

BOOK REVIEWS



Le Fil de l'écrit, une anthropologie de l'alphabétisation au Mali

BY AÏSSATOU MBODJ-POUYE

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Ten years ago we published a collection of papers on the first novel in several African languages (Garnier and Ricard). It was the product of a three-year-long seminar. One of the most intriguing papers dealt with bambara and gave us many headaches: there simply did not seem to exist long fiction texts written directly in bambara. Jean Derive identified one such text and later discovered that it was a bambara adaptation of a first draft in French, commissioned by a Canadian NGO. It nonetheless remained a credible candidate for the position of the first novel in the language. The close contiguity of French and Bambara, the mixing of language, is what is shown in Mbodj-Pouye's book at the grassroots level.

Historically the African language most taught in France was Bambara; many epics have been edited and translated, and conversation books were published a long time ago. Bambara was the language of the *tirailleurs*. Was this closeness in a context of devaluation of African languages the reason why instead of promoting Bambara it became locked in a very subaltern position? These questions are not addressed directly in the book, but provide the background to an anthropology of literacy, written with remarkable methodological care by Mbodj-Pouye. She has done extensive fieldwork (six months between 2002 and 2004), conducted many interviews, and written several life histories of villagers in the area of southern Mali between Sikasso and Kita along the Ivoirian border where cotton is grown and where literacy campaigns were conducted in the last decades of the 20th century with the help of UNESCO. In that area, twice as many people can read Bambara (19%) compared to French, and the same applies to writing. Interestingly enough, these individuals, mostly men, were often one and the same, as Mbodj-Pouye shows. This competence is also an effect of a "moderate attachment" to Bambara, perceived as "forobakan," the language of all, the vehicular language (77). Thus the division is not, as Goody thought, between those who do and those who do not write, but a fluid separation between languages in writing, a "legitimizing practice," for those aspiring to positions of "responsibility" (79).

It is useful in every day life to know how to write and villagers know that and use it very practically: work, family, and trade are the main areas of writing use. The author looked for practices of appropriation leading to the personal use of writing,

for instance in correspondence. This exists, but she was not shown letters, except those sent to the radio station. She studied a similar corpus in a recent article as part of a follow up of her study (Mbodj-Pouye and Van den Avenne). She also wanted to identify, if possible, the emergence of discursive genres, to use a Bakhtinian concept (198), or their use in the notebooks. How can subjects use their agency and not be mere tools of a production system? She chose a more practical approach, identifying several practices of appropriation such as reusing previous texts, copying, and even, in the case of one of her informants, Moussa Camara, attempting first-person writing (228). Writing in several languages, translating calendars, and collecting anecdotes and stories about Sufi saints is also part of the repertory of some notebooks. She even quotes a performative utterance linked to incantatory texts.

She notices that the practice of “writing stories in bambara has not been verified among former school children” (242), and this is probably related to the difficulties mentioned previously. You write in French, that is what has been taught in school. French is different and special, more linked with writing practices. The contrasting uses of “code switching” for Bambara terms indicate quite strongly this special relationship, foregrounding the foreign (243). Writing is not spontaneous and the recourse to a foreign language is a symptom of that distance.

She attempts to classify corpuses of inscriptions in different “thematic categories,” for instance, as lists, calendars, anecdotes, and personal, religious, and technical matters (see table 220). The notebook is the site of continuous note taking by Moussa Camara, son of the first literacy instructor. The author mentions a family book, which could, but does not, become a family history. However, personal narrative is excluded, these notebooks are not a place for a self-reflexivity, but localized models of “chronicles” linked to specific statuses and experiences.

How could they be the site of texts that Karin Barber has examined, of what gets later hidden in the tin-trunk? Public validation of what is enunciated in the notebooks does not occur; apart from the area of the *gundo*, the secret, the self is not directly addressed in the notebook. The writer can stage his own status in the village, but that is a mere posture. In 2009, Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye was back in the village and the cell phone had taken a new role: calendar, agenda, notebook. Writing is a shared practice: this very thorough and meticulous book opens many doors on the possibilities that narrative, in Bambara, will emerge, and, secretly, may have already emerged. How can these texts become shared and kept?

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