ORTHOPRAXY, WRITING AND IDENTITY:
SHAPING LIVES THROUGH BORROWED GENRES IN CONGO

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Abstract

This paper explores grassroots historiographical writing from Congo in the context of globalization. The authors are both sub-elite writers, producing text for First-World readers, and they spend enormous efforts at producing a generically regimented text, based on borrowed models of text and textuality that are seen to offer spaces for identity-construction. Performing such models of text and textuality is a construction of Self vis-à-vis history. But in order to understand such moves into identity-constructing spaces, we need to take account of different economies of meanings and signs. The identity construction only works in one particular economy of meanings and signs, but loses ‘meaning’ as soon as it is being inserted into other economies. The shift from one frame into another involves relocations of referential and indexical meanings attached to signs, a phenomenon of semiotic mobility that needs to be addressed sociolinguistically. Detached from their local semiotic environment, such texts become ‘orthopractic’: Performances of shape detached from locally valid indexicalities.

Keywords: Literacy, Hegemony, Inequality, Central Africa, Autobiography, History.

1. Introduction

History is a discourse in which accounts of events are set and interpreted in relation to time frames. Discourse analysis can elucidate the ways in which history-as-discourse relates to time, and one of the inroads into such a venture is investigations of ‘stance’, ways in which people position themselves and their accounts vis-à-vis particular time frames often combined with spatial frames and involving moral and political frames in which accounts of events can be couched. Genre work - deploying communicative means sensed to belong to and index a particular and culturally recognizable ‘way of speaking’ (Hymes 1975) - is
a clue to this. Genres offer pre-patterned expressions and articulations of stance, and performing ‘historical’ genres may offer opportunities for constructing ‘history’ in the culturally and socially recognized (or recognizable) sense (Collins 1998; Feld 1996). Thus, the production of historical text involves entextualization work, setting/desetting/resetting events in particular (morally and politically loaded) time frames, and this in turn involves the usual power differences of entextualization: Access to contextual spaces, the importance of ‘the record’, orientations towards authoritative voices, shifts in referential and indexical frames and so on (Bauman & Briggs 1990).

I want to explore these generic dimension of the production of historical text from a particular, problematic, angle: That of orthopraxy applied to subjectivity - a concept which is hard to detach from historicity. In his brilliant discussion of hegemony and resistance, James C. Scott (1990: 117) opposes orthopraxy to orthodoxy, saying that hegemony often occurs in the shape of hegemonic practices rather than hegemonic beliefs. People’s behavior can emanate received normative rules and models, while their worldview remains largely untouched and can be a tool of resistance against the deeper meanings contained in that behavior. Consequently, practices and conventional meanings are dissociated and the assumption of a conventional ideological ‘load’ to certain practices is analytically unwarranted.

Scott made these remarks in a discussion of ideology; I feel they can be productively applied to the ways in which symbolic behavior works in general. More specifically, they may offer an interesting spectre through which to look at the mobility of signs and sign-systems across referential and indexical spaces (Silverstein & Urban 1996). In particular, taking stock of Scott’s suggestions about the connections between orthopraxy, resistance and identity-formation, we may address in a more refined fashion the ways in which acts of identity are lodged in the use of generically regimented models of text and textuality, forms of use that can be identified ethnographically.

The suggestion I want to do in this paper runs along the following lines. Generically regimented models of text and textuality offer spaces for identity-construction, and performing them can amount to a (local) construction of Self. But in order to understand such moves into identity-constructing spaces, we need to take account of different economies of meanings and signs. The shift from one frame into another involves relocations of referential and indexical meanings attached to signs - a process of re-entextualization in Silverstein & Urban’s (1996) terms. But this form of relocation is a non-local phenomenon that needs to be addressed sociolinguistically.

One is reminded at this point of Hymes’ ‘second type of linguistic relativity’ (Hymes 1966). Whereas the first, Whorfian, type of relativity pertained to different structures having similar functions (organizing world views), Hymes suggested “that the role of language may differ from community to community; that in general the functions of language in society are a problem for investigation, not postulation” (1966: 116). Similar structures, in other words, can prove to have very different functions depending on the particular “cultural reality” (ibid) in which they are used. This cultural reality, I take it, includes patterns of speech, repertoires and ways of organizing them, linguistic hierarchies and ideologies, and the particular function of speech forms will depend on how these speech forms relate to the larger whole: “Placement among some other aspects of culture implies some degree of fit for the linguistic traits” (1966: 119).

My target will be grassroots writing from Congo, a type of writing which is
performed in highly problematic economies of signs and resources, but with lots of opportunities, consequently, to relocate the meaning of signs. I will discuss two attempts at constructing ‘history’ in handwritten documents, and each time issues of subjectivity and the construction of ‘lives’ will be central. The data are highly exceptional: They are texts that were only written once, not as part of an established tradition but one-time, other-directed written acts of language. Their exceptional character is precisely the feature that may point us towards the ‘degree of fit’ of such texts in larger patterns of culture and society.

2. Orthopraxy and having a life

Subjectivity is often associated with the practices by means of which individuals construct an autobiography, i.e. the way in which individuals set and situate themselves vis-à-vis larger temporal, spatial and social patterns. To quote Giddens (1991: 53, cited in Castells 1997: 10), “self-identity is not a distinctive trait possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biography”. Important here (though by now truistic) is to realize that ‘a life’ is not a static property, not something one ‘has’, but something that requires active semiotic, representational and discursive construction. Equally important (though slightly less truistic) is to realize that this kind of construction develops not in a vacuum but in spaces filled with codes, conventions, expectations and so on. Creativity is undoubtedly the norm, for life is seldom dull, though creativity may be controlled or determined in various, often invisible ways. Raymond Williams (1977: 212) summarizes the issue as follows:

“Creative practice is thus of many kinds. It is already, and actively, our practical consciousness. When it becomes struggle - the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships that is the ineradicable emphasis of the Marxist sense of self-creation - it can take many forms. It can be the long and difficult remaking of an inherited (determined) practical consciousness: A process often described as development but in practice a struggle at the roots of the mind - not casting off an ideology but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships. It can be more evident practice: The reproduction and illustration of hitherto excluded and subordinated models; the embodiment and performance of known but excluded and subordinated experiences and relationships; the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness.”

In other words, there is always a complex play between what is there and what can be constructed, a trade-off between available, accessible and exploitable resources. Consequently, as noted by Williams, a lot of the construction work is a matter of what is already around: The question ‘what did this author do to this form can be “reversed, becoming ‘what did this form do to this author’?” (Williams 1977: 192). This more nuanced notion of determination will be central to my argument here: Given the availability, accessibility and exploitability of certain sets of resources, people construct historical discourses and representations in ways that seem to map resources on newly reordered functions, thus arriving at orthopractically shaped ‘lives’.

This is a bit disconcerting, for the acquisition of a ‘life’ - the acquisition of subjectivity, in other words, depends on the capacity to reorder generically regimented discursive resources and functions - referential and indexical frames which give (local)
'meaning' to the resources. This means that the capacity to arrive at subjectivity would be subject to distribution patterns of (hence, differential access to) particular codes for constructing them. I cannot substantiate this claim in general here, but I intend to make it in a particular intercultural context: Subjectivity is not transculturally readable or recognizable, for the reorderings of resources and functions create all sorts of difficulties in interpretation. Texts have undergone complicated entextualization processes, and a close ethnographic scrutiny of resources-functions relations is required. With this in mind, I can now turn to the data.

3. Two histories

I will discuss two textual complexes, and as said above, they are highly exceptional types of data. The first is a collection of three versions of an autobiography, handwritten by a former houseboy from Shaba (Congo) for his former employer, a Belgian woman. The author, Julien (a pseudonym), had worked with the woman and her husband while the latter were expatriates in Lubumbashi during the late 1960s. After their return to Belgium in 1969, the woman had supported Julien by sending him clothes and money. When the issue of repayment arose, the woman asked Julien to write ‘the story of his life’ for her, with the intention of incorporating it into an autobiographical novel she was writing at the time. The effect of this request was that over a period of seven years, Julien produced three versions of the story, each time written in ballpoint on white paper. The first version was probably written around 1991-1992, the second in 1994 and the third in 1997 (see Blommaert 1999, 2001a). The three versions together total 46 pages, and they are 9, 17 and 20 pages long respectively. I acquired copies of the texts from the Belgian woman, who had asked me to translate the texts into Dutch for her.

The second document is a handwritten ‘history of Zaire’ produced in 1980 by the notorious Congolese popular painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, also from Shaba (Congo), the man who had painted a sequence of 101 paintings on Congolese history for the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (Fabian 1996 presents and discusses the paintings). The text is 73 pages long and fills the best part of a cheap copybook, given by Tshibumba to the Africanist historian Bogumil Jewsiwiecki (through relatives of Jewsiwiecki’s who lived in Lubumbashi) who provided me with a copy. There are clear connections between the text and the paintings, though both events - the production of the paintings and the production of the written text - are separated by quite a few years (Fabian reports having received the paintings in 1973-1974). Fabian does not mention the existence of a written text in his 1996 book, and it is unclear whether he had used it in his discussion of Tshibumba’s historical gaze in the book. Jewsiwiecki, in correspondence about this topic, claims that Tshibumba

“wrote the text for me (Jewsiwiecki), as some kind of companion/explanation to the paintings he sold me. After I left in 1976, he (Tshibumba) brought the paintings to my parents in law who bought them for me. He knew that it was for me and not for them. There thus was some kind of relationship of historian-to-historian, because we knew each other well between 1971 and 1976. He often came to me to sell his paintings, knowing that I was a historian. He had towards Fabian, me and Eduard Vinck a kind of rapport among professionals of knowledge. In that respect he was different from other popular painters.”
Important for the rest of the argument is the fact that both documents are instances of intercultural written communication. Julien sent his autobiographies off to the Belgian woman; Tshibumba transmitted his to relatives of a Canadian historian. Given what we know of Julien’s texts, it is clear that the texts were intended as intercultural communication: They were written specifically for the Belgian lady. In the case of Tshibumba, given the background of interactions on history with Fabian it is equally likely that the text served as a ‘reminder’ for Fabian or others interested in his historiography (Blommaert 2001b). I will come back to this later. At this point it is important to keep in mind that the writing is done from a distance, with no direct ‘quality assessor’ in the neighborhood. The audience is virtual, and its expectations are a matter of imagination. So quite a lot of what the texts represent hinges on the way in which they have been assembled out of locally available resources.

Both texts are written by people from Shaba, the southernmost province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Congo is, like all African countries, an extremely multilingual country in which apart from the ‘official’ language French and four semi-official ‘national languages’ Swahili, Lingala, Kikongo and Cilubà, a great number of local languages are used. Multilingualism is the rule and frequent code-mixing and shifting (in often intricate ways, see Meeuwis & Blommaert 1998) occurs in all urban centers. Colonial as well as postcolonial troubles have made Congo a region of intense migration both internally as well as externally, and languages with a regional distribution such as the four ‘national’ ones thus often function as the lingua francae of diasporic communities.

Both Julien and Tshibumba are most likely to be native speakers of a Luba-language, as both were born in the north of the Shaba province and migrated into the large urban center of Lubumbashi. There, they must have acquired the local variety of Swahili which serves as the lingua franca. Both also had some competence in French, the postcolonial ‘official’ language and the language of instruction in schools in the former Belgian Congo. Julien’s texts are written in Swahili, with a shift into French in the final parts of the second and third versions. Tshibumba’s text is in French. In all cases, the writing is in a monoglot code, i.e. a code as close to ‘monolingual’ Swahili or French as possible. There are only distant traces of codeswitching in Julien’s texts, while they are absent from Tshibumba’s text. This is in itself meaningful, for we know that the colloquial use of these languages in urban Shaba is marked by dense code-switching between Swahili and French (de Rooij 1996). Monolingual styles are therefore ‘special’, and they fit into local symbolic hierarchies of linguistic varieties in which monolingual French, monolingual Swahili, and urban mixed varieties all assume situationally dependent ranks and allow for locally evaluated identity work (an excellent discussion of this is Fabian 1982; see also Meeuwis 1997 for more general sociolinguistic observations).

Julien and Tshibumba live in an environment in which literacy is a rare commodity. Their handling of orthographic conventions and narrative style betrays an incomplete insertion into economies of literacy: Both have difficulties in systematically organizing graphic symbols on paper, the texts are littered with ‘errors’ (seen from a normative viewpoint), the overall coherence of the story is sometimes questionable, and to the extent that ‘documentation’ would be an instrument required for constructing historical narratives (e.g. for Julien, in constructing his three versions) there seems to be a near-absence of directly usable sources of information. Neither Julien nor Tshibumba seem to have worked
on the basis of an ‘archive’, and neither seem to have kept copies of their writings. The texts themselves are the archives of remembering. This is important to keep in mind: The deep differences between economies of literacies allow for shifts in functionality and relative positioning of written texts vis-à-vis other genres and forms of communication – Hymes’ ‘degree of fit’ mentioned above. Some excellent research in literacy-poor environments has shown how intricate such function allocations can be (Besnier 1995; Street 2001; see also Collins 1995; and Kress 1996). Consequently, little in the way of current associations between literate forms of communication and functions can be taken for granted.

These comments provide the general sociolinguistic layer upon which the documents are built. It is important to remember that both monolingual styles as well as literacy are precious commodities in this economy, that Julien as well as Tshibumba have limited access to these commodities, and that they live in an environment where hierarchically regimented multilingualism is widespread. What does all of this mean for the specific texts? Let us take a closer look at how Julien and Tshibumba construct their stories.

**Borrowed genres**

I have mentioned above that some of the features of the texts mark them as ‘special’. Both the monoglot code as well as the written format indicate intentions to write a *particular type of text*, not just any text. A considerable amount of detailed discussion, way beyond the scope of this paper, would be required to make this clear. A point-by-point summary may however be useful; readers can be referred to Blommaert (1999, 2001a, 2001b) for details.

![Figure 1: Fragment from p56 of Tshibumba’s text.](image)

1. Both Julien and Tshibumba make great efforts to use particular text-structural conventions in their writings. They divide their text into chapters, use chapter titles in a
more or less conventional way, and some degree of aesthetic elaboration is used: Tshibumba provides sketches of national and regional flags and symbols used by the various governments he discusses in his narrative (see Figure 1); Julien uses particular forms of underlining in chapter titles as embellishment. The texts are partly graphic and visual objects, and efforts have been made to give particular 'shapes' to the texts.

2. In both cases, the texts appear to be the product of time- and energy-consuming elaboration. Labor and creativity have been generously invested in both texts. To give an idea of the amount of time and energy required to write a text: Julien narrates how he travels whenever he intends to write to his Belgian addressee. He travels enormous distances - several hundreds of miles - from his home town in Northern Shaba to Lubumbashi or Mbuji-Mayi, and he does this by means of very basic traveling means: On foot, on a bicycle or hitch-hiking. Writing trips, consequently, take many months to accomplish. The material, temporal and social investment spent on writing a text is enormous, for while he is away, his family needs to be supported and he himself needs to find jobs on the road.

Figure 2: p69 of Tshibumba’s text.
3. More in particular, throughout the three versions of Julien’s text we see an increase in structural tightness, expressed in a more consistent use of chapter divisions and titles and a significant increase in the amount of chronological detail. In the first version, only 15 dates are mentioned; the second already contains 31 tokens and the third one (roughly equivalent in length with the second) contains 48 tokens. Over a period of seven years we see a gradual moving into the direction of a tightly structured genre: Monolingual, thematically organized into chapters, chronologically linear and coherent, detailed. In the case of Tshibumba, this tight generic structure is there right from the start. Even more, Tshibumba explicitly qualifies his story as a ‘history of Zaire’, thus calling on all kinds of generic expectations and conventions (see Figure 2). Both Julien and Tshibumba, in sum, display an awareness of a generic model to which they orient their texts, and their texts display clear and many features of generic regimentation.

4. But in both cases, the model seems to be unclear - it appears to be a distant image of what such a text should be. Also, the way in which it is realized is not always consistent. Julien shifts from Swahili into French towards the end of version 2 and 3; this code-shift marks a genre shift, from autobiographical narrative into ‘letter’; yet, the chapter titles that marked the genre of autobiography spill over into the letter-part of the texts and parts of the letter are headed by chapter titles (Appendix 1 provides a transcript of this fragment). In the case of Tshibumba, the difficulties in realizing the (image of a) genre are most clearly located at the level of sources and available information. He intends to write a national history, but he has no access to particular types of ‘national’ information that would warrant his claim to a ‘history of Zaire’. His writing is strongly locked into his geographical position: He writes from Shaba, and has a keen eye for developments in that region. Zaire is only visible as soon as Mobutu enters the picture, and Tshibumba’s texts appears to be influenced by propaganda by Mobutu’s party. So there is a tension between an universalist, historiographic ambition and a localist perspective. At the same time, Tshibumba, like Julien, spends attention and efforts to provide accurate chronology, names and event descriptions.

5. It is also unlikely that Julien and Tshibumba had clear examples of such a genre within their reach. Both had some exposure to literacy products, and both had some schooling under Belgian colonial rule. But it is highly probable that textual genres such as autobiography and historiography were largely alien to them. That does not mean that they have no ideas about this: Tshibumba surely has a very well developed idea of what historiography is and should be (see the discussion in Fabian 1996). But it means that they had little acces to concrete textual examples of the genre they were intending to construct. The textual organization of the distant image of the genre needed to be done on the basis of borrowed, approximative models such as the catechism and the schoolbook. The tone and style required for constructing the genre needed to be ‘assembled’ on the basis of what both authors had in their own ‘baggage’ as semi-schooled individuals living in a literacy-poor environment. While Tshibumba has some ease in writing - his handwriting reveals the steady hand of a painter - Julien still struggles with very basic writing skills (see Figure 3, compare with Figures 1 and 2). Similar difficulties of ‘getting things right’ occur at all levels of textual structuring.
Summarizing, the texts display a wealth of features that suggest the existence of distant generic models associatively projected onto autobiography and historiography. At the same time, they display lots of features indicating that the ‘full’ model is beyond their reach since they lack access to essential resources required to provide a ‘complete’ instantiation of the genre. The genre is something they want to write, but for which they lack the means and resources. They borrow the genre, but are unable to put it to full use.

Figure 3: Page 5 from Julien’s second version.
5. The relocation of resources and functions

The effect of this tension is a complex pattern of relocations of resources and functions. To summarize it in simple terms: Sub-elite resources are given elite functions, thus allowing a self-identification that does not necessarily come across to the addressees.

Again we need to look at the local economies of signs and resources in order to make this clear. I have mentioned repeatedly that Julien and Tshibumba chose a monolingual code for their writing, Swahili and French, each time a code marked by an absence of codeswitching. But saying that the code is monolingual does not mean that Julien and Tshibumba use standard varieties of these languages. As already mentioned, the texts are replete with orthographic inconsistencies, corrections displaying uncertainty with regard to e.g. inflection or lexis, and (certainly in Julien’s case, but also noticeable in Tshibumba’s) clear traces of oral vernacular varieties transferred into writing. This is most noticeable in the French texts. When reading these texts, the errors are overwhelmingly visible, but when the texts are read aloud, they sound acceptable. A couple of examples may clarify this:

Julien:
Cette lumière ça n'a pas illumine que moi qui a été votre boy, la production aidera les vieux et les jeunes gens, surtout les jours de Fêtes des Mariages et des deuils. Déjà une bonne somme d'argent qui étaient destine à moi, c'étaient tombé dans les mains d'autres pauvres et la Malle des Habits aux missionnaires, cela ne vous a pas choquer mais vous me parliez que Heureusement c'étaient tombé dans les mains d'autres pauvres.
Vous m'avez sauvé et empecher à être Voleur

Translation:
This light has not only enlightened me who has been your boy, the production will help the elderly and the young, especially on the days of Festivities Weddings and funerals. Already a good sum of money that were destined for me, it had fallen into the hands of other poor people and the suitcase with Clothes to the missionaries, that has not shocked you but you spoke to me that Fortunately they had fallen into the hands of other poor people.
You saved me and prevented me from becoming a Thief

Tshibumba:
Afin l'histoire du ZAÏRE est mal écrite dans beaucoup des livres, des journaux et dans l'enseignement, puisque nos ancêtres
aux années les plus reculées, savaient bien
gouverner (diriger) mais ne savaient
pas lire ni écrire. voyons: on payait des
impôts et choissait leurs chefs, on avaient
des Empereurs, des Rois des notables pour-
quoi pas des États et des Regions (provinces).

Translation :
Well the history of ZAIRE is badly
written in many books, newspapers
and in education, because our ancestors
in the most remote times, knew well
how to govern (direct) themselves but they did not know
how to read nor write, that is: they payed
taxes and chose their chiefs, they had
Emperors, Kings and aristocrats why
not States and Regions (provinces)

Note the frequency of errors in writing based on homophony in spoken (vernacular) French:
“étaient - était”, “avaient - avait”, « choissait - choissisait », and so on. Note also the
difficulties in using punctuation and sentence formulation. What we witness here is how
Julien and Tshibumba both use the spoken, local, variety of French as the ‘standard’ for
writing, while writing itself is a highly cumbersome enterprise.

Yet, the texts are the product of enormous amounts of work, care and attention. The
texts are littered with corrections and additions, revealing an awareness of ‘correctness’
and a desire to write ‘correctly’. This suggests - a disturbing idea - that to Julien and
Tshibumba, the variety they produce would be the ‘correct’, ‘(qualitatively) good’ variety,
not improbable given the extreme limitations in access to prestige codes prevalent in their
environment and noticeable in many features of the texts. I could conclude at this point that
Julien and Tshibumba use sub-elite, non-prestigious varieties to fulfill elite, prestige
functions: Writing a ‘serious’, important and generically exceptional text for the benefit of
someone overseas, whom they value and respect.

The argument can be broadened by looking at Julien’s and Tshibumba’s attempts
to construct a structured written text. I have mentioned the attempts of both writers to arrive
at a tightly organized text, structured into thematically or episodically defined chapters and
with a degree of aesthetic elaboration. I have also mentioned the fact that in both cases, this
attempt was plagued by lots of deficiencies in realization. Julien’s chapter titles - a
structuring feature of the autobiographical narrative - spill over into the second genre of his
texts, the letter to his Belgian patron (see appendix 1). In the case of Tshibumba a similar
feature occurs. The first part of his history is a survey of the precolonial kingdoms of the
Congo. He manages to write full ‘chapters’ on the kingdoms of Shaba and neighboring
Kasaï, and of the Kongo kingdom of the Kinshasa region. But two other kingdoms are
mentioned in chapter titles with no text below: The kingdom of the Mongo and that of the
Bampende, both kingdoms from remote regions seen from Tshibumba’s Shaba location
(appendix 2 provides a transcript of this fragment). We have chapter titles but empty
chapters: There is an awareness of categorization, division and comprehensiveness as
features of a ‘history of Zaire’, but there is no information to complete this format.

We are facing the same phenomenon as above here. Julien and Tshibumba adopt a prestige format - the tightly structured model of the ‘serious’ genre they try to accomplish - but realize it with means that betray their sub-elite place in the economy of communicative resources in which they live. But these sub-elite resources are given the function of realizing the elite, prestige-bearing genre.

This is the play of relocating resources and functions that is central to the construction of identities and lives here. In order to construct an autobiography - a structured, narrativized version of one’s life - or an identity as ‘historian’ (something Tshibumba repeatedly emphasizes in his text), Julien and Tshibumba adopt elite, prestige genre-models. They have some ideas of what these genres involve in terms of linguistic and textual regimentation: Monolingual, written, structured. But in order to realize this prestige model, they take what is available in their own environment: Resources belonging to a sub-elite stratum of society, which get reallocated - they receive functions and properties - so as to fit the prestige genre. Thus, even an incompletely realized genre can provide the elite or status identities attached to the genre, seen from within local communities and local economies of signs and symbolic resources. In lapidary terms: Even ‘bad’ French can bear prestige in environments where ‘good’ French is as good as inaccessible to most people. Even by means of very deficient resources, Julien and Tshibumba are able of inserting themselves in an elite discursive space and assume prestige identities - one vested in a life important enough to be narrated in a generically structured way in Julien’s case, that of a serious historian in Tshibumba’s case.

Determination and globalization go hand in hand here. Values and functions of resources are attributed locally, and people construct meanings on the basis of the codes, conventions, hierarchies and scales available to them - the deterministic side of the argument. But the values and functions thus attributed to resources such as French or Swahili are not necessarily transferable to other environments. What can pass as ‘good’ Swahili in Lubumbashi does not necessarily qualify as such in Dar es Salaam or Mombasa, and what Julien and Tshibumba adopt as ‘good’ French would not necessarily be perceived as such in Paris or Brussels. The relocation of resources and functions offers opportunities to move into locally defined prestige spheres, but simultaneously it ‘localizes’ those who grasp these opportunities.

To refer back to Raymond Williams: The creative process of forming new consciousness by exploring “hitherto excluded and subordinated models” is the force that allows the insertion of Julien and Tshibumba into prestige places, but these places are fixed and this prevents this move to be recognized translocally and transculturally. What the author does to the form is the creation of new consciousness; what the form does to the author is to keep this consciousness in place, so to speak.

6. Conclusion: Orthopraxy, genre and subjectivity

We have seen how Julien and Tshibumba adopt models of written genres in order to accomplish an act of self-creation. The genre - however incomplete in actual performance - offers spaces for such self-creation, because it allows its authors to move out of one place in society and into another. But we have also seen how such attempts can be confined to
local spaces, with restricted ‘translatability’ in others, because of differences in economies of signs and symbols. The attempts are orthopractic in the sense that they adopt a form but add other meanings to it: The genres are not adopted orthodoxically - the doxa of the genre is not adopted - but orthopractically - the practice of the genre is adopted. Such orthopraxy, however, is rarely a matter of choice: It is an effect of determination in Williams’ sense, a form of determination that grows more pressing as a feature of sociolinguistic explanation the more we view language in global terms. The orthopraxy observed here is thus not necessarily an expression of resistance, but one of inequality: People behave as if they have control over elite resources, but not because they reject these elite resources. They do so because they have no access to elite resources. Consequently, we get new “limits of metapragmatic awareness” (Silverstein 2001 (1981)): Limits that are induced by the widening difference between value and function attributions to linguistic resources on a worldwide scale. The ‘doing as if’ has to be seen now in terms of global economies of signs and symbolic resources.

The effect this may have on our understanding of transcultural subjectivities is yet unclear, but I can venture some suggestions. This would mean that the discursive articulations that lead to the construction and perception of subjectivity need to be looked at afresh, taking into account the potentials for local constructions of subjectivity that may not match criteria valid elsewhere. This would also mean that quite a bit of what we take for granted with reference to subjectivity needs to be called into question or qualified. For one thing, Giddens’ view of subjectivity, quoted above, proves to raise an enormous amount of complex and delicate empirical issues. Biography, and the way in which it can be used by individuals to construct subjectivity, is not simple.

The same goes for history. Julien and Tshibumba set themselves and their stories against time frames, and one of the striking features of the texts is the way in which such settings involve formal generic work. Not just chronologies, but generically regimented chronologies expressed, for instance, in a higher frequency of dates mentioned in the narrative, appear to offer the opportunities for constructing ‘history’ both as identity and as act of text-construction. In sum, they not only set themselves against ‘objective’ chronologies but also against textual models of chronology. Thus there is a poetics to historical narrative - the deployment of particular formal, generic features, the desire to give text a particular ‘shape’ - which seems both liberating and oppressive. It is liberating because it offers space to construct history, but it is oppressive because it makes such histories almost unreadable because of the historical tiedness of textual resources and genres to particular modes of practice and groups of practitioners. To the extent that this still requires reiteration, this goes to show that ethnographic approaches to text must be sensitive to the historicity of the materials that enter into the text.

References


Appendix 1:

Transcript of page 14 from Julien’s second version. The transcript provided here has kept as many features of orthography intact as possible: super- or subscript insertions, corrections, line breaks and so on.

I 4

FEZA ile nilifika nayo Malemba-NKulu
mwezi wa Mei, kufika mwezi wa Ogistino
ikatemuka nouvu (devaluation) kazi
ya mashamba shikwiltumika apana vile
viilivyo waza kwiltumika (programme)
Niliombaka Madame Helena na Bwana
yake de grave wanisa'idie miaka tano,
njoo sababu nilifika Hapa LubuMBASHI
kwa Kupokea msaada na masaidio yao
ni pate namna ya kuishi na juu ya
maendeo ya kazi ya FERMO.

Il N y a pas de SOT metier, il y a que le
SOT gens

Les noirs riches et intellectuels preferent avoir des
domestiques, mais ils les considere NT comme des gens
inferieurs, qu'ils ne peuvent pas parler longuement avec
eux, ni s'assoire ensemble autour d'une table, ni
boire dans UN Bar ou restaurant, meme pour les pay
ement de salaire il y en a qui disent a leurs a leur
BOYS, tu mange ici et tu n'a pas de respect pour
reclamer ton salaire. Les BOYS repliquent parfois que
NOS [xxx] FAMILLES ne viennent PAS manger ici, ça aboutir souvent
du dispute ou les BOYS quittent les services.
Depuis la colonization et aujourd'Hui, pendant les
cries politique et ecoNOMique les boys gagnent
toujours bien leur vie par rapport, aux Directeur
comis, professeur, Mecaniciens, Menuisier, a moins
que ces derniers trouvez a leurs services les.
Appendix 2: Transcript of pages 16 and 17 of Tshibumba’s text. Note the ‘empty chapters’ on p.17.

d=autre explorateurs comme Diego-Cao
venait a leur tour explorer le fleuve
KASAÏ, d'où ils ont XX été bien acceuile[?]
Par le Chef Ngole, après avoir explore
la région les explorateurs ont regagné
leur pays

Le Royaume de BAKUBA
Le Roi de BAKUBA

Puissant Roi de Bakuba,
Le Roi LUKENGU, dans son reigne, le
Chef des Bakuba, dans son village
ont travailler de la sculpture, des MASQUES
et d=autre Oeuvres-Artistiques.
Il a ouvert sa porte aux
occidenteaux dans des commerces: tel que
des Oeuvres Artistiques et d=autre.

Royaume de Mongo

Royaume des BAMPENDE

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