

“Le français petit nègre” and the Construction of Social Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa

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The expression "le français petit nègre" is a metonymic term referring to the variety of "ungrammatical" French spoken during the colonial period by the indigenous colonized people of French Africa. By extension, it is used in a mocking and offhand way to refer to non-standard and/or faulty French, often with a racist undertone. The term has long been considered as an endogenous production in the colonies through learning on the job and contact between the indigenous populations and the colonizers. French writers such as Delafosse questioned the intellectual capacities of the African and, consequently, his language of expression. Writing in 1904, Delafosse asks:

Comment voudrait-on qu'on Noir, dont la langue est d'une simplicité rudimentaire et d'une logique presque toujours absolue, s'assimile rapidement un idiome aussi raffiné et aussi illogique que le nôtre? C'est bel et bien le Noir, ou d'une manière générale le primitif, qui a forcé le petit-nègre, en adaptant le français à son état d'esprit. (264)

[How do you expect the Black man, whose language has a rudimentary simplicity and a logic which is almost always absolute, to quickly assimilate a language as refined and inconsistent as ours? It is entirely the Black man, or in a general way the primitive man, who has created the petit-nègre, by adapting French to his state of mind.]

This consideration, erroneous as it were, obfuscates the role of the French colonizers themselves (especially the French colonial army) in the construction of this variety of language.

Delafosse's research and descriptions of "le français petit nègre" are often used as the starting point for linguistic analysis dealing with the question of creolization. Petit nègre is also the first instance of what has now come to be called "popular" French spoken in different parts of Francophone Africa. My paper will attempt to interrogate this metonymic term and what it signifies in the socio-historical construction of identity through the examination of a body of works that use or make use of the expression "petit nègre".

Linguistic Policy of the French Colonial Power

Convinced of the superiority of western civilization and the "civilizing" mission of France which would bring well-being, freedom and liberty to the rest of the world through the transmission of European knowledge and the values of the 1789 Revolution, the French republican ministers who had encouraged the colonial adventures in the 1880s were prompted by desires of assimilation aimed at bringing the colonized peoples to the level of the colonizers. This desire for assimilation however raised insurmountable practical difficulties since it implied that the colonial power would give certain rights to the colonized people, especially French nationality and the right to education under the same conditions as those in the metropolis. Even if the supporters of assimilation were inclined to grant these rights, they found it impossible to do so. This desire also presupposed that the colonized would accept to be assimilated. This was farther from the truth. As Denise Bouche (1975, 885) reports, "l'administration coloniale dut user de contrainte pour imposer l'école à ses débuts. La pression dut être maintenue plus ou moins longtemps, souvent jusqu'au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale" (même si) "l'opposition ne prit jamais la forme d'une résistance ouverte. Les populations les plus réfractaires se contentaient d'attendre le relâchement du maître ou un changement d'administrateur pour retirer les enfants de l'école." [In the beginning, the colonial administration had to use force to impose the French school.

The pressure had to be maintained more or less for a long time, often until the end of the Second World War” even if “the opposition never took the form of an open resistance. The most rebellious populations were content to wait for the release of a teacher or a change of administrator in order to withdraw their children from the school.] In the period between the two wars, the colonial authorities, especially under the impulse of A. Sarraut, several times Minister of the Colonies, substituted the unrealistic objective of assimilation for that of association which, according M’bokolo (1993, 353) “se fondait sur un certain respect des structures traditionnelles : les deux peuples, le colonisateur et le colonisé, pouvaient cohabiter en se respectant, l’un étant là pour apprendre à l’autre la manière efficace de s’administrer et surtout la voie d’une mise en valeur économique.” [was based on a certain respect of traditional structures: the two peoples, the colonizer and the colonized, could live together in mutual respect, the one would be there to teach the other the most effective way of self government and especially economic development.]

The French School: the fundamental instrument of imposing the primacy of French

As Bokiba (1998) has pointed out, the rejection of African languages by the colonizer is tantamount to the negation of the African’s humanity. For the colonizer, this rejection appears to be a necessary step to domination, for domination postulates a devalued image of the colonized. The French colonizer’s attitude towards African languages shares some of the characteristics of the Manichean discrimination inherent in the colonial society. Based on the principle of direct government, the policy of assimilation and later that of association presupposed a coercive linguistic and educational policy through the imposition of the laws, customs and the language of the colonizer. The school system occupied an important position in the process of westernization and Frenchification. In his memo of 22 June 1897, Claudié, the Governor General of French West Africa stated: “L’école est en effet le moyen le plus sûr qu’une nation civilisatrice ait d’acquérir à ses idées les populations encore primitives et de les élever graduellement jusqu’à elle. L’école est, en un mot, l’élément de progrès par excellence. C’est aussi l’élément de propagande de la cause et de la langue française le plus certain dont le Gouvernement puisse disposer.” [The school is the most effective way for a civilizing nation to impart its ideas to primitive populations and to bring them up gradually to its level. In short, the school is the unit of progress par excellence.

It is also the surest element of propaganda at the disposal of the Government for the French cause and language.] These principles are reaffirmed by his successor William Ponty in his circular of 30 August 1910: “L’école est le meilleur instrument du progrès; c’est elle qui sert le mieux les intérêts de la cause française (...) Nul n’ignore que l’étude du français est le remède le plus efficace qui puisse être opposé au fanatisme”. [The school is the best instrument of progress; it is also the best means for serving the interests of the French cause (...). Nobody denies the fact that the study of French is the most effective remedy against fanaticism.] This doctrine presupposed that French education would be dispensed only in the French language. In Central Africa, right from the very beginning of colonization, the principle of using French exclusively was affirmed in the decree of 9 April 1883 which prescribed that “l’enseignement {non religieux} sera donné exclusivement en français.” [{Non religious} instruction would be given exclusively in French.] The doctrine of the primacy of French or the exclusive use of French (at least in non religious instruction) would be reaffirmed subsequently. Thus, as the order of 12 November 1912 concerning French West Africa recalls, “le but de l’enseignement élémentaire est la diffusion parmi les indigènes du français parlé (...). La langue française est seule en usage dans les écoles. Il est interdit aux maîtres de se servir avec leurs élèves des idiomes du pays.” [The goal of elementary education is the spread of spoken French among the natives (...). French is the only language to be used in the schools. School teachers are forbidden to speak local languages with their students.] The same proscription of local languages is constantly evoked for normal as well as professional schools.

During the period between the two world wars, the same objective was constantly stressed in official decrees. Thus, the Governor General of French West Africa reaffirmed on 1st April 1924: “La langue française est la seule qui doit nous occuper et que nous ayons à propager. Cette diffusion du français est une nécessité. Nos lois et règlements sont diffusés en français. C’est en français que les jugements des tribunaux sont rendus. L’indigène n’est admis à présenter ses requêtes qu’en français. Notre politique d’association l’appelle de plus en plus à siéger dans nos conseils et assemblées à la condition qu’il sache parler français. Il faut donc qu’administrations et administrés se comprennent (...) Il est de toute nécessité que le français, sans prétendre supplanter les idiomes, véhicule les idées communes qui fusionnent les races.” [We should only be interested in spreading the French language. The spread of French is a necessity. Our laws and regulations are in French.

Court decisions are rendered in French. The native can only present his petitions in French. According to our policy of association, the native can sit in our councils and assemblies on condition that he knows how to speak French. The governing body and those under its jurisdiction must understand one another. Without claiming to supplant the local languages, French should convey the ideas that bring the races together.]

The circular that accompanied the decree stated: “Le français doit être imposé au plus grand nombre d’indigènes et servir de langue véhiculaire dans toute l’étendue de l’Ouest africain français. Son étude est rendue obligatoire pour les futurs chefs (...) Mais notre contact ne s’arrête pas au chef. Il pénètre plus loin dans la masse (...) Il faut donc répandre en surface le français parlé. Il faut pouvoir rencontrer dans les villages les plus éloignés, avec le chef, au moins quelques indigènes comprenant notre langue et pouvant s’exprimer en français sans prétention académique. Avec les tirailleurs libérés et rendus au village, ce but peut être atteint aisément et rapidement. Multipliez donc les écoles préparatoires, appelez-y le plus d’enfants possible et apprenez-leur à parler français.” [French should be imposed on a great number of natives and serve as a lingua franca in all of French West Africa. Its study should be mandatory for future chiefs (...). However our contact should not be limited to chiefs. It must penetrate deeper into the masses (...) Spoken French should be spread everywhere. One should be able to find in the remotest villages, in addition to the chief, at least a few natives who understand our language and are capable of expressing themselves in non-academic French. This objective should be easily and quickly attained with the tirailleurs who have been discharged and sent back to the villages. Increase the number of preparatory schools, send in as many children as possible and teach them to speak French.]

In the beginning, setting these principles in motion encountered a certain number of insurmountable problems. On the one hand, it was difficult to get many children to go to school because of the brutality of the instructors and, on the other hand, the professional level of the instructors was very low. Thus, the disparity between the objectives of intensive Frenchification and the means to achieve these objectives explain why at the end of the colonial period the French language had not spread much among the indigenous populations of the so-called French Africa. Of course, there was an elite group of intellectuals that survived the selective school system in the colonies and then continued their studies in France. These intellectuals, composed essentially of civil servants who express themselves in scholarly French, would serve as a pool for the future leaders of the independent African states. Thus is created the first indigenous upper class society in colonial Africa whose membership is predicated upon a mastery of the French language.

The military origin of le français petit-nègre

The other Francophone speakers, however small their number, have only a limited competence. They acquired this competence in French through the formal education system from which they were more or less quickly excluded, and/or through working contacts with the whites living in the colonies. As housekeepers, clerks, unskilled workers, or forced laborers, they only have a very limited use of French which they use intermittently, essentially to communicate with their employers, their supervisors or their fellow workers. Thus their occasional use of French is incorrect and strongly influenced by the “français-tirailleur” which had been used for a long time in the colonial army.

In fact, right from the beginning of colonization, once the territorial conquest had been achieved, the conquering colonial army was composed of tirailleurs from the colonies. According to Caprille (1979, 496), these soldiers “constituent une véritable catégorie sociale.” Their number was significantly increased on the occasion of the massive enlistment during the two world wars. Above all, their political and economic role was at least as important as their military role since they often became the indispensable intermediaries between the colonizer and the colonized. Indeed, having a prestige based on their status and knowledge of French, they occupied important positions once they were discharged from the army. They became village chiefs or landlords appointed on the orders of the colonizer, team leaders on plantations or work yards, store assistants, and interpreters to the colonial administrators. The administration appointed them as civil servants and allowed them to serve as mailmen, custom officers, clerks, and even school teachers. They generally constituted the supporting staff of the colonial militia charged with maintaining law and order and were feared by the inhabitants. This major social role explains why they are at the origin of the spread of “français-tirailleur” or “français petit nègre,” which, according to P. Alexandre (1967: 91), is “le français déformé utilisé dans l’armée ou sur les chantiers par les Africains qui n’ont pas eu la chance d’aller à l’école.” [Deformed French used in the army or work yards by Africans who did not have the chance to go to school.]

This incorrect French served for a long time as a lingua franca in the colonial army and as a powerful force of acculturation and ethnic mixing. The “français tirailleur” resulted from the coming together of black soldiers from all over the colonial empire. In order to communicate with their mostly white superiors and their fellow black brothers in arms, these soldiers, for the most part illiterate and speaking multiple languages, had to use as a lingua franca, a variety of incorrect French learned on the job, which they later spread in French Equatorial and French West Africa as a result of their travels. Studied precisely by Manessy, (1984: 113-126) and by Houis (1984: 5-17), from a manual written to help metropolitan officers who had to serve in the colonial troops (*Le Français tel que le parlent nos tirailleurs sénégalais*), this variety of French presents a certain number of important traits that are found in other French-based pidgins or in certain varieties of current basilectal African French like the Ivorian popular French (Hattiger, 1983) or the Camfranglais of Cameroon (de Ferral, 1993, 211-214). It is characterized by the stability of the signifier, univocity, limitation of semantico-syntactic categories, the unchanging order of words, limitation of vocabulary, and the recourse to gestures to make up for the deficiency of the deixis.

Obviously, this interlanguage, what Clayton (1994, 414) calls a “patois évolutif,” [evolving jargon] was unstable and had to change and develop proportionally to the frequency of contacts established by its users with the more normative forms of French. According to Houis (1984), its systematization into an autonomous variety depends more on a fantasmatic representation than on a sociolinguistic reality. Furthermore, it is more of a “variété idéologique de français née dans une situation de domination” (15) [an ideological variety of French born out of a situation of domination] than a real pidgin. Nevertheless, it has played a considerable role at the level of representations for both Europeans and Africans. Colonial texts constantly affirm its existence and widespread use. In certain regions where there is no dominant African language, it is presented as a lingua franca. Thus, commenting on a study of the lingua franca being used in his territory, the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, Reste, wrote in a letter on 6 April 1939 to the Minister of Colonies: “il n’existe pas au Gabon de langue véhiculaire; pratiquement le français plus ou moins écorché en tient lieu.” [There is no lingua franca in Gabon; a butchered form of French is practically used.] At the same period, in his *Contribution à l’étude des langues indigènes en A. E. F.*, Abbey Walker expressed a similar idea when he stated that “le ‘français écorché’” ou “français de milicien” est parlé dans les villages les plus reculés de l’intérieur.” [“Butchered French” or “militiamen French” is spoken in the remotest villages of the interior.]

The spread of this approximate French was further facilitated by the fact that, at least at the beginning of colonization, it was carried out by the school system itself since a certain number of ex-servicemen became school teachers after their demobilization. According to Amaye (1984:307), in French Equatorial Africa, “le personnel enseignant dans ces écoles officielles était constitué par des moniteurs improvisés provenant soit du commerce défaillant des compagnies concessionnaires, soit du service de l’armée (...) c’est dans ces écoles qu’on comptait essentiellement les gens parlant le français “petit nègre (les moi y’en a dit).” [The teaching staff in these official schools consisted of improvised monitors from either the failing concessionary companies, or from the army service (...). It is essentially in these schools that one found people speaking “petit nègre French.”]

For want of something better, the colonial administration appeared to be satisfied with this variety of French, at least for the majority of the students. One can therefore see that the famous “Rigaux teaching method” (named after the Commandant in the Middle Congo who initiated it), which is supposed to be essentially practical and aimed at forming generations of farmers and workers “urgently needed by the colony,” was satisfied with teaching a few French words “permettant plus tard aux élèves de converser avec leur contremaître ou de comprendre ce que leur demande le patron” [that would later enable the students to converse with their foreman or understand what their boss demands of them] (cited by Amaye, 1984, 313).

According to Houis, the dominant power imposed these models in conformity with an ideology that saw the simplicity of African languages and the people who spoke them and, syllogistically, the superiority of the dominant language and the people who spoke it. In *Parlez-vous petit nègre*, Amedegnato and Sramski (2003) contend that the français petit nègre possesses an identity dimension which does not proceed from a choice, since in a colonial situation the dominated can only submit to the dominant. By characterizing this variety of French and their speakers as “petit”, the French people pushed the Africans who spoke it outside of the French culture. Speakers of this variety of French who were rejected as members of the French culture because of the faulty use of this language, among other things, were also not entirely members of the African culture. A typical example of this new social class that lacked identity and history is that of the interpreter.

The role of the interpreter

According to Bokiba (1998) the character of the interpreter appears as the collaborator of the fortunes of the white man. No precise selection criterion seems to be used in his recruitment. The “répond-bouche” [answering-mouth] as Amadou Hampaté Bâ calls him in *L’Etrange destin de Wangrin*, does not have any formal education. He is presented as an illiterate person, armed with a rudimentary knowledge of French. Describing Racoutié, one of the future adversaries of Wangrin, the author writes:

Il n’était pas allé à l’école comme Wangrin. Il parlait le “forofifon naspas” ou le français du tirailleur. En “forofifon naspas”, les verbes n’avaient ni temps ni mode et les noms, pronoms et adjectifs, ni nombre ni genre. (32)

[He had not been to school like Wangrin. He spoke “Forofifon naspas” or tirailleur French. In “Forofifon naspas”, verbs have neither tense nor mood, and the nouns, pronouns and adjectives have neither number nor gender.]

In the colonial administration, the interpreter was treated with distrust, suspicion, condescension, hypocrisy and contempt. According to Kuoh Moukouri (1963), although the interpreter was very useful and sometimes indispensable to the “commandant,” the latter refrained from admitting publicly the importance of the interpreter. In order to maintain his position among the Europeans, he had to ridicule the interpreter and prove that that he was not useful: “Devant [le public européen], il brutalisait l’Ecrivain [-interprète], l’accablait de grossières injures (...)” 37 [He maltreated and heaped insults on the Writer [-interpreter] in front of the European public.]

It would however be erroneous to assert that the overall relationship between the administration and the interpreter was characterized by these circumstances. The interpreter’s role in the success of the colonial enterprise was often emphasized and even rewarded. The ambivalent nature of the relationship between the interpreter and the administrator can be explained by the contradictions inherent in the colonial enterprise. On the one hand, according to Hardy (1919), literate natives represent the first products of the civilization effort of which every colonizer had reason to be proud and, on the other hand, the most “active forces” among the indigenous elite were perceived as a serious source of threat, for it was thought that they would use their newly acquired “science” to engage in subversion, thereby jeopardizing not only the proclaimed supremacy of the colonizer but also the reason for his presence and action. Finally, since the interpreter was the closest collaborator of the “commandant” he had a higher influence in the administration than that of the subordinate Europeans, a situation which, at the time, was really scandalous and a source of animosity.

In the native community, according to Mopoho (2001), the interpreter is unofficially placed at the summit of the new social hierarchy well above traditional authorities (chiefs and persons of influence). No matter his family origins, the interpreter is propelled to the forefront of the society simply because he possesses the white man’s science which enables him, among other things, to hear “avec les yeux” [with his eyes] (Kuoh Moukouri 1963: 18). As a group, the community relies upon the interpreter to look after their interests and, if necessary, counterbalance any suspicious action by the authorities. Although the interpreter is only an aid in the colonial administration, he is the African who is closest to the center of power. As the native collaborator who is closest to the commandant, he assumes, in the eyes of the indigenous populations, responsibilities which are well beyond his modest official functions. That probably explains why the native community tends to accord a seemingly huge importance to the role of the interpreter in the administrative machinery. This perception is sometimes encouraged by the interpreter himself. In *L’étrange destin de Wangrin*, the interpreter Racoutié regularly reminds the indigenous community of the importance of his functions:

Je suis [...] l’interprète du commandant. Je suis son oeil, son oreille et sa bouche. Chaque jour, je suis le premier et le dernier auxilliaire qu’il voit. Je pénètre dans son bureau à volonté. Je lui parle sans intermédiaire. Je suis Racoutié qui s’assied sur un banc en beau bois de caïcedrat devant la porte du commandant blanc. Qui parmi vous ignore que le commandant a droit de vie et de mort sur nous? Que ceux qui l’ignorent sachent que ma bouche, aujourd’hui, Dieu merci, se trouve être la plus proche de l’oreille du commandant. (51)

[I am (...) the commandant’s interpreter. I am his eyes, ears and mouth. Everyday, I am the first and the last assistant that he sees. I enter his office at will. I speak to him without any intermediary.]

I am Racoutié who sits on a beautiful cailcedrat wood bench in front of the white man's door.
Who among you does not know that the commandant has the power of life and death over us?
May all those who are unaware of this know that my mouth, thank God, is today closest to the ears of the commandant.]

If the enviable status of the interpreter accords him respect and admiration within the African community, it also arouses resentment and jealousy both on the part of the chiefs and prominent people whose power he "usurps" so to speak, and on the part of the literate elite who occupy less prestigious posts in the administration.

Le petit nègre in literature

According to Bokiba the rejection of African languages by the colonizer imposes a relationship between the African and the French language. This relationship, which he characterizes as being an attitude of projection and subjection, far from being uniform and univocal, places the Francophone African writer face to face with a cruel ambiguity. On the one hand, the writer uses a means of expression whose nuances and seduction cannot leave him indifferent; on the other hand, because of this very powerful seduction that he perceives more than anybody else, he is suspicious of this instrument in which all contact with the uneducated public is inconceivable, to the point of denouncing it as a factor of depersonalization and alienation.

However, if there is a suspicious relationship between the African and the French language, it is because, as we have pointed out, the colonizer had already rejected the humanity of the African through the rejection of African languages. It is obvious that the contempt that the colonizer had of African languages was a result of an ideological imperative for mystification and exploitation. If in 1904, Maurice Delafosse qualified African languages as being "simple" and "transparent," he was obviously not the only French colonial writer to do so. The Tharaud brothers echoed this attitude in colonial literature in 1922 when they wrote in their novel *La Randonnée de Samba Diouf* (The Adventures of Samba Diouf):

... Vos Noirs s'expriment comme des académiciens! – Ma foi, oui... Je vous traduis mot pour mot ce qu'ils disent. Si leurs langues sont simples et riches, et capables de rendre des nuances très subtiles, cela témoigne simplement que ces gens de l'Afrique Occidentale ne sont pas du tout les brutes qu'une médiocre littérature coloniale se plaît à nous présenter. Un beau langage est un chef-d'oeuvre collectif et inconscient. Ces Noirs ne parlerait pas ainsi s'il n'y avait pas derrière eux une civilisation très simple, mais une civilisation tout de même... (ii)

[... Your Blacks express themselves like academicians! – Indeed yes... I am translating word for word what they say. If their languages are simple and rich, and capable of rendering some subtle nuances, it simply proves that these people of West Africa are not at all the brutes that a mediocre colonial literature has presented them to us. A beautiful language is a collective and unconscious masterpiece. These Blacks would not speak this way if there wasn't behind them a very simple civilization, but a civilization all the same...]

Thus it was in keeping with their assumption that Africans had a simple language and civilization that the Tharaud brothers introduced français tiraileur in the speech patterns of their African characters. It is interesting to note that since these African characters are soldiers fighting alongside the French, the petit nègre words they use come from the French military vocabulary: "kanou" (canon); "Etnant de Sipahis" (Lieutenant de spahis); "Capolar" (Caporal); "sarzent" (Sergent). In effect, by making the African characters speak they way they do, the Tharaud brothers place them in a social category different from that of the French soldiers who, in all instances of the book, are presented as officers, and therefore are placed over and above the African soldiers. As Bokiba has argued, the incursion of French into the African society led to two grave consequences. The first is that as a foreign value and the expression of colonial power, the white man's language is not only a factor of alienation for the individual, it is also an element of discrimination and disagreement for Africans, between those who speak it and those who do not understand it. It upsets traditional relations of authority, promotes the breakup of social cohesion, and feeds the misunderstanding between the generations. The second consequence is the linguistic phenomenon of "français petit nègre." By using this form of expression, not only do African writers show a concern for an exact and realistic expression of their characters, they also demonstrate a willingness to restore the function of communication peculiar to the language.

In Ousmane Sembene's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu (God's Bits of Wood)* for instance, some of the characters prefer to use "petit nègre" rather than to speak through an interpreter. Let's look at the episode where the policemen tried to take away Friday, El Hadj Mabigué's ram that had been killed by Ramatoulaye and a group of women:

L'agent auxiliaire qui servait d'interprète, s'avança et annonça sur un ton d'homme habitué à être obéi:

- Nous voulons voir Ramatoulaye et reprendre le mouton!
- Le mouton, le mouton... répétèrent les femmes comme si elle ne comprenaient pas...
- Macou! (Silence) reprit l'auxiliaire. Nous voulons voir Ramatoulaye.
- Pas habiter ici. Missié Blanc, dit l'une des femmes en français, en s'adressant à l'Européen qui commandait le détachement. (122)

[The assistant serving as interpreter, came forward and announced in the tone of a man who is used to being obeyed:

- We want to see Ramatoulaye and take away the sheep!
- The sheep, the sheep... the women repeated as if they did not understand...
- Macou! (Silence) the assistant continued. We want to see Ramatoulaye.
- No live here. Massa Whiteman, said one of the women in French to the European who led the detachment.]

On the following page, Ramatoulaye appears, and when called upon to give back the sheep and follow the European who, the interpreter claims "n'est pas comme les autres toubabs" (is unlike the other white people), she replies:

Moi je ne connais aucun toubab! Ils sont tous pareils. Le seul qui était bon est mort en naissant. Le mouton ne sortira pas d'ici.

- Que dit-elle? demanda le Blanc qui s'était approché.
- C'est une mauvaise femme. Elle ne veut pas nous suivre. Faut-il appeler du renfort?
- Dis-lui que nous ne prendrons que le mouton et que'elle pourra venir demain. Dis lui que je ne suis pas méchant...
- Méchant, pas méchant? Moi connaître pas, interrompit Ramatoulaye. Vendredi pas pâti... lui manzer riz, moi couper cou! Enfant beaucoup faim, Vendredi manzer riz enfants. Moi venir avec toi, Vendredi pas venir. Vendredi pour manzer. (123)

[I don't know any white man! They are all the same. The only good one died at birth. The sheep will not leave this place.

- What is she saying? asked the white man who had drawn nearer.
- She is a bad woman. She doesn't want to follow us. Should I call for reinforcement?
- Tell her that we will only take the sheep and that she can come tomorrow. Tell her that I am not wicked....
- Wicked, not wicked? Me don't know, interrupted Ramatoulaye. Friday no go... he eat rice, me cut neck! Children very hungry, Friday eat children rice. Me come with you, Friday no come, Friday for eat.]

In these scenes Sembene uses French to create three different layers of social identity. The first layer is the Frenchman whose language, not to talk of his race, places him at the top of the social ladder. Next is the interpreter whose social identity is merely derived from his rudimentary knowledge of the white man's language, and at the bottom is Ramatoulaye whose place is determined by her use of "français petit nègre." If in Sembene's world, the relationship of the African to the French language entails a gradual psychological and cultural alienation, for Ahmadou Kourouma this condition is a result of the colonialist's language policies in Africa.

In *Allah n'est pas obligé*, his fourth book, Kourouma's protagonist is a child-soldier who speaks français petit nègre:

Et d'abord... et un:

M'appelle Birahima. Suis p'tit nègre. Pas parce que je suis black et gosse. Non! Mais suis p'tit nègre parce que je parle mal le français. C'é comme ça. Ça c'est la loi du français de tous les jours qui veut ça. (9)

[And first... one:

Am called Birahima. Am p'tit nègre. Not because I am black and a kid. No! But am p'tit nègre because I don't speak French well. It's like that. It's the law of everyday French that makes it so.]

Birahima decides to speak français petit nègre without any complexes because he has no choice; it is the first of several conditions thrown upon him by the colonial situation. Moreover, his lack of formal education clearly predisposes him to the use of this form of language. As he puts it:

Et deux...

L'école ne vaut plus rien... Mais fréquenter jusqu'à cours élémentaire deux n'est pas forcément autonome ou mirifique. On connaît un peu, mais pas assez... (10)

[And two...

School is now worthless. But having two years of elementary school is not really uplifting or wonderful. You know a little bit, but not enough...]

The second point raised by Birahima in his use of français petit nègre concerns the school in general and his education in particular. As we have already pointed out, the French colonial school ensured the social promotion of a tiny minority who were given access. Mastery of French enabled one to become a civil servant thereby creating a new social identity. In addition, the colonial school had the unfortunate result of alienating the students by cutting them from their traditional roots without assuring them any promotion in the colonial world.

Thus the implantation of French in African has created, for the African, a dual socio-cultural and ethnic identity. The ethnic identity is presented through the notion of race while one's socio-cultural identity is expressed through one's linguistic competence in the white man's language.

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