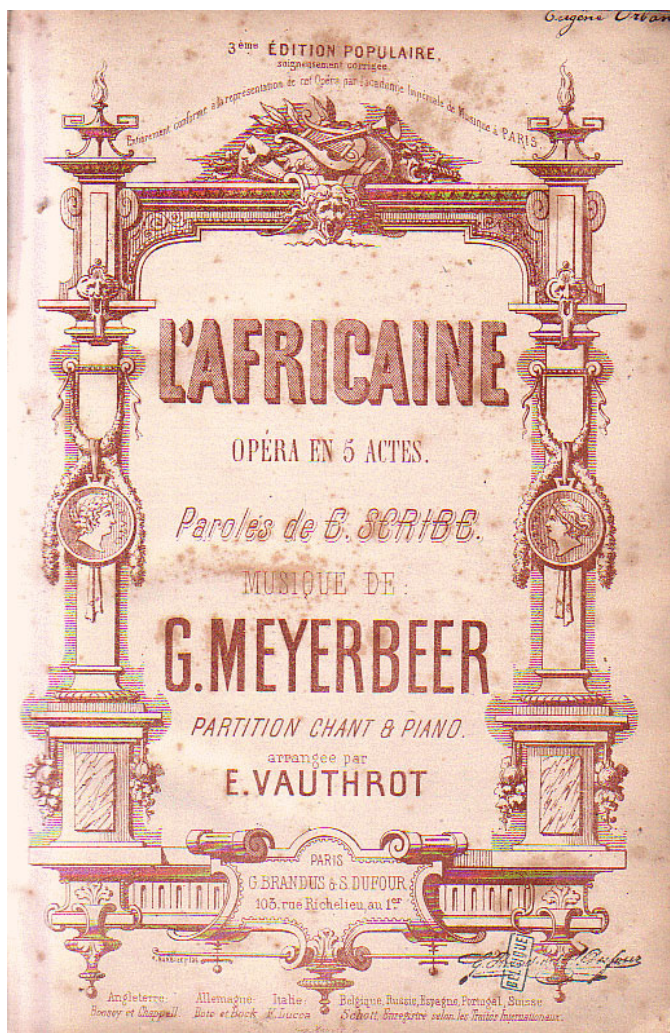


Figure 1. Poster of the grand opera *L'Africaine* in Paris (1865).



Figure 2. Male of *Trithemis selika*, Isalo National Park in Madagascar on 9 January 2016. Photo credit: Erland Refling Nielsen.

selika (Selys, 1869), clearly comes from Sélîka, the heroine from the opera *L'Africaine*. Selys did not provide any etymology, as this was seldom done at the time, but at least in this case there can be no doubt as to its origin.

It should be mentioned that in the same article Selys described two new '*Neophlebia*' species from the Moluccas; presently known as *Tetrathemis leptoptera* (Selys, 1869) and *Nannophlebia lorquini* (Selys, 1869).

The conspicuous and colourful *Trithemis selika* (Crimson Dropwing) (Fig. 2) is a common and widespread dragonfly in Madagascar. It inhabits a wide range of open, stagnant-water habitats, but can also be found in slow-moving streams and rivers. A subspecies *T. selika maia* Ris, 1915 occurs in the Comoro Islands. The name *maia* comes from Greek mythology.

At least a dozen other species epithets in the extant dragonflies refer to fictional characters from western cultural sources, other than Classical mythology. The best known among them are the names taken from William Shakespeare's tragedies *Hamlet* and *Othello*: *Brachygonia ophelia* Ris, 1910, *Camacinia othello* Tillyard, 1908 and *Agyrtacantha othello* Lieftinck, 1942. The most recent name of this kind is *Archboldargia scissorhandsi* Kalkman, 2007, which was named after the hero of Tim Burton's fantasy film, *Edward Scissorhands*.

'Social and cultural odonatology' as I will use it is a broad concept. It covers anything which has developed in the brains of odonatologists, be it taxon names or derogatory comments on colleagues. In future articles in this series I wish to write on random topics related to past odonatologists and their work on dragonflies.

References

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