



Translation of African Literature: A German Model?

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1994 – 2004

**Dix ans d'échanges littéraires entre
l'Afrique du Sud et la France**

*Ten years of literary exchange
between South Africa and France*

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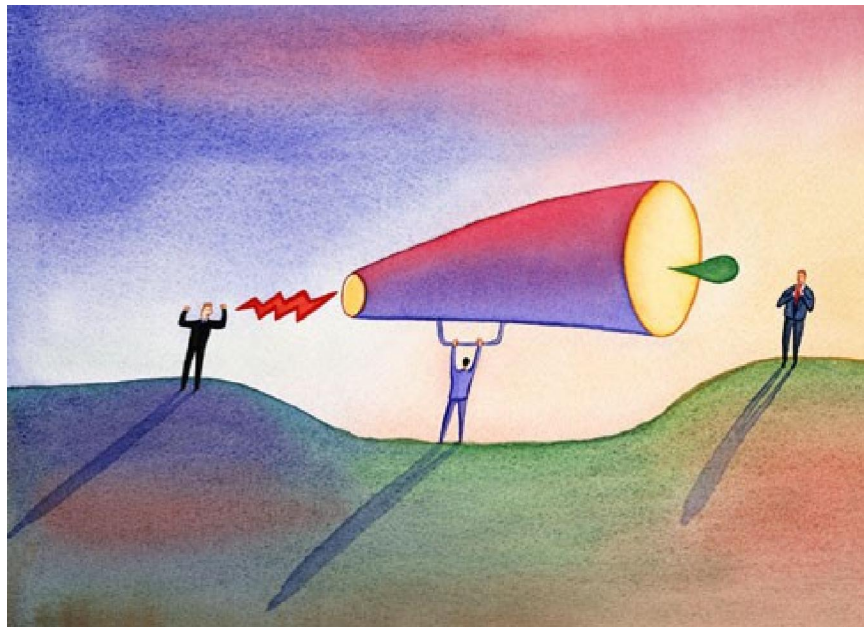
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Translation of African Literature: A German Model?

Jean-Pierre Richard

Abstract

Qu'elle soit traduite en français ou en allemand, la littérature africaine reste l'un des parents pauvres de l'édition de part et d'autre du Rhin, où elle ne représente pas plus de 0,5% des livres de fiction publiés en traduction chaque année.

Quant à la nature de la production, les points communs ne manquent pas : hypertrophie du domaine anglophone, au détriment notamment des littératures en langues africaines d'origine non-européenne ; prédominance des auteurs anglophones d'Afrique du Sud et du Nigeria ; sur-représentation de quatre auteurs (Brink, Breytenbach, Coetzee, Gordimer), ce "quatuor blanc" occupant toutefois plus de place en français (la moitié des titres sud-africains publiés) qu'en allemand (un cinquième).

L'Histoire coloniale explique une autre différence, majeure, entre les deux cultures quant à la traduction des littératures d'Afrique : depuis 1945 l'allemand en a traduit près de quatre fois plus que le français, soit quelque 611 titres publiés contre 165, toutes langues d'origine confondues. C'est qu'il n'y a pas d'auteurs africains écrivant en allemand, alors qu'ils sont nombreux à le faire en français. Paradoxalement, en français, l'essor de la Négritude dans les années 1950 a pénalisé les littératures africaines qui n'étaient pas d'expression française, au moment même où elle créait en Allemagne, autour du traducteur Jahn Janheinz, une tradition traductive dont les effets bénéfiques allaient plus tard s'étendre à toutes les littératures d'Afrique, une fois surmontée la crise due aux lendemains désenchantés de certaines Indépendances africaines.

Quant au long oubli où tomba en France la littérature sud-africaine alors que sur place triomphait l'apartheid, sans doute fut-il lié aux besoins du général de Gaulle en uranium et en or. Si l'expérience de traduction acquise au temps de la Négritude a assurément aidé l'allemand à sortir du marasme sa littérature africaine, aurait-elle suffi à réveiller l'intérêt du lectorat germanophone ? La comparaison avec la situation en France, depuis un quart de siècle, tend à montrer le rôle décisif joué par la Société pour la promotion des littératures d'Afrique, d'Asie et d'Amérique latine créée en 1980 autour de la Foire du Livre de Francfort. Rien de tel n'a vu le jour en France, avec pour résultat qu'il paraît en traduction française, bon an mal an, et une fois décomptées les oeuvres africaines d'expression française publiées en allemand, trois fois moins de livres africains qu'en traduction allemande.

When it comes to translating African literature into French and German since WWII, it may be revealing to compare situations in both languages, with a nagging question in mind: which culture performed better and can one or the other serve here as a model? A comprehensive description of the German or French scene on the subject falls well beyond the scope of a short paper. Here we can try and point out areas in which German and French outputs of African literature in translation tend either strictly to coincide or noticeably diverge. First we shall compare facts and figures, then consider matters from a historical perspective.¹

¹ This is the third part in a case study of African Literature in French Translation. First we looked into French publishers' policies towards South African Literature in the second half of the 20th century (Richard, 2003: 59-71). Then we tried to assess the part played by translators in getting African titles published in French translation (Richard, 2005).

Facts and figures: a shared marginality and imbalances

Clearly, on the basis of data collected over the past sixty years², African fiction is marginal both in German and French translation. One score on which the record of both cultures looks equally poor is the number of African writers in the total amount of published translations. In 1999, 24 new books by African writers were published in German translation out of 4300 fiction titles in translation published that year³: a 0,5% share of the bounty can definitely be called marginal. As to French translations of African fiction, they do not even reach that level. Sadly Peter Ripken was totally justified in observing that "there are very few translations of Anglophone and Lusophone African writers in France, and the more popular ones are white South Africans."

Still, marginal though it is when viewed against the overall picture, the output of African literature in translation is barely four (exactly 3,7) times greater in German than in French: since the end of WWII 613 different fiction titles by African writers were translated into German⁴, and around 165 into French. Now this huge difference in size is partly deceptive, for whereas any book out of Africa has to be translated into German, French-speaking Africa has many African authors writing in French – from Djibouti to Dakar, from Mali to the Congo River. If we strike those French-speaking African writers off the German list of translations where they account for just under 20% of all titles (121 altogether⁵ out of 613) an impressive 492 books in German translation out of Africa still remains which is three times more African titles in German than those translated into French over the same sixty-year period (1945-2004).

Although quite different in size, the German and French outputs show the same inner unbalanced, or distorted, structure on at least three counts: the languages translated into French and German; the African countries represented in French and German translation; and the writer's skin colour.

Firstly, the output is linguistically unbalanced: translations from English predominantly in both French and German. There were 434 titles translated into German from English (70,8% of 613), 121 from French (19,7%), leaving only 58 from other languages, including 24 titles from altogether seven African languages (discounting Afrikaans): 10 from Arabic, 5 from kiSwahili, 3 from Igbo, 2 from

² For all figures concerning German publishing I am indebted to Peter Ripken of the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin American Literature. As for translation into French of African fiction, *Notre Librairie* lists all South African titles up to the publication date (1995). I have simply added new African titles published in French translation over the last decade.

³ The figures quoted here cover primary works in African literature, excluding anthologies and anything not fiction: Northern Africa is not included.

⁴ The count stopped on January 12th, 2004, with the publication of the latest edition of the Quellen catalogue, published in alternate years by the Society for the Promotion of African, Asian, and Latin American Literature.

⁵ African fiction writers translated from French into German include Francis Bebey, Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Alexandre Kum'a N'dume, Jean Skelle-Matiba, René Philombe from Cameroon, Laye, Ousmane Sembene, Birago Diop, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Cheikh Hamidou Kane from Senegal, Rabemananjara from Madagascar, Ahmadou Kourouma, Aké Loba, Bernard Dadié from the Ivory Coast, Henri Lopès from the Congo, Michel Kayoya from Burundi, Yambo Ouologuem from Mali, Olympe Bhely-Quénou from Bénin (all those before 1980), and (since 1980) Esther Kamatari from Burundi, Abdourahman Waberi from Djibouti, Jean-Marie Adiaffi, Fatou Keïta, Véronique Tadjo from the Ivory Coast, Jean-Félix Belinga, Calixthe Belaya, Mireille Makampé, Daniel Mepin, Patrice Nganang, Claude Njiké-Bergeret, Kolyang Dina Taiwé from Cameroon, In Koli Bofane, Pierre Kembo Mayamba, V. Y. Mudimbe, Emmanuel Dongala, Sony Labou Tansi, Tchicaya U Tam'si from Congo, Jean-Luc Raharimanana, Michèle Rakotoson from Madagascar, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Aly Diallo, Kassoum Keïta, Soukalo Modibo Keïta, Idrissa Keïta from Mali, Malcolm de Chazal from Mauritius, Amenokal Alhavi, Mano Dayak, Abdoua Kanta from Niger, Axel Gauvin from Réunion, Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall from Senegal, Camara Laye, Djibril Tamsir Niane from Guinea, Tété-Michel Kpomassie from Togo, Bambote Makombo from Central-Africa.

seSotho, 2 from Zulu, 1 from Kikerewe, 1 from Hausa. Over the same period 15 titles were translated from Afrikaans, 17 from Portuguese (all since 1980) and 2 from Dutch.⁶ Almost all translations into French were from English.⁷ Translations from kiSwahili, Acholi, seSotho, Arabic (Sudan) accounted for one each, and there were 3 from Afrikaans and 8 from Portuguese.

Secondly, most titles translated from English into German or French are by writers from South Africa and Nigeria. There were 264 titles from South Africa (representing 60,8% of 434), 67 from Nigeria (15,4%), 25 from Ghana (5,7%), 19 from Zimbabwe (4,3%, all since 1980) and 23 from Kenya (5,3%) translated into German. 111 titles translated into French originated in South Africa (67,2% of 165), 33 came from Nigeria (20%, half by Wole Soyinka), 8 from Zimbabwe (4,8%), 6 from Kenya (3,6%) and 2 from Ghana (1,2%).

Thirdly, German and French South African translations are equally loaded in favour of so-called "white" writers. 7 South Africans totaling 88 titles (one third of 264) were translated into German: 27 titles by Nadine Gordimer (including just 2 before 1980), 19 by Laurens van der Post (including 5 before 1980), 10 by Athol Fugard (but only 3 since 1980), 11 by Breyten Breytenbach (all since 1980), 9 by André Brink (idem), 8 by J.M. Coetzee (idem) and 4 by Mike Nicol (idem). For French translations it goes up to two thirds of the output: 74 titles out of 111, including 19 by Gordimer, 18 by Brink, 10 by Coetzee, 10 by Breytenbach, 7 by Fugard, 7 by Laurens van der Post and 3 by Nicol.

Between France and Germany the contrast is even more striking if we focus on the four biggest names for French, Gordimer, Brink, Breytenbach and Coetzee accounting for 57 titles out of 111 altogether for South African literature, that is to say more than half (51%) of translations from English, whereas in German the same four writers boast 55 titles, which represents a fifth (20,8%) of all South African translations from English into German. Concentration of the French translation process onto a quartet of "white" writers is extreme and indeed needs to be looked into as a phenomenon specific to the French situation, considering just those four writers take up more than a third (34%) of translation space for African literature into French, as against only 12,6% for African fiction translated into German. Of all African works of fiction translated into French, whatever their country of origin, one book in three is by Breytenbach, Brink, Coetzee or Gordimer.

A historical perspective

To try and understand why and how such an imbalance prevailed in French and not – or not to the same extent – in German, we may look at the history of translation of African literature in both languages since the end of WWII, and see how it often developed along parallel lines but at other times clearly did not.

German (non-)colonial heritage favored translation. Germany lost its budding African empire during WWI, including Tanganyika, Namibia, and Cameroon. As a result no African writer (or next to none) ever wrote in German. Faced with the mammoth task of having to translate any given book coming out of Africa, the German-speaking world developed a real habit of translating. Thus a much bigger chunk of the African literary output in English, or indeed in African languages, is now available in German translation than in French translation. Paradoxically, if you are keen on African literature,

⁶ Both books are written by Moses Isegawa, from Uganda. They were published in German translation in 2000 and 2002.

⁷ That is excluding the series "African Classics", published by Julliard, then by Armand Colin (since 1963 and *Poètes nzakara* translated by Eric de Dampierre).

you are better off being German than French-speaking, even if you actually live on African soil, let us say in Tunis or Dakar, Brazzaville or Kinshasa.

Indeed the tradition of translating African writers into German became established soon after WWII. As early as 1954 a 200-page anthology by translator Jahn Janheinz introduced Negritude to the German-speaking world (Janheinz, 1954). The following year a whole volume of poems by Senghor came out in German translation by Janheinz (Senghor, 1955). Janheinz's main interest was with Negritude, and the 1950s were the heyday of Negritude. So Negritude, which dominated African writing in the fifties and early sixties, helped create a dynamics of translation into German. It was instrumental in launching the process of translation and created a tradition when obviously nothing of the kind could happen in France. Although it made French literature richer and developed French interest in African literature, Negritude meant a bad start for translation into French as compared with Germany where it proved a boon for German translation. Again figures tell it all: before 1980 there were 38 published translations of African books – by 20 writers – from French into German, out of a total output of 140 African titles in German translation over the same period (27,1%). For books published after 1980 the proportion of translations of African books from French into German fell by 10% (to 17,5%, i.e. 83 titles out of 473).⁸

In the first half of the 1960s German readers were to benefit from the early launch of the translation process in their language and from German translators' pioneering work and initial experience (Ricard, 2005). The whole affair was facilitated when "the winds of change" blowing independence throughout the continent boosted interest in Africa among the citizenry of Europe. A fairly impressive mass of African literature in English from South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania and even Somalia and the Sudan appeared in German translation in the early 1960s, on a scale that was unprecedented and which is unparalleled in the French-speaking world.

Still, German translators were not the only ones in the field. Indeed Negritude boosted both German *and* French interest in African literature in English. French publishers did a fairly good job at the time: 6 books by Peter Abrahams – 1950, 1956, 1958, 1960, 1966, 1968 –, 3 by Alan Paton – 1950, 1954, 1963 –, 4 by Laurens van der Post – 1953, 1956, 1960, 1962 – appeared in French translation within a couple of years of their initial publication in English. And the publishers involved were called Albin Michel, Stock, Casterman, Gallimard – all big names in French publishing. Also in 1963, *Présence Africaine*, a Paris-based publishing house with Senegalese connections and a Negritude attitude, published a French translation of Esk'ia Mphahlele's autobiography *Down Second Avenue* (Mphahlele, 1963) before turning to other parts of Africa swept by "the winds of change" (unlike South Africa at the time) Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria.⁹

Soon enough, unfortunately, Africa was to be "written off". Many African writers began to express disenchantment with the new dispensation in their independent countries: In Europe interest for Africa waned and publishers grew reluctant to have African literature translated into French or indeed German. To quote Peter Ripken (Ripken, 2002): "In the second half of the sixties and the seventies, there were considerably fewer translations of works by African authors than in the 15 years before. (...) Africa had been written off." At the time, the situation with French translations of African literature

⁸ Over the same period translations from Portuguese and African languages into German rose by 10%, allowing translations from English to retain the same lion's share (70%) after WWII.

⁹ *Présence Africaine* published out of Ghana: Ayi Kwei Armah in 1976, out of Kenya: Ngugi wa Thiong'o in 1985 and 1988; out of Nigeria: Chinua Achebe in 1966, 1974 and 1978, Cyprian Ekwensi in 1978 and 1988, Wole Soyinka in 1979 and 1986.

was similar, except that the blackout was much more radical than in Germany and it went on for much longer. In fact not a single French translation of a South African work of fiction was published between 1968 et 1976.¹⁰ Breytenbach's volume of poetry *Feu Froid* ended the "blackout" in 1976 (Breytenbach, 1976), the year when André Brink also had his first book published in French translation (Brink, 1976). Indeed, if we look at so-called "black" writers, the blackout went on for another eight years, as late as 1984, when in February Alex La Guma's novella *A Walk in the Night* was published by Hatier in their own African Writers Series called "Monde Noir" (La Guma, 1984). Altogether "black" South African writers vanished from the French publishing world for sixteen long years between 1968 and 1984.

Nothing on that scale happened in the German speaking world and we must look beyond post-independence depression and trauma to try and find why exactly French publishing adopted such a radical course as banishing South African (especially "black") writers. There are specific reasons. Some are political and point to an unholy alliance between the apartheid regime and the De Gaulle Administration, at a time when the French authorities, embarked on a programme of nuclear weapons and keen on reinstating the Gold Exchange Standard against the dollar supremacy, bartered Namibian uranium and South African gold against military and police equipment, nuclear knowhow, oil supplies and moderation in the fight against apartheid. Arguably, like many other sectors of French life and society, publishers were thus under that influence. Other reasons may be literary: French publishers are wary of short stories, poetry, or drama, and these were the literary "genres" most favoured by the "black" writers in South Africa in the fifties (The Drum Decade), the sixties (the District Six School, around Alex La Guma and Richard Rive), the seventies (Black Consciousness and other poets; and committed theatre (Fatima Dike, Maishe Maponya, Matsemela Manaka).

German networking

History does not explain everything, however. Whatever advantage can be perceived in favour of German translation of African literature must be attributed to energetic German policies for promoting books from Africa. In 1980 Africa happened to be the main guest at the Frankfurt Book Fair, and a group of people, including translators, publishers, media persons, literary critics, academics and readers got together and founded a Society for the Promotion of African, Asian and Latin-American Literature¹¹, funded by German sources, including the Government and the Evangelical Church in Germany. The Society's work includes monitoring what is being published in their chosen field, getting publishers interested in having the selected books (including literature for children and adolescents) translated into German. It acts as a vital information centre for about two hundred and fifty publishers in Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland, and provides them with whatever books they wish to peruse and eventually publish. The Society also facilitates contacts between Third-World publishers and German-speaking countries and acts as a non-profit-making literary agency. Since its inception, the Society has had over 400 titles translated from Africa, Asia and Latin-America into German. It runs a quarterly magazine, *LiteraturNachrichten – Afrika – Asien – Lateinamerika*, primarily aimed at media and publishers, and publishes the "Quellen" ("Sources") catalogue of available titles in German translation every other year. The Society's stand at the Frankfurt Book Fair has become an essential forum for publishers from all over the world. More than twenty translations are also jointly funded by the Society and a specific scheme run by the German authorities and Pro Helvetia. Organizing book tours, public readings, debates, exhibitions, and lectures is part of

¹⁰ Etienne Leroux's novel published in 1970 has to be disregarded as the French translation was done from the (American) English one of the original text in Afrikaans (Leroux, 1970).

¹¹ E-mail: litprom@book-fair.com

the Society's promotional work. Since 1985 members of a readers' club, "Der ANDERE Literaturklub" ("Book club with a difference") receive four free books in translation per year.

This is an impressive effort by all standards, one that lovers of African literature in the French-speaking world can only admire, and envy.

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