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How Is Otherness Represented in Songhay-Zarma society? A case study of the "Tula" story

1. Introduction

Both in Africa and Europe, concerns about Otherness and its counterpart, Identity, have been and are — more than ever — at the heart of politics. However, although they are presented as facts, Identity and Otherness are really imaginary social constructs.

In many African societies, including the Songhay-Zarma of Niger that I will focus on here, oral literature is one of the major vehicles for dissemination of these social representations understood as "knowledge that is socially produced and shared, having a practical aim and contributing to the shaping of a common reality in a social group." (Jodelet 1989: 53, my translation).

This concept of social representations requires us to take two things into account:

- **On the one hand**, Otherness can not be studied without considering what constitutes Identity, because as the Other speaks, so he shapes himself; or as Sabria puts it he "shapes himself by constant evaluation of his own being, and of whether or not to be the Other." (1999: 16, my translation).
- **On the other hand**, enunciation plays a central role in the development of self-image. "The way a speaker says things says much more about him than anything he can say about himself" (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2002: 238-239, following Ducrot, my translation). But beyond the development of his own image, the speaker shapes his spoken word according to the image he has of the person he is speaking to (his narratee).

Using an example from Songhay-Zarma oral literature, I will analyze how Identity and Otherness are represented in *Jasare* narratives (*Jasares* are griots who are genealogists and historians). From this, we can decipher how the perception of Songhay-Zarma identity fits into a changing world, and to draw out what group ("ethnic", "class", religious) these notions are founded on.

Thus, through the analysis of *Jasare* stories, we can ask the following

questions:

- How is Otherness defined (and lived) in the Songhay-Zarma territory?
- What forms can it take?
- How is it put into words?
- Are some more "Other" than others, that is to say, are there different hierarchical categories of Otherness?
- Robic-Diaz states that "Shaping one's identity on a form of Otherness is the same as identifying, at least partially, with the Other, the logic being that one can not compare elements of the same 'nature'." (2005: 27, my translation). Given that what is totally Other can not be described, how does the narrator go about evoking an Otherness whose form would be *a priori* completely foreign?

Otherness and utterance-based linguistics

Before illustrating these theoretical considerations, I would like to clarify one point:

To designate the "Other" and describe "Difference" we must pass through the experience and awareness of self, an unavoidable egocentricity which, in turn, is the source of ethnocentricity. So Otherness and Identity form an inseparable and analytically indissoluble couple. And they are obviously a couple with problems. (Deuber, Ziegler & Perret 2005: 32, my translation).

A proverb offers us an initial indication of Songhay-Zarma world-view:

No matter how long the log stays in the water, it will never become a crocodile.¹

This proverb questions notions of Identity and Otherness. It tells us that if you ever mistake a log for a crocodile, it is simply a confusion; a log remains, substantially and despite its age, a log. Likewise, a foreigner who is immersed in the lives of villagers remain different (in spite of illusions to the contrary) and will never be the same as a local person.

The proverb tells us that the passage of time has no influence on the definition that we have of ourselves and of each other. But the *Jasare* stories relativize this rigid conception of Otherness. Narrative analysis shows the

¹ *Ba bundu ga gay hari ra a si bare ga te kaaray.*

evolution of our view of Otherness and Identity to the extent that "for a story to happen, you need a minimum sequence of events occurring in a time t and $t + n$ " (Adam, 1992: 46). This time dimension allows the narrator to stage not only the development of the plot but also the representations he disseminates, especially those of Otherness and Identity in the case of *Tula*.

The story, by adding a time dimension to representations of Identity and Otherness as developed by language, allows us to deconstruct the ideological process that is at the heart of representations of Self and Others in a given society, and to dissect the linguistic mechanisms responsible for these representations and the mechanisms of appropriation and exclusion.

2. Case study

Tula's story, which is analyzed here, was narrated by a *Jasare* to the descendants of the heroine's family [on 16 December 2006]. It is a story about a girl called Tula who was sacrificed by her maternal uncle, Biyey Koy, to the spirit of the local pond in exchange for a heavy rainy season which would ensure the survival of his people. Tula is now a dangerous spirit who haunts the pond, and is liable to kill anyone approaching it who is not descended from the sisters of her mother.

If the question of perspective is essential, it will not be developed here for a question of time.

Who is the Other, who is the Same?

Through the enunciation of a genealogy presented in reverse chronological order (v. 14-36), starting with the narratee and going back in time to Askia Mohammed, the ancestor of the Mayga Muslim dynasty, the narrator defines who is truly Songhay and who is not, from his point of view and that of the narratee. Indeed, after enumerating a list of ancestors, the narrator concludes with the following:

He wh` is n` t descended fr` m these S` nghay ancest` rs / is n` t S` nghay / It is n` t millet / [...] / This is S` nghay and its b` undaries (v. 37-41)

He takes up the same conclusion later on

Y`u are the g`ld `f S`nghay / He wh` is n`t descended fr`m Mamar / Is n`thing²

This genealogy thus excludes a large number of people designated as « Songhay » by the colonial and post-colonial administrators :

- Slaves (*Bannya*) and descendants of slaves;
- Freeman, called *Burcin*, who are not descended from Askia Mohammed. In this way, the narrator reduces Songhay identity to the aristocracy.
- But not only so, because – and here I'm simplifying – he also excludes the descendants of the non-Muslim Songhay dynasty of Si that preceded the Mayga (Muslim) dynasty.

This exclusion is reinforced by the use of metaphors intended to confer prestige on those, says the narrator, who are the real Songhay:

- the image of millet, the staple diet indispensable to the survival of the people;
- the image of gold.

This is even more the case, because anyone who doesn't trace their ancestry to Askia Muhammad is utterly disparaged ("is nothing"). In this way, exclusion is reinforced by negation and disqualification. So the real Songhay is defined by his aristocratic origins that bind him to the founder of the Mayga dynasty.

This exclusion of certain people who are usually considered to be "Songhay" has as its corollary their characterization as "Others" and their assimilation with other people groups mentioned in the narrative:

- the Bella
- the Fulani

Three different people groups are straightaway mentioned as living in the Tareygorou area where the story takes place:

[Biyey K`y] used t` lead the Bella / The S`nghay and the Fulani³

Two of them are immediately understood as being different from Songhay to which the chief belongs : Bella and Fulani.

² *Araŋ ga ti Soŋay wura / Bora kaŋ mana fun Maamar ga / Bora manti hari kulu* (v. 332-334)

³ *Nga no ga Balley / Da Soŋey da Fulaney kulu dabari* (v. 57-58)

The evocation of these two populations refers not only to local realities [since the Bella and Fulani live in this region], but also to opposing stereotypes and ethnotypes:

- The first are the Tuareg slaves who dominated the region in the nineteenth century. They are seen as "the most despised of ethnic groups or social categories, and are victims of all the racist ethnotypes (thieves, filth, liars, savages...)" (Olivier de Sardan 1982: 65, my translation). They are represented as sub-humans, with the behavior of slaves. But they also inspire fear, because they used to abduct women and children who were isolated in the bush and sell them.
- The Fulani are considered better : they are, most often, respected and admired, because they are viewed as being "more" noble than anyone else. But sometimes they are also ridiculed because of their reputation for being deceitful and their different lifestyle : like the Bella, they are nomadic shepherds,⁴ whereas the Songhay are settled farmers.

But whether Bella or Fulani, in this instance there is no difference, for all are characterised by their submission to Biyey Koy. The only elements that vary are what is conveyed implicitly by the evocation of stereotypes, and the fact that even the "most noble" are under the orders of the Songhay chief which can only enhance his status. By restricting their role to that of being subjugated, the narrator denies them their ethnic identity as it were, and more or less equates them with other social groups that depend on chiefdom.

The reference to the Songhay people is surprising for two reasons. First, the term "Songhay" is rarely used in popular language, which refers more often to subgroups (Kado, Wogo, etc.). This generic term is usually employed exogenously, by the colonial administration or in scientific literature. So the narrator's use of the term "Songhay" has strong connotations and expresses his willingness to highlight the dominance of Biyey Koy not only over a single sub-group, but over the entire Songhay population. Secondly, the Songhay are first and foremost the people from whom Biyey Koy came, and to see his name inserted between the words "Bella" and "Fulani" is surprising. From a linguistic point of view, he is put on the same level as the two "ethnic" groups (which is confirmed by the use of the coordinating conjunction *nda* "and"), positioning him as an Other rather than as an Identity. This is in contrast to Biyey Koy, who is no longer considered to be

⁴ Even though many Fulani have been sedentary for a long time, the stereotype of the Fulani nomad is still very real in Songhay-Zarma territory.

a simple Songhay, but a Mayga.⁵ The kind of Otherness defined here is not really that of people groups, but that which exists between a dominant group and the peoples who are subjugated to it.

This interpretation is confirmed further on too, when the narrator presents Songhay (here referred to as *Kaad`*⁶) and Bella on an equal footing, because Biyey Koy sacrifices the same number of each to the spirit in the version told out of context],⁷ he also mentions the same number of Fulani):

He t`ld her he w`uld `ffer / Ten Bella-s t` redeem his pe`ple

He t`ld her he w`uld `ffer / Ten Kaad`-s t` redeem his pe`ple⁸

The term *kaad`* comes from Fulani and means "foreign, pagan." It refers not only to slaves and to groups of diverse backgrounds who have assimilated to the Songhay people over the years, but also to the ruling aristocracy (composed of Mayga or Si descendants). The comparison to the Bella — slaves of the Tuareg — suggests that we are dealing here with "common people".

In this way, the Songhay populations really are perceived as "Others", just like the Fulani and the Bella, because of their common exclusion from power. So initial representations of Otherness are presented here in terms of exclusion from political power and relationships between the dominant and the dominated. So-called "ethnic Otherness" is therefore reduced to "class Otherness."

Along with this deconstruction of the "Songhay ethnic group", there is the shaping of a new Songhay identity, that of the Mayga aristocracy:

- First, the story is intended for the Mayga aristocratic lineage, dating back to the sixteenth century. Their power, as we have seen, holds sway in Songhay territory.

⁵ A true Songhay as the narrator says in verses 37-41.

⁶ This term, more restrictive than "Songhay", designates a sub-group, but the narrator's earlier reference to "Songhay" leads the listener to continue the synecdoche.

⁷ See also Hamidou Yayé's account of the story of his ancestors.

⁸ *A ne a se to nga ga no / Kaado way ga nga laabo fansa* (v. 101-102)

- Secondly, he assigns a double religious identity to this dynasty. Two superimposed religious features characterize this lineage: the reference to Askia Mohammed, his ancestor, identifies him with Islam, since the Mayga dynasty is Muslim. But at the same time it implies a special relationship with the water spirits: the story of *Askia M`hammed* that follows the story of *Tula* in the narrative studied here reminds us that Askia Muhammad's father is a water djinn⁹ who gave him powers so that he could topple the chief, his maternal uncle Sonni Ali Ber. The eulogy also designates the Mayga as "chief of the magician-crocodiles" and "guardian of the fetish."^{10,11} The term *kaara k`y* comes from the association of the name *kaara* (a Songhay subgroup closely associated with water, belonging to the Kaado, and whose origin is probably *kaare*, "crocodile") and the suffix *-k`y* designating "one who possesses." We can state two hypotheses regarding the origin of the cult of Tula, the young girl who became a spirit. The first places it in the continuity of the primeval ties that bind Mayga and the water spirit. The second defines it as the Songhay's continuation of ancient Gourmantche¹² cults. This refers to the double origin of the Kaado: Gourmantche and Songhay, Muslim (for the Askia dynasty) and pre-Islamic. The term *kanga k`y*, for its part, comes from the association of the verb *kanji* (infinitive *kanjiyaŋ* "to fix, to drive into the ground") and the suffix *-k`y*. It recalls the fact that a stake planted in the ground [*kangari*: "what is planted"] was, before modern-day Islamicisation, the "object used for magical and propitiatory practices" (Olivier de Sardan 1982: 249, my translation). So we find, in the eulogy directed both to the narratee and to Biyey Koy (his ancestor), a link to the fetishes and the water spirit. This contributes to the shaping of their identity as a "mythical" aristocracy, linked to supernatural powers, and therefore increasing their prestige.

⁹ A Muslim spirit referring back to a pre-Islamic practice.

¹⁰ A "fetish" or "idol" is an object or a place "where supernatural forces dwell (spirits, ancestors...), and to whom one addresses prayers and sacrifices" (de Sardan 1982 : 358, my translation).

¹¹ *Mayga Kaara koy kanga koy.*

¹² According to de Sardan (1982), the cult of the crocodile-spirit or the snake-spirit is probably of Gourmanche origin.

1.1.1. What about gender Otherness?

In this story, the sister and the mother are defined as being close to Biyey Koy and since they are related, they are the Same.

The status of Tula, the principal female in the story, on the other hand, is more ambiguous: it is presented to us as being half-way between the Same and the absolutely Other. The Tula story tells us about the transformation of the eponymous character, defined as the nearest possible relationship (the chief's preferred uterine niece) to the absolutely Other (a spirit living in the pond in the guise of a serpent), giving an interesting perspective on the relationship between Identity and Otherness. In this case, the Other stems from the close relationship, as if an irreducible proximity still existed in the absolutely Other. It is this process of transformation that I will attempt to explain here. We will see how it is shown as an (admittedly radical) metaphor for a young girl's change of status when she marries: as daughter of the family, she becomes a stranger to it when she leaves the parental home.

Metamorphosis is a component of her Otherness. Tula, having become a spirit, in effect changes into a woman whose incredible beauty is henceforth simply a lure to attract her victims. Yet — so the story tells us — "In the rainy season she becomes a white water lily"¹³ whose properties are metaphorically those of the Tula spirit: both live in still waters (ponds, backwaters, etc.), and both show their loveliest apparel on the surface: the water-lily's flowers, and Tula's long hair (in the out-of-context version) and breasts.

Tula's metamorphosis, in addition to being an enticement, demonstrates the elusiveness of her being. We might also wonder whether this inability to grasp her form, and therefore to describe it, is not the only way to evoke her as absolutely Other. How can we describe that for which there are no words?

The part of her that appears on the surface of the water is presented as being identical to the human body (with the use of terms such as head – sometimes with hair - arms, breasts). But the story does not describe what is

¹³. *Kaydiya mo bolooli no a ga te* (v. 301). *Bolooli* : *nymphaea lotus*, white water lily or *nymphaea alba*, pond lily.

below,¹⁴ as if it lacked words to express this Otherness. The silence of the narrative on this subject is closer to that of Tula herself, and seems to emphasize that absolute Otherness manifests itself primarily by the inability to say or be said.

As the uterine niece, Tula is the blood relative to whom Biyey Koy is most attached. Presented first as a passive object, she only becomes a proactive subject (witness the verbs used: to want, to be able to, to do) once recognized by her mother, that is once she accepts her Otherness: having been offered to the spirit, she has become different from her mother. The origin of this differentiation refers to the bonds of alliance, an alliance symbolized here by the uncle's negotiation with the spirit. To truly become a proactive subject, Tula must be distinguished from her nearest and dearest, that is her mother and her maternal uncle.

Yet this process of distancing and individualization brings Tula close to the process that every bride experiences. In a patrivirilocal society, the wife leaves her parent's home to join her husband and her settling into this new family makes her in some way a stranger to her own blood family.

So women, because of their potential as wives, are Other; and this Otherness is manifested in the misfortunes for which she is responsible. Do not the Songhay-Zarma say that behind the fall of every hero there is always a woman? The Other does not reveal herself through words, but appears veiled, manifesting herself through the evils she causes. Is it not the spirit who is responsible when a drought ravages the region? Is it not the spirit who (through a stranger, an old Gourmantche man) demands that Biyey Koy sacrifices the person who is dearest to him in the world? And finally, is not Tula, once sacrificed, who is responsible for the numerous drownings that happen in Tareygorou pool, and in other pools elsewhere? (5?)

3. Conclusion

At a time when Songhay-Zarma society and [the whole country of] Niger are rapidly changing under the constant pressures of Islam and the West, the *Jasare* reminds the audience — through his story — what he claims are the "real" values of Songhay society. So we witness a redefining of Songhay

¹⁴ It could be that what is hidden is a metaphor for taboo: the part of Tula's body that should not be shown in public because of its sexual connotations (breasts are not associated with sex in Songhai-Zarma society).

identity by the spokesman of a once totally dominant ideology, that of the aristocracy. This has two consequences:

- First, it excludes a whole segment of society that the colonial and postcolonial administrators define as "Songhay".
- Secondly, it highlights the predominance of the social over what might be called the "ethnic".
- Third, From the perspective of gender relations, narrator and narratee join and offer a full representation of women as "Other" and therefore dangerous. These representations are not really different from those of modern power and are not necessarily in conflict with them,

The analysis of enunciation devices in the Tula narrative lets us examine the relationship between Identity and Otherness and how the narrative forms particular images of it. It also shows that one is faced with a vivid, dynamic relationship between Self and Other, the "we", symbol of social identity, bringing the narrator sometimes towards or sometimes away from the narratee. We note that this conception of Otherness as a dynamic and moving category is also seen in the recurring image of metamorphosis.

[Taking into account the enunciative dimension of oral literature narratives, this analysis makes it possible to highlight the process of shaping the relationship between Identity and Otherness and the discursive strategies and processes established by the enunciators in defense of their different points of view.]

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