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12 Cultural Mediation, Colonialism & Politics

Colonial 'Truchement', Postcolonial Translator

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

I admit that it is a good thing to place different civilizations in contact with each other; that it is an excellent thing to blend different worlds; that whatever its own particular genius may be, a civilization that withdraws into itself atrophies; that for civilizations, exchange is oxygen; that the great good fortune of Europe is to have been a crossroads, and that because it was the locus of all ideas, the receptacle of all philosophies, the meeting place of all sentiments, it was the best center for the redistribution of energy. But then I ask the following question: has colonization really placed civilizations in contact? Or, if you prefer, of all the ways of establishing contact, was it the best? I answer no. And I say that between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance.

(Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* 2001: 11–12)

Every culture wants to be self-sufficient and use this imaginary self-sufficiency in order to shine forth on the others and appropriate their patrimony. Ancient Roman culture, classical French culture, and modern North-American culture are striking examples of this. Here, translation occupies an ambiguous position. On the one hand, it heeds this appropriationary and reductionary injunction, and constitutes itself as one of its agents. This results in ethnocentric translations, or what we may call 'bad' translations. But, on the other hand, the ethical aim of translating is by its very nature opposed to this injunction: The essence of translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a crossbreeding, a decentering. Translation is 'a putting in touch with,' or it is nothing.

(Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign* 1992: 4)

Let me start with a scene from a book by anthropologist, historian, novelist, but above all interpreter then translator of West African oral cultures and literatures into French: Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901–1991) from Mali. The book is entitled *Vie et enseignement de Tierno Bokar le Sage de Bandiagara* (literally: 'The life and teachings of Tierno Bokar, the Sage of Bandiagara') and is the biography of his master and guide in Islamic sciences and spirituality (Tierno means 'master'). The scene in question takes place in 1937, in the Malian town of Mopti under French colonial rule. The *dramatis personae* are the master Tierno Bokar, the French commander of the town, named

Levavasseur, and the official interpreter for the colonial administration whose name is Oumar Sy. As soon as Tierno appears before him commander Levavasseur angrily and impatiently gets directly to the point: 'Tierno', he asks in French of course, 'are you willing to go back to the spiritual practice of which you are one of the masters, namely the 12 beads, so that all is over, yes or no?' (Bâ 1980: 104).

The interpreter then turns towards Tierno and 'translates' for him the question into Fulani language as follows: 'Your cousin Tidjani Aguibou Tall, the chief of Bandiagara, accompanied by other prominent personalities has come to meet you and take you with him to Bandiagara, Are you ready to follow him?'

To which Tierno then answers 'yes', nodding also with his head, a universal human sign that needs no translation and which the commander can easily understand. Then the interpreter adds in French that Tierno was ready to follow his cousin to Bandiagara, and would certainly obey him when asked to reintegrate the Tall family and its spiritual tradition. Later, Levavasseur could write in his administrative report: 'This day, Tierno Bokar Salif Tall and members of his family appeared before me. The marabout Tierno Bokar will resume the practice of the 12 beads and abandon that of the 11 beads. His people have come to fetch him. All is settled, the case is closed.'

What the scene and the interpreter's trick manifest is that the situation in the colony is not the simple, clear face to face between the European imperial authority and its subject. That could only be the case if the same language was shared across the line separating the realm of the dominant and the space of the dominated. But because there is more than one language involved in the relationship of domination, the colonial confrontation is inevitably troubled and the colonial power supposed to be exercised exclusively and unequivocally by the representative of the imperial authority can find itself bent, diverted, diffused, and ultimately turned round: it can literally get lost in translation. So in this chapter, starting with the examination of this particular scene of translation, I want to illustrate how translation in the context of 'imperial encounter' (Mandair 2009: xiii) 'is always complicit with the building, transforming or disrupting of power relations' (Sakai 2006: 72).

But let me first present the context which gives meaning to the different elements that constitute the scene and to expressions such as 'practice of the 12 beads' vs 'practice of the 11 beads'.

The Context

Tierno Bokar is a spiritual guide from the Sufi order named Tijaniyya after its founder Ahmad at-Tijani who was born in Ayn Madi, in Algeria but then lived and taught in Fez, Morocco, dying there in 1815. An important ritual characteristic of his spiritual path is the daily recitation, *11 or 12 times*, of a particular prayer, praising the prophet of Islam and calling upon him God's blessings. The actual prescription was to repeat it 11 times, until a day when

the prayer was recited an additional twelfth time so that at-Tijani, who had come late to the session of recitation could join his disciples and be part of it. Subsequently, the practice of '12' was adopted by most of his disciples as the right count but '11' was also kept by some of them as the official, written rule of the Order. The Sufi order of the Tijaniyya spread throughout West Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the 'jihad' the holy scholar, warrior Shaykh Umar Tall (d. 1864 in Bandiagara, Mali) but mainly though the teachings of Tijani masters such as Tierno Bokar who belonged to the same Tall family. Shaykh Umat Tall had fought against the French and their local allies before being killed in a battle in 1864. His descendants lost temporal power under colonial rule but retained the spiritual aura of the warrior, and guidance of the order. Eventually the colonial administration found a path of accommodation with the Tijaniyya and the Tall family. Then, in the 1920s, another branch of the Tijaniyya developed in the region formed by the territories of Mauritania, Senegal and Mali. It was led by Shaykh Hamaullah from Mauritania who had adopted with his followers the '11 beads practice', thus starting a controversy with the '12 beads' establishment. The controversy led to a violent political conflict which took an anti-colonial turn as the French administration got involved because of the possible troubles. Shaykh Hamaullah, having always voiced his opposition to the colonial administration, was imprisoned for five years in 1925 then deported to Côte d'Ivoire for another five years. He was briefly liberated and was back in his town of Nioro in 1936 thanks to the political change that happened in France that same year, when the Popular Front came to power. Hamaullah's enemies would still insist that he was preparing a jihad. Eventually he was arrested again in 1940 and in 1942 the Vichy Governor Buisson deported him to Eveaux-les-Bains, France. He died soon after in January 1943 and was buried in Montluçon. His disciples were persecuted by the French colonial administration.

Tierno Bokar had adopted the '11 beads' practice after becoming a disciple of Shaykh Hamaullah whom he met in 1937 at Nioro, a conversion that the Tall family considered a betrayal. The French colonial administration also went after him as it considered the '11 beads' faction an anti-France movement and because it wanted to please the Tijaniyya establishment.

So the scene from his biography presented earlier came just after Tierno had joined the 11 beads movement. It shows that the French administration was wary of the new situation thus created by the rallying of a prestigious and respected member of the Tall family to what they labelled an 'anti-France' dissident branch of the Tijaniyya. The commander had summoned the Sufi master to seek confirmation of the fact of his conversion and probably arrest and deport him after the hearing and his confession. The 'translation' to which he had responded positively had avoided him such a fate. But when it was later discovered that the case was not closed as Levavasseur had been led to believe, retaliation followed and Tierno lived through persecution, house arrest, and hardships of all nature until his death three years later in February 1940.

Translating versus Interpreting

I have described the scene as a dialogue. Commander Levavasseur did think that he was in a dialogue in its simplest form, that he was posing a precise 'yes or no' question to be answered by his interlocutor. He assumed that his words were conveyed to Tierno through the interpreter (meaning that the intermediary just made the words in French pass through him to be expressed in Tierno's tongue at the other end) and that in return the sounds uttered by the Malian Sufi master came back to him in the same way, accompanied by the universal body language of acquiescence that he could decipher. The interpreter should not have had any agency. He was supposed to be a simply intermediary, an instrument to convey words from a language into another language, *salva veritate*, the information remaining unaltered. *Truchement* is an interesting word in French, coming from the Arabic *tarjumān* meaning translator. It has then come to mean 'instrument', or 'means', a channel 'through' which some effect is produced. In that sense the *truchement* is not an agent but a tool. But in this scene agency is claimed by Oumar Sy, the official interpreter. We are presented with an instance of the intermediary playing the colonial power by a false translation.

For the past two decades historians of colonialism have paid great attention to the important actors of a third space, the space of hybridity participating both in the world of the imperium and that of the colonized: intermediaries and other colonial clerks have become categories of great interest in the studies of empires with a focus more particularly on the figure of the interpreter and the question of translation in general in colonial context. Full understanding of the colonial encounter in its complexity supposes an exploration of what Homi Bhabha (Rutherford 1990) has called a 'third space', complicating the face-to-face colonizer–colonized encounter. Taking that into account means questioning the one-sided dimension of interpretation, as an interpreter, a representative *par excellence* of the third space, always, inevitably, exceeds the role of a mere *truchement*.

Great attention has been paid recently to the transactional nature of the colonial system and to the figure of the interpreter as its best manifestation and illustration. Two titles could be thus evoked: African Agency and European Colonialism, Latitudes of Negotiations and Containments, edited by Femi J. Kolapo and Kwabena O. Akurang-Passy (2007) and Intermediaries, Interpreters and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa, edited by Benjamin Lawrence, Emily Lynn Osborn and Richard L. Roberts (2006). No contribution shows better the transactional nature of colonialism than the article by Tamba Mbayo in African Agency on the Senegalese interpreter Bou El Moghdad Seck. The text is entitled: 'Bou El Moghdad Seck (1826–1880): Interpretation and Mediation of Colonialism in Senegal'. The very title of that article expresses the important notion of 'African agency' under colonial rule as a move from interpretation to mediation or transaction: action through translation.

Coming back to the scene from *Tierno Bokar*, we understand that the decision had been made by the interpreter to save Tierno from himself by deceiving him, in addition to deceiving the French commander: Oumar Sy, as a benevolent deceiver, needed the Sufi master's body language to be directly readable by Levavasseur so that it would conform with with his own 'translation'.

What was the meaning of that decision? What Oumar Sy understood is that the hearing as it was set and the 'yes or no' question as it was asked, failed to take into account the true situation, the reality of the whole affair. He knew Tierno and knew that he could not possibly be the agitator and the trouble-maker that for Levavasseur a 'no' to his question would make him be. He also knew that the master would not answer 'yes' just to avoid trouble. So the Oumar Sy's deceptive 'interpretation' was done in the name of what the *true translation* of the whole situation was. Simply interpreting in this case, that is to say transferring a given uttered meaning from a language to another would have been the real deception. What was then needed was a translation whereby the totality of the meaning would be present, a situation far more complex where 'yes, Tierno is a partisan of the 11 beads movement' and 'no, Tierno could not possibly be an agitator and an "anti-France" trouble-maker' could be both true beyond the binary 'yes or no' to which Levavasseur wants to reduce the hearing. Both Levavasseur and Tierno are agents of simplification, both for totally different reasons would simplify the situation into the predictable consequences of a 'yes or no' answer, the former because he is the power to decide between what is right and what is wrong, the latter because he is committed by his faith to the simple bare truth. The wisdom of the official interpreter is to understand that the truth is not simple and is best realized in translation, that is *transaction*. So he makes the move from the instrumental nature of the *truchement* or the *intermediary* (who transmits information up to the colonial administrator, and conveys instructions down to the colonized administered) to the agency of a *mediator*. In so doing the interpreter aims at moving from interpretation to translation and at the establishment of a true *dialogue*.

Cultural Mediators & Translators

But is such a dialogue possible in colonial context? Antoine Berman has written that there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the fundamental drive of any given culture – *a fortiori* an imperial one – to appropriate and reduce to itself other cultures and languages and, on the other hand, what he calls 'the ethical aim of translation' which implies 'openness, dialogue, crossbreeding, and decentering'. Translation, he concludes, means 'putting in a relationship, lest it is nothing' (Berman 1992: 4). That is precisely the ultimate goal of interpretation: to 'put in a relationship', to create reciprocity and respect. It must be recalled that Amadou Hampâté Bâ himself started his career as an interpreter at the service of the colonial administration like the one, Oumar Sy, whose trick to save Tierno from punishment he

has reported. In fact, in 1973, Bâ published a novel, *L'étrange destin de Wangrin ou les roueries d'un interprète africain*,[1] which is largely autobiographical as it describes precisely the life of an interpreter who helped the colonial administration establish its rule over the West African territories it controlled in the early twentieth century and who could sometimes use his privileged position to 'manipulate [the] Europeans and even defend other Africans against them' (Austen 2006: 167). Beyond the anecdotes about the interpreters as tricksters, what is important is the way in which they expanded the significance of their position as *écrivains-interprètes* (the official title in French meaning literally 'writer-interpreter') by becoming translators of their cultures and the literature (or rather *orature*) of their own indigenous languages. To use the title of Ralph Austen's article, 'Interpreters Self-Interpreted', they created their autonomous voices by interpreting themselves.

That colonialism understands translation not as relation, transaction and reciprocity, but as a one-directional process of Europeanization has found its best expression in the views of British historian and politician Lord Thomas Macaulay (1800–59) concerning the value of non-European languages and the meaning of educating colonized people. In his famous 'Minute on Indian Education' in 1835 he addressed the question of the best way to employ funds 'for the intellectual improvement of the people of [India]'. Given what was for him a simple fact that 'the dialects commonly spoken among the natives contain neither literary nor scientific information', he argued that it would take huge enrichment if 'any valuable work were to be translated into them'. So, the only possible improvement would come through 'some language not vernacular amongst them'. Then Macaulay asked whether such a language could be Sanskrit or Arabic: such a choice – Sanskrit being the language of Hindu Law and Arabic that of 'Mahometan Law' – would appear to mean an openness to 'cooperation'. This was a purely rhetorical question as he quickly dismissed and ridiculed the very possibility of making such a choice: even the poetry in those tongues is not comparable the least to European languages and as to 'cooperation', why would learners be involved in what is the exclusive privilege of the teachers to 'prescribe' in what language students have to be educated? So, of course, English stands as the language of education and intellectual improvement as 'it stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West'. Therefore, what Greek and Latin were to Europe, English must be to India. In summary, and given the constraints of 'limited means', Macaulay concludes:

> we must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (1994: 430)

[1] It was translated into English as *The Fortunes of Wangrin* and published in 1999 (Bâ 1999).

Macaulay obviously speaks of translation in terms that are the opposite of Berman's notion of the 'ethics of translation' being 'a putting in touch'. This is because the colonial space rests, by definition, upon the notion of an *imperial language* that defines the meaning of translation simply as *vertical transfer* through interpreters. What the colonial *écrivains-interprètes* tried to achieve by becoming *écrivains* of their own cultures in the imperial language, was to introduce reciprocity, to transform that space into a space of dialogue.

To come back to the case of Amadou Hampâté Bâ, he worked to become a mediator between languages and cultures and to turn the colonial context into a space of translation and reciprocity: when in 1942 he was recruited as a research assistant at the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire (IFAN) thanks to its director, Théodore Monod, he devoted himself mainly to the task of transcribing and translating West African oral literatures into French. The same task had been undertaken by European missionaries, ethnologists and sometimes administrators doing ethnological work, but A.H. Bâ was one of the first and most prominent West African francophone 'interpreters' turned indigenous 'writers': in other words cultural intermediaries who sought to translate their situation of *in between-ness* into literary creation.[2]

Now there are two ways of looking at such an endeavour. One way is to consider that transcription/translation of oral African literature into French only means an assimilation of the local and particular cultures into the imperial and universal language through which it could only truly exist and even simply survive: A.H. Bâ has famously declared that in Africa the death of the elders had the same significance as libraries disappearing in flames, unless the memory of which they were the custodians was safely transferred into the colonial archive. Another way is to read the transcription/translation of *orature* as the gesture of affirming not only the life of the content that is thus transferred into the European language but also that of the indigenous languages from which it was produced. The oral text 'translated' into French is also the presence, virtual of course most of the time and sometimes explicit, of the language from which it was *recreated*. That transcription/translation is co-presence of languages, the indigenous and the European, is marked by the poet Blaise Cendrars who put together in the 1920s an anthology of African oral texts from all over the continent, collected and translated mainly by missionaries and ethnographers. In his very short word of introduction to the volume he wrote that the stories, myths and narratives gathered in the *anthology* pointed towards the 'beauty' and the 'visual power' (*puissance plastique*) of their original languages. He then concluded that the study of the 'primitives' languages and literature was indispensable to the knowledge of the history of the human spirit.

In a certain way, without the dated racialist and evolutionary language of Cendrars, the literary genre of recreation, in written French, of indigenous *orature* illustrates that notion that it constitutes also an authentic praise for

[2] Ralph Austen indicates that although Amadou Hampâté Bâ and another colonial clerk from Cameroon, Kuoh Moukouri, 'entered colonial service only in the 1920's', they are the first who were taken by their 'exceptional talents' beyond their level of employment as interpreters and to truly 'write' (2006: 159).

the original African language it is virtually and sometimes actually present in the text produced through 'translation', thus establishing a dialogue between French and itself.[3]

To his reading of Amadou Hampâté Bâ's memoirs, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*, Ralph Austen has given the following title: 'From a Colonial to a Postcolonial African Voice: *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul*' (Austen 2000). To consider A.H. Bâ both a colonial and a postcolonial voice at once makes great sense. In the colonial space, of which Aimé Césaire has written that it is not a space of contact, a space where interpretation is uni-linear and can only mean and serve assimilation and Europeanization, A.H. Bâ has played the role of a '*truchement*' and interpreted African cultures and languages into the imperial language. But in so doing he has also naturally expanded the role into dialogue, relation and, ultimately, a postcolonial call for multilingualism and genuine translation.

Conclusion

One should certainly not be naïve about translation. We know that in the global 'Republic of letters', what is translated into what language is the result of decisions that manifest that the world of languages is a world of inequality and domination. The sociological study of translation conducted among others by what we may call the Pierre Bourdieu school, reminds us that, translation happens in a field where certain languages have more weight and prestige than others, and that bilingualism is most of the time not a choice but a necessity for people whose native tongues just do not count much in that field (Casanova 2015).

That being said, it is also true, at the same time, that the response to linguistic domination and imperialism is also translation. Umberto Eco's famous quote: 'the language of Europe is translation' (see Wolf 2014: 224) expresses eloquently the idea that translation is the way of recognizing the simple fact that any language is one among the plurality of human idioms. Eco's saying could certainly be generalized as: 'the universal language is translation'.

Merleau-Ponty has perfectly described the passage from the colonial era to a postcolonial world when he wrote that the time of an 'overarching universal' that Europe had claimed to represent was over and that another kind of universality was to be invented in a world of a plurality of cultures and languages, all equivalent:

> [T]he equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides *a second way*

[3] The style of Senegalese author Birago Diop who thus published volumes of 'transcribed/translated' tales from the oral tradition is probably the best illustration of that co-presence of languages in a text. Of course, as Senghor, has noted, his so-called *translations* of orality are in fact written *creations* (Senghor 1961).

> *to the universal*: no longer the *overarching universal* of a strictly objective method, but a sort of *lateral universal* which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self. It is question of constructing a general system of reference in which the point of view of the native, the point of view of the civilized man, and the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place – that is of constituting a more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 119–20)

As the invitation to learn to speak other languages indicates, caring for universality in a postcolonial world means developing the capacity to be in between languages, to be a translator. I understand a 'lateral universal' to mean translation. Of course, again, that does not mean transparency and the elimination of the untranslatable. On the contrary the untranslatable or the unavoidable misunderstandings or 'mistaken views about each other' are part of this incessant testing, marked by the co-presence of many different views. So 'lateral' universality does not have as its horizon the establishment of a universal grammar, and it does not mean the end game of a final reduction of the plural of the 'chaos-world' to the One and the Same. But it does mean the 'putting in touch' of languages and the creation of reciprocity in the asymmetrical context of linguistic imperialism. The interpreters who became translators understood it to be their task.

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13 *'Kos'ona Miran?'* Patronage, Prebendalism & Democratic Life in Contemporary Nigeria

Adigun Agbaje

Introduction

In this chapter, I offer a view on the prospects for democracy in Nigeria against a backdrop of Jane Guyer's timeless concern with the dynamics of autonomy, resilience, co-optation and capitulation of micro (marginal, local) processes, structures and actors in their daily interactions and negotiations with the macro (dominant, national). In this regard, I attempt an outline of elements of continuity, change and the suspended – if restive and tense – state between change and continuity, in the role of patronage in the evolving democratic possibilities in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. I do all this in the specific context of Jane Guyer's enduring focus on and contributions to African studies in general and the study of Nigeria in particular. No less important, this chapter also engages with Guyer's intellectual encounters and collaborations with African scholars against the backdrop of her steadfast commitment to, and interest in, life in Nigeria, which has yielded unusual insights evident in her work on the African continent – a continent described by some as characterized by wholesale marginality of entire populations (Guyer 2002: xiii). She has devoted herself to the study of the people and their money, the people in other areas of the economy, the people and energy, the people, their spaces and places (rural and urban), and the people and politics.

I start at the level of the personal. As a student and teacher of political science, I come, along with many others, from a long tradition of adherence to the point, stated recently by Larry Diamond (2013: vii), that:

> The oldest and most enduring story of human political life is this: the strong exploit and abuse the weak. Those who wield political power use it to extract wealth from the powerless ... Historically, force was typically the means by which the wielders of power acquired it and held it. And force remains the ultimate guarantor of power ... Political development can be viewed as a quest to solve three basic problems in the organization and exercise of power. First, how can violence be subdued and contained so that power is acquired and exercised by (largely) peaceful means? Second, how can the abuse of power – the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful – be restrained? And, third, how can the powerless be empowered, so that all members of the collectivity benefit to some fair – if not exactly equal – degree