

**Fulani Oral Literature and (Un)translatability:  
The Case of Northern Cameroon 'Mbooku'  
Poems**

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# Aspects of Cameroon Fulani Literature

- **Oral:** proverbs, short stories, riddles, circumcision songs, griots, poetry...
- **Written:** *Ajamiya* (using arabic alphabets). Mostly poetry inspired from arabic tradition. Then using latin alphabet with the advent of colonizers.
- **Oral, transcribed and translated:** many oral traditional literature put into written and translated into English French and German.
- 'Mbooku' is one of the translated oral poems that interest us in this study.

# Fulani Literature and Translation

- « Classiques africains » : 9 volumes of Fulani oral literature in French between 1965 and 1994 from several African countries.
- Individual translation projects into English, French and German also abounds.
- Cameroon alone have several Fulani texts translated into European languages: Lacroix (1965); Eguchi (1978-1992); O.Dalil (1988); Erlman (1979); Baumguardt (1992)...

## 'Mbooku' is:

- An *a capella* song, with a solist leading three or more chorists.
- Sung not by griots or praise-singers, but by people of noble social class amongst the Fulanis.

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# **‘Mbooku’, Translation & T.S**

- **‘Mbooku’ & Translation:** Translated in three European languages: English (Eguchi:1978; 1980; 1981; 1984; 1992); Erlman (1979); French (Oumarou Dalil); German (Erlman 1979).
- **‘Mbooku’ & Translation Studies:** Almost nothing written on said on Fulni Oral Lit. See Mal Mazou (2009; 2013a; 2013)

# Fulani 'Mbooku' Poems: (Un)translatable?

- **The MYTH of Untranslatability**

“(...)[P]oetry by definition is **untranslatable**. Only creative transposition is possible”. (Jakobson 2000: 118)

“In **poetry**, the form of a linguistic unit cannot be changed without a corresponding change in (semantic, pragmatic and textual) meaning. And since the form cannot be detached from its meaning, this **meaning cannot be expressed in any other way**, i.e. through paraphrase, explanation or commentary, borrowing of new words etc”. (House 1997: 48).

# Data and Methodology

- Corpus is from “Beeda” poem of 241 lines, by Aakal, transcribed and translated by Eguchi (1978), « Weelo » by Erlmann (1979), 270 lines, and O.Dalil (1988), 422 lines on the other hand.
- Analysis draws alot from Toury’s DTS (1995), Hewson(2011), while our theoretical framework is based on the Skopos theory (Reiss:2000; Nord:1997).
- Descriptive approach to TS is applied to the analysis.

# ANALYSIS

## Macrostructure

- All the works contain infrapaginal notes (long introductions, biographical references of the poets, social and historical background of the Fulanis...
- All the translations are carried out between 1978 and 1992.
- Translators are from different origins and backgrounds.
- The title of the poem "Beeda" is left untranslated in the TT, while the poem "Weelo" is translated as "Die Hungersnot" by Erlmann, and as "La famine" by O.Dalil.
- All the three translators put ST and TT side by side, line-to-line.
- Most of the lines of the TT are longer than the ST lines.
- None of the translators divide his texts (transcription and translation as well) into stanzas to fit the traditional canons of western poetry.



# Microstructure

- TT shows a lot of explicitations and a lot of foot/endnotes/glossaries in all the texts analyzed.
- Wordplays are lost in all the TTs and no translator has tried to recreate them in the TL.
- Eguchi and Erlmann translate cultural elements and other specificities of Fulani through explicitation, glossaries and foot/endnotes, while O. Dalil transfers them as they are, with little modification. He then uses endnotes to explain their meaning.
- All the three translators do not consider rhythms, sounds and the musicality of the poems.
- Most of the humorous effects of the poems are less visible in the TTs.

# Example 1

FULANI ORIGINAL POEM	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<p>BEEDA            [Haa mboyen Beeda.]            Kadi mbaɗon jabre.            Beeda bii Naɗda            taaniraa<sup>wa</sup> Layaajii<sup>wa</sup>            Walaa e Beeda <b>naataay-no</b>.            Walaa ladde nga <b>naataay-no</b>.            Maaje kewɗe <b>nga</b> caali<b>nga</b>,            daga ndi juul<sup>be</sup> bee haa<sup>be</sup>.            Nden boo Beeda majjaayi.            Kadi mbaɗon jabre.            Yiwde maaga haa Dumru.            Daga Dumru mi dow Beeda.            Nden boo Beeda meemaaka.            Ngar-mi <b>Kuusu</b>. Be <b>kuusaay</b> nga.            Biiseele be <b>ceelaay</b> nga.</p>	<p>BEEDA            [Let us cry for Beeda.]            Now, sing in chorus.            Beeda, Naɗda's daughter,            Layaajii<sup>wa</sup>'s granddaughter.            There were no places where Beeda <b>did not go</b>.            There were no bushes into which she <b>did not go</b>.            She passed through rivers full of water,            in the Moslem land and the pagan.            Even then she did not disappear.            Now, sing in chorus.            She came from Dumru.            From Dumru I accompanied Beeda.            Even then she was not touched,            I came to Kuusu. They did not slaughter her.            In Biiseele, they did not cut her meat into strips.</p>
<p>Eguchi, 1978. Lines 1-15, p. 55</p>	<p>Eguchi, 1978. Lines 1-15, p. 56</p>

# Example 2

FULANI ORIGINAL POEM	GERMAN TRANSLATION
<p>WEELO            Fuu boneeji yontaango            yeebi naati nder Papata            liintaniingo Amma Baru  <u>Amma Baru ko daanin ma</u>  <u>Mi daanaaki mi wad dum non</u>            Erlmann, 1979. L.65-69, p.92</p>	<p>WEELO            Alle Mühen (komen wegen) der Verfluchten.            (Sie) schlich und kam nach Papata hinein            Und öffnete (die Tür) von Amma Baru  <b>(und sagte:)</b> <u>“Mutter Baru, was brachte dich zum Schlafen?”</u>  <b>(Mutter Baru sagte:)</b> <u>“Ich schlafe nicht, ich tue nur so.”</u></p>
FULANI ORIGINAL POEM	FRENCH TRANSLATION
<p>Weelo naati nder Papata            Dampata rufa feeguuje            Weelo faltani Daada Baru            Weelo meyi mo bee cimatel  <u>“daada Baru ko dannin maa?</u>  <u>A haaray ko dannin maa?”</u>            Daada Baru ko jaabii ngo  <u>“naa mi daani mi waddum non »</u></p>	<p>La famine fit son entrée dans Papata,            Renversant les jarres de bière à coups de pied.            La famine déverouilla [la porte de] la mère Barou            La famine la toucha de l’auricululaire :  <u>« Hé ! Mère Barou, qu’est-ce qui t’endort ?</u>            Tu n’as pas le ventre plein, pourquoi dors-tu ? »            Ce que lui répondit la mère Barou ?  <u>« Ce n’est pas que je dors, c’est plus fort que moi ».</u></p>
<p>(Dalil, 1988. L. 80-87, p.142)</p>	<p>(Dalil, 1988. L. 80-87, p.142)</p>

# GENERAL DISCUSSION

Example 1: Some sounds are reproduced in the TT ( L 4-6); the wordplays (L14-15) are lost in TT, and the TT lines are longer than those of the ST.

Example 2: German TT uses indirect discourse (sagte) while the ST is in direct discourse. The same is seen in the French translation.

TT lines of both German and French are longer than the ST lines. All the three translators are more explicit in their translations, though using different translation strategies. That shows the difficulty to manage translation from Fulani into European languages. Lost of rythm, sounds, effects and musicality of the ST.

# Difficulties

- **Linguistic:** some lexical elements which are not found in the TL. Ex: Hela **kelle** rufa tuubu/ (Er) bricht *kelle-Früchte ab* Erlman (1979: 176-177)
- **Cultural:** some cultural elements cannot be easily understood in the TT culture.
- **Formal:** Rythm, meters, wordcounts of the lines.
- **Stylistic:** metaphores, comparisons and other rhetorical devices do not function the same way in the TL/TC.

Does that mean Fulani poetry is untranslatable?

# Of course, (Re)translatable!

[Haa mboyen Beeda.]

Kadi mbadon jabre.

Beeda bii Nadda

taaniraawa Layaajiiwa

Walaa e Beeda naataay-no.

Walaa ladde nga naataay-no.

Maaje kewde nga caaliinga,

daga ndi juulbe bee haabe.

Nden boo Beeda majjaayi.

Kadi mbadon jabre.

Yiwde maaga haa Dumru.

Daga Dumru mi dow Beeda.

Nden boo Beeda meemaaka.

Ngar-mi Kuusu. Be kuusaay nga.

Biiseele be ceelaay nga.

Let's mourn Beeda

Men! Chant the chorus

Beeda, Nadda's daughter

Nadda's granddaughter,

No place Beeda has'nt been.

No bush Beeda hasn't been.

Full rivers she has cross'd

From Muslims ' to Pagans' lands.

Even then she hasn't been lost

Men! Chant the chorus.

Her origin was Dumru.

From Dumru I guided Beeda

Even then, Beeda wasn't touch'd

I crossed Kuusu. They didn't cut her

In Biiseele, she wasn't stripped

# CONCLUSION

The three translators studied have different *Skopos* and different backgrounds; so their strategies differ in many points.

Though Fulani « mbooku » poems appear to be very difficult to translate, there is always a possibility to translate them into European languages like English, when we keep in mind some rules of European poetry.

To date, little has been said in TS concerning translated literature from oral African languages into European languages. It's hoped existing translated oral literature will be exploited by TS scholars and retranslations will be done accordingly in order to bring a new impetus both to TS and oral African literature.

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**THANK YOU**

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