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## **The Invisibility of the African Interpreter<sup>1</sup>**

**Jeanne Garane**

“Les interprètes le font tourner dans un petit cercle d'intrigues.” (The interpreters keep him turning in a narrow circle of intrigues.)  
Robert Delavignette, *Service africain*<sup>2</sup>

### **Domesticating the Foreign(er)**

Despite the essential role played by indigenous African interpreters in the formation of the colony of French West Africa, an entity that ultimately included Mauritania, Senegal, French Soudan (now The Republic of Mali), French Guinea (now The Republic of Guinea), Côte d'Ivoire, Upper Volta (Haute Volta--now Burkina Faso), Dahomey (now Benin), and Niger between 1895 and 1958, covered 4, 689,000 square kilometers and eventually included a population of approximately 25 million people, scholars in the fields of Translation and Interpreting Studies have hitherto paid them scant attention. This may be due to the fact that as Michael Cronin notes in “The Empire Talks Back: Orality, Heteronomy and the Cultural Turn in Interpreting Studies,” (2002) the fields of Translation and Interpreting Studies have been “dominated by the typographic cultures of highly literate Western elites who speak majority languages [such that] whole areas of translation practice... may be either misunderstood or simply ignored” (48). While Cronin himself uses the example of French traders learning the languages of North American Indians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as an example of the material history of interpreting, (57) the central role of native interpreters in pre-colonial and colonial French West Africa goes unmentioned. This is somewhat understandable, given that, as I demonstrate below,

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none of the works on interpreters or interpreting that were in print when Cronin's essay first appeared deal with this particular group.<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to remedy the lack of attention to indigenous African interpreters in Translation and Interpreting Studies, it is useful to revisit certain key works by Amadou Hampâté Bâ (*L'Etrange destin de Wangrin, ou les roueries d'un interprète africain (The Fortunes of Wangrin)*; *Amkoullel l'enfant peul* and *Oui mon commandant!*) since these works all portray in some way the powerful interpreters who manipulated the contacts between French colonizers and African populations in colonial French West Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In examining the ways in which these works both maintain and overturn the conventional image of the native informant/interpreter as colonized subaltern, I demonstrate that the interpreter in these works is often a trickster figure who is never entirely "faithful" to his "own" people nor to the colonizer, and that this "infidelity" is ironically constitutive of agency, whether "ethical" or not.<sup>4</sup> As such, the interpreters in this study do not always conform to the conventional expectation that their work is, as Pöchhacker defines interpreting, performed "for the benefit of people who want to engage in communication across barriers of language and culture" (10). In this context, M'bayo argues that the "representation...of African colonial interpreters as dishonest, disloyal, and untrustworthy individuals has been overblown" (17) due in part to Amadou Hampâté Bâ's portrait of the interpreter Wangrin in his *L'etrange destin de Wangrin ou les roueries d'un interprète africain (The Fortunes of Wangrin)*, which M'bayo calls a work of fiction. My argument here is that first, Bâ's portrait of Wangrin is an accurate document that nevertheless tended to be more laudatory than M'bayo would have it; that second, Bâ's memoirs also document the interpreter's agency, whether

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beneficent or malevolent, and that third, Translation and Interpreting Studies must take Bâ's work into account in order to constitute a more complete history of translating and interpreting.

The reference in the title of this essay to Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) is therefore intended to refer both to the lack of attention in Translation and Interpreting Studies to the work of indigenous African interpreters under French colonialism, as well as to the ways in which these interpreters were involved in the processes of concealment and transformation that Venuti identifies as elements of a "domesticating" translation. As he demonstrates in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, contemporary translation (from the 17<sup>th</sup> c. onward) privileges fluency and tends to mask the translation as translation. According to Venuti, "a fluent translation is immediately recognizable and intelligible, 'familiarized,' domesticated, not 'disconcertingly' foreign..." (4-5). Such an ideology means that a "good" translator makes his or her work invisible in order to produce "the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems 'natural,' i.e. not translated" (5). Under this regime, just as the translated text masks itself as a translation, the translator must efface him or herself, and stand in the author's shadow. This "masking" is coterminous with the denial of the translator's legal status as author, so that translations are not only often effectuated for relatively little pay, but they are also denied the kind of copyright protection afforded to authors of "original works" because translations are viewed as derivative and secondary.<sup>5</sup> As I demonstrate in this essay, the lack of recognition for chirographic translators is in turn related to a similar absence of attention to the effects of oral interpreters, whose work may be so "fluent" that it is

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deemed transparent and thus, invisible. This is in part because, as Pöchhacker defines it, interpreting is distinguished from other types of translation by its unfolding in the “here and now,” its immediacy (10).

Venuti’s paradigm is based on his reading of Schleiermacher’s 1813 lecture, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” where Schleiermacher formulates the well-known statement, translated by Susan Bernofsky here as, “either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer towards him.”<sup>6</sup> Venuti reads the first option as an ethics of “foreignization” that would “restrain the ethnocentric violence” of a domesticating translation. In the colonial context, however, indigenous African interpreters manipulated colonial violence through a kind of domestication of foreign officials. The idea that an indigenous interpreter may be capable of domesticating French foreign(ers) may seem incongruous and even impossible in the context of violent colonial conquest, where French conquerors were intent upon unseating local power structures in order to replace them with their own foreign administrative hierarchies. Nevertheless, indigenous interpreters repeatedly used “local” forms of knowledge to gain and maintain power, whether that power was used for personal or community gain. These forms of knowledge tended to remain “invisible” to the French conquerors when they did not speak the local languages or understand the local customs. As a result, the colonizers themselves thereby ironically underwent a kind of “domestication,” even as they were imposing their “foreignizing” cultural values upon the indigenous populations of the colonies. This is how the indigenous African interpreter could in some cases become a kind of masked trickster who “transforms a text in one language into a text in another

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while simultaneously concealing that such a transformation has taken place” (Thompson, 2005, 154).

### **Translation and/as Manipulation<sup>7</sup>**

In *Le Roi de Kahel* (2008), a novel about the failed attempt of the French explorer and entrepreneur Olivier de Sanderval to establish his own kingdom in the Fulani lands of nineteenth century Fouta-Djalou (Guinea), Guinean novelist Tierno Monémbo humorously but sincerely pairs the lowly cook with the indigenous African interpreter, for they were the two men most essential to the survival of the white man in the colony of French West Africa. So doing, Monémbo establishes the vital link between verbal artistry as the manipulation of the spoken word and interpreting:

Le cuisinier et l'interprète, les deux hommes essentiels des colonies! De leur *art* dépendait la vie du Blanc. Il vivait ou mourait de la marmite du premier ou de la bouche du second. Une petite pincée de sel, celui de la sorcière bien sûr, et votre coeur s'arrêtait de battre après deux jours de rhume! Un mot mal traduit dans l'oreille des rois nègres, vous étiez bon, selon le rite du coin, pour la case aux serpents ou la strangulation! Ces deux-là, il fallait les sélectionner, les complimenter matin et soir, les gratifier pour un rien, surtout l'interprète, le poison des mots étant, dans ces contrées, souvent plus redoutable que celui des mets (25, emphasis added).

In the colonies, a man's cook and interpreter were essential. The white man's life depended on their *art*. He lived or died by the cook's pot and the interpreter's mouth. A little pinch of salt--sorceress's salt, of course--and your heart stopped beating after a two-day cold. A poorly translated word whispered into the ear of the Negro kings and you were condemned to the snake hut or strangulation, depending on local custom. These two had to be carefully selected, complimented morning, noon, and night, and rewarded at the drop of a hat--particularly the

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interpreter, for poisonous words were often more dangerous than poisoned food in these parts. (Trans. Elliott 2010, 15)

In fact, in the colonies of French West Africa, the indigenous African interpreter was often known as “la bouche,” or “2mouth,” of the colonial “commandant,” or French colonial administrator.<sup>8</sup> This “bouche” could be “bonne” (favorable) or nefarious depending upon the ability to pay the interpreter to manipulate the message when it emanated from the African side of the exchange. As Ivorian writer Ahmadou Kourouma further explains in an interview with Jean Ouédraogo (2001) regarding the figure of the interpreter in his novel, *Monnè, outrages, et défis* (1990),

quand j’étais jeune, c’est-à-dire au temps de la colonisation, avant que les Africains ne sachent lire, écrire, et parler français, l’interprète était un homme très, très important. Il est impossible à la jeunesse aujourd’hui de rendre compte de ce qu’était l’interprète. C’était le vrai, vrai administrateur du Blanc parce que c’est lui seul qui comprenait le Blanc, c’est lui seul qui disait ce que le Blanc avait dit, c’est lui seul qui vivait avec le Blanc. Quand vous arriviez dans une subdivision, c’était l’interprète qui en était le chef parce que personne ne comprenait ce que le Blanc disait. (777)

when I was young, that is to say, during the time of colonization, before Africans knew how to read, write, and speak French, the interpreter was a very, very important man. It is impossible for the youth of today to understand what the interpreter was. He was the true, real administrator for the White Man because he alone could understand the white man, he alone said what the white man had said, he alone lived with the White man. When you arrived in a district, it was the interpreter who was the chief because no one understood what the White Man was saying.

Simplistic models of oppositionality would cast the interpreter as a defender of African interests through the manipulation of information in their favor. However,

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interpreters muddied the waters for Africans as well as for Europeans. Citing one colonial administrator's remarks regarding indigenous interpreters, Henri Brunshwig writes in *Noirs et Blancs dans l'Afrique noire française* (1983) that “ils ne sont pas recommandables: beaucoup d’entre eux ne désirent pas qu’un Européen entre en contact direct avec des indigènes susceptibles de révéler des faits qu’ils qu’ils entendent dissimuler. Ils s’efforcent alors de troubler les investigations et d’écarter des témoignages gênants” (109) (they are not to be trusted: many of them do not want a European to enter into direct contact with natives liable to reveal facts that they intend to conceal. Therefore, they make efforts to trouble investigations and to impede incriminating testimonies). In *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* (chapters 5-8) both the colonial administrator, the Count of Villermoz, and Wangrin engage in a battle of wits in order to avoid being incriminated in the so-called “affaire des boeufs,” where Wangrin and others, Europeans and Africans, profited from illegal cattle exports in 1914. The cattle were taken from the herds of Wangrin’s fellow Africans. Brunshwig shows that the interpreter's role during colonial conquest and settlement was of the utmost importance, “parce que le commandant d'une part, les chefs coutumiers de l'autre en étaient souvent réduits à croire ce que disait l'interprète, même si sa traduction n'était pas fidèle” (106) (because the colonial administrator on the one hand, and the traditional chiefs on the other hand were often reduced to believing what the interpreter was saying, even if his translation was not faithful). Because they controlled and manipulated the flow of information between colonial administrators, customary chiefs and colonized subjects, African interpreters could become the most important men of the colonies. The colonial “commandant,” theoretically all powerful, was often “paralyzed” (106) and ineffective

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without interpreters who could speak French along with several other indigenous languages.

This image of the interpreter as politically powerful, important, and manipulative reverses the conventional expectation that such a person in the employ of the colonizer could be nothing but a compliant servant. To the contrary, although interpreters worked with the colonizers, they did not tend to deny their own identities. According to Brunschwig's schema, the interpreter was a kind of “collaborator”<sup>9</sup> who would assist

le colonisateur, blanc ou noir, sans pour autant renoncer à son identité, sans estimer supérieures à celles des Noirs les manières des Blancs, bref, sans se convertir...Relativement libéré des contraintes du milieu coutumier, relativement rattaché à la société occidentale, il ne participe pleinement à aucune des collectivités que sa présence met en rapport. (96-97)

the colonizer, white or black, without renouncing his own identity and without thinking that the manners of white people are superior to those of blacks; in sum, without converting...Relatively free from the constraints of the traditional milieu, relatively attached to Western society, he does not participate wholly in any of the activities that his presence places into contact.

Thus, while colonial administrators considered interpreters to be their “agents,” they also mistrusted them and were often preoccupied with controlling and assuring their loyalty.

### **Indigenous African Interpreters: Forgotten Power Brokers of the Past**

The passages cited above illustrate the powerful mediating role of indigenous African interpreters in the French colonies. However, despite these explicit links between oral translation, the colonial enterprise, and occult forces (in *Le Roi du Kahel*, the sorceress supplies the poisoned salt, and in A. H. Bâ's *Amkoullel* the interpreter is described as the

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(white) sorcerer's "acolyte" (185) whose favorable intervention must be sought out at night or in secret), the agency of indigenous interpreters has only recently begun to be fully explored by historians and translation theorists. Moreover, this work is just beginning to touch the surface of what has become an almost submerged entity.<sup>10</sup>

According to Anna Niang<sup>11</sup> in "History and Role of Interpreting in Africa," (1990), before European colonization,

the diversity of ethnic groups and tribes in Africa made interpreting a necessary tool for communication. As a result of contacts with the Arab world [as early as the 7th and 8th centuries CE], the period of the glorious empires and especially the advent of colonization, the status of the African interpreter became recognized and officialized...In urban centers such as Timbuktu, which was a world-famous seat of learning with its own university, there soon appeared a privileged class of Arabic-speaking intellectuals among members of the local community who belonged to the upper classes. Interpreters were chosen from among this elite group and played a major role in consolidating the relationship between Africa and the Arab world. Most often, these interpreters did not have their role confined to that of a simple conveyor of a message. Esteemed as highly intelligent people by both parties, they were also often consulted for guidance and advice. (34)

Later, as A. H. Bâ's works demonstrate, during the colonial period the indigenous interpreter in French West Africa came to be considered as the practitioner of "a magic art," who was "envied and feared by all" (Niang 1990, 36, 35). This is because indigenous African interpreters were able to turn the new social orders that developed under European colonialism to their advantage.

It is perhaps because of the occult nature of the interpreter's power that, contemporary work in translation and interpreting studies has almost completely ignored their important role in colonial French West Africa. This neglect could also be explained

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by two additional factors. First, scholars may not be aware of the extant sources in French. For instance, Henri Brunshwig's *Noirs et Blancs dans l'Afrique noire française* (1983) has not been translated into English. In addition, as I will demonstrate below, Amadou Hampâté Bâ's untranslated memoirs, *Amkoullel* and *Oui, Mon Commandant!* contain numerous examples of the role and power on the indigenous African interpreter.<sup>12</sup> However, with the exception of Austen (2006), the role of the interpreter as recorded in these memoirs has received scant attention. Moreover, while scholars of African literature are certain to be familiar with the powerful and somewhat heroic figure of the indigenous interpreter in Bâ's *Etrange destin de Wangrin, ou les roueries d'un interprète africain* (1973, not translated until 1999 as *The Fortunes of Wangrin*) who is himself portrayed as a kind of sorcerer, this work also goes unmentioned in interpreting studies. This neglect is perhaps explained by the fact that the work was classified against Bâ's wishes as a "novel" by his French publisher, and therefore not taken seriously as documentary material. However, while Wangrin has often been taken to be a semi-fictional figure, Bâ repeatedly stated that Wangrin's story is a true account, collected from Wangrin and from others who knew him. Indeed, the work contains eye-witness accounts collected orally that document the life of Wangrin (also known variously as Samaké Niamebe, Samako Niembélé, Samba Traoré or Samba Taraore) showing that he and his rivals used local knowledge and occult power to manipulate Africans and Europeans alike in the colony of French Soudan. In the Afterword to *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, Bâ insists on the "reality" of Wangrin, and categorically denies that the work is a fiction. While this Afterword was written in 1989, it was not included in the following editions of the book until 1992. According to Bâ,

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[d]epuis la parution de ce livre en 1973, ... certains...s'interrogent: ce récit est-il une fiction, une réalité ou un habile mélange des deux? On admet généralement l'existence historique de celui qui s'était surnommé lui-même 'Wangrin,' mais on pense que j'ai dû 'romancer' quelque peu sa vie, y introduisant même, pour corser l'histoire et lui donner une sorte de signification symbolique, un dosage subtil de tradition orale et d'événements surnaturels de mon cru. (359)

Since the publication of this book in 1973...some people ask themselves whether this narrative is fiction, reality, or a clever mixture of both. Although the existence of the man who chose to call himself Wangrin is generally accepted as a historical fact, they think I 'romanticized' his life somewhat and even added a subtle sprinkling of oral tradition and supernatural events of my own making in order to flesh out the story and give it a patina of symbolical significance. (257)

Moreover, in the appendix to *Oui mon commandant!*, Hélène Heckmann, Bâ's literary executor, reveals Wangrin's "true" identity, with the permission of his descendants, in order to counteract assertions by literary critics that *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* is a fiction, or even an autobiography. According to Heckmann, Wangrin's granddaughter asserted that "tous les événements relatés dans le livre étaient véridiques, sauf les circonstances exactes du décès de Wangrin..." (518) (all of the events related in the book were true, except for the exact circumstances of the death of Wangrin).<sup>13</sup>

An additional explanation for the silence of interpreting studies scholars regarding indigenous African interpreters may lie in the fact that the colonial archives contain relatively little information regarding the names and activities of the indigenous interpreters who were active during the European conquest of Africa. McClendon (2006) speculates that "the relative silence of the colonial archive concerning African interpreters may...reflect official disdain for such employees rather than their literal non-existence" (79).<sup>14</sup>

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It is no accident then, that the French word “occulter,” is often associated with certain interpreters in official documents and literary texts alike. In *Le Trésor de la langue française*, “occulter” is defined as “Rendre obscur, peu visible; dérober à la vue. Synon. *cache*, *dissimuler*, *masquer*.” (Make obscure, scarcely visible; to hide from view. Synonym, to hide, to dissimulate, to mask.) According to this same source, the French word “art,” which first appeared in 1100 CE, was used to describe the occult sciences, known as the “males arz,” or “arts maléfiques.” In this sense, the verbal artistry of the indigenous interpreter also involved the manipulation of cultural values and expectations. This practice often predominated over the altruistic aim of bridging cultural divides and establishing dialogue through interpreting.

These factors may thus explain why African interpreters go almost completely unmentioned in Frances Karttunen’s lengthy *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (1995), which combines the biographies of nine interpreters with short sketches of the lives of seven others. Only briefly does the book mention the English and Dutch practice of snatching African people from the shores of the Cape of Good Hope in order to make them into interpreters (248-252). Otherwise, African interpreters remain invisible. Similarly, the collective volume entitled *Translators Through History* (1995) hardly mentions oral interpreting in Africa, a constant fact of life from ancient times to the present on a continent with thousands of different languages. Unfortunately, the editors of this work equate translation with writing alone and declare,

although it is impossible...to indicate the exact date at which translation began, there is some evidence of early translation activity on the African Continent. The Septuagint, a translation of the scriptures from Hebrew into Greek made from c. 250-130 BC in Egypt is one example...By the eighteenth century, the complete

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Bible was available in two African languages, namely Ge'ez and Arabic, while a New Testament was available in Coptic. (51)<sup>15</sup>

A later chapter attributed to seven different authors<sup>16</sup> asserts that because African literature is rooted in the oral tradition, it “does not have a long history of translation” (92). Although they do acknowledge “pictorial writing as a common form of artistic expression” (strangely, they do not acknowledge this kind of writing as a form of communication) as well as the “transcription of African narratives into Arabic characters” as a “certain kind of translation” that predates the arrival of European invaders, the authors date “translation as we know it” with the arrival of Christian missionaries and the Latin alphabet (92). The volume does mention the role interpreters played from the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries onward in the arrival of Islam in certain parts of Africa (254) as well as the doctrine of Koranic untranslatability (178)<sup>17</sup> and later mentions the role played by servants such as houseboys who sometimes acted as interpreters under European colonialism (259), but these references are brief and dispersed in different chapters. An exception to the idea that translation began either with Arabic or with the arrival of European languages under colonialism is the mention of the Egyptian hieroglyph entitled “interpreting,” (c. 1350 BC) portrayed in a bas-relief as discussed by Kurz (1985). The interpreter is depicted as small, “reflecting his social status...The sculptor carved a double image of the interpreter in order to clearly indicate his role as a mediator” (286).<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Ruth Roland’s *Interpreters as Diplomats: A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics*, first published in 1982 and then again in 1999, never mentions indigenous African interpreters, although this very readable book covers Samuel de Champlain’s resident interpreters in New France, Doña Marina, interpreter for Cortès in Mexico, Sacajawea interpreter for Lewis and Clark

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in North America, and the French institute for the “jeunes de langue” or “enfants de langue,” established in 1669 to train children as interpreters in the Levant. Jean Delisle, who also coedited *Translators Through History*, and aided in the republication of *Interpreters as Diplomats*, includes an illustration of an interpreter’s gaffe in his introduction. Citing an interpreting incident where “il y a anguille sous roche,” perhaps best rendered as “there is a snake in the grass,” instead came out as “there is a nigger in the woodpile,” Delisle writes,

a black man got up immediately and left the room. He was the leader of the American delegation...If the interpreter had said, ‘There is more than meets the eye’ instead, which means the same as ‘There is a nigger in the woodpile,’ he would not have offended the sensitive American delegate and would have avoided an international incident. Interpreters are linguistic acrobats constantly walking on a tight rope. (3)

Surprisingly, Delisle makes no attempt to unpack the offending expression of its racist history, rooted as it is in American slavery (and thus rendering it offensive to the “sensitive” African-American delegate of the anecdote), but retains it as meaning the “same thing” as the expression, “there is more than meets the eye.” What kind of power differential forced the person of African descent to have to hide in a woodpile in the first place? How often did it have to occur in order for the expression to become a cliché? Paradoxically, similar questions involving power differentials arise in a discussion of the appearance and quasi disappearance of indigenous African interpreters in colonial French West Africa. Historically, there has precisely been more to the story than at first meets the eye.

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### **Interpreting, Transparency, Invisibility**

In *After Babel* (1975), George Steiner traces the history of the distinction between “translation” as the “recreative” or written transfer from one literary, philosophic, or religious text to another” (265), and the oral interpreter's “translation of common matter--private, commercial, clerical, ephemeral” (265). According to Steiner's overview of the interpreter's role in the French and German traditions, the interpreter is an always male “garden variety” (265) intermediary unconcerned with “high translation” (265). Rather, he translates commercial documents, answers the questions of travelers and deals with “the exchanges of diplomats and hoteliers” (265). In this schema, the “traducteur” is at the top of a hierarchy where written translation is the most valued and the “interprète” is at its bottom because he deals with the ephemeral spoken word. While Steiner recognizes that “the most banal act of interlingual conveyance” (265) through an interpreter involves the entire theory and nature of translation, he nevertheless contends that it is the

upper range of semantic events that make problems of translation theory and practice most *visible*, most incident to general questions of language and mind. It is the literary speech forms...which ask and promise the most...The poem, the philosophic discourse, embody those *hermetic* and creative aspects which are at the core of language. Where it addresses itself to a significant text, translation will engage this core. (266, emphasis added)

This view echoes that developed in Schleiermacher's “On the Different Methods of Translating,” where “common” oral discourse is thought to be transparent. In Theo Hermans' analysis, for Schleiermacher, “when language merely repeats what is already known, it disappears as language, and ‘where speech is without art, no art is needed to understand it’...and hence [is of] no value to hermeneutics” (92). Moreover, Schleiermacher contrasted the oral interpreter (“Dolmetscher”) with the “translator

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proper” and claimed that the translation of journalism and travel writing were akin to oral interpreting. As Hermans explains, for Schleiermacher,

in those genres the subject-matter is the sole concern, and everything follows definite and known paths: the participants are familiar with the things being referred to, the phrases to be used in both languages are no more than counters determined by law or convention, and consequently speakers are readily understood. It will be clear that Schleiermacher is talking about texts which hold no hermeneutic challenge, i.e., have zero or minimum value in hermeneutic terms. Translating these texts is merely a mechanical exercise. (97)

This view has also been prevalent in a number of works written by Western travel writers, where the interpreter as “native informant” is accorded, as Cronin points out, a certain epistemological innocence even as he/she “confers a legitimacy and verisimilitude on the narrative as a privileged source of ‘inside’ information” (54).

In privileging the visible and the literary over the spoken word, Schleiermacher and Steiner give short shrift to the transformative power of speech. This approach is short sighted, pun intended. Hermes the messenger is not only the god of hermeneutics, he is also a trickster, the deity who governs thieves, translators, and interpreters.<sup>19</sup> As Cronin points out,

historians of translation have...failed to fully appreciate the importance of orality studies for their subject area. Indeed, it might be argued that the hold of literacy on our analytical worldview means that we tend to exaggerate the importance of textual translation and ignore the far-reaching historical and political effects of interpreting encounters. (48)

In the hierarchy of French terms that Steiner discusses in *After Babel*, “traducteur” and “interprète” are nouns designating professions. Likewise, the term “truchement” is a masculine noun meaning “spokesperson,” or “go-between.” It can also

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mean “intervention,” “means of expression,” “vector,” and is also used in the locution, “par le truchement,” or, “through the intervention of.” According to Steiner, the word derives

from the Arabic *tarjuman* (Catalan *torsimany*) and originally designates those who translated between Moor and Spaniard. Its use...suggests a negative feeling: the *truchement* is a go-between, whose rendering may not be disinterestedly accurate. But the term also signifies a more general action of replacement, almost of metaphor: the eyes can be the *truchement*, translating, substituting for the silent meanings of the heart. (265)

It is this term that most closely approximates the ambiguous figure of the indigenous African interpreter during the colonial period in French West Africa. This is so not only because of its etymology, but also because it implies a lack of transparency that can even lead to substitution. Brunshwig shows that official colonial publications such as the *Annuaire de l'A.O. F.* and the *Journal officiel* contained inconsistent information on the number of interpreters they employed, thus making it “difficile et sans doute vain de préciser le nombre des interprètes en fonction” (difficult and perhaps useless to pinpoint the exact number of working interpreters) (111). Nevertheless, Brunshwig cites the names and activities of several interpreters who abused their power for personal gain. Very often, however, the colonial administration was more inclined to suppress knowledge of these activities than to deal with them openly. These interpreters were often transferred from one post to another instead. To cite just one example from Brunshwig, an interpreter named Demba Alarba abused his authority in order to demand gifts, impose fines, and engage in the trafficking of captives (118). Another named Ousmane Fall imposed his own taxes, embezzled funds, took individuals captive and resold them. Brunshwig concludes that in order to better understand “le rôle joué

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par l'interprète qui formait, avec le commandant, en brousse, un couple mal assorti, la voix indigène doit aussi être entendue” (115) (the role of the interpreter in the African bush, who constituted a mismatched couple when paired the colonial administrator, the voice of the native must also be heard”. This voice has been “difficile à percevoir parce que presque toute la documentation est d'origine métropolitaine” (115) (difficult to hear because almost all of the documentation comes from metropolitan sources). In fact, Brunschwig cites A. H. Bâ's *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* and Jacques Kouh Moukouri's autobiographical *Doigts noirs* to illustrate the role and status of African interpreters under French colonialism. However, the negative portrait of the crafty and self-serving indigenous African interpreter that emerges in Brunschwig is a far cry from the rather laudatory biography of Wangrin in Bâ's work, or the positive personal image that emerges from Kouh Moukouri's autobiography. Instead, as we shall see, the image of the interpreter that emerges in Bâ's memoirs as opposed to his portrayal in *Wangrin* is much closer to Brunschwig's casting of the interpreter as a kind of mercenary.

### ***Le Commandant passe, l'interprète reste***

In the remainder of this essay, I examine the figure of the indigenous African interpreter in a few specific examples chosen from the memoirs of Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1901-1991). So doing, I hope to shed further light on the interpreter's power in French West Africa as well as to bring Bâ's work to the attention of scholars in Translation and Interpreting Studies. As Bâ explains in the first volume of his memoirs, *Amkoullel*, after being “requisitioned” (forced) by the French colonial administration to attend the “Ecole des otages,” or “School for Hostages” (307-347) where the sons of chiefs and other

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notables of the colony were made to learn French, he himself became a clerk, a secretary and occasional interpreter in the colonial administration.<sup>20</sup> A specialist of the oral tradition, biographer, and ethnographer, A. H. Bâ lived over half of his life under colonial domination. As is amply documented in his work, this domination was aided and abetted by indigenous interpreters. Indeed, the common expression, “le commandant passe, l'interprète reste” (the colonial administrator is just passing through but the interpreter remains) clearly illustrates the ubiquity as well as the ambiguity of the interpreter's power.

Although A.H. Bâ goes unmentioned in Bowen and Bowen, Cronin, Delisle and Woodsworth, Karttunen, and Roland, it is from his work that writers and historians such as Austen, Brunschwig and Niang have drawn many of their illustrative examples of the role of indigenous interpreters in French West Africa. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Bâ considered *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, *Amkoullel* and *Oui, Mon Commandant!* as historical documents, and throughout these works, insists on the documentary accuracy of his memory. In *Amkoullel*, Bâ explains that

la mémoire des gens de ma génération, et plus généralement des peuples de tradition orale qui ne pouvaient s'appuyer sur l'écrit, est d'une fidélité et d'une précision presque prodigieuses...je n'ai pas besoin de me 'souvenir', je...vois sur une sorte d'écran intérieur, et je n'ai plus qu'à décrire ce que je vois...Et si un récit m'a été rapporté par quelqu'un, ce n'est pas seulement le contenu du récit que ma mémoire a enregistré, mais toute la scène... (13)

the memory of the people of my generation and more generally of peoples of the oral tradition who could not use writing as a support, is of an almost prodigious fidelity and precision...I do not need to 'remember', I...see on a sort of inner screen, and all I have to do is describe what I see...And if the story was told to me by someone else, it is not only the content of the story that my memory has

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recorded, but the entire scene...

It is precisely because of this prodigious memory that a clear and detailed record regarding the actions of indigenous interpreters exists today, for in almost every major episode of Bâ's life in the period before independence, there is an interpreter present.

Whereas in *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, the interpreter Wangrin preys upon the powerful while his generosity toward the poor and the powerless is emphasized, in Bâ's memoirs, the interpreter is a much more ambiguous and less heroic figure. Wangrin, who also appears in Bâ's *Mémoires*, is the exception. For example, in *Amkoullel*, Bâ praises Wangrin for helping African people to survive during the famine of 1914.

“Wangrin, qui était alors grand interprète du commandant, ne ménagea pas...son aide aux pauvres gens, soit directement, soit en leur faisant obtenir des secours auprès de l'administration. Beaucoup ne purent survivre que grâce à lui” (*Amkoullel* 380)

(Wangrin, who was at the time the top interpreter for the commander, did not scrimp on his aid to people in need, either directly, or by ensuring that they got help from the administration). This could be because, as Bâ explains in the preface to *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, that particular book

est le fruit d'une promesse, faite à un homme que je connus en 1912. J'étais écolier et n'avais que douze ans, Lui était interprète du grand commandant de cercle de mon pays. Il se prit d'amitié pour moi pour deux raisons...En premier lieu, il était très lié avec mon oncle maternel...et en second lieu, à cause du grand nombre de contes que je lui rapportai sur sa demande. (7)<sup>21</sup>

is the fulfillment of a promise I made to a man I met in 1912. I was then a twelve-year-old schoolboy, and he worked as interpreter for the Commandant of that area. He became attached to me for two reasons...first, he was very close to my maternal uncle...and secondly, because of the large number of stories I collected for him at his prompting (Trans. Taylor, 1999, xvii).

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In order to write the book, Bâ took notes on what Wangrin himself, Wangrin's griot, and others told him about Wangrin's deeds in Bambara, Ffulfulbe, and French in order to compose a work in French that would both “entertain” and “teach” its readers (8).

On the other hand, Bâ was under no such obligation when he wrote his memoirs, where the language used to describe indigenous interpreters and the colonial enterprise itself is much more critical. One of Bâ's earliest encounters with colonial power and the attendant power of the indigenous interpreter is recounted in the story of his stepfather's condemnation by the French colonial administration and his stepfather's subsequent exile. In *Amkoullel*, Bâ recounts that in an intrigue where his stepfather Ahmed Tidjani refused to lie and later to testify on his own behalf, he fell into disfavor with the colonial authorities and was condemned to solitary confinement and then to hard labor. As further punishment, the colonial administration decided that it would exile this Fulani chief from his home in the city of Bandiagara where he had many supporters, to Bougouni, a region located about 700 kilometers to the south and dominated by the Bambara ethnic group (78-182) Having learned of the impending transfer, Bâ's mother Khadidja

alla trouver l'interprète Babilen Touré. Elle lui demanda d'intervenir en sa faveur auprès du commandant afin qu'il l'autorise à accompagner son époux. Que ne pouvait alors un interprète colonial, pourvu que le solliciteur sache étayer sa requête par la 'chose nocturne,' le cadeau discret que l'on échange la nuit tombée, à l'abri des regards! (133)

went to see the interpreter Babilen Touré. She asked him to intervene in her favor with the Commandant to get him to allow her to accompany her husband. What wasn't the colonial interpreter capable of, provided that the person making the

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request knew to back up his request with the 'nocturnal object' the discreet gift that was only given after nightfall, when no one was looking!

The unjust treatment of Ahmed Tidjani Tall had a profound effect on A. H. Bâ, who saw his stepfather deposed from his position as chief, heard of his imprisonment in solitary confinement, of his forced labor, and saw him walk in shackles. As a young boy, he declared that he would seek revenge for the mistreatment of his father, and although he was “requisitioned” for the French school, he told the colonial commandant that one of his main goals in learning that language would be to “apprendre la langue du commandant pour pouvoir parler directement à lui, sans passer par un interprète” (325) (learn the language of the commandant in order to be able to speak to him directly, without having to go through an interpreter). Once again, Bâ's mother was forced to go to the interpreter in an effort to keep her son from the French school, which was seen at the time as the place where children were taught to renounce their culture and faith. As Bâ explains, parents who wanted to keep their children from this fate had to buy their children's liberty from the interpreter and the schoolmaster, who would in turn provide the commandant with a false explanation concerning the child's inability to attend school. Bâ disdainfully explains that the commandant never doubted the declarations from the schoolmaster or the interpreter for, “en bon Blancs-Noirs qu'ils étaient, c'est-à-dire, nègres à moitié européens, ils étaient au-dessus de tout soupçon!” (335) (being that they were good Black-Whites, that is to say, half European negroes, they were above all suspicion!)

Indeed, throughout *Amkoullel* and *Oui, mon commandant!*, indigenous interpreters are qualified as “Blancs-Noirs” that is, a “noir imitant les Blancs, autrement dit, un Blanc de couleur noire, un faux Blanc” a black imitating the whites, in other

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words, a white who is black, a fake white (*Oui, Mon Commandant!* 52). They were the constant companions and accomplices of the so-called “Blanc-Blancs” (White-Whites) (*Amkoullel* 184) whom Bâ compares to the “hibou qui... accompagne partout le sorcier” owl who accompanies the sorcerer wherever he goes (*Amkoullel* 185). Brunshwig writes that African writers called interpreters “des nègres blancs” (white blacks), “collaborators” (go-betweens) who themselves became, or were the fathers of “beaucoup des leaders de la résistance et de l’indépendance africaines” (1983, 123) (many of the leaders of African resistance and independence). Kourouma corroborates this fact in his interview with Jean Ouédraogo. When asked about the similarity between the figure of the interpreter in *Wangrin* and *Monnè*, Kourouma explains,

que ce soit moi ou Hampaté Bâ, on a vécu la colonisation. Hampaté Bâ était un vieux fonctionnaire de la colonisation et moi, mon père était un infirmier qui vivait la colonisation. Nous savions ce qu’était l’interprète....D’ailleurs... beaucoup d’amis maintenant... sont de hauts fonctionnaires, de hauts responsables qui sont des fils d’interprètes parce que l’interprète c’était le commandant. (777)

whether it is I or Hampaté Bâ, we lived under colonization. Hampaté Bâ was an old colonial official and as for me, my father was a nurse who lived under colonization. We knew what the interpreter was...In fact, many... friends are...now ...upper-level officials...who are the sons of interpreters because the interpreter was the commander.

Although Bâ often calls interpreters the “acolytes” (*Amkoullel* 185) of the French colonial administrators, and even ridicules his younger self as being one of these “blancs-noirs,” (*Oui, Mon Commandant!*, 25) who imitates the colonizer in his manner and dress, the image of the interpreter that emerges in Bâ’s memoirs is much closer to that of a mercenary than to that of a simple subaltern, although Bâ also emphasizes the

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fact that the colonial interpreter's power would be inexistent without the administrative hierarchy that brought it into being. Bâ himself eventually became a colonial employee who started his career with the punitive title, “Ecrivain temporaire essentiellement précaire et révocable” (Essentially Temporary, Precarious, and Revocable Secretary) because he followed his mother’s wishes and did not complete his studies at the colonial school, the *Ecole normale de Gorée*. As punishment for this, the then governor of French Soudan sent him to Ouagadougou in Haute-Volta (Burkina Faso), one thousand kilometers from Bamako, Mali. In order to reach his destination, Bâ walked, traveled by train, water, and by horseback. On the way, he was employed as an occasional interpreter before later being chosen for the privileged position of “personal interpreter” for a number of upper level colonial officials. Nevertheless, in his *Mémoires*, he never places himself in the category of collaborator/mercenary. Rather, he uses his position to gather the oral material that will eventually be translated and published in French, thereby preserving in writing the memories of a culture that was fast disappearing.

Indeed, Bâ is famous for his work on behalf of the African oral tradition. In an interview which highlights the hermeneutic value of the spoken word in that tradition, Bâ proclaimed,

L'écriture est une chose et le savoir en est une autre. L'écriture est la photographie du savoir, mais elle n'est pas le savoir lui-même. Le savoir est une lumière qui est en l'homme; héritage de ce qui lui a été transmis. La parole EST l'homme. Le verbe est créateur. Il maintient l'homme dans sa nature propre. Apprenez que dans mon pays, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle. (Konaté 2005: 58)  
Writing is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is the photograph of knowledge, but it is not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is in man; the heritage of what has been transmitted to him. The word IS man. The verb is creative.

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It maintains humanity in his own nature. Know that in my country, when an old man dies, it is a library that burns.

### **Conclusions: *La prise de la parole***

In *Oui Mon Commandant!*, upon observing that whites of any rank were treated better than all Africans put together, Bâ reflects,

Je réalisai...combien l'Africain était privé de droits dans son propre pays. A l'époque, la garantie la plus sûre pour tout obtenir sans peine et se permettre tous les abus sans punition, c'était d'avoir la peau blanche, et aussi, il faut le reconnaître, mais dans une moindre mesure, le fait d'être un 'blanc-noir,' c'est-à-dire, un représentant de l'administration coloniale. (55)

I... realized how much the African was deprived of rights in his own land. At the time, the surest way to obtain anything without effort and to allow oneself the greatest abuses with no punishment was to have white skin and also, it must be recognized, although to a lesser extent, it was to be a 'white-black,' that is to say, a representative of the colonial administration.

In the words of Bâ's grandmother, the whites were sorcerers who "font boire à leurs serviteurs des philtres d'une magie si puissante que les nôtres qui s'engagent à leur service en cessent d'être eux-mêmes!" (104) (have their servants drink potions whose magic is so strong that our people enter into their service and cease to be themselves!).

In the grand-mother's view, one type of sorcerer gave rise to another. However, Bâ explains that in the battle for power under colonialism, colonial employees and interpreters could manage to maintain an element of agency.

Such agency goes beyond a Pöchhacker's primary definition of an interpreter as a person who explains meaning and makes sense of "what others have trouble understanding" (10). As the examples from Bâ's memoirs demonstrate, the indigenous

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interpreter was the intermediary who was instrumental in the establishment and maintenance of colonial power because, as Fabian (1986) writes, under colonialism “the need to communicate and the *intent* to control were inseparable” (14, emphasis in the original). As this essay has shown, indigenous interpreters in French West Africa were able to use this need to their advantage, literally through a “prise de parole” (the expression is translated by the figurative expression in English, “to take the floor,” but the word for word translation is “to take the word,” “to take speech”) and to actively shape (or obscure) the colonizer's knowledge about the territories which he intended to govern, however incompletely. Consequently, given this evidence of the interpreter's active agency in the shaping of colonial knowledge and politics, it can be concluded that, despite the ephemeral nature of the interpreter's spoken words, those words and the acts that accompanied them left traces. Thanks to the prodigious memory of Ahmadou Hampâté Bâ, who is also credited for translating West African oral traditions into French and writing them down, the traces left behind by indigenous African interpreters are in part recoverable for those who are inclined to seek them out.<sup>22</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Professors and Associates of the May, 2015 Nida School of Translation Studies and the San Pellegrino University Foundation in Misano Adriatico, Italy for their input and feedback on a draft of this essay. A special thanks to Nida Professor Theo Hermans for sharing the proofs of his forthcoming article, "Schleiermacher and Plato, Hermeneutics and Translation," which reexamines the context in which Schleiermacher wrote his 1813 lecture, "On the Different Methods of Translating." Schleiermacher's lecture, and Theo Hermans' reexamination of it are of particular interest here because "On the Different Methods of Translating" serves as an element of Lawrence Venuti's conceptualization of the "foreignizing" and

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“domesticating” modes of translation developed in *The Translator’s Invisibility*, two modes that I revisit in this essay. Additionally, Schleiermacher’s early casting of the oral interpreter (“Dolmetscher”) as the binary opposite of “the translator proper” (“der eigentliche Uebersetzer”) (Hermans, 96) who works on hermeneutically challenging written texts as opposed to oral texts which supposedly “hold no hermeneutic challenge” because they are ostensibly related to transparent commercial transactions, reappears in Steiner’s *After Babel* in a passage that I analyze below.

<sup>2</sup> *Service africain 75/Freedom and Authority in French West Africa* 21. The direct object in this sentence is the French colonial administrator. While men were always employed as interpreters, much remains to be said about the impact of women as cultural interpreters and translators once they entered into forced “colonial marriages” with white French administrators. Several examples of indigenous women “requisitioned” by colonial administrators for sexual services are found in A. H. Bâ’s *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin* (1973) and in the memoirs I examine here, *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* (1991, 1992) and *Oui, mon commandant!* (1994). Tamba M’byao’s extremely valuable PhD dissertation entitled “African Interpreters, Mediation, and the Production of Knowledge in Colonial Senegal: The Lower and Middle Senegal Valley, ca. 1850’s to ca. 1920’s, volume I” also mentions the importance of the “signares” (women of mixed Afro-European descent from the Portuguese word *Senhora*) of Saint-Louis who had a long history of operating in the commercial sphere as cultural brokers who interceded between their French spouses or associates and Africans” (*African Interpreters* 20).

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, there are a number of works in print that address the work of indigenous interpreters in other contexts. For the case of Doña Marina, (also known as La Malinche) the indigenous woman who interpreted for Hernán Cortés, see Diaz, Glantz, Esquivel, Lanyon, Karttunen, and Roland. For a portrait of Sacagawea, the Shoshone woman who interpreted for Lewis and Clark see Karttunen, and Nelson. See Szasz for a broader conceptualization of Native Americans as cultural brokers and go-betweens. For the most recent comprehensive historical work to date on the pivotal role of indigenous African interpreters, see M’bayo, 2007, 2007a, and Lawrence, Osborn, and Roberts. See also my 2013 essay, “What’s New About Amadou Hampâté Bâ? Translation, Interpreting, and Literary History.”

<sup>4</sup> In my essay, “What’s New About Amadou Hampâté Bâ,” I develop an analysis of cultural translation as an ironic activity that moves between the West African trickster tradition and a theory of irony developed from the “Western” classical tradition. Just as irony operates in the open space between fixed positions, so does cultural translation because it operates between two or more fixed positions as it attempts to represent one culture in the terms of another more or less successfully. I analyze the ironic role of the interpreter in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Monnè, outrages et défis* in a separate essay, entitled, “The King, the Colonizer, the Interpreter, and the Narrator: (Mis)translation, Retranslation, and Resistance in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Monnè, outrages et défis*,”

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currently in progress. For a thorough analysis of irony in African literatures, see Onyeoziri.

<sup>5</sup> See Venuti's chapter, "A Call to Action" in *The Translator's Invisibility* 311-313.

<sup>6</sup> Theo Hermans' forthcoming essay points out that Bernofsky's translation, "moves the writer towards *him*" should in fact read, "moves the writer towards *them*," (the readers) (101). He also argues that despite positing translation as a choice between "foreignization" or "domestication," for Schleiermacher, there was in fact no choice. The only solution is to move the reader to the translator. According to Hermans, "despite Schleiermacher's initial formulation of the two methods of translating, neither moving the author to the reader not its opposite, moving the reader to the author, is a possible option in practice. The reason is simple: the point at which author and reader meet can only be the translator"(100).

<sup>7</sup> In "Translation in Oral Tradition as a Touchstone for Translation Theory," Maria Tymoczko (1990) reminds us that translation "necessarily involves manipulation" (46). Although she studies the manipulation of oral literature in its translation and recitation, this point also holds true for the translation of everyday and "official" affairs such as those handled by interpreters. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of the interpreter as "bouche" abound in *Wangrin*. See, for instance, p. 69, where Wangrin is characterized as both the "bouche" and the "oreilles" (ears) of the colonial administration because he has gained its confidence. As A.H. Bâ explains in footnote 165, p. 193 of *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin*, colonial administrators of all ranks used the title, "commandant" [commander]. Aina Pavolini Taylor further explains in her translation (1999) of this work that the term 'Commandant' "corresponds to that of 'District Officer' in the British colonial administration in Nigeria, or 'Commissioner' in other territories such as Sierra Leone. The French colonial administration was initially set up by military officers, and its higher ranks continued to be occupied by individuals transferred from the army to the civilian administration. The term 'commandant,' with its military resonance, is more suited to their status and function, which enabled them to wield considerable powers over their colonial subjects well beyond those of their British counterparts (n.1, 261).

<sup>9</sup> In using the term "collaborateur," Brunschwig requests that it not be thought of as synonymous with the one used to designate those who collaborated with Nazi Germany in World War Two. With this in mind, I would suggest the term "free agent" or "go-between" instead.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Austen, 2006 and 2007; Cronin, 2002, M'Byao, 2007, and Lawrance, Osborn, and Roberts, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Niang held the title of Chief Interpreter for the African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in Dakar, Senegal.

<sup>12</sup> A new edition combining these memoirs into a single volume was published in 2012 by Actes Sud.

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<sup>13</sup> See Austen (2007), who examines Bâ's account of Wangrin and compares it to archival traces of Samaké Niambelé, (Wangrin) and those of his rival, Moro Sidibé. My essay, "What is New About Amadou Hampâté Bâ?" analyzes the role of sorcery and the occult in the perpetuation of the interpreter's power as it is portrayed in *L'Etrange destin de Wangrin* and also makes the argument that Bâ's works can be read as documents without denying their literary value. This argument is in line with those made by Bâ himself in "The Living Tradition," (1981) and by Walter Ong (1982) and Jan Vansina (1985).

<sup>14</sup> M'Bayo (2007) does an excellent job of recuperating the names, biographies, and important roles of indigenous interpreters in Senegal. M'Bayo also provides a more positive image of interpreters in his study than is seen in the works of A.H. Bâ or Ahamdou Kourouma's *Monnè, outrages et défis*. I would also speculate that the colonial administration may have deliberately chosen not to retain a record of some of the unsavory activities of indigenous interpreters in its employ.

<sup>15</sup> No individual or collective authorship is attributed to this chapter. Thus, one must assume that it was prepared by the editors, Delisle and Woodsworth.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Woodsworth, Michael Cronin, Lieven D'hulst, Bill Findlay, Ana Gargateli, Theo Hermans and Charels A. Nama.

<sup>17</sup> Regarding this doctrine, Benedict Anderson (1983) explains, "In the Islamic tradition, until quite recently, the Qur'an was literally untranslatable (and therefore untranslated), because Allah's truth was accessible only through the unsubstitutable true signs of written Arabic...In effect ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-representation: the truth-language of Qur'anic Arabic" (21).

<sup>18</sup> An excellent illustration of the role of the pre-colonial oral interpreter in West Africa is vividly illustrated in a scene from the film *Yeelen* directed by Souleymane Cissé (1987). Here, the Bambara hero Nianankoro has been captured by Fulani warriors and taken to the Fulani king. The king and Nianankoro speak to each other through the king's interpreter who translates from Bambara to Fulfulde and back, despite the fact that in a later scene the Fulani king also speaks directly to Nianankoro's uncle in Bambara.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Louis Gates (1989) claims that Hermes is the Western kinsman of the Yoruba messenger and trickster god Esu (8).

<sup>20</sup> I examine this element of Bâ's memoirs more closely in "What's New About Amadou Hampâté Bâ?"

<sup>21</sup> Some of these tales were eventually published in François Equibecq's *Contes populaires d'Afrique occidentale* (1913).

<sup>22</sup> In a book that I am writing on this topic, I analyze in detail examples of various "speech acts" and their consequences. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, whose primary intent is to bring the existence of indigenous African interpreters to the attention of the Translation and Interpreting Studies community.