



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

One Bangle Does Not Jingle. Culture, Literatures, and Migration in a Globalizing World

Schipper, Mineke; Ponzanesi S., Merolla D.

Citation

Schipper, M. (2006). One Bangle Does Not Jingle. Culture, Literatures, and Migration in a Globalizing World. In M. D. Ponzanesi S. (Ed.), *Migrant Cartographies. New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*. Lanham: Lexington Books. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7913>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7913>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

5

One Bangle Does Not Jingle: Cultures, Literatures, and Migration in a Globalizing World

Mineke Schipper

We live in an age when all continents are visibly incorporating the same fundamental economic ingredients as well as numerous common cultural features (due to the mass media and electronic culture). Tomlinson (1996: 22–23) cogently defines cultural globalization as “the particular effects which the general social processes of time-space compression and distanciation have on that realm of practices and experience in which people socially construct meaning.”

The concept of “globalization” suggests an active process of more or less *anonymous* conquest and unification of the global space. But who is globalizing and who is globalized, and to what effect? At a recent small globalization conference in Tanzania one of the local participants gave his own definition of what it means: globalization is like medicine: if you take too little it does not work; if you take too much, you’ll die. And another one put it more violently: globalization is like rape: since nothing can be done against it, we should perhaps just lean back and enjoy it. If this is the situation, will the ongoing global unification process destroy our diversities? Those who fear uniformity worry about whether people’s identities are threatened and emphasize the importance of differences. Culture has always been the way members of society create meaning; but existing meanings, especially dominant meanings, also create people and determine behavior of men and women as members of their society through ongoing flows of interactions. Globalization interacts negatively and positively with lived local realities, with people’s search for cultural identity as related to their roots as well as their search for integration and assimilation.

A number of human similarities, and possibly some universals, however, are hardly the result of contemporary globalization effects. In other words, in spite of all constructed dichotomies, there are similarities shared by humans, since all peoples belong to humankind. What we have in common has mainly to do with very early common basic human drives such as food, shelter, safety, and procreation. Such primary drives and needs determine behavior and are determined by innate representations. At the level of social structures, institutions, and culture, these primary drives are articulated in order to secure continuity (and to cope with change, if need be) in specific geographical, historical, and socio-cultural contexts. Still, the primary drives and needs, and the anatomy and physiology of the human body, underlie human social, cultural, and linguistic universals. How else would we be able to communicate across cultures at all?

In the context of globalization, one should ask: who is migrating, and what are the underlying reasons for migration? The African writer Sembène Ousmane told me a few years ago: We of my generation may still be so foolish as to stay in the countries of our birth, but, believe me, I know for sure that in my country, Senegal, the whole younger generation desperately wants to leave by all possible means and come to Europe, and they are all trying to prepare their departure in one way or another.

In the twenty-first century the literatures of Europe reflect the effects of migration from the South to the North. It is evident that literature in the West has profited from the immigration of writers and scholars coming from other parts of the world. However, a question rarely asked is what this migration flow of intellectuals and writers and artists means in their respective home countries and cultures. *In my opinion, this and related questions should be at the center of the debate on migrant cartographies: which part of the world is culturally enriched and which part is impoverished by the direction most cultural travelers in today's world take?*

As a result of migration, new data, new insights, and new knowledge have led to new discussions and ideas, particularly in the human sciences. Research in Africa, for example, has indeed transformed understandings and the disciplines, as emphasized by Bates, Mudimbe, and O'Barr in *Africa and the Disciplines* (1993). This does not mean, however, that the United States, Europe, and Africa have profited equally from these new data and insights.

Biodun Jeyifo (1990: 46) is troubled that in the field of research, the shift has been away from the African continent and the African universities. The agenda of Africanists in the West were little concerned with the bridging of the knowledge gap between Africa and the West in the academic field. Their agenda, in Jeyifo's words, "consists primarily of winning respectability and legitimacy for the discipline of African literary study *in the developed countries*" (44). This shift in location underlines "the problematic continuous production and reproduction of Africa's marginalization from the centers of economic

and discursive power" (46). Evidently, the scientific and political implications of contemporary postcolonial relations in the North and in the South are far from similar, as Paulin Hountondji (1990, 1992) states in several publications on the matter. In a commentary with the eloquent title "Scientific Dependence in Africa Today" (1990), he described this dependence history from within. The international labor division has made scientific invention and development the monopoly of the North, while the contribution of the South is restricted to the importation and the application of what others have found. Most students in African universities, according to Hountondji, share "the feeling that, whatever their special fields might be, everything that matters for them is located or taking place elsewhere." Elsewhere, outside Africa that is, methodologies and theories, paradigms for the "really scientific," are invented. Africans have the choice between staying at home—which means accepting the limited local knowledge situation in which researchers feel trapped—and moving to the West. There are almost no possibilities for exchange between African scholars in Africa amongst themselves or with colleagues from other Third World countries. No wonder that an enormous brain drain to the West has taken place, and Hountondji outlines the colonial history of this situation: the theoretical emptiness of colonial science is a side effect of economic domination and forced integration in the world of the capitalist market, a peripherization of the Third World economy (6, 9).

Totally different circumstances are relevant depending on whether a researcher from the North goes to the South or the other way around. The European or American going to the "Third World" is not in search of science but of scientific "raw materials"; in Africa he or she is not in search of paradigms, of theoretical and methodological models, but is in search of new information and facts to enrich his or her own paradigms. The comparison with the proverbial colonial economic greed for African "raw material" is obvious.

It is indeed true, as Bates, Mudimbe, and O'Barr (1993) have stated, that much contemporary knowledge has resulted from Northern scientific investigations in the South. This knowledge has contributed to existing disciplines or has given rise to new ones, such as anthropology. Much of this knowledge went, so to speak, behind Africa's back; it escaped the Third World in general, but it has been enriching indeed for Europe and America. It is knowledge that has systematically been returned from Africa, "repatriated, capitalized, accumulated in the center of the system," in Hountondji's words (1992: 344-346). In this system, Africa seems no more than a detour to be made on the scientific highway leading to the academic insiders' bulwark of knowledge. In the meantime, what is happening to traditional knowledge and skills? In the best case, these continue to exist next to the new knowledge; in the worst, they are wiped out from the collective memory. Here the critical question asked in Kane's novel *L'aventure ambiguë* is crucial: "... what you learn, does that compensate for what you forget?" (49).

SIMILARITIES

Those looking for differences will find only differences in their research, and those looking for similarities will certainly find similarities. I'd like to articulate both similarities and differences in this context. On the one hand, it is important to be aware of human similarities, globally speaking, but also as far as Europe itself is concerned: we may tend to aim at differences between the works of travelers coming to Europe and those who "were always there." We tend to forget that as human creatures we certainly have things in common: we are all earthlings; we all have the same body shape; we all are products of genetic, cultural, and societal forces that seem to provoke similar reactions. All peoples breathe, have language, and are sexually active. Anatomical and physiological features have been mostly neglected in anthropological studies, although, as we said earlier, they do underlie social and cultural structures and institutions in society. Culture is transmitted horizontally and vertically between individuals and collectivities, and to a great extent, culture is much less created by individuals than it is imposed upon them (Brown 1991: 40).

We can try to classify certain human phenomena, even when the contents profoundly differ. Examples are *cooking, courtship, etiquette, funeral rites, fire making, incest taboos, property rights, numerals, and so forth*. In a number of cases, though, there are also universals of content, with universal details, for example, general similarities across the world in the emotions people express during bereavement, such as shortening and easing bereavement by final funeral rites (Levinson and Malone 1980: 297).

People typify the world about them in a variety of words, but there are some basic universal conceptions in the semantic components beneath the cultural varieties in vocabulary, as Goldschmidt (quoted in Brown 1991: 76) argues: "Underlying the diversity of human institutions is a universal set of problems or functions that must be solved or discharged in all societies [and] these functions provide a common framework for the analysis of all societies." As far as the research on the relations between men and women in society is concerned, for example, most comparative studies conclude that "men exercise more power, have more status and enjoy more freedom" (Levinson and Malone 1980: 267).

Some scholars have distinguished universals "of essence" and "of accident." According to Brown, "essence" refers to universals "that could not be eliminated except by unnatural interventions" (e.g., by genetic engineering), "examples of essences being biological features of the species." In his opinion, "much of the debate concerning male and female differences turns around the issue of whether certain of the universal differences are essential or accidental."

Our world is not static; universals may change or disappear, and over time new universals have come into being: the use of plastic containers, phos-

phorus matches, and manufactured clothing are almost universal by now, and Coca-Cola and McDonald's do not (alas for the romance of anthropology) seem far behind (50). Old universals do not necessarily have eternal life, and numerous new universals, not only material ones, but also ideas, representations, and artistic devices, will spread around the globe in the years ahead, affecting people's earlier perspectives on humanity and the universe. Such new universals spread today, often thanks to globalization.

DIFFERENCES

While the academy may declare all dichotomies dead in today's world, there is undeniably at least one crucial dichotomy that subsists among humans in the contemporary world, although it is not a problematic issue in the European context. Still, what should be far more taken into account in the academy, since it influences research results all the time, is the continuous reality of the enormous information gap and inequality in access to material facilities between the rich and the poor of our world. Globally speaking, there is a huge imbalance in available scholars and available data, in library access, in access to means of communication and information technology, and in the quantitative representation of existing cultural, regional, and gender diversities worldwide.

One human universal is the mechanism of oppositions and hierarchies people have to establish continuously in their perspective on the world. It is important, for example, to be aware of the fact that not only in the West, but in all cultural and social contexts, in all times and places, people constantly develop views of themselves and of those considered to be others; this is how humans think and behave. Juxtaposed to our views of ourselves and of others, there are others' views of themselves and of us—it is as simple as that. However, people's demand for alternative perspectives outside their own center tends not to be particularly intense in the camp of most "selves."

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the academic debate in the humanities has mostly been dominated by emphasis on difference rather than on what people share: difference between "us" and "them," difference in race, class, ethnicity, culture, nation, continent, and so forth. Migration then became a factor of such importance in the Western world of culture and literature, and solutions have been sought to override the emphasis on constructed dichotomies. They were found in "mixture" concepts, such as creolization or hybridity, as the result of mutual influence and migration, with emphasis on the West: travelers from the West going to other parts of the world and travelers from other parts of the world going to the West. Such "solutions" have been invented mainly by scholars located in the West as a result of the multinational Otherness industry that had been developed in

this part of the world. Again, the academic attention focused on the relations of the West to the Rest, the old colonial relations of the metropolitan center to its margins.

The centrality of the role of the West in most research has to do with its economic domination of people's destinies, food or famine, war or peace, and migration. Most migrant writers develop after arrival strong connections with their new environment. They have found a much more comfortable place to live than in their countries of origin. This one-way migration of a relatively small intellectual elite will continue as long as the West is economically more prosperous than other parts of the world.

What is happening in migrant literature in Europe in our new century? In Elleke Boehmer's definition, this literature represents a "geographic, cultural and political retreat by writers from the . . . post-colonial world back to the old metropolis," with literatures as one of the results of that retreat (Boehmer 1995: 237).

From the writers' home countries voices can be heard that blame migrant writers and academics for being culturally coquettish: using their cultural background to entertain readers in the West for exotic or economically attractive reasons, without being loyal to the brothers and sisters who stayed at home. On the other hand, writers who stay in their own cultures and focus on the national local context in their work draw little attention from readers and critics in the Western world.

The key question is: what is the difference between writers who have migrated and those who stayed? Did the migrant writers cut off the cultural umbilical cord with their cultures of origin, or has culture become an easily transportable commodity? To what extent do they continue to relate to their original cultures for reasons of loyalty and commitment? And what about the second or third generation, those who were born from migrant parents? Is their position very different? Are they less connected to the country of origin of their parents? Or do they reinvent the cultures of their ancestors to satisfy their own needs or their readers' needs? This has happened, for example, in African-American culture where an Africa has been invented that appears completely alien to Africans in Africa.

Some try to relate by all means to the place where their ancestors lived, for reasons ranging from a passionate search for a lost identity to profitable opportunism. To what extent are their books read in their countries of origin? And if they are read, what is the difference in critical reactions in both parts of the world? Very little is known so far about the varying reception of many of those texts. A case in point is the way the Nigerian writer Ben Okri, living in England, linked his work to that of predecessors in his own transcultural context of origin, such as D. O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola, who had transcribed oral Yoruba stories into written texts, in Yoruba and in English, respectively, each in their own personal way. Ben Okri, on the basis

of and inspired by oral and writing predecessors of various origins in his own country of birth, and inspired by earlier booming magical realism in Latin America, developed this earlier line of writing in new directions. The most interesting difference between these authors is that Tutuola still respected the old dichotomy between human settlement and forest, whereas Okri made this dichotomy problematic by introducing ghosts and spirits and other characters—belonging to their own separate space in those earlier Yoruba stories—to the “real world” of his fiction. They have become part of the whole scene of life, thanks to the mosaic of esoteric events taking place in the context of “everyday reality.” The urban location of his realistic characters in his fictional work thus belongs to a wider intercontinental magical realistic tradition. And Okri makes use of a distancing postmodern irony, which made no sense in the world of Fagunwa and Tutuola. Still, Okri’s work would not have been possible without those earlier oral and written West African cultural traditions, and cannot be understood without taking into account his predecessors in his Nigerian background.

In their comments on migrant literature, Western literary critics and academics often take the position that migrant writers are a “special category.” In the Netherlands, we have seen this in the *Week of the Book 2001*, dedicated to “Writing between Cultures,” with attention from the media concentrated on those writers who are considered as originating from “other” parts of the world. Although there was indeed attention paid to writers with origins from outside Europe, the message was clearly circular: “they” are different; therefore they have to be dealt with differently—which leads directly to paternalist praise and shoulder patting. One might suspiciously wonder whether this is a way to prevent such writers from “crossing over” to the category of the “real” national or international Western literature canon?

There are also those critics who argue that there should be no such category as migrant writers or migrant literature. They seem to believe in a human universal called “literary quality,” a quality that can be found in texts from all cultures and that is not dependent on elements outside the text such as autochthony or allochthony. There are writers and failures, their argument goes: if they are good writers we’ll pay attention to them and if they write rubbish we’ll ignore them. It is exclusively a matter of quality. Such critics may be harsh in their condemnation of what is in their eyes an obvious lack of quality.

The question then is about what far too often is taken for granted: who decides what quality is? To what extent is the application of the label of quality subconsciously mixed up with the critic’s biased perspective on what is considered to be real literature? Those who suggest that they know for sure what quality is may be so myopically concentrated on cultivating and weeding their own little garden that they completely ignore what is growing and blooming in gardens and fields outside the hedge enclosing their own little corner of the world.

My point is that there is much cultural knowledge critics and academics are not "naturally" aware of. We are all condemned to necessarily limited knowledge, despite our globalizing world. We therefore should not only try to be as erudite as possible, but at the same time also cultivate our awareness of the relativity of our own position and perspective.

INTERCULTURAL COOPERATION

In order to define where we want to go, globally speaking, we first of all have to be aware of the restricting legacies of our human socio-cultural past. This certainly holds for research in the field of migrant cartographies. I strongly recommend that those working in departments of European languages and interested in the field of "New Literatures" cooperate intensively with specialists in the fields of the cultures, traditions, and literatures of origin of the migrant writers concerned. Otherwise we may tend to neglect or misinterpret traditions, themes, or devices that seem original and "exotic" to Western eyes, but are in reality nothing new to (or perhaps, on the contrary, totally foreign to) the ancestral traditions of these writers. Lack of knowledge routinely leads to serious lack of insight and very erroneous conclusions.

In a world of globalization and migration, genuine intercultural cooperation is therefore inevitable. We cannot know everything and need to be aware of our limits. This is particularly true for those who are the posterity of a history of colonial expansion and of a Europe that ruled the waves. Humility is a rather underdeveloped quality in the West, as Chinua Achebe warned a long time ago. In spite of human universals and globalization, cultures are not accessible to outsiders without serious study. Why are critics being so sure that they really understand the references to cultural contexts and traditions they have never studied? Migrant writers write in a variety of ways and in this respect they do not differ from other writers. However, they often refer insistently to their cultures of origin. If we wish to do justice to those references, we need solid knowledge regarding those cultural contexts. Postcolonial criticism does not seem to be well equipped to understand the underlying cultural legacies and the specific subtlety of the texts concerned.

We have to acknowledge our profound mutual lack of cultural knowledge before these gaps can be bridged. The approach from a cosmopolitan perspective is one thing. It is practiced, largely, in the Western academy and is mainly limited to texts and criticism in European languages. In this approach the cultural dimensions of the motherlands of origin tend to be neglected, ignored, or exoticized. We should carefully take into account that a history which has brought cultures together is strongly connected to cultural histories with different origins and languages. The contexts and literary (oral as

well as written) traditions of those unique histories of origin deserve as much attention as the cultures of destination and the postcolonial perceptions developed in the West. In order to do justice to the new literatures in Europe, more in-depth research is needed to reveal the various real-world cultural contexts that have inspired and contributed to the birth of those new literatures. Neither approach, the cosmopolitan approach from the West or the specialized in-depth approach related to the cultures of origin, can do without the other. Specialized knowledge, and interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation, are indispensable. As the Fulfulde in West Africa say in their great wisdom: "One bangle does not jingle." This common-sense metaphysics is more than rhetoric; it is applicable to cross-cultural perspectives on new European literatures: the bangles of the cultures and literatures of origin and of destination all contribute to the new ensemble created in a globalizing and globalized Europe in the twenty-first century. The global imbalance in access to data and research (and not only on the subject of migrant cartography) risks the inescapable biasing of research projects and hence results across the humanities. This is one of the reasons to plead for a better exchange and distribution of cultural and scientific knowledge. The various bangles need both to be heard in and to tune to the new intercultural dialogues about the emerging cultural processes and realities of our time and world.

WORKS CITED

- Boehmer, Elleke, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Brown, Donald E., *Human Universals*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.
- Hountondji, Paulin. "Scientific Dependence in Africa Today." *Research in African Literatures* 21.3 (1990): 5-15.
- Hountondji, Paulin. "Daily Life in Black Africa." In *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. Ed. V. Y. Mudimbe.
- Jeyifo, Biodun. "The Nature of Things: Arrested Decolonization and Critical Theory." *Research in African Literatures* 21.1 (1990): 33-46.
- Levinson, David, and Martin J. Malone, *Toward Explaining Human Culture*, New Haven, CT: HRAF Press, 1980.
- Tomlinson, J. "Cultural Globalization: Placing and Displacing the West." *The European Journal of Development Research* 8.2 (December 1996): 22-35.