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## **Between mother tongue and ‘ceremonial tongue’: Boubacar Boris Diop and the self-translation of *Doomi Golo***

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### **Abstract**

This article is a case study focusing on the not-so-common experience of writing and publishing in French as well as in an African language. Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop decided to switch from French to his mother tongue, Wolof, after a stay in Rwanda as part of the ‘Rwanda, écrire par devoir de mémoire’ project. This study focuses specifically on the novel *Doomi Golo* and on Diop’s self-translation of the text into French. What is at stake in the translation from Wolof to French? How has Boubacar Boris Diop managed to translate or transpose his text for different audiences? To what extent have traditional literary patterns influenced the writing of the text? These are a few of the questions raised and discussed in this contribution.

### **Résumé**

Cette contribution se présente sous forme d’une étude de cas et s’intéresse à une expérience encore relativement marginale dans le champ des littératures francophones: celle de l’écrivain sénégalais Boubacar Boris Diop. Représentant important de la littérature francophone durant les années 1980–2000, celui-ci a en effet décidé d’effectuer un retour vers sa langue maternelle, le wolof, après un séjour au Rwanda dans le cadre de la résidence d’écriture ‘Rwanda, écrire par devoir de mémoire’. La présente contribution s’intéresse en particulier à l’expérience d’auto-translation que son premier roman en Wolof, *Doomi Golo*, a fait naître. Que se joue-t-il dans le travail de traduction entre Wolof et Français? Quelles nécessaires adaptations / transpositions se font jour? Comment les traditions littéraires (génériques et de réceptions) influencent-elles le texte même? Voici quelques-unes des questions abordées au long de cette contribution.

**Keywords** : Boubacar Boris Diop ; translation and self-translation ; African languages ; Wolof ; reception ; circulation of texts

No serious writer can possibly be indifferent to the fate of any language, let alone his own mother tongue. For most writers in the world, there is never any conflict – the mother tongue and the writing language are one and the same. But from time to time, and as a result of grave historical reasons, a writer may be trapped unhappily and insidiously between two imperatives. (Achebe 2009: 97)

Language and the writing of the self or of specific cultural contexts is an issue that has already been discussed extensively. In the case of African literature, the question is nonetheless a very sensitive one, since, as Chinua Achebe aptly reminds us, the mother tongue and the writing language are very rarely the same. Far from the ‘happy’ multilingualism of an intellectual like Steiner (1975: 115–16), who freely wandered between his three mother tongues, African writers face a different situation that cannot be apolitical, as the languages they use do not share the same status on a global scale. How then does the African writer negotiate his identity and culture through his texts, and through which language? There is not only one answer to this question. Indeed, Kofi Anyidoho has listed four major trends in African literature (1992: 47). These four options are as follows: (1) to choose colonial language without trying to change it; (2) to turn the colonial language into a weapon for self-recognition by way of ‘Africanizing’ it; (3) to go back to one’s mother tongue; or (4) to reinvent the mother tongue as a national language for the diaspora. Chinua Achebe, aware of what was at stake, proposed a response grounded in the notion of ‘cross-fertilization’ shared by a number of African writers from former French and British colonies, most able to identify themselves with his statement: ‘I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings’ (Achebe 1975: 62).

The work of many African francophone writers agrees with this statement, demonstrating that it is possible to wage a war for cultural recognition through the French language as ‘butin de guerre’, as Kateb Yacine once put it. But if cross-fertilization is a possible answer, a few writers and critics such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Obiajungwa Wali have developed another way of perceiving things and decided to fight for African literature in a different way. By denying African literature in European languages the right to be called African, they underline that the expression ‘African literature’ has to be used only for texts written in African languages (Wali 1963; Wa Thiong’o 1986). This does not mean that they do not value the works produced in European languages, but that these ‘Afro-European’ studies, as wa Thiong’o calls them, cannot be the right media to convey African culture and perceptions that could only be expressed in African languages (Wa Thiong’o 2011: 58).

In this special issue dedicated to ‘Multilingual Francophone African Identities’, I would like to explore the relations between identity(ies) and language(s) by focusing on the question of self-translation. A few years ago, the Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop wrote *Doomi Golo* in Wolof before translating it into French a couple of years later. The original novel was thus published in 2003 by the Dakar-based publisher Papyrus (Joob 2003), while the French version, *Les Petits de la guenon*, was issued in 2009 by the French editor Philippe Rey (Diop 2009). As it appears, Diop’s experience is a very instructive testimony that explores the relationship between languages and creation, while implicitly commenting on how texts circulate between oral and written fields and underlining the interesting editorial strategies at stake.

### **The reason(s) for a choice**

Before switching to his mother tongue Wolof, Boubacar Boris Diop had already written five novels in French: *Le temps de Tamango* (1981), *Les Tambours de la mémoire* (1991), *Les traces de la meute* (1993), *Le cavalier et son ombre* (1997), *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000) and the play *Thiaroye, terre rouge* (1990). Each of these works shows a deep interest in historical issues as well

as a keen attention to the art of storytelling: Diop gives weight to memories (intimate as well as official) and often uses intertwined narrations. As most of his texts in French were well received in France and in Senegal and were awarded numerous and significant prizes,<sup>1</sup> I would like to question further what triggered his decision. Diop's choice was everything but an irrational move. It is thus important to expose the writer's motivations before moving on to a comparative work between *Doomi Golo* and *Les Petits de la guenon*, its French counterpart.

Diop was often praised for his books written in French and especially for the classical touch of his style. If Diop surely knows how to tell a story, far from subverting the French language as some other francophone writers – such as Kourouma or Chamoiseau – have done, his writing is crystal clear, neat and precise *français du roi*, if we may use this expression. There is no attempt to deconstruct syntax or to Africanize vocabulary. But, as a socially and politically committed writer, deeply involved in the African continent (where he mostly lives), his writing was affected by a pivotal moment in his career when he rejected French as a creative language in order to embrace Wolof. In 1998, appalled by the lack of reaction from the African intellectuals to the Rwandan genocide, Nocky Djedanoum, then in charge of the Fest'Africa festival, decided to organize a workshop in Rwanda and invited ten African writers to participate, including Boubacar Boris Diop.<sup>2</sup> These writers met both victims and perpetrators of the genocide in order to try to make sense of what had happened: an experience that had a profound impact on Diop. In different interviews and articles he explains how he discovered that language policies had taken a not inconsiderable part in the Rwandan genocide. As a result, he decided to distance himself from a linguistic world that could be seen as stained with blood. Indeed, Rwanda had no diamonds, gold mines or petrol to be defended, but the population spoke French, which was one of the main reasons why France intervened. However, protecting what the French government called in 'pré-carré' did not prevent the tragedy from happening. Quite the contrary in fact. Consequently, Diop, whose writing has to play with words and language, felt that French was no longer a language to play with. 'J'ai perdu l'envie', he stated.<sup>3</sup> Distancing himself from French, he also lost a kind of intimacy with the

language that was formerly his writing tongue. Moreover, he felt that, confronted with such a situation, he had to go back to his mother tongue to reflect on it and try to find answers: ‘Cette expérience rwandaise m’a profondément perturbé. J’ai eu besoin de ma langue pour me réconcilier avec moi-même’ (Diop 2003: 109–12).

This testimony already draws a kind of equivalence between the mother tongue and a feeling of inner unity, a near transparency or adequacy of the self. If Diop usually underlines that he does not consider the French language as an enemy, he also states very strongly that the links between languages and thoughts are essential and that the major issue (and his main interest) can be summed up as follows: ‘La question est de pouvoir articuler une pensée’.<sup>4</sup> And for that, the use of the mother tongue is required. While he did offer another novel in French, *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000), Diop decided that his future texts would be written in Wolof. Returning to his mother tongue, he decided to follow Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, whom he much admires, and whose book *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Wa Thiong’o 1986) was, as Ngũgĩ himself wrote, his ‘farewell to English’. In this very book, Ngũgĩ had expressed the deep link between language and the self in using words very close to Diop’s: ‘La langue comme culture est le prisme à travers lequel nous entrons en contact avec nous-mêmes, avec les autres et avec le monde. Elle nous traverse de l’intérieur’ (Wa Thiong’o 2011: 37). Both writers state that, while Afro-European literature offers wonderful opportunities in English and French, it is high time that African literature written in African languages expands and makes its way through the continent in order to better articulate a thinking of its own, freed from the words and concepts born of and attached to European languages.

True to his words, Diop’s next book was *Doomi Golo*. The book was quite well received by the critics, even those who were sceptical about the results. Most of the critics who were able to compare the French and Wolof texts stated that Diop’s mother tongue felt more natural and managed to convey the rhythm, voices and subtleties of Senegalese life.<sup>5</sup> Reviewing *Doomi Golo*, Papa Samba Diop writes: ‘A la manière d’un cinéaste, Boubacar Boris Diop vient ainsi de livrer un

ouvrage difficilement égalable dans son adéquation à la gestuelle des personnages, aux couleurs des objets et aux bruits des rues de Dakar' (2004: 113). This is one example among several others.<sup>6</sup> So, we might well ask, given what has just been said, how did the book eventually end up being published in French?

In November 2006, Toni Morrison was a special guest at the Louvre Museum in Paris and, as such, could invite any artist she liked. The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature had deeply appreciated *Murambi* (2000) and so she invited Boris Boubacar Diop to come and read a text of his choice. Diop chose *Doomi Golo*, but, because of a mainly European audience, he had to translate the excerpt he had chosen to read aloud. His French publisher was in the audience, and this marked the beginning of a longer work of self-translation that would give birth to *Les Petits de la guenon*. The experience of self-translation led Diop to reflect upon the relationships between cultures and languages, expanding on how identities can express themselves and be negotiated through writing. Self-translation, which initially seemed easy for Boubacar Boris Diop, left him with a number of challenges to overcome. Confronting these difficulties, the writer also discovered new aspects of creativity that had repercussions on his literary practice.

### **Between mother tongue and 'Ceremonial Tongue': Experimenting in self-translation**

As suggested by the title, Diop has always been aware of the very personal aspect of – and maybe opposition between – each of his languages. Wolof, his mother tongue, is for him very intimate, whereas French is a literary language whose codes are intimidating, even if mastered and understood:

Le français – ou l'anglais – est une langue de cérémonie, et ses codes, à la fois grammaticaux et culturels, ont quelque chose d'intimidant [...] Ce sont là autant de raisons qui amènent l'écrivain à douter du sens ou de la finalité de sa pratique littéraire. (Diop 1999)

I have already pointed to the question of the legitimacy of writing in Africa using European languages, which became so important for Boubacar Boris Diop, and I will come back to this question to consider the circulation of texts. What I find puzzling in Diop's quote, and want to reflect on more fully now though, is the feeling of reverence, which is also a feeling of inadequacy between a European language and the self. French for the non-native writer is a formal language with its rituals and strict rules, a 'ceremonial language' that can be seen as restrictive. And for Diop, the experience of writing in Wolof felt close to liberation:

Après avoir écrit pendant la plus grande part de ma vie des romans en français, je peux dire aujourd'hui que j'ai une plus grande aisance d'expression dans ma langue maternelle. Les gestes banals de tous les jours se laissent dessiner sans réticence par ma plume et je n'ai plus besoin de longs détours pour exprimer les sentiments les plus simples. (1998)

There is a kind of transparency between everyday life experiences and their translation into Wolof here. Words flow easily, embracing life and the self, which Diop highly valued when he experimented in his return to his mother tongue. But what happens to the transparency and the fluidity of language when it comes to translation and when the author has to express in French what has originally been written in Wolof? The writer himself has testified of the pitfalls he faced:

Lorsque l'on traduit de l'italien vers l'espagnol ou du bambara vers le *pulaar*, on est dans le même univers sonore et les codes culturels peuvent se faire harmonieusement écho. Dans ce cas-ci, je devais me débrouiller pour faire correspondre deux univers mentaux radicalement différents, les univers pris en charge par les langues wolof et française. (Diop 2012)

Because he had to negotiate between two drastically different worlds of reference, Diop had been forced to make choices. How could he 'freely' translate a text, which could not reach his Senegalese



and French readers in exactly the same way? And how could he arrange it so that his text would better fit the cultural codes of each public?

### **Writing voices**

One major difference between literature in Europe and Africa is the paramount importance of orality, which, even today, is the prevalent form of literature in most parts of Africa. The written word really weighs light in Senegal compared to the songs, poems and words that permeate the fabric of the whole society with the work of singers, *griots* and *jottalikat* (in charge of transmitting the words and teachings of the *chefs de confrérie's*).<sup>7</sup> Writing in Wolof engulfed Boubacar Boris Diop in a polyvocal world where voices – in their very texture – shaped his text. If this point is not new to Diop's work (and to many other African writers), the author has nevertheless underlined how intense the sensation of 'hearing voices' was when writing in Wolof. The mother's voice was particularly hard hitting in the writer's mind. During his childhood, Diop was surrounded by women who used Wolof through singing and storytelling. Educated people like his father were more likely to speak French. Going back to the mother tongue was also for Diop like diving into his own memories through the sonorities of words. The author even says that writing in Wolof felt like having his mother reading over his shoulder,<sup>8</sup> her voice and inflexions being clearly audible. This was very important for storytelling: 'J'écris avec des échos', states Diop, 'je connais un grand nombre de langues mais celle qui me réponds, c'est le Wolof'.<sup>9</sup> So, the Wolof version is full of voices and noises that had to be conveyed in French. This was not an easy task and, 'poetically', Diop never really tried to transform the Wolof dynamics of sonorities into French, assuming that this was, in a way, a battle lost in advance:

L'exercice a consisté, en gros, à naviguer d'un monde bruyant, aux rythmes saccadés et fous à un autre où les mots ne sont, pour dire le vrai, que des sourds-muets pompeux. Pendant l'écriture de *Doomi Golo*, des sonorités me sautaient à la figure, je n'avais pas affaire à des

mots ou expressions sagement alignés entre les pages d'un dictionnaire mais à des êtres palpitants de vie. (2012)

The overwhelming presence of voices is nonetheless very noticeable throughout the French version. It is conveyed by a dialogue between an old man, Nguirane Faye, and his grandson Badou, who has left for another place, which is likely to be Europe. Even if the play on sonorities is not so vividly audible, voices are still important in the French text. As in the Wolof version, on many occasions the written words are brought into gentle conversation where the grain de la voix is to be heard. The very first pages of *Les Petits de la guenon* mention the oral words of the storyteller as a model: 'J'aurais préféré te parler de vive voix, comme tout conteur digne de ce nom, pour faire battre plus vite ton cœur et t'éprouver par mes déroutantes énigmes' (Diop 2009: 19); and the whole text underlines the importance of the voice: 'et j'aime te parler' (Diop 2009: 242). In another section we are told, 'Nguirane Faye a alors ouvert *Le livre des secrets*, ce carnet rouge où il te parle à l'oreille... accroche-toi à ma voix' (Diop 2009: 435). The book is thus humming with voices, from different characters and narrators, as well as with embedded narratives whose presence necessarily brings back memories of the art of storytelling. Words are spoken, stories travel from one mouth to another: Ali Kaboye – who was once just a character (although of major importance) in the story – takes over from old Nguirane in the second part of the book (entitled 'Moi, Ali Kaboye') and assumes the narration. As for embedded stories, the dream sequence (Diop 2009: 190–98) as well as the 'Brèves digressions' (Diop 2009: 209) gives way to new stories and anecdotes not directly linked with the main plot. But if the French readership has no difficulty in picking up on such spoken words and stories, other aspects of the original text exclude the French audience because of the cultural differences between France and Senegal. It is at this point that the self-translator was forced to transpose.

## **Texts and contexts**

Still rooted in Wolof culture, *Doomi Golo* presents a significant number of proverbs, signalled by italics and labelled as coming from ‘*wolof njaay*’.<sup>10</sup> These sayings, which can be compared to those of the celebrated Senegalese philosopher Kocc Barma,<sup>11</sup> belong to the cultural heritage that informs the identity of every Wolof. They can be seen as part of the *cosaan*, the social and moral codes that order the society (the word *cosaan* means ‘origins’ or ‘foundations’; ‘traditions’).<sup>12</sup> Rhythmically punctuating the novel like a chorus, the proverbs also function as a strong cultural bind, making each Wolof speaker part of a community in recognizing the art of the writer as well as the usual context of uttering. These proverbs can often be easily understood on a certain level by a French audience, for example, ‘Nous avons beau prétendre que rien ne nous arrête, tu ne nous verras jamais traîner près d’une maison gardée par une meute de chiens’ (Diop 2009: 336) or ‘Pourquoi s’accuser mutuellement d’avoir une hernie des testicules? Le plus simple n’est-il pas que chacun enlève sa culotte?’ (Diop 2009: 418). But it is not always the case. For example, the proverb ‘Dès qu’elle est seule, la poule gratte le sol d’une seule patte’ is not very clear for a European reader, but for his Senegalese counterpart the few words are seen evidently as a way of enhancing concurrence. However, Diop states that he sometimes had to find equivalences.<sup>13</sup> Besides, the feeling of community evades the French reader as well as some other cultural allusions. For example, the words *Doomi Golo* refer to a proverb, even in an indirect way: *Golo naawul, baay ba la niru*, meaning ‘Le singe n’est pas laid, il ressemble seulement à son père’. A reader from Senegal will immediately recognize the allusion from the title, especially as acculturation is the main issue of the text, but it remains quite enigmatic for a French audience.

Another example of the necessary logic of transposition can be seen throughout the early pages of the original text and its translation. The Wolof version begins with ‘*Àddina: dund, dee*’: three little words (and a sparkling alliteration) that literally means ‘down here (in this world). To live. To die’ or ‘Ici-bas. Vivre. Mourir’ in French – these are three words that any Wolof will understand but that cannot be translated as such because the result in French still lacks the

emotional charge contained in the Senegalese formula. Diop thus decided to turn these three little words into a whole paragraph in order to explain the cultural context of funerals in his country:

Depuis des générations, le rituel d'adieu est le même dans notre famille : un à un, nous pénétrons dans la pièce où le défunt est étendu sur une natte et là, nous disons en silence des prières pour le repos de son âme. Les visages sont graves et les corps refermés sur eux-mêmes, comme il se doit. Il se trouve pourtant toujours quelqu'un – c'est souvent le meilleur ami du mort, plus dévasté que tous les autres – pour essayer de détendre un peu l'atmosphère. Il se moque affectueusement de celui qui a cru malin de filer en vitesse pour fuir nos petits ennuis sur terre. Et il l'avertit: 'Tu te trompes, mon gars, si tu penses en avoir fini avec moi. Je ne te laisserai jamais seul, je suis déjà en route et, je te le promets, je vais tellement te casser les pieds là-bas que tu vas regretter d'y être allé!' Et quand il le supplie de lui garder bien au chaud une des meilleures places du Paradis, certains ont la force d'esquisser un sourire, vite réprimé il est vrai.

Ces moments sont précieux, Badou.

Je trouve que c'est bien de s'entendre rappeler ainsi que la vie ça n'est pas grand-chose, même si nous en faisons toute une histoire, nous autres, de cette petite flamme qui s'agite et que le vent peut éteindre à chaque instant.

Mais ne t'y trompe pas: ce n'est pas pour te dégoûter de l'existence que j'ouvre avec ces mots un peu tristes et amers le premier de mes sept Carnets.

Bien au contraire. Pour ce qui est de vivre, je ne me suis pas gêné, moi. (Diop 2009: 13–14)

Such a development gives an idea of the work at stake when translating between two languages originating from different cultural spheres. The text is, in a way, less important than a context that has to be mediated. In translating – or transposing – into French, Diop had to suppress pages of

work – for example, when Badou meets his childhood friend. This episode was too ‘sénégalolo-sénégalais’ for the author to be transposed into French. We reach here an interesting turning point. The process of understanding a text supposes that both author and audience share a mutual cognitive environment (Hill 2008: 16). The translator’s task is to try to convey enough information to make the original context ‘readable’ for the foreign audience. By clearing the French version from this episode, Diop indicates a lack of cultural knowledge thought to be too difficult to bridge; the French audience could not infer the intended meaning even with the help of the translator. As Harriet Hill puts it, ‘If a text does not evoke any context at all, processing is arrested’ (2008: 16). It seems to be the case here, and translation, reaching its limits, is to no avail.

But if this one example underlines some untranslatability, writing in French permitted other experiences, and Boubacar Boris Diop did not only suppress certain aspects but he added some. For example, he sometimes developed the story in a different way because he considered that the writing was more interesting in French. This is the case with the story depicting Rodrigo Mancera in Gibraltar (Diop 2009: 190–98). In Wolof, the parable originating with the anecdote of some monkeys living in close relationship with human beings was not developed. However, in the French version, through the use of a dream sequence, Diop inserted a more satirical and political passage on the relationship between the western world and Africa. Quite disconnected from the plot (it has no real incidence on it), this inclusion tends to spur on the francophone reader to think about the rather unequal relationship between northern countries and their *parents pauvres* from the south. In a way, through the parable, Diop delivers a message and tries to awaken political awareness in his new (and different) readers.

This question of sequences and episodes ‘lost and gained in translation’ is quite fascinating because it gives clues about the societies themselves, what message or interpretation is important to them (and also, in this precise case, what the author wants to be read). One can know more in reading about an interesting experience that took place in Mali. Since 1996, Bakary Tangara, a trained schoolteacher and school director, has been translating from French into Bamana some

literary francophone works. They are then broadcast by Faso Fanu in his programme *baramuso bulon* (literally in French, ‘Le vestibule de l’épouse préférée’). While Tangara has often chosen to translate francophone writers from Mali (Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *L’Étrange Destin de Wangrin* [1973] and Massa Makan Diabaté’s trilogy *Le Lieutenant de Kouta* [1979], *Le Coiffeur de Kouta* [1980], et *Le Boucher de Kouta* [1982]), he has also presented European works by Jules Verne, Agatha Christie and Alexandre Dumas. The success of the translation of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* was overwhelming in Mali and has been smartly analysed by Tal Tamari (2010: 151–75). It is, of course, not the place here to repeat her work, but some points can be underlined. In transposing Alexandre Dumas’ *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* into Bamana for a Malian audience, Bakary Tangara highlighted certain themes and episodes while others (too *franco-français* as Diop may have put it) disappeared. In this case, what was highlighted was the importance of destiny and the role of Abbé Faria who, by his rather stoic position, can easily stand for an old wise Malian. The relationship between Faria and Dantès was also well appreciated and contributed to the success of the show, since, in an African context, the *maître et disciple*’s relation is highly valued.

These examples show how translating texts is also a way of encoding them so as to reach an audience according to specific cultural characteristics. It also brings to light the fact that, if Diop does feel the differences between French and Wolof, he is also using each of these languages according to their literary traditions; orality is a keyword in Wolof, while irony is making its way into French. By working between languages, Diop takes an approach that is quite different from Kourouma’s, who mixes Malinké patterns with French structures, combining syntax. Diop does not attempt to ‘cocufier la langue française’, as one critic puts it, in analysing Kourouma’s work (Gassama 1995: 118). The French he uses is very clear, always grammatically correct and adheres perfectly to the rules of the ceremonial language already mentioned. In his translation, there is no attempt to tropicalize French as in the case of other writers from the Caribbean and Africa. Wolof is present in the French version, but only through vocabulary, as numerous Wolof words are peppered throughout the French text. But it must be said that these words are never translated and that no

glossary is offered to the reader at the end of the book. This way of dealing with foreign lexicon can be understood in two complementary ways. First, it means that the author considers that Wolof words are easily understandable and do not need translation (which is, to my mind, the case most of the time). When one reads ‘il était vêtu d’un *sabadoor* gris et ses babouches blanches étaient couvertes de poussières. Le *tengaade* posé sur sa tête n’avait non plus rien de singulier’ (Diop 2009: 90), even if *sabadoor* and *tengaade* are not explained, there is no ambiguity about what they refer to (a cloth; a hat). But here Diop asserts the preeminence of Wolof words over European ones. European explorers used to pepper their travelogues with African terms. They surely had a reason for doing so. Beyond a kind of exoticism, one plausible explanation is that local languages express with a greater accuracy the reality that has to be described. Trying to translate everything may not always be the best solution as it implies that any word can find an equivalent in any target language, an assumption very likely to be challenged. Instead of trying to go on with translation, footnotes or glossaries, translators can bet on the original words themselves, considering that they are powerful enough to break through the cultural barriers. It is a way of highlighting the capacity of original languages to reveal new realities, otherwise left quite unattended.

In his way of dealing with French and Wolof, Diop seems to prefer the idea that both languages remain impervious to each other; the logic of hybridization or association is replaced by one of transposition that assumes that a writer does not write the same things when using different languages. Such a way of working on languages is also linked to Diop’s conception of literary creation. Bastardizing or desacralizing the French language may be a way of subverting it, but at the same time French still stands at the centre. For Diop, what is important is to give African languages a central place and use them to offer new perspectives and new ways of telling and thinking. Because languages and literary patterns are different, they convey experiences in their own ways. (Self-)translation underlines that choice of narrative matters, and shifts and adaptations occur in order to reach a broader audience.

## Languages and the circulation of texts

Indeed, the way of telling a story matters. I have just explained that orality remains important in the African world. By 'orality', I do not mean only how voices permeate written texts but more obviously how literature is uttered rather than read, and transmitted from mouth to mouth. This brings us to the question of the reception of *Doomi Golo* in Senegal. How many copies of the text were sold? How did the text manage to reach its public? And who constitutes this public? In the absence of precise figures from the publisher, it is quite difficult to tell, but some information is still available. If the text found its readership and was rather well received in Senegal, it is also true that only a few people had real access to the book. Of course, we must keep in mind that Wolof is far from being the only language spoken in Senegal. If this language is quite widely understood and spoken, there are still numerous non Wolophone Senegalese who were *de facto* excluded from the reading. Even for Wolophone people, things were not that easy. This was all the more true in rural areas, where Diop had an interesting experience. As few people were able to read Wolof (even the intellectual elite who are mostly educated in French are not always used to reading it) or to afford the book, a single copy was often read aloud by a literate person so that the words could reach a wider audience.<sup>14</sup> Wolof written words have thus quickly been re-oralized and Boubacar Boris Diop, deciding that it was all the more important that his text could circulate through the oral media, recorded his own reading of the book and made it available in e-book format. This leads me to think once more about how languages, texts and reception are connected. If we look back at the publication of *Doomi Golo* ten years ago, what can be learnt from this experience?

Diop still writes in his mother tongue, but has come back to French to write and publish some of his latest books. *Doomi Golo* remains his only novel in Wolof. The field of publishing in France (and in French) is much more stable and efficient than the African one. Economic realities, as well as the rather small number of potential readers in Senegal, act as barriers to the consistent development of publishing companies in the country. The audio-circulation of texts could be a solution to be developed, but it is true that e-books are still expensive (the initial price came close to



twenty dollars). Moreover, few people have access to credit cards in Senegal and buying a book online is far from a common habit! Diop himself admits that the system rather failed. But there are ways to bypass the problem, and five community radio stations in Dakar broadcast the whole text of *Doomi Golo* in August 2014, showing once more how more important the oral sphere is in regard to the written one.<sup>15</sup> It was such a popular success that since 31 August five other community radio stations (in Thiès, this time) have continued the experience. However, and quite interestingly, if Diop is still publishing in French, it does not mean that he has stopped writing in Wolof. On the contrary, his mother tongue is now his creative tongue, which prevails on French. Against all odds, even if Diop's text is to be published in France before Senegal, the original version of a literary text is in Wolof, to then be (self-)translated into French. This is currently the case for the biography about Capitaine M'baye Diagne that Diop is writing at present, and which will be published in Paris by Philippe Rey.<sup>16</sup>

Confronting himself with his mother tongue, Diop made his way from a political/ethical choice to a poetic one. His mother tongue turned out to be, for him, easier and more natural to use, revealing itself as the 'true' literary language. Writing this, I am of course deeply aware that there is no 'true' or 'better' language in which to create, but that the author, in his ways of negotiating his art, feels more comfortable with one – in this case Wolof – to convey his feelings and stories. But, it is also interesting to point out that a kind of selection implies operating between languages, which would need to be more precisely analysed. If Diop is writing poetry, drama and fiction in Wolof,<sup>17</sup> he continues to use French for articles, pamphlets and essays. As far as publication is concerned, his poetry and drama are to be published in Wolof in Senegal, whereas his novels and, above all, essays are usually published in France. The author gives three main reasons to this fact. First of all, and it is especially true for essays, there are economic and political reasons: Diop wants these texts to be efficient and widely read. Thus, they must be immediately available. As publishing in Senegal, and especially in African languages, is quite hard and a long process, Diop prefers to turn to French publishers. Second, and as Diop himself puts it, feelings are not implicated while writing essays: 'Il

n'y a pas d'émotion là-dedans'. As such, French can be elected as the most relevant language, especially – and that is the third point – because Diop feels that he is not competent to write essays using Wolof, because he is not used to certain notions and concepts.<sup>18</sup> His mother tongue remains more efficient to catch sounds and voices, and to convey his inner feelings.

This seems to suggest that because of the literary traditions and the different habits of the public, language may have an implication upon the generic aspect of creation and vice versa. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had already given convincing examples of this interaction between language, literary patterns and writing while recording his theatre experience with the Kamiriithu Center (Wa Thiong'o 2011: 80). Looking at Diop's production, Wolof seems more likely to embrace the poetical aspects of literary creation, whereas French is seen as a more incisive tool, chosen when it comes to debate, question and denounce.<sup>19</sup> But between the two languages and their literary traditions, there are of course bridges to build, and there are other issues to question. As Diop finally puts it:

Il ne s'agit pas simplement de jeter des passerelles entre Kocq Barma et Molière dans l'espoir de pouvoir gambader, le cœur léger, sur les deux rives de ses émotions. Le défi majeur est de réussir à concilier les deux logiques – souvent en conflit ouvert – de production et de réception du texte. (2012)

In Diop's case, it appears that this statement has had two repercussions: first, there is a further involvement in what the French call *la chaîne du livre*. Diop is not only a writer but has also become an actor of the publishing field, who tries to develop the circulation of texts and ideas. With his colleagues Felwine Sarr and Nafissatou Dia Diouf he has created and managed a bookshop in Dakar, offering texts in French as well as in Wolof. Second, experimenting in self-translation triggered a deep interest in the role of translation. Teaching Wolof literature since a few years at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint. Louis, he has also decided to pursue the translation of major

francophone texts (mostly from the Senegalese area) into Wolof, making them available to a new public. Some classical works such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961), Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979/2007) and Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (1953) have already been translated into Wolof, and Diop is currently working on *La Plaie*, a novel by Malick Fall, which was published in French in 1967. If translation is giving texts a broader audience, it also proves the literary potential of every language, a potential that has sometimes been denied to African languages. Recently, Wolof and Pulaar have begun to gain their *Lettres de noblesse* as literary languages in Senegal, even if the economic field is still in search of firmer basis. There is no doubt that translation holds a special place in this cross-fertilization between words and cultures and that Boubacar Boris Diop's experience with *Doomi Golo* has borne fruit beyond expectations.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup>*Le temps de Tamango* (1981) was awarded Prix du bureau sénégalais du droit d'auteur; *Les tambours de la mémoire* (1991) won the Grand prix de la République du Sénégal pour les lettres and *Le Cavalier et son ombre* (1997) the Prix Tropiques, quite a significant recognition in France at that time.

<sup>2</sup>The 'Rwanda, écrire par devoir de mémoire' writing workshop organized in 1998 by Nocky Djedanoum and Maïmouna Coulibaly (Fest' Africa). Apart from Nocky Djedanoum and Boubacar Boris Diop, the other writers were Koulsy Lamko, Tierno Monenembo, Véronique Tadjo, Monique Iboulo, Meja Mwangi, Abdourahman Waberi, Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa and Venuste Kayimahé.

<sup>3</sup>Personal communication, 22 November 2014.

<sup>4</sup>Intervention during the panel 'Les langues africaines au cœur de la culture', Festival Africajarc, 26 July 2014.

<sup>5</sup>To this point, I must make it clear that it is not my case and that even if my interests lay in issues such as African languages in the editing field I cannot read Wolof. This contribution is thus indebted to many critics mentioned in the bibliography and also to Boubacar Boris Diop himself. I am very grateful to them.

<sup>6</sup>For example, Ibrahima Wane: 'Avec *Doomi Golo*, Boubacar Boris Diop n'a pas seulement gagné le pari de réaliser une fiction majeure dans sa langue maternelle, l'écrivain fait du même coup un pas important dans l'approfondissement de son art du récit' (2005).

<sup>7</sup>Both *griots* and *jottalikat* are people mastering spoken words (in fact, most *jottalikat* are *griots*) and transmitting important messages mostly dealing with history or religion. The *jottalikat* is speaking for the chef de confrérie (the religious leader, most of the time of a *qadiriyya*) because the status of this one forbids him to speak directly to his audience, especially in a loud voice. The *jottalikat* is the one who speaks aloud his message.

<sup>8</sup>Boubacar Boris Diop, unpublished personal communication, 2010.

<sup>9</sup>Boubacar Boris Diop, personal communication, 22 November 2014.

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<sup>10</sup>Here are a few occurrences through the pages of the French edition: 87, 93, 160, 219, 248, 291, 333, 336, 377, 418.

<sup>11</sup>Kocc Barma Fall (Birima Maxuréja Demba Xolé Faal, 1586–1655) is a Senegalese philosopher. His maxims are a very important part of the Wolof cultural ground. Most of the Senegalese call him ‘*Suñu màam Kocc*’: our grandfather Kocc.

<sup>12</sup>*Cosaan* comes from the verb *sos*, which means ‘to create’ (to found). It can be translated as ‘origins’, and also as ‘past’, ‘tradition’ and even ‘history’. Translation into European languages is always difficult as the meaning of the word in Wolof heavily depends on the context of utterance and also because – and Boubacar Boris Diop clearly points out the fact in the quote already given – societies and cultures order the world according to various perspectives. Another well-known example of ‘untranslatability’ has been pointed out by Ahmadou Kourouma himself about the word *monnè* present in his book title *Monnè, outrages et défis*.

<sup>13</sup>Boubacar Boris Diop, personal communication, 2013.

<sup>14</sup>Boubacar Boris Diop, personal communication, 2010.

<sup>15</sup>The radio stations are Ndef-Leng-FM; Oxy-Jeunes; Afia-FM; Jokkoo-FM and Rail-bi-FM. They will broadcast twenty minutes of text every Monday for twenty weeks (see [http://www.aps.sn/articles.php?id\\_article=131520](http://www.aps.sn/articles.php?id_article=131520)).

<sup>16</sup>By the time of revision of this text (September 2014), Diop seems to have decided to set this work apart and is currently working on a novel written in Wolof *B’ammeelu Kocc Barma* (Le tambour de Kocc Barma).

<sup>17</sup>One piece of poetry ‘Biiir ak biti’ and one play *Ibu Ndaw boroom jamono* have been written in Wolof and are awaiting publication. At this point, I do not want to suggest that some languages are ‘only good’ for poetry and others for ‘thoughts, but that the way an individual is born and raised within literary traditions and specific educational systems can have a lasting impact on his/her creation. The more often essays are written and published in Wolof, the more people will read them and try their hand at the genre.

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<sup>18</sup>Personal communication, 22 November 2014.

<sup>19</sup>Once again, Diop does not mean to suggest that one cannot develop philosophical discourses or thoughts in Wolof – on the contrary, he can quote Senegalese intellectuals who do – but that he himself lacks the practice to do so.