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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/itineraires/6122>

DOI: 10.4000/itineraires.6122

ISSN: 2427-920X

Publisher

Pléiade

Electronic reference

Pierre Boizette, « Défense et Illustration des Langues Africaines: Linguistic Commitment and Critical Thought in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Kwasi Wiredu's Works », *Itinéraires* [Online], 2019-1 | 2019, Online since 24 July 2019, connection on 03 August 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/itineraires/6122> ; DOI : 10.4000/itineraires.6122

This text was automatically generated on 3 August 2019.

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Défense et Illustration des Langues Africaines: Linguistic Commitment and Critical Thought in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Kwasi Wiredu's Works

Défense et illustration des langues africaines : engagements linguistiques et pensée critique chez Ngugi wa Thiong'o et Kwasi Wiredu

Pierre Boizette

- 1 In recent years, the apparently anachronistic term of decolonization came out again in the francophone intellectual field. Anachronistic because, more than twenty years after the end of apartheid, decolonization seems to be a completed process. However, the contemporary vogue of the word symbolises a change in its meaning from an infrastructural scale to a superstructural one. In other words, political and economic autonomy is achieved—at least partly—but it is not the case for the minds and the imagination. Fanon already wrote the following:

The liberation of the individual does not go hand in hand with national liberation. Genuine national liberation exists only to the extent that the individual has irreversibly begun his liberation. It is not possible to distance oneself from colonialism without the slightest time to take in regard to the imide that has been colonized by the filter of colonialist culture. The one of the revolution of the national consciousness. (Fanon 2011: 789)

This assertion echoes the comments of many other artists and politicians who, like him, have stressed the need to do such a work on mentalities to complete the struggle for independence. Thus, such an emphasis on the need to continue the work of decolonization also testifies to the fact that a true renaissance of the continent can not take place unless, beforehand, such a work has been accomplished.

- 2 This phenomenon is obvious when it comes to debates about the use of African languages in literature. Although it is a highly contentious issue, it nevertheless appears out of date today to many writers as both English and French languages have become the norm. However, for many of them, this consensus makes no sense. According to them, it is unlikely that an African renaissance will occur as long as the languages inherited from imperialism will remain at the expense of African languages. As the signing of the Asmara Declaration of African Languages and Literatures showed in 2000, their claims keep influencing a whole section of contemporary criticism. The rise of decolonial argumentation therefore invites us to analyze how to rethink the relationships between the project of African renaissance and the use of African languages in a context where, nevertheless, they remain minored at a global scale.
- 3 By analyzing the trajectories of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu, my aim is to demonstrate how their theses on African languages are in the wake of old ambitions. Furthermore, I also discuss how they renew these to adapt to contemporary issues, even if English keeps playing an important role.

Which languages for the African Renaissance?

- 4 Since the early twentieth century, there has been a relationship between the idea of an African Renaissance and the enhancement of African languages. Even when the colonization was at its peak, African intellectuals thought about the future of the continent once delivered from foreign domination. As Bill Ashcroft remarked, preoccupation about the future has unfailingly been linked to the memory of the past in African literature, a perspective Ashcroft calls "anticipatory consciousness" (2009: 703), which he defines as "a positive anticipation of the future freedom" (703). Its utopian characteristic explained why some authors frequently tried to devise the conditions of emergence of this future and to promote it through their commitment. In this perspective, the use of African languages in literature has been caught between the Afrocentric search for a return to pre-colonial African wisdom and the quest for liberation from colonial reason. Consequently, literature helped delineate the outlines of the African Renaissance and anticipate its achievement. It was according to this pragmatic conception of literature that intellectuals sought to invest the linguistic issue of political stakes.
- 5 We can draw up a summary and lacunar history of this linguistic reflection on what the African Renaissance should be. First, it seems that the notion is as old as the Western and modern conception of African literature: the term "Renaissance" has been claimed by generations of intellectuals from the continent and the diaspora (we can mention the well-known "Harlem Renaissance" and "Sophia-town Renaissance"). They made it a catchphrase aiming to rally thinkers and artists around an emancipatory project, which was to allow Africa and its inhabitants to recover dignity after centuries of oppression. As Maurice Taonezvi Vambe noted: "The most remarkable impulse in the creation of an African literary Renaissance in Africa was an attempt to foster the cultural pride of African people" (Taonezvi Vambe 2010: 257). There is no doubt this is a common point to all peoples sharing the feeling that their cultures have been belittled, when not all but annihilated. If the monument of the African Renaissance, built by Pierre Goudiaby Atepa and inaugurated in Dakar in 2010, is its most recent expression, it is only the culmination

of a project that took many forms during the twentieth century, the linguistic form being one of them.

- 6 Two milestones enable us to grasp how the utopian project of a revival of the continent was connected with that of a revalorization of its languages. It is expressed by several of the founding fathers of the novelistic genre in Africa. For instance, Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford made the apology of African languages as early as 1911 in his novel entitled *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation*, considered the first novel written in English by an African. The end of the novel looks ahead the world in 1925. Inspired by the Irish and Danish models, the author imagines what he calls *Ethiopian leagues* to promote the learning and development of Hausa, Yoruba and other African languages. He concludes by claiming: “The black races had at length learnt to run along their own natural lines of development, and the white needed the black and the black needed the white. The work of Cain had given place to the grace of conciliation [...]” (Casely Hayford [1911] 2003: 208). By this way, he imagines the possible pacification between African and European languages.
- 7 He was not the only one to establish a clear link between political emancipation and linguistic assertion. At the historic conference that took place in October 1936 in the city of Florida, S.S. Mafoyané and Vilakazi, among others, examined the status and crisis of African literature(s) in African languages. As in Ghana, in South Africa, the claim was not new since it had been made since the beginning of the twentieth century by the first generations of Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho writers. Pixley ka Isaka Seme published his essay *The Regeneration of Africa* in 1904 and was one of the founders of the ANC in 1912. Among the leaders of the movement were also authors who became famous for their commitment, first and foremost Solomon T. Plaatje. Benedict Wallet Vilakazi is just one among many other writers not to give up African languages, let us quote at the same time Shaaban Robert, Gakaara wa Wanjau or Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa. Nevertheless, their works are published in a context where European languages tend to become hegemonic with the appearance of transnational publishing houses devoted to African literatures. For authors choosing African languages, it is therefore very difficult to be legitimized and recognized internationally without going through European languages.
- 8 However, the writer/intellectual who made the most explicit link between the upgrading of African languages and the idea of an African Renaissance remains the Senegalese historian and Egyptologist Cheikh Anta Diop. In “When can we talk about an African Renaissance?” (An article originally published in *The Living Museum*, Special Issue 36–37, November 1948), he wrote:

We believe that every literary work necessarily belongs to the language in which it is written [...] All these reasons—and many others—prompt us to put the development of indigenous languages as a prerequisite for a true African Renaissance.¹ (Diop 1948: 34–35)

The aspiration for an African Renaissance is thus rooted in a rich cultural tradition prior to 1994, a tradition that shared a desire to give the continent its grandeur back after the colonial experience.
- 9 However, this utopia has given rise to a multitude of theoretical and political projects which only partially overlap. As noted by Mahmood Mamdani:

When did the African Renaissance begin—in 1994 or earlier? Is the African Renaissance to be a turnkey for South African export to the rest of Africa? Alternatively, could it be that the African Renaissance does not have a single parentage, a single genealogy, that its waters come from springs before joining a

larger flow? Could it be that this genealogy is as continental as its claim? (Mamdani 1999: 125)

Indeed, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the expression has benefited from a renewed interest particularly from authors like Ali Mazrui or Kwesi Kwaa Prah. Above all, since the positions taken by the immunologist Malegapuru William Makgoba and the organization of the eponymous conference held in 1998, it has come to focus on two meanings. The first could be described as traditionalist, emphasizing the values that are supposed to be immemorial on the continent and whose climax is the *ubuntu*, or, schematically, the idea that one is a human being only through the recognition of others (see Ramose [1998] 2003: 270–80). Secondly, a more economic-political significance has emerged, the aim of which is to promote the continent's further integration into world economy, a vision that is also found in Rwanda, notably with Paul Kagame and his close advisers.

- 10 While the first significance has been greatly studied in human sciences, the latter poses difficulties if we put it in perspective with what the African Renaissance must have been for the intellectuals mentioned above. As a more or less clearly elaborated government program, it is in opposition to the orientations they advocated. The words of President Thabo Mbeki seem to narrow its meaning only to its economic dimension (see Mbeki 1998). In its South African acceptance, the African Renaissance seems to take little account of the demands of several generations of intellectuals, who, precisely, sought to suggest a different path from those proposed by the dominant economic models. Two conceptions clash here. On the one hand, we have what Dipesh Chakrabarty named “the pedagogical side” (Chakrabarty 2010: 47) of decolonisation where:

the very performance of politics reenacted civilizational or cultural hierarchies: between nations, between classes, or between the leaders and the masses. Those lower down in the hierarchy were meant to learn from those higher up. (Chakrabarty 2010: 46)

- 11 The second, “dialogical side” would be “an urge towards cross-cultural dialogue without the baggage of imperialism” (47). While the former does not aim at a complete reform but at a partial renewal of an already established order, the second undertakes the transformation of the established relations in order to put an end to the hierarchization between the parts of the world and their inhabitants established by Western domination.
- 12 From a literary point of view, it seems that it is at the junction between these two major trends that the contemporary phenomenon of the Anglophone African literary Renaissance must be apprehended. Writers are forced to negotiate between the utopian aspiration for a global conversation that respects local differences and a necessary integration into the globalized world. The question of African languages in this dynamic has thus profoundly changed, it now generates individual trajectories where it is a matter for the authors to promote literature in minority languages while taking advantage of the echo chamber the American intellectual field represents.

Decolonising the Tongue

- 13 Consequently Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu's commitment results from these claims to increase the pace of African Renaissance. As a consequence, these authors turn to/resort to pragmatic engagement in order to advocate for it. It seems as if it was a performative statement which, having ruled on the need for a Renaissance,

simultaneously prompted it. In *Something Torn and New*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o thus stated: "The African Renaissance has already started: it began at the historical moment when the idea of Africa became an organizing force in opposition to the European colonial empires" (Wa Thiong'o 2009: 72). Such a political stance places the issue of the Renaissance in the very act of Panafrican awareness, as soon as this awareness was no longer experienced as a badge of inferiority but as the symbol of an alternative model offering the possibility to chart other paths, different from those introduced by Western imperialism. Similarly, according to Odhiambo:

During the past fifty years, an African Renaissance has taken place whose meaning may have been lost for the politicians but which remains rooted to our today's search for the genuine African past, for a correct analysis of the most striking contemporary reality and for tracks leading to multiple possible futures for Africa². (Odhiambo 1999: 10, quoted in Samarbakhsh-Liberge 2010: 390)

So it becomes possible to read the works of these scholars as laying the foundations for an African renaissance, each standing as an endorsement within the literary system to succeed in making it responsive to the positions advocated by the Africans.

- 14 Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu have too often only been regarded as leaders of cultural nationalism. In this perspective, the question of African languages is read only as the continuation of a reflection on the national independence of Kenya and Ghana. It is a question of freeing oneself from colonialism and the best way to achieve this would be turning away from English, both in literature and philosophy. Spiritual decolonisation, then, in fact conceals very local political demands aimed at completing the movement of independence and thus putting an end to the neocolonial turn taken by some of the governments of the newly decolonised states. However, it would be greatly restrictive to limit their respective remarks to national scales and one should rather put them in perspective with the global dynamic that attempts to take stock of Western domination.
- 15 First of all, these two authors did not immediately take a stand in favor of the revitalisation of African languages. Both were initially part of the intellectual elite formed in colonial schools and Western universities. Ngugi wa Thiong'o began his training at the Alliance High School, founded by the Church of Scotland Mission, and then graduated from Makerere and Leeds. Kwasi Wiredu studied at Alisadel College, then at the University of Ghana and finally at Oxford. Their situation has, in the beginning, caused them to be mistrustful of Afrocentric claims and, in particular, tribalism. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's first newspaper articles published between May 1961 and August 1964 (in the *Sunday Post*, *Sunday Nation*, *Daily Nation*) refer to his refusal to mythologize pre-colonial Africa (see Cook and Okenimkpe 1983 and Lovesey 2015). Similarly, in "How Not to Compare the African Traditional Thought with Western Thought" (1976), Wiredu suggests the underlying irony of defending and protecting, even with anti-colonialist intentions, a so-called "general trait" of culture that has "allowed small troops of Europeans to enslave and keep much more African populations under the colonial yoke" (Wiredu 1980: 43); a trait which "still today makes them the prey of neo-colonialism." Thus, Wiredu establishes a link between this technological backwardness and the superstitious foundations of many traditional practices. Wiredu warns against the perpetuation of traditional culture that encourages superstition and thus leaves Africa lagging behind in the West in terms of rational investigation. "To develop us," he writes, "we in Africa must break with our old uncritical habits of thought; that is to say, we must advance past the stage of traditional thinking" (1980: 44 quoted in Jeffers 2011: 642).

- 16 It was therefore later on that Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu spoke out for the revitalisation of African languages. At the local and regional level, both build on reflections initiated long before them. In the Kikuyu context, Derek R. Peterson has shown that the question of language and its fixation has always been invested by the population to question the measure of the community for which it was a rallying mark. Whether by the members of the revivalist churches in the 1940s or by the *Land and Freedom Army* fighters, the way of writing the Kikuyu language was systematically conceived of as a means of engaging the Kikuyus towards unexplored forms of the future. According to Derek R. Peterson:
- The political imagination in central Kenya was never an abstract mental exercise. In record books and in novels, in Bible translations and in grammar exercises, Gikuyu entrepreneurs projected possible futures and, in so doing, inspired people to act. Their creative writing lined up constituents, consolidated political support, and mobilized dissolute, directionless, disputatious people behind a cause. (Peterson 2004: 19–20)
- 17 In Uganda, Okot p'Bitek, of whom Ngugi wa Thiong'o was very close, went in the same direction for Luo people, notably via his essay *Africa's Cultural Revolution* and his texts in Luo like *Lak Tar Miyo Kinyero Wi Lobo* or *Wer pa Lawino*. The famous 1962 Makerere conference had also already generated the famous criticism of Obi Wali about the use of European languages (see Wali 1963). Gakaara wa Wanjau, a militant, writer and publisher who published in Kikuyu in the 1950s and with whom Ngugi wa Thiong'o worked on the linguistic reform of the early 1980s, wanted to do the same thing (see Pugliese 1995). For West Africa, it is necessary to remember Cheikh Anta Diop but also the postulates expressed by Chinweizu Ibekwe and Ihechukwu Madubuike in *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* in 1983.
- 18 Behind Wiredu's belated will to devote himself to an in-depth study of Akan's ideas, there is the concern, shared by Ngugi wa Thiongo, with breaking away from the mental colonialism by which Western-trained African philosophers and academics are affected in their eyes. It is easy to see the correspondence between these tasks and the slogans of cultural nationalism: rejection of assimilation by the West; preservation and fruiting of indigenous African culture. Wiredu and Ngugi devote particular attention to what might be called linguistic nationalism: trained in European languages, African philosophers are, Wiredu writes, "constantly threatened with mental deafricanisation, unless consciously and voluntarist to their own languages" (1996: 137). His studies of the Akan conceptual framework illustrate this recourse when Wiredu shows how a reflection on the difficulty of translating the Western philosophical terms into the indigenous languages makes it possible to contemplate certain central philosophical problems from a different perspective.
- 19 However, what their cultural claims point out is how much the idea of severance remains important in the postcolonial imagination. Severance should not here be mistaken with some kind of isolationism but should rather be understood as time closure trying to grieve the colonial era while laying the foundations of a future separated from the West. "Breaking with the West" (see Chakrabarty 2000) results in virtually designing a world based on principles that are different from those issued by modernity and, in particular, in the case of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, by capitalism. As Bill Ashcroft explains concerning Braithwaite's texts:

The utopian function of Caribbean writing, as for all postcolonial writing, lies not in the perception of a utopia but in its very determination that the world could be different, that change is possible. (Ashcroft 2017: 163)

Therefore, the tropism over “Nationalism” when voicing their opinion does not sufficiently account, in our opinion, for the resolutely global nature of their commitments. The Renaissance they offer is not that far from the one called for by decolonial theorists of “modernity/coloniality” among whom we find a good number of South American researchers, such as Walter Mignolo or Ramon Grosfoguel. In their wake, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kwasi Wiredu do not imagine that an African Renaissance may occur within Western mental constructs that European languages convey, even despite themselves. If some sort of universalism must remain, once the break is completed, it should only be as a kind of pluriversalism (see Ali and Dayan-Herzbrun 2017), i.e. substituting to the vertical identities of modernity ways of being together that are more horizontal and where each region and culture could exchange, a dialogical ideal that is in many ways the contrary of the educational model already criticised by Dipesh Chakrabarty. Only by prioritizing such an approach can the English language sustain its role, in their opinion, to the benefit of the African Renaissance.

African Renaissance and Global Awakening

- 20 Consequently, questions about African Languages and African Renaissance do not stop at the scale of the continent, rather, they have to do with the capacity, for academics, to invent a new set of relationships between spaces and peoples after colonisation. As the group “modernity/coloniality” pointed out, Western modernity was from the beginning built on the hierarchization of the world. As Ramon Grosfoguel explained, colonialism was not the same thing as “coloniality,” meaning:

[...] a hierarchization of power relations deploying at global level [...] and mutually interwoven within the framework of an overall paradigm in which Occident, perceived as superior, dominates and exploits the rest of the world, seen as inferior.

³ (Grosfoguel 2014: 7)

Consequently, contrary to the canonical definition of imperialism suggested by Edward Said, *coloniality* emphasizes the need for imaginary structures to be re-formed in order to build a fair world, finally freed from the spectre of the colonial experience.

- 21 Decolonization is both an act of reappropriation of a territory and a therapeutic procedure which aims to unleash the spirits of the aftermaths of colonialism (see Durrant 2004). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kwasi Wiredu foregrounded the decolonisation of the mind as propaedeutic to real liberation. Their respective questioning of African languages thus aims to promote other ways of collectively creating a new world and, consequently, to reduce the impact of eurocentrism. Nevertheless, their project faces the constraints of the global system. Indeed, they correlate, as the Asmara declaration did, the African renaissance with the use of African languages, but those are minored on a global scale in comparison to English language. Under these circumstances, their ability to open up the continent seems unrealistic. As Natasha Distiller said:

Globalisation, with all its implications for cultural exchanges and influences, is part of the world created by colonialism. It is precisely the global networks of power, politics, and economics into which the concept of the African Renaissance has to enter, and the inevitable dominance of an elite which results, that make the African Renaissance and the institution of English Literature co-dependent. (Distiller 2004: 125–26)

Kwasi Wiredu and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are aware of this power relationship that weakens the development of literature and philosophy in African languages. It encouraged them to imagine other ways to open up African languages even if this implies to use English.

- 22 As illustrated by Kwasi Wiredu's reflection on the Akan concepts, it is not a matter of challenging Western hegemony in favor of a purely Afrocentric perspective, but rather of being done with a unilateral approach to express the world. His aim is to promote other ways of perceiving it than those given by English language and its concepts. According to him: "The way your language functions can predispose you to several ways of talking and, indeed, to several ways of reasoning" (Wiredu 2000). First, the decolonization of the minds will have to reclaim a plurality of approaches thanks to the practice of African languages. However, it is only the first step because, once this is accomplished, the cross-cultural dialogue must be restored. Wiredu wrote the following:

As we start, we must be aware of the differences: we must investigate the differences. But when we have brought the differences to attention, we can then work on cross-cultural evaluation. [...] in the programme of decolonization, I envisage two stages: first, to elicit the differences, but second, to use what I call the independent considerations, i.e. considerations that are independent of the peculiarities of a particular language or culture, to make cross-cultural evaluations. (Wiredu 2000)

Such an ambition nevertheless requires to find a common communication instrument otherwise intercultural dialogue would be jeopardized.

- 23 This insistence on the dialogical aspect of decolonisation that needs to be undertaken thus strangely led Ngugi wa Thiong'o to reconnect with English. Although he always uses Kikuyu for his novels, he nevertheless favored English to begin his memoirs. This return to English in fact indicates the role that the author hopes to endow English with, that of a *lingua franca* which could make it possible to weave connections between cultures that do not benefit from sufficient mutual connections. He thus used the metaphor of the bridge to express this point of view. According to him:

the really important thing is to see connections. It is only when we see real connections that we can meaningfully talk about differences, similarities, and identities. So the border, seen as a bridge, is founded on the recognition that no culture is an island unto itself. It has been influenced by other cultures and other histories with which it has come into contract. This recognition is the basis of all the other bridges that we want to build across our various cultural borders. The bridges are already there, in fact. The challenge facing, say, teachers of English literature, of African or of Asian literature, is to recognize and find those bridges and build on them. (Wa Thiong'o 2000: 124)

Indeed, English has become a border operator between different African countries, but also between the black population on the continent and in the Diaspora. The best example is undoubtedly one Ngugi uses in *In the Name of the Mother*. Ngugi said that the Heinemann publishing house and its African Writers Series:

[...] has published writers from virtually every country in Africa thus enabling a dialogue among readers and writers from the three main colonial traditions: Portuguese, French and English. They have also enabled a dialogue between Africans of the continent and the diaspora. (2013: 8)

- 24 The existence of centres in the literary field is thus not a limiting horizon for him. On the contrary, it is a question of using this position in order to participate in reforming the field, from within, by working from its interstices. If the room for maneuver is limited, their inclusion in this system alone is sufficient to cause a disturbance. While it may be recycled in the form of a dilution of their proposals for the benefit of capitalism, it

nevertheless contributes to blur the lines by transforming a situation, that of the in-between, into an engine for decentring.

- 25 The notion of *globalectics* appeared in the work of Ngugi wa Thiong'o at the beginning of the year 2010, and it is inseparable from the *Global South Dialogue Project* platform launched by several researchers from Cornell University in the United States: Duncan McEachern Yoon, Pashmina Murthy and Ngugi's son, Mukoma wa Ngugi (also a writer). Their project is:

to facilitate conversation among writers and scholars from Africa, Latin America and Asia as well as minority groups in the West. Through such a dialogue, we can learn how our different societies have responded to questions of language, identity, and the role of culture in the work of decolonization. This project seeks to encourage an honest discussion about the ties that bind the South to the South and to help imagine and create a more democratic and egalitarian global culture. (Wa Ngugi, McEachern Yoon and Murthy 2015)

It seems, therefore, that Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kwasi Wiredu and the postcolonial authors have developed an increased awareness of the conditions of transfers in the globalized world. This allowed them to deepen their linguistic commitment as they enjoyed wider recognition and thus to work towards a decentralisation from this centre, with which they are in some way involved.

- 26 Thus, according to them, English has a part to play in the African Renaissance from the very fact of the imperial stature it still has today. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o said:

Translation is one way by which the accessibility of resources in African languages can be ensured. Philosophizing in African languages directly, conversation among African languages, and then across other languages through translations is the only way by which Africa can add originality to the wealth of human knowledge, enriching the world the way it once did in Old Egypt. (Wa Thiong'o 2013: ix)

- 27 Resolutely pragmatic, these two authors are aware of the fact that working in the U.S. may indeed turn them into "compradores," quoting the very harsh expression used by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991: 348) to call members of the post-colonial movement but, simultaneously, American universities give them the possibility to create synergies with researchers from the whole world. Remaining within these "places of Utopia" indeed represents a concession to a kind of hegemonic power but it is also the best means to move towards a progressive shift in the field of culture.

* * *

- 28 Faced with the depreciation of their cultures, intellectuals from Africa and the Diaspora have long been hoping for the rebirth of the continent after the tragedies experienced by its populations. The question of which language to use very quickly emerged as a nodal point in their commitments, so that the use of former colonial languages seemed to endlessly reproduce some form of addiction to the West. For Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu, the African Renaissance, if it had to come, can not take place without a prior spiritual decolonization, which necessarily implies the revitalisation of African languages. Without that, any rebirth would be partial because it would always be inscribed in the paradigms of the former imperial powers.
- 29 This concept of African Renaissance breaks with its more contemporary avatar, promoted in South Africa since 1994. However, promoting African languages does not mean, for Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Kwasi Wiredu, limiting oneself to a national, or even ethnic scale.

Rather, it is a means to reform international relations so that all cultures can meet and enter into dialogue. English can be a strategic tool to make this conversational ideal attainable. Due to its hegemonic status today, it is a vector capable of building bridges between the various cultures of the continent and re-establishing a Pan African ideal.

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NOTES

1. “[N]ous estimons que toute œuvre littéraire appartient nécessairement à la langue dans laquelle elle est écrite [...]. Toutes ces raisons – et bien d’autres – nous incitent à poser comme condition préalable d’une vraie renaissance africaine le développement des langues indigènes.” All translations are mine.
2. “Les cinquante dernières années ont vu se produire une renaissance africaine dont la signification peut s’être perdue aux yeux des politiques, mais qui est au fondement de notre quête actuelle du véritable passé africain, d’une analyse correcte de la réalité contemporaine la plus prégnante et des chemins conduisant aux multiples futurs possibles pour l’Afrique.”
3. “C’est un type de pouvoir multiforme, hétérogène, et complexe : il consiste en une hiérarchie de relations de pouvoir qui se déploient au niveau mondial [...] et s’imbriquent mutuellement dans le cadre d’un schéma global dans lequel l’Occident, reconnu supérieur, domine et exploite un monde non occidental, jugé inférieur.”

ABSTRACTS

This article proposes to return to the history of the notion of “African Renaissance” and its link with the question of the revalorization of African languages. By presenting the work of the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu and the Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o, we wish to illustrate how the linguistic dimension has been central to thinking about how to free the continent from Western domination. The use of English could thus appear antinomic to the very idea of rebirth as it symbolized the renewal of a form of imperialism, even after independence. Nevertheless, these two authors did not give up English. Their works testify to the fact that English, despite but also thanks to its hegemonic status, can today contribute to the African renaissance by promoting a conversational ideal capable of reviving the Pan-African dream.

Cet article propose de revenir sur l’histoire de la notion de « Renaissance africaine » et de son lien avec la question de la revalorisation des langues africaines. En présentant les travaux du philosophe ghanéen Kwasi Wiredu et du romancier kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong’o, nous souhaitons montrer la centralité de la question linguistique dans les réflexions autour de la possibilité d’un détachement de l’Afrique d’avec l’Occident. L’usage de l’anglais a ainsi pu apparaître comme antinomique avec l’idée même de renaissance puisqu’il symbolisait la reconduction d’une forme d’impérialisme, y compris une fois les indépendances acquises. Néanmoins, ces deux auteurs ne renoncent pas pour autant à l’anglais. Leurs travaux témoignent du fait que l’anglais, malgré son statut hégémonique et grâce à lui, peut aujourd’hui contribuer à la renaissance africaine en promouvant un idéal conversationnel à même de redonner vie au rêve panafricain.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Renaissance africaine, Wiredu (Kwasi), Wa Thiong'o (Ngugi), nationalisme culturel, décolonial, idéal conversationnel

Keywords: African Renaissance, Wiredu (Kwasi), Wa Thiong'o (Ngugi), cultural nationalism, decolonial, conversation

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