

**Original citation:**

Fraiture, Pierre-Philippe (2018) Georges Balandier's Africa : postcolonial translations and ambiguous reprises. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* .

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“Georges Balandier’s Africa: Postcolonial Translations and *ambiguous* Reprises”

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### Abstract

This article focuses on Georges Balandier’s autobiographical essay *Afrique ambiguë* (1957). Its translation into English, *Ambiguous Africa: Cultures in Collision* (1966), provides the basis for an examination of the concept of translation in its linguistic but also, and above all, transcultural dimensions. As a text, *Ambiguous Africa* does not quite render the subtlety of the French original but beyond its translational shortcomings, Balandier’s book is also shown to conduct an in-depth analysis of late colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa. This era is characterized by a high degree of cultural anxiety on part of the colonizers and the colonized. Echoing other anti-colonial thinkers of the period – Balandier was a regular contributor to *Présence Africaine* – he records the environmental, artistic, psychological, and linguistic devastation generated by the colonial process in this part of the world. Balandier’s assessment is pessimistic but he identifies, however, the ability of some unassimilated African intellectuals and members of messianic movements such as Matswanism and Kimbanguism to challenge the hegemonic status of the colonial Ur-Text. This emancipative move relies on vernacular intellectual and cultural resources and is driven by an attempt to re-write and translate biblical stories anew. It is argued here that this process of indigenous re-appropriation, however ambiguous it might have been assessed by Balandier, is postcolonial for it bears witness to a partial de-canonization of the colonial source text.

**Keywords:** Georges Balandier, translation, Millenarianism, decolonization, indigenization, cultural & linguistic re-appropriation

“Nobody can adopt a foreign language and a foreign way of thinking as if they were borrowed clothing. The lack of fit is obvious; it takes time and favorable conditions for the transformation to occur.” (Georges Balandier, *Ambiguous Africa*: 189)

“More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone.” (J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*: 117).

“The very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests.” (Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*: 11)

The term “translation” defies ready-made definitions because translation is a process which, whilst being concrete – the passage from one place to another – generates a wide range of questions about language and culture and their interdependency. Translation is therefore an activity which lies at the junction between the pragmatic and the metaphorical. Even though it was primarily conceived of in military, expansionary, and commercial terms, the colonial enterprise generated transcultural effects and was, from the early encounters between the colonizers and the colonized, contingent on linguistic factors. If the French colonial project in sub-Saharan Africa remained assimilative until the interwar period (Girardet 1972), there is no doubt that this programme of cultural – and, more to

the point, linguistic – homogenization was never fully achieved (Dubreuil 2013). The vast areas under French domination in AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française/French West Africa) and AEF (Afrique Équatoriale Française/French Equatorial Africa) remained haphazardly exposed to the French language and this uneven situation created a rich and varied map of linguistic usages in which standard French, whilst becoming the preserve of local elites, was also submitted to processes of adaptation – and paved the way for the emergence of “français aofien” (*Aofian French*)<sup>1</sup> (Van den Avenne 2017: 163-182) and Europeanized African languages (Fabian 1986) – pidginization and relexification (Zabus 2007: 118-119). The history of the French colonization in Africa, as will be examined in this article on cultural, religious *and* linguistic re-appropriations in Georges Balandier’s *Afrique ambiguë*, was shaped in no small measure by this heteroglossic context in which frictions between different belief systems and languages gave way to new communication practices and innovative supplements.

### Translational Mishaps

Georges Balandier’s most famous book – *Afrique ambiguë* (1957) – captures the complexity of the new cultural and linguistic landscape generated by colonial modernity in sub-Saharan Africa. Although not an African author, Balandier (1920-2016), a French intellectual who was also one of the founding members of *Présence Africaine* (see Copans 2013), occupies a central position in post-war Africanist thought (sociology, anthropology, history, applied ethnography, and even literary criticism, see Balandier in Raymond Queneau 1957). The “colossal provocation of his ‘sociology of Black Africa’” (Mudimbe 1994: 43) has often been regarded as a decisive moment in the development of a postcolonial anthropology. By the same token, his theorization of the “colonial situation” – an existentialism-inspired situation (see Mann 2013; Copans 2001 & 2013) primarily centred on the lived experience of urbanized Africans - has been interpreted as a departure from “an anthropology focused on static, primitive Africa, divided into discrete tribal units” (Cooper 2005: 37). Released by Plon in the “Terre humaine” series which, two years before, had published Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes tropiques*, *Afrique ambiguë* also mixes science and autobiography to conduct an analysis of the changes generated by western modernity in sub-Saharan Africa. Balandier’s diagnosis is severe and he notes that Africa’s westernization is all-encompassing and has impacted not only the environment but also customs, artistic creativity, sexuality and gender relations, religious practices, language usage, and the circulation of concepts. In her cautiously praising review of the English version of the book - *Ambiguous Africa: Cultures in Collision* (1966) - the SOAS-based researcher Eva Krapf-Askari expressed her reservations about the quality of the English rendition of *Afrique ambiguë*:

The translation provides irritations of its own. The general level, though pedestrian, is competent; but there is a minor error every two or three pages, and a few that are genuinely misleading. *Aînés* are not leaders, but elders; a *griote* is not a female witch-doctor, but a praise-singer; a *repas communiel* is not a communal meal, but a meal of communion; and Camara Laye’s autobiographical novel was published in English as *The African Child*, not *Dark Child*. Is a translation really required for the term *évolué*? And if so, is “enlightened man” the best that can be found? (Krapf-Askari 1967: 255).

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<sup>1</sup> The invented adjective “aofien” derives from the acronym AOF.

Krapf-Askari's assessment is fair and there is no doubt that the translational infelicities that she identifies here have the potential of distorting Balandier's representation of African culture. She does not say that originals are intrinsically better than their translations but implies, however, that it is incumbent on translators to approach other cultures accurately *and* respectfully. In the following passage, Balandier ponders the geographical transformations brought about by modern mining techniques in Jos (British-ruled Nigeria), an area which used to be the tin capital of Africa:

An airplane flying over the outskirts of the city reveals to the traveller, as it rocks wide strips of landscape, a region revolutionized by human industry. Across a now barren bush, the large breaches opened by the miners are very evident. They are sometimes arranged in steps, giving the impression of a gigantic amphitheater, and are surrounded by heaps of loose soil which are flattened by the altitude. [...] Next, the eye falls on a compact group of monotonous buildings: a camp for native workers. However, it is only on ground level that the real scale of these exploitations can be grasped. Tractors and modern cranes with long steel arms extract, push and transport tons of ore and "sterile" earth. The latter is piled in curious pyramids; it is used to reconstruct the natural surroundings according to Nigerian legislation as if the European businessmen were trying to prove to the natives, the real owners of the land, that nothing has happened, nothing has been taken. An engineer commenting on this obligation told me without irony, "In this way, we further the agricultural and pastoral vocation of the natives" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 129).

This quote exposes the cynicism and the "environmental racism" (Stoler 2013: 11-12) presiding over the exploitation of strategic metals and resources in Nigeria but also elsewhere in Africa during the colonial period until now. The tale that it tells belongs to a string of "unfinished histories" (Stoler 2013: 11) and problematizes a strict temporal understanding of the concept of decolonization for its effects and enduring "ruination" (Stoler 2013) continues to be felt now. It clearly reveals the profit-driven motivations of the western multinational in charge of tin extraction in this part of the world and, as such, foreshadows other harrowing episodes of environmental activism, the battle fought (and lost) by Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Ogoni kinsmen against the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) being exemplary of this type of commitment (Nixon 2011: 103-127). The different perspectives adopted by the narrator, from the sky and then "on ground level", give two complementary visions of this ransacked and impoverished landscape. The bird's eye view does not offer any solace and illusion of managerial (or imperial) mastery. In fact, it appears that the original site has been ripped open and robbed of its original character and fertility; and that the locals have been proletarianized, a process that will elicit, as examined later in this article, future-orientated political, religious and cultural responses among native Africans.

This English translation, however, does not quite render the violence expressed by the original passage in French. The region around Jos is said to have been "revolutionized by human industry" whereas the source text talks of a "territoire bouleversé par l'industrie humaine" (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 175). "Bouleversé" is unambiguously derogatory and conveys ideas of disruption, disorganization, disorder, turmoil and even profound sadness and depression. "Revolutionized" (and its equivalent "révolutionné"), on the other hand, are altogether much more positive as they carry the promise of a better future. It is impossible to know why "revolutionized" was preferred over, say, "devastated" (one of its possible translations) but what is sure is that this choice of word clearly affects the way in which this passage is received by the reader. By parenthesis, the word

“amphitheatre”, with its connotations of classical harmony, does not properly express either what is implied by the French word “cirque” (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 175) which, beyond its meaning of “circus”, denotes ideas of mess and chaos. The word “tractors” also contributes to a certain sanitization of the French original. Balandier employs “caterpillars” (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 175), a term that he uses generically as most of the mining tractors, trucks and vehicles were – and still are – produced by this flagship of American manufacturing. Its removal from the text by the translator amounts to an unintentional act of absolution: Caterpillar Inc., and by extension all other companies involved in the mining industry, are exculpated of the part that they played in colonial development (“mise en valeur”) and are still playing in the “slow violence” (Nixon 2011) engendered by this process. Unsurprisingly Caterpillar Inc.’s *bien-pensant* and self-congratulatory website reads as if imperialism had never happened.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, tin mining has continued to wreak havoc on the Jos area and the environmental situation of the region has reached critical levels.<sup>3</sup>

A close analysis of Balandier’s text in its English version would reveal other semantic distortions and cultural slippages. The specific example highlighted here is symptomatic of a wider reflection on the partial unreliability of translation as a medium to disseminate culture-specific knowledge. Of course, the colonial situation – and its constitutive ethnocentrism – exacerbated this climate of unreliability as non-western texts were invariably abused to promote the West’s self-aggrandizing project of cultural hegemony (see Barber; Bassnett and Trivedi; Carré; Khatibi; Pugach; Ricard; Van den Avenue). This focus on some of the linguistic mishaps generated by the translation of *Afrique ambiguë* is instructive but should not divert our attention away from the fact that Balandier’s exploration of “cultures in collision” is also eminently translational as it is primarily dealing with the encounter of (and rivalry between) western and African texts and discourses. If Balandier bemoans the effects of colonialism on African cultures, it is also important to point out that he identifies, in the midst of colonial devastation, vernacular techniques and practices which, while rooted in the past, could form the basis of future-orientated projects and generate change. I shall now attempt to explore further how these methods of re-appropriation and “reprises”<sup>4</sup> play out in urban settings and in situations where native intellectuals – often unassimilated or little assimilated intellectuals like Benoît Ogoula Iquaqua (See Balandier 1952) – operate at the intersection between religion and politics. It will be argued here that these processes, without being translations *per se*, have nonetheless a translational dimension. This idea, in turn, will be premised on the assumption that the colonial venture, by virtue of its being a profoundly discursive process, also involved textual confrontations which invariably reflected the “ethnocentric violence of translation” (Venuti: 2008 [1995]: 16) and, hence, the unequal relationships between cultures and languages.<sup>5</sup> What will be at stake, then, in this discussion, is the increasingly precarious epistemological primacy of the colonial “source” text during this era of decolonization.

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.caterpillar.com/en/company/history.html> [consulted on 20 September 2017].

<sup>3</sup> See Freund (1981: 33-38) and <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/field-report-209-abandoned-tin-mines-endanger-communities> [consulted on 20 September 2017].

<sup>4</sup> He often argued that some ethnic groups – e.g. the Fang and the Ba-Kongo – demonstrated a “reprise d’initiative” [revival of initiative] in the cultural and religious fields. See Balandier (1955: xi).

<sup>5</sup> See also: Ngugi wa Thiong’o (1986); Edwin Gentzler and Maria Tymoczko (eds) (2002); Christina Schaeffner and Susan Bassnett (eds) (2010) and Lefevere (2017).

Like many anthropologists of this period, Balandier did not speak any African languages and had therefore to rely on the support of African interpreters (Copans 2013: 43), a role assumed by the novelist Abdoulaye Sadjı during Balandier's first mission in Senegal.<sup>6</sup> The linguistic question, however, resurfaces at various points in *Afrique ambiguë*, an unsurprising fact if one considers how much Balandier was conscious of the dangers of ethnocentrism and mindful of the methodological posture to adopt when conducting fieldwork research. The ethnologist, he argues, must attempt to "obliterate his origins" and "mitigate his foreignness" if he wishes to "enter the indigenous system". His main difficulty is one of "communication" and he should aim to act as an "eloquent witness" and "interpreter" of the cultures submitted to his scrutiny (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 10). This ideal scenario is however more often than not rendered problematic by the intercultural pitfalls of the profession. Communication and translation are reciprocal operations involving different actors and (con)texts and their development is contingent on a process of mutual exchanges. In chapter VII of *Afrique ambiguë*, Balandier provides a detailed account of his meeting with Nganga Emmanuel, the prominent Kongo religious leader, and he demonstrates why this basic reciprocal transaction fails to operate in this instance. Encounters between black and white dignitaries were usually initiated by a ceremonial whereby each party would exchange gifts and take on simultaneously the roles of givers and receivers. In this case, however, Nganga Emmanuel presents Balandier (the Maussian anthropologist!)<sup>7</sup> with a gift *but* turns down the Frenchman's offering. For Balandier, this refusal is the concrete manifestation of a new balance of power in which the traditional colonizer-colonized hierarchy is challenged. Mindful of the translational approach highlighted above, it could also be argued that Nganga Emmanuel's rejection amounts to a de-canonization of the colonial source text:

In forcing his gift on me, he was forcing my loyalty and friendship; at the very least he was neutralizing me. In refusing mine, he retained all his freedom of maneuver; he had made no commitment in my behalf, he had not compromised himself. So runs Bakongo logic, which in this case was accompanied by a determination not to receive anything from the hand of a white man. (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 205)

Ironically, the "interpreter" feels that he is now the object of the other's inquisitive gaze: "Never until that moment had I realized how irrevocably my race and my membership in a particular social system could classify me automatically, apart from my intentions and desires" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 205-206). This Fanonian realization demonstrates that the "colonial situation" was at the beginning of the 1950s defined by a new set of factors and that the divides between white and black residents in urban areas – this scene occurred in Brazzaville – became increasingly blurred. Indeed, Balandier feels here reduced to the racial part of his being. This essentialization amounts to a partial and partisan translation in which words and idioms are divested of their polysemy. As such, it bears witness to the fact that "[t]ranslation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems" (Bassnett and Trivedi 2002: 2). Balandier finds himself indebted and coerced to pledge his loyalty to the Congolese religious leader. Notions of indebtedness (see Derrida 1998: 24), reparation (see Bandia 2008), loyalty (or fidelity – see Chamberlain 2000 [1985]; Philcox 2010) and treason (see Aedín Ní Loingsigh's article in this volume; Zabus 2007: 134) are supremely translational

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Jean Copans for confirming this fact in an email (sent on 19 October 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Alice Conklin (2013: 337-338).

for they conjure up a world of cultural *dependency* in which canonical texts command unconditional respect and are the foundations of future knowledge production. In this paternalistic dictatorship of the Ur-text, translators are mere epigones and it is of course paradoxical that Balandier, in this interview, should assume this subservient position.

It is useful to note that Balandier's early writings are underpinned by an exploration of the notion of dependency which, in his own words, can be either "negative" (or "accepted") or "positive", that is, engendering, on part of the indigenous populations, reactions "de dérobade, de refus ou de révolte" (*of prevarication, refusal or rebellion*) (Balandier 1973 [1952]: 152). Balandier's examination of linguistic issues is conducted in a context of accelerated acculturation at a time when the French authorities were attempting, in the framework of the newly established "French Union" of 1946,<sup>8</sup> to consolidate the role of the French language and pave the way for Francophonie, an enterprise often deemed neo-colonial (see Parker 2014; Watts 2005). Balandier notes, however, the "inadequate" nature of the French education system and, commenting on the situation in Poto-Poto (Brazzaville), he adds that "[w]ith makeshift schools we have turned out makeshift scholars who, deprived of their very ancient and very vivid means of expression, often sound like tape recorders playing to themselves" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 188). Balandier ascribes this psittacism to the haphazard pedagogical methods applied in this part of the colony and, above all, to the fact that pupils "become the victims of undisciplined reading" and fall prey to "the dealers in quick learning and the purveyors of occultism" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 188). Interestingly, he draws an analogy between their peculiar use of language and the linguistic experiments conducted by the French playwright Alfred Jarry in his famous *Ubu Roi* (1896). Widely considered as the precursor of Dadaism, Surrealism and the Theatre of the Absurd, Jarry invented a world in which language fails to fulfil its basic communicative function and where speech acts are reduced to the production of stereotypes couched in irrelevant registers. A sense of incongruity pervades this play in which words are randomly used and appear to be often disconnected from their referents. *Ubu roi* is a satire in which the grotesque and the macabre are deployed to explore political greed and despotism. The play is disconcerting and "ubuesque", an adjective formed from the name "Ubu" and conveying the idea of what is absurdly ludicrous. Although it is set in a topological and ontological no-man's land (Salazar-Sutil 2013), Jarry insists on making use of an undifferentiated and indiscriminate Poland to develop his intrigue of political coups and arbitrary assassinations. The play mixes archaic phrases with scatological expressions and draws upon Shakespearean motifs from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *The Winter's Tale* to depict the political vicissitudes of King Ubu and his acolytes. The drama also offers an examination of the way in which language and power intersect and how verbose language is employed to signify the absence of political idealism and mask intellectual vacuum. "Jarry and the literary school of which he was the inspiration" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 189) is referred to here to comment on political texts disseminated by religious leaders and followers of the African churches founded by figures like Simon Kimbangu and André Matswa. Their writings are, he argues, incongruous translations indiscriminately mixing formal and informal registers and assembling fragments borrowed from administrative French and betraying "a freely assimilated missionary education" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 189). They are reminiscent of what Balandier called the "African baroque" in his discussion on African art, that is, a new artistic language in which "the objects

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<sup>8</sup> A reconfigured French Empire in which the word "colony" was replaced by "overseas" territories and departments (see Frémeaux 2014).

disseminated by our industrial civilization are incorporated into a context of values and meanings which is often alien to the utility habitual with us" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 123). Although Balandier does not question the immense – and historic - significance of their political struggle (as it is, in fact, one of the most prominent issues covered in *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire*), he argues, however, that the "curious style" of this literature gives "the impression of mere verbal exercises" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 189). But are they really? As I shall now attempt to demonstrate these uncanny translations are also the sites of creative transgressions and re-appropriations on part of the colonized.

Like most French Africanists of his generation, Balandier's ethnographic missions were supported by funds allocated by the French State and its scientific agencies. Like some of his closest collaborators – e.g. Paul Mercier – and after a trend inaugurated by Malinowski in *Methods of Study of Culture Contact in Africa* (1938), Balandier took it upon himself to reconcile "expertise et science" (de L'Estoile 2017: 902). He was a scholar but also an expert on whose knowledge – but also "'applied" studies"' (de L'Estoile 2005: 52)<sup>9</sup> - the colonial administration would routinely call upon to shape new policies and manage the territories under its jurisdiction (Copans 2013: 54-55). It is a well-known fact that colonial authorities committed enormous resources to collect data on the empire and its populations and that the notorious "colonial library" resulting from this exercise became one of the most efficient instruments for the "invention of Africa" (Mudimbe 1988: 175). When Balandier started his career as an Africanist, he proceeded, among other investigative undertakings, to submit his native subjects to Rorschach psycho-diagnostic tests. It was thought that this methodology would enable colonialists to assess the intelligence of their subjects and gain deeper insight into the locals' psychology, potential psychological disorders, and personality. Rorschach tests and other projective tests – e.g. Horn-Hellersberg and mosaic tests – had gradually become part and parcel of the methodological arsenal of social anthropology in colonial settings (see Macdonald 2016).<sup>10</sup> This trend had been given a major impetus by scholars such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict at Columbia University during the Second World War when a research project ("Research in Contemporary Cultures") commissioned by the US Government was initiated to investigate the concept of "national character", at a time when the understanding of cultural differences between the various nations involved in the war became an issue of strategic importance (Beeman 2000). Balandier notes that he became quickly suspicious of the interpretative efficacy of these tests. This critique is another dismissal of ethnocentrism and of "our technical mastery" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 38). Like some of his contemporaries – he refers here to the psychologist Roseline Barbé and the physician André Ombredane<sup>11</sup> – Balandier became conscious of the cultural inadequacy of this methodological apparatus (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 38). This reflection is epistemologically driven and resonates with other attempts by African thinkers such as VY Mudimbe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Kwasi Wiredu to question the applicability, for non-westerners, of systems of thought primarily developed in the

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<sup>9</sup> Benoît de l'Estoile argues here that Balandier failed "to be elected to the Collège de France because he lost the contest to Claude Lévi-Strauss – who was to argue that ethnology was more valuable when it was 'pure' rather than 'diluted'" (53).

<sup>10</sup> And particularly chapter 4, "The Colonial Archive, Stereotypes, and the Practice of Psychological Assessment", 55-89.

<sup>11</sup> Ombredane had published articles in the *Revue Internationale du Rorschach* – see Schuhl (1959).



West. Hermann Rorschach was a Swiss Freudian psychiatrist born in 1884 (see Naamah Akavia, 2013). Ultimately, his inkblots reflect specific conditions of possibility:

The problem with traditional European-American theories of personality functioning is that even unconscious mechanisms and structures are based upon Eurocentric lifestyle norms, values, and beliefs. The Rorschach test [...] is anything but a culture-free test. Additionally, it should be noted that Freud believed that Africans had a stronger id [...] and a weaker ego [...] and superego [...] compared to Europeans. (Macdonald 2016: 63-64)

Along similar lines, Balandier wonders whether it is scientifically tenable to assume that the personality assessment methodologies perfected by Rorschach and others operate in Africa: "How can we be sure that our instruments for measuring the mind, taken out of their element, still give satisfactory results?" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 38). These analytical grids – and their culture-specific grammars – fail to convey the African complexity. Balandier acknowledges here that the colonial translation has stalled, and that Africa will not reciprocate the gift and pledge loyalty to the Ur-Text and the taxonomies informing its epistemological deployment. This last quote throws up an interesting translational issue: "taken out of their element" poorly renders the original "dépaysés" ["Quelle certitude avons-nous que nos instruments à mesurer l'esprit donnent encore, *dépaysés*, des résultats satisfaisants?" ] (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 49, my emphasis). Alongside its compounds – the verb "dépayer" and the noun "le dépayement" – this adjective is an untranslatable (on this notion, see Martinon and Rettová in this special issue). Of course, "taken out of their element" gives the idea but does not quite carry over the more dramatic connotations of the original. "When uprooted", "when displaced", or "when relocated" – although not as economical as the source – would translate more accurately a sense of spatial remoteness and unfamiliar translocation and "reterritorialization".

Balandier notices an analogous "dépayement" in the natives' idiosyncratic use of the French language:

Observing the French diction of my Lebou Friends, I noted the existence of a slight difference in our usage of the same words [...]. I should like to emphasize the frequency of a schematic and in a certain sense artificial use of our language, even in more advanced students. Literary teachers on the secondary level ascribed this deviation to what they term "dictionaryitis". Words do not have the same density, nor do they always occur in the same semantic fields, when they are our instrument of communication and when they become those of the French-speaking African. From the outset, therefore, we run the risk of missing the nuances. (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 39)

Here, it seems that the French language has been submitted to a process of denaturalization as its usage in Africa is deemed deviant and artificial (see also Balandier 1955b: 237-238). Balandier records a partial breakdown of communication between the "teachers" and their "more advanced students" and, hence, the failure of a certain type of paternalistic education. Given the utilitarian role played by language in the French colonial project (see Dubreuil 2013; Van den Avenne 2017), there is no doubt that this remark is aimed at highlighting the disconnect between French words in Africa and in France. French educators in the colonies, as argued by Georges Hardy, one the most energetic advocates of the civilizing mission in the first part of the twentieth century, had the duty to encourage their African pupils to use clear and precise French as they were destined to take on

clerical positions in the colonial administration (Hardy 1917: 193-194). Therefore, it was imperative to dissuade them from using hyperbolic style, and accumulating images and “mots qui ne veulent rien dire” (*meaningless words*) (Hardy 1917: 193). The École Normale William-Ponty in Senegal (see also Le Lay in this special issue), the most significant incubator of West-African elites during the colonial period (see Chafer 2007), complied with this teaching philosophy in which clarity was favoured over literary and aesthetic pursuits. The school, nonetheless, produced African writers but, by and large, these early figures – Ousmane Diop Socé and Abdoulaye Sadjí spring to mind – remained the representatives of what has been referred to as “Littérature d’instituteurs” (*school teachers’ literature*), that is, a type of literary production characterized by a high degree of linguistic compliancy and stylistic normativity (see Mouralis 1984). At a time when *Présence africaine* was developing strategies to curtail the cultural dependency on mainland France and French cultural hegemony, Balandier’s linguistic anxieties – indeed, it is fair to say that he does not welcome this situation in which “nuances” are missed - anticipate works by Sony Labou Tansi, Yambo Ouologuem and Ahmadou Kourouma and their own creative denaturalization and “reterritorialization” (see Grant Farred’s article in this special issue) of the French language.<sup>12</sup> This process also reflects Coetzee’s (in fact his narrator’s) statement - in the second epigraph at the beginning of this article - about the deterritorialized status of English in contemporary South Africa. These interrogations are reminiscent of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the famous linguistic theory developed in the 1930s by Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir which posited a deterministic relation between language, thought, and behaviours:

Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way - an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees (Whorf 2012: 215).

### **Translation as Transgression**

This reflection on language takes place in a quasi-revolutionary context – Balandier uses the expression “religious war” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 203) to describe the activities of the new churches founded by Matswa and Kimbangu - and at a moment when ethnic groups such as the Ba-Kongo and the Fang are re-asserting their rights to self-determination (Balandier 1955: xi). This politico-theological process is also eminently translational for it takes place at the crossroads between languages, traditions, discourses and their narratives and histories. Prophetic movements in sub-Saharan Africa emerged in times of collective crises. The colonial situation – whether in

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<sup>12</sup> For an analogous process of “relexification” but in Anglophone literatures of West Africa, see Zabus (2007). See also Vakunta (2011).

French or Belgian Africa (where Kimbanguism first developed in 1921) – became the terrain of a renewed religious fervour fuelled by the sense of alienation and dispossession experienced by the colonized. It appears that they were increasingly reluctant to tolerate God's whiteness. Nganga Emmanuel (nganga means "priest" in Kikongo - Mélice 2010: 221) decided to leave the Catholic Church after befriending André Matswa. Subsequently, he militated against "inequality" and took part "in the first antiwhite demonstrations" but was, as a result, deported to Chad by the colonial authorities. He also discovered that "servants of Christ did not side with the Bakongo" and, after realizing that the "God worshipped within those walls was first of all French, his claims took on political overtones" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 205). In *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire*, Balandier had already provided a sustained analysis of these messianic movements. With regards to Matswanism (see Coquery-Vidrovitch 1988: 194-195) and Kimbanguism – but also earlier analogous phenomena such as the "Ethiopian movement" studied by the French anthropologist Maurice Leenhardt at the turn of the century (1902; see also Clifford 1992: 24) - Balandier identifies several recurring characteristics. Millenarianism mainly developed in extensively Christianized urban centres, particularly in industrialized zones – above all mining areas – where locals had been most exposed to labour exploitation and racial segregation (Balandier 1955: 419). These movements were also fuelled by a sense of ethnic identity which rendered obsolete the former clannish allegiances and generated proto-nationalist sentiments transcending the colonial borders as in the case of Kimbanguism which spread from the Bakongo areas of the Belgian Congo to the French Congo, and Angola (Balandier 1955: 427). These prophetic movements were modernist and enacted a sort of religious *Aufhebung* in the sense that they often both preserved and rejected elements from African traditional cults (Balandier 1955: 428-429), and attempted to reassemble them with indigenized biblical fragments. This process of indigenization disrupted the order on which colonialism had envisioned to export its norms in sub-Saharan Africa. It also produced a supplement which cannot be exclusively ascribed to the logic of the original biblical texts. Interestingly, the "sacred literature" (Balandier 1955: 428) produced by modern-day African prophets grew in a context in which western evangelists were competing against one another. Indeed, Christianity never spoke with one voice on the continent and evangelization was conducted by churches with conflicting interests and agenda: the Catholic Church, and its many rival missionary orders but also Protestant churches (Balandier 1955: 419-420; see Mudimbe 1994: 106-110). African messianic movements exploited these divisions to express their frustrations with the colonial order. Balandier shows that the adepts of the Ethiopian movement called upon the sacred authority of the Old Testament to discredit the view held by missionaries according to which polygamy and circumcision were "pagan" practices (Balandier 1955: 425). Albeit an import of western origin, the Bible, became - like language – a weapon to target the colonizers themselves (Balandier 1955: 429-430).

Although not intellectuals in the classical sense of the word, these prophets – like Fanon, Césaire, and Senghor at the same time but with fewer means and in more trying circumstances – were also expressing their ambition to overcome the unequal basis of the colonial situation: they "used, with great strategic skill, the cultural gap that separated them from the colonizers". Their battle was "politically significant" but fought "in an indirect way [and] under cover of an apparently unpolitical traditionalism and neo-traditionalism" (Balandier 1970: 160). There is, however, no triumphalism here and no attempt to idealize these clandestine exegetic practices which act "like an image of this disturbed society" (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 162). Balandier insists that these responses on part of the

colonized are often haphazard and marked by the precariousness of indigenous living conditions and that they can, as a result, serve ““revolutionary”” but also ““reactionary”” goals (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 162). They are, in other words, *ambiguous*. In his analysis of African art, these critical reappraisals of western culture are the signs that “all may not be lost” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 117) and attest to the fact that “Africa was recovering her balance in order to begin again” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 128) – in the French original, interestingly, he says “l’Afrique se ‘reprend’” (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 174) - a turn of phrase announcing Mudimbe’s “Reprendre” and his examination of political and artistic change in sub-Saharan Africa from the late 1940s to the postcolonial period (Mudimbe 1994).<sup>13</sup> By means of a “doctored legend” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 164) from the Fang area of Gabon, Balandier demonstrates that the incorporation of biblical episodes into tribal legends fulfilled a number of functions. First, it played a very practical role as these biblical norms were taken over to provide an organizing framework “in the most diverse realms, ranging from the campaign against adultery and excessive dowries to the regulation of petty commerce” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 161). More fundamentally, however, these references are pride- and equality-restoring instruments:

The Bible, which presents the Africans with a society comparable to their own, provides the possibility of transcending the inferiority they have suffered, of denying their state of “savagery”. By identifying with the people of the Book,<sup>14</sup> they can re-establish an equality which in their eyes is the condition of all future progress [...]. (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 164)

He adds that this desire to be associated to a prestigious historical civilization resonates with other attempts “in certain Negro intellectual circles” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 164) to draw on ancient Egypt to articulate the historicity of African civilizations – and there is no doubt that he is thinking here about Cheikh Anta Diop mentioned elsewhere in this book. This analogy is interesting and reveals that intellectual creativity – this desire to read, interpret, translate, recycle and discard sequences of the western cultural legacy – was not limited to exclusive university cenacles and it is thus easy to understand why Balandier uses the phrase “literature of resistance” to qualify the “sacred texts” produced by the “native messiahs” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 211). The innovations (religious and otherwise) elicited by the shock of civilizations recorded by Balandier provoked strong reactions in colonial circles where they were either “ridiculed as a childish parody” or “feared as signs of subversive intent” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 164). In this regard, he recalls that some religious Fang movements borrowed their hierarchical titles - e.g. “president-in-chief”, “governors”, “assessors”, “majors”, and “commissaries” - from colonial military and administrative organizations and that these disconcerting appropriations – indeed, these titles were displaced from their natural registers – “show a new desire for terms vividly expressing the idea of power and a need to ‘possess’ the name in order to arrive, by a kind of magical process of the imagination, at the reality” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 164). The ambivalence of these cannibalizing practices is, incidentally, neatly captured by Jean Rouch’s ethno-documentary *Les Maîtres fous* (1955) in which the Hauka priests impersonate the language and reproduce the insignia and sartorial markers of colonial officials to take hold of their authority and restore their own self-respect.

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<sup>13</sup> See also VY Mudimbe 1991 and 2016.

<sup>14</sup> I took the liberty of amending the translation here as “people du Livre” in Balandier (1962 [1957]: 224) was translated as “the people in the Book”.

The new discourses, cultural grammars and languages generated by this wholesale borrowing process baffled many a colonizer. Balandier reports the dissatisfaction of a French Catholic priest in the face of Bakongo religious schisms:

All our troubles come chiefly from men who once had our confidence and are using our teachings to supplant us... They combine everything in their ceremonies: fetishes, fits of possession, prayers they have stolen from us, gestures copied from the priest's, processions that imitate ours. It's disgraceful! They no longer want us as interpreters of God. They say that we alone enjoy the benefits of our intercession... (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 203)

The priest acknowledges a painful reality – and one that Balandier had experienced in his encounter with Nganga Emmanuel – i.e. that his former Bakongo parishioners will no longer accept the gift of his own exegesis. The great efficacy of these messianic churches is that they both “imitate” the Christian organizational structures and are “reminiscent” of the traditional rituals. In the French version, Balandier uses the two verbal forms “imitent” and “rappellent” (Balandier 1962 [1957]: 295) to describe this dual process whereby the translation of the source is accompanied by a pledge of fidelity to the African text. Some of the most noteworthy contributions of the churches founded by Matswa and Kimbangu include, in Balandier's words, the creation of “a language suited to the cultural level of the Congolese peoples” and the development of “innovations” which maintained their “familiar sociological landscape” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 216). This reterritorialization of the colonizers' *dépaysé* language is, however, not without its caveats. Foreshadowing some of the issues that have plagued African identity politics until today, Balandier warns that these politico-theological movements – and their underlying “xenophobia” (or, at best, anti-racist racism to use Sartre's famous expression) – could easily slip into “mysticism” and generate a bigoted “return to the past” (Balandier 1966 [1957]: 217). On a different but not unrelated note, the “mere verbal exercises” mentioned earlier by Balandier and the locals' tendency to appropriate the colonial hierarchical nomenclature conjure up the threat of a violent political culture – Achille Mbembe's *postcolony* - in which the incongruous, the grotesque, the stereotype, the parody, the simulacrum, and the hyperbole would become the main features underpinning the relationship between the “*commandement*” and its subjects (Mbembe 2001: 80-108).

*Afrique ambiguë*, by way of conclusion, provides a captivating examination of the way in which antagonistic languages and discourses transformed sub-Saharan Africa in the years leading to political decolonization. Balandier records the damage generated by French, British, and Belgian colonialism but identifies also new forms of intellectual creativity amongst the colonized. If he despairs at the psittacism of assimilated locals, he also explores the fascinating proliferation of dissenting voices in areas where Christianity is well established and long-standing. Their new translations are ambiguous because they conjure up an Africa sitting uncomfortably between the ancestors and the people of the Book. Ultimately, however, the translational processes identified in this article bear witness to the emergence of a post-Whorfian era in which languages are no longer expected to be the vehicles of exclusive worldviews (see Zabus 2007: xi-xv). “Good translation, argues Lawrence Venuti, “is minoritizing” because it eludes absolute domestication: “it releases the remainder by cultivating a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves, to the substandard and the marginal.” (Venuti 1998: 11)

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