



Transcultural Spaces: Language Dynamics in L'*Aventure Ambiguë*

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Received: 10/05/2024

Accepted: 01 /07/2024

Published: 25/12/2024

Abstract

This article delves into the multilingual dimension of Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961), highlighting its significance within Francophone literature from sub-Saharan Africa. While traditional critiques have emphasized the novel's use of elite French language and themes of cultural collision, this study shifts focus to the linguistic heterogeneity Kane weaves into the narrative. By examining the integration of various languages and literary styles, this paper challenges the perception of the novel's monolingual nature and underscores the importance of languages beyond French. Drawing on theories of heterolingualism and translingualism, the analysis reevaluates Kane's prose, spotlighting the role of indigenous languages such as Arabic, Peulh, and Wolof. The exploration of plurilingual dynamics in *L'Aventure ambiguë* aims to deepen our understanding of Francophone literature and its broader implications for postcolonial discourse.

Keywords: Plurilingualism, francophone literature, language dynamics, heterolingualism, translingualism, *L'Aventure ambiguë*

ملخص

هذا البحث يتعمق في البعد اللغوي في رواية المغامرة الغامضة لشيخ حميدو كان ويسلط الضوء على معناه في الأدب الفرونكفوني من جنوب صحراء أفريقيا. بينما النقد التقليدي يركز على استعمال اللغة الفرنسية وعلى مواضيع التصادم الثقافي، هذه الدراسة تنقل التركيز لعدم التجانس اللغوي الذي نسجه كان في الرواية. بفحص تداخل لغات عديدة وادبية، هذه الدراسة تتحدى رؤية طبيعية اللغة الأحادية في الرواية وتسلط الضوء على أهمية اللغات بعد اللغة الفرنسية. مستنبطاً من نظريات التعددية اللغوية، هذا التحليل يعيد تقييم نثر كان مركزاً على دور اللغات المحلية مثل العربية بول و ولوف. استكشاف ديناميكية تعدد اللغات

في المغامرة الغامضة بهدف لتعميق فهمنا للرواية الفرونكفونية واثارها الواسعة على الخطاب ما بعد الكولونيالي.

كلمات افتتاحية: التعددية اللغوية، الأدب الفرونكفوني، الديناميكية اللغوية، التعددية اللغوية، المغامرة الغامضة

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Introduction

This article explores the transcultural spaces and language dynamics in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961), a seminal piece in sub-Saharan Francophone literature. We concentrate on the novel's plurilingual dimension, which is often eclipsed by its themes of cultural collision and the use of elite French. Our study challenges the traditional monolingual view of the text, emphasizing the significance of linguistic diversity. Using plurilingualism as a methodological lens, we aim to uncover the complex web of languages and linguistic registers in Kane's narrative, reevaluating, on a broader scale, the linguistic commitments of Francophone authors.

1. On African Francophone Literature

In the realm of Francophone studies, particularly in Africa, the role of French presents a paradox between cultural diversity and uniformity. This article assesses how French is perceived as both a vestige of colonial dominance and a language that has been culturally reappropriated (Kalliney, 2016; Serunkuma, 2024). Our analysis, inspired by Umberto Eco's idea that "a text wants someone to help it function" (1990, p. 63), employs heterolingualism and transpolingualism to deepen our understanding of the linguistic and cultural layers in Francophone works, particularly through the lens of authors like Kane who integrate a variety of languages into their storytelling.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*, a widely studied novel, narrates Samba Diallo's spiritual journey from Senegal to Paris. While traditional criticism has focused on the novel's French quality and the meeting of civilizations, this study takes a fresh approach by highlighting the plurilingual nature of Kane's writing. By identifying the diverse languages in the French narrative and examining their textual representation, this study challenges the monolingual character often attributed to the novel and affirms the validity of other spaces, languages, and literary traditions.

Through the paradigms of heterolingualism by Rainier Grutman (1997) and transpolingualism by Laté Lawson-Hellu (2003, 2004), this study re-examines the perceived elitism in Kane's prose, highlighting the presence and relevance of languages such as Arabic, Peulh, and Wolof. In Francophone novels, language is more than a medium; it is a site of cultural identity appropriation (Murdoch and Fagyal, 2013; Dutton, 2016). The Francophone author's awareness of the linguistic diversity in their environment, a concept Gauvin (1997) calls "surconscience linguistique," transforms writing into a symbolic act and a site of contestation and representation. *L'Aventure ambiguë* and Cheikh Hamidou Kane exemplify this transformative literary approach.

In numerous Francophone nations across Africa, attaining political sovereignty did not equate to achieving linguistic independence, as highlighted by Ngugi (2018), Salomone (2022), and Gibbs (2024). Despite the end of colonial rule, French, the language of the former colonizers, continues to dominate, particularly in key intellectual arenas. While a vast array of

languages are spoken throughout the continent, French remains the exclusive official language in the majority of these Francophone countries. The significance of maintaining linguistic variety is underscored by the phenomenon of diglossia, which has, since colonial times, established dominant relationships between French and local languages. Echoing colonial linguistic policies, French is still often viewed as the sole language suitable for literature. This imbalanced linguistic relationship in both the personal and literary worlds of writers calls for a critical reexamination of texts produced within this dominant Francophone framework.

Indeed, in 1880, the same year Onésime Reclus first coined the term “Francophone,” Jules Ferry, the French Minister of Education, mandated French as the exclusive language within the educational system of the French colonial empire (Lizotte, 2020, p. 2). In Senegal, a decree in May 1924 reinforced this policy, stating that “French [was] the only language used in schools. [It was] forbidden for teachers to use the country’s idioms with their pupils” (Gauvin and Larouche, 1995, p. 55). This legislation underlined, if any further evidence was needed, the critical role of language in the French colonial civilizing mission. For France, colonization was more than a simple project of territorial expansion; it was fundamentally about civilizing the indigenous populations, with the French language at the core of this effort.

Given this historical backdrop, it becomes evident why analyzing Francophone texts is crucial, particularly those where authors opt to write in French despite their often complex and conflicted relationship with the language. The exploration of linguistic issues in Francophone literature is increasingly relevant, as questions of identity and representation gain prominence. Additionally, languages other than French, present in the writers’ environments, are finding their way into literary works more frequently. The concept of plurilingualism, which refers to an individual’s ability to use multiple languages or the inclusion of several languages (or language levels) within a text, has become a key focus and strategic objective in African Francophone novels. This emphasis on plurilingualism is vital due to the deep connection between language and culture. It serves as a critical tool for examining how Francophone authors, and postcolonial authors more broadly, navigate the challenge of writing in French while expressing the linguistic and cultural diversity they represent. This is particularly true in our study of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, as he portrays this diversity in himself, his narrator, and his various characters.

In Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s depiction of Senegal, multiple local languages exist alongside French, which remains the sole official language in key sectors like education and literature. This linguistic landscape prompts several critical inquiries: What language should writers choose to most effectively reach their audience? How can they integrate the diverse languages spoken by their peers into their work? Which language will help these authors gain international acclaim? Additionally, how do writers portray the interplay between official and vernacular languages in their narratives? These questions are essential for understanding how authors navigate the complex dynamics of language in a multilingual society, particularly in the context of maintaining a sense of place while seeking broader recognition.

Recent works in African literature reveal that authors, while primarily using French for their narratives, have skillfully woven the linguistic diversity of their settings into their stories (Faye, 2016; Zeniter, 2016; Mabanckou, 2017; Amal, 2020). They integrate a range of local languages into their narratives, thereby enhancing the cultural and social depth of their characters. This technique introduces audiences to unique linguistic and cultural expressions, such as Ahmadou Kouroumah's "Malinkismes" (Russo, 2012) and Sony Labou Tansi's "Tropicalites" (Taoua, 2023).

In his novel *L'Aventure ambiguë*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane employs a subtler technique. While French is the dominant language, Kane skillfully interlaces other local languages and cultural nuances into his narrative, mirroring the linguistic realities of his characters' surroundings. This nuanced portrayal challenges the notion of French as an elitist language and underscores the vibrant, multilingual fabric of postcolonial African societies.

2-Theoretical Foundations: Plurilingualism and its Paradigms of Heterolingualism and Transpolingualism

Exploring the concept of dialogism, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) suggests that every individual inherently juggles multiple languages, whether they are aware of it or not. This mix of voices and language levels explains the variations in how a person communicates depending on the topic or social context. Lise Gauvin, in her book *Les Langues du roman: du plurilinguisme comme stratégie textuelle* (1999), builds on Bakhtin's ideas by explaining that the term "multilingual" not only refers to foreign languages and different language levels but also includes how these languages coexist within a text. Each language reflects a distinct cultural and ideological universe, suggesting that literary plurilingualism can represent a diversity of viewpoints, worldviews, or ideologies. This is where the paradigms of heterolingualism and transpolingualism come into play, which we will use to analyze Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*.

Rainier Grutman's work, *Des langues qui résonnent, l'hétérolinguisme au 19e siècle québécois* (1997), is pivotal in the theoretical discussion of heterolingualism. Echoing Bakhtin's insights and acknowledging the near impossibility of pure monolingualism in literature, Grutman defines heterolingualism as "the presence in a text of foreign idioms in any form, as well as varieties (social, regional, or chronological) of the main language" (1997, p. 37). This paradigm illustrates how texts actively engage with different languages within their structure.

Laté Lawson-Hellu's theory of transpolingualism enhances our understanding of heterolingualism by revealing the subtler aspects of multilingualism in literature. This paradigm focuses on the "invisible" languages in texts, overshadowed by the dominant language, such as French in *L'Aventure ambiguë*. It shows how these languages add depth to the narrative, treating multilingualism both as a method of interpretation and a subject of

study. This approach informs us about how languages are portrayed and raises important questions about the interplay between language, power, and literature in Francophone writing.

This focus on Francophone texts is not a recent development. Since the earliest works in French by intellectuals from former colonies, literary criticism has often highlighted the distinct features of this new literary domain. Unfortunately, orality was frequently seen as the primary distinction between Francophone (and broadly postcolonial) literature and Western French literature. However, aligning with Josias Semujunga's perspective that "the African novel... has nothing original except what the art of the novel anticipates: the phagocytosis of all literary genres beyond national and international borders" (1999, p. 22), this analysis avoids simplistic contrasts between oral and written forms. Instead, it closely examines the historical and cultural contexts that have influenced the development of African Europhone literature, recognizing orality as an important element but not the only factor in understanding Francophone African literature.

3-Enunciative Context: Notes on the Writer and the Novel

Cheikh Hamidou Kane was born in 1928 in Matam, Senegal, and was raised in a setting that rigorously upheld traditional values and Islam, much like his main character, Samba Diallo. Kane started his education in a Quranic school, learning the precepts of Islam, similar to Diallo's journey. At the age of ten, he transitioned to a French school. After completing his primary education, he moved to Dakar and later traveled to Paris to study philosophy and law. Upon returning to Senegal, Kane assumed several significant roles in the administrative and political spheres of a newly independent Senegal. Despite being the author of the critically acclaimed novel, which won the "Grand prix littéraire d'Afrique noire," Kane views himself as only a part-time writer. In an interview with Lise Gauvin, he remarked, "I am a writer only incidentally" (1997: 139). This statement might explain the limited scope of his literary work, but his fame is not constrained by the quantity of his publications. Kane has written just two novels, *L'Aventure ambiguë* and *Les gardiens du temple* (1995), yet he rose to prominence immediately after his first novel was published.

L'Aventure ambiguë recounts the journey of a young man from the land of the Diallobé who travels to Paris to learn "comment lier le bois au bois" (p.57) ("how to bind wood to wood"). This novel was among the first by a black intellectual to explore the conflict between traditional African Islamic values and those brought by colonization. A key question the author raises is how to harmonize local knowledge and faith-based wisdom with Cartesian rationalism?

While there are parallels between Samba Diallo's life and that of Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'Aventure ambiguë* is not an autobiographical work. Both Kane and his protagonist hail from aristocratic families deeply rooted in Islamic culture and oral tradition, which significantly shape their collective destiny. As they confront the impact of European colonialism, the Diallobé grapple with whether the benefits of embracing colonialism outweigh the losses to their existing way of life. Specifically, they ponder whether to fight to

preserve their traditions or to adopt the French school and its different approaches to knowledge. Characters like Maître Thierno and Samba Diallo embody this skepticism towards the French school. Conversely, La Grande Royale, Samba Diallo's aunt, offers a more nuanced view of this cultural encounter. As the matriarch of the Diallobé, she insightfully addresses the power dynamics and ideological mechanisms at play through education. Her strategic decision to send her nephew to the French school to learn how to “win without being right” reflects her complex engagement with the colonial reality within her cultural context.

Cheikh Hamidou Kane delves into these questions through his characters, whose experiences and insights continue to be the subject of extensive analysis. Samba Diallo's journey is, in many respects, an allegory for the Senegalese people's experience following independence. The novel offers a perspective on the psychology of a colonized mind grappling with the challenge of reconciling internal conflicting voices. When Samba Diallo says :

Je ne suis pas un pays des Diallobé distinct, face à un occident distinct, et appréciant d'une tête froide ce que je puis lui prendre et ce qu'il faut que je lui laisse en contrepartie. Je suis devenu les deux. Il n'y a pas une tête lucide entre deux termes d'un choix. Il y a une nature étrange, en détresse de n'être pas deux.[†](p. 164)

Kane captures the inner conflict faced by many Francophone intellectuals. This conflict arises from the desire to preserve their culture against the backdrop of the colonial legacy's pervasive influence.

4-Plurilingualism in *L'Aventure Ambiguë*

In *L'Aventure ambiguë*, the Quranic and French schools are portrayed as opposing forces. This presence of two educational systems inherently challenges a monolingual perspective of the narrative. Arabic, introduced in Senegal long before French colonization and during the European Middle Ages, was the country's first codified language. With Arabic came Islam, which the majority of the Senegalese population would embrace. However, unlike French, Peulh, or Wolof, Arabic is not commonly used for daily communication. Both in the fictional world of the Diallobé and across broader Senegal, the prevalence of Muslim practitioners does not correspond to widespread use of the Arabic language. Typically, Arabic in Senegal is reserved for religious purposes, with only a small portion of the population using it as a communication tool. In the novel, Samba Diallo and his peers learn to recite Quranic verses without truly understanding their content. Highlighting this, the narrator recalls “cette phrase qu'il ne comprenait pas, pour laquelle il souffrait le martyre” (p. 14) (“That sentence which he did not understand, for which he suffered martyrdom”). This illustrates that while Samba Diallo can vocalize the language, its meanings remain elusive to him.

[†] I am not a distinct Diallobé facing a distinct Occident, and appreciating with a cool head what I must take from it and what I must leave with it by way of counter-balance. I have become the two. There is not a clear mind deciding between the two factors of a choice. There is a strange nature, in distress over not being two. (*Ambiguous Adventure*, p. 135)

Often, both among the Diallobé and in broader Senegal, Islamic precepts are taught not in the Quran's original Arabic but through local languages. When Master Thierno speaks to La Grande Royale about his desire to make Samba Diallo an Islamic scholar, his speech provides a deeper insight beyond the information intended for the matriarch: "Ce fut un chef, votre père, qui me montra, à moi qui traduit le Livre, comme il faut mourir. Je voulais transmettre ce bienfait à son petit-fils" (It was a chief, your father, who showed me, one who translates the Book, how one must die. I wanted to pass this blessing on to his grandson) (p. 37-38). This reference to translating the Quran suggests the involvement of languages other than Arabic or French in the narrative. Given that the Quran is originally in Arabic, the "translation" among the Diallobé likely shifts from Arabic to a target language, which, though not explicitly stated, is presumably Peuhl—the language the Diallobé commonly uses for everyday communication.

In Kane's portrayal and in the lives of his characters, Islamic knowledge doesn't necessarily hinge on mastery of its scriptural language, Arabic. Instead, Islam and its teachings are primarily transmitted through vernacular languages before reaching the broader population. Although most people do not understand or speak Arabic, references to the language are frequent in the novel. From prayers to the Night of the Quran, and through direct borrowings, Arabic appears in *L'Aventure ambiguë* as a language that is both impenetrable and yet familiar. As devout Muslims, the Diallobé consistently perform their prayers in Arabic. This is highlighted by the use of the word "chahada" (p. 181), a term borrowed directly from Arabic to denote the profession of faith among Muslims.

In *L'Aventure ambiguë*, the constraints of the Arabic language are contrasted with the expansive possibilities offered by French. For many characters, French facilitates a direct and personal engagement with knowledge, eliminating the need for intermediaries. Throughout the novel, French is the chosen language for intimate discussions on a variety of subjects, including metaphysics, philosophy, history, and politics. For instance, when the Chevalier and Paul Lacroix converse about topics such as the absolute, the void, the end of the world, and resurrection (p. 89-90), they naturally use French, as it is the shared language between them. Similarly, when Samba Diallo and Lucienne explore themes like God and freedom (p. 151), their dialogue also unfolds in French, the common language that connects them.

In the novel, those who use French are not only capable of speaking the language but also fully comprehend the messages conveyed and can partake in discussions as abstract and profound as necessary. Whether it is the narrator employing historical jargon (p. 59), Samba Diallo and his father discussing God and work (p. 112), or Lucienne engaging in political discourse (p. 151), French is depicted as a language that offers superior qualities for introspection and sharing for all who are proficient in it. This communicative function attributed to French is paralleled in the use of Peuhl between the Master and members of the Diallobé royal family, as well as within the broader Diallobé community. This is exemplified by the public consultation led by La Grande Royale with the Diallobé regarding the appropriateness of adopting the colonial option.

Samba Diallo's interactions with Arabic, French, and his other "local" languages mirror Cheikh Hamidou Kane's own relationships with these languages. In *L'Écrivain francophone à la croisée des langues* (1997), a collection of interviews by Lise Gauvin, Kane discusses the unique opportunities French offers for his writing:

[...] Je pouvais, sans être en présence de quelqu'un, comprendre ce qu'il pense, ce qu'il veut me dire, rien qu'en lisant ce qu'il a écrit. Cela a été une fascination. Il faut essayer de vous mettre à la place de quelqu'un qui appartient à une civilisation de l'oralité. Pour lui, il n'y avait jusque là, comme seul moyen de communication, que le langage oral ou, en tout cas, les sons et la percussion: seulement ce qu'on pouvait entendre. Cette communication par l'écriture, c'était quelque chose d'assez extraordinaire.‡ (1997, p. 148)

In *L'Aventure ambiguë*, Kane's portrayal of cultural encounters is deeply rooted in linguistic nuances. By depicting Islam as a dynamic cultural force within Francophone society, Kane sidesteps the simplistic and often inaccurate dichotomy that portrays French as the language of modernity and culture, while casting Arabic as synonymous with rigid faith and insularity. Through his main character, Samba Diallo, and other key figures like La Grande Royale, Master Thierno, and the Chevalier, all devout Muslims yet intellectually curious, Kane illustrates that the language one speaks does not determine one's cultural depth. By weaving together various influences—religious, intellectual, cultural, and social—that shape his characters' personalities, Kane highlights the heterogeneity that contributes to the discursive richness of his fiction.

Samba Diallo's journey is not just a spiritual or cultural quest but also a linguistic one. From reciting Quranic verses in Arabic to subtle references to the Peulh language and the acclaimed eloquence of the French language, the evidence challenges a simplistic interpretation of Kane's book. This analysis counters critiques that emphasize the superior and ostensibly uniform quality of the French used in the narration, revealing *L'Aventure ambiguë* as an inherently diverse work. Despite Kane's reservations about using dialects, language registers, or parenthetical notes, plurilingualism remains a key aspect of the novel. Kane's approach to writing resistance does not necessarily adopt local or indigenous traits; instead, it involves presenting a complex philosophy of life in a French language he regards as universal and most capable of expressing his views. Echoing Teilhard de Chardin's belief that "On empêcherait la Terre de tourner plutôt que le monde de se totaliser"§ (qtd in interview with Delafin and Chanda), Kane fully embraces the French language to offer insights into his native Peulh culture. By using French to write about Peulh, Kane resolves the debate over the use of Western languages in African literature. In an interview with Amadou Sanou, Kane

‡“ I could, without being in a physical presence with someone, know what he/she was thinking, what they wanted to tell me, simply by reading their works. That fascinated me. Try being in the shoes of someone who knows nothing but oral culture. For that person, the only medium of communication was orality—or to be more precise—anything that pertained to hearing and percussions: things that could be heard. Using writing then as a way to communicate was nothing short of extraordinary”. (Translation mine)

§ “It's easier to stop the Earth from going around than to stop the world from becoming one”. (Translation mine)

states, “[...] Nous étions une société de l’oralité, aujourd’hui nous avons maîtrisé l’écriture [...] Que les Africains s’approprient [cet outil] pour se retourner vers notre culture. ‘Apprendre l’art de vaincre sans avoir raison.’”**

Conclusion

L'Aventure ambiguë reveals the transcultural spaces within which Cheikh Hamidou Kane operates. Through his novel, Kane navigates the complexities of spiritual, cultural, and linguistic identities, blending the sacred and the secular, the local and the global. His masterful use of French to articulate the nuances of Peulh culture demonstrates his belief in the transformative power of language. Kane’s work is a testament to the fluidity and richness of African literature, proving that it can embrace and transcend linguistic boundaries to reflect a broader, interconnected world.

** “[...] We were an oral society, now we have mastered writing [...] Let Africans reclaim [this tool] to revisit our culture ‘The art of winning without being in the right’”. (Translation mine)

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