The Question of Women in Francophone African Tales

Kahiudi Mabana

In Africa families live tight together, they find a lot of strength and confidence in the inherited traditions. (Traudl Schmitt)

Introduction

The purpose of this reflection is not to provide a feminist perspective or an interpretation oriented towards that approach. It is about the Tales of Amadou Koumba by Birago Diop. The approach is strictly literary and mythopoetical, i.e., a reading of the tales in the sense of myths and poetics. Therefore the aim is to discover the profound structures of the tales before starting any thematic or critical investigation.

The idea to address the question of women by Diop came as a result some years ago of the reaction of some students after reading “Fari the donkey” and “Mamelles” in Birago Diop’s collection of tales. It was a female reaction to a male writer speaking of women: “Why have you chosen for your teaching only texts against women?” Can a man depict women or speak of them without male-dominant passion or stereotypes?

The Senegalese writer Birago Diop (1906-1989) is the classical type of a storyteller converted into a writer of the francophone African literature. His Tales of Amadou Koumba (1947) and New Tales of Amadou Koumba (1958) are among seminal models of oral tradition. Some tales show a bad image of women in terms of ethics and behaviors. Is Birago Diop an anti-feminist writer? Is the griot Amadou Koumba an anti-feminist storyteller? My point is that tales and other literary texts have to be read, as they are, regardless of their gender implications. There are theoretical issues related to oral tradition that have to be addressed.

Concretely the focus is on some specific topics. The first one is about relationship between the writer Birago Diop and the text translated into French. So to say, what happens in terms of authorship when a writer translates and publishes a text stemming from the oral tradition? The second and third topics are on the clumsy and the trustful woman as shown in the tales. A reflection will finally draw theoretical and ethical considerations from those tales.

1. The writer and the text

The delivery of an oral or written publication forms a very important and significant element for the comprehension of the literary narrative of Africans. In the foreword Diop indicates that he is not the author of the Tales of Amadou Koumba and that Amadou Koumba is the author instead:

Si je n’ai pu mettre dans ce que je rapporte l’ambiance où baignaient l’auditeur que je fus et ceux que je vis, attentifs, frémissants ou recueillis, c’est que je suis devenu homme, donc un enfant incomplet, et partant, incapable de recréer le merveilleux. C’est que surtout il me manque la voix, la verve et la mimique de mon vieux griot. (Diop 1961: 12)

[If I have not been able to reproduce, in what I set down, the atmosphere in which I had luxuriated as a young listener, nor describe those attentive, quivering, contemplative people about me, it is because I have become a man, therefore an incomplete child, and being thus reduced, am incapable of re-creating the marvelous. It is especially because I lack the voice, the verve, and the art of mimicry of my old Griot. (Transl. by Anne Atik in J. Drachler 1964: 93)]

1 Since I have no official translation available, I will be doing so in the course of the paper. Except for “Mamelles” where I have one by Mercer Cook but the reference is missing.
Who takes responsibilities for the translated text if Diop is just a translator? In other words, it is about the text translated in French. Oral literature can be taken as a collective property whereas its written transcription makes it the result of an individual performance. The author belongs from the inception to the whole work and nobody can refute it. From the collective to the individual, from the community to the personal there is nothing else but the writing as a bridge. Therefore the response to the question “who is the real author of the Tales of Amadou Koumba?” depends on the way one looks at it. There are in fact many translations of African myths, legends and tales, provided by ethnologists and missionaries. Why have those translators never personally claimed their author’s rights? A reason can be the fact that, not having personally invested themselves in the text, they have never claimed any right over the content of the translated texts. Hence the tales have remained collective properties. On the hand Diop is more than just not a simple translator. The statement that he is not the writer can be interpreted as a literary and stylistic device. Diop is honest and humble when he hides himself behind Amadou Koumba. Thanks to this rhetoric of modesty he recourses to griot Koumba, which is a mark of intellectual honesty and helps him to share a part of responsibility for the content.

Who between Birago and Amadou Koumba is an antifeminist? Again here it is all about taking responsibility. Any reader of the Tales of Amadou Koumba observes that Diop has a personal art of introducing his text. He usually starts the tale by exposing or enunciating a general principle, a sentence, a say or a proverb. For example: “When memory goes to collect dead wood, it brings back the bundle of sticks that pleases it” (My own translation: Diop 31) It is how the story “Mamelles” starts. The classical rhetoric used to speak of captatio benevolentiae. Such a principle works not only for this tale but also for other narratives. A tale’s transmission always requires a certain extent of wisdom.

Sometimes Diop starts with a real story, a trip story, or even with something that has nothing to do with the tale itself. The tale, the story are never directly narrated: digressions, diversions and detours characterize this rhetorical art. The narrative of a tale or a story often stems from a question, an observation, a situation, which is superficial. The question or the observation functions as an inspiration for the storyteller; i.e. at the same time it participates in the introductive process of the tale.

Through the art of digression, Birage Diop displays his tale in two distinct parts. There are in reality two stories: the story of the narrative instance on one hand, and the tale itself on the other hand. The narrative story generally underpins the circumstances under which Amadou Koumba introduces the recitation of the tale, which never arises ex abrupto. It suggests the presence of the writer and the historical interaction between the translator and his griot. This raises the question on the identity and the consistency of the character of Amadou Koumba the family griot. Would he not simply be, as some studies have suggested, an imaginary creation of Birago Diop? Such an assumption could easily open to antifeminist statements presented in the tales without engaging the integrity of the author. The debate is complex and open.

2. Clumsiness

21. „Fari the Donkey“

Threatened by drought in their land, Queen Fari and her courtesans go to search for better and more fertile lands. They arrive at the kingdom of N’Guer, a kingdom of men only. They transform themselves from donkeys to women and settle in their host country. King Bour marries Queen Fari whereas the other men get married to her courtesans. After a short time the women feel homesickness of their previous state of freedom. Thus the Queen and her followers seek permission to go to bathe in the lake. There, they become donkeys under the rhythm of a song: Fari hi Fari is a donkey! But one day, Narr, the aid of King Bour sees them in the state of donkeys and
reveals their secret to Bour. The following night, when the musician-griot Diali executes the song he learnt from Narr: *Fari hi Fari is a donkey!* Fari and all the women become donkeys again. So to say, all donkeys suffer until today because of the clumsiness of Queen Fari.

This tale is narrated during a trip toward South Sudan. Amadou Koumba explains to the narrator why one should not feel pity for donkeys when they suffer under the load of heavy burdens by burning sun. According to him, they are responsible for their fate. Therefore he tells the story “Fari the Donkey” to show the origin of their fatal fault. Birago Diop uses the opportunity to present his griot’s oratory technique. The question one can ask is if he himself is not inspired by this technique. By using the digression, he never tells something directly, nor does he report a tale without diversion. His main topic always remains to be discovered: it reveals itself much later.

Amadou Koumba is presented as the speaking instance of the word; he is announced as the speaker of all the tales reported. Diop confesses that he just transcribes oral tales of another and projects to write on the story of the griot in the future. The *Tales of Amadou Koumba* can also be read as an autobiographical account. The Ego on the opening refers to the writer whose signature is on the cover page. The homodiegetic narrator refers to Birago Diop. From this point of view one notices in almost all the tales a historic-biographical level, which is distinct from the story’s fictional level. Through this stratification, the author-translator gives us indications on how to read and interpret his collection of tales.

“Fary the Donkey” illustrates a myth of metamorphosis, the myth of the soul’s migration: the transformation of a human being into an animal, and at the same time of a woman into a donkey. On the other hand a donkey carries in that part of the world some negative connotations: idiocy, silly thing, carelessness. The donkey faces man’s exploitation as soon as this later discovers his secret code of transformation, the sesame that opens its treasury box, exactly as in the movie *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves.*

The magical song *Fari hi! Han Fari* possesses a powerful power of transforming a woman into a donkey: it is the irresistible key, which regulates, veils and unveils the donkey status of the woman. In this marvellous world of magic, Fari and her followers are mastered by the song which transforms them into donkeys. Therefore, any one who sings this particular song automatically masters them and can manipulate them as one pleases. The recourse to the donkey helps to explain how the man has succeeded in ensuring his supremacy over the woman. Feminists see in such an etiological tale not only a confirmation of the biblical story of the Genesis, of Eve’s fault which has brought the mankind to sin, and also a consecration of the immense power held by the man over the woman.

22. „*Mamelles*“

Momar is married to Khary-Kougué. Khary is hunchback; she is ashamed to go out. She is a bad and angry wife: “,.She could have filled ten calabashes with her jealousy and thrown them in a well, and still have ten times ten goatskins full in the depths of her evil heart.” (Diop: 88). She never brings food to her husband in the field. For this reason Momar decides to marry a second wife, Koumba. Although she is also hunchback, Koumba is a very happy person, heartfelt and generous; she brings food to her husband in the field. One day, appears to her a very old woman with long white hair, who wants to help her get rid of her hunch; she orders her to participate on the Friday of the upcoming moon in the dance of the girl-spirits at N’Guew Hill. She will have to take off her hunch and give it to her neighbour: „Here, hold the baby I have on my back; it is my turn to dance.“ (Diop 91). All happens as planned. When Khary notices that Koumba has no hump any more, she also wishes to get rid of hers. Unfortunately it does not succeed. Even worse, the genius girl to whom she talks gives her back the “child” she got last time from Koumba. When all the girls disappear, Khary has no other solution but throw herself in the sea. “It is the two humps of Khary that have become the Mamelles”. (Diop: 93)

„*Mamelles*” form today the two hills of Cap Verde one can see from Senegal. In fact it is about the formation of mountains. This tale spreads a science like geology or geography, which explains the origin of the universe and nature and describes their evolution throughout the times. In a society without writing, this story exactly amounts to a school lesson. Nature and mankind are so linked that one can represent the one by the other and vice-versa through personification or metaphor. The oral narration teaches young people and reminds older
people of the kind of the world in which they live, what hides behind what they see or experience in nature. In order to understand this fundamental knowledge one can think to the Greek myths of Chronos, Rhea or Atlas. “Mamelles” form an allegory of the antithetical fight between the Good and the Bad. Throughout the ages ethics and wisdom forge human behaviour.

The roles of women as seen in this tale are not to be exaggerated. It is about an educative perspective to develop a positive view in the fight against the destiny. Both figures of Khary and Koumba are just allegoric and random; they function as the explanation of the mankind’s history in general. It is not about all women but about two women, of whom one is good and the other is bad; and each has her own name. In Wolof Koumba means first-born or femininity. Her triumph, the triumph linked to her name, is a celebration of femininity. However there are some stereotypes in it. In a church song sung in the diocese of Popokabaka (DR Congo) one can here: “E bamama kimpala lulos / E batata kiloki lulos / E bajeunes ulendo lulos. (Mothers get rid of jealousy and envy / Fathers get rid of sorcery / Young, get rid of arrogance)

So, even in the catholic church (of the Congo), this song which is authorized by the liturgical commission, shows that women are fundamentally linked to jealousy, men to kindoki (magical power) and young people to vanity and arrogance. The aim is to show that both roles of the woman function in exemplary title in “Mamelles.” It would be wise not to take into account the antifeminist stereotypes.

23 „N’Gor Niébé“

N’Gor Séné has never eaten beans and does not intend to do so. He is called N’Gor Niébé because people are amazed that he has never wanted to change his mind. Some friends push his girlfriend N’Déné to convince him to eat beans. So when she ensures him that nobody will hear about it, N’Gor answers:

- N’Déné il est dans Diakhaw une personne à qui tu donnerais ton nez pour qu’elle vive si elle venait à perdre le sien, une personne dont le coeur et le tien ne font qu’un, une amie pour laquelle tu n’as aucun secret, une seule personne à qui tu te confies sincèrement ?
- Oui ! fit N’Déné
- Qui est-ce ?
- C’est Thioro. (Diop 1961a: 46)

[- N’Déné is there in Diakhaw one person to whom you would give your nose so that she live if she had lost hers, a person whose heart and yours are just one, a friend for whom you have no secret, a person in whom you sincerely confide?
- Yes! Said N’Déné
- Who is that ?
-Thioro. ]

When he calls Thioro, she gives the name of N’Goné to the same question. N’Goné in her turn mentions the name of Djégane. Etc. the answer to the question is always different. So, the entire village would finally know the secret. Morality: „Donne ton amour à la femme, mais non ta confiance.“ (Diop 1961a: 47) [Give your love to the woman, but not your confidence]

This story shows clearly to what extent the woman is unable to keep a secret for a long time. The man sticks to his decision whereas a woman is unpredictable. This is exactly as in the book of Genesis when Eve pushed Adam to sin. A Congolese proverb says: “Kolia na mwasi kolia na ndoki” (Eating with a woman means eating with an ndoki, a sorcerer). When it comes to law or order, a woman represents the tempter, the she-devil who demolishes everything. It is in the nature of the woman to lead the man into temptation, to destroy the order, to call principles into question. In an intimate relationship the woman is the weak link where everything can fail. Instead of showing this as an antifeminist conception, we are in front of what can be called the characterization of the mankind, in which the male stereotypes against women prevail and play a decisive role. The correct lesson to draw from this tale is loyalty in a human relationship. On the other hand, honour is more important than anything else. This case can happen to any human being, be it a man or a woman. It would be a serious mistake to extend this example to all women.
3. Loyalty

31. „The Bone“

Mor Lame would like to eat his bone all alone. But whereas the bone is being cooked in the pot, his brother Moussa comes to visit and he also decides not to leave before tasting the bone. So Mor Lame decides to feign the death. But nothing happens, Moussa is still there. Mor Lame’s state worsens. His thoughtful and trustful wife Awa willing to save him tries everything possible to get him change his mind but nothing changes; it is too late:

„Serigne, dit-elle, mon mari m’avait recommandé de réciter sur son cadavre une sourate qu’il m’avait apprise pour que Dieu ait pitié de lui. “
Le Marabout et sa suite se retirèrent. Alors Awa, se penchant sur l’oreille de son époux:
- Mor! Lève-toi! On va t’ensevelir et t’enterrer si tu continues à faire le mort.
- Où est l’os? s’enquit le cadavre de Mor Lame.
- Il est là-bas.
- S’est-il amolli?
- Oui.
- Et Moussa ?
- Il est toujours là.
- Qu’on m’ensevelisse! décida Mor Lame.
Ainsi fut fait. (Diop 1961b: 35)

[...] Alors Moussa, régnant déjà en maître dans la maison de feu Mor Lame, demanda à Awa:
- Où est l’os?
- Il est là, fit la veuve docile.
- Apporte-le et qu’on en finisse. (Diop 1961b: 37)

[Serigne, she said, my husband had recommended me to recite on his corpse a sourate he had taught me so that God has mercy on him.”
The Marabout and his followers went out. Then Awa bending on the ear of her husband said:
- Mor! Stand up! They are going to bury you if you continue to feign the dead.
- Where is the bone? Asked the cadaver of Mor Lame.
- It is there.
- Is it softened?
- Yes
- And Moussa?
- He is still there.
- Let me be buried! Decided Mor Lame.
So did it happen.

Then, Moussa already reigning as a master over the house of the late Mor Lame asked Awa:
- Where is the bone?
- It is there, said the docile widow.
- Bring it here and let us eat it once for all. ]

One can also think that Mor Lame is totally blind and stubborn so that he never measures the idiot consequences of this inveterate egoism. Maybe he places so much value on this idiocy that he is unable to share the bone with his brother.

This story shows the tough, cruel and obstinate masculinity. It reminds of a German popular song: « Männer sind Schweine » [Men are porcs]. I add: they are « Schweinshaxen » (pig feet). This German song demonstrates
what extend masculine self-esteem and egoism can attain. These defects admit no compromise, no intermediary solution. These kinds of personalities stick to their decisions even if they realize that they are wrong. The impression is that Mor Lame would have lost his honour if he had ever stopped feigning the dead.

An anthropological or mythical explanation would be that Mor dies because he acts against the tradition of solidarity and community life. In the old African tradition everything would equitably belong to all brothers and sisters. Death sentence could be implemented against someone who breached the community laws. One can argue that sorcerers have thundered his mind so that he lost his reasonable and clear consciousness. He is so bad that the gods have not opened him the way to healing or salvation.

Another possible explanation would be that the bone is just a facade of another deeper fight at another level. Obviously the bone is cooked by the very wife who performs her usual domestic work, which is in fact the arena of the two brothers. From the beginning the question is not whether Moussa will go away but if he will win the fight against the death. In words the right question is: “Who will eat the bone?” The fight for power and the love drama are so strong and so invincible that one of the two brothers has to die. There is apparently no solution as long as Awa conducts as a referee the unconscious quarrel between the two brothers. Does not Allah authorize that a brother inherits the wife of his deceased brother? The ancestors used to say: “What belongs to you, also belongs to your brother.”

In this society a woman like the bone belongs to the husband, so that Serigne-the-Marabout can easily trust Awa to Moussa:

Moussa, tu fus le frère-de-case, le plus-que-frère de feu Mor Lame. Awa ne peut passer en des meilleures mains que les tiennes. Son veuvage terminé, tu la prendras pour femme. (Diop 1961b: 36-37)

[Moussa, you were the brother-of-home, the more-than-brother to late Mor Lame. Awa cannot get into better hands than yours. At the end of her widowhood you will take her as your wife.]

Awa is honest, reserved. She finds herself as a referee amid the two brothers and is surprised that the drama goes so far. She plays her role trustfully, heartily, without complaint or bad consciousness. She remains the traditional wife who avoids causing her foolish and idiot husband to get angry. A modern wife would have done whatsoever to stop this tasteless comedy; she could even ask Moussa simply to go.

In last analysis, it is precisely about power handing over. Moussa finally takes control of Mor Lame’s house. As if it was obvious, he asks exactly the same question: “Where is the bone?” This question is the key: who asks it automatically takes control over the house and possesses it. So Moussa takes over on events that Mor Lame simply can not conduct any more.

32. „Little Husband“

When the hunter Samba dies, a struggle rises between N’Diongane his son and Khary his daughter because Khary decides to call N’Diongane Little Husband. Koumba, Samba’s widow, is unable to stop the obsessive passion of her daughter. Stubborn, she always sings again and again: “Je le dis, et le redis: Petit-mari: Petit-mari.” (Diop 1961a: 121), [I say it and say it again: Little Husband, Little Husband] although her brother does not like this nickname. N’Diongane warns his mother but nothing changes. In response the mother orders her son: "N’Diongane reviens, / N’Diongane chéri reviens! / Que ta soeur ne t’exile pas / N’Diongane reviens!" (Diop 1961a: 124-127). [N’Diongane come back / N’Diongane darling come back / That your sister does not exile you / N’Diongane come back!] An interminable quarrel takes place until the day when N’Diongane disappears in the sea and Koumba kills Khary.

In this dramatic tale the Oedipus complex works backwards, in two different directions. Khary transposes her love for her late father on her still living brother and would like to share this discovery with her mother. The multiform conflict between the mother and the daughter does not stop and lasts further until the death of different family members. There is here a variant of the Oedipus complex. The mother loses her husband, her daughter considers her brother as the husband who becomes the centre of the conflict. The brother repels his
sister’s disguised love and the mother is unable to help him. Such behaviour is incest in the tradition of certain African peoples. The process consists of determining who between the mother and the daughter loves most the only man who still lives in the house. The girl becomes totally upset, foolish; she loses the reason. What the tale shows is that one needs a balance in life, that even the death of the father should not disturb the family unity but reinforce it. No family is built on the stubbornness or ostentation of extreme characters; on the opposite, it has to be built on respect, serenity and mutual tolerance.

At night, from the shells on a beach, one can hear the cry and songs of the foolish Koumba constantly calling back her son: *N’Diongane, reviens / N’Diongane chéri reviens!* (Diop 1961a: 124) [*N’Diongane come back / N’Diongane darling come back*]

The world forms an eternal unity. According to this anthropomorphic world vision all natural events stem from events of human life. If the sun shines while it rains, Kongo children think the sun is bathing its child. The birds’ songs are compared with human cries. There are oral sources, like legends, myths and says that underpin such ideas. “Little Husband” is an example of such an explanation of natural phenomena, for it is important to link the noises of nature to the songs of humans.

33. „The inheritance“

After the death of Old Samba, the elders of the village suggest that the wisest man of the world Kèm Tanne talk to the three heirs, because nobody in the village is able to do so. So Moussa the youngest receives gold in his leather bag; Momar the oldest is left with nothing but sand and Birama gets ends of rope. On their long way to Kèm Tanne’s village, the three brothers meet first M’Bam Ham, the wild boar; then a very fat stier in a desert area; a very skinny cow in a beautiful meadow, a very fat cow at a place where there is scarcely food and drink. About the skinny cow, Kèm Tanne says: « *Telle est, dit Kém Tanne, la mauvaise épouse, la méchante femme au milieu des richesses de son mari.* » (Diop 1961a: 170) [*So is the bad wife, the nasty woman amid the wealth of her husband*]

About the fat stier, he says: „*Telle est la femme au grand coeur, la bonne épouse, la mère généreuse. Les biens de sa maison peuvent être minimes, elle en est satisfaite et donne sa part à qui franchit le seuil de sa demeure.* “ (Diop 1961a: 170) [*So is the woman with great heart, the good wife, the generous mother. The goods of her house can be little; she is satisfied and gives her part to anybody who crosses the threshold of her home*]

Only experienced men are able to explain the nobility and the beauty of the nature. All the events described here consist of some aspects of the symbolic world and build the sense of the narrated story. There exists a pattern of wisdom transmitted by the eldest. These are models to which correspond certain types of precise behaviours.

The figure of the old woman almost remains at the background. In many tales, she acts as a counsellor, helper and giver of lessons. The old lady is respected and positively valued because of her age and ascendance. Her presence symbolises first of all assurance and security. In “Mamelles” she is the comforter who shows Koumba how to get rid of her hunchback. In “The Inheritance” when the old woman meets the three brothers, she shows them Kèm Tem’s property. Actually the old lady receives the same considerations, respects and honours as the old man.

4. Critical assessments

From a critical point of view the problematic of woman in Birago Diop’ tales can be understood as a construction of a feminine identity by men; and this identity construction gets, in a male dominant writing, satiric features with explicit antifeminist stenches. The stake here is to escape this dichotomy and objectively assess Birago Diop’s work.

In a study on orature where S. Gehrmann tries to show the pragmatic development in the written encoding of oral material, as practiced by Birago Diop and Boris B. Diop, she mentions an interesting remark on Birago Diop in a footnote:
Considered on the man versus woman opposition axis, this argument refers in terms of powers to known anti-feminine stereotypes: patriarchy, usurpation of power by men to the detriment of women. Feminism uses such arguments to justify why women endured difficulties to be recognized as writers, and at the same time, why books publishing has been and has remained for so long an essentially male activity. Gehrmann might obviously be right. Her perspective seems to confirm feminist positions, as it is the case with the translation of the Tales of Amadou Koumba titled as: Geisteröchter: Die Geschichten des Amadou Koumba by Gudrun Honke. Indeed, Honke adds a surtitle to the original title: Geisteröchter means “ghost-daughter” or “spirit-girls”.

The first female writers known in the French Literature history had to face social prejudices, honour losts and reproaches of ethical order. Marie de France, Louise Labé like George Sand had never had a good reputation when they were alive. Writing was taken for a male activity. That the existence of female griots often passes unnoticed has nothing to do with Birago Diop, but with the fact that society is under masculine dominance. During the colonial time, it was easier for a young man than for a young woman to pursue education until the obtaining of a diploma. The girl should not study too long; she had to get married young.

Birago Diop’s texts presented here determine a construction of feminine identity as meant by men. Actually men have their dominant stereotypes against women; and they would like to show and justify through the tales. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote once: „La raison forme l’homme, mais le sentiment le guide“ (Heening Mankell, in B Grill / S. Hippler: 21) [Reason forms man but feeling guides him.]

Mohamadou Kane considers „N’Gor Niébé“ as an innocent satire:

[Cette satire est moins féroce, parce que l’auteur n’écrase nulle part la femme sous le poids du ridicule. En outre, Birago Diop, par pudeur ou par goût personnel, ne retient aucun des contes licencieux qui foisonnent dans la région dont les contes d’Amadou Koumba sont originaires. (Kane 75)]

Whereas acknowledging the immense contribution of Mohamadou Kane to the critical reception of Birago Diop, I do not agree with his approach nor do I agree with his analysis of “N’Gor Niébé”. To me the final sentence “Give your love to the wife but not your confidence” clearly favorite man’s condescension and humiliates the woman. The female indiscretion as illustrated in tales such as “N’Gor Niébé, Liguidi-Malgam, Khary Gaye” is deliberately exaggerated, turned in mockery. Instead of constantly celebrating Diop and underlining his writing skills, which nobody doubts, Kane should be more critical and enrich his commentary by using arguments susceptible to attain an acceptable degree of balance.

To me Eileen Julien presents a better approach. She states that the men who incite N’Dène to betray N’Gor Niébé are as wrong as their victim; but the storyteller does not affirm nor does he say anything about it:

[We are left to conclude that N’Dène deserves the scorn of N’Gor, the fictional society, and the listener or reader because she betrays for the ignoble reason of the feminine vanity and weakness. Men, who betray deliberately because men may do so and because it is manly to do so are not to be reproached. (Julien 1987, 343)]
In other words, it is essentially about femininity, being a woman: “Femaleness is perceived as apriori essence. And because N'Dène’s flaws are seen as inherent to femaleness, they are typical of women as a whole.” (Julien 1987: 343)

A tale functions like the sign of world vision. It is never gratis, it possesses its own ideology; it underpins a knowledge, a doctrine and spreads a new way of looking at the world. For every tale there exists a counter-tale which can justify the contrary. It has been reproached to Birago Diop and other figures of negritude to be patriarchal, to have relegated the place of the woman to the background and to be traditionally conservative. Kembe Milolo in her thesis L’image de la femme chez les romancières de l’Afrique noire francophone provides an enlightening interview with Senghor on this topic. In the foreword to the German translation, Janos Riesz summarizes the intentionality of Birago Diop’s tales: „Die Geschichten in ihrer Gesamtheit können gewissermaßen als Lehrbuch der Erziehung gelesen werden.“ (Geistertöchter 305) [The tales in their totality can be read like an education textbook.] On the other hand the modern griot Birago Diop was among the first men (if not the first one) who admired Mariama Bâ’s So a long letter and have strongly recommended its publication.

Conclusion

The African tradition represented in the selected tales clearly shows the impact of the gender balance in society. Men possess however the highest voice and can, as it please them, determine the roles of women. The question of the translation is decisive concerning Birago Diop: Do the translated tales correspond to his personal world vision? Or is it better to conceive translation as just an intellectual and impersonal exercise, and therefore, not take into account its content? The author has nevertheless to take responsibility for the publication because, as a writer of negritude, he represents the African tradition. Although women are described as clumsy, envious and indiscrete in many tales, it is no sufficient reason to treat the translator as antifeminist.

The selfish Mor Lame who deliberately dies because of a bone is not a better model of behaviour than the indiscrete N’Dèné. Beyond gender difference, what is condemned is egoism and indiscretion. As Julien states: „The tales are subject to different mythologies which preserve the social structure of their milieu; they give a less flattering picture of the feminine, to be sure, but also a more complex one of gendering” (341).

References


