

SYMPOSIUM

on the work of
sur l'oeuvre de

PATRICE NGANANG

With articles by
Avec les textes de

Bénicien Bouchedi Nzouanga
Peter Wuteh Vakunta
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PALIMPSESTS : INDIGENIZATION OF LANGUAGE IN NGANANG'S *TEMPS DE CHIEN*

Peter Wuteh Vakunta

(Defense Language Institute-Foreign Language Center,
Monterey, California)

1. INTRODUCTION

Several literary critics have attempted to address the question of language choice and intertextuality in postcolonial literature. A seminal work that has contributed substantially to this ongoing discourse is Genette's *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (1982), translated into English as *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982). In Genette's view, intertextual palimpsests refer to the relationship between two texts, two traditions, in which the two are intricable.¹ Genette insists that intertextuality should be seen as « [...] *la vieille image du palimpseste, où l'on voit, sur le même parchemin, un texte superposé à un autre qu'il ne dissimule pas tout à fait, mais qu'il laisse voir par transparence.* »² [...a double voicing that can be understood through the figure of the palimpsest in which one can see a text transposed into another one, not completely hidden but seen through it.] In a sense, the term 'palimpsest' could be defined

¹ Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré*, Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1982, p. 11.

² Ibid., p. 41.

as an attempt at producing a pastiche since it entails getting rid of that which pre-existed in an attempt to write anew. Genette defines the term « pastiche » as:

« [...] *l'imitation directe d'une oeuvre, c'est-à-dire sa reproduction pure et simple, soit par le même artiste ou son atelier (réplique), soit par un autre artiste qui s'y applique au titre de l'apprentissage technique [...] ou à tout autre fin, y compris frauduleusement.* »³

« [...] *the direct imitation of a work, i.e., its reproduction pure and simple, either by the same artist or his workshop (replica), or by another artist who engages in imitation for technical training purposes or for any other purpose, includes fraudulent ones.* »⁴

From this perspective, a palimpsest involves the parodying of a work of art for justifiable or unjustifiable reasons. A palimpsest is the result of repetition and violence, since it entails erasing what has already been written. However, complete erasure is often unfeasible, as traces of the subtext subsist and remain performative within the new text. Genette's theoretical formulation on the concept of palimpsest is of crucial importance to the study of the African Europhone novel given that the novelistic genre in Africa embodies a multitude of verbal art forms. In this vein, the contemporary African novel could be defined as the product of an intertextual creative writing process.⁵ In her seminal work titled *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization in*

³ Ibid., p. 437.

⁴ Gerard Genette *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, p.386.

⁵ Patricia Merivale, « Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka », eds., Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, *Critical Perspectives on J.M.Coetzee*, London, Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996.

the West African Europhone Novel (1991), Zabus argues along the same lines by defining African novels written in European languages as « *the writer's attempt at textualizing linguistic differentiation and conveying African concepts, thought patterns and linguistic concepts through the ex-colonizer's language.* »⁶

The overriding objective of this article is to shed light on the ramifications of Nganang's recourse to indigenization of language as a creative writing trope in *Temps de chien* (2001). For the purpose of this study, the term *indigenization* has been defined as Nganang's attempt at negotiating linguistic and cultural spaces in a bid to infuse his fictional work with the worldview, imagination and sensibilities of Cameroonian indigenous cultures. We shall shed ample light on the ways and means through which this novelist succeeds in indigenizing his novel by employing appropriative strategies in ways that undermine the sacrosanct canons of metropolitan French writing. In order to do so, it will be necessary to examine critically the paradigms employed by Nganang in his narrative in order to transpose the cultural realities and lived experiences of Cameroonians into the French language through the process of translation. The translation process that takes place in *Temps de chien* involves not only the transposition of cultural artifacts into a European language—in this case French, but also the transition from orality to the written word. It is perhaps for this specific reason that Obiechina (1973) observes: « *We are aware that writers are drawing elaborately from West African folklore, national symbols and images, and traditional turns of speech, to invest*

⁶Zabus, Chantal. « A Calibanic Tempest in Anglophone and Francophone New World Literature », *Canadian Literature* 104, 1985, p.23.

their writing with a truly...African sensibility and flavor. »⁷ The implication is that Nganang's *Temps de chien* is a composite fictional text comprising aspects of traditional verbal arts and elements derived from Western literary tradition as seen in the following textual analysis.

2. UNPACKING CODE SWITCHING AS A NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN NGANANG'S *TEMPS DE CHIEN*

With the publication of *Temps de chien* Nganang emerged as a writer noted for his innovative use of the French language. Any discussion on this novel that glosses over the function of language would amount to parochial literary criticism. One can hardly speak of Nganang's narrative technique without reckoning with the linguistic novelty that characterizes his style of writing. *Temps de chien* addresses the thorny question of language choice in Cameroonian literature in particular and in fictional writing in postcolonial Africa as a whole. Nganang employs language to wed form to content. Over and above, the particularity of his writing style resides in the presence of bits and pieces (if not chunks) of Cameroonian languages in the text. In his attempt to transpose the speech mannerisms of Cameroonians into French, he employs a variety of linguistic codes, a phenomenon which Haugan refers to as « *the alternate use of two languages, including everything from the introduction of a single unassimilated word up to a complete sentence or more into the context of another language* »⁸. *Temps de*

⁷ Emmanuel Obiechina, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1991, p. 11.

⁸ Quoted in James O. Omole, « Code-switching in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*. » eds. Epstein, L. Edmund and Robert Kole, *The Language of*

chien harbors an amalgam of codes—French, Cameroonian Pidgin English, Camfranglais and numerous indigenous languages. It is a novel in which street-talk, also known as « Kam-Tok », « Camspeak » or « Majunga Talk »⁹ blends freely with conventional French to produce a new code whose effect on the reader is exhilarating. In an interview Nganang granted Taina Tervonen, he had this to say about the linguistic synthesis he used in writing *Temps de chien*: « *La rue a une avance singulière tant sur les journalistes que sur les écrivains. Ce roman essaie de se mettre à l'école de la rue... L'imagination et l'oralité des rues a fabriqué ces personnages qui existent et que j'ai mis dans mon roman* »¹⁰ [*The street exerts a unique pull both on journalists and writers. This novel attempts to depict the street school... The imagination and orality of the street have produced the characters that that exist and that I have inserted into my novel.*]

Our critique of *Temps de chien* hinges on the linguistic phenomenon of code switching, (also called code mixing) as a narrative technique. The novelist has used code switching as a technique for transposing Cameroonian sociocultural realities and linguistic specificities into the French language throughout his narrative in *Temps de chien*. In his attempt to interpolate the speech patterns of indigenous populations into the French language, Nganang switches codes frequently. Code switching has enabled this dexterous writer to transpose Cameroon Pidgin English, Cameroonian native tongues and Camfranglais into the French Language.

African Literature, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1998, p. 58.

⁹ Etienne Ze Amvela, « Reflexions on the Social Implications of Bilingualism in the Republic of Cameroon », *Annals of the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences*, Yaoundé, University of Yaoundé, 1989, p.56.

¹⁰ Nganang, in Tervonen, p.105.

3. CAMFRANGLAIS AS A NARRATIVE MODUS OPERANDI IN *TEMPS DE CHIEN*

Temps de chien is replete with words and expressions culled from Camfranglais. Kouega observes that Camfranglais is a « composite language consciously developed by secondary school students in Cameroon. This urban lingo embodies a number of linguistic codes, namely French, English and indigenous languages ». ¹¹ Generally, Cameroonian youngsters employ this metro-language as a communicative code that enables them to exclude other members of the community from youth communication. Young Cameroonians often resort to Camfranglais in order to exchange ideas on themes such as dating, sports, drugs, physical looks and more in such a manner that the message remains coded. Camfranglais is not only a marker of social stratification or status. Rather, it is also a label for « social resistance » ¹² Nganang frequently uses Camfranglais expressions for gender self-representation as seen in the following excerpt: « *Ma woman no fit chasser me for ma long dis-donc! Après tout, ma long na ma long!* » ¹³ My woman no fit chasser me for ma long, dis donc! Après tout, ma long na ma long! ¹⁴ The translator resorted to a loan translation but did a laudable job of providing a note in the glossary that sheds ample light on the meaning of the statement as follows: « *My woman can't throw me out of my house, I am telling you! After*

¹¹ Jean Paul Kouega, « Camfranglais: A New Slang in Cameroon Schools », *English Today* 19.2, 2003, p. 23.

¹² Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Malden, Blackwell, 1997.

¹³ Patrice Nganang, *Dog Days*, trans, Amy Baram Reid, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2001, p.80.

¹⁴ *Dog Days*, op cit, p.54.

all, my house is my house! »¹⁵ The word “long” is not used here as an adjectival descriptive. It is actually a noun referring to “home” or “house” in Camfranglais. The novelist used the same technique to transpose Camfranglais expressions into his narrative as seen in the following passage: « *La voix d'un lycéen lui disait: comme d'habitude, Mama Mado. Et ma maîtresse connaissait son goût. La voix d'un autre exigeait, put oya soté, for jazz must do sous-marin.* »¹⁶ [A student's voice would say, the usual, Mama Mado, and my mistress knew just what he wanted. Another's voice would order, put oya soté, for jazz must do sous-marin.]¹⁷ The term « oya » is a pidgin word for « oil », in this case oil used in cooking. « Jazz » is a Camfranglais word for « beans ». Cameroonians often use this expression to describe the trumpet-like sound that one's stomach would make if one ate too much beans or badly cooked beans. The expression « jazz sous-marin » is translatable into English as follows: « beans submerged in oil ». The entire sentence would read as follows, « *A student's voice would say: as usual, Mama Mado, and my mistress knew just what he wanted. Another's voice would order: put enough oil in it so that the beans look like submarines.* »

Oftentimes, Nganang employs Camfranglais in conjunction with Pidgin English expressions for the purpose of creating the burlesque as seen in the following example: « *Le silence des mille regards du quartier la suivait. Une véritable small no be sick.* »¹⁸ [The silence of the neighborhood's thousand staring

¹⁵ P.208

¹⁶ P.84.

¹⁷ P.57.

¹⁸ P.67.

eyes followed her. A real small no be sick.]¹⁹ The expression « small no be sick » derives from the medical lexicon. It refers to a balm considered by most Cameroonians to serve as a panacea for a variety of ailments because of its supposed efficacy. However, Nganang uses « small no sick » in *Temps de chien* to describe a woman named Mini Minor, owner of a tavern code-named « Chantiers de la République. » The writer's figure of speech as used in this content could be interpreted as, « *Don't mess with her; she may look small but she's a tough cookie.* » Nganang often resorts to code switching in an attempt to transpose Cameroonian turns of phrase, street parlance and language of the underworld into the standard French.

The technique of code switching enables this novelist to blend English and French lexicons into a third code. Nganang uses Camfranglais in order to underscore the socio-cultural backdrop against which *Temps de chien* was written as the following example shows: « *If he no fit tchop he moni, n'est-ce pas la mbok-là va l'aider?* »²⁰ [If he couldn't spend his money fast enough that mbok was going to help him, isn't that right?]

²¹The term « tchop » is used in Cameroonian Pidgin English as the equivalent of « spend » and « eat ». In Anglophone Cameroonian Pidgin, it is written as « chop ». « Moni » comes from « money », and « mbok » is a Camfranglais word for « whore ». The word « he » is the equivalent of « his » in standard English. The entire sentence could appropriately be rendered as, « *If he didn't know how to spend his money, this whore would help him spend it, isn't that right?* » By alternating between

¹⁹ P.45.

²⁰ P.253.

²¹ P.176.

codes in fictional writing, Nganang draws the reader's attention to the multi-coded matrix from which his novel takes root. The novelist infuses his fiction with a plethora of expressions culled from indigenous languages spoken in Cameroon. This creative writing trope has enabled him to underscore the vitality of oral discourse that is rampant in the streets of small and big cities in Cameroon. More often than not, Nganang resorts to Cameroon Pidgin English in a bid to express Cameroonian imagination, worldview and sensibilities in his Europhone novel as seen below.

4. CAMEROON PIDGIN ENGLISH AS PARADIGMATIC INDIGENIZATION IN *TEMPS DE CHIEN*

Temps de chien is replete with expressions culled from Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE)²² as the following excerpt

²² Cameroonian Pidgin English is an English-based Creole. About 5% of Cameroonians are native speakers of this language, while an estimated 50% of the population speak it in some form. Pidgin English has been in active use in Cameroon for over 500 years. It started in the Slave Trade years, resisted a German ban during the German annexation period (1884-1914) and survived post-independence neglect. It took flight when it became a makeshift language used in the plantations. Five varieties of Pidgin English are spoken in Cameroon: Grafi Kamtok, the variety used in the Grassfields and often referred to as 'Grafi Talk', liturgical Kamtok— this variety has been used by the Catholic Church for three quarters of a century. Francophone Pidgin is the variety used mainly in Francophone towns such as Douala, Bafoussam and Yaoundé and more by French-speaking Cameroonians. Southwest Pidgin is spoken mainly in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. Bororo Kamtok is the variety spoken by the Fulani cattle traders, many of whom travel through Nigeria and Cameroon. For more on Cameroon Pidgin English, see Francis Mbassi-Manga, Francis. « The State of Contemporary English in

illustrates: « *Et mon maître lui, se retranchant dans son pidgin de crise, tout en déchirant sur son visage un bleu: Dan sapak i day kan-kan-o.* »²³ [As for my master, he'd fall back into Pidgin, his dialect of disaster, cursing the whores as he tore his face into a sick smile: 'Dan sapak i day for kan-kan-o.]²⁴ Recourse to Pidgin English in this excerpt is an indication that some of Nganang's characters are not only bilingual but also bicultural straddling the linguistic divide (English and French) in Cameroon. The novelist spices his text with Pidgin English expressions in order to make his language respond realistically to the socio-linguistic status quo in Cameroon. Notice that « sapak » is a Cameroonianism²⁵ for the standard word « whore ». Another Pidgin English lexeme that Nganang uses for narrative effectiveness is « kan-kan », which is a translation for « kind » (variety). « Day » (often written as « de » or « deh ») is a Pidgin English word derived from the Standard English word “there”. The word ‘dan’ is the pidginized form of the demonstrative adjective « that » In *Temps de chien*, recourse to Pidgin English could be perceived as an indication of the character's social status, level of education or inability to communicate well in standard French or English. The excerpt above is translatable as, « There are all kinds of whores in this vicinity. » The expression « kan kan » connotes « variety ».

Some Pidginized expressions in *Temps de chien* harbor sexual innuendos. For example, the following comment made by

Cameroon », ed., Francis Mbassi-Manga. *Cameroon Studies in English and French (CASEF)*, Victoria, Cameroon Press, 1976.

²³ *Dog Days*, p.52.

²⁴ P.35.

²⁵ Cameroonian turns of speech

Massa Yo about Mini Minor is bawdy: « *Quand elle avait disparu au loin, mon maître disait rêveur: Dan tendaison for dan woman na big big hein?* »²⁶ [When she has disappeared in the distance, my master would say, still dreaming of her ample behind: Dan tendaison for dan woman na big big huh?]²⁷ The duplication « big big » translates the idea of « extremity ». « Tendaison » is a Pidgin word for « buttocks ». In this passage, Massa Yo sees Mini Minor's buttocks as elephantine. The sentence could be translated as follows: « When she had disappeared in the distance, my master would say, still dreaming of her ample behind: That woman has extremely big buttocks, huh? » In a similar vein, Nganang's narrator, Mboudjak, resorts to the following Pidgin English expression in an attempt to shed light on the uncanny ways of robbers: « *Femme, avait-il dit, tu n'as pas entendu ce qu'on raconte? Les voleurs ont déjà la potion pour se rendre invisibles ici dehors. N'est-ce pas hier ils sont entrés dans le salon de Massa Kokari et ont emporté sa télévision sous son nez? A di tell you.* »²⁸ [Woman, he said, haven't you heard what people are saying? Thieves already have a potion that makes them invisible out there. Don't you know that yesterday they went into Massa Kokari's living room and took his television right from under his nose? A di tell you.]²⁹ The emphatic « A di tell you » could be translated as: « Take it from me ». Generally, Cameroonians employ an expression such as this one in an attempt to dispel doubt especially when they sense disbelief on the part of the interlocutor. The word « Massa » is the Pidgin English equivalent of the standard English word

²⁶ *Dog Days*, p.69.

²⁷ P.47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.50.

²⁹ P.34.

« Mr. » Nganang's uses these sociolects³⁰ in his narrative in an attempt to shed light on the linguistic alterity that characterizes discourses in the Cameroonian context. Each linguistic variety invokes a discursive prototype common to Cameroonian linguistic community. In this sense, *Temps de chien* is a pastiche of the linguistic plurality that is endemic in the Republic of Cameroon. Like most Cameroonians, Nganang's characters communicate in both European and indigenous languages.

5. THE CALIBANIC RECOURSE TO INDIGENOUS TONGUES AS A NARRATIVE TROPE

The narrative in *Temps de chien* is unique in its recourse to indigenous languages as a medium of communication. Nganang constantly borrows words, sentences and turns of phrase from the several vernacular languages spoken in Cameroon as seen in the following example culled from Fufuldé: « *A ce moment une voix furieuse dit au-dessous de moi: Kai wa läi!* »³¹ [At that moment I heard a furious voice above me: Kai wa läi !]³² « Kai wa läi! » is an expression culled from Fulfudle, an indigenous language spoken in the Northern regions of Cameroon. « Kai wa läi » is actually is a swear expression which could be rendered as « Watch out! » It is interesting to note that Fufuldé speakers borrowed this expression from speakers of Arabic, another language spoken in Cameroon, Nigeria, Mali, Niger and Chad. Fufuldé is not the only indigenous language from which Nganang borrows.

³⁰ Dialect of a particular social class

³¹ *Dog Days*, p. 212.

³² *Ibid.*, p.148.

The novelist gleans words and expressions from the Beti³³ indigenous language group as seen this excerpt: « *Quelques heures après leur arrestation, la voix de la Panthère traversa les chuchotements coupables de la cour du bar. “Mbe ke di? Cria-t-il, mbe ils ont arrêté l’écrivain-a? Sè? Nùm ke? Ntog a ya? Comment? Vous dites vrai? A tat’te!”* »³⁴ [A few hours after their arrest, Panther’s voice cut through the guilty whispers of the bar courtyard. « *Mbe ke di?* » he screamed. » *They arrested the writer-a? Sè? When? Why? Which way did they go? How? I don’t believe it! A tat’te! It’s a lie!* »]³⁵ Indigenous language words and phrases used by characters in *Temps de chien* are difficult to translate because they do not have equivalents in European languages because of cultural gaps. As Omole contends, « *Even if a form of translation could be forged, it would inevitably mutilate the writer’s meaning* ».³⁶ Some indigenous language words found in *Temps de chien* could be described as anthroponyms—personal names, as seen in the following example : « *On parlait de l’homme qui avait insulté tout le monde. Ce devrait être un nkoua, dit-on* ».³⁷ [People were talking about the man who had insulted everybody. He must be nkoua.]³⁸ The word « nkoua » refers to people who hail from the Beti tribes in the Southern part

³³ The Beti people are a Central African ethnic group primarily found in central Cameroon. They are also found in Equatorial Guinea and northern Gabon. The Betis are comprised of the Bulu, the Ewondo and the Eton people.

³⁴ *Dog Days*, p.145

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.99.

³⁶ James O. Omole, « Code-switching in Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* », eds., Edmund L. Epstein, and Robert Kole, *The Language of African Literature*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 1998, p.63.

³⁷ *Dog Days*, p.97.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 66.

of Cameroon. Another word that carries tribal undertones is « Bamiléké »³⁹ « Medumba »⁴⁰ is another anthroponym which Nganang defines in a footnotes as « langue bantou du groupe bamiléké ».⁴¹ It begs the question why Nganang insists on transposing indigenous language lexes and phrases into a French language novel. It would appear that *Temps de chien* is meant to be Nganang's Calibanic attempt at decolonizing Cameroonian literature written in a colonial language—French. In this sense, Nganang's novel fits into the mold of protest literature analogous to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1599). In an article titled « A Calibanic Tempest in Anglophone and Francophone New World Writing », Chantal Zabus (1985) observes that the English language is considered « *not only as Prospero's legacy to Caliban but also as the latter's means to curse the colonizer...* ».⁴²

The postcolonial writer's attempt to appropriate the language of the ex-colonizer has led some critics to draw a parallel between Caliban's language of resistance in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1599) and the language of the dissident postcolonial writer. The play is set on a mysterious island surrounded by the ocean. Prospero rules the island with his two servants, Ariel and Caliban. When Prospero shipwrecked on the Island, Caliban and Ariel treated him kindly but Prospero later makes them his unwilling servants. In Scene 2 of the play we encounter Prospero and his servants—the self-effacing Ariel, and Caliban, an abrasive, foul-mouthed

³⁹ Ibid, p.91, 96.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.91.

⁴¹ Patrice Nganang, *Temps de chien*, Paris, Serpent à Plumes, 2001, p. 91.

⁴² Chantal Zabus, « A Calibanic Tempest in Anglophone and Francophone New World Literature », *Canadian Literature*, 104, 1985, p.37.

servant. We learn that while the language of Ariel is that of a slave who submits to his master without question, that of Caliban is one that questions the authority of his master as seen in the excerpt below:

You taught me language;

And my profit on't is I know how to curse.

The red plague rid you

*For learning me your language!*⁴³

Caliban's language in this passage comes as a shock to Prospero, as it is unexpected that a servant would defy his master in this manner. Caliban's anger toward his master is indicative of his urge to be free from Prospero's domination. Shakespeare's play sheds light on the dynamics of power in a colonial set-up. The relationship between Prospero and his servants throughout the play supports a colonialist reading of the text. *The Tempest* written in 1611 saw a new dawn in sea travel. It was written two years after the ill-fated journey of the Sea Adventure to Virginia. It is likely that this early attempt at colonization had an influence on Shakespeare's conception of the themes and characterization in his play. The theme of colonialism can be explored further by examining the dynamics of power between Prospero, the supposed « colonialist » and the « colonized », namely Ariel and Caliban.

The encounter between Caliban and Prospero raises interesting questions relating to the function of language and power dynamics in postcolonial literatures. The play

⁴³ Shakespeare, William, *The Tempest*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1959, 1, ii, p.363-65.

provides one of the most telling demonstrations of the critical importance of language in the colonial encounter. Caliban's reaction to the diatribes of Prospero's daughter, Miranda, encapsulates the malaise and bitter reaction of many colonized peoples to centuries of linguistic and cultural imperialism. Caliban's language is the product of a mind surely in a state of general discomfort and ill ease. Caliban rejects the master's language because Prospero has given him the tools of communication but has failed to give him the freedom and self-responsibility with which to use the language. His rebellious attitude comes across as a reaction to the feeling of being abused and subjugated by his master. The excerpt cited above has been viewed by postcolonial theorists as a celebration of linguistic resistance. By appropriating the master's language, Caliban is able to break out of Prospero's infernal linguistic prism. His longing for autonomy makes him relevant in the study of postcolonial Francophone African literature. Like Caliban, African Francophone writers frequently manipulate the French language in a bid to dismantle the power structures that determine the master-servant relationship. By doing so, ex-colonized writers are able to actualize their own possibility of being. Ashcroft et al. (1989) posit that this is the « *key to the transformative dynamic of postcolonial writing and cultural production.* »⁴⁴

It is the same craving for freedom that Aimé Césaire fictionalizes in his play titled *Une tempête* (1969) in which Caliban denounces his master in no uncertain terms:

⁴⁴ Bill Ashcroft ; Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989, p.91.

PALIMPSESTS

Tu m'as tellement menti,
Menti sur le monde, menti sur moi-même
Que tu as fini par m'imposer
Une image de moi-même
Un sous développé, comme tu dis,
Un sous-capable,
Voilà comment tu m'as obligé à me voir,
Et cette image, je la hais! Elle est fausse!
Et maintenant, je te connais, vieux cancer,
Et je me connais aussi! (88)
[And you lied to me so much,
About the world, about yourself [sic],
That you ended up by imposing on me
An image of myself:
Underdeveloped, in your words, incompetent,
That's how you made me see myself!
And I loathe that image...and it's false!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
*And I also know myself!*⁴⁵

A keen examination of the passage above reveals the relationship between language and colonial power; the connection between language and race; and the constitutive, and therefore, putatively ontological power of linguistic

⁴⁵ Aimé Césaire, *Une tempête*, Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1969, p.70.

dominance. Like Caliban, the postcolonial writer feels disabled by borrowed tongues. By appropriating the language of the ex-colonizer and using it to write back to the imperial center, postcolonial writers succeed in actualizing their own possibility of being as seen in Nganang's dogged willingness to deconstruct the ex-colonizer's language.

Code mixing enables Nganang to fictionalize alterity and the belief systems of his characters. A classic example is the belief in Famla⁴⁶ as seen in this excerpt: « *L'argent seul est ton ami, non? Je suis sûr qu'un jour on va seulement entendre que tu as vendu Soumi au famla ne ne ne.* »⁴⁷ [Money is your only friend, right? I'm sure that one day we're gonna hear you've sold Soumi to Famla.]⁴⁸ By alternating between French and indigenous languages, Nganang introduces an important cultural element into his narrative—the practice of witchcraft. By reverting to the mother-tongue expression « ne ne ne », the writer translates both the belief system and emphatic mannerisms peculiar to the Bamileke ethnic group into the French language. The expression « ne ne ne » is used for the emphatic purposes. It could be rendered into English as 'with no qualms'. In other words, Massa Yo would « sell » his, son Soumi, into « Famla » with no pang of conscience. Notice that to « sell » someone into famla is to bewitch that person. Notice that belief in the existence of Famla is a myth tenable only in a society where people believe in death through witchcraft as the following sentence indicates: « *A un Carrefour, une femme maudissait tous ceux qui venaient la nuit la manger. Elle faisait des*

⁴⁶ Bamilike occult society notorious for its acts of sorcery.

⁴⁷ *Temps de chien*, op cit, p. 147.

⁴⁸ *Dog Days*, op cit., p.101.

gestes démentiels, et promettait de partir chez le père Soufo. »⁴⁹ [At one intersection, a woman was cursing those who came in the night to devour her. She was waving her hands around like crazy promising to go see Père Soufo, the miracle-working prophet of La Carrière].⁵⁰ In some African cultures, the term « Père » often shortened to « Pè » and translated as « Pa » in English is a form of address reserved for senior citizens. It connotes respect for the elderly. This is true for « Ma », a derivative from « mama » (mother). Honorific titles such as the aforementioned play a critical role in African cultures where it is unacceptable for youngsters to address elders by their names.

The linguistic variety that is ubiquitous in *Temps de chien*—French, Pidgin English, Camfranglais, Beti, Medumba, Ffuldé, Duala and a host of others—serve as signifiers and identity markers. The language of narration in *Temps de chien* is French but the novelist has manipulated codes in order to translate the worldview, speech patterns and communicative peculiarities of Cameroonians into the French language. Nganang's constant play on words serves as an effective narrative trope. It could be inferred from the examples cited above that signifying⁵¹ is an essential component of Nganang's narrative style. He uses the technique of

⁴⁹ *Temps de chien*, op cit., p.196.

⁵⁰ P. 136.

⁵¹ In his work, *The Signifying Monkey: A theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1989), Henry Louis Gates points out that 'signifying' « concerns itself with that which...we can represent as the playful puns on words that occupy the paradigmatic axis of language and which a speaker draws on for figurative substitutions. », Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, p.48.

« signifying » as a trope that conflates several other rhetorical devices. In sum, *Temps de chien* is a hybrid text that looks inward into Cameroonian socio-cultural realities and outward toward an exogenous culture—in this case French. This is an irrefutable indicator that Nganang straddles both the English and French divides in Cameroon. His fiction draws abundantly from both the oral and written discourses. Essentially, cultural and linguistic translations palpable in the text appear to be effective narrative tools in his fiction.

6. INTERCULTURAL TRANSLATION AS A STYLISTIC DEVICE IN *TEMPS DE CHIEN*

Temps de chien could be treated as an ethnographic⁵² novel in which cross-cultural translation serves as an effective narrative trope. Translation enables the novelist to convey the cultural experiences of Cameroonians into the French language as seen in the following excerpt: « *Une fois mon maître demanda à Soumi de me donner une part du délicieux koki rouge et huileux qui gonflait son plat.* »⁵³ [Once my master asked Soumi to give me some of his delicious red and greasy koki that was piled up in his plate.]⁵⁴ Notice that « koki » is the name of an ethnic dish indigenous to the coastal ethnic groups in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. It is composed of ground beans mixed with numerous ingredients steeped in red palm oil. This culinary reality is absent in French culture. Recourse to translation as a narrative modus operandi enables Nganang to transpose African imagination, worldview and cultural

⁵² Ethnographic fiction aims to evoke cultural experience and sense of place using literary techniques.

⁵³ *Temps de chien*, op cit, p. 26.

⁵⁴ *Dog Days*, op cit, p.17

realities into French, a language that seems to be at variance with African imagination. *Temps de chien* contains several extra-linguistic elements that the reader must decipher in order to fully appreciate the richness of the text as this excerpt seems to suggest:

« *Recroquevillé dorénavant dans le trou obscur de sa crise, mortifié par le souvenir de l'aisance dont il avait été abruptement sevré, émasculé par le bobolo sec aux arachides grillées qu'il devait maintenant manger le matin, à midi et le soir, mon maître ne tendait plus sa main vers moi pour me caresser le crâne.* »⁵⁵

[Hunkered down from then on in the dark hole of his crisis, mortified by memories of the comfortable life from which he has been so abruptly weaned, emasculated by having to eat dry bobolo with grilled peanuts morning, noon and night, my master no longer reached out to caress my head.]⁵⁶

Notice that 'Bobolo' is the name of another ethnic dish in Cameroon. It is made of ground cassava tubers wrapped in banana or plantain leaves. A cultural referent such as 'koki' may pose translation problems for the culturally unformed reader. However, some effort has been made by the writer to convey native tongue words accurately in a foreign language. Several other indigenous terms transposed into *Temps de chien* have no French language equivalents. Examples include « koki »,⁵⁷ « bobolo »,⁵⁸ « maguida »,⁵⁹ « siscia »,⁶⁰ « ndoutou » and more. The term « ndoutou »

⁵⁵ *Temps de chien*, p.15.

⁵⁶ *Dog Days*, p.10.

⁵⁷ *Temps de chien*, p.26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.112.

poses particularly thorny translation problems given that this word is polysemic; it does not have an exact equivalent in European languages as seen in the following passage: « *Il frappa ses mains et dit: C'est du ndoutou, dis donc. Elle veut me gâter la journée.* »⁶¹ [He clapped his hands and said, « It's just ndoutou, I tell you, bad luck. She wants to ruin my day »].⁶² Note that the term 'ndoutou' is worse than back luck. Cameroonians use this word to convey several shades of the concept of misfortune. « Ndoutou » carries a deeper signification than mere ill-luck. « Ndoutou' is a mishap that is likely to ruin one's entire day. This is because there is a myth among Cameroonians according to which a misfortune begets another. For instance, a beyam-sellam (market woman) would tell her first customer to not bring her « ndoutou » if the customer drove too hard a bargain. The reason is that these women believe that the first customer sets the pace for the day.

Indigenous language words expressions such as 'ndoutou' and more have specific connotations as this excerpt seems to suggest: « *Des rumta, elles étaient, oui et lui Massa Yo saurait bien les tordre. Il saurait leur montrer qu'il les dépasse. Elles avaient beau être hautains, ces tchotchoro du quartier....* »⁶³ [They are just rumta—and Massa Yo was sure he'd bend them to his will! He'd teach them who was in charge! They could be as haughty as they liked, those local kids—the tchotchoro—he knew how to handle them.]⁶⁴ « Rumta » and « tchotchoro » are synonymous words that could be translated as « teenage »

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.205.

⁶² *Dog Days*, p.142.

⁶³ *Temps de chien*, p.54.

⁶⁴ *Dog Days*, p.36.

girls. These words harbor extra-linguistic connotations. For example, a « rumta » could be the equivalent of a « green horn », « non-initiate » or « rookie » in the English language. Nganang's indigenization of the French language provides him with a cultural backdrop for creative writing. The foregoing analysis leads to the conclusion that potential translation problems must to be resolved in order to make *Temps de chien* accessible to global readership; readers who are not conversant with African cultures, worldview and imagination.

Some code mixing in *Temps de chien* introduces elements of vulgarity into the narrative for the purpose of humor. A good example would be the following passage: « *Il se leva sur la pointe des pieds et maudit par-dessus la tête de tout le monde la femme qui avait osé le découvrir en public: Youa mami pima!* »⁶⁵ [He got up on his tiptoes and, shouting over every one's head, cursed the woman who'd dared to expose him in public: « Youa mami pima! »]⁶⁶ Note that « Youa mami pima! » is an extremely vulgar expression. Literally, it means « your mother's vagina! » Another expression that translates sexual understatements in *Temps de chien* is 'ma din wa' as seen in the following passage: « *Je t'ai déjà dit: ma din wa. Je sais que tu n'aimes que l'argent, mais moi je t'aime.* »⁶⁷ [I've already told you, ma din wa, I love you. I know you love money, but I still love you.]⁶⁸ « Ma din wa » is a Beti language expression which could be translated as « I love you » as the translator indicated

⁶⁵ *Temps de chien*, p.222.

⁶⁶ *Dog Days*, p.154.

⁶⁷ *Temps de chien*, p.231.

⁶⁸ *Dog Days*, p.161.

in the glossary.⁶⁹ Uttered by a whore, this expression would carry ironic undertones because this sort of love is devoid of affection given the pecuniary motive behind the love affair.

In a nutshell, this study has enabled us to unravel the price that Nganang attaches to language choice in fictional writing in the postcolony. More importantly, it has helped us to accentuate the claim that most postcolonial writers are at the cross-roads of languages; entrenched as they are in the battle toward the decolonization of African literature.⁷⁰ It is difficult to dissociate the glory that *Temps de chien* has garnered for Nganang from the writer's narrative choices. By adopting an iconoclastic approach that borders on linguistic miscegenation, the novelist succeeds in forging a style of writing that causes the French language to endure bear the weight of Cameroonian imagination. The language in *Temps de chien* is still French in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. Achebe's remarks on the seminal role of language and translation in the literary decolonization process are worth committing to memory:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience...But it will have to be

⁶⁹ *Dog Days*, p.208.

⁷⁰ Jemie Onwuchekwa Chienweizu and Madubuike Ihechukwu, eds., *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, Washington D.C., Howard University Press, 1983.

new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.⁷¹

In *Temps de chien*, linguistic and extra-linguistic constituents conflate to produce the totality of the messages intended by the writer. Situational dimensions and semantic shifts demand corresponding code-shifts that require readers to interpret the text exegetically in order to fully appreciate its semantic richness. Nganang's narrative technique is securely wedded to his socio-ideological concerns. *Temps de chien* harbors a psycho-sociological message that is fully welded to the novelist's use of language.

7. CONCLUSION

If up to a certain point, each writer has to re-invent language, the situation of Cameroonian fiction writers is peculiar in that for them, French is not a mother tongue; rather it is a medium for constant mutation and modification for the purpose of self-expression. Engaged as he is, in the quest of an appropriate of channel of self-expression and self-representation, Nganang has created his own language of fiction, in a multilingual and pluri-cultural context affected by signs of diglossia. As the foregoing analysis indicates, Nganang relied on the trope of linguistic indigenization as a literary canon in order to convey the totality of his message. Our analysis of *Temps de chien* leaves no room for doubt that Nganang is at the crossroads of languages, straddling multiple linguistic spaces in a bid to articulate that which Gauvain refers to as « la surconscience linguistique de

⁷¹ Chinua Achebe, *Morning yet on Creation Day: Essays*, London, Heinemann, 1975, pp. 61-62.

l'écrivain. »⁷² [the writer's linguistic subconscious.] Our study of the various mechanisms through which indigenization of language serves as a creative writing *modus operandi* in *Temps de chien* has enabled us to delve into the sinews of linguistic appropriation as an effective narrative trope. We have attempted to show in the course of this study that the language used in *Temps de chien* is a hybrid contraption, amounting to what Ouedraogo refers to as « concubinage linguistique »⁷³ [linguistic concubinage], or the fusional exploration of the resources of both the native language and the language of the former colonizer. The stylistic choices that Nganang has made in *Temps de chien* owe more to his intent to transpose Cameroonian worldview and cultures into the French language than to his feeling of insecurity with French language canons. The need to write a French language text informed by indigenous languages and cultures led the novelist to the invention of a third code.

Whether or not Nganang has succeeded in his task of de-Europeanizing *Temps de chien* is a task that falls beyond the scope of this article, the more so because renowned African literary scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o have argued vehemently that to qualify as African, literature written by Africans has to be written in indigenous languages. Ngugi further contends that « Literature written by Africans in European languages...can only be termed Afro-European literature; that is, the literature written by Africans in

⁷² Lise Gauvin, *L'écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 1997, p.6.

⁷³ Jean Ouedraogo, « An Interview with Ahmadou Kourouma », *Callaloo* 23.4, 2000, p.127.

European languages. »⁷⁴ Much as we salute the success of Nganang in infusing his text with the modes of speech characteristic of indigenous peoples in Cameroon, we cannot lose sight of the fact that *Temps de chien* is not written entirely in a Cameroonian indigenous language. The entire novel is written in French, a European language. In spite of the impressive innovations evident in the narrative, *Temps de chien* is still an essentially French novel in which the autor uses a French language lexicón. To wit, as far as Nganang is concerned, French is a necessary evil with which he has come to terms. This novelist is in love with both his mother tongue and the language of erstwhile colonizers.

⁷⁴ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London, Heinemann, 1986, p.27.

SYMPOSIUM

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École normale supérieure de Paris (France), 24 mai 2022

Princeton University (USA), 6 octobre 2022

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