

Magic Marketing: Performing Grassroots Literacy¹

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Abstract

This article shows how socially stigmatized *ways of writing* may be commodified by the scribes themselves in order to reap symbolic and/or economic benefits. I illustrate this point by examining African marabouts' advertisements in France and the way they are read by the French. These cards promote marabouts' spiritual powers with promises to bring back unfaithful spouses and, among other things, success in business. I argue that what French readers interpret as grassroots literacy should instead be analyzed as *astroturf literacy*, i.e. literacy that imitates or fakes popular grassroots ways of writing. I submit that display of seemingly poor literacy is an essential part of marabouts' *doing being African*: By performing 'non-standard' literacy they become 'authentic' Africans, and therefore legitimate clairvoyants, according to the set of fantasized sociocultural stereotypes. Yet, by recycling socio-cultural stereotypes, the marabouts participate in the re-production of the social and moral orders that enable the possibilities of French readers' meaning-making.

1. Introduction

Work on national and transnational migrations has amply shown that geographic mobility often entails the restructuring of social and linguistic practices of both those who move and those in the host population who come in contact with them (Vigouroux 2008.) Blommaert (2006) has convincingly argued that texts, be they oral or written, may not travel as well as people because of the usual discrepancy between the ecology of signs in which a text is produced and that in which it is received, read, and therefore interpreted.²

As "circulating entities" (Latour 1993, quoted by Ury 2007:46), textual artifacts establish rela-

tionality between people who would otherwise not be in contact with each other. Semiotic artifacts create social continuity between otherwise discontinuous geographic spaces. Yet, relationality experienced in the here-and-now may have been shaped by previous long-term processes of broader timed-spaced encounters, real and/or imagined, experienced first-hand or entextualized through fictional narratives. Because language is inherently indexical, the activity of making sense of a text is often inseparable from that of categorizing the scribe. In other words, *ways of writing* become iconic of (projected) *ways of being*. The indexical work performed in the activity of reading may be retrospective (e.g. s/he is poorly educated because s/he has "poor" literacy skills) or prospective (e.g. s/he is expected to have "poor" literacy skills because s/he is poorly educated). Work done on social literacy has shown that the activity of reading is shaped by, among other things, overlapping ideologies of what counts as text, as good or bad writing, and as an educated or uneducated scribe (e.g.

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Sali Mufwene for being such a gracious intellectual companion, constantly challenging my ideas and helping me tighten up my arguments. Many thanks also to Jan

² Yet, this needs to be nuanced, on account of drastic migration policies in Europe and elsewhere that constrain the mobility of targeted people, who often happen to be the same ones whose literacy skills are contested.

Barton 2007, Baynham 1995, Gee 1996, Street 1995). Sociolinguistic work has shown how these multilayered ideologies control people's access to services, jobs, education or asylum (Blommaert 2001). Less attention has been given to the ways scribes may frame the readers' indexical work by conforming to the latter's socio-cultural expectations. My contribution here aims at analyzing how socially stigmatized *ways of writing* may be commodified by the scribes themselves in order to reap symbolic and/or financial benefits.

I illustrate this point by examining African marabouts' advertisements in France and how they are read by the French.³ Marabouts circulate cards that promote their spiritual powers, promising to bring back unfaithful spouses, restore virility, help pass driver's license tests, and succeed in business, among many other things. Metadiscursive comments on marabouts' flyers can be found on the Internet, where webservers comment on and display their personal collections, which they typically mock and parody with spelling mistakes and exaggerated poor literacy skills. I argue that what French readers interpret as grassroots literacy (as defined by Blommaert 2008) with instances of hetero-graphy, and vernacular language varieties, should rather be analyzed as *astro turf literacy*, which I define as literacy that imitates or fakes popular grassroots ways of writing.

Astro turf literacy implies that second indexical order — i.e. ways of indexing a particular social group, social class, geographic location, or ethnicity — operates both in the production of text and in its reception by readers. The act of writing is therefore intrinsically shaped by the act of reading, more precisely by the *expected* act of interpreting. In *astro turf literacy* the production of text is not framed as an individual act but as part of a collective activity of producers; therefore each individual voice is subsumed by an identifiable collective voice. In other words, each

³ *Marabout* is the emic term commonly used to designate African soothsayers in France. Yet, as illustrated below, the self-categorization *marabout* used in early advertisements is shifting towards other identifications such as *astrologist* or *medium*.

individual voice draws its existence from a collective one.

Marabouts' advertisements are one of the visible and visual aspects of African migrations to France and epitomize a peculiar South-to-North direction of interaction taking place in the North. Yet, as I argue below, we should not hastily subscribe to an approach where these advertisements are unilaterally analyzed as an illustration of vernacular literacy, with the marabouts stigmatized because of their 'peripheral' variety of French. A diachronic analysis of data doesn't lead to such conclusions. Nor should we, well-intentioned analysts, stop at legitimizing socially stigmatized ways of writing with fine-grained discursive analyses demonstrating how linguistically and semiotically powerful and elaborate they are nonetheless. I don't intend to question the usefulness of such studies: They have drawn the attention of analysts and readers alike (often highly literate Westerners) to the different literacy regimes in which inscriptions emerge and circulate and how the latter are stratified in the global system of communication. I argue that, although at first glance it appears to be emancipatory, such a framework of analysis may uncritically subscribe to, and moreover participate in, what de Neroni (1992) calls *Afrique fantasme* (phantasm Africa), viz., a set of reified and long-lasting images and discourse on Africa and Africans which social sciences and the humanities have partly helped construct. I submit that, on the contrary, these advertisements illustrate the commodification by some Africans of cultural and linguistic stereotypes Westerners associate with them, in order to assert their supernatural power and promote their status as authentic African marabouts to their French readers and hopefully to succeed socio-economically.

I start the discussion below with a presentation of the set of data on which my analysis is based. I then turn to a brief history of marabouts in France where I analyze the emergence of an African 'economy of the occult' (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993) in relation to the following: 1) the long tradition of clairvoyance and occult sciences in France since the 16th century, with the advent of spiritism and theosophy; 2) Europeans'

long-lasting ‘sub-Saharan fantasies’ (Negroni 1992:128) about Africans’ occult powers; and 3) the proletarianization of African migrants coming to France after Independence (1960’s).

The French’s reading of the flyers in section 3 illustrates how multiscalar processes of *erasure* (Gal and Irvine 1995) shape the readers’ frames of interpretation. I analyze the metapragmatic discourse constructed by these reading acts as part of a linguistic and “social order of what makes [them] happen” (Heller 2010:102).

The fourth section is a comparison between paper- and web-advertisements. I show that, unlike the ‘struggling’ literacy displayed on flyers, that of websites is rather unmarked and therefore does not index any particular socio-cultural or socio-economic group. The question I address is why there is such a striking difference between the two modes of advertising when there are no obvious reasons to believe that paper- and cyber marabouts represent two distinct groups of people.

I conclude that marabouts’ advertisements shed new light on the topic of language commodification by showing that marketability does not necessarily equate with ‘authorized language’ (Bourdieu 1982). Non-standard literacy skills may become marketable commodities, although the practice recycles offensive sociocultural stereotypes from the host population, part of which is also targeted as potential clientele.

2. Data

This study rests on three sets of data: 1) a corpus of 200 Marabouts’ paper advertisements that I collected in Paris, in the 18th and 20th *arrondissements* (‘neighbourhoods’) between 2000 and 2005, and on the Internet in collectors’ personal and collective websites. These advertisements come as flyers slightly bigger than business cards and printed on colorful paper and hand-distributed in streets or at subway station exits, in predominantly migrant neighbourhoods, usually not very far from the marabouts’ homes, based on the street addresses given in the advertisements.

These cards have been in circulation in Paris since the late 1970’s, along with newspaper advertisements in free Parisian newspapers, in



Figure 1: Marabout’s flyer

Source: Author

African women magazines such as *Amina*, and in astrology magazines; 2) 36 Cyber advertisements ranging from marabouts’ personal websites to pre-designed advertisements found in clairvoyance websites. (Since the late 1990’s African marabouts’ advertisements have increasingly been present on the Internet.) 3) Metadiscursive e-comments written by French readers in blogs, discussion lists, and websites. They range from short metapragmatic comments such as below to very caustic diatribes and generalizing comments on the obligation for migrants to command the “language of the Republic,” a *sine qua non* condition to embrace its values (i.e. liberty, equality, and fraternity) and to be “integrated” to the French nation:

“Vous avez certainement tous déjà reçu l’un de ces tout [sic] petits flyers de prétendus guérisseurs-marabouts africains. Ces petits papiers vous promettent de réparer tous vos problèmes de couple, d’érection, d’argent et j’en passe dans un français maculé de fautes d’**orthographe** les plus inattendues...”⁴

You all certainly have already received one of these very small flyers of these professed African healers-soothsayers. These small papers promise you to repair all your couple, erection, money problems and so on in a French smudged with the most unexpected **spelling** mistakes...

In order to better understand the ways in which the French make sense of these advertisements, for example, through parodistic entextualization, I start with an analysis of the sociocultural fac-

⁴ <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/38666225/ENQUETE-SUR-LES-MARABOUTS-DE-PAP>

tors that triggered the emergence of marabouts' flyers in French society. It will become apparent that, among other things, African occultism advertisements must be analyzed within the long tradition of 'exotic publicity' which marabouts' advertisements are a continuation of, though under new forms.

3. A short historiography of marabouts' advertisement cards

The first African clairvoyants' advertisement in France dates back from the late 1960's and appeared in the astrology magazine *Horoscope*. The number of advertisements increased steadily until the mid-1970's, after which it multiplied. Although the first advertisements coincide with the arrival of the first marabouts in France — estimated around the 1960's (Kuscynsky 1992:47) — the choice of self-advertisement did not apply uniformly to the heterogeneous population of marabouts. This heterogeneity is encapsulated by Kuscynsky's expression *multiform invisibility* (*idem*: 58), with *invisibility* capturing the haziness of the French administration toward the marabouts regarding their immigration status and taxation. Those who were occasional or full-time marabouts before their migration to France would rather resort to their local network among the migrant population, benefiting largely from the reputation they had built in their home country rather than on self-advertisement. Many of them were providing their services in immigrants' residence halls called 'foyers', performing religious ceremonies, solving matrimonial, social and political conflicts, or helping fellow countrymen obtain residence cards or find jobs, thanks to their prayers, amulets and social networks (Samuel 1978). Yet, with the increasing pauperization of the African working class in France, it became difficult for marabouts to rely only on their traditional clientele, who could no longer afford to pay for the services they received (Globet & Guillon 1983). Thus, the circle of potential customers needed to be expanded, but word of mouth was no longer sufficient to reach a population not acquainted with West African maraboutic practices. Self-advertisement also became an option for "self-made-marabouts",

who saw clairvoyance as a possible way to overcome economic hardship in the host society and help provide financial assistance to family members who had stayed "at home" (Diallo 1984; and Kuczynski 1992: Chap.2).

The emergence of marabouts and therefore their publicity should also be understood within the broader context of occult economy in France since the 16th century. Its best-known representative is undoubtedly *Nostradamus*, a former apothecary who became famous for his publishing collections of prophecies. The attraction for occultism pervades both urban and rural environments (see Favret-Saada 1977 on witchcraft beliefs and experiences in the Bocage of western France), including all socioeconomic strata of French society, even intellectuals and artists. For example, surrealists such as André Breton were known for their engagement in occultism. In his *Lettre aux voyantes* ('Letter to clairvoyants') published in 1925, he acknowledges clairvoyants' "great powers" and asks for their help to "chase away infamous priests" (*idem*: 22).⁵

The close connection between African occultism and French-based clairvoyance has been evident in the marabouts' self-categorization since the very beginning: categories such as *voyant* 'clairvoyant' and *medium* are commonly used together, as in *Cheikh Kalipha Grand voyant Médium* ('Cheikh Kalipha Great clairvoyant Medium'). More recent flyers display the category *guérisseur* 'healer' or *astrologue* 'astrologist' alone or with a string of those already mentioned, for instance: *grand medium – voyant – astrologue*. Clearly, the marabouts have inserted themselves in an already existing economy of beliefs and have adopted categories of self-presentation already in currency and familiar to the French. Entering a new economy of written signs, marabouts' advertisements get to compete with other divinatory practices such as that of astrologists and clairvoyant, more familiar to the French, even though they publicly don't hold high currency in many segments of the population.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that on the advertisement pages of magazines or free Pari-

⁵ For a study on the relation between surrealism and occultism see Lepetit 2008 and Edelman 2006.



Figure 2: Fakir Fhaknya Khan, *Le Petit Journal Illustré* 1925.

Source: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/>

sian newspapers marabouts are categorized under the heading *esotericism* whereas clairvoyant and astrologists are classified under the label *clairvoyance* (voyance). Whereas the category *clairvoyance* is rather unmarked in French, that of *esotericism* conjures up images of occult, magical, and slightly threatening power foreign to Cartesian logic. Using categories known to French readers, the marabouts not only show their knowledge of the French local belief system but also display a clear understanding of advertising strategies, trying to attract a wide range of customers. One can assume that clairvoyants' customers are potentially more disposed to marabouts' practices than those skeptical toward non-rational practices.

In a country already very receptive to occult practices, publicity helped clairvoyance gain increasing visibility and possibly legitimacy. In 1925, *Le Petit Journal Illustré* launched the first advertisement, thus inaugurating clairvoyance with 'sensational' predictions by Fakir Fhaknya Khan, a real or imagined Indian astrologist living in Paris. For a few weeks the Fakir briefly responded to readers' questions until he was urgently recalled by his religious community and departed from France: he was believed to have committed a serious mistake in making revelations to the French (Eldelman 2006: 161). Below is how Fakir Fhaknya-Khan appeared for the first time to his French readers:

The semiotics displayed on the image is rather complex, conveying several intertwined layers of explicit and implicit meanings. Indianness is exhibited by the character's turban and iconized in the Indian-like script and oriental-sounding name *Fakir* on the left side of the page. Oriental spirituality, more specifically Hinduism, is framed through the category *FAKIR*, the bodily inscription of the swastika on the character's forehead and to a certain extent his beard. Yet, Indianness is tempered with his western-style suit. With his body posture (his crossed hands on his right lap) and staring look, he is represented as self-confident and serious-minded (he wears glasses, which may be interpreted as a sign of sophistication). Attraction for the mysterious and exotic Orient had been common in French advertisement since the 19th century and echoed, on a broader scale, France's expansionist fervor to "match British imperial achievements" (Said 1978: 218).

In the 1960's, when the first marabouts' advertisements appeared in France, the exotic Other was no longer Oriental. Since the 19th century colonization of the African continent, French imagination had been filled with images, stereotypes of and fantasies about Africa and Africans constructed and circulated in political discourse, scientific literature, colonial literary work, and advertising. (For the representation of African colonized in French advertisement see Blanchard

& Boncel 1998.) Conversely, European colonization had constructed Africans' representations of France and the French. As I am about to illustrate, marabouts' advertisements can be read as iconizing the encounter of these cross-representations.

While entering a French market already open and predisposed to occultism, marabouts also had to display distinctiveness in order to find their niches and become competitive. Yet, for singularity to become an asset, it must conform to existing frames of reference as illustrated by the use of the generalizing category 'African' exhibited since the beginning of marabouts' advertising (e.g. *le très célèbre voyant africain* 'the very famous African clairvoyant').⁶ 'African' does not locate marabouts in a well-defined socio-cultural space but rather refers to a fantasized semiotic space filled with images and discourse on Africanness, entertained by Europeans and Africans alike, be they writers (e.g. Léopold Sédar Senghor, André Gide, Graham Greene among many others), anthropologists (e.g. Marcel Griaule), or lay people. With the category AFRICAN, what seems to be exhibited are images of *authenticity* and *naturalness*, with the African "living traditionally out of his land and with his land, in and through the cosmos" ("il vit traditionnellement de la terre et avec la terre, dans et par le cosmos", Senghor 1945, quoted by De Negroni 1992:67) in a culture where "spirituality prevails over materiality" (Griaule 1958, quoted by De Negroni 1992:67). The discourse of authenticity, naturalness, and power of divination associated with Africans has prevailed in Europe since the 15th century (Lowe 2005), from explorers' travelogues to acclaimed literary works such as those of Senghor's just mentioned. As noted above,

⁶ To be sure, there are a few advertisements that refer to specific geographic location such as in the following example: *l'un des plus grands marabouts de la Casamance Senegal* ('one of the most famous marabouts from Casamance, Senegal'). Interestingly, the line following this self-presentation states: *Vient d'arrivé [sic] à Paris* ('just arrived in Paris'). Clearly, the mention of a well-identified African location, Casamance, helps construct a sense of authenticity, for both those who are and those who are not familiar with maraboutic practices. Casamance is indeed an important place regarding marabouts and maraboutic practices.

authenticity is sometimes framed in temporal terms such as in Monsieur Ali's flyer: *Heureusement que je viens d'arriver d'Afrique* ('fortunately I just arrived from Africa').

Although African marabouts' advertisements can be read in light of the long tradition of exotic publicity explained above, it is different in some ways. The *mise en scene* of the exotic Other is here performed by the exoticized himself, i.e. the marabouts, unlike in the 'Orientalism' displayed in French publicity where iconography and discourses are imagined and circulated by the French. I suggest that marabouts' advertisements should be interpreted as an expression of POST-ORIENTALISM, where stereotypes, phantasms, and projections onto the exotic Other—in this case, Africans—have been appropriated, reworked and re-circulated by African marabouts themselves, for their own benefit. Distinctive ways of writing, as I will suggest, are an essential part of marabouts' *doing being African*. But, before turning to this point, let's first make a detour to the way French readers make sense, if not fun, of them.

4. Entextualization of marabouts' advertisements

Research conducted on marabouts' clientele in France shows a vast socioeconomic and socio-cultural diversity of customers ranging from affluent to working class Hexagonal French, Portuguese, French West Indians, and Africans (Borghino 1995, Kuczynski 1992). The socio-cultural diversity of the potential addressees of advertisement cards is revealed in the marabouts' presentations of self. Alignment with French social codes is illustrated by the use of first or last names preceded by *Monsieur* as a self-reference term: e.g. *Monsieur Sakho, Mr Sidikhi, Monsieur M'Bemba*. Sometimes, honorification applies as with the title *professeur*, most commonly used after that of *Monsieur*.⁷ *Professeur*, alternating with *Pr.*,

⁷ On a collector's website specialized in marabouts flyers, statistics can be found on the use of terms for self-presentation. 51% of the 1443 flyers collected mainly in France (with a few from other parts of Europe) use the term or its variants *Monsieur* and 40% *Professeur* and its variants (<http://www.megabambou.com/galerie/stats/>).

Prof, and *Le Professeur*, can be interpreted as both an attempt to assert symbolic and cultural capital according to the French value system and as a reference to marabouts' traditional major activities, i.e. teaching the Qur'an, in the West African system.

Relocation to a new geographic ecology triggers new socio-cultural practices that enable the "relocators" to insert themselves into new socialization networks and to conform with the host country's frames of cultural and linguistic expectations.⁸ Yet, by conforming with new local frames of production and reception, the producers of those messages also run the risk of being misunderstood by their targeted audiences: on the one hand, the French population that is not familiar with African maraboutic practices and, on the other, West-Africans who are more familiar with marabouts' practices and are most likely to believe them but are otherwise not accustomed to this particular advertising style. For the marabouts, change of geographic space triggers a major shift from an oral mode of "promotion of Other" based on lineages and word-of-mouth in their countries of origin to a written practice of self-advertisement in the host country. Self-advertising ones' own powers is usually considered as a transgression of marabout's code of conduct because it transforms their powers into commodities while they have traditionally been considered as God's gifts. That is, power should speak for itself without any need for self-promotion. Many stories in Senegal recount how marabouts' self-advertisements provoked other marabouts' anger and brought a *mauvaise langue* 'a curse' (literally, 'bad tongue') to those who dared indulge in them. Kuczynski (1992) suggests that marabouts in France need to find strategies to accommodate both the pressure from the French market system and that from other marabouts' competition, while trying to comply with their home tradition, in order to secure their business without drawing malefic attacks from other marabouts. This boils down to asserting one's visibi-

lity while preserving one's anonymity. For some marabouts, this tension is resolved by adopting several names while at the same time forging one single identity with the same picture, or with the same street address and telephone numbers. In my own collection, for example, *Charles* alternates with three other identities: *Professeur Moro*, *Professeur Bengali*, and *Pr. Mohammed Aly*. His four advertisements are almost identical, with two of them displaying the same picture. Yet, because readers have other frames of reference where a name is understood to apply to one single identity, such variation and latitude in the presentation of self tend to be associated with fraudulent practice by the French. Although such practices may not be completely ruled out, the display of multiple identities need not be simplistically reduced to fraud.

As amply shown in sociolinguistics, social legitimacy is often tied to speakers' linguistic performance. Failure to speak or write according to the norms or expectations associated with a given space is thought to index a shortcoming if not social backwardness. Marabouts' flyers are no exception. Their linguistic features become emblematic of illiterate African migrants seeking opportunities in the West, conforming to a scheme of representations in the broader time-space frame of North to South relationships, where Africans are often associated with poor education. On the Internet, French readers abundantly comment on the flyers' supposedly nonstandard literacy by pointing out spelling and syntactic mistakes. For example, commenting on a "generator" of marabouts' cards available on the Internet, a web user regrets the lack of mistakes in the automatically generated cards: e.g. *c genial mais il manque les fautes dans le texte ;-)* ('it's great but mistakes are lacking in the text ;-')).⁹

Discourse on spelling or syntactic mistakes often conjures up images of marabouts as dubious characters taking advantage of fragile and naïve souls, as in the following example:

⁸ Kuczynski (2008: 242) writes that the marabouts accommodate the French and adapt their practices to the new socio-cultural environment instead of reworking them symbolically.

⁹ <http://www.megabambou.com/encyclopedie/te-moignages/questions>.

2. Analyse de l'orthographe

Pour un dégrossissage rapide, il vaut mieux éviter tous les marabouts dont les prospectus contiennent des fautes d'orthographe. Idem pour ceux qui ne contiennent que des superlatifs tel celui du "Professeur BANORO", censé être "très célèbre" (une simple recherche sur internet montre bien qu'il n'est pas si connu que ça : "Aucun résultat trouvé").

2. Analysis of spelling

To get a quick idea, one should rather avoid all the marabouts whose flyers have spelling mistakes. Likewise for those who have superlatives such as "Professor BANORO," supposedly "very famous" (an elementary search on the internet shows that he is not as well-known as he claims: "no result found").

This excerpt is part of a group of students' final paper (12 pages, only 7 of which are text) on marabouts' practices in France and the legitimacy of their advertised gifts, posted on the Internet. The students' criteria to distinguish between real vs. fake or good vs. bad marabouts are clearly based on a homology between social and linguistic order. Interestingly, among the five advertisements they reproduce in their study, only one could possibly qualify as non-standard literacy:

(...) *problème financière familiaux et sexuelle*
(...) 'financial, family and sexual problem'

In French, adjectives agree in gender and number with the head noun. This syntactic rule is correctly applied on the two adjectives *financière* and *sexuelle* if we consider, as the author of the advertisement did, that *problème* is feminine and singular. According to the scribe's use, his only 'mistake' would be on *familiaux*, because of its masculine and plural form. This is by far less than the 53 'mistakes' I identified in the students' seven written pages with among them 13 head noun-adjective disagreements, 14 non-standard spellings, 8 idiosyncratic syntactic 'niceties', and so forth. Could such instances of heterography qualify as *grassroots literacy* although the scribes belong to the highly educated stratum of

French society? Or are they just characteristic of the 'ordinary writing' (Fabre 1993) of a significant proportion of native French scribes making them rather unmarked?¹⁰ Clearly, contrary to Blommaert (2004), WRITING is not THE problem here, READING is. It is not *who* writes *what* nor *who* reads *what* but rather *who* reads *whom*. The students' comments acutely illustrate how their social construction of African marabouts is shaped independently of or prior to their reading of the latter's advertisements and how 'poor' linguistic performance is pointed out as post-facto ratification of this pre-construction.

Students' comments are both a production and an entextualized reproduction of stereotypical discourse on marabouts that circulate on the Internet in different forms. For example, performance of marabouts and their practices are sometimes staged in amateurish videos reminiscent of minstrelsy, where marabouts are impersonated by white characters wearing Afro wigs, harboring painted black faces, and speaking with parodic 'African' pronunciation and highly rudimentary French reminiscent of *le Français tirailleur*.¹¹ By their parody these videos participate in the interpretive framing of marabouts as uneducated and dubious characters and as 'racial Others'. Stereotypical representations also circulate through entextualization in official advertising campaigns such as that of French national lottery where maraboutic practices are turned into derision.¹² This video stages an African wearing a 'traditional' West African tunic and a skullcap, who is seen performing magic by reciting unintelligible incantations, reading cowries and spraying Air Wick on the lotto bulletin in order to discover the combination of winning numbers. The motto at the end of the advertising reads as follows:

¹⁰ I wish to introduce a distinction between *grassroots* and *ordinary* literacy. I suggest to reserve *grassroots* for a way of READING texts that display non-standard literacy and *ordinary* for the actual WRITING of a text that would be considered as 'non-standard' in reference to an ideology of spelling- and syntactic-mistake free literacy.

¹¹ *Français tirailleur* is a non-native variety used in the French colonial army by West African recruits before and during the First World War.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PESGI9K36iU>

AUGMENTEZ PLUTÔT VOS CHANCES
EN JOUANT À JOKER+

INCREASE YOUR LUCK INSTEAD
BY PLAYING JOKER+

This advertisement opposes two belief systems discursively articulated by the adverb *plutôt* ('instead'): a shady and irrational African system resting on mysterious and unintelligible oral practices, and a westernized and tangible one iconicized by the materiality of the lotto bulletin. This opposition frames games of chance as rational ones by playing on European internalized representations of African occult practices. Yet, if we pursue a historiography of the marabouts' association with gambling, we notice that they are the ones who drew it upon themselves by advertising their power to improve luck in gambling. The parodic discourse of the French lottery advertisement then typically illustrates how new meanings emerge from the re-inscription into a new context of a text being lifted up from its 'original' context of production. New meanings are always selected out of a variety of potential others. In order to make sense to the intended audience they need to conform to existent frames of interpretation, thereby participating in both their construction and circulation. Thus, this applies to both marabouts' discourse on gambling and that of the national lottery on marabouts.

Although derogatory, such entextualizations illustrate how the marabouts have penetrated the French semiotic landscape. In a way they also assert that *it is the French who creates the marabout*, to paraphrase Fanon's words (1972).¹³ Yet, as I remarked above, the French interpretative framing of marabouts and their practices has been partly shaped by the marabouts themselves, especially through displaying seemingly grassroots literacy.¹⁴ In doing so, they conform to linguistic and social schemes of representations

¹³ Fanon's exact words are: *C'est le blanc qui crée le nègre* ('it is the white who creates the negroe', my translation) (1972 :29).

¹⁴ The same idea is expressed by Fanon (1972:29) when he states: *Mais c'est le nègre qui crée la négritude* ('But it is the negroe who creates negritude', my translation)

in currency in France. Approaching marabouts' display of literacy as a business strategy, as I do below, gives agency to scribes often deprived of it in our sociolinguistic analysis and helps reframe seemingly 'poor written' competence into an economically empowering experience, although this is based on the reworking of socio-cultural stereotypes.

5. Doing being African by commodifying 'non-literacy skills'

In her extensive ethnographic study on African marabouts in Paris, Kuczynski (1992) observes that the early comers, who had been trained as marabouts before migrating to France, were often illiterate in French, having been educated in Koranic schools. Thus, the flyers are allegedly often written by one of the marabouts' family members, friends, or faithful customers. Consequently, the flyers are hardly designed by or for one individual marabout, but produced from templates used by/for others. Over the past 40 years only a few templates have been used, creating the impression of a style of writing and a distinctive genre.¹⁵ Intertextuality is made obvious by the replication of the entire text, or of short or large strips thereof, from one flyer to another. Variation emerges from the color or design of the cards, or from the reordering of the borrowed strips. When reinserted into a new discursive space, the borrowed strips create thematic and discursive heterogeneity as utterances or words follow each other with no apparent systematic discourse structure: e.g. *amour, commerce, cheveux, poils, amaigrissement, sexuel, fécondité, chance*¹⁶ ('love, business, hair, slimming, sexual, fertility, luck'). Instances of rewording from one advertisement to the other are also common currency:

¹⁵ This genre is found in different parts of the world including Asia, Europe, and Latin and North America. The emergence and spread of a marabouts' transnational written genre is worth investigating but extends the editorial limits of this article.

¹⁶ <http://www.megabambou.com/encyclopedie/style/enumeration.html>

a) Réussit la ou les autres ont échoués 'succeeds the or others have failed'¹⁷

b) Réussite là ou les autres ont échoué 'success there or others have failed'

The verb *Réussit* ('succeeds') in (a) becomes the noun *Réussite* ('success') in (b), or the other way around. Grammatical 'mistakes' may be multiplied, such as with *ou* 'or' instead of *où* 'where'; or they may be corrected: from *la* to *là* or from *les autres ont échoués* to *les autres ont échoué*. In French, the past participle (e.g. *échoué*) does not agree with the subject noun if preceded by the auxiliary *avoir* ('have').

Marabouts' advertisements share not only common themes (love, professional success, achievements in different domains such as sports, luck games, increase of sexual prowess, fertility, healing of sickness etc.) but also linguistic features that can be summarized as follows: spelling mistakes, typos, lack of agreement, misuse of prepositions, cross-register transfers, misuse of diacritics, misuse of written conventions.

1. Spelling 'mistakes'

Quite common are artificial word boundaries and word boundaries 'transgressions' such as *tou tou* (toutou 'pooch'), *sur tout* (surtout 'especially'). Others like RÉUSSITDANSTOUSLESDOMAINES instead of RÉUSSIT DANS TOUS LES DOMAINES 'succeeds in all domains') appear to be dictated by editorial constraints with the scribe trying to fit a whole sentence in one line. While some orthographic 'mistakes' show good knowledge of word pronunciation, e.g. CHUTTE DE CHEVEUX (CHUTE 'hair loss'); *efficacité* (*efficacité* 'efficiency'), others display phonetic non-discrimination that often indexes non-nativeness in French, e.g. *abondon* (*abandon*). Spelling mistakes on homonyms such as *quelque soit votre problème* (*quel que soit* 'whatever your problem is') are very frequent among native French speakers and marks a confusion between *quelque* [determiner] and *quel que*, a phrase consisting of an indefinite article *quel* and the complementizer *que*.

¹⁷ I chose a literal English translation to help the reader grasp the vernacular variety used.

2. Typos

Some marabouts' flyers display a great number of typos, which can be distracting for the reader but hardly impede understanding: e.g. *Guérit l'imuisseance* instead of *Guérit l'impuissance* 'heal impotence', *marige* instead of *mariage* 'marriage', *mal"fique* instead of *maléfique* 'malevolent'.

3. Lack of agreement

Adjective-head noun disagreements are found both for gender, as in *entente parfait* instead of *entente parfaite* 'perfect harmony', and for number, e.g. *l'homme et la femme deviennent inseparable* instead of *deviennent inseparables* 'become inseparable'.

4. Misuse of prepositions

Although in some cases misuse of prepositions may not alter meaning such as in *Les méthodes de résoudre vos problèmes* instead of *Les méthodes pour résoudre* 'methods for solving your problems, or *les problèmes au lieu de travail* instead of ... *sur le lieu de travail* 'at the workplace', in others it may say the contrary of the intended meaning: *il créera contre vous, une entente parfait* 'he will create a perfect harmony against you' instead of *entre vous* 'between you'.

5. Cross-register transfers

These show up mostly in the concurrent display of elements usually associated with written (formal) and oral (informal) registers such as the use of 1) T/V to which we will return below, 2) adverbs' reduplication for marking emphasis (*Guérisseur très très compétent* 'very very competent healer'), and frozen expressions: *il courra derriere vous comme le chien derriere son maitre* ('he will run after you like the dog behind his master') sometimes written with some variants as in *Il ou elle sera pour toujours comme un toutou* ('he or she will be forever like a pooch'). The canine reference is so commonly used in marabouts' advertisements that, over the years, it has tended to epitomize marabouts' flyers.

6. Misuse of diacritics

In French, misplaced or misused accents tend to not impede meaning (e.g. *ÂPRES* for *APRÈS* 'after', *vous à quitté* for *vous a quitté* 'left you'), but in some cases it may hamper understanding such as in the following two examples:

(1) *Envoute – ensorcelle la malchance vous poursuit.*

Here the absence of acute accents transformed the expected participles *Envouté – ensorcellé* into third person presents with the sense of [the marabout] ‘captivates and bewitches misfortune follows you’ instead of ([you] ‘captivated and bewitched’).

(2) *votre rival repousse à jamais,*

In this example the lack of accent on the past participle *repoussé* radically transforms the intended meaning ‘**pushed away** for ever’ into ‘your rival **pushes back** again forever’.

7. Misuse of written conventions

This mistake results typically from inconsistent punctuation and seemingly erratic usage of capital letters. Whereas no clear patterned use of punctuation emerges from the analysis of marabouts’ flyers, usage of capital letters appears to be dictated by meaning rather than writing conventions. In the example *n’hésitez pas à me Contacter* (‘don’t hesitate to Contact me’), capitalization of the verb is used specifically to emphasize the importance of the requested action as in (...) *pour des Résultats bénéfiques garantis* (‘for guaranteed beneficial Results’) where the positive outcome of the advertised work is stressed. As illustrated by the following enumeration *Amour, Chance, Sentiments, Problèmes familiaux, Situations commerciales...* (‘Love, Luck, Feelings, family Problems, commercial Situations’), use of capital letters appears to be far from random; it only applies to head nouns and not to adjectives.

The typology presented above should not make us forget variation between marabouts’ advertisements, with some displaying a high degree of non-standard literacy while others conform to written standards. Readers generally overlook this diversity, blowing out of proportion the number of mistakes, and emphasizing the most stereotypical and often the least common ones.

Evoking marabouts’ lack of or poor literacy in French to account for their advertisements’ non-standard variety, as Kuczynski suggests (see above), does not explain why the same spelling or syntactic mistakes have been replicated for the past 40 years. Firstly, it is hard to imagine

that nobody close to the marabouts, be they a loyal customer, a cousin or brother who has been schooled in France, has ever called their attention to these ‘mistakes’ or suggested corrections to them. In addition, Kuczynski (1982:357), who conducted work with the Parisian printers of flyers, points out that the marabouts allow very little divergence from the circulating norm of writing, valorizing the reproduction of a consistent style of advertisement. Lastly, a fine-grained analysis of the ‘mistakes’ that supposedly index the scribes’ poor literacy skills shows indeed a patterned use of linguistic features such as usage of capital letters (discussed above) and confusion of T/V pronouns, to which we now turn.

According to Coveney (2010:127) ‘The choice between *vouvoisement* and *tutoiement* (henceforth, ‘T/V’) is possibly the most salient of all sociolinguistic phenomena in French’. The T/V distinction has been analyzed as highly indexical, signaling the level of formality of the relevant setting, the types of discourse and channels (online vs. on-site settings), the degree of deference and intimacy between interactants, and the reproduction of the broader social order (Brown and Gilman 1972, Brown and Levinson 1987, and Morford 1997, Warren 2006, Williams and van Compernelle 2007, 2009, among many others). At first glance, the marabouts’ misuse of pronouns of address tends to corroborate studies arguing that T/V misapplication generally indexes speakers’ non-nativeness in French (Dewaele 2004 and Dewaele & Planchenault 2006). Two ‘misuse’ features can be noted: 1) the concurrent display of T and V to address readership; and 2) the use of T in public writing. Although, the latter emerged in the 1980’s in French advertising, it still remains uncommon to date (Pires 2009). Every use of T is therefore marked, all the more so when concurrently used with V. Yet, the analysis of data shows a patterned use of T/V by the marabouts:

3) *Pour que personne ne te prend ton bien-aimé tout ce qui te tourmente dans la vie et vous saurez le soir que vous aurez votre résultat ce qui ne sera pas tard. L’homme ou la femme parti(E) tu*

viens ici – tu vas le(la) voir! Vous qui voulez des **RÉSULTATS IMMÉDIATS**, passez sans tarder !

In order for nobody to take away your (T) beloved one everything that torments you (T) in life and you (V) will know in the evening when you (V) will have your (V) result which will not be late. The man or woman gone you (T) come here – you (T) will see him(her)! You (V) who want **IMMEDIATE RESULTS**, come (V) with no delay!

4) Si ton mari ou ta femme t'a quitté(e), tu viens ici et il (ou elle) courra derrière toi (...) Grosir ou maigrir, si vous vous sentez mal aimé(e), ou si vous vivez seul(e), réussite dans tous les domaines

If your (T) husband or your (T) wife left you (T), you (T) come here and he (or she) will run after you (T) (...) Getting fat or becoming skinny, if you (V) feel unloved, or if you (V) live alone, success in all areas

My findings corroborate those of Pires (2009), who argues that, in flyers where both T/V are displayed, T is generally used when referring to love matters (e.g. a breakup or a spouse's unfaithfulness), whereas V is left for other problems such as weight issues, as in example 4. In the first example, T aims at establishing closeness with the potential distressed reader by framing the marabout-customer interaction as a helper-helped relationship, whereas V is used when describing services provided by the marabout establishing a business-type relationship with his customer (*vous saurez le soir que vous aurez votre résultat* 'you (V) will know (in) the evening when you (V) will have your (V) result').

Of course, because V in French can be both a singular formal term of address or a non-marked plural one, scribes may play with its semantic fuzziness such as below:

5) (..) même si tu as été déçu par un autre medium. VENEZ ME CONSULTER, LA CHANCE VOUS SOURIRA.

(...) even if you (T) have been disappointed by another medium. COME (V) AND CONSULT ME, LUCK WILL SMILE AT YOU (V)

Here, the shift from singular to plural addressee(s) is iconized by a font change from lower to upper case.

The marabouts' seemingly deliberate choice of non-standard literacy appears at first glance counter-intuitive both linguistically and economically. First, France epitomizes what Silverstein (1996) calls the *culture of monoglot standardization*, where the standard variety is *de facto* the yardstick against which deviations in language practices are measured. Thus, the marabouts' way of writing can be expected to trigger acerbic and derogatory comments and therefore may handicap their business. Second, the lack of striking distinctions between flyers appears to be counter-productive in a highly competitive market where the implicit business rule is to display distinctiveness, if not originality, in order to appeal to potential customers. As noted above, it is precisely because they present linguistic peculiarities and they all seem to look alike, that the marabouts' flyers have become collectors' items for many French people. Unsurprisingly, their seeming linguistic singularity has favored their world-wide circulation outside the specific ecology, the urban settings, they were designed for. Although the flyers' world-wide circulation makes the marabouts and their practices known, it does not necessarily entail economic success.

I submit that marabouts' apparent decision to conform to the same vernacular style of advertisement is part of their attempt to seek legitimacy on the French market of occultism. In a society generally suspicious of foreign occult practices, it is safer to project a collective discourse rather than to display conflicting individual voices. Although the marabouts compete with each other on the same business market, their survival as practitioners also depends on their 'recognizability' as a group, notwithstanding their expertise and authenticity. Therefore, the interdiscursivity found in their flyers can be interpreted as indexing in-group membership. Second, by performing vernacular literacy

they conform to deeply entrenched French stereotypes of Africans as incompetent speakers of French. By performing deviant literacy, they become 'authentic' Africans, and therefore legitimate clairvoyants, through meeting the socio-cultural fantasies and stereotypes of their host country.

This re-appropriation of the linguistic stereotypes and the ensuing social categorizations are very similar to Hall's (1995) description of female fantasy lines. According to her, sex-workers have learned to manipulate female conversation stereotypes, for example, when they use powerless forms of women's language, in order to be empowered economically. However, I don't share Hall's conclusion that such practices are both socially and economically empowering for women and bring them money without forcing them 'to participate in a patriarchal business structure' (1995: 208). By recycling socio-cultural stereotypes through their use of linguistic features, both Hall's sex-workers and the marabouts participate in the re-production of the social and moral orders. It is this process that enables French readers to construct the meanings that are found on the Internet. If any actual economic benefits are drawn from their endeavor, they are to the detriment of timeless symbolic benefits, i.e. the end of underlying power dynamics that help shape women's and Africans' socio-economic subordination.

Nonetheless, the example of the marabouts' flyers extends linguists' current reflection on commodification, showing a disjuncture between 'legitimate' and commodifiable language. The marabouts' performed 'non-literacy skills' are turned into a marketable commodity, becoming an "added value for niche markets" (Heller 2010:103). Astro turf literacy, as I call it, is the commodification of grassroots literacy through: 1) a process of erasure of marabouts' diversity and that of their literacy skills; 2) an acknowledgment of the local economy of linguistic resources in which values are allocated to ways of speaking and writing, and thus where linguistic stratification is performed; 3) an awareness of the non-referential indexical ordering in currency in the local ecology (e.g.

Africans migrants are poor speakers of French); and 4) scribes' fitting of readers' linguistic and social expectations. The analysis of language commodification in local economies draws our attention, once again, to the crucial importance of studying language resources in light of the communicative economy in which they are used and from and within which they are made sense of.

The best illustration is found in marabouts' web-advertisements.¹⁸ The striking difference between 'non-standard literacy' performed in paper-advertisements and the unmarked one in on-line publicity tends to corroborate my hypothesis about language commodification in the marabouts' paper-advertising. Although I haven't yet found marabouts who advertise on both flyers and the web, there is no obvious reason to believe that paper- and cyber-advertising marabouts represent two distinct groups of people with the 'traditional' ones on one side and the technology-savvy ones on the other. In addition, hypothesizing that, because the creation of a blog requires technical expertise, the marabouts may have received help and therefore have had their French 'polished' in the process would rest on the idea that one cannot be a marabout and computer-savvy at the same time. Finally, it would equate being computer-literate with being French-literate. Some of us know from experience that this assumption is far from being true.

I suggest that the differential display of literacy competence in the two advertising modes has partly to do with the ecology of signs in which both texts are inserted. Unlike the streets where flyers are distributed, the web is a discursive space where the marabouts are challenged,

¹⁸ Marabout's web-advertising emerged in France in the mid-1990's. With the development of the Internet in major African cities, it has also spread to countries such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. However, because advertisements are written in French, one may wonder to what extent the audience targeted by Africa-based marabouts' is just local. Some cyber-marabouts advertise their services on ready-made astrology websites while others create more or less elaborate personal websites. See for example: <http://www.marabouts-voyants-africains.com/>

criticized and highly stigmatized. Although maraboutic practices attract a wide spectrum of French customers, the French are generally reluctant to admit consulting or considering approaching marabouts. The mediated communicative platform provided by the Internet is then used by web-users to inquire about maraboutic practices, share good or bad experiences, ask for advice, warn against some untrustworthy marabouts, etc. Reports also abound on marabouts' alleged fraudulent practices, and disparaging remarks are regularly posted on them and their customers, with the latter being ridiculed as naïve and stupid for being lured by such 'crooks' (*escrocs*).

Whereas sameness is sought for in paper-advertisements, distinctiveness seems to be the rule on websites. The less constraining format of the web-page, combined with the use of multimodal semiotic resources (e.g. images, colors, sounds), explains in part the performed singularity of cyber-marabouts. Their individual voice on the Internet is in sharp contrast with the collective one projected in flyers, which is subject to intense criticisms. The display of standard literacy helps disconnect web-advertisements from paper ones, as if to rehabilitate the stigmatized image of marabouts and reframe the French' interpretation of maraboutic practices. Standard literacy appears to be used as a counter-discourse to the readers' widespread derogatory comments on

paper-advertisements. Web-advertising does not compete with that on paper: it is complementary in that both fit expectations regarding public, formal writing (with un-marked literacy for the first one: for instance none of the 36 websites I consulted displays the T form.) and vernacular, grassroots writing. The latter meets the stereotypes the average French has of African migrants considered unprepared to integrate the host social conventions.

Distinctive claims of legitimacy are also another important feature of the two modes of advertising. They vary from the marabouts asserting their expertise on the flyers to their asserting the power and validity of maraboutic practices on the web. The variation is apparent in the use of interdiscursivity in web-advertising, where, unlike that in the flyers, intertextuality here is realized through links to texts ratified as legitimate source of knowledge. For example, on the opening page of 'the network of marabouts medium clairvoyant' (<http://www.marabouts-voayants-africains.com/>) two links direct web-users to a history of Senegalese maraboutic brotherhoods and that of Muridism, the most influential of them. The links as a reliable source of information are indexed by the author's well-identified French academic institution shown in the document's excerpt below, not mentioning her French-sounding name:

le réseau des marabouts médiums voyants

Le mouridisme

Sophie Bava

Laboratoire Méditerranéen de Sociologie,

MMSH Aix-en-Provence.

copyright : Sophie Bava, REMI

<http://remi.revues.org>

ames.mmsh.univ-aix.fr/bava%202002%20VEI.doc

Source: <http://www.marabouts-voayants-africains.com/le-mouridisme.html>

Links have two interrelated functions: 1) discursive: redirecting readers' attention from the image of the marabout to maraboutic practices, a feature found on many of the marabouts' personal websites; 2) social: 'rehabilitating' the marabouts as knowledgeable, pious and morally honest. No data are available yet to evaluate the ways web-users read cyber-advertisements. The rare comments I found only take notice of marabouts becoming computer-savvy without any mention of their literacy skills, regardless of whether or not they are rated positively, as in the following example:

Les Marabouts de l'an 2000

Ce n'est pas parce qu'on est Marabout qu'on ne sait pas se servir d'**Internet** !!

The marabouts of 2000

It is not because one is a Marabout that one doesn't know how to use the **Internet**!!

This lack of derogatory comments may illustrate that marabouts, once again, manage to meet their French readers' frame of interpretation, this time by conforming to expected standard literacy in public writing rather than the expectation of grassroots literacy associated with them from their paper-advertising.

6. Conclusions

Stereotypes of African marabouts pervade the French semiotic landscape as is evident from the numerous comments on and entextualizations of their advertisements one finds on the Internet. I have advocated reading these advertisements in light of the economy of writing and reading in which they are inserted. This economy is characterized as highly normative due to France's

"culture of monoglot standardization" (Silverstein 1996) since the 17th century, and as 'monochromic', with a predominantly white/European public space. Through a process of erasure of France's cultural diversity, France and Frenchness are typically, if not exclusively, imagined and projected as white and European. These are among the sociolinguistic assumptions that underlie French readers' entextualizations of marabouts' flyers. Both the marabouts' productions of flyers and the readers' comments give us access to 'linguistic ideology in action', with the marabouts displaying a strong metalinguistic awareness by their very act of writing.

Indeed, a fine-grained analysis and comparison of both paper- and cyber-advertisements show that grassroots literacy is *performed* rather than *endured*. Interestingly, it is by NOT conforming to the French written norms of literacy, for instance through displaying 'poor' literacy skills, that they conform to the latter's widespread social stereotypes about Africans and Africa. Through the display of non-standard literacy emerges a standardized way of *doing being* marabout, at least in the flyers. In other words, highly devalued ways of writing become an asset in projecting oneself as trustworthy clairvoyants.

In *astroturf literacy* as I call it, non-literacy skills become a commodity that helps reap symbolic and/or economic benefits. On the other hand, in recycling socio-cultural stereotypes through their use of specific linguistic features, the marabouts participate in the re-production of the social and moral orders that sustain the French readers' meaning-making. Thus what may be economically empowering at an individual level is symbolically detrimental at a collective level. Socially, it is a no-win situation.

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