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‘La parole construit le pays’. Théâtre, langues et didactisme au Katanga (République Démocratique du Congo). Le Lay, Maëline. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2014, 496 pp, broché cousu, 15,5 x 23,5 cm, ISBN 978-2-74532-791-8.

“Discourse builds the nation”, a quotation from Thomas Mpyoi-Buatu’s novel *La reproduction*, became the leitmotiv for an intellectual history not only of Katanga, but of the Congolese nation as a whole. Narratives on spaces of literary production and performance, the history of language use and theatre from colonial times to today and an argument on the plurilingual context frame the analysis of theatre texts in Swahili and French. The description of the corpus and its linguistic and pragmatic analysis provides the basis for an in-depth description of the didactic character of theatre texts and performance by Katangese groups.

In her introduction Maëline Le Lay discusses the choice of texts for the corpus and convincingly argues for the qualifier “didactical”, which characterises both the French and the Swahili production, instead of “popular”. Literary text production has a specific role in the attempt to change living conditions. In different ways and under various names creative acting intends to support and lead people on the way to a “good life” (as Martha Nussbaum calls it).

By far exceeding a sociolinguistic and pragmatic analysis, this book provides an insight in the building and development of the intellectual fraction of Congolese society and the role of writers and academics in times of crisis. The author discusses social and intellectual history through three historical phases: Belgium colonialism, the regime Mobutu and finally the so called (copy right Madeleine Albright) Central African World war. The focussing on theatre production in Katanga in no way narrows the view of the author, who succeeds to imbed description and analysis of her text corpus in a narrative of colonial and global history, but also in Western cultural and academic discourses.

The book is divided into four sections. Part one describes the socio-political frame of language use and literature production, part two deals with production and distribution of didactical literature and the history of theatre in the Congo and especially in Katanga, part three analyses the corpus of texts in French and Swahili as elements of an environment marked by diglossia, and part four is devoted to the didactic function and its mode of realisation.

The literary landscape (“*paysage textuel*”) of Katanga consists of two quite different spaces: the “French literary system” and the “space of performance in Swahili”. While French literary production leans on several publishing houses – of missionary or academic origin or of self-

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publishing character -, Swahili theatre finds its way to the audience through productions in radio and TV or public performances in local halls or in the open.

The author provides a comprehensive and precise description of both arenas, going back to the very origin of Congolese literary production. The two literary spaces don't overlap and to a large extent ignore one another; Le Lay explains the existence of two disparate arenas by a stable diglossia which marks the society since colonial times. Own observations confirm the impact of a French/vernacular diglossia for the social elites, or with the words of Ngalasso M.M. "The use of French [...] serves as the proof that somebody has the linguistic competence to rightly claim power over his next."¹ I doubt that it has strong explanatory power to comprehend the rules of language use of the broad public – I will come back to this argument later.

The topic of diglossia dominates also the following concise description of the socio-linguistic situation in the Congo, but the author introduces a second problematic concept – linguistic standards. While French, due to its implementation through school teaching and dominant use in writing² is considered more or less following linguistic norms of the metropolis, discussing (spoken) Swahili in relation to linguistic standards leads the linguist into a vast field of failed language policies. The author's short but concise description of the history of Swahili in the Eastern Congo leads to the statement that "Lubumbashi Swahili is a language which has no standard" (p. 99), notwithstanding that speaker in different situations may refer to "Swahili bora" as a means to aspire after a variety of higher status. The problem concerning norms in language use is on the one hand linked to the fact that French writing is compared to Swahili speaking, on the other hand we have to take into consideration that even in Tanzania language norms by the European definition (cf. Duden, Grevisse) don't exist and even if they would exist, they would not be applied in the rigorous way of French "language watchers."

The following history of language policies, cultural instruments of control and literary production provides a highly informative and cohesive description from colonial times up to present. The author presents a dense narrative of intellectual guidance and control, jointly done by colonial actors (including Christian missionaries) and later on Congolese government, French and Belgian *coopérants* and local elites. The section on language policies and academic discourse

¹ "Mais le français exerce aussi, au Zaïre comme partout dans les pays francophones d'Afrique, une fonction mythique, mystique voire mystificatrice: signe extérieur de savoir, il est la clé magique qui donne accès à la réussite sociale et au pouvoir. Son utilisation correspond rarement à une nécessité absolue sauf celle qui consiste à montrer qu'on est <<arrivé>> à un niveau de compétence linguistique autorisant une légitime revendication de pouvoir et, éventuellement, à mystifier son prochain." (Ngalasso, M. M. 1986. *Etat des langues et langues de l'Etat au Zaïre. Politique Africaine* 23: 15)

² Concerning the use of French Maëline Le Lay quotes J. Kilanga & J.P. Bwanga: "Le français parlé au Zaïre obéit généralement à la norme scolaire. D'où l'opinion généralement répandue dans les milieux occidentaux du Zaïre que le Zaïrois parle comme un livre c'est-à-dire comme il écrit." (p. 80)

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combines the description of institutions and processes with an analysis of motives and social background. Maeline Le Lay succeeds to present an intellectual history based on a broad range of literature and sources, a concise and highly informative story and a concise and convincing analysis. She qualifies her field of research with the term “didactic” (“discours didactique”, “literature <<édificatrice>>”), but deals with a much broader social and cultural domain. Concluding the first two chapters of the second part she refers to two “main aspects” the different genres of “didactic literature” have in common: “the relationship to power and a specific temporality oriented towards the future” (p. 177). Both arguments are discussed in the fourth part of the book.

The following chapter on “theatre in the Congo and Katanga” and the presentation of the text corpus provide a detailed description of actors, producers and texts and of the relevant context of their production.

Part three is devoted to the pragmatic and socio-linguistic analysis of the corpus. The author focuses on the one hand on phenomena of language contact (code mixing/switching, loans, structural transfer), on the other hand on strategies of valorisation and distance (ostentation, orthopraxy, parody). The analysis unfortunately suffers from two defects: On the one hand the author follows the mainstream approach marked by diglossia, on the other it provides only a description but no interpretation of the phenomena found.

The hegemonic concept *diglossia*, enforced on the colonised and internalised by the local elite, was and still is a strong argument to confirm the power of a tiny fraction of the society. It is a mighty faith, which results in not allowing children of westernised families to learn and practice the languages of their grandparents. The average *citoyen / citoyenne* did not and does not believe in diglossia, but uses her/his repertoire to get the best out of a given communication. In this, code switching or French loans might realise at the same time the ambition to be recognised as having a higher status and the ridiculousness of a social climber. The character Masumbuko in plays of the *Groupe Mufwankolo* perfectly transmitted both strategies.

For a broad socio-linguistic analysis it would have been better to use a multilingual approach³, where – unlike diglossia – the complete repertoire of the participants is taken into account and dominance roles are not fix, but open to negotiation. I therefore don’t agree to the conclusion:

³ “Contact-induced language change is thus ultimately the product of innovations that individual multilingual speakers introduce into discourse in a multilingual setting. Such innovations are, in turn, strategies that allow speakers to navigate between the two push-and-pull factors that we have identified: complying with social norms and expectations on context appropriate selection of structures, on the one hand, and exploiting the full potential of the linguistic repertoire, on the other.” (Matras & Yaron. 2009. *Language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 5)

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“What the strategies finally show is the fundamental theatrical character of diglossia”⁴. Actors – maybe less writers – fully use their repertoire of linguistic varieties and their capacity of expression in order to realise intended messages and impacts. Of course, this would have meant still more of investigation and field research, a reviewer’s claim which sounds unreasonable in view of the great amount of data and sources already exploited.

Part four finally comes back to the didactic function of theatre. Le Lay initially focuses on the actors/producers, who generally attach high value to their role of “educators”. In recent times the didactic tradition of colonial and missionary character (as presented in previous chapters) is reinforced by the encounter with Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* and the highly promoted (and financially rewarding) *Development Theatre*. In this context the description of activities indicates that actors in French try to downsize Swahili productions which have by far better chances in the market. Maëline Le Lay skilfully embeds the description into a concise presentation of popular/didactic theatre in Africa.

With a chapter on didactic markers the author returns to her text corpus, discussing the emplacement of moral messages, stage directions – in case of the impromptu performance of the Swahili groups the written sketch – and the textual frame of the play. The analysis of the corpus also provides examples of realisations which are used to reinforce the didactic message (for instance discourse markers) or produce aesthetic effects.

In “Du miroir au miracle”, the last chapter of the fourth part, Le Lay return to the topics “relationship to power” and “future oriented temporality”. The analysis of texts deals with authors and characters, dramatic genres and creative means and finally states that all plays are built on base of the same time schedule: the plot starts from a deleterious present and drives the story to a promising future (“*le future est toujours prometteur et engageant dans les pieces du corpus*”). The deleterious present is characterised by the enduring economic crisis, the tension between tradition and modernity, between “village” and urban dwellings or by processes of exclusion and eviction. Political references are widely omitted⁵ (“*La mémoire au placard*”). The future is presented in three different modes: instant changes, distant and long lasting changes and finally the utopian, ideal situation, the “miracle” mentioned in the heading of this chapter.

“If the concept of time of this didactic-oriented theatre can be qualified as ‘mythic’ in order to describe the unreal and phantasmagorical dimension of its execution, it may more precisely

4 “Ce que ces stratégies révèlent enfin, c’est le caractère foncièrement théâtral de la diglossie.” (p. 316)

5 “En effet, outre ces quelques traits de discrète évocation et critique de la dictature, les textes sont muets sur cette période dont on peut pourtant raisonnablement penser qu’elle contient son pendant de traumatismes, tant par la terreur qu’instillait le gouvernement [...], que par l’absolutisme du pouvoir et l’abolition de la liberté d’expression, et donc l’interdiction d’une pensée libre et dégagée de toute vassalisation au parti.” (p. 426)

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appear to be ‘mystic’. In fact, it does nothing else than imposing a Christian, or in a wider sense religious, conception of existence as the primary condition for the creation of theatre plays.” (p. 431) This introducing remark leads the discourse on Congolese theatre back to the history of its genesis and to the challenge writers have to face in their own society. The author rightly questions that literary production should have the sole aim to “produce hope” (“*unique vocation de fabriquer de l’espoir*”) and at the same time exclude politics.

Le Lay refers to Elikia M’Bokolo, who in his preface to Isidore Ndaywel’s *Nouvelle histoire du Congo* complains: “How to reconstruct a country when its own children devise, cultivate and maintain such an inaccurate, poor and negative opinion of themselves?” (p. 438) Katangese theatre visibly avoids coming to terms with history and engaging in ongoing conflicts; instead it seeks salvation in a more or less far away future. In this sense it fits not only into the Christian universe, but also into development business, which promises a better world, but only deals with symptoms instead of tackling the root causes.

To sum up, “*La parole construit le pays*” is a convincing and extremely well constructed story of a failed project. By transposing the responsibility for social and political change into a more or less far away future, or even into a kind of mythical space, Congolese intellectuals and play writers contribute to the persistence of a deleterious present. Maëline Le Lay demonstrates not only competence and broad knowledge in various academic domains, but also the determination to search own tracks in the fields of socio-linguistics and literary analysis.

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