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"Translating African Thought and Literature: Postcolonial Glottopolitics"

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La culture est un instrument; ne pensons pas qu'ils ont élu la nôtre; les Anglais eussent-ils occupé le Sénégal, au lieu de nous, les Sénégalais eussent adopté l'anglais. La vérité, c'est que les noirs tentent de se rejoindre eux-mêmes à travers un monde culturel qu'on leur impose et qui leur est étranger; il faut qu'ils retaillent ce vêtement tout fait; tout les gêne et les engonce, jusqu'à la syntaxe, et pourtant ils ont appris à utiliser jusqu'aux insuffisances de cet outil. Une langue étrangère les habite et leur vole leur pensée; mais ils se retournent, en eux-mêmes, contre ce vol, ils maîtrisent en eux ce bavardage européen et, finalement, en acceptant d'être trahis par le langage, ils le marquent de leur empreinte. (Jean-Paul Sartre 1947: 29)

Translation, in its real – linguistic – but also more metaphorical meanings, can be used as an instrument to understand the cultural and epistemological factors that have contributed to, but also compounded, exchanges amongst African and Africanist intellectuals working across languages and cultures. This special issue of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* focuses on the way in which African and European languages (French and English mainly), and the question of multilingualism, have aided the development of African thought and literature in Africa and in the African diaspora.[1] The fact that most African literature and thought is published in global languages such as English and French is intriguing because it seems to run counter to various attempts on the part of Africans to "decolonise the mind" (Ngugi 1986) and dismantle the mechanisms of imperial "glottopolitics" (Zabus 2007). Indeed, African intellectuals – ethnophilosophers but also their critics (see Masolo 1994; Hallen 2002; Wirth 2003; Gordon 2008; Diagne 2015) - and novelists have often advocated the practice of vernacular forms of knowledge and an active rejection of the Eurocentric legacies of imperialism. This attempted indigenization of knowledge was invariably predicated on the assumption of an innate link between linguistic deep structures – "chose du texte" (see Beryl Bellman in Mudimbe 1988) - and autochthonous worldviews and thought procedures. However, the dissemination of Europhone classics in African languages could also attenuate the cultural hegemony of western literature and curtail its "glottophagia". (Calvet 1974). The Céytu project is a case in point. Initiated by the Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop under the aegis of two publishers (Éditions Zulma and Mémoire d'encrier), this project aims at translating French and francophone classics into Wolof. Although only three titles - *Nawetu deret* (by Césaire), *Baay sama, doomu Afrig* (Le Clézio), and *Bataaxal bu gudde nii* (Mariama Bâ) - have so far been published,[2] this scheme is

[2] All published in 2016 by the Éditions Zulma (Paris) and Mémoire d'encrier (Quebec) and translated into Wolof by Boubacar Boris Diop (*Nawetu deret);* by Daouda Ndiaye (*Baay sama, doomu Afrig*); and by Arame Fall and

certainly driven by a desire to bypass the rules usually prevailing in the circulation of global literature. Céytu is also the birth place of the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop and thus constitutes an homage to his own ambition of increasing the cultural prestige of Wolof (see Diop 1955) at a time when it was still regarded as a mere vehicular language of French West Africa. "Translating African Thought and Literature" approaches these questions and explores the various linguistic, cultural, and epistemological aspects responsible for the enduring use of the former imperial languages in African literature and thought. It also examines the resources (linguistic and otherwise) called upon by Africans – in French, in English and other African languages – to overcome intellectual and conceptual dependency and reflect on the present and future of African cultures.

When one translates, one is immediately aware of one's limitations and these limitations are cultural rather than merely linguistic. But, of course, it is difficult to disentangle what is strictly linguistic from what is strictly cultural; and it is equally important to stress that these limitations, whatever they might be and imply (culturally, linguistically, and politically), are never absolute for translation need not be conceived of as a servile exercise: the act of translation "allows a measure of linguistic experimentation and innovation and highlights the polyvalencies and plurivocities of the source text." (Bandia 2008: 239). Translating and thinking about the multifaceted implications of translation force us to examine the boundaries between the vernacular and the universal; reconsider the place of notional centres and their peripheries; and, as significantly, envisage the possibility of other translational connections between some peripheries and other peripheries (Saint-Loubert 2017). Translation is a process "calling into question the politics of canonization and moving resolutely away from ideas of universal literary greatness." (Bassnett & Trivedi 2002: 2). In this regard, it also throws up issues of debt, fidelity, and betrayal and there is no doubt that the related notion of reparation has in the aftermath of African decolonization played a pivotal role in the emergence of specifically African literary practices. Indeed, African authors writing in European languages have developed "a translation ethics of reparation", that is, an attempt on part of these Europhone African writers to "redress the unequal power relations between the colonized and the colonizer by resisting and reversing […] the cultural imperialism enacted through the imposition of colonial languages." (Bandia 2008: 238). What is really at stake here is the enduring (post)colonial guardianship over African languages (Fabian 1986; Ricard 2004; Dubreuil 2013) and the equally vexed issue of claiming back one's linguistic agency and ownership. It seems that the world of things and words were submitted to analogous processes of dispossession: whilst African artefacts were sent to ethnographic museums (see Conklin 2013; De l'Estoile 2007), African languages were being eclipsed by the colonizers' vertical and asymmetrical linguistic policies, classificatory violence (see Errington 2008), and translation practices.

The articles of this special issue on "Translating African Thought and Literature" are exploring the long-term linguistic consequences of colonialism and appraising the sometime violent legacies thereof. The contacts generated by imperialism complexified further the situation of a region – sub-Saharan African – with one of the "highest linguistic diversity indexes in the world." (Batchelor 2009: 37). This process engendered new types of diglossia, and, indeed, "polyglossia" (Zabus 2007: 14), in

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Mame Younouss Dieng (*Bataaxal bu gudde nii*). Original titles: *Une saison au Congo* (by Césaire), *L'Africain* (Le Clézio), and *Une si longue lettre* (Bâ).

which clear hierarchies were established between colonial tongues – English, French but also Portuguese and Spanish – and African languages. This confrontation with local languages – Fula, Gikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Lingala, Swahili, and Yoruba are some of the languages considered here - constitutes an important aspect of each contributor's investigation. This linguistic hierarchization – Carl Meinhof's notorious Hamitic hypothesis springs here to mind (see Howe 1998; Ricard 2004; Pugach 2012) - was further consolidated by the spread of literacy and accelerated by the introduction of publishing and the gradual westernization of African education, a process in which, of course, evangelization and the translation of the Bible into African languages played a major part (Bandia 2009: 6-7; Pugach 2012; Mazrui 2016). Kwasi Wiredu, drawing on a true account told by Okot p'Bitek, reminds his readers of some of the semantic difficulties encountered by Christian missionaries in their attempt to find linguistic equivalents to spread their faith among Acholi people. They soon realized that the verb "to create" and the noun "creation" were inexistent in the Luo language and, instead of asking the Acholi elders '"Who created you"', they decided to ask them '"Who moulded you"'. This question did not, however, produce any satisfactory answer but eventually:

One of the elders remembered that, although a person may be born normally, when he is afflicted with tuberculosis of the spine, then he loses his normal figure, he gets "moulded." So he said "Rubanga is the one who mould people." This is the name of the hostile spirit which the Acholi believe causes the hunch or hump on the back. And instead of exorcising these hostile spirits […] the representatives of Jesus Christ began to preach that Rubanga was the Holy Father who created the Acholi. (Wiredu 1992: 301-302).

Conceptual slippages of this kind were not infrequent and were, in fact, part and parcel of the cultural reterritorialization engendered by imperialism (see Van den Avenne 2017: 109). This process was accompanied by the gradual realization that "all languages intrude upon each other […] interrupt each other when foreign tongues no longer say merely 'bar bar bar bar'" and "can no longer be dismissed as the indiscernible discourses of the *barbarous*." (Wirth 2003: 280). In this respect, it is nonetheless important to point out that French colonizers were more assimilative and "glottophagic" than their British counterparts and that the French tendency to consider the "Enlightenment notion of writing as the visible sign of Reason" meant that African languages were invariably "'condemned to orality'" (Zabus 2007: 19; on orality, see also Ricard 2004: 22-45). As famously argued by Fanon in the first chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* ("The Negro and Language"), "a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language." (Fanon 2008 [1967]: 9; on Fanon and language, see Mazrui & Mazrui 1998: 53-65).

The writers and intellectuals analysed in this volume have all invariably been faced with this apparent discrepancy between past and present for whether in Africa, in the US, or in the Caribbean, how can one think decolonization and emancipation in the languages of the Jim Crow laws and of the code noir? The passage from the colonial to the postcolonial era has generated epistemological anxieties and reopened the question of whether one can critically think and create in the former masters' languages. It is undeniable that "within translation studies […] the negative, even violent, complicity of translation in colonial conquest and enforcement has received more attention than its positive outworkings" (Batchelor and Bisdorff 2013: 7). If the authors of this special issue do not explicitly attempt to situate themselves within this dialectic, they all recognize that translation and

the decision to think and create in one language rather than in another has political, cultural, and ethical implications.

In "The Birth of Language or the Necessity of Rule", Jean-Paul Martinon focuses, via Levinas, some of his readers (Lyotard and Derrida), and anthropological material, on the notions of murder and individual responsibility or "sin" in the context of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Rwanda was of course intensely Christianized, and it would therefore be logical to assume that the two foundational pillars of Christian *and* western ethics – that is, the Biblical Commandments "I am the Lord" and "Thou Shall Not Kill" - would have been internalized by Rwandans and translated into Kinyarwanda. Martinon demonstrates, however, that this translation did not systematically take place. He explains that Rwanda has continued to be profoundly influenced by a set of oral interdictions – or *imiziro* – which do not recognize the prohibition against murder. He also shows that the concept of individual "sin" was completely inexistent before the arrival of the White Fathers in late nineteenth century.

Encounters between languages and their underlying cultures are at the heart of the articles proposed in this special issue. All these encounters are highly confrontational and even catastrophic as in the case of Rwanda. Most contributors, however, decided to approach this translational question through the prism of individual authors. In "What Weight Can a Language Bear? Translatability and Ngugi wa Thiong'o", Grant Farred focuses on Ngugi's attempt (in dialogue here with Heidegger, Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara) to return to his native language, Gikuyu. For Ngugi, this decision is a political act. He argues that this linguistic homecoming is undertaken in the name of African authenticity which has for too long been obscured by western thought procedures, cultural practices, and linguistic hegemony. This shift to Gikuyu is also predicated on his ambition to provide the conditions for restoring the African writer to her- or himself and to the peasantry, a category that Ngugi regards as the "guardians" of Gikuyu. By means of Deleuze's and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and the view that English can be submitted to postcolonial processes of "reterritorialization", Farred argues that Ngugi may not be able to reach the anti-imperialist goals that he had originally set out to achieve. In "Translation as Destruction: Kezilahabi's Adaptation of Heidegger's 'Being'", Alena Rettová focuses on the Tanzanian Swahili-speaking philosopher and novelist Euphrase Kezilahabi. She explores several intriguing paradoxes on the links between Kezilahabi's work and European philosophy and his ability to use translation to challenge the conceptual basis on which Western thought has developed. Kezilahabi's doctoral thesis, "African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation" (1985), is a critique of essentialism. However, Rettová demonstrates that, despite his critique of "philosophies of origin" and inclination for existentialism, Kezilahabi seems to have internalized the essentialist basis of Heidegger's philosophy and particularly his concept of authenticity which, as she recalls, was theorized against the backdrop of Nazism. Nonetheless, Rettová contends that it is in his novels in Swahili - *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991) - that Kezilahabi finds the resources to move away from essentialism and provide a more radical critique of western philosophy.

In the next four articles, francophone Africa is given a more prominent position. In "Diplomatic Translation and the Professional Selves of Mercer Cook", Aedín Ní Loingsigh examines this little-studied African-American figure described here as an "agent of translation". The article focuses on Cook's difficulty to reconcile his activities as an American diplomat, French literature scholar, and translator of French *and* francophone texts. The author provides an analysis of the contexts in which Cook's work developed from the 1930s until the 1980s and offers an examination of the figures with whom he engaged as an academic and diplomat between cultures, races, continents, *and* languages. Cook's various attempts to anthologize and translate African literature and map out racial (and

racist) representations of Negro characters in canonical French literature served two major purposes. They provided Cook's black students at Howard University with pedagogical tools to study French language and break away with American monolingual cultural practices; secondly, they enable these students to appraise the development of a shared transatlantic black culture. In my own contribution, "Georges Balandier's Africa: Postcolonial Translations and *ambiguous* Reprises", I focus on the period leading to the decolonization of Francophone Africa and the role played during this era by unassimilated (or semi-assimilated) African intellectuals among prophetic movements such as Matswanism and Kimbanguism. Balandier's *Afrique ambiguë* (1957) offers a fascinating account of the changes generated by colonial modernity in West and Central Africa. Published in the same series as Segalen's *Les Immémoriaux* and Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques*, this autobiographical text by one of France's leading Africanists explores the cultural and environmental ravages brought about by European imperialism in this part of the world. This article examines how the book's translation, *Ambiguous Africa: Cultures in Collision* (1966), renders the original and captures the processes of cultural and linguistic deterritorialization ("dépaysement") analysed by Balandier. This translational focus is used, in turn, to reveal Balandier's recurring exploration of the way in which the biblical message was read, translated, reprised, and Africanized by African religious leaders. In the next piece, "Africanizing Classical European Playwrights (Shakespeare and Molière)", Maëline Le Lay explores the attempts on part of western and African theatre companies to adapt and translate plays by these two canonical authors. This article focuses on North and sub-Saharan Africa where Shakespeare and Molière were first performed with a view to entertaining Europeans but also assimilating the local elites and consolidating the cultural basis and alleged universal value of British, French and indeed Belgian colonial ventures. However, Le Lay also contends that the African translocation of this theatrical tradition paved the way for thought-provoking experiments in which plays by Molière and Shakespeare were submitted to a process of "transladaptation" to reflect local sociolinguistic factors and performability. She demonstrates that this notion of Africanization is highly political and deployed to "decolonize the mind". Julius Nyerere's own translation of Shakespeare to elevate Swahili to the status of Tanzania's new national language being here a case in point. In the last contribution of this special issue, "The Movers of the Text: Monénembo's Nomad Subjects", Hannah Grayson returns to the powerful links between migration and translation. Her investigation is informed by Rosi Braidotti's study on *Nomadic Subjects*. By means of this framework, Grayson analyses how Monénembo and his characters reinvent place and space and redefine postcolonial African subjecthood in Latin America (Cuba and Brazil), an area associated with the Middle Passage and the impact of this historical tragedy on the African continent. By focussing on the resilience and the affirmative consciousness of his characters (or "débrouillardise"), the Guinean novelist moves away from traditional representations in which Africa (and traces of Africa elsewhere) is often associated with victimhood and racial objectification. Their resilience is also contingent on the multilingual (French, Fula, English, Yoruba, Spanish and Portuguese) context of their nomadic meanderings and interactions and Grayson demonstrates that, here too, the collision of languages and cultures provide the basis for the affirmation of a renewed agency.

Colonial violence, as examined by the contributors of this special issue on "Translating African Thought and Literature", has had long-term effects on language usages and global translational practices and the consolidation of what the French literary scholar Pascale Casanova called the "Greenwich Meridian of Literature" in *The World Republic of Letters* (on this notion in a translational context, see Saint-Loubert 2017: 205-206). Indeed, ethnic violence and identity politics can often be traced in linguistic determinism and chauvinism. The assimilative logic informing colonialism was, however, never absolute and applied differently in the French and British domains. Although global

literary (and translational) processes are still largely vertical and oblivious of "peripheral" cultures, languages are not fixed systems. Ultimately, their collisions have also highlighted the conceptual resourceful of African cultures and the latter's ability to displace and disrupt, through acts of translational re-appropriations and "creative treason" (Zabus 2007: 134), that which had been momentarily ossified in the colonial Ur-text.

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