

## Études littéraires africaines

**Martinez (Nadine), *Écritures africaines. Esthétique et fonction des écritures dogon, bamana et sénoufo*. Paris : L'Harmattan, coll. Ethnoesthétique, 2010, 272 p. – ISBN 978-2-296-11734-1**

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L'enfant-soldat : langages & images  
Numéro 32, 2011

URI : [id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018664ar](http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018664ar)

DOI : [10.7202/1018664ar](https://doi.org/10.7202/1018664ar)

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Éditeur(s)

Association pour l'Étude des Littératures africaines (APELA)

ISSN 0769-4563 (imprimé)  
2270-0374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

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Citer cet article

Boscolo, C. (2011). Martinez (Nadine), *Écritures africaines. Esthétique et fonction des écritures dogon, bamana et sénoufo*. Paris : L'Harmattan, coll. Ethnoesthétique, 2010, 272 p. – ISBN 978-2-296-11734-1. *Études littéraires africaines*, (32), 181–183. doi:10.7202/1018664ar

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relève, dans ces romans, l'omniprésence d'une « technique narrative » (p. 166) marquée par, respectivement, « le statut du narrateur », celui des « personnages » et le « cadre spatio-temporel » (p. 166-196).

On peut regretter que le caractère un peu trop technique de cette dernière partie crée un hiatus avec l'approche thématique, tout en proximité et en sympathie, des parties précédentes. D'autant plus que c'est l'auteure elle-même qui affirme que « ces romans ne font pas preuve d'une originalité particulière dans leur démarche narrative » (p. 166). *In fine*, les annexes, constituées d'entretiens avec les trois auteurs en vie et d'un portrait du défunt auteur (Tene Youssouf Guèye) de son corpus, rétablissent l'harmonie et la pertinence du travail fait par Coudy Kane.

■ Thierno DIA TOURÉ

MARTINEZ (NADINE), *ÉCRITURES AFRICAINES. ESTHÉTIQUE ET FONCTION DES ÉCRITURES DOGON, BAMANA ET SÉNOUFO*. PARIS : L'HARMATTAN, COLL. ETHNOESTHÉTIQUE, 2010, 272 P. – ISBN 978-2-296-11734-1.

If the title of the book *Écritures africaines* calls to the mind the intriguing and beautiful signs of Nsibidi, Bamun, or Vai writing systems on the one hand, and Tifinagh and the Ethiopic one, on the other, the subtitle suggests that the content of the study might present something that will dig deeper in the African past and throw a new light on its ways of encoding knowledge and information.

The table of contents is captivating : the analysis of the Dogon, Bamana, and Senufo « sign systems » (more accurately, graphisms) is followed by an interdisciplinary perspective on what constitutes « writing ». Besides, it announces a section focussing on the relation between writing and art, another one on the oral/written dichotomy and, after a chapter on the function of writing, it proposes the author's interpretation of the data. The task is ambitious as it aims to modify the very definition of « writing » and constitutes therefore « une tentative d'apporter des modifications aux définitions de l'écriture » (p. 12).

For the reader, the beginning is synonymous with being confronted with the fascinating world of meanings contained in myths, rituals, as well as in the structuring of the living spaces of the cultures under consideration. The signs build a kind of inter-textual relation to the cultural system to which they refer. Accordingly, they require background knowledge to be read, while they open up

to varying interpretations. In effect, they share the power of the « things » they refer to, because they are part of them and of their construction. Their modalities are usually owned by a restricted group of people ; they are made of different materials belonging to everyday life, though what these writings say is not necessarily meant for everyday communication, nor for everybody. At times the communication is with god or it is just meant for humans ; it is inscribed in the body, in the environment and it is either visible or kept hidden.

After the informative first contact with the features of Dogon, Bamana and Senoufo sign systems, the scholar attentively considers the position of anthropologists, linguists and semioticians focussing on the reception of African writing. And, at this point, as it often happens with « things African », academic scholarship appears to have a problem with its own procedures or, better, with those definitions on which it normally thrives. Long considered as some kind of predecessors along the evolutionary line that sees phonetic and alphabetic writing as the apex of development, these « signs » have been denied the status of writing systems. Yet, as the author argues, they constitute a system as they are written, and carry and convey a message. According to Martinez, to move away from the Eurocentric vision that still lingers and has hindered the fruitful analysis of the functions of the African traditional writing systems, it is necessary to re-formulate what writing is : « La pleine reconnaissance de l'écriture traditionnelle africaine passe par la formulation d'une nouvelle définition de l'écriture » (p. 62).

But whereas one might wonder whether a new label would be enough to bring about a different approach, apt to highlight the unique features of these writing systems, this concern of theoretical nature actually limits the scope of the study, preventing an analysis in the terms announced in the subtitle. Thus, for instance, the scholar's discourse – especially the intriguing relation between art and signs – does not take advantage of important studies in African art criticism that might be extremely relevant to approach the features and, above all, the aesthetics of African writings. Relevant examples of this tendency would be the collection of essays edited by Mary H. Nooter : *Secrecy : African Art that Conceals and Reveals* (New York : Museum for African Art, 1993) or Bargna's approach in *Arte Africana* (Milano : Jaca Book, 2000 ; NewYork : Antique Collector's Club, 2000). Indeed, even the insightful observations that emerge from the focus on the cohabitation of oral and written words seem to be subordinated to the scholar's theoretical concern. Besides, it is only

in the light of the author's theoretical priority, that one can interpret the strikingly missing voices of those who write using these signs. *Écritures Africaines* is thus altogether more an academic, historiographical, and semiotic in depth disquisition on the nature of writing. Its reading triggers different questions, whilst it definitely calls for more research into this fascinating aspect of human communicative strategies.

■ Cristina BOSCOLO

MCKINNEY (MARK), *THE COLONIAL HERITAGE OF FRENCH COMICS*. LIVERPOOL : LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011, 270 P. – ISBN 978-1-84631-642-5.

This book is an important contribution to the history of the Francophone comic strip. It explains how early masters of the form, Hergé and Alain Saint-Ogan, produced work that was sympathetic to imperialism. It narrates how these and other artists promoted the colonial idea by drawing work which encouraged readers to take pride in French and Belgian power overseas. However, this is only a part of the story. In addition, McKinney addresses more contemporary graphic narratives. He explains that since the 1980s graphic novelists in France, Switzerland, and Belgium have produced works that evoke imperial history. These new publications include some material that is nostalgic for empire, as well as strips that are more critical of it. McKinney admires the work of this latter type, produced by people such as Yvan Alagbé and Joann Sfar, and when he concludes the monograph it is to them that he gives the last word.

*The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* therefore combines detailed historical analysis of material from the 1930s with politically informed literary criticism of more contemporary art and writing. It successfully sweeps from past to present and back again, linking heritage to history and vice versa. This is achieved so elegantly because of the structure that is used. Quite clinically, the book is organized through a prolonged discussion of two dominant themes : comics and representations of the colonial exhibitions, such as the Exposition coloniale internationale (Paris, 1931), and how comics portray colonial expeditions, notably the Citroën sponsored Croisière Noire (1924-1925).

*Grosso modo*, McKinney's analysis reveals that comics are helpful barometers for understanding their times. Their creators are depic-