

Literature in Cameroon

Georgina Collins on a conference and workshop focusing on nurturing emerging literary translators in a country where many different languages flourish



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'Africa in miniature' is the perfect name for Cameroon, a country that is home to around 250 local languages, as well as English and French. Yet despite a thriving literary scene and well-respected translation community, there is very little literary translation training on offer. A team from the University of Bristol and non-profit independent publishers Bakwa Books recently set out to change this by running a workshop for budding literary translators and a large public event in the capital, Yaoundé.

My first involvement with the project came in 2018. As a translator with a specialism in African literature, I conducted a feasibility study on literary translation training in West Africa. My interviews provided a fascinating insight both into translation training across Cameroon and into the politics of language that have contributed to the current civil war between anglophone separatists and central government in the francophone central region. I returned to Yaoundé in 2019 with colleagues to hold focus groups aimed at gathering ideas for the workshop and conference. With additional advice from Dzekashu MacViban, the founding editor of Bakwa, we developed a workshop outline that incorporated training in a variety of literary genres alongside a discussion group focusing on current issues in literary translation.

Retranslating the classics

We recruited 12 talented translators to the programme, all of whom work between French and English (six in each direction). Most were already professional translators but few had

literary translation experience, so they were keen to grab this opportunity to work with the team and the workshop leaders: expert literary translator and tutor Ros Schwartz and award-winning writer and translator Edwige-Renée Dro.

During the week-long workshop, which was managed locally by Bakwa, participants studied and translated a whole range of different texts, including ones written by Cameroonian writers. For Ros Schwartz, the workshop was very timely as she is currently translating a book by Cameroonian writer Max Lobe, and she took the opportunity

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to discuss and research some of the cultural challenges she encountered. Some interesting issues arose in the discussion of early translations of Cameroonian texts such as the misinterpretations of local cultures they reveal. There was an interesting parallel between the Lobe translation and Oyono's book *Une vie de boy*, as both texts include the term '*baton de manioc*'. John Reed translates this in *Houseboy* as 'cassava stick'. Ros and the participants discussed alternative solutions that better represent local realities, deciding upon the term '*bobolo*', which is used in some anglophone communities.

Discussion inevitably turned to whether many classic Cameroonian texts should be retranslated locally for Cameroonian audiences and how much more culturally representative those translations might be. We also looked at early translations of postcolonial literatures in their historical context, when Western domestication of African texts was more commonplace than today, and publishers would more frequently make amendments to translations to appeal to a European or American readership, without the knowledge or consent of the translator.

Challenging conventions

As a result of these discussions, we debated the relevance of the terms 'foreignisation' and 'domestication' when translating Cameroonian texts for Cameroonian audiences. Professor Madhu Krishnan introduced a recent political debate among African writers, academics and publishers which questions the use of glosses, footnotes and italicisation in African europhone literatures, arguing that these strategies serve primarily non-African audiences. Clearly, this argument is also relevant to translations of African literatures, and it made participants and workshop leaders alike question their use of techniques like these when they are translating Cameroonian texts.

The discussion group after the workshop each day turned out to be much more popular than expected; when the workshop ran late, or there was no power, or the noise of thunderstorms meant that we had to huddle together, participants still insisted on our evening conversations. We talked about topics including the diversity of cultural translation strategies, African translation traditions and the future of literary translation in light of technological developments and neural machine translation.

The language of the country

One popular subject was the translation of literature into and out of local Cameroonian languages and

sociolects. The challenge in a country with so many different languages is the number of people who will actually read it; the language groups are often small to start with, and many languages are primarily oral and have no standard written form. During the workshop, we looked at non-standard euphone texts influenced by African languages, and as participants shared sociolects, they worked on translating and appropriating classic European texts by rewriting them in Camfranglais and Pidgin. Ray Ndébi's translation into Camfranglais of an extract from Jane Austen's *Emma* was particularly impressive and well received by participants, who could hear their own voices in his. The exhilarated reactions to Ndébi's translation contrasted sharply with participants' responses to translations of Pidgin or Camfranglais in early postcolonial literatures, which many individuals saw as 'insulting'.

As part of the workshop, we held a translation slam on Sony Labou Tansi's *L'Anté-peuple* to show just how diverse literary translations of the same text can be, and we invited local experts, including publishers, to speak on issues affecting the world of literary translation in Cameroon. One major concern was over sourcing finance for publishing translations locally; some people suggested collaborations with international publishers to increase opportunities for funding and access to other sorts of financial support.

Bridging the generation gap

The workshop culminated in a public literary translation conference at the Muna Foundation in central Yaoundé. Workshop participants such as Félicité Ette Enow and Mariette Tchamda Mbunpi were able to showcase their work by reading extracts of their translations. The programme was entirely filled with local speakers, and attracted politicians such as former shadow Minister for Education Jean Takougang; translators and publishers like Rita Bakop (Bak Editions); journalists such as Parfait Tabapsi, president of Cameroon Art Critics; and writers like Florian Ngimbi, whose declaration '*J'écris Camerounais*' set the tone for the whole event.

There was also a round-table discussion on the vital role of translation in Cameroonian society today featuring Professor Valentine Ubanako, vice-dean and lecturer in English linguistics and translation at the University of Yaoundé I; and a further discussion regarding the development of a local literary translation network caused heated debate between different generations. Some of the older participants wanted something very structured, with clear entry levels, while emerging literary translators preferred a network that is open to those who have not yet been published or who are simply passionate about languages. Prudence Lucha, an experienced translator at the Ministry of Transport, expressed her fervent desire to bridge this clear generational gap, to cheers from the younger members of the audience.


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A round-table discussion on local language translation explored the work being carried out by Christian organisations SIL Cameroon and the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL), both of which help languages thrive beyond the spoken word by producing dictionaries and grammars and other resources in languages such as Fe'fe', Kom and Yemba.

We also heard from Dr Ndé mu Fopinn, who translates classic Western texts into Ngemba; and from authors who write in local languages: Godbless Kigha, for example, recently published *Kiḃoó Kě Ji Nir* (*The Garden of Advice*) in Lamnso' and travelled for several days from the war-torn anglophone region to participate in the event. As a whole, attendees expressed a keen desire to see the impact of literary works in local languages expanded through translation.

Mentoring from the experts

Since the conference took place, workshop participants have been translating short stories (written in French and English by up-and-coming Cameroonian writers), and their translations will appear alongside the source texts in a bilingual anthology published by Bakwa this spring. Each participant has worked closely with a mentor to refine their work, and we recruited Mona de Pracontal, Roland Glasser and Sika Fakambi to the mentoring team to offer their guidance and expertise to participants. The mentorship period, over two and a half months, was a chance for participants to apply the knowledge they had acquired during the workshop, to gain further one-to-one advice, and to experience the lengthy process of literary translation from that first initial read, through numerous drafts as well as research and ongoing feedback, to the copyediting and publishing process. Participants will then benefit from having a published, paid translation which they can use as a springboard for future literary translation work.

However, the project has not only benefited the participants; it has also been enlightening for workshop leaders in terms of developing our understanding of Cameroonian cultures and perspectives in their plurality and hearing diverse views on the current political climate and its relationship with language. We hope this project will be the first of many to come, as local networks develop further and the people who took part in this workshop become the experts passing on their knowledge to other budding literary translators. Colleagues at Bristol University and Bakwa are certainly keen to continue collaborating to further develop creative talent in Cameroon, and also to look increasingly at local languages to reach out to oral communities across the country through podcasts. Whatever happens now, this is an exciting time for literary production and translation in Cameroon: omnipresent, political and imperative, both on and off the page. 

Georgina and her colleagues will be presenting the session on African Literary Translation at the ITI event on 27 June.