

## RETRANSLATING FULANI (CAMEROON) *MBOOKU* POEMS

La retraducción de los poemas *mbooku* de la lengua fulani de Camerún

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### INTRODUCTION

“The Europeans are not good: A Fulbe *Mbooku* poem of protest” is a Fulani oral poem first transcribed and translated by Paul Kazuhisa Eguchi and published as a scholarly paper in 1992. The 164-line poem, recorded by Eguchi himself on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1976, was composed by the *mbooku* poet Siddi Yambaram. *Mbooku* is a form of oral poetry specific to the Fulani people, who live in the Far North of Cameroon. The poets sing in a group consisting of a few singers led a soloist with no instrumental accompaniment. The subject matter is often critical of misbehavior in society but may also praise good deeds and heroes. It is mainly characterized by the humorous use of figures of speech, parables, puns and repetition. Contrary to the griots and praise singers of most traditional African societies, *Mbooku* poets (or *mboo'en*) are members of the noble class and do not sing for money or gifts; they are proud and consider themselves entertainers. Today the genre has completely disappeared due to the lack of interest among the younger generations as well as the lack of modern means of conservation that may guarantee its survival.

## RETRANSLATION

Before studying the retranslation of an excerpt of Eguchi's text, it may be worthwhile to reflect on retranslation itself. What is retranslation? A simple answer to this question would be "the act of translating a work that has previously been translated into the same language, or the result of such an act, i.e. the retranslated text itself" (Baker 2009: 233). This can be done in several ways: by "re-translat[ing] an original text which has already been translated in that foreign language, translat[ing] in a new language from a translation (as opposed to from the original text), or carry[ing] out a back-translation into the original language from a translation" (Elise 2014: n. p.). In our case, the retranslation is based on both the original text and its first translation into English. Of course, the decision to retranslate the text into a new English version gives rise to another question: Why? As Venuti (2013: 98) rightly stated, a retranslation is an added value in that it contributes to advancing both Translation Studies and Literature "through the inscription of a different interpretation". I<sup>1</sup> chose to retranslate this poem in order to make it more literary. This aspect was downplayed in Eguchi's translation as his research centered on the musical, historical and anthropological aspects of the poem: "The aim of this paper is to present a Fulɓe *Mbooku* poem of protest against the foreign invasion and loss of Fulɓe sovereignty which occurred at the beginning of this century" (Eguchi 1992: 465). My intention is neither to evaluate nor to amend Eguchi's work. I simply deem it necessary to make the poem more 'poetic' by incorporating certain patterns, such as the use of stanzas and verse meter as well as images and stylistic devices into the translation.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Christine Pagnouille for reading the poem and for her valuable comments and suggestions.

## FULANI EXCERPT AND EGUCHI'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION

### Fulani poem transcription

Ko mbi'iru-noo-mi ɓe mboobaayi.  
Ko ɓe mbanngi ɓe tefi balmi.  
Ko mbi'iru-noo-mi ɓe mboodaayi.  
Turooɓe yimɓe mbada bamɓe,  
yimɓe ɓe'e mbalaa akiri.  
Raneeɓe baaba nya"irde,  
naa be, borodɓe, be borgooje,  
juulnitooɓe juulniife.  
Nde ɓe mbanngi ɓe tefi balmi.  
Zamaru keeke fakataake.  
Famaru mboya, ɓe mboyni en.  
ɓe ngoodi toro, ɓe torri en.  
Ko mbi'iru-noo-mi, ɓe mboodaayi.  
Fii raneɓe jaaliife,  
raneɓe bure wullaandu.  
Ko mbi'iru-noo-mi ɓe jaaliife.  
Annditee lee ɓe mboodaayi.  
Nde ɓe mbanngi, ɓe tefi balmi.  
Konu darnani ɓe, ɓe mbanngi.  
Kuma, be kumi laamiife.  
ɓe loslosnii ɓe nder maayo,  
ɓunndu Kahfu kon tagana.  
Bolidooɓe e seydanji,  
(...)

Katuwal waɗi jalnaare,  
meemi leebura kaɓɓaado,  
yaaɓi winnde saakiingo.  
Naati Caanaga konu somi,  
comko cifanii haɓe.  
Tayri duunde njaareendi.  
ɓunndu Baali ko mbaali.  
Habaru heewti nder Marwa,  
kiiri yeynugo haa jenggi:  
"Jawmu ɓaaru fuu tookna."  
Marwa tookni kurol muuɓum.  
Tammo ban kaɓe kooseeje.  
Tugga koppi ɓe ngoorna kuri.  
Jaka Nasaara haɓataako.  
ɗara galnodi labbon mum,  
tammo ban kaɓe fuunaange,  
kaɓe Hayaatu wad-noo ɗum,  
caamna ngorgu, nguboo sewngo.  
Ibba Saɗe e canngin-no.

### English translation

What I have been saying is that they are not good.  
Since they came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
What I have been saying is that they are not good.  
It is they who made people bend down and made them donkeys.  
The people were forced to carry without payment.  
The white people are masters with spurs.  
They wore red fezzes, and carried blankets.  
It is they who torture the circumcised adults again.  
Since they came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
In these days no one can stop the machines.  
When these young people shout, they made us cry.  
They have money, and they troubled us.  
What I have been saying is that they are not good.  
The story of the white people, the conquerors.  
The white men cannot be appealed to the court.  
What I have been saying is that they were conquerors.  
You should know that they are not good.  
Since they, came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
The war made them powerful as they are.  
They made fools of chiefs saying: "What?"  
They are those who came out of a river.  
They were created in the Kahfu cave.  
They can talk with Satans.  
(...)

What happened in Katuwal makes me laugh.  
They insulted the laborer who was forced to carry things.  
The white men reached the market place.  
They went into the Chaanaga river and got tired.  
They were hindered by the river but thought how to fight.  
They crossed the sand hill.  
They stayed overnight at the Baali well.  
The news about them reached Maroua.  
The chief announced from the evening till late at night, saying:  
"Let every archer poison his arrows."  
The Maroua people poisoned their arrows.  
They thought it was just like attacking the hill pagans.  
They knelt down and sent the arrows at the white men.  
Actually they were not able to fight the white men.  
Thenara men sharpened their spearheads.  
They thought it was just like attacking the people living in the east.  
They thought it just a fight of Hayaatu's days.  
They tried to gallop on horses and throw spears.  
The white men camped at Ibba Saɓe.

Kofiingel hofi ansar'en,  
neeḅaayi nii ḅe piyi bunndukru.  
Njaawi, ḅe njowi kolkolma,  
njoofi mayruwa dow maḅḅe.  
Siddi Geereme don saydi,  
caydinoodo e foondanne.  
Marwa doggiri gal Zayka.  
ḅara doggiri dow Makabay.  
Nyannde nden boo mi don waali.  
Centudum wadi keeddiddam,  
doggani wari meemi-mmi.  
O wi'i-mmi: "Ngorgi, war ndoggen.  
Woodi ngaska ngi'-noo-mi.  
Njemma tawen ka naaten ka."  
"Alla wadi mi semtaayi.  
Miin mi naataataa ngaska.  
Haḅre haḅanne haa Miskin.  
Koo yaadu mi daara nde."  
(Eguchi, vv.1-24; 125-164, pp. 470-478)

The one who knelt down took position among the Sara soldiers.  
Soon they shot the guns.  
Hastily they shot the machine guns.  
They poured machine gun bullets over the Fulbe warriors.  
Siddi Geereme became a martyr on the spot,  
the victim of the confrontation against them.  
The Maroua warriors ran away toward Zayka.  
The ḅara warriors ran up to the Makabay hill.  
On this day I was sleeping.  
shameful thing happened to my neighbor.  
He came to me running, and touched me.  
He told me: "My friend, let us run away.  
I found a cave.  
Let us go to find it, and go into it."  
"As is my character, I do not feel ashamed.  
I will not go into a cave.  
The war is taking place in Miskin.  
I can run away from them even on foot."  
(Eguchi, vv.1-24; 125-164, pp. 471-479)

## SOME COMMENTS ON EGUCHI'S TRANSLATION

Several aspects, such as rhythm, structure, form and content, of this first English translation of the poem beg commentary. The rhythm of the source text (ST) is ignored in the target text (TT), the English verses being longer than those of the Fulani original. Also, neither the ST nor the TT is divided into stanzas. Both are presented side by side in running form. Eguchi does include a total of 11 footnotes (for the whole poem) to explain certain details. Taking these comments into consideration, let me now propose my retranslation of this excerpt, using Eguchi's TT as a starting point, but relying too on my understanding of the original text.

### Eguchi's Translation

What I have been saying is that they are not good.  
Since they came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
What I have been saying is that they are not good.  
It is they who made people bend down and made them donkeys.  
The people were forced to carry without payment.  
The white people are masters with spurs.  
They wore red fezzes, and carried blankets.  
It is they who torture the circumcised adults again.  
Since they came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
In these days no one can stop the machines.  
When these young people shout, they made us cry.  
They have money, and they troubled us.  
What have been saying is that they are not good.

### My Retranslation

Why do I say they are not good?  
When they came they came fully armed.  
Why do I say they are not good?  
Those who bend people and make donkeys.  
People without salary.  
White men, masters of spurs.  
Not with fezzes but in their capes.  
Who circumcised adults another time.  
When they came they came fully armed  
In the age when machines  
Cannot be stopped.  
Children cry, we the adults do too.  
They have money and make us harried.

The story of the white people, the conquerors.  
The white men cannot be appealed to the court.  
What I have been saying is that they were conquerors.  
You should know that they are not good.  
Since they, came out into the world, they looked for arms.  
The war made them powerful as they are.  
They made fools of chiefs saying: "What?"  
They are those who came out of a river.  
They were created in the Kahfu cave.  
They can talk with Satans.  
(...)

What happened in Katuwal makes me laugh.  
They insulted the laborer who was forced to carry things.  
The white men reached the market place.  
They went into the Chaanaga river and got tired.  
They were hindered by the river but thought how to fight.  
They crossed the sand hill.  
They stayed overnight at the Baali well.  
The news about them reached Maroua.  
The chief announced from the evening till late at night, saying:  
"Let every archer poison his arrows."  
The Maroua people poisoned their arrows.  
They thought it was just like attacking the hill pagans.  
They knelt down and sent the arrows at the white men.  
Actually they were not able to fight the white men.  
Thenara men sharpened their spearheads.  
They thought it was just like attacking the people living in the [east].  
They thought it just a fight of Hayaatu's days.  
They tried to gallop on horses and throw spears.  
The white men camped at Ibba Sape.  
The one who knelt down took position among the Sara soldiers.  
Soon they shot the guns.  
Hastily they shot the machine guns.  
They poured machine gun bullets over the Fulbe warriors.  
Siddi Geereme became a martyr on the spot,  
the victim of the confrontation against them.  
The Maroua warriors ran away toward Zayka.  
The ɲara warriors ran up to the Makabay hill.  
On this day I was sleeping.  
shameful thing happened to my neighbor.  
He came to me running, and touched me.  
He told me: "My friend, let us run away.  
I found a cave.  
Let us go to find it, and go into it."  
"As is my character, I do not feel ashamed.  
I will not go into a cave.  
The war is taking place in Miskin.  
I can run away from them even on foot.  
(Eguchi, v.1-24; 125-164, pp. 470-478)

Why do I say they are not good?  
The story of White men, the victorious.  
Those who are above the law.  
Why do I say they are victorious?  
Do recognize they are not good!  
When they came they came fully armed.  
War made them powerful and they came.  
How! They turned our kings into cows!  
Those who pulled themselves from rivers.  
They were made for the Kahfu Cavern.  
Those who talk with the devils  
(...)

Katuwal witnessed something funny.  
They hit a chained labourer.  
The Whites crossed the marketplace.  
They came to Tsanaga River and got tired.  
Though tired, they thought of how to fight.  
They then crossed the mountain of sand.  
They spent night at the Well of Sheep.  
The news spread in all Maroua.  
Till late into the night:  
"Anyone who gets arrows  
Should have them poisoned."  
Maroua then poisoned its arrows.

And they thought it was as easy  
As fighting hill pagans.  
They aimed and arrowed the White men,  
But the White man is unbeatable.  
Ngara people sharpened their spears.  
Thinking it was like the battles of the East.  
Battles in which Hayaatou fought.  
A ride on horse, a throw of spear.  
But the White men had  
Ibba Sannge besieged.  
Who knelt fought on the other side  
Very soon they shot the guns,  
And then quick another shot,  
And fired bullets on people.  
There became Siddi of Guereme a martyr,  
Attempting to fight them.  
Maroua escaped through Zayka.  
Ngara escaped on Makabay.

And that day I was on my bed.  
A shameful thing happened to my neighbor,  
Who ran, came to me and touched me:  
"Dear friend come and let's run.  
There is a hole I saw around.

In the night let's find it and hide in it."  
Thank God I didn't go such ashamed.  
"Me I'll not hide into a hole,  
For a war happening in Miskin.  
Even if walking, I'll escape from it."

## CONCLUSION

Having translated and published five extensive poems as scholarly articles, Eguchi's work is a very important source for the retranslation of Fulani (Cameroon) *mbooku* poems not only into English but also into many other languages. Two additional scholars, the German Viet Erlmann and the Cameroonian Abdoulaye Oumarou Dalil, have published two transcriptions and translations into German and French, respectively. Therefore, new retranlations will be a way of giving this endangered oral literature a second chance and will also be of great value for Translation Studies and world literature. The same may be said of other 'minor' literatures belonging to other oral traditions.

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