

A MINORITY BOOKS: SOME ISSUES CONCERNING THE CIRCULATION OF CULTURAL GOODS

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The position of foreign literature in France is highly related to the positions of the countries and languages these texts are coming from. Clearly dominated by the Anglo-Saxon culture, the French market has been opened to the Scandinavian literature and to the South-American one. African literatures remain one of the poor parts of the foreign literature in the French publishers' lists. Human sciences don't stay away from the dominating systems' rules and the mood (or the need) of best-sellers. This paper strives to analyse the evolution of this situation. If we could consider that the mainstream logics will continue to dominate the publishing activity, we would choose to focus, from a socio-economic point of view, on some practices and conditions potentially able to modify the circulation of texts. Our hypothesis consists in thinking it is useless to wait that the economic system of publishing industry make place for minority books. As a consequence, the question is to look for new ways of the international circulation of intellectual goods.

KEYWORDS: *foreign literature, African literatures, cultural diversity, concentration, independence, self-publishing.*

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this conference invites us look at the historical dimension, the modern forms and the general context of minority expression. It is an ambitious project, and this contribution will be centred on four points.

- It will firstly resituate the question of minority expression within the relatively recent history of cultural diversity, through the concepts of concentration and independence.
- It will then take a brief look at the case of French-American exchanges, showing that the dominating system also includes hierarchical positions.
- The third point will concern the question of publishing in Africa.
- The final point will be that of the connection between, on the one hand, the subject of this conference and, on the other, emerging practices such as self-publishing.

MINORITY EXPRESSION: CULTURAL DIVERSITY, CONCENTRATION AND INDEPENDENCE

The idea of cultural diversity, as developed by UNESCO since the 1990s, has been applied to books using the term “bibliodiversity”.

Cultural diversity is seen as “a common heritage of humanity”¹, a source of creation and innovation, and something to be protected and promoted. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that markets tend to favour “certain aspects of diversity, to the detriment of others (cultural goods, social groups and symbolic expressions), which become invisible or obsolete insofar as they do not fit in with commercial interests”². This being the case, and despite a lengthy period during which different parties took up positions – sometimes diametrically opposed – on the status of cultural and symbolic products and services, UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted in Paris in 2001, stipulates that cultural goods are not simply forms of merchandise like any other³.

As mentioned, the idea of bibliodiversity originally derived from the seminal concept of cultural diversity. One often considers that its importance stems from the fact that in the general field of culture, books, with their authors and other agents, have the capacity to play a major role in the spread of diversity, given that the investment necessary to produce a book is relatively small – and especially if one compares it to the sums expended in the audiovisual sector. In other words, the barriers to entry are not prohibitively high, and this works in favour of books.

Without wishing to get involved in a debate on the precise provenance of the term “bibliodiversity”, we might note that it is generally associated with a political analysis of the publishing business, and, more generally, the circulation of ideas. But its international acceptance is to be credited, notably, to those who in 2000, at Gijón, made it a key concept in a language that is common to independent publishers across the world.

At this initial meeting of independent publishers, Leo Harari, the European representative of the Inter-American Development Bank, insisted that cultural diversity was just as important as biodiversity, and that “a loss of [cultural] diversity can be as serious as a loss of biodiversity. A monopoly in the production of cultural goods <...> is comparable to a monoculture that rejects every other species.”⁴ The term “bibliodiversity” did not feature in the meeting as such, but the concept was clearly present. There were discussions about concentration in publishing, and how to resist it by promoting cultural diversity in the face of globalisation, and by supporting initiatives (not just as possibilities, but as necessities) in favour of independent publishers.

In other words, the banner of “bibliodiversity” can serve to highlight the situation of publishing and publishers, for example, in Latin America, with “the end of dictatorships, and the development of literature publishing and human sciences publishing companies, claiming their independence and their criticism of monetisation of the book market, the expansion of international commerce and neo-liberal globalisation, the lack of regulation in the book market, and the absence of dialogue with government.”⁵

It was also by reference to bibliodiversity that, at the start of the 21st century, a number of collectives were created, including, in 2002, the International Alliance of Independent Publishers. This brought together those national associations which, for the most part, had sprung up after the meeting in Gijón.

In its own terms, “the International Alliance of Independent Publishers is <...> a network of solidarity – comprising 85 publishing houses and groups of publishers in 45 different countries – which, directly or indirectly, represent some 360 organisations.

The aim of the Alliance is to make books and ideas more accessible, to defend and promote bibliodiversity.”⁶

For Thierry Quinqueton, the president of the Alliance from 2006 to 2013, the group represents “the other globalisation of publishing”. Because the fact is that there are two types of globalisation. In one of them, the book is an object of spectacular deals and enormous buyouts, with constant changes in the ownership of multinationals, and fluctuations of capital. In the other, according to Quinqueton, “the stories are different, though not necessarily more significant, or representative, or more ‘who knows what’, than the major capital movements in the publishing industry.”⁷

Between the initial meeting in Gijón and the 2007 Paris Declaration⁸, via UNESCO’s 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the 2003 Dakar Declaration and the 2005 meeting in Guadalajara⁹, UNESCO and the Alliance developed

1 *Unesco’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Art. 1, 2001.

2 MIHAL, Ivana. Actores y procesos en la gestión de la bibliodiversidad. *Alteridades*, 2013, vol. 23, no. 45, p. 123–136.

3 *Unesco’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Art. 8, 2001.

4 *In the minutes of the proceedings*. See: <<http://www.oei.es/cultura2/actas00.htm>>.

5 LEHEMBRE, Sébastien. Du «produit pas comme les autres» au produire autrement. *Mobilisations d’éditeurs et résistances à l’économicisation*

(1970–2010), 2012. Access through Internet:

<<http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/10942.pdf>>.

6 *International Alliance of Independent Publishers*. Access through Internet: <<http://www.alliance-editeurs.org/-l-alliance->>>.

7 *L’autre mondialisation de l’édition*. *Esprit*, 2007, no. 334.

8 The meeting at which it was signed was organised by the Alliance.

9 This was jointly organised by the organisations referred to in this paragraph.

strong links and common objectives. Shortly afterwards, other international bodies joined them, for example, the Regional Centre for Book Development in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Latin Union. In 2006, talking about these converging movements, Koichiro Matsuura, UNESCO's Director-General, said that bibliodiversity, "like cultural and biological diversity, expresses a reality that is essential to the intellectual development of future generations."¹⁰

It is here that the concept of bibliodiversity takes on its full scope, bringing into play the symbolism of a cultural struggle on the international level, but one which can be fully understood only in national and local contexts. The Alliance, though being an international association, insists that a publishing house must be rooted in a territory. In Quinqueton's words, "You don't publish in the bubble of the global village."¹¹ The contrast between the internationalisation of "independent" publishers' activity and their identification with their respective countries illustrates the Alliance's discourse and modes of action, and those of its associated collectives. International meetings of publishers (Dakar, 2003; Guadalajara, 2005; Paris, 2007) naturally led to collective demands. But they also propagated the idea that a genuine editor was one who had "a firm attachment to his community, his country"¹², and who wanted to share texts.

Without going into detail about these meetings, we might nonetheless mention the first major international statement they gave rise to, namely the 2003 Dakar Declaration¹³, which signalled an intention to "make available our knowledge, our expertise and our professional experience in the service of solidarity <...>; [to act together] on the basis of a common ethic, and to assign value to cultural diversity <...>; to defend and promote independent publishing, and an associative spirit <...>; to work with other professionals of the written word so that we can bring the maximum amount of influence to bear on international negotiations relating to cultural diversity and the development of public policy with regard to books and reading."¹⁴

These commitments are of a cross-border nature, and the objective is that the issues should be aired in international negotiations on culture. The last article of the Dakar Declaration summarises the point very well, and spells out the Alliance's determination to promote a "different" globalisation: "Conscious of our responsibility, we intend, as far as possible, to play an active part in the emergence of a worldwide civil society, another kind of globalisation, with humanity and solidarity."¹⁵

Over the years, and in the course of the various international meetings, the Alliance has adopted a more cautious tone. Its view is that financial globalisation is incompatible with creativity in publishing and culture in general; that "bibliodiversity is everywhere in danger"¹⁶; and that the multinationals' introduction of economic rationalisation into publishing is leading to "cultural impoverishment"¹⁷.

Bibliodiversity has now achieved legitimacy. In fact, it has become institutionalised. For a number of States and international bodies, it is a policy issue. But it is also an issue for non-governmental structures, given that it represents both a component of identity and an economic and political resource. It has “the attraction of self-evidence”, and of consensus. After all, “who could be opposed to the pluralism it implies?”¹⁸

The principle of bibliodiversity (or, more broadly speaking, cultural diversity) is now widely accepted. However, a number of questions remain. For example: does bibliodiversity not denote a set of idealistic values and practices, remote from professional realities and the commercial world? For example: what about the ability of those engaged in the promotion of bibliodiversity to go beyond local levels of decision-making? For example: can we accept that it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the reality of bibliodiversity on the global scale? For example: should the effects of technological change not be introduced into the equation? To what extent should a critique of the publishing system, and the idea of a “different” globalisation, be founded on a criterion of independence which, though it can act as a guiding thread for analysis, remains imprecise? There again, does “independence” have to be seen as synonymous with “diversity”? And finally, do we not need to take into account the disparate views of the different participants in the book business, and make sure we don’t get diverted by the financial logic of the major publishing groups, to the point of overlooking the commercial and communicational implications of bibliodiversity?

THE CASE OF FRENCH-AMERICAN EXCHANGES

The second point concerns the international distribution of books in French. France may not be a country with a “minority” culture – still, there is a certain point in examining the hypothesis, even if it is somewhat provocative.

10 See: Message de Koïchiro Matsuuda. In MOLLIER, Jean-Yves (ed.). *Des paroles et des actes pour la bibliodiversité*. Alliance des éditeurs indépendants, 2006.

11 QUINQUETON, Philippe. L'édition numérique dans les pays en développement. In *Alliance des éditeurs indépendants*, 2011. Access through Internet: <<http://alliance-lab.org/etude/archives/category/01-preliminaires?lang=fr>>.

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 MOLLIER, Jean-Yves. Op. cit.

17 Ibid.

18 MATTELART, Tristan. Pour une déconstruction de la ‘diversité culturelle’. *OMIC*, 2007. Access through Internet: <http://www.observatoire-omic.org/pdf/Mattelart_T_Diversite_deconstruction_diversite_Culturelle.pdf>, consulted on 7 March 2014.

In France, publishing is highly concentrated. Among the country's 10,000 publishing structures, just about 100 imprints are in the hands of large groups – but they account for more than 90% of sales. And a similar situation is to be found elsewhere in the world.

Literature from other countries occupies a significant place in French publishing. And this has allowed a number of newcomers to enter the market, the most striking example being that of Actes Sud. But other, more established publishers, such as Stock, also began in this way, along with lesser-known names such as Métailié, L'Olivier, Picquier and Sonatines, and more recent arrivals such as Gallmeister.

Foreign literature has energised and rejuvenated book production in France. But it should also be noted that the prevailing climate in French society, and government policy, are favourable to cultural diversity. The tradition of translation is strong there, accounting for around 14% of the market, in other words, some 9,000 works per year, including both new publications or reprints. In the United States, by comparison, translation represents just 3% of the market. And this is indicative of the domination exercised by the English-speaking world. Three quarters of the novels that are translated into French were written in English, followed by Japanese, with 8% (essentially manga), then German, Italian and Spanish. In 2010, the cultural economist Françoise Benhamou wrote: "As far as publishing is concerned, cultural diversity occurs only on the margins."¹⁹

This domination of the international book market by works in English is accompanied by another form of domination, namely that of blockbusters such as the Swedish trilogy *Millennium*, or the American *Twilight*, or, more recently, *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Suspense, fantasy, eroticism, thrillers, chick lit, etc., may not yet have established total world dominance, but they are becoming central to the globalised publishing industry. And this tendency is further reinforced by the fact that some of them have given rise to cinema and TV adaptations (or indeed vice versa). Harlan Coben and James Ellroy, for example, were brought to the attention of the public by films. In Coben's case it was *Tell No One*, directed by Guillaume Canet. In that of Ellroy, it was *The Black Dahlia*, directed by Brian De Palma.

Globalised transmedia strategies dominate international cultural exchanges. To take the example of the *Twilight* series, by the end of 2008, it had generated \$1.6 billion of direct revenue, but also \$5.7 billion for the film adaptations and \$5.7 billion for the official merchandise.

French literary candidates for translation are subject to the logic of the "star system". And they tend, understandably, to be those who are already well known at home. They include Michel Houellebecq, Frédéric Beigbeder, Amélie Nothomb, Yasmina Reza, Catherine Millet and Bernard-Henri Lévy. We won't go into the

question of how representative such authors may be of contemporary French writing, which, though it has a reputation for standards and quality, is not highly successful in exporting its more “literary” figures – for example Jean-Marie Le Clézio, the 2008 Nobel laureate.

In 2007, TIME magazine devoted a cover story to “The Death of French Culture”²⁰. The journalist, Donald Morrison, saw the influence of French literature as being confined to that of the “classics”, from Molière to Malraux. And he remarked on the general tendency of countries that are major producers and consumers of cultural goods not to look beyond their own borders. A great deal of material is available aside from translations, which are thus, by default, demoted to a secondary role, not to mention the fact that they necessitate at least a minimum of knowledge about a culture other than one’s own, if not its language. The quantity and quality of translations to be found in a given country are indicative of its openness to other cultures. And reciprocally, the standing of a country’s publishing industry in the global system indicates its position on the spectrum between strength and weakness. From this viewpoint, although Alexandre Dumas, René Goscinny, Balzac and Jules Verne vie with Agatha Christie and Shakespeare for positions among the 50 most widely translated authors, the French publishing industry is in an overall situation of weakness.

There again, the facts should not prevent questions being asked. International multimedia productions, often Americanocentric, create emulation, but might this not also have negative effects, notably economic? Are there not literary editors who feel they need “big” books or series that can hold their own on the world stage? Should there be a concern about blockbusters overshadowing, or even blocking, discussions about rights with regard to works that were not intended to compete at this level? Is enough being done, in the more restricted markets, to look for professional solutions, and to create, or reinforce, policies that would favour the circulation of works originating in “minority” cultural spaces?

THE CASE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

Over the last dozen or so years, a number of Africans writing in Africa or elsewhere, but published in France, have received French literary awards. Alain Mabanckou, for example, won the 2006 Prix Renaudot for *Memoirs of a Porcupine*, and Léonora Miano took the 2006 Prix Goncourt des Lycéens with *Outlines of the*

19 Access through Internet: <<http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2010/04/13/la-traduction-parent-pas-tout-a-fait-pauvre-de-l-edition-francaise->

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20 *Time*, 3 Decembre 2007.

Coming Day. In other words, they were recognised, respectively, by the professionals and the public. And this is all the more striking in view of the fact that since the creation of France's major literary prizes, few have been given to African authors writing in French: René Maran received the 1921 Prix Goncourt for *Batouala*, and Yambo Ouologuem was awarded the 1968 Prix Renaudot for *Bound to Violence*.

Since the end of the 1990s, however, African literature in French has been increasingly admired both by the critics and the public. The 1999 Prix Livre Inter went to *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Animals*, by Ahmadou Kourouma, who also received the 2000 Prix Renaudot for *Allah is Not Obligated*. And in 2003, Fatou Diome's *The Belly of the Atlantic* was favourably received by critics and booksellers, and it became a bestseller.

The professionals of the publishing sector are now taking an interest in the phenomenon. In 1999, Editions Dapper launched an African literature collection, "Dapper literature", and in 2000, Gallimard inaugurated a new collection, "Continents Noirs", featuring authors from Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean region.

France's growing interest in African literature can be seen in the light of certain professional practices.

To begin with, it is problematic to talk about "African literature" as though it were something monolithic. Simple at first sight, in reality the question is complex. The criteria used are sometimes geographical, in which case the choices may be open to discussion. Why, for example, is African literature so often grouped together with that of the Indian Ocean region and the Caribbean, but not that of the Maghreb?

When talking about the origins of authors, what do we have in mind? The works of the white South-African authors André Brink and J. M. Coetzee are often to be found in the "English literature" sections of bookshops, whereas those of black authors, even if they live in Europe or the United States, are in the "African literature" section. When it comes to Africa, linguistic classifications often cease to apply, in that no distinction is made between books written in English, French and Portuguese. In other words, the same criteria are not applied to European and African writers. It is as though African literature, unlike that of Europe, was homogeneous. But whereas the term "European literature", especially in the singular, would not be used to designate anything other than a highly selective anthology, or a reference library with hagiographical connotations, the use of the term "African literature" as something undifferentiated could be seen as condescending, or even redolent of the colonial past. This non-differentiation also indicates a relegation of African literature to the peripheries, all the more so as it is generally not published either in Africa or by Africans. As a consequence, it is highly dependent on non-African publishers.

One might look at the conditions of publication of African literature in France, whether in “African” publishing houses such as Karthala, Présence Africaine and Dapper, or in collections created by non-specialist publishers, like “Afriques”, at Actes Sud, or “Continents Noirs” at Gallimard (the use of the plural for “Afriques” and “Continents” being intended, no doubt, to forestall accusations of non-differentiation), or again “Cadre Rouge”, at Seuil, “10/18” at Bourgois, or “Le Serpent à Plumes”. Specialisation is probably not the best way to bring texts to the attention of the public, in that it creates ambivalence. It can produce a strong identity, but it can also ghettoise authors. And Alain Mabanckou personifies this ambivalence. His first texts were brought out in France in 1998 by the specialist publisher Présence Africaine, but after 2002 he moved to a non-specialist publisher, due to what he saw as “the danger of the black writer <...> becoming a prisoner of his blackness”²¹.

Obstacles to the publication of books in Africa can be economic, professional, political, sociological or cultural. And I would like to say a few words about these aspects of the question. In Africa, the cost of producing a book can be more than 50% of its retail price. Materials are expensive, and particularly paper, which, even if made from native trees, is mostly produced elsewhere. Another major problem is that economies of scale could be achieved only by producing a much larger number of books than the market would bear. In Africa, the book is a luxury object. There is also an absence of national policies on books. The majority of African countries have signed two separate agreements to abolish import taxes on books and the raw materials needed to produce them, notably paper, ink and machines; but these agreements have not been implemented. Then there is the almost total lack of professionalisation. Training programmes have been set up in some countries, but they are inadequate both in technical, legal and commercial terms.

The sociological and cultural factors that exacerbate the difficulties faced by literary expression in Africa include modes of sociability, oral traditions, the dominance of local languages, low literacy rates, a shortage of bookshops and libraries, competition from the radio, television and the Web, and the fact that the available resources tend to be channelled into technical, economic and professional education, to the detriment of literature and the human sciences.

One must also mention the threats posed by the police to writers in some countries, which contribute to the fact that “African literatures without African publishers” can equally be “literatures without African authors”, or authors who

21 Interview on: *evene.fr*, 10 février 2009. Access through Internet: <<http://evene.lefigaro.fr/livres/actualite/alain-mabanckou-black-bazar-1807.php>>.

have gone through the experience of diaspora. This recalls the fact that literary production, and in particular its modes of recognition, are geopolitical questions. Power relations between literary nations, but also between literatures, languages, authorities and critics, are what determine how a writer is viewed. As Ahmadou Ly said, “In Africa, those who write are those who’ve left.” And this is confirmed by the careers of contemporary authors such as Alain Mabanckou, Léonora Miano, Calixthe Beyala, Fatou Diome, Emmanuel Dongala and Scholastique Mukasonga.

CIRCULATION OF CULTURAL GOODS: EMERGING PRACTICES

These observations and interrogations are far-reaching. The fact that they have already been formulated in various different contexts, and over a considerable period of time, does not inspire optimism with regard to the development of the book industry in the kind of technical, legal and commercial conditions that would be compatible with those of the international market.

But should this really be the objective? The question may appear surprising, especially in the context of an International Book Science Conference. The fact is, however, that the emerging approaches are based largely, if not exclusively, on new technologies. The defence of editorial independence and bibliodiversity has been accompanied by increasing cooperation between publishers, but also economic logics inspired by social economics, solidarity and fair trade. A desire to “produce otherwise” has opened up new possibilities, despite the constraints imposed by the publishing system as it stands. That being said, the results so far obtained, though unquestionable, have not played a real structuring role. Nor have the countries concerned taken action to adopt book-friendly policies. And the recommendations of international bodies have made little tangible difference. Only a few courageous, individual initiatives inspire some hope for a brighter future.

In the absence of the appropriate policies, and the time required for them to bear fruit, it is hard to see how the book industry in Africa, and beyond, is to attain a sufficient level of professionalization and effectiveness, especially if one bears in mind its interdependencies with the educational system. At best, the process will be a lengthy one; and in any case it must be seen in relation to new technologies. In Africa, the availability of information, literature and, more generally, culture, depends largely on access to the Internet, with sites such as *www.africultures.com* and *www.sudplanete.net*.

In this respect, self-publishing deserves close attention. It is an object of criticism in traditionalist circles, where the publisher plays a key role as a symbolic

marker. Nonetheless, it can establish a direct link between authors and readers. It can give an author a “pro-am” status between that of the amateur and that of the professional. And digital self-publishing allows authors to participate in what Patrice Flichy has called “the consecration of the amateur”²². A certain amount of work has already been done on the phenomenon, and on the “do it yourself” approach, in areas such as music, video, video games, photography and art.

Conclusion

These developments are to be seen in relation to a more radical, general transformation that is taking place, namely the transition from a material economy of brand-related scarcity to a non-material economy of brand-unrelated abundance. While not wishing to overestimate the importance of digital leverage for cultural and media content, or to view self-production as a way of achieving disintermediation by cutting out the traditional functions of production, publishing and prescription, we may assume that self-production is going to become increasingly significant. This will mean better prospects for the publication and circulation of works in “dominated” sectors, but also the risk of giving politicians an excuse to avoid considering books as a serious issue. In France, for example, there are local politicians who consider that with the advent of the Internet, libraries, and librarians, have become obsolete – and that the same will soon be true of schools and teachers.

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MAŽUMŲ KNYGOS: KELI INTELEKTINIŲ PRODUKTŲ SKLAIDOS KLAUSIMAI

Bertrand Legendre

Santrauka

Užsienio literatūros padėtis Prancūzijoje priklauso nuo to, kokių šalių tai literatūros tekstai ir kokiomis kalbomis jie parašyti. Nors Prancūzijos rinkoje neabejotinai vyrauja anglosaksų literatūra, ji atsivėrė ir skandinavų bei pietų amerikiečių literatūrai. Afrikos literatūra Prancūzijos leidyboje vis dar lieka viena iš skurdžiausiai atstovaujama literatūrų. Humanitarinius mokslus irgi domina leidybos sistemos dėsniai ir bestselerių paklausos svyravimai bei jų poreikis. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama aptarti susiklosčiusios situacijos raidą. Jei būtume įsitikinę, kad leidybos veikloje ir toliau bus vadovujamasi vyraujančia logika, remdamiesi socialiniu ekonominiu požiūriu, turėtume sutelkti dėmesį į tokias praktikas ir sąlygas, kurios galėtų pakeisti tekstų sklaidą. Mūsų hipotezė pagrįsta teiginiu, kad neverta laukti, kol ekonominė leidybos verslo sistema pati savaime užleis vietą mažumų knygoms. Tai reiškia, kad būtina ieškoti naujų tarptautinės intelektinių produktų sklaidos būdų.

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