

Postcolonial Francophone Autobiographies: From Africa to the Antilles

Edgar Sankara

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One of the postcolonial issues that cannot be skirted is that of the readership of writings by Africans in colonial languages. Ngugi wa Thiong'o famously addressed this issue in 1987, after which he shifted to writing in Gikuyu. Ngugi's view on language created discomfort among many writers and critics and attracted accusations of isolationism. However, others have since adopted his view; for example, Boubacar Boris Diop turned to writing in Wolof.

Edgar Sankara plunges into these choppy linguistic waters with his analysis of autobiographies written in French after the 1960s by writers from Africa and the Antilles. His book exhibits a transnational and transcontinental character in that it studies an impressive and diverse array of writers including Hampâté Bâ, the Malian who spent the latter part of his life in Côte d'Ivoire; Valentin Mudimbé, a Congolese professor resident in the United States; Kesso Barry, a woman born in Guinea-Conakry and residing in France; the Martinicans Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant; and, lastly, Maryse Condé, the female Guadeloupien novelist now residing in the United States.

In the introduction to his book, Sankara lays out the analytic framework of his study, the main elements of which can be roughly classified as identity, reception theory, and autobiography as a genre. With respect to identity, Sankara sees France, the former colonizer, and the identity crises caused by colonialism and slavery respectively, as salient features of the chosen writings. Reception theory, which Sankara puts to convincingly good use, facilitates the discussion of the audience of the autobiography written in French. Many critics of African literature talk about the audience as one of the ambiguities of writing in a colonial language, but few carry out a sustained study of actual audiences as Sankara does. Sankara lays the groundwork for his analysis of how the colonial legacy affects the peculiar relationship between the author and the reader of the autobiography. The use of the French language alienates the author from his home audience, while the actual audience in France commodifies the autobiography as an exotic product.

The introductory section is followed by six chapters on each of the six writers. Each chapter begins with a historical background of the author and an analysis of the autobiographical elements of the text. It is in this section that the postcolonial theme of the colonized caught between authenticity and westernized globalization becomes most prominent. For

instance, Sankara reads Bâ's *Amkoullel* as a "self-narrative of métissage" and as a struggle between keeping one's African identity and the colonially imposed one (23). Mudimbé's *Les corps glorieux des mots et des êtres* reveals Mudimbe to be one who concedes that he has been colonized but feels that he has "benefitted from [colonialism]" (62). In his study of Barry's *Princesse peuhle*, Sankara focuses on the gender dimensions of the African tradition vs. Westernization narrative. Living as a modern African woman has made Barry unclear on "how to integrate into her society of origin"; at the same time, however, she "finds herself a foreigner in France" (87).

The chapters on Chamoiseau and Confiant are more interesting because they are devoted to the uniqueness of the writers' autobiographies. For instance, Chamoiseau's text is rich in terms of the use of childhood and variations in the grammatical subjects *je* (I), *tu* (you), and *il* (he) (102). The following chapter highlights the contradictions that underlie the defense of the Creole language and identity. On the one hand, Confiant wants to defend his heritage and address a primarily Martinican audience; on the other hand, he writes in French and revels in accolades from France. Sankara reads Condé's autobiography as an attempt to redeem a previous book, one that critics have perceived to be afro-pessimistic.

The final section of each chapter is dedicated to audiences of the books. Not one of the books has a significant audience from the countries of the authors' origins. Analysis of the critical reception in those countries reveals, moreover, that book reviews are largely reprints of articles written in France. Also, women's autobiographies seem to attract little attention in either hemisphere. In Barry's case, Sankara suggests that her book put off Africans for being too revealing about female genital mutilation (FGM), while the very little attention it received in France concentrated on that practice at the expense of the rest of the book. For Condé, the problem may arise from the "focus of the autobiography on more painful memories than happier ones" (158).

Sankara concludes by voicing his personal disappointment in the texts' inability to resolve the tension between writing for one's own community and writing for the former colonizer. This is particularly the case for the Creólité defenders who, in reality, exoticize their status as marginalized subjects. Understandably, Sankara's bias leans towards the autobiographies of Mudimbe and Condé which appeal to a more intellectual audience.

Sankara's book is a rich resource for scholars outside Francophone studies because it not only covers significant texts but also provides important background information on the writers and their contexts. Moreover, the study of the circulation and reception of books makes a valuable contribution to understanding the power dynamics at play between "the Third World and the West" (5).

But while Sankara's methodology is unique, the questions and conclusions are not. For African peoples, the question of audience is

always at the root of the language issue. In fact, Sankara's book is surprisingly silent on how major writers theorize the relationship between language and audience. Ngugi wa Thiong'o made it a point to state how his novels in Gikuyu were so well received that they had to go to a second printing. In the Francophone world, Ambroise Kom (2000) has argued that African publications in France are out of reach of many ordinary African citizens because of the publication costs and the relative inaccessibility of the French language. Furthermore, local policies in Africa make publishing difficult. Kom has also shown how French literary prizes are biased toward books that are susceptible to the exoticizing gaze.

While it is commendable that Sankara's study crosses from Africa to the Antilles, the book's claim to transnationalism would only have been strengthened by the inclusion of autobiographies from Anglophone Africa. After all, the book's publication in English suggests the desire to reach out to an English-speaking audience. The book's preoccupation with Francophone texts may be explained by the grant from the Modern Language Initiative (MLI) that supported the writing of the book. The MLI specifically caters to American foreign language needs, the need to make texts about non-English-speaking cultures available to American audiences, for example. This bias has helped to reinforce the artificial separation of African countries on the basis of languages that were imposed on Africa by Europe. Sankara's book struggles with the same tensions as the texts it has taken up. Even so, the book opens the door for postcolonial critics into the world of African and Caribbean writing in French.

Works Cited

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