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## Le fil de l'écrit: une anthropologie de l'alphabétisation au Mali by Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye (review)

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Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute, Volume 84, Number 4, November 2014, pp. 671-672 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/afr.2014.0059



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social conflicts that emphasize their integrative social function (pp. 102–18). That, plus those parts of the book that steer clear of rational choice reasoning, present an interesting reflection of life behind the façade of ethnicity.

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AÏSSATOU MBODJ-POUYE, *Le fil de l'écrit: une anthropologie de l'alphabétisation au Mali*. Lyon: ENS Éditions (pb €24 – 978 2 84788 375 6). 2013, 316 pp.

A few decades ago, it was believed that learning to read and write structurally changes an individual's consciousness by developing cognitive and mental skills, and thus by increasing agency. The idea inspired not only development projects for adult education, but also emancipation movements such as Latin American liberation theology. The idea of the power of literacy education gradually lost dominance, and it is now common knowledge that the impact of reading and writing depends on contextual variables. Cultural, educational and political norms and ideas attributed to writing determine its impact. Hence, something often used in present-day analyses of literacy is the concept of the 'literacy event' – a term that invites researchers to an anthropological or ethnographic approach.

This concept of the literacy event is Mbodj-Pouye's analytical starting point in her study of the Malian village of Fana. She describes a wide range of texts produced by people who had acquired various literacy levels from school education (in French and/or Bambara), adult education in Bambara, or Koranic teaching in Arabic, or a combination of all three. The connecting historical 'thread' in this study is cotton, a product that introduced major changes to local agriculture and taught people systems of bookkeeping and record holding that they applied creatively in personalized genres, such as a (literary) genre called 'book of secrets'.

Mbodj-Pouye convincingly shows why people decide to write about a particular issue or event as well as which textual formats or literary genres they use, and her study presents a fascinating variety of texts that people write and keep. I most liked the individuals' notebooks, some of them published in full by Mbodj-Pouye. The books are not only rich 'literacy events' in themselves but also evidence of the high level of intimacy the author shared with her informants. In that respect, the study is a most welcome and inspiring contribution to Karin Barber's 'grand project' on 'everyday literacy' in Africa.

Mbodj-Pouye also discusses, although rather indirectly, *why* people write at all. She doubts (correctly) that writing changes the consciousness, thus rejecting the 'classical' – and false – 1970s and 1980s dichotomy between orality and literacy, although her suggestion that writing inspires individualization (and personal ambition through the Mande concept of *fadenya* (rivalry)) leans perhaps too heavily on the – typically Western – dichotomy of public versus private. For Mali, the qualities the author attributes to writing (keeping secrets, helping to document a personal account of an event) are also ascribed to memory and speech by those, such as griots, who take pride in oral knowledge.

However, the author gives another, rather more plausible, explanation for why people write, in a remark offered by one of her interviewees who said that writing 'favorise le progrès' (p. 166). Mbodj-Pouye notes that, with the decline in cotton production in the 1980s, literacy became a skill that people acquired with the idea of using it after a successful migration to town. This reminded me of James Ferguson's *Expectations of Modernity* (University of California Press,

1999), where he describes people developing a ‘cosmopolitan style’ in order to keep their lives open to progress and modernity, even though they live in a context of decades-long economic decline. The textbooks described by Mbodj-Pouye are a fine example of the material culture that people may produce as part of such cosmopolitan ambitions.

While cotton is the historical thread running through this study, unfortunately the impact of social media has not been woven in. In 2009, when the author finished her fieldwork, people in the Malian countryside were already making ample use of mobile phones, and observations of text messaging activity would have given the author relevant data, for instance on the subject of literary creativity, or for her discussion of the cultural dominance of the French language. This absence of attention to social media might have been caused by the fact that, although the book is a 2013 publication, its text seems, at least partially, to have been written much earlier (a publication from 2000 is called ‘recent’ on p. 174). As a result, the work sometimes reads like a vintage ethnography of writing culture: in a second, revised, edition an additional chapter on social media as literacy event would be most welcome.

I have saved my red ink for the publisher. The book has numerous images of pages from notebooks, but they are printed in a very small format, making many of them unreadable. Paper saving can’t be behind this printing decision, since the images are often reproduced on an entire page. No; to me, the publisher has simply failed to give this study the layout it deserves.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972014000564

DEREK R. PETERSON, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: a history of dissent, c.1935–1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (hb £62 – 978 1 1070 2116 7). 2012, 344 pp.

*Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival* shows admirably how productive it can be to revisit longstanding scholarly interests with fresh eyes. Some time ago, many studies of Christianity in Africa were guided by the assumption that African-initiated Christianity was to be seen as an expression of protest and a means of resistance to inequality, dominance and exploitation. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that unease developed regarding the inflation of what was interpreted as constituting ‘symbolic resistance’, which led to critical reassessments of its status as an analytical concept.

Derek R. Peterson’s new monograph, aptly subtitled *A history of dissent*, involves a welcome, though largely implicit, intellectual confrontation with prominent themes in these earlier studies. Peterson takes meticulous account of the political, economic and socio-cultural particularities of regions in eastern Africa as diverse as western Kenya, northern Rwanda, north-western Tanganyika and southern Uganda, and traces the multifarious interconnections between these regions in the period between the mid-1930s and the early 1970s. In doing so, he paints a rich picture of the cultural-cum-political tensions between the ostensible nonconformity of converts to the East African Revival – a Christian conversion movement that began in northern Rwanda in the mid-1930s – and their African patriotic contemporaries, many of whom felt that morality and social discipline were being undermined by colonial land reforms, labour migration and prostitution.