

THE HEAD OF THE CRAFTY SERPENT

MISSIONARY GRAMMARS AND BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES IN AFRICAN AND CARIBBEAN COUNTRIES

MYTHS OF CONVERSION BY TRANSCRIPTION

A comparison of African grammars written in French, and bilingual Franco-African or Franco-Caribbean dictionaries*, allows us to discern a common myth concerning “family” ties between French and African Languages.

Missionaries consider two means of conversion: by the introduction of the God-Word to his *children*, which predetermines the foreign society to be encountered;¹ the other demands an ethno-

* Used as adjective or noun, “Caribbean” is almost synonymous with the Antilles. We have used the word “Caribbean” because it refers more precisely to those who inhabited the Antilles before the arrival of the Europeans. (*Editor’s note*)

¹ Fernando Ainsa develops a similar point in “The Invention of America”, *Diogenes*, no. 145, 1989, p. 101; p. 105, note 8.

graphic study (to discover the meaning of language) in oral societies (African, Caribbean) to whom an alphabetical language is superimposed (with Latin characters). This effort of transcription presupposes the harmonious compatibility of all oral languages with French. Thus the missionaries breathe the Word and transcendence into the colonies in order to recover in “Word incarnate”, instrument and symbol for the conversion process. (The theologian would speak here of the “verticality of transcendence”.) But the missionary enterprise meets with the resistances of written language and of foreign societies endowed with complex structures and syntaxes. Thus, the so-called “verticality” crumbles along with missionary hopes, resulting in a trite approximate translation which could be characterized as “horizontal”.

WRITING ORALITY: ALPHABETS AND BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES

The Franco-African bilingual dictionaries assume an introductory role to Africa for the future traveler or missionary. The latter proceeds from a familiar context towards the unknown, where he will eventually find himself untutored. Bilingual dictionaries thus promise the uncanny return to familiar surroundings. The dictionaries often include grammars, catechisms and observations on common African customs. The works are either unfinished or lacking precision (on the authors’ confessions), or as complete as possible but susceptible to being perfected.² The following study concerns some African dictionaries, and a Caribbean one. They were conceived by Francophone authors between 1664 and 1942. The missionaries borrow from secular authors and *vice versa*, so that the points of view converge toward a common myth of “natural” languages—African or Caribbean—as distinct from “civilized” languages.

For these authors, one of the first problems to solve remains the choice of an alphabet to represent essentially oral languages.

² It is the case for Kobès, *Grammaire de la langue volofe*, Saint-Joseph de Ngasobil, Imprimerie de la Mission, 1869; 1872; 1923 augmented, and of Karl Edward Laman, *Dictionnaire kikongo-français avec une étude phonétique décrivant les dialectes les plus importants de la langue dite kikongo*, Brussels, 1936; Ride-wood, NJ, The Gregg Press Inc., 1964.

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Of course the 26-letter French alphabet serves as a basis but it must be modified, and as a general rule it diminishes: 22 letters for the Kirundi grammar by Father F. Ménard; 30 letters in Mgr. Aloïse Kobès' *Grammaire de la langue volofe*, but a footnote explains that the 30 letters total 21:

“At first, this number of letters may appear considerable, but in reality it is less than in the French alphabet which merely totals 26 letters. This is because, according to the principles we presented earlier, we take accentuated letters, apart from the long vowels, for so many distinct letters, while in French, these same letters are actually considered as one. If we were to count as we do for the French alphabet, instead of 30 letters, we would have a total of only 21”.³

Kobès' attempt at transcribing every phonetic nuance of the oral language into the French alphabet reveals the “serious defects”,⁴ characterized by the multiplication of letter combinations standing for the value of one sound (c, q, k for instance). This multiplication appears quite superfluous to him. Also, sometimes a letter represents multiple sounds. African languages must follow a system of representation whereby one sound is paired with one letter.

AGAINST THE SUPERFLUOUS: FOR AN ORTHOGRAPHIC REFORM

Thus the authors seize the occasion to suggest a reform of French spelling which would follow the Italian model. The moral considerations over a state of nature as opposed to civilization often accompany such thoughts, as is the case for Baron Roger (1829), who once was governor of Senegal:

“The custom by which one speaks to a single person as if one spoke to many owes its origin to the monstrous coupling of the contorted servility of the Court of the Late Empire with the ignorant vanity and the military spirit of small northern tribes. Whatever the oppression of uncivilized people, they do not know this over-refinement of plati-

³ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. 8, speaks of “*graves défauts*”.

tude and flattery, which is, moreover, for the Europeans simply a bizarre flaw of language, or at the most a social prejudice, which is admitted—as so many other prejudices—without reflection or consequence”.⁵

The superfluous French multiplication of letters for one sound and the use of a plural pronoun for a single person affect the constitutional status of French people as well as their language. Thus, suggesting an orthographic reform, the authors would prefer to remodel a civilized state (France) according to a “natural” model (African or Caribbean). Africa and the Caribbean land would occasion the birth of a new France, somehow reformed, purified, morally elevated in its linguistico-political system of representation which should function according to a principle of total equivalence (of equality). Thus Roger recalls the reforms proposed by Rousseau of exact representational equivalence: for one letter, one sound; for one man, one representative or one voice. Equivalence is here based on equality which opposes any superfluous effect to representational signs.

WOLOF/ OUOLOF/ VOLOF/ GHIOLOF

In his introduction to *Recherches philosophiques sur la langue ouolofe*, Baron Roger notices that the common spelling for the word “wolof” is inaccurate when one refers to the treatment bilingual people give to the first letter of the word. They consider it to be a vowel if one trusts their use of the French definite article (“l’ouolof”).⁶ The transmission of the French alphabet to African languages implies a phonetical re-evaluation of French writing. Roger wishes to establish a transcription according to which “A Frenchman could read Wolof as his own language, without changing the ordinary value of his alphabet”; “The first law I imposed upon myself was to admit no useless or double signs”.⁷

⁵ Baron Roger, *Recherches philosophiques sur la langue ouolofe suivie d’un vocabulaire abrégé français-ouolof*, Micro-Éditions de l’Institut National des Civilisations orientales, Archives Africaines, Série V, Paris, Librairie Orientale de Dondey-Dupré Père et Fils, 1829, p. 48.

⁶ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 20.

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Monseigneur Aloise Kobès (1869) echoes Roger (1829): “There are no useless letters”.⁸ The *common place* between French and African languages would then be situated in *the common value of a Franco-African alphabet*. But this quest of a writing faithful to African sounds ironically reveals a certain French deafness, as evidenced by the multiplication of French spellings for: “wolof”, “ouolof”, “volof”, “ghiolof”.

French ordinary value must be completed by sounds related to Spanish, Latin, Greek, and Arabic in order to complete the French transcription of languages which belong to oral tradition. In the case of Wolof, the language now spoken in Senegal, the authors recognize the existence of a writing which is indicative of Islamic presence:

“The natives who know Arabic write it [Wolof], but rarely, with [Arabic] characters. Yet the great majority can neither read nor write, so there would be no advantage in the use of this writing which would anyway prove a great difficulty for Europeans”.⁹

Roger also notes:

“When these literate people need to write but cannot express all their ideas in Arabic, they write Wolof with Arabic characters. But these cases are extremely rare. Sometimes *one also finds words extracted from Wolof interspersed within their Arabic letters*”.¹⁰

This other colonial presence is minimized, so that Wolof remains intact, uncontaminated and free of writing. Monseigneur Sauvant, apostolic vicar at Bamako, introduces his *Manuel bambara* (1942)¹¹ with historical considerations about the Bambara populations who had to flee their persecuting chiefs then converted to Islam. An agreement must be reached among recognized and allied authorities, and later with the cooperation of Africans as well, as is the case for Karl Edward Laman (1936, 1964)

⁸ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁹ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹¹ Sauvant, *Manuel Bambara*, Alger, Maison Carrée, Imprimeries des Missions d’Afrique, 1942.

who thanks his academic colleagues—Professor Westermann for instance—and “the indigenous phalanx formed years ago with a view to this mission, and who remained faithful to it”.¹² *The word “mission” applies to the various “conversion” projects which underlie the task of writing bilingual dictionaries.* Moreover, Laman uses international references which circumvent any possible choice on behalf of the “faithful phalanx”:

“In the perspective of a rational study of the language and according to a practical goal, after previous agreement, I adopted the spelling recommended by the International Institute of African Languages and Civilization. This spelling was already selected by various linguistic conferences and it was accepted by colonial authorities as well as by the Catholic and Protestant missions and other such groups”.¹³

Clearly, the natives were not the first consulted in this pre-established agreement which includes the Christian, academical, political, and military institutions of Europe. For “African civilizations”, entry into the written world is always conditioned by external contacts. In the *Grammaire kirundi* by Father F. Ménard (1908), Barundi people are renamed by their neighbors and by the missionaries:

“It is entitled *Grammaire kirundi*, although the word does not belong to the [Barundi] language. As well as several other terms sometimes too easily admitted, this term has been imported from abroad, introduced by analogy with the word *kiswahili*. But the term in question is understood and used very often by those who have had more or less contact with the missionaries”.¹⁴

It is necessary to obtain the cooperation of the “faithful phalanx” of those who chose to enter into contact with missionaries and the world of the sacred scriptures. In all cases the project of writing entails the foreign reflection of a given local language.

¹² Laman, *op. cit.*, “Introduction”.

¹³ Laman, *op. cit.*, p. X.

¹⁴ Ménard, *Grammaire kirundi*, Alger, Maison Carrée, Imprimeries des Missions d’Afrique 1908, p. V.

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GRAFTING FRENCH

Thus appears the staging of reciprocal co-adaptation and adoption, confirmed by the Africans who accept alphabetization along with French grammar and catechism. The African's easy adoption of imported scriptures is a double-edged sword. As Ménard reminded about the Barundi, named "Kirundi" by their neighbors: "As well as several other terms *sometimes too easily admitted*, this term has been imported from abroad". The Caribbean dictionary by the Reverend Father Raymond Breton (1664)¹⁵ signals Spanish presence in the Caribbean as a vague and distant danger. The evasive mention of rival colonial forces denotes a cautious distancing from potential conflicts. For moral and economical causes, Islam and Spain are equally spurned because they pose the same threat against the economic integrity of France and its interests. The inopportune presence of a *terzo incomodo* could also interfere with the promise of family reunion, the intimate face to face with African languages endorsing French values. With Caribbean, Breton notices the difficulty of this project:

"Make sure to lend your ear to the Savages' pronunciation, and speak as they do; with less than that you will not be informed of their language, they will not hear you, or they will mock you".¹⁶

Rejection is always possible. French grafting could fail. It is then necessary to find principles of compatibility of kinship between French and these oral languages.

THE RECOURSE TO LANGUAGES FROM ANTIQUITY

Thus, if one must refer to other languages, it is preferable to implicate "dead" languages belonging to civilizations of which

¹⁵ Breton, *Petit catéchisme ou sommaire des trois premières parties de la doctrine chrétienne traduit du français, en la langue des Caraïbes insulaires, suivi d'un dictionnaire caraïbe-français*, Auxerre, Gilles Bouquet, Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy, 1664.

¹⁶ Breton, *ibid.*, p. 8.

France claims to be the inheritor: Roger finds a remarkable similarity between Wolof and Latin numerical systems,¹⁷ and the two distinct classes of verbs (of state and of action) remind him of Latin again.¹⁸ Breton establishes a French alphabet for the Caribbeans with the exception of a Greek value and a Latin one.¹⁹ According to the biblical model (reworked by Rousseau), the voice precedes the letter in the mythic chronology of writing, since God dictates his word and his law by means of the characters penned by Moses. Oral language becomes the potential origin of writing. The French missionaries and grammarians share the privilege of assisting at the birth of French writing, a mirror-writing where Africa, as well as France, is to recognize itself; they recognize each other, the one in its lost oral origin, the other in its initiation to divine scriptures which reveal its birth. The name of New France may be applied to numerous colonized territories. African languages would then belong to the family of languages which contributed to the constitution of French. Thus, African languages are invited to participate in the French genealogy.

DO AFRICAN LANGUAGES HAVE A DIVINE ORIGIN?

African languages constitute a symbolic childlike status at the origin of civilized languages. In a state of innocence, the “savages” nevertheless dictate “natural” words and grammars of powerful organization indicative of a quasi-divine design. On the other hand, the French speaker brings writing and the Word to new territories. Thus, when the Reverend Father Raymond Breton must retire from the Caribbean, due to his tropical sicknesses and old age, he writes a bilingual catechism and a Caribbean-French dictionary (*Petit catéchisme* and *Dictionnaire français-caraiibe*) in order to allow the younger missionaries to carry on his ministry. He thanks his financial benefactor in the following manner:

¹⁷ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 42-43.

¹⁸ Roger, *ibid*, p. 56.

¹⁹ Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

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“With your act, you imitate God who was not satisfied with mere pronouncements in his tongue, nor with the writing in ours, of the ineffable mysteries of his very august Law, but whose will was to articulate them word for word by the learned ministry of a tongue made of flesh, which he borrowed in order to render them intelligible to our minds, fearing that the angelic or prophetic style he once used was too elevated or involved...”²⁰

Breton’s dictionary is another “word for word”, his catechism another incarnation of the Word. The double book converts Caribbeans to writing, letting them recover their lost divine origins. It forms the symbolic corpus which will immortalize both the converted and the good works of the missionary.

THE BODY: GOD’S CONCEALED SCRIPTURES

An oral (African) language must be related to French in such a way that one should be the origin of the other. French civilization discovers its own birth by recognizing its origins, and the natural state (of Africa) recovers its original writing by recognizing itself in the mirror of French writing. Laman starts his “*avant propos*” with the phantasm of civilization’s birth: “Because of its rich potential for evolution, Kongo language is perfectly suited to become the cultivated language of East Africa”.²¹ If the language of the Congo can evolve toward (French) civilization, under French tutelage, it can in turn serve as a civilizing center. This double circular destiny must allow all kinds of familiar recognitions; it should be so for the Wolofs, whom Roger (1829) compares to the Greeks, the latter being commonly considered to be the cultural ancestors of the French people:

“I cannot prevent myself from a striking reflection; the most beautiful Blacks are without doubt the Wolof, the sweetest language spoken by negroes is Wolof; during antiquity the Greeks were considered to be the most beautiful people; their language also was the most beauti-

²⁰ Breton, *ibid.*. There are only a few pages numbered in the introductions to the various parts of the book.

²¹ Laman, *op. cit.*, p. X.

ful and the sweetest of languages. Should we believe that the reciprocal influence of physical and moral qualities would be extended to this degree that the forms of language would be in relation to the forms of the body”?²²

“The Wolof people are generally lithe, tall, well built; they have a smooth skin, of a pure and shiny black. Their faces offer regular lines which very much resemble those of Europeans: one rarely sees among them those very fat lips, even less those flattened noses”.²³

Languages and bodies denote kinship between populations, their affiliation. Ménard (1908) shows as great an enthusiasm toward the Barundi:

“This race is without question one of the most beautiful and most interesting of equatorial Africa. Physically, the *Matusi* is tall; well-proportioned, of swift gait. He has good features, a regular-shaped nose, large bright eyes.... In the domain of morality, the population we are studying appears to be superior to the common Black man. One likes to recognize in it some of the primitive purity of patriarchal morality. The family is well founded, the family ties well developed. Polygamy doubtless exists. But where is the region of Central Africa where it does not”?²⁴

The lights emanating from, or reflected by black skins, resplendent and shining with this divine brilliance, the organizing esthetic principles of facial features, body lines, and grammars attest that the African body is preformed by *the concealed scriptures of God*. The French only have to guess and write the principles of oral language, the alphabet of sounds, in order to find themselves in the lost proximity of God and his voice. Kobès exposes thus his joy to meet God:

“After learning about our grammar, the reader will doubtless share the surprise which we ourselves felt at the discovery of so much harmony, delicacy, riches and regularity in a language which at first appearance ought to have been savage. Who invented it? Who imposed

²² Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 126-27.

²³ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁴ Ménard, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

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it upon a great people? Who kept it from generation to generation?
How admirable are the works of God in all places and times!²⁵

Africa becomes the place where faith is confirmed.

THE GIFT OF WRITING: REVEALING THE ORIGINS

Nevertheless, the black “savages” do not even have the ability to return to their origins without French help. Their knowledge derives from grace, while systematic and difficult studies are the plights of Francophone authors who compose bilingual dictionaries and grammars. Aloïse Kobès, Bishop of Modon, enjoys the privileged access to both the oral and the written realm of words. The following words introduce his preface: “As for us, says the Prince of the Apostles, it is to oration and to the ministry of words that we shall devote ourselves”.²⁶ The administration of words becomes the bone of contention which must eventually elude African mastery.

As previously indicated, international powers place the Barundi in a minority situation with regard to the writing of their own language—concerning the name itself, which becomes “Kirundi”. Laman acts in a similar fashion in the Congo. The authors claim to belong to a brotherhood of writing (of scriptures as well) of which Africans and Caribbeans are but minors.

PARENT TERMINOLOGY: CHRISTIAN AND NON-CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

Their brotherhood remains problematical, schismatic. It is difficult to close the gap existing between the African and French (or even European) families. A series of words adapted from French fill the apparent “gaps” (*lacunes*) of Wolof: “brother” (*frère*) and “sister” (*soeur*) belong to the missing vocabulary.²⁷

²⁵ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. VI.

²⁶ Kobès, *ibid.*, no page number.

²⁷ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. 346.

Wolof terminology is improper to the naming of Christian family ties. The concept of brotherhood, considered absent from Wolof, is invested with special importance for the French Constitution with its motto: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. Two question marks follow the translation of the word “to equal” (*égaliser*) in Émile Jenniges’ *Dictionnaire français-kiluba*.²⁸ The approximate translation adopted by the most ambitious lexicologists such as Laman becomes suddenly *intolerable* for family terms which become the occasion of lengthy ethnological specifications. Raymond Breton thus exposes the following intricacies: “Uncles and aunts give the name *Nibàche* to their nieces. *Niniboue* is the name given by uncles and aunts to their nephew’s children... First cousins call each other brothers. *Nigatou* is the name female cousins give to their maternal cousins when their sisters do not marry them”.²⁹ Monseigneur Sauviant (1942) defines a Bambara word with a whole sentence which—incidentally—does not respect the French intransitive use of the verb “*marier*”, unless there is in the marriage he depicts the necessary intervention of a will other than that of the spouses: “To marry the brother or a parent of the defunct husband” (“*Marier le frère ou un parent du mari défunt*”).³⁰ It is very difficult to remedy the disorder of these family terms. We soon dwell in the untranslatable, the grammatical mistake, the appearance of scandal.

FOOD VOCABULARY

Other authors become fastidious about terms of food. The Reverend Father E. Riebstein,³¹ missionary in Togo, translates a word by: “indigenous soup” (*soupe indigène*) and another “indigenous sausage” (*saucisson indigène*). The specification “in-

²⁸ Em. Jenniges, *Dictionnaire français-kiluba exposant le vocabulaire de la langue kiluba telle qu'elle se parle au Katangua, publié par le ministère des colonies de Belgique*, Brussels, Spineux & Cie, 1909.

²⁹ Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁰ Sauviant, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³¹ Riebstein, *Vocabulaire de la langue ewe: I. ewe-français*, Rome, Imprimerie de la Sodalité de S. Pierre Claver, 1923.

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digenous” remains vague but necessary. Sauvant also lists “indigenous sausage”³² in his *Dictionnaire ewe-français*, and the following sentence: “To dip *fufu* in soup (to eat in the indigenous manner)” (*Tremper du fufu dans la soupe, manger à la façon indigène*).³³ The last sentence appears to refer no longer to Ewe language but to an expression born from French by a Franco-phone colonial presence. This type of French must then be clarified by a parenthesis for the newcomers. Further, “*fufu*” is translated by “*cassava*” (*manioc*) but like the term “indigenous”, it indicates the distance separating culinary referents. On the other hand, Sauvant shows no qualms when it is a question of translating words much more determined by a geographical context foreign to Africa such as “galoches”, or “tribunal”.

AUTONOMY AND LINGUISTIC BORROWINGS

Bilingual dictionaries reflect a fragmented image which calls for the reciprocal completion of both languages considered, but the grammars recognize more readily the autonomy of African languages. Thus it is found that the “savages” already supplemented their “lacks” by other words missing in French:

“The Wolof language is poor in nouns expressing metaphysical ideas; but the natives have a lot of maxims... Abstract words to designate genres, species and generalities are also lacking in Wolof. On the other hand it is very rich in concrete words... Instead of qualifying adjectives we found verbs”.³⁴

One must eventually consider that gaps exist in both languages, African and French, otherwise the link of interdependence is broken along with the presumed family ties. One language must complete the other in order to reach harmony.

In the case of Wolof, Kobès creates a new French adjective, “*volofisé*”, to describe Wolof’s borrowings from French:

³² Sauvant, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³³ Sauvant, *ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁴ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. 349.

“The Wolof language does not have words to designate beings, things, art objects and tools, and household objects and clothing, etc., which were introduced into the country by European colonization. One understands all the more that it does not have terms to express the supernatural truths and the mysteries of the Catholic religion. Nevertheless, it possesses words *to render the first principles of natural morality*”.³⁵

A moral basis is guaranteed and thus the harmonious graft of French on African language appears possible.

Thus the recognition of European features and lines in a black face, the organizational lineage of family structures are interpreted as so many signs of a pre-established identity, familiarity and harmony. Ménard expresses his joy to recover his patriarchal origin in the African family: “One likes to recover there some of the primitive purity of patriarchal mores”.³⁶ African purity, asceticism, lacks and losses are interpreted as sources of riches or poverty, of virtue or defect, according to the personal perspective of the observer. These characteristics, combined with the problems of French transcriptions eventually threaten the idea of common genealogy.

RESISTING CIRCUMSCRIPTION: THE MARGINS OF MISUNDERSTANDING

Ménard describes a Barundi language which unfolds endlessly under the multilayered levels of meanings he discovers. Barundi evades comprehension because of its concision,³⁷ and his book remains incomplete—for example the catechism and dictionary by Breton.

Riebstein seems to be preoccupied with words expressing secrecy and treachery which probably correspond to his perception of Togo. As Roger notes: “To each his own manner of seeing and feeling, particularly where novelty is concerned”.³⁸ Oral languages seem to *resist circumscription*. Applied to African lan-

³⁵ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. 346, (my italics).

³⁶ Ménard, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁷ Ménard, *ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁸ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

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guages, French analytical values cause letters to multiply, such as in Kobès' alphabet, which includes eventually more than 26 letters. Laman feels the necessity to add an accentual treatise to his dictionary.³⁹ Ménard ends up noting elided vowels in parentheses for "Kirundi".⁴⁰

Lack of a written form as well as *lack of gender distinction* in Wolof suggests implications difficult to weigh in relation to French: "I could examine whether this nonexistence of *genders* which introduces so much simplicity into the language, and which does not prevent it from expressing all the nuances of thought, may be considered as an advantage or an inconvenience".⁴¹ The lack of familiar distinctions and the suggestion of a reference system so foreign, lend to the African world an irreducible and potentially uncanny otherness.

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Breton starts his Caribbean dictionary with a vocabulary denoting a strong feeling of alienation. Indeed, this missionary who hoped to smash "the head of the crafty serpent" (*la tête au serpent rusé*)⁴² begins his first entry with the list of all the snakes inhabiting the island:

"A: *Ahoïa*, venomous snake. *Alaralouáta*, another species which is red. *Ioulía*, *ioulíati*, another, black and yellow. *Mácao*, this one jumps on passers-by. Not venomous. *Oüanáche*, this one is thick and long. *Oüalloúcoule*, small and thin. *Touboulouéro*, even smaller".⁴³

Despite the alphabetical promise of the letter "A", a more imperious necessity makes him adopt a thematic order of which he is probably the only one to hold the key. The words following

³⁹ Karl Edward Laman, *The Musical Accent or Intonation in the Kongo Language*, Stockholm, 1922. He refers to it in his *Dictionnaire Kikongo-Français* by the letters MA.

⁴⁰ Ménard, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁴² Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁴³ Breton, *ibid.*

these serpents do not necessarily follow the alphabetical order either. They start with the letters, a, k, l, c, a, k, m:

“*Abaágnakêtemi*, defense; *Kabaaguákêta lónêti*, he defends; *Kabaagnaákêtatina boroman*, you prevent me; *Kabaíntatiti*, he punishes; *Loubáagnem*, as punishment; *Abaákêta liéni lámouleem*, he will vent his anger upon his younger brother; *Chíoüi liéni labaáketenni*, he will kill him to vent his anger; *Abaacoüa*, to injure, to hurt; *Kábaanhanyénli nhaúnicóüa*, they maimed each other; *Kabáarou loróman canáli*, he broke his canari*; *Manbáarou*, not done; *Abápatouleukê*, the pus is not oozing, does not have an opening”.⁴⁴

Brotherly harmony as well as the alphabetical order is here noticeably upset. Jenniges (1909) and Laman (1936, 1964) also render a sinister portrait of the people whose language they analyze. Laman shows a predilection for the adverbs “violently”, “quickly”, “strongly”, “brusquely” and his vocabulary occasions ethnological reports generally characterized by exotic brutalities and sexual observations. He doubtless projects his own personality in his study, but it would appear that a feeling of alienation dominates his production. Jenniges decided to shock his readers with escatological examples which are allied to an irresistible preoccupation with sexual organs and female bodily secretions. He is equally dedicated to the discovery of French words without African equivalents. According to him, it would be the case for the verb “to have”. On the other hand, he describes in minute detail the gestures of African ritual practices, transforming them into apparently grotesque meaningless mimics. His point of view remains resolutely external. All the authors appear to suffer from the same feeling of exclusion in varying degrees.

AN IMPOSSIBLE GRAMMAR

Thus African languages seem to belong in *the present tense of experience*, which is lived as the juxtaposition of uncontrollable events external to history, identity, and the genealogical temporal-

⁴⁴ Breton, *ibid.*

* *canari*: terracotta recipient.

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ity of the Francophone author. He needs cultural or ethnological knowledge. Grammars become impossible because the language often takes an unpredictable or undecipherable turn. They decompose the various uses of the present tense and the dictionaries endlessly expose the values of African pronunciation or the values of words. The arbitrary divisions of the alphabetical dictionaries, whose goal was to reconstitute a bilingual totality, threaten to remain incoherent. The observer could remain face to face with the unknown of which the rules remain unfathomable, lost in a linguistic environment where structures are unpredictable.

TOWARD THE HIDDEN GOD: JOURNEY INTO THE LABYRINTH

The authors of analytical grammars and dictionaries—such as Kobès—attempt to “dissect” and “appropriate” African languages.⁴⁵

Ménard (1869) speaks of “catching live”⁴⁶ a unified body which belongs to the dynamics of the present. Written reflexion, as it belongs to the past or the future, appears improper to the fluid temporality of a language which cannot be fragmented without loss: “*My* and *me* are pronounced almost indifferently, particularly among illiterate people. This is indeed because nature is neither absolute nor clear-cut; everything is links and transitions”.⁴⁷ The whole problem of dissection is to cut knowingly, not blindly. More dogmatic, Kobès (1869; 1872; 1923) thinks he has revealed the natural laws of Wolof—they amount to the perfection of the Christian God, and so his knowledge is less scientific than it is a profession of faith. As a natural manifestation Wolof is a “perfect” “new”⁴⁸ language: “We found the pre-existing grammar in the language, and we brought into broad daylight this existence which was hidden up to then”.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. 351, 8.

⁴⁶ Ménard, *op. cit.*, p. XII.

⁴⁷ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. 352, 1.

⁴⁹ Kobès, *ibid.*, p. IV.

In order to reach this familiar presence, *this hidden God*, the authors make use of the analytical scalpel bringing to light “the *bone structure of grammar*” (“*l’ossature de la grammaire*”).⁵⁰ French alphabetical order traces its imaginary lines cutting into the African body which unfolds and opens endlessly its internal principles: “At the beginning of this study we surprised ourselves more than once thinking that *we were walking in a labyrinth* or yet that we were this *traveler* forced to open a route for himself in the middle of our virgin forests of Africa”.⁵¹ The use of the plural possessive adjective (“our”) and pronoun (“we” instead of “I”) denote the solitude encountered during the quest for familiar appropriation. Ariane did not allow for the trace of a previous journey. Endless aperture does not even ensure the loss of oneself—the center around which the unknown unfolds.

Thus, the pagan values of Africa do not translate into a French alphabet despite the preconceived notion of the original agreement French-speaking missionaries and observers are quick to point out:

“Although they do not have a proper word to express the idea of God, these people had nevertheless known how to give Wolof a lot of harmony, delicacy, and regularity. How many combinations, what spirit of order these principles of convention demanded, and around which all the language terms come to be so happily arranged that often the author of a philosophical language could not have done any better? Chance does not create any such things. This work supposes a people gifted with a sense of rectitude, a happy organization, and of whom, despite the absurd prejudice all too often inspired by its color, humanity should not blush”.⁵²

God the Father, who seemed to be present in these “wild” parts, remains absent from natural vocabulary.

⁵⁰ Ménard, *op. cit.*, p. XI, (my italics).

⁵¹ Ménard, *ibid.*, p. XI, (my italics).

⁵² Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

Roger invites his readers to perceive Franco-Senegalese unity under the superficial pigment of the skin. For Roger (1829), the Senegalese facial features merge with European ones.⁵³ They would be European but for the unfortunate intervention of bad taste, and of the fetishes' and charms' loud colors "with which they bedeck themselves" ("*dont ils se chamarrent*").⁵⁴ These details cut the melodic or harmonious line which guaranteed the possibility of an African "naturalization" of French (it is the word Roger uses to describe the acclimatization of French plants in the Senegalese earth of Richardtol).⁵⁵ The *griots* themselves shout: "Without calculation or acoustics, their ear guided them perfectly in the division of tones and in the relations of the sonorous chord's vibrations. Unfortunately these public singers are used to shouting with all their voice's strength".⁵⁶ The energy of the voices and the multiple colors sported by the Senegalese are the superficial but blinding details alienating their French brothers. Their excesses or "hubris" are not compatible with the Greek values inherited by the French. Roger refuses to consider them as essential to the Wolofs or as representational systems. Similarly, according to him, their colorful charms are but ancient habits deprived of meaning,⁵⁷ rather than part of a specific theology. The detail in bad taste, or the charming trinket is akin to the "arabesques" Caribbean women draw on the body of their spouses. Breton finds this practice visually pleasant but purposeless and consuming a long period of the day, best put to use for other scriptures such as the Bible or French transcriptions. His tone of bemused complacency does not concede any value to these written traces. Their feminine characters and their pagan or "natural" origin is implicitly depreciated, while remaining one of the most formidable obstacles to French writings.

Thus, God the Father and his patriarchal order, which seemed to be present in the Caribbean, threatens to remain absent from

⁵³ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵⁴ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁶ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵⁷ Roger, *ibid.*, p. 11.

“natural” vocabulary, and the promise of agreement could very well end up in estrangement. Probably because he did not know the Enlightenment, nor the Revolution, Breton is the author least inclined to recognize himself in the Caribbean people. He is also one of the quickest to signal the possibility of an inhospitable reception.

“I introduced my book with a little dialogue, to introduce you to their contact, according to their savage civilities: so that you do not render yourself ridiculous to these rather mocking people: when one is savage to them, by failing to observe their way of behaving, and to capture their good will”.⁵⁸

Indeed Breton includes a letter to the Caribbeans, asking them to receive well his fathers and theirs since he is presently unable to travel out of France, now that he is old and sick.

Breton seeks to help the new Missionary Brothers to avoid possible conflicts. The Infernal Caribbeans are reached by boat, guided by a Charon who will accept as payment that the Missionary Brother save his soul. The Caribbeans thus represent a society of disturbing autonomy, provided with rules apparently as rigid and structured as the written laws and grammars. Breton appears to be one of the authors most sensitive to the existence of a pagan autonomous culture.

Kobès assumes a superior familiarity with the Senegalese (particularly with the women) and reassures himself that he is always well received with the following reflection: “We say *Blacks* instead of *Negroes*, because the word *negro* has become an insult on the African beaches. The word *Negress* for a woman is still graciously accepted”.⁵⁹ Franco-African harmony in African society seems to rely on the subordinate status of the African woman who does not share the political demands of her brother, and who accepts herself as a “negress” in the French vocabulary. It is more than probable that she also guarantees the enduring conversion of the African man into a “negro”. Ménard specifies: “Far from being men’s slaves, women have the rank which *suits* them in the

⁵⁸ Breton, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁹ Kobès, *op. cit.*, p. III.

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family: they enjoy all their rights of spouse and mother”.⁶⁰ There again, the African woman offers the reassuring portrait of a natural family order, which also reserves a subaltern status to the black man compared to his white brother. Ménard thinks that if sexual hierarchy remains untouched, the chances are that each hierarchic relation will also remain, and he finds the prospective reassuring.

THE WOLOF FABLE OF THE MONKEY AND THE RABBIT

In order for the conversion of his language to be completed, it is necessary for the African man to recognize himself gracefully (“*de bonne part*”) in the writing and the name given to him by the family of written languages, according to a suitable status of minor and subordinate dependence. The myth bound to African languages is one of a “brotherly” tie, sealed by the transcription of African culture into a French one. Such a bond would be articulated in a patriarchal system common to Africa and France. The union is concluded at the price of a transcription which remains approximate, more or less French, more or less African. The process of “naturalization” used resembles Roger’s who finalizes his *Recherches* with the literal translation (word for word) of a Senegalese fable, before he attempts to inscribe the African tradition into the Greek one (Aesop), with a parody of La Fontaine, complete with alexandrines, rhymed octosyllables and an added morality.⁶¹ The characters are a monkey who scratches (like a writer) and a rabbit, *Leuk*, whose eyes follow the motions of discourse (like a reader).

Under the pretense of breaking away from their old habits, the monkey and the rabbit of the oral tradition discretely perpetuate their manners. One shows his old wounds in order to keep itching, while the other mimes his narration, rolling his eyes left and right so that he may observe potential predators as usual. The tale could finally illustrate the superficial character of the con-

⁶⁰ Ménard, *op. cit.*, p. VI, (my italics).

⁶¹ Roger, *op. cit.*, p. 152-53.

version of oral traditions to writing, and serve as an ironic conclusion to such enterprise.

PARACLETE AND BABEL

Several experiences of conversion by transcription were attempted by missionaries in Oceania, in America with Indians, and in all the “new” lands. In New Caledonia, Maurice Leenhardt (1878-1954), a Protestant pastor, found that in order to produce his bilingual vocabulary and his Houailou grammar, it was necessary to reconstruct an ethnology of New Caledonia. In his introduction to Leenhardt’s *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World* (1947), Vincent Crapanzano describes the Protestant priest as close to the thought of Lévy-Bruhl (whom he influenced) and Marcel Mauss: Leenhardt would have found fault with English missionaries for their lack of “fraternity” and he would have wanted to establish “the familial religion”.⁶² By his methodology, “he sought to discover native terms for Western religious concepts” searching for “the living meaning of words (*le sens vivant des mots*)”.⁶³ Leenhardt’s attempt to find common ground between the native’s conception of the world and the New Testament was a work towards mutual acceptancy far more complex than “cosmomorphism” or the alignment on one culture’s conception of the cosmos. Crapanzano questions the possibility of totally conceptualizing otherness in this way and even that of learning about *Leuk* and the monkey may question further how the Bible is converted into native terms, a question closely studied by Leenhardt who found that he gave the Canaques the body rather than the spirit.⁶⁵

Maurice Raymond de Brossard (1909), concludes his chapter

⁶² Vincent Crapanzano, “Preface” to Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World*, Trans. Basia Miller Gulati, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. IX, quoting James Clifford.

⁶³ Crapanzano, *ibid.*, p. XI, quoting Leenhardt’s article on translating the New Testament.

⁶⁴ Crapanzano, *ibid.*, p. XXV.

⁶⁵ Crapanzano, *ibid.*, p. XXIV.

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“Hyphen”,⁶⁶ with the ironic spectacle of a Catholic island celebrating quite precisely the presentation of Kava as it has been transmitted from generation to generation under the very eyes of the bishop, Mgr. Poncet. Conversion and translation leave room for interpretation. Elaborated only in the 20th century and referring primarily to Latin, with its declensions, linguistics was not sufficiently developed to be of any help to the missionaries who thus faced *insurmountable difficulties*. Translated in terms of “myth”, this failure evokes the crumbling of hopes for the Word. Yet missionary work opened the way for the great works of linguistics as it proceeds from ethnology rather than philology, and from the unsolved contradictions between cultures.

In his second volume, *Nouméa le roman calédonien*, Brossard notes that there are approximately 30 different languages for 22,000 inhabitants on the Grande Terre.⁶⁷ How can the Holy Spirit—Paraclete—survive Babel’s demons? All ethnocentrist conversion becomes fragile by the strength of cultural resistance that often the Europeans do not suspect. Did Leenhardt bring the body to the Canaques or was the Word disincarnated, dissolved in a tumultuous history?

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⁶⁶ Brossard, *Océan des Français: Tahiti, le chant polynésien*, vol. 1, Paris, Éditions France-Empire, 1962.

⁶⁷ Brossard, *ibid*, vol. 2, p. 253.