

Translation Revisited

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Contesting the Sense of African Social Realities

Edited by

Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo,
Mamadou Diawara
and Elísio S. Macamo

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INTRODUCTION

TRANSLATION AS TOTALITIES, ALTERITIES, AND INTERPRETATIONS

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Africa N'Ko, Speaking of Africa in the World is a long-term project that aims to establish a synergy between the plurality of reflections on knowledge production in the human sciences in and about Africa. To this end, conferences are regularly organised on diverse topics. After the Dakar conference dealing with colonial libraries, this conference discusses the concept of translation¹ in the social sciences and humanities, where the term usually refers to the operation that makes something said or written in one language intelligible in another. We hope to extend this restrictive meaning to include any form of conversion from one semantic space to another. Since translation is also a singular interpretation, the question of the role of translation in knowledge production is crucial. Having played a significant role in the constitution of the representation of Africa as an object of study, concepts in the social and human sciences are a social representation in need of a space for practice. To broaden this perspective, we need to extend the operation of translation beyond linguistics to all social practices.

¹ The verb *translate* is thought to come from a very old Latin verb with the present infinitive *transferre*, and the past participle *translatus* (See Robert Larousse, 1989:3).

Discussions on the colonial library during the first *Africa N'ko* conference held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2014, highlighted the question of translation in knowledge production about Africa. Translation appears as a key element in the knowledge production process and, as such, entails political stakes linked to the imbalance of the relations expressed. However, beyond domination and political exploitation, it should be emphasised that problems associated with epistemology, the architecture of knowledge and the methods of their construction, interject themselves into discussions. Thus "translation", in the sense we attribute to it, which is a transfer of an element of meaning from one social system to another, highlights social contradictions and affirms identities, which emphasises the obvious imbalances of domination. Very early on, translation posed problems – technical as well as social or political – linked to the singularity (sometimes exacerbated, sometimes in disintegration) of the semantic spaces between which it tries to establish a bridge, a shared space of meaning and an exchange. It soon became apparent that it was necessary to go beyond "translation" as a simple operation of substituting words from one language to another. Since the 1950s, the idea of a mechanical inter-translation of languages has been challenged, as the immeasurability of the historical context makes such a project unrealistic. Each space of meaning reflects the force of the heterogeneous history of societies and makes language not a closed system, but a representation of the world. This is a method which predates human action on the environment in a world that is constantly evolving. The linguistic field, in its broadest sense, has thus been integrated into ordinary social relations. Language is not only an instrument of communication or knowledge, but also always an instrument of power. Translation has, in fact, played an important part in the expansion of colonial empires. We recall the importance of the role of interpreters for early explorers and conquerors, and the impact of local translation of texts, especially legal and religious texts. Translation was a means of establishment and consolidation of colonial domination. Moreover, the absolute power of the coloniser's language and the devaluation of local languages meant that local populations had a vital need for translation. Living between at least two languages became the mark of their colonial condition. In many situations, translations of agreements were manipulated for the benefit of the conquerors. Situations of linguistic non-correspondence and the recourse to translation clearly show the methods of exercising political power and imposing epistemological hegemony. In this respect, it should be noted that the main task of "translator" agents (including traders and military) of the "colonial cultural conversion enterprise" was to re-write and re-

translate indigenous realities, often resistant to colonial command. Tajaswini Niranjana² suggests that it would ultimately be a question of transforming the translation "from being a 'containing' force... into a disruptive, disseminating one. The deconstruction initiated by re-translation opens up a post-colonial space as it brings 'history' to legibility". We should emphasise that linguistic misunderstandings, or even more broadly social ones, can be important moments of expression of resistance against domination on the part of local populations.

In Africa, no less than elsewhere, translation updates relations of competition, political relations between societies coming face to face and, here, the colonial situation decisively pervades the search for linguistic correspondence. Despite the usual attempt to make "translation" appear a neutral activity, translating a text from one language to another is to transform its symbolic identity. Translation, according to August von Schlegel, "is a duel to death where the translator or the one who is translated inevitably perishes" (cited by Danan, 2007). In the colonial context, translation, in the sense proposed here, is the transformation of an indigenous social organisation into a subordinate of a colonial order, and the superposition of a system of colonial domination in which all aspects of the indigenous system must be reconstructed and reconfigured. This operation functions like processes of "translational devaluation". Under colonialism, the colonial copy becomes more powerful than the indigenous original, which becomes devalued.

This historical context has often been misunderstood in favour of a narrow practice of translation limited to only linguistic transfers, and the creation of glossaries of similarities between languages. Yet, as an instrument of communication, language cannot escape the process of qualification, the evaluation of beings and things which presides over all human interaction. It becomes understandable that language itself is under the influence of internal social relations and those built with the "neighbours" of the society that uses it. Systems of meaning are closely indexed to the rhythm of the social dynamic which experience shows to not be fixed at all. The imbalance seen in relations between societies directly influences the structuring of linguistic exchanges. The system of domination into which African populations have been inserted places them in a kind of linguistic imperialism, and therefore in a hegemony of Western meaning. This hegemony is necessary in the epistemological domain, as it guides, and establishes the limits of meaning and the

² See Niranjana Tajaswini, (1992), *Siting Translation. History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*, University of California Press: 186.

personal and collective methods of production, development and use of knowledge about Africa. This book directly poses the question of the conditions for an overriding of the relations of power resulting from colonialism and which underlie concepts, languages and symbolic structures. Is it possible to include African realities not listed by the hegemonic colonial system in this process? This last quest helps to reinforce the means of investigation, enrich our knowledge, and broaden our systems of interpretation of a changing world. The unachieved intention of the reduction of violence in translation, the neutrality of translation and, above all, the quest for plurality and thus a limitation of the reproduction of the hegemonic semantic system, will remain.

In this introduction, we will return to the way in which the question of translation has thus far been addressed in the classical African scientific space. To this end, we will develop the conditions for the advent of this intellectual orientation and emphasise the social and political causes which are at their origin. We will thus use a definition of translation as a central theme of the work, an activity at the centre of knowledge production on societies which extends, beyond linguistics, to all operations of conversion, intentional transfer, from all social practices to different significant fields. Translation is then understood only if replaced in the political relations maintained by the connected semantic spaces. This relation is informed by the unequal quality (value) assigned to the 'Other' and, viewed in this light, the operation of translation then gives priority to the question of alterity, difference, definition of the 'Other' and the resulting social, cultural and economic inferences. In the service of colonialism in which it was asserted, the operation of translation served to deny the existence of other languages and peoples, and to legitimise their inferiorities, thus constituting one of the foundations of Western "superiority" and domination. This is the context within which Subaltern Studies asked whether the subaltern could speak, and postcolonial studies deplored the inscription of local life worlds into the order of knowledge purveyed by colonial regimes. A close link clearly exists between discursive structures and forms of knowledge, the definition of truths and justification for domination over conquered peoples. Translation, as an operation for linking opposed social orders, requires us to introduce at all stages of production, presentation and use of knowledge about Africa, the question of the identity, the power of the systems of values confronted, and, ultimately, the subversion of the epistemological frameworks in use. The operation, like the field of meaning to which it allows us access, moves away from the narrow perspective which formerly claimed to reveal the secret resources of connected societies to us through language. This

operation is now considered as a totality, a "total social fact", which is extended to all "translatable" human expressions, the semantic field of which we understand to include a vast domain – the present and past of human interactions.

The assumption behind this book we propose to readers is that knowledge from Africa and on Africa has always been approached through the prism of Western epistemology, which constitutes the order of knowledge established on Africa as a discourse rarely favourable to Africans. This historical situation leads to the promotion of a sort of "Gnosis", which tends to trap traditional African systems of thought in a rigid epistemological order that has been "imagined elsewhere" in the West. The result is a distortion of the content of discourse on Africa, which obscures the fundamental reality that it evokes. This reality results from a "translation" which generates many clichés and negative fictions, translation being part of the power relations linked to forms of domination based on misrepresentation, the commodification of the conquered and exploited individuals. African discourse in its variety and multiplicity is distorted by its expression in non-African languages and in hegemonic systems implementing concepts and categories, paradigms invented and imposed by social and human scientists, with the political objective of grasping and domesticating the social realities of this continent. This phenomenon in its entirety can be considered as an extended form of "translation", hence the importance we attach to it. From this perspective, a real observation post of the social function of languages and knowledge, policy and hierarchy of men and societies takes shape.

The African field of linguistics is vast. The many languages spoken but rarely written on the continent have attracted the interest of linguists, first appearing in the wake of the colonial administration. Learned societies and evangelistic missions assigned themselves the task of inventorying, preserving and analysing the hybrid life of languages. Thanks to independence, emphasis is now placed on national identity that does not obliterate the local, ethnic preservation of languages, as a means of promoting cultural diversity. Translation in the nation, as at the global level, guarantees a translation policy that protects plurilingualism and harmony between identity groups, against the risk of a dreaded hegemony. The work on languages in Africa bravely took a multidisciplinary direction that integrates anthropology, sociology and political science in the approach of linguistic fact. The central concept of "translation", which goes beyond proposals put forth by the promoters (Jacquemond, R. 1992, Newmark, P, 1993, Holmes, JS, 2000) of contemporary *translatology* and *translation studies*, should be strengthened and surpass a simple

metaphorical use, as has grammar in history (F. Braudel, 1993). The multidisciplinary, multi-site and critical approach adopted by the authors of this volume proposes an exploration of the African social dynamic through careful observation of points of convergence, the tensions that emerge there and, finally, a better understanding between men from a humanistic perspective.

Translation then gives priority to the question of alterity, difference, value, and the establishment of the equivalence of related social institutions. Here, we are dealing with the actual content of this supposedly balanced valence of translation. The chapters of this book will examine the social and political stakes of the translation of meanings from one semantic space to another throughout the various phases of the knowledge production process on Africa and in Africa. These confrontations of spaces of intelligibility are seen within the continent, as in its multiple contacts with the rest of the world. We can legitimately inquire about how this conversion of languages, cultures, techniques and social existences takes place between social spaces inscribed in relations marked with the seal of inequality and even political domination. The contributions to this volume are multidisciplinary milestones towards the critique of the political use of knowledge produced on African societies. We present a new heuristic perspective, based on the redefinition of criteria for knowledge production and use in relation to the historical dynamics of societies. The authors explore new fields of interaction between knowledge and politics, to reveal the secret strategies that organise translations, the changes of meaning and the ways of legitimisation of these semantic reconfigurations. Finally, each text invites a deeper study of this equation – translation – which links social groups, to then rethink translation as a tool of emancipation. From this perspective, it must always pass the test of comprehension. Such a goal limits translation to the study of empirical processes, the clearing of new fields of inquiry and the establishment of principles of constructive dialogue by proposing an open, broader approach to the analysis which goes beyond linguistics.

The crux of translation is the interpretive moment. But if "saying something about something is, in the full and strong sense of the word, interpreting", this operation only becomes meaningful once the status of the two parties – the narrator and the thing said – are identified. In Western history, the philosophical movement which focuses on interpretation is hermeneutics,³ long devoted to the technical problems of

³ Since its Greek origins, the art of *hermeneuein* has made hermeneutics a technique of interpreting, explaining, transcribing, transmitting, translating a set of

locating the rules for reading religious and legal texts. Hermeneutics, as a general philosophical problem, experienced a certain boom in the search for the solution to the continuity of the European tradition, particularly the French Revolution. It then follows that access to the spiritual products of other eras and peoples became an essential issue; the Bible and legal texts were no longer the objects of constant attention of all interpretation. This new historical fact, with the discovery of overseas lands, colonisation and contemporary globalisation, allows us to criticise the two main terms of the hermeneutic operation, namely the interpreter and his or her text. Historians are then clearly "members of the uninterrupted chain" which is rooted in Western political history. Starting from the criticism of historical reason, philosophers of this tradition realised that the rest of the world had things to say to them. Recognition of the foreign character⁴ of what comes from the outside leads hermeneutics to be dissatisfied with the simple objective neutrality imbued with ethnocentrism, but to assume an awareness which indicates their opinions and prejudices and qualifies them as such. Thus, the text has the opportunity to appear in its difference and manifest its own truth, against preconceived ideas that western observation had already put forward.

Gadamer observes that "Historical knowledge cannot be described following the model of an objectivist knowledge, for it is itself a *process* which has all the characteristics of a historical event. Understanding must be understood as an act of existence, and therefore a 'discarded project'".⁵ This leads Paul Ricoeur to consider interpretation as an operation that carries understanding within it. Yet, as Yves Charles Zarka⁶ notes, despite the interpreter's openness to the alterity of the text, Ricoeur's openness is often limited to an "unachieved self to self". The recognition of the Other remains very theoretical and is expressed only marginally in the development of the social sciences. In the wake of economic domination and the power of its military system, the West extends a hegemony that encompasses both material goods and men in a vast arrangement of

meanings from a "foreign world" to the world of its own. This is reflected in the meaning of the term *hermeneia*, which includes an idea of ambiguity, plurivocity.

⁴ Jane Elisabeth Wilhelm, *Herméneutique et traduction : la question de □ « l'appropriation ou le rapport du "propre" à "l'étranger" [Hermeneutics and Translation: the question of "appropriation" or the relation between "own" and "foreign"]* Revue META, Volume 49, Number 4, December 2004.

⁵ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Le Problème de la conscience historique [The Problem of Historical Conscience]*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1996, pp. 73-74.

⁶ Yves Charles Zarka, « Éditorial. L'odyssée interminable de soi à soi ["Editorial. The interminable odyssey of self to self"] », *Cités* 2008/1 (n° 33), pp. 3-6.

meaning. Translation is no longer simple word processing, but the deployment of a permanent evaluation system, a translation system that converts everything according to the supreme pole of the process of validation. This process was already present at the dawn of Western hegemony, as François Hartog⁷ observes: "Master of seeing, master of knowing, master of believing using figures and procedures of a rhetoric of alterity set into motion by the whole set of masks of utterance, it names, inventories, classifies, counts, measures, surveys, arranges, delineates boundaries, distributes praise and blame, it says less about it than it knows. It remembers: it knows, shows, it makes known, we must believe." This hegemony is all the stronger because it imposes on all the means of interpretation, the technical means and institutions of legitimacy which give each sign its meaning and function in an invisible but coercive hierarchy.

Translation is not a simple tool of communication as humanists would like to think, but an operation of domination. In such a context, the open approach to translation that we propose accentuates the difficulty of interpretation: it minimises the semantic centrality of the language (oral or written) to take seriously all the objects entering the process of the dialogical operation of translation, which itself should lead to the establishment of an equivalence of units of meaning considered. The significant status of all the protagonists can only be asserted at the end of an undertaking of intelligibility, an agreement on the meaning to be given to the entities involved in the proposed formulation of the semantic field. In this context, this universe of interpretation must therefore rid itself of hierarchies supported by the teleological, Eurocentrist line of thought to seek other referential types for the social valuation of units as well as the result of their interactions. This new framework of reference is required to break with the reductionist view corresponding to utilitarian standards adopted/adapted from the philosophical and political utilitarianism that permeates the history of our relations with Europe. This task of reconversion of ways of thought will reassess the historical concepts and social and temporal divisions which crisscross our reasoning and our logical links according to trends imposed by the dominant intellectual and political position of the West. It is at this price that a radical hermeneutics will be possible. The texts included in this volume are still-tentative sketches of this critical and general reformulation of our relationship with

⁷ Hartog François, *Le miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'Autre* [*Herodotes' Mirror: Essay on the Representation of the Other*] Paris, Gallimard, 1980, p. 372.

African social realities. While our approach to translation seeks to address epistemological issues by laying bare the assumptions underlying the production of knowledge of Africa, it also pursues a methodological goal breaking down into two major concerns. The first concern takes up the preceding discussion on translation as interpreting drawing on hermeneutics, to argue that engaging with the role of translation in the production of social science knowledge today in Africa must entail a commitment to a discussion of how Africa is “told”, as opposed to what is said about Africa. The question of “how” refers to procedures or methodology, and therefore one of the most important challenges faced by those like us, who feel uncomfortable about the representation of the continent in the social sciences. The second concern refers to the potential, based on African challenges, which the proposed engagement with translation has for improving the language of the social sciences beyond Africa. In other words, while the volume takes issue with how translation may have misrepresented Africa, it also seeks to clear the path for a critical engagement with the knowledge production of Africa, which yields useful insights into the practice of social science in general.

This book provides the proceedings of the 2015 *Africa N’ko* conference, with the theme “Translation: Disputing the Sense of African Social Realities”. The goal of the conference was to discuss methods of translation from one social system to another, particularly the relationship to knowledge construction and the need to put forward conditions that allow human societies to connect meaning without having to give up their identities. This book includes a selection of papers from presentations made at this conference, including research from the fields of history, anthropology, political science/political philosophy, international relations, law, sociology, literary and comparative literary studies, linguistics, education, among others. While the papers broached a broad range of topics and research questions, a few resurging themes of discussion in the presentations emerged each day of the conference. Through the different sections and chapters that make up this book, the main points examined during the conference can be seen as follows.

The first section of the work addresses issues arising from Western expansion and highlights the limits of European universalism that is supposed to justify this conquest of the world. This limit generates a series of disputes about the intention of the conquerors to symbolically domesticate the multiple indigenous sources, which have remained recalcitrant in the face of the local imposition of imperial meanings. Dating back to very ancient periods in Africa, this situation is seen in contexts of global political domination, hegemony, or direct colonisation.

This political dispute over the conditions of standardisation, is actualised concretely in operations of translation, seen as a means of transforming local norms and institutions, spiritual values, as in those of the medical science newly imported into Africa, to achieve a form of secularisation of the indigenous social order. A critical feedback on knowledge production conditions in the famous Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Zambia proposed in one of the chapters is an illustrative case of the confrontation between European anthropology (Godfrey Wilson) and its local assistants and informants on interpretation of indigenous social life and dynamics of local change. The process of reconstructing indigenous histories is mediated in acts of translation. African discourse in its variety and multiplicity is distorted by its expression in non-African languages and in conceptual systems, and categories used by social and human scientists, to grasp the realities of this continent. The problematic of the possibility for Africans to think for themselves, to deviate from these conceptual systems, non-African epistemological grids and linguistic universalisation, emerges in the face of the hegemonic agenda. The role of intellectuals in this operation is crucial.

The second section plunges us into the vast space of the globalised business world in the realm of international norms of capitalism, through the African *Ubuntu* as a strategic economic lever for Africans, capable of provoking a reversal of capitalism that is more advantageous for them. The analysis of globalisation, its supranational institutions, its capitalism and its dominant language (English), shows a certain permanence in the regulatory functions of norms as political means of secularisation and subversion of dominated societies. This clearly raises the question of boundaries, their qualifying status and methods for crossing them. Struggles, and thus the valuations of individuals, groups and things, are crystallising on the sidelines. Nothing seems to escape this competitive institution of the development of social spaces: toponymy is strongly influenced by the Eurocentric colonial heritage, and translations of the Bible reveal semantic conflicts between Europeans and Africans, who are disputing the way of structuring African identity in the long term.

The third section includes texts criticising the historical conditions of dispute and "negotiated stabilities" of African perspectives. From anthropological discourse to the manifestation of African diasporas (men and art objects) confronted with the rigidity of European systems of meaning, translation proves to be required moments of tension, expression of symbolic domination and the search for agreements exuded by literary texts of all kinds, material arts (war monuments) and the most sophisticated academic knowledge. Thus, exhibitions function as translations insofar as

they reconstruct contexts in which African objects are created and original messages attached to them. On the other hand, the paradox here is that these modern museums bring to light knowledge processes about African art, and therefore about African societies, of which most of the symbolic functions – not expressed in this European framework – are sacred. There is thus an epistemological problem in that the public, the words and codes used, are external to the art objects. All this rivalry, which arises during knowledge construction – its forms determining the use made of it in social arenas – on various scales of the human world, forces us to revisit the old project of an anthropology of Western origin, whose foundations are challenged in the African field, where it presents itself as a permanent political auxiliary. Here, the universalist epistemological principles are weakened by the triumph of reductionism, which limits its heuristic potential and its explanatory power of social facts. The analysis of moments as a source of translation opens up a new interpretative possibility. Such a perspective will provide a more or less objective assessment of the pluralistic nature of the functionality and phenomenology of artistic works that commemorate a conflict, and thus revisit paradigms of conceptualisation in translation.

The last section restarts the discussion on the enclosure of African thought systems, caught up in constraints imposed by the Western epistemological order. In such a context of domination, African scholars who are required to express themselves in non-African languages and, according to rationalities of Western scientific disciplines, struggle to deploy their semantic potential and assert their own scientific identity. This line of confrontation of modes of constructing knowledge about Africa is evident in the use of social media, in these falsely virtual spaces, where identity quests assert themselves and users rely on cultures of their reference groups, exacerbating the tensions surrounding the permanence of colonialist imageries coupled with African realities. A battle of representations is crossing the very heart of social confrontations which are common in societies in the midst of transformation. At the centre of African social life – here Gabon and Cameroon – the law is increasingly becoming a central norm and appropriation, that is, a "balanced translation". In this new juridified post-colonial universe, legal rules by local populations are paramount. An active and enlightened legal life in traditional circles is the condition for the emergence of truth within an imported positive law with formal principles and displaced ethics. Emphasis is then placed on issues relating to the translation of the law, with respect to standards and methods of social action. Colonial influence in the translation of social law is central here because translation can be

seen as a political discourse, a tool for the control of indigenous peoples. This clearly shows the role of "translation" in the definition of cultures, of individuals, things, thus in a reconversion of what is historically considered "the African tradition". What then follows is a negative intervention of tradition in the updating of all the norms governing contemporary indigenous practices. Edward Said⁸ stressed that this interception of local history "implies control, accumulation, confinement, implies a certain type of estrangement or disorientation on the part of the one who represents". In such a perspective, we understand the importance of an epistemological discussion about the claim of some Western philosophers (here, the American Thaddeus Metz) to assume an organising competence that defines the bases of the "worldview" and therefore the morality of Africans. The confrontation with the "wall" of colonial law shows a constant aspiration of the populations to address it with a proper and appropriate legal discourse. This clearly shows that each society has a "system of truth", and this unbalanced social confrontation in a Cameroonian court of law demonstrates the ethical distance of politically opposed, politically unequal social orders, each producing a competing legal statement.

The reading of these texts highlights the misunderstandings that translation reveals in the enunciation of African realities. Through their work, the authors demonstrate the ideas of political domination underlying "Western translation", the scholarly and popular development of ways of describing and narrating African social realities. They considered the diversity of materials (visual art, sculptural art, museums, written literature, oral traditions and personal careers of African intellectuals) in a multidisciplinary perspective (museumology, literature, art, sociology, philosophy and anthropology), and have carefully and rigorously taken on the questions posed. This pluridisciplinarity, called for by the context of the study, avoids a heuristic restriction of perspective to integrate into a space of common meaning all human expressions without *a priori* privileging linguistic translation. Nevertheless, this new approach confronts important epistemological questions. How do we transform the negative constraints of the persisting colonial situation into a positive momentum? African researchers are called on to offer a reflexive feedback on their collective itinerary. In his inaugural lecture given at the first *Africa N'ko* conference, a discussion on the colonial library, Valentin Yves Mudimbe stressed the close relationship between language and power.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Dans l'ombre de l'Occident [The Shadow of the West]* Payot, 2014, p. 13.

Mudimbe (1994: 13) wrote in *Les Corps glorieux des mots et des êtres* [*The Glorious Bodies of Words and Beings*]: "We are amused by my linguistic talents. [...] I speak French to my schoolmasters, Swahili to my fellow students, Songhye to my father and Luba to my mother." The force of French, the language of the schoolmasters – in both the metaphorical and proper sense of the word, because the schoolmasters were white – imposed itself on him very early on. As a child, Mudimbe realised that the choice of language is far from being a simple matter of mechanical translation. Language is the seat, the instrument of power. He speaks Swahili with fellow students, people of the world, those from elsewhere. Is not Swahili the language of trade? In a school environment, a place of mixing par excellence, this language establishes itself, provided that French allows it. As a *master* required by the context of birth and circulation of different languages, the young Mudimbe navigates between the various societies he tells us about: the society of the schoolmasters, of the fellow students, the paternal domain and that of his mother. Africanists have made an object of knowledge from this polyglottism. We should clarify the conditions for the creation of this object in Africa, but also reflect on how the social sciences, beyond the continent, create their object of research. We have thus broadened the question of translation beyond linguistics, to all social practices. We deal with the way in which translation prioritises the question of alterity, of difference, of the definition of the Other. In the service of colonialism, translation serves to deny the existence of other languages and other peoples and to legitimise their inferiorities, thus creating one of the foundations of Western "superiority". Edward Said has shown the close link between discursive constructions and forms of knowledge, the definition of truths and the justification of domination over colonised peoples.

This particular example emphasises an important question worth discussing: how is history, not only the past, told and re-told, read and re-read, by whom and for whom? How is Africa defined as an object of knowledge and thus defined, interpreted? This issue is all the more complex because it brings into question the researcher's affiliations. Questioning the itinerary of knowledge production about Africa is tantamount to positing the status of the "African voice", the epistemological legacy left to us by experience accumulated in Africa on the functioning of men in society. Ngĩgĩ wa Thiong'o launches a warning that should be kept in mind: "So if we want to develop knowledge, philosophy, and other arts through African languages, then we have to learn how to listen to what African tongues are saying. The pen should

work with the tongue [...] It's sad that instead of that cooperation, the pen has become the knife that cuts off African people's tongues."

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PART ONE:

**TRANSLATION THROUGH THE LENS
OF HISTORY**

CHAPTER ONE

TRANSLATING THE TIME OF CAPITAL: TRAVELLING IDEAS AND COLLECTIVE CLAIMS-MAKING IN ACCRA'S MAKOLA MARKET

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Translating coeval temporalities: Theoretical perspectives on travelling ideas and transformation

According to Harootunian (2000; 2010), temporal interpretative frames and templates have been used throughout most of the twentieth century's social theory to construct a distinctly modern experience in contrast to its ultimate other, the so-called Third World. For the case of Africa, Mudimbe (1988) and Mbembe (2001) most famously pointed to the practice of constituting a category of the continent that can be analysed only in negative terms, in the absence or lack of 'progress', 'modernity' or 'development' (Mudimbe 1988, 4; Mbembe 2001, 1), or in the words of Harootunian (2010, 367), in terms of history, 'stalled (...) to live repetitively their presents as unchanging pasts', because 'any time that doesn't conform to the normative social and historical time of a capitalist modern present' belonged to the historical temporality of untimeliness and was denied 'its immanence and contemporaneity with the modern present, that has judged it as unworthy of equivalent status'.¹

These critiques are grounded in the rejection of social formations, dated along a singular stream of time, on which cultural difference is

¹ Mbembe takes this point furthest when he states that 'the discursive definition of African identities and differences is not about being-other' but about not being at all (2001, 4).

translated into historicity, a point famously raised in Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*. Benjamin notes that 'the concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (...) History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)' (Benjamin 1969, 261). Benjamin proposes that the moment of everydayness, marking the emergence of modern capitalism, allows for the possibility of difference in the constant production of sameness in capital's routinising force. For Benjamin, time and history cannot be thought of in singular terms, but are fundamentally multiple, entangled and – crucially – coeval in nature, repeatedly converging with themselves and other temporal strands.

More recently, Anderson (1998) and Cheah (1999) pick up this critique of the 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983, 31-32) when they contest the so-called 'time-lag' associated with the idea of 'latecomers' in history, while Chakrabarty (2008) refutes what he calls the 'historicist', 'stagist' or 'waiting-room' versions of history that do not culminate in the history of capitalist modernity. Their responses to these issues emphasise the mutual integration of various times lived and experienced across the world. Whereas for Anderson, the "specter of comparison" simultaneously brings to the fore Euro-American modernity and its outsides, which are mutually inscribed in each other, Chakrabarty develops a dual historicism in which the categories and subjectivities of capitalist modernity may be reaching into each and every corner of the planet, but their 'universalizing thrusts' are cut through with various 'History 2s', that do not lend themselves to the historical development of capital, thereby disrupting its ordering logic and rendering its realisation necessarily incomplete. Similarly, Mbembe contributes to this debate his concept of 'entanglement', when he describes the time of the postcolony as marked by 'discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another and envelope one another' (2001, 14).

Mbembe, who bases his point on a concept of 'time as lived (...) in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presences and absences, beyond the lazy categories of permanence and change' (ibid., 8), approaches these often evasive everyday convergences through the lens of the 'contemporaneousness' of subjects, their 'experience of "living in the concrete world"' and ultimately their 'subjective forms that make possible any validation of its contents' (2001, 17). It is in this work of 'validation' that the complex interplay of multiple, coeval temporalities can be

revealed, as convergences require specific efforts of translation between the plausibilities involved. This is in line with Chakrabarty who argues that there are no universally valid concepts. Instead, globalisation is rendered possible through continuous translation which allows those affected by it to creatively adapt (rather than one-sidedly assimilate) travelling significations upon their integration in the new context – thereby evading the universalising thrusts of seemingly universal concepts, such as capitalist modernity, ultimately providing the possibility for difference.

In other words, evasive everyday entanglements between coeval temporal strands can be approached through the lens of translations and subsequent validations of different subjectivities and associated significations of order. This conceptualisation of converging, coeval temporalities as continuous translations moves away from a concept of historical change through unilinear assimilation to a multi-sided process that is actively shaped by the efforts of translation actors. These actors continuously reproduce the plurality of coeval temporalities along with, as Mbembe (1999, 4) puts it, the subjectivities ‘that make these temporalities possible and meaningful’. Mbembe’s point emphasises that instead of thinking about Africa in terms of alternatives, that is, from the point of view of cultural relativism, which ultimately freezes African identities and not least reproduces the notion of an implicit referent of these alternatives (Mitchell 2000, xii), understanding Africa in the world requires us to take seriously the role of capital, while refuting the notion of its unilinear assimilation in local sites. His methodological emphasis on the everyday opens the way to understand the ‘distinctive historicity’ of African societies in this very ‘multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that, although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualized outside a world that is, so to speak, globalized’ (ibid., 9).

Several authors have theorised the temporal character of capitalism, most prominently among them Thompson (1967), Harvey (2006) and Sewell (2008). Based on its ‘complex and dynamic process wherein diverse material landscapes of commodity production, distribution, exchange, consumption, servicing and disposal are fabricated in reciprocal relation to the temporally determined dictates of surplus value realization’ (Castree 2009, 27), capitalism probably has an ordering effect on all areas of social life. This materialises in a particular capitalist temporality, ‘punctuated time’, which is ‘rigidly programmed into the formal calendrics of financial debt and benefit, self-renewal as a citizen, [and] insistent work schedules’ (Guyer 2007, 411). The structure of the capitalist system of production, in other words, goes hand in hand with the construction of a particular subjectivity as capitalism presumes certain forms of control over

personhood, in the form of free labour. In Chakrabarty's (2000, 654) words, the Marxian category of abstract labour, which 'is juridically and politically free – yet socially unfree', combines 'the Enlightenment themes of juridical freedom (rights, citizenship) and the concept of the universal and abstract human who bears this freedom', because free labour is 'both a precondition for capitalist production and its invariable result' (Chakrabarty 2008, 63).

Yet, as explained by Castree (2009, 35), 'we live in a more-than-capitalist world: one where (...) there are other stories to be told, other modes of living, other today's and various possible tomorrows.' Or, to follow Guyer (2007), all these forces do not necessarily produce complete ruptures or transitions. Instead, transformation results from 'not so much a break as a major shift composed of a multitude of small ruptures', which implies 'continuations and reverberations that are configured into themes and images in novel but not necessarily revolutionary ways' (ibid., 410). These composites then call for an analysis of the 'still-lingering and newly emergent entailments and dissonances that escape their terms of reference and that constitute life in the attenuated temporal spaces in which everyday intelligibilities are forged' (ibid.). Mbembe's emphasis on the *contemporaneousness* or the convivial experience of the everyday that is simultaneously within and without the time of capital equally underlines that that which he calls the modern African condition cannot be described in the simple juxtaposition to the time of capital or modernity. For Mbembe, 'every age, including the postcolony, is in reality a combination of several temporalities' in which persist different significations and relations of subjectivity (ibid., 15).

This chapter is concerned with the translation of capitalist relations of subjectivity into the Makola market of Ghana's capital, Accra. Data for this analysis was collected between 2011 and 2014 over the course of ten months of fieldwork, applying a mix of qualitative interviews and participant observation in market stalls and meetings of market associations. I proceed by retracing these translations in the fields of market leadership, conceptions of justice, and finally notions of entitlement, by drawing on traders' 'validations' of travelling significations of order, previously translated into their everyday.

Coeval constructions of political subjectivity: Translating significations of order

Makola market is the centre of commercial activity in Ghana's capital, Accra, hosting an estimated 30,000 traders. Clark's (1994) seminal analysis of Kumasi Central Market reveals the principles that structure

Ghanaian traders' collective organisation. Although her main preoccupation is the role of these collectivities in safeguarding traders' economic interests – emphasising the role of market organisations in managing entrepreneurial risks and competition besides providing support in times of private hardship or need – Clark also describes the capacity of these groups to voice dissent on a political level. Like Clark's description of the structural characteristics of the market system in Kumasi, collective negotiations of subjectivities in Makola unfold along commodity lines, that is, the '[f]ormal groups and informal sets of colleagues defined by commodity and by location' (Clark 1994, 219). These assemblages of sheds and kiosks into such market stall lines offering goods and commodities of a similar kind can be read as a material expression of the time of the market in that they accommodate the particular subjectivities and relationships of entitlement and obligation between market actors that evade the marketised rationalities of capital time, while at the same time enabling the very rotation of different forms of capital in the marketplace (cf. Marfaing and Thiel, 2013).

In the following, I extend this observation of the entanglement between mechanisms lending themselves to the time of capital and those evading it altogether onto market traders' collective claims-making practices. In my first empirical example, I explore the mechanisms legitimating market leadership and their entanglement with received proceduralistic approaches associated with the time marked by the capital-citizenship-(nation)state formation, which arguably only partially "nationalise" the market traders' concept of order. My second case illustrates the creative appropriation of ideas pertaining to justice in Makola's localised market courts. Finally, I explore transnational travels of ideas in the form of international NGOs seeking to associate traders with concepts of citizenship as a "rights-bearing relationship with the state", thereby affecting the understanding of entitlement by associations within the market.

Translating leadership: Syncretic forms of representation

Commodity lines in Makola run along multiple, overlapping and cross-cutting collective identities, including identities based on capital access and partisan divisions and, to some extent, ethnicity. Irrespective of their structural differences, these associations share fundamental notions of representation and leadership. Equally, they have in common their creativity regarding the reception, translation and adaptation of alternative travelling concepts of order into the context of their marketplaces.