

Lalbila Yoda

Lalbila Yoda is a lecturer in the Department of Anglophone Studies and the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Ouagadougou, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.
E-mail: lalbila.yoda@univ-ouaga.bf

Literature and translation in Burkina Faso: the case of Fidèle P. Rouamba's novel *Le Carnaval de la mort*

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Translation, considered as a product of linguistic diversity or the confusion following the fall of the Tower of Babel, represents an act of communication. In a multilingual society, such as Burkina Faso, translation is an indispensable tool for socioeconomic, political and cultural development. In this paper I propose to examine how multilingualism, which is at the origin of translation, is reflected in Burkinabè literature. Since literature is a fictional representation of reality, I shall examine the way literary communication mirrors this reality, i.e., the linguistic and cultural diversity of Burkina Faso. In addition, this paper goes beyond the classical and linguistic definitions of translation in terms of equivalence between target text and source text and claims that, to some extent, African writers qualify as translators. This is exemplified by Fidèle P. Rouamba's novel *Le Carnaval de la mort* ("The carnival of death", 1995). **Key words:** Translation, multilingualism, communicative strategies, translation procedures.

Translation, considered as a product of linguistic diversity or the confusion following the fall of the Tower of Babel, represents an act of communication. In a multilingual society, such as in Burkina Faso, translation is an indispensable tool for socioeconomic, political and cultural development. The case of religion especially reveals this importance of translation in a multicultural and multilingual situation. In African churches, mosques, temples and many other places of religious worship discourse or communication largely depends on translation. This explains why the expansion of Christianity is inextricably bound to translation. In Burkina Faso and in Africa in general, colonial missionaries were the pioneers of modern translation between European languages and African languages.

In this paper I propose to examine how multilingualism, which is at the origin of translation, is reflected in Burkinabè literature. Literature is a fictional representation of reality, yet can we assert that literary communication mirrors this reality, i.e., the linguistic and cultural diversity of Burkina Faso? More specifically, since translation is a product of this diversity, what is the place and role of literary translation in Burkinabè literature?

To answer these questions, I shall first deal with the linguistic situation of Burkina Faso by looking into its linguistic and cultural diversity. Secondly, I shall examine Burkinabè literary productions, in order to determine the place of translation in Burkinabè literature. Fidèle P. Rouamba's novel *Le Carnaval de la mort* ("The carnival of death", 1995) will be used to support the idea that African writers qualify as translators.

Multilingualism and literature in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, with an estimated population of 12 million inhabitants, has about sixty languages, of which the most important, in terms of speakers, are Mooré, Fulani and Jula. Mooré is spoken by more than 50% of the population. For historical and political reasons, here, I shall not dwell upon French, the language of the former colonial power, spoken by a minority. It is the official language and the language of power. Without any knowledge of this language, it is impossible to secure a job in the administration or in the modern economic sector.

Because of the close link between language and culture, very often language is seen as the vehicle of a people's culture (Bamgbose 1994: 21). Burkina Faso is a multilingual and multicultural society. Does this linguistic and cultural diversity which conspicuously manifests itself in urban centres, due to the various ethnic origins of the urban populations, exist in literary productions, particularly in the form of translation?

One may expect literary productions in a multilingual or multicultural society to reflect this situation. In countries such as Canada, which is bilingual, or Switzerland, which is multilingual, their literary productions echo their linguistic diversity. But written Burkinabè literature, similar to the literary productions of former French colonies in Africa, does not reflect the linguistic diversity mentioned above, since it uses French almost exclusively. The weight of the French language is disproportionate to the number of its speakers, 10-15% according to Norbert Nikiéma (2000: 127). A glance at the various editions of the national literary competition, *Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres* (GPNAL, National Grand Award for Arts and Letters), since its inception in 1983, shows that the bulk of the Burkinabè literary productions are in French (Sanou 2000).

I shall not insist on the reasons and constraints which have led Burkinabè writers to use French instead of the national languages. However, there is a need to underscore the language hierarchy, which accounts for this situation. The prestige and domination of French, the official language, do not favour the development of a multilingual and translated literature. As pointed out by Alioune Tine (1988: 16-17), the official language has taken over as the national language: "In fact, the status of national language has been really devolved to the official language which enjoys the same legitimacy as the national anthem or flag".¹ Moreover, this literature in French is elitist, as it is only accessible to a minority which has been schooled in French. School,

the only place for learning French, is still beyond the reach of many. There has been an increase in the school enrolment rate in Burkina Faso in recent years, but as the percentages given above show: a minority speaks French.

Literary translation

In countries such as Canada, Switzerland, or Scotland, to some extent, bilingualism and multilingualism manifest themselves not just in literary productions, but also in the existence of literary translation. Translation in such a context fulfils, among others, the following functions: the promotion of the translated literature and its culture, and the enrichment of the literature of the receptor culture. As shown by Judith Woodsworth (1996: 235) translation may serve as means to improve the status of a minority language and culture. During the Renaissance in England, English did not have the status of national language. Most translations, which were from Latin, the official language, into English revealed the poverty of English and, at the same time, contributed to enriching it and increasing its status (Shire 1978: 179). If one considers Burkinabè literary productions, it is striking to see that literary translation barely exists. As far as the national languages and French are concerned, translation into Mooré is relatively better off. The following examples can be cited: *Proverbes et contes mossi* (1982), *Théâtre mooré - français* (1983), *Poèmes et théâtre bilingue* (1986) and *Bendr N Gomde paroles et poésie du tam-tam* (1988), an 11 volume bilingual Mooré-French edition by F. T. Pacéré. These parallel texts constitute a means for preserving Mossi culture and making it known to the external world. They also partake in the development of the Mooré language.

There are also a few translations between European languages, particularly between French and English, such as *Enjoy English Classes through Stories from Burkina Faso*, translated for pedagogical purposes from French into English by Clémentine Ilboudo. The original by Xavier Sanou is entitled *L'Enfant noir et le conte Voltaïque* ("The black child and Voltaic tales"). However, translation from other European languages into French by Burkinabè is rather scanty. However, it is worth mentioning *La Route* (1998), the translation of Soyinka's *The Road* by S. Millogo and C. Fioupou, *Sozaboy (petit minitaire), roman écrit en anglais "pourri"* (1998) the translation of Ken Saro Wiwa's *Sozaboy* by S. Millogo and A. Bissiri.

From what has been said above, one may conclude that literary translation reflects the language hierarchy mentioned earlier. There are two types of translation: horizontal translation and vertical translation. The former designates translation involving two languages having the same status. This concerns European languages to which Arabic can be added. Although some people believe that Arabic has a lower status, compared to European languages, the economic, cultural and political weight of the Arab world and the use of Arabic in international instances confer upon it a

higher status as compared to African languages. Except a few translations for pedagogical purposes, horizontal translation is virtually inexistent in the domain of literature in Burkina Faso.

The second type, vertical translation, deals with translation from a lower status language to a higher status one and vice versa. This would be, for instance, the case of translation between any Burkinabè language and European languages. Apart from biblical translation, there is almost no literary translation between European languages and Burkinabè national languages. As to translation between national languages, there is none at all.

The lack of vitality in literary translation in Burkina Faso is a direct consequence of the lack of literary productions in the country's various languages and the role of national language played by French, the official language. The prestigious status of horizontal translation also derives from this factor. It is worth pointing out that the typology of translation in Burkina Faso is part of the global framework of economic, cultural and political domination of the North over the South, which Richard Jacquemond (1992: 139) describes as follows:

A political economy of translation is consequently bound to be set within the general framework of the political economy of the intercultural exchange, whose tendencies follow the global trend of international trend. Thus, it is no surprise that the global translation flux is predominantly North-North, while South-South translation is almost inexistent and North-South translation is unequal: cultural hegemony confirms, to a great extent, economic hegemony.

However, an analysis of the Burkinabè literary productions in French permits to consider the Burkinabè author as a "translator."

Burkinabè literary productions as metatexts

One is tempted to consider Burkinabè literary productions as metatexts because most of them are in French and tend to do away with the country's multilingual situation, as observed by Claude Caitucoli (1988: 191): "Curiously enough, the linguistic problem is absent from the francophone novel, it could have an important place in it."² The fact that the language issue is ignored can be interpreted politically. It may reflect the political will of writers to contribute their share to the national building process by having their characters systematically speak French, the official language. Such an attitude is based on the controversial idea that language and culture are considered as the main features of national identity which partake in the process of nation building. For such a position national identity and cultural identity are only possible when people speak the same language. Nevertheless, the 1994 Rwandese genocide shows how this can be misleading as both Hutu and Tutsi share the same language

and culture. (For a further discussion on cultural identity, national identity and language see Yoda (2005).)

If one takes Rouamba's *Le Carnaval de la mort*, which won a literary prize at the 1994 edition of the Semaine Nationale de Culture (National Culture Week) in Bobo, it is set in a Mossi village, Gouldou. Yet, all the characters, including the hero, Yamba, who have not attended school, speak French. Although we are dealing with a fictional work, fiction is supposed to mirror reality. Traditional Mossi songs, proverbs, tales which abound in this novel are in French. Thus, the characters' discourses may be considered as translations by the author. The songs, proverbs and tales, which contribute to the aesthetic qualities of the novel, are also translations or adaptations from Mossi oral literature. It is also recognition of the aesthetic value of Burkinabè and African cultures where speech represents an art, associated with wisdom. As pointed out by Chinua Achebe (1958: 8) "the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." In his preface to *Le carnaval de la mort* Hyacinthe Sanwidi (1994: 8) insists on the links between written literature and oral literature in Africa: "The tale can be cited as one of the charms of the novel. In Africa, written literature is often enriched by oral literature. It [*Le carnaval de la mort*] is a totally new tale imagined by a character on the *model of popular production*. It explains in its own way the origins of the relationships between man and the animals known as pets" (*italics added*).³

One may draw a parallel between such a perception that takes oral literature as a model, on the one hand, and the perception of translation as a creative model based on an original text (Hermans 1993: 69), on the other hand, and consider the Burkinabè writer as a "translator" even if his model does refer to a physical prototype, i.e., a prototext. The case of Rouamba's novel may be generalised to the bulk of Burkinabè literature. The use of French in Burkinabè literature confirms its role of national language.

The proposition that literary translation is almost non-existent can go unchallenged only if one limits oneself to the linguistic definitions of translation which tend to see translation in terms of equivalence between target text and source text (see for instance Vinay and Darbelnet 1995, Catford 1965, Nida and Taber 1969 and Nida 1975). However relevant such definitions may be translation, nowadays, is seen more and more in terms of functionality (see the functional approaches of Nord 1991, 1997a, 1997b and Vermeer 2000 for examples) and cultural transfer (see Amara 1996, Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, 1998 for examples).

The functional and cultural approaches to translation allow us to consider the Burkinabè literature as a form of translation. For that matter the concept of text needs to be broadened: "social and cultural activities as well as events and forms of expression can be regarded as text" (Wolf 1995: 128). The Burkinabè or African writer represents his vision of the world in fiction. In other words, their fiction accounts for their

understanding and interpretation of the world. Commenting upon Burkinabè literature Salaka Sanou (1993: 71) says: "The thematic of all Burkinabe literary production, including all genres, is closely related to Burkinabè history and society. Social problems are by far the most predominant themes. Here, realism borders on naturalism, contributing to a very pronounced 'national' character."⁴

The fact that short stories, plays and poetry are widely represented in Burkinabè literary productions reinforces the idea that writers draw inspiration from models pertaining to oral tradition. Even the novel, a genre brought along by colonization, as shown in *Le Carnaval de la mort*, is largely inspired by it. A glance at any edition of GPNAL is enough to show the influence of oral literature on Burkinabè written literature through poetry, short stories and plays. In the 1998 edition, for instance, they come first with respectively 60 collections of poems, 37 collections of short stories and 24 plays in French out of a total of 151 works (Sanou 2000: 41). There is continuity between these genres, the favourites of Burkinabè writers and public and oral literature. A play, for example, is meant to be performed on stage for an audience, as in traditional African societies where the production and consumption of art is collective. There is no clear-cut distinction between social and aesthetic functions. The link between Burkinabè written literature and oral tradition is so close that the former may be seen as an adaptation of the latter. The examples of songs, tales and proverbs in *Le Carnaval de la mort* taken from Mossi oral tradition serves as means of promoting Burkinabè and African cultural values. In addition to this relationship between Burkinabè writings in French and oral tradition, the Burkinabè writer makes use of communicative strategies which reinforce his role as a translator, as in *Le Carnaval de la mort*.

The style of Burkinabè writers and translation strategies

The style and communicative strategies of most African writers, including Burkinabè ones, are similar to the strategies used by professional translators to overcome some translation problems. Wolfgang Lörcher (1991: 80) defines translation strategy as "a potentially conscious procedure for the solution of a problem which an individual is faced with when translating a text segment from one language into another". Despite the controversies around the linguistic approaches, the notion of equivalence still represents one of the major concerns for professional translators and theoreticians. The translation of a text into another language is often difficult when it comes to expressing social or cultural realities, objects, phenomena or concepts of the source language which do not have equivalents in the target language. This situation, which accounts for the limitations of equivalence in translation, is at the origin of translation strategies also found in the style of many African writers, whose fiction represents in European languages realities that are specific to African languages and cultures. Ro-uamba's *Le Carnaval de la mort* is a case in point.

Space constraints do not permit me to deal exhaustively with all the communicative strategies in this novel, but I shall limit myself to two examples which correspond to translation procedures: borrowing and literal translation. Delisle *et al* (1999: 122) defines borrowing as follows: "A translation procedure where <the translator> carries over a word or an expression from the <source text> into the <target text>, either because the <target language> does not have a lexicalized <correspondence>, or for stylistic or rhetorical reasons (*sic*).” As to literal translation, it is “a <translation strategy> where a <translator> produces a <target text> while retaining the formal features of the <source text>, but conforming generally to the grammar of the <target language>” (Delisle *et al* 1999: 154). The authors of this definition add that the concept of “literalness” applies to both the meaning and form of the text.

If we take borrowing, we find that it is a recurrent communication or translation procedure used in the *Le Carnaval de la mort*. The author uses borrowing for proper names (names of people and places). In general, the author borrows from his mother tongue – Mooré – proper names, as shown in the following examples: Yamba, Tindaogo, Téné, Gouldou and Tanlarghin. The same technique is used to designate objects, concepts or realities which are specific to Mossi culture. In this connection, one may cite: *Voaga*, *Roundé*, *Zakin Naba*, *Zabyouya*, *Zou-Pondo*, *Sindo*. When these borrowings are used for the first time in the novel, they are followed by explanations or by what Paul Bandia (1996: 141) describes as “in-text translation” which he defines as follows: “In-text translation is an attempt to clarify the meaning of a foreign language word, expression, clause or sentence within an utterance which is otherwise entirely in the main language of writing or expression. This translation technique seeks to elucidate foreign language items in an utterance by providing clarification within one and same discourse.”

A few examples will suffice to illustrate this technique: “*Voaga* (kapok), a sauce he enjoys very much” (14); “*Roundé*, i.e., the one who is given preference, the favourite” (54); and “*Zou-Pondo*, the phase of shaving heads” (120).⁵ The author deems it necessary to explain or translate these terms because he is fully conscious that his readership does not exclusively belong to his Mooré linguistic community. This technique results in a kind of code-mixing or code-switching in the text (for further details see Bandia 1996). However, the use of vernacular words or phrases constitutes a safe means for expressing sociocultural realities for which there are no equivalences in the French language. This technique adds a local flavour to and enriches the text: “Besides preserving meaning and compensating for a lack of adequate terminological equivalence, native words and expressions add local colour to the text, and putting them side by side with their gloss, explanation or translation, enriches the text from a stylistic point of view” (Bandia 1996: 143).

As for literal translation, this strategy applies to proverbs, metaphors, riddles and praise songs. The passage below is part of the praise songs at Yamba’s father’s funer-

als: "Pardon left, pardon right. Pardon in front, pardon behind. I have no name. But as our ancestors say, you cannot go away without saying something. This is why when you want to call me, 'I am the liana from the desert; in the absence of a protecting tree, I lean against God'" (119).⁶

The first two sentences, literally "Apologies to the left, apologies to the right. Apologies to the front, apologies to behind", may not mean anything to the Francophone reader who is not familiar with the Mooré language and culture, but the Mossi reader will recognize this literal rendering of Mooré. Such a literal translation serves to mark the cultural differences between Mossi culture and French culture and to confirm the very often and debated hypothesis of Sapir-Whorf according to which our perception of reality is moulded by our language (for example, see Wardhaugh 1992 and Hudson 1998). Our world vision, Sapir and Whorf claim, is determined by the way we behave and think:

The background linguistic system (in other words the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language (Sapir and Whorf cited by Hudson 1998: 96).

The techniques used in Rouamba's novel may be generalized to most Burkinabè writers. They contribute to the valorisation of Mossi and Burkinabè cultural identity, and account for the specific condition of the Francophone and Anglophone writer, who is not only bilingual or polyglot, but also bicultural or multicultural. African literature is inspired by both Western culture and African culture. But in the case of a novel like *Le Carnaval de la mort* it is possible to qualify the writer as an "author-translator"⁷ because of the topics, style and communication strategies used in this novel. This seems to be the case for African writers in general according to Makouta M'Boukowsky: "In most cases the Black African writer thinks in his/her mother tongue, and expresses himself/herself in French. Thus, his/her language of expression must be considered as a perfect translation from his/her mother tongue" (cited by Nintai 1993: 567).⁸

Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial literary texts have often been described as "hybrid" texts because they result from linguistic and cultural contacts. According to Christina Schäffner and Beverly Adab, these texts represent a compromise between two or several cultures. One of the consequences of such a hybridity for Samia Mehrez (1992: 122) is that the reader of African literary productions is subjected to a perma-

nent translation exercise. The case of *Le Carnaval de la mort* shows that a monolingual or monocultural reader will find it difficult to decipher African literature.

Conclusion

This study reveals that literary translation in Burkina Faso, which is a multilingual and multicultural society, is virtually non-existent if we consider translation in its classical definition, i.e., the transfer of a text in a language into another. Yet, as we have shown translation can contribute to the valorisation, promotion and enrichment of the local languages. However, the example of *Le Carnaval de la mort* clearly indicates the complexity of the concept of translation. This novel conspicuously illustrates the fact that Burkinabè and African creative writings can be considered as metatexts, even if they do not refer to prototexts in the traditional sense. Thus, African writings constitute a challenge, on the one hand, to the concepts of “author-original text”, and on the other hand, to those of “translator-translation/copy”, as assumed by Western literary theory and translation theory.

Notes

1. “En fait, le statut de la langue nationale est réellement joué par la langue officielle qui jouit de la même légitimité que l’hymne ou le drapeau national” (Tine 1988: 16-17). I have done all the translations from the original.
2. “[L]a problématique linguistique est curieusement absente de la littérature romanesque d’expression française, alors qu’elle pourrait y occuper une place centrale” (Caitucoli 1988: 191).
3. “Au nombre des charmes du livre il faut citer le conte. En Afrique la littérature écrite est souvent fécondée par la littérature orale. Il s’agit d’un conte inédit, imaginé par un personnage sur *le modèle de la production populaire*. Il explique à sa manière ‘l’origine des rapports entre l’homme et les animaux dits domestiques’”. (Sanwidi, 1994: 8, italics added).
4. “La thématique de l’ensemble de la production littéraire burkinabè, tous genres confondus, est intimement liée à l’histoire et à la société burkinabè. Les problèmes sociaux sont de loin les plus dominants. Le réalisme frise ici le naturalisme, donnant un caractère ‘national’ très poussé à cette littérature” (Sanou 1993: 71).
5. In quoting from *Le Carnaval de la mort* only page numbers are cited. “Voaga (kapok), sauce qu’il prisait le plus” (14); “Roumdé, c’est-à-dire, la préférée, la favorite” (54); and “Zou-Pondo, la phase de rasage des têtes” (120).
6. “Pardon à gauche, pardon à droite. Pardon devant, pardon derrière. Je n’ai pas de nom. Mais comme disent les ancêtres, on ne doit pas se relever sans mot dire. C’est pourquoi, quand vous voulez m’appeler, sachez que ‘je suis la liane du désert; à défaut d’arbre tutélaire, je m’adosse à Dieu” (119).
7. This phrase, which has been applied to Oyono by Suh Joseph Che (1995: 175), is also used by Sumner-Paulin (1995) to speak about African writers in general.
8. “L’écrivain négro-africain, dans la plupart des cas, pense dans sa langue, et s’exprime en français. De sorte qu’il faut considérer sa langue d’expression comme une traduction très soignée de sa langue maternelle” (Makouta M’Boukow cited by Nintai 1993: 567).

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