

## Postcolonial Translation Theory and Minor Literatures

### Professor Paul Bandia in Conversation with the RTG Minor-Cosmopolitanisms

**Professor Paul Bandia is professor of Francophone Studies at Concordia University in Montreal specialising in the field of translation studies with a focus on African literatures. He is the author of the book *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (2008), and *Orality and Translation* (2016) as well as several edited and co-edited volumes.**

**Following his lecture as part of the lecture series *Minor Cosmopolitan Theory* at the University of Potsdam in June 2017, Prof Bandia was kind to respond to a set of questions by Yann Le Gall and Moses März, who are members of the RTG. In this conversation, he provides a glimpse into the field of postcolonial translation theory, describes how his work relates to 'minor cosmopolitanisms' and shares his views on the notion of reparation through translation as well as on current trends in African literature, such as afropolitanism.**

#### **What are some of the main characteristics of an African Postcolonial Translation Theory?**

It is an interesting question because it's not just about African post-colonialism but about post-colonialism as a whole. Postcolonial translation theory aims to address the lacuna that exists in dealing with literatures or contexts that are minor, subaltern or peripheral. This is always in relation to what you would call the imperial centre.

Now what are the characteristics of postcolonial translation? They are different from your regular normative translation studies. By 'normative' I mean situations where we mainly think of translation from one monolithic, monolingual entity onto another monolithic, monolingual entity, such as going from standard French to standard English or vice versa. What postcolonial theory does differently is that it finds the monolingual translation project to be limited and not able to account for postcolonial experiences. In other words, postcolonial experiences are often plurilingual, plurivocal, heteroglossic: all these terms that speak to a sense of multiplicity; an essential heterogeneity. You need a theory or an approach that can account for such texts and should then be different than what we have known in translation studies since the 1950s when translation studies was basically the understanding of contrastive linguistics and comparative stylistics.

So what is the basic tenet of African postcolonial translation theory? I would even extend this to postcolonial translation theory in general. I work on the African context; Africa gives me, to some extent, the empirical data with which I work. Of course, one could argue that postcolonial translation theory may not apply to every context equally, such as in Ireland or in India where colonial politics were different. But I see postcolonial translation theory as all that deals with translation between dominant language cultures and minor cultures and minority contexts, including what I consider to be 'ethno global minorities', not just minorities in the former or post-colony. Ethno global minorities are groups in different parts of the world that form part of the cosmopolitan society; we call them 'ethno global cosmopolitanisms' often resulting from experiences of migration or displacement whether forced or voluntary.

So for me the difference from the mainstream theory of translation is obvious. You have to account for the specificity of a postcolonial text – oral, written or in different kinds of media. These are texts that are born out of historical circumstances that make them by their very nature hybrid, as Homi K. Bhabha would call them. I have used the terms polylingual, multilingual. Some talk about plurivocality. These are texts that are not easily isolated as one monolingual, monolithic text, even though they may be expressed in one and the same language – meaning that you are expressing the text in English but the English that you are expressing it in becomes the medium or the matrix of expression infused with the linguistic and aesthetic specificity of African discourse.

Forms of expression in that particular linguistic matrix are drawn from many different language experiences, such as African, creole and hybrid languages. This isn't a hodgepodge of 'barbaric' or basic languages thrown together that no one can speak. It is going to be cloaked in English for instance. But English simply becomes the matrix. And this matrix is informed by various languages. Mikhail Bakhtin would talk about languages that feed into both the matrix of the main language and the dialogic experience.

**What roles do some of the traditional concepts in the field of translation, such as original and target language,**

### **native, second language play in that framework?**

In that context, classical notions of translation become a problem. Right from the start the source text itself is not your usual original, given that in normative translation theory, the original was not a translated text. But in the context of post-colonial translation theory this is different. The text that is being translated is itself to a certain extent a translation. Why do I call it a translation? Because it is a text that is in conversation with many different 'languages' that interact with each other. In order to make sense of the text you have to journey between the different languages and cultures that make up the post-colonial texts. You are translating in-between several different language cultures. So I consider them to be translated or as I sometimes call them, 'translative texts', meaning that, as a source text, they are already in a translated state of being, which can still be further translated.

### **Within this heterogeneity, are there aspects that you consider to be untranslatable or opaque?**

Absolutely. In the context of this multiplicity, of this already translated original, it even becomes necessary that there be always things that we refer to as the remainder, as the residue, all these things that cannot translate or do not need to be translated in order to preserve the identity of the text. In fact, it is futile to want to translate those items. Because the translation of such items is the denial of the identity of that so-called original translated text. So there are things that, by their very nature, you do not wish to translate, because those are the markers of identity of that text.

### **What happens when you force the translation onto something that does not want to be translated? Certain monolingual societies, like here in Germany, usually feel compelled to translate every word of a foreign text for the sake of transparency or readability.**

You do not have to understand every word to appreciate the text, particularly what we call postcolonial texts. It is important to allow the resisting element of the text to exist. And that resistance is necessary, it becomes part of its way of saying "I am different. I am in English but I am not English. Or I am English but I am presenting realities in English that belong to several cultural experiences". And you do not need to translate those things. Oftentimes it is done in the effort to clarify, or create fluency or transparency. But it is actually counter-productive for such a literature. You do not need fluency; you do not need transparency. You need understanding.

Concepts like fluency and transparency are very characteristic of mainstream monolingual translation practices. So now we move into translations that do not need to be fluent or transparent: these characteristics become a handicap. What I use in place of this – and Bhabha has used it in other contexts – is translation as a metaphor, thinking of concepts like mirroring, representation, creating a similar image of what it is.

### **Mirroring in a sense that puts greater emphasis on the contours and the structures of the translated text, rather than on finding the culturally appropriate equivalent for every word?**

That's right. Because transparency would imply assimilation. It would mean, in some cases, serving the source postcolonial text on a silver platter to your reader. You are basically chewing it up for them, and giving them your postcolonial experience in their own experience. I've begun to use this term differently than Bhabha, who uses it in terms of colonial mimicry. I actually borrowed the term more so from French theory: Antonin Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son double* (The Theatre and its Double) (1938). "*Le double de soi*" is the idea. He says that you have theatre, and if you are going to represent it elsewhere, it could be different, but it is its double. You hear French theorists playing a lot with these words, *doubler* or *doublage*. And it's not always in the sense of exactness, but rather in the sense of mirroring. You find the contours of the original: the original mustn't be relevant to the receiving culture but to its own essence. You don't adopt the audience's ways to make them understand the source culture(s).

### **You have mentioned several notions, like resistance to assimilation, and the defence of one's own identity and culture, that evoke translation practices as a metaphor for political struggles. To what extent are you interested in the political meanings potentially implied in some of the theories you develop about the translation of African texts in particular?**

My interest in translation as a metaphor has mainly to deal with translation as representation. That means we know classic translation to be translation from one language to another. But when you say translation as representation it becomes metaphorical in the sense that here it is not about translating from one language to another *per se*. It is not about translating the X in the source to the X' in the target language. It is about translating abstract notions, it is about the representation of subaltern cultures, identities, trends and art forms. What I am talking about here is how these people translate themselves in global situations or contexts. For instance, how aboriginal people translate themselves

in dominant colonial cultures, how groups that are marginalised represent themselves within majoritarian discourse, how minoritised groups are representing themselves in globalised majoritarian discourse.

**So the emphasis is primarily on the agency of the ones who are normally considered to be forced to integrate, whose cultures are either denied or translated by other political institutions?**

Yes, they become the agents themselves. They express their own cultures through their own agency. This all comes from the French philosophical, literary discussions of *l'altérité*, *le soi et l'autre*, the self and the other – significantly influenced by Emmanuel Levinas. You take it upon yourself, the subaltern, to represent yourself. The others are no longer your agent. That is how I see the metaphorical use of translation.

**Do you think what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari say about Franz Kafka writing in a major language to express his idiosyncrasies, applies to writers or agents using global languages to express their heterogeneity on a global scale? Also when we think of translation as something that takes place within the self, can we perhaps speak of a theory of minor cosmopolitan translation?**

I think so. When I read through your programme, I thought what we are doing in terms of translation as a metaphor has a lot to do with minor cosmopolitanisms. There could be, in that case, what one could call translation theories with respect to minor cosmopolitanisms. It would be related to postcolonial translation theory, but it would not necessarily be substitutive, it would be minority cosmopolitan but not always postcolonial. In the sense that you have minority cosmopolitan situations in contexts where post-colonialism does not exist.

Post-colonial studies and minor cosmopolitanisms have in common that they deal with minor groups, minority groups, that are for historical reasons required to, or feel the need to, express themselves in major languages. So in the case of Kafka, as he says himself, he is the most comfortable in Yiddish, he talks about the German concept of *Muttersprache*, he says it very crudely actually: "I was breastfed in that language, it is my language. But then I have to write in German". He could never successfully say all that he was trying to say in German; he could say that in Yiddish. Because German was not his *Muttersprache*. Not because he did not grow up in it. He grew up speaking German. But because of the affective side of language, the relationship he had with Yiddish.

He goes into the etymology of 'mother language'. Mother language literally means the language your mother spoke to you as she breastfed you. It almost becomes quite an erotic attachment to language that becomes completely absent when he moves on to that other language, which was the majority language. The language in which he suffered insults, rejections as a child. How could you express your feelings in a language like that? In some cases, for purely linguistic reasons, the German could not express some of the things that he could express in Yiddish. This is quite fascinating because Yiddish is a hybrid language, and yet the very so-called innate language – we call them original languages – cannot express what hybrid languages can do, which is a very big point for minority languages, or postcolonial languages: they can express a lot more for people like that.

**What do you make of the conceptual difference between 'minor cosmopolitanisms' and 'minority cosmopolitanism'? One way of understanding minor cosmopolitanisms could be to look at communities that are dispersed across space and times and share certain characteristics and political commitments but could not necessarily be classified as minoritarian in a numerical sense vis-à-vis a certain majority.**

Your definition is very much in line with Kafka's definition of minor literature. Minor literatures are not about numbers *per se*. What Deleuze and Guattari say is that minor literature is about political power, about the fact that this is a literature that is minor in relation to the power structures that exist. It is not about numbers at all. In fact, within that framework you could consider Chinese literatures to be minor literatures (laughs). It is a very useful idea. You raise a good point. I do understand minor cosmopolitanisms the way you describe it. This understanding is not far from forms of ethno global cosmopolitanisms.

Ethno global cosmopolitanism refers to the fact that in Western cultures and Enlightenment you have 'cosmopolitanism': people living in 'modern contexts', usually in metropolises, who had a sense of sophistication, knowledge of knowledge to begin with, but also knowledge of languages, of cultures. A cosmopolitan person would be conversant with all different kinds of languages or cultures living together. In ethno global cosmopolitanisms, we add a new dimension to this. The metropolitan existence in Western capitals, for instance, now has deliberate ethnic identification.

If you assume that, at one point, Berlin was cosmopolitan German, it is today – from what I can observe – a very typical ethno global city. In other words, it becomes ethno global cosmopolitan when the people who form the cosmopolitan contexts do not all derive from one or the same dominant culture. In New York you have a Jewish Community, a Hispanic community and so forth. So it becomes ethno in the sense that the cosmopolitan experience that used to be mainly for the sophisticates of Western contexts is blurred, or disrupted by the fact that there are many other communities involved in that reality. One of the well-known scholars who discusses this modern experience of cosmopolitan ethnicity is Kwame Anthony Appiah. Ethno global cosmopolitanisms speak to the cosmopolitan societies that are made up of various ethnicities, coming from different contexts, which you will find if you go anywhere in a major city in Europe. If you go to a city like Montreal you find that some of the top doctors and high flying people come from different ethnic groups, and they relate with the French Canadian: everybody is just together. It makes for a different kind of cosmopolitanism, which includes all kinds of ethnicities.

Some people have explored this in terms of gastronomy actually. People joke about London being without a particular mainstream dish and that Indian is England's cosmopolitan cuisine. Lily Cho at York University (Toronto) discusses this a lot, and it is an interesting way of looking at it. It makes sense.

In relation to the idea of using 'minority' or 'minor', I would defend the use of 'minor cosmopolitanisms'. If I say minority, I mean that the context of minor cosmopolitanisms – especially in the Global North – is often a context in which there is a minority presence. Meaning there must be a community there that is not of German descent, for instance. There has to be a cosmopolitan element which is not necessarily German in the beginning. So I am looking at immigrants for instance.

When I do migrant literature and translation, I am looking at the influences of minority communities within the cosmopolitan setting, how they influence the cosmopolitan experience. That is why I use minority sometimes. When you are speaking about the Western metropolis where you have major immigrant settlements, diaspora, then you begin to highlight the fact of minority influences on those cosmopolitanisms. Because if you do not highlight the minority presence, what makes that cosmopolitanism minor? In that sense you could consider my approach to ethno global cosmopolitanism to be a subset of your project, yours being a bit more of an umbrella term.

**Does your work relate to the notion of Afropolitanism that currently plays an important role in the field of African literature? In our context, the term is mostly associated with the work of Taiye Selasi and Achille Mbembe, although they use it quite differently.**

I see Mbembe's point of African cities like Johannesburg developing a sense of afropolitanism that is not informed by Europe as coming from his work in the field of history and development studies: the idea of having something that is cosmopolitan that is not necessarily fashioned or determined by the experience in Western metropolis.

I am more familiar with the notion proposed by Selasi. I see it referring more to 'everything African'. I find the way Selasi describes afropolitanism as a more current term in relation to afrocentric understandings. Afrocentrism has become a loaded word and people do not like it. It has become a divisive term; it is like saying eurocentric. The afropolitanism I share is the idea that people of African descent, wherever they are on the planet, have cosmopolitan ideals and experiences, but that they are fundamentally defined by or related to their afrianness.

You can be second or third generation, but there is going to be something about your writing that may make it different to that produced by a German of the old stock. Not because yours is weaker or worse or alien, but because it has its characteristics based on tradition passed on from generation to generation. You cannot claim that after two generations you do not have this experience at all. It is something that is in you, your heritage. And I see afropolitanism in that sense.

But what Mbembe is doing – and it's important to remember his field overlaps with development studies and he's interested in urban issues – is looking at Africa as developing a parallel modernism. In other words, and I agree with him, he does not see Africa's modernism as developing through European modernism. African modernism is following its own path, its own rhythm and growing that way.

**You published the monograph *Translation as Reparation* in 2008. 'Reparation' is a term which has been ubiquitous in postcolonial struggles for acknowledgement of past violence such as Maafa, genocides or anti-colonial resistance like the Maji-Maji-War. Could you elaborate on this act of reparation with regard to the politics that underlie practices of translation?**

I used the word 'reparation' clearly thinking of injustices towards Black people. I thought of the whole discussion of reparation, the concept of debt, for Black constituency, for Black experiences. It could be slavery, colonialism, it could be other forms of oppression, but the reparations for that is what I had in mind. But since I am not an economist and since I do not deal with money I thought about transferring that term metaphorically to the concept of understanding translation in postcolonial terms, particularly postcolonial African translation, as paying back, as reclaiming what is yours. That means in very simple terms that the practice of translation could be conceived as a gesture of a reclaim of debt, reclaim of reparation, with the ultimate aim of wanting to set the record straight. What does that mean? Others have written your history, your literatures, your cultures. Now you, as postcolonial subject, have taken it upon yourself to write your own history, your own cultures.

So what you are doing is therefore quite directly engaging in reparation, restitution, fixing, readjusting, reclaiming, setting right. But also taxing and challenging the colonial language, colonial mentality, colonial entity, the imperial centre, by asking that centre, so to speak, to pay reparations to you. I am speaking metaphorically. How are you taxing them? You are writing in such a way that, as I said earlier, you are not going to offer them this on a silver platter. You are using their own language, the language imposed on you, turning that language into your own weapon, your own tool, and making sure that they cannot get you completely without making some sacrifice, without delving into close reading to grasp meaning. The sacrifice of intimate and close reading.

For the imperial centre, translation is a requirement for reading the postcolonial text. They have to translate to read. Reading is as much a translating experience. They have to work to get it. We will not just give it to them. This is how I see the whole idea of reparation. There is the idea of the agent writing him or herself such that they are setting the record straight by fixing, bending, correcting historical facts, such as Chinua Achebe did with *Things Fall Apart* (1959), presenting the Igbo culture not as critics had previously, as primitive cultures. The way he presented *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God* (1964) was to prove to the West that these are ancient civilisations with a great history and traditional values. So when he does something like that I would see that on a very plain level to be a form of reparation in a very denotative sense. But the way he writes these texts is that the English reader, the non-Igbo English reader, or the Western English reader, will have to do some work to understand what is happening in the novel.

**In your view, how have the debates on language use and translation changed across generations of African writers and scholars since the wave of political independences in the 1960s? We are thinking here of possible shifts in attention from the nationalist or pan African concerns to 'Afropolitan' visions expressed in some contemporary African literary productions.**

Fifty years down the road, the debate about writing in Indigenous languages is still quite alive. But the difference today is that there is so much happening. People are writing. So those who have the ability to write in their own language are doing so. And those who do not, do not. And those who have the ability to write in global languages are doing so. So the debate has become somewhat muted. Simply because those who are writing in local languages are very satisfied with what they're doing. And those who are writing in Western languages continue to do what they are doing. Some still have qualms about it.

But given the context, what has changed? There has been a major generational change. The discussion at Makerere University in those days, the people involved... Over time it's been made clear that they've had a wonderful career writing in English. Despite the desire of Ngugi wa Thiong'o to write in his native language, he translated his own works into English from Kikuyu. This is not to say that it is futile to write in your native language. But after such a long time and given the practice that we have observed, it becomes a moot question.

Those who care to write in their own languages are doing so. It is really happening. It does not have the same international regard but it is happening. Creative works are coming out of young people, a younger generation of writers, people born after the independences of the sixties. They do not seem to get bogged down by this debate about native and non-native languages. Not because they do not care about their native languages, but my take on this is that they have been very good at devising ways of blending both, of uniting both.

If you read the work of Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (1991), you will see how it is in English but there is a lot in it that speaks to the local culture, in terms of vocabulary, for instance. Given that they do not have the same experience as their predecessors who were engaged in colonial struggles, given that this younger generation has different interests, their preoccupations are with neo-colonialism, survival, means, poverty. They seem to think they need to speak to a different kind of audience. It is not the same struggle any more. The initial struggle was speaking to the metropole. It was about our identity vis-à-vis the metropole. The people today have another view, for them the struggle is just as

good as the struggle that you would find in any other developing context, in India and anywhere else. So people are writing today in English but writing an English that is for them not a foreign language at all.

**Do you still consider the younger generation to have a strong recourse to oral traditions, in the way that you have considered a specificity of African writers being the necessity to translate from oral to written languages? Does this aspect of translation matter to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as much as it did to Chinua Achebe?**

Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is a blend of life in the United States and Nigeria. You can see a bit of what the Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala did with her book (*Les honneurs perdus*, 1996). When it has to do with Nigeria it is very much influenced by oral culture and tradition. We do not mean the old oral narratives, but the aspect of orality within the Nigerian context. How people express themselves, how people go about their daily lives. If you have been to Nigeria, even just as a visitor, you will understand the novel very well, because the English is very Nigerian. They use standard English but there is a lot about how people talk in Nigeria. That is what we mean by orality in that sense. We are not talking about deliberate translating or drawing from Yoruba folk tale anymore. It is not that at all. That is different.

The older generation needed to do that. Because their goal was to prove to their oppressors that they had a culture that was rich, authentic, and strong and could survive. Whereas that is not necessarily the concern of the younger generation at all. It is about representing their world as it is today, how it exists, in terms of languages, cultures and all the like. And it is quite fascinating if you read their novels. Because they will still take swipes at the West, but the way we do when we watch the news and understand things. It is not in terms of "you horrible colonialists who came and dominated us in our land, now we are going to show you that we are better than you think". It is not the same discourse it used to be. It is a very different experience altogether.

A very important aspect in that regard is globalisation. Globalisation has had incredible cultural impacts that have been good and bad. For most Western people it has been bad, for people like Trump and his ilk, but for most Third World people culturally (and economically) it has been good in some ways. It has undermined their immediate local traditional cultures to a certain extent, but no – in some cases those traditional local cultures have been so reinvented and have created something going in the direction of what Mbembe has in mind when he talks about "*culture afropolitaine*".

Africa is not stuck in time. And you are not always going to think about Africa in terms of Western modernity. That is how I see it. It has evolved. We fought the fight, but our grandchildren have different experiences and we are better off understanding and accepting that. But we should not lose sight of who we are.

*Questions by Yann Le Gall and Moses März*