

Felix Couchoro, 1900-1968:

pioneer of Popular writing in West Africa?

The life of Felix Couchoro is in itself a chronicle of togolese political history; but his main passion in life was writing and his main aim to achieve literary success. He holds the distinction of having produced twenty novels, read locally, which earned him the lasting admiration of a local audience. In this respect he was a true literary phenomenon, comparable to what happened in Onitsha in terms of communicative exchange. But Couchoro was alone and his career started in the twenties to culminate in the sixties. The capacity to remodel his works in view of their prospective audience shows a functional attitude which considers literature to be first a question of textual practice, and of communicative exchange. This is truly the mark of the popular writer: but in a situation where these textual practices are also the invention of literature in foreign language, these criteria of the popular may lose their relevance...

The life of an activist

Felix Couchoro was born in the Brazilian quarter of Ouidah (Dahomey) one of the capitals of the slave trade in the XIXth century, a city where a peculiar hybrid coast culture was invented which provided the background for B. Chatwin's novel *The Vice Roy of Ouidah* (1982).

After his primary school education in a Catholic School and a short period as a primary school teacher, he became the manager of a local branch of the SCOA, a French trading company in Grand Popo (Dahomey) in 1924. Grand Popo is a Dahomean enclave on the Togolese side of the river Mono, which, before World War 1, marked the boundary between German Togoland and French Dahomey. According to D. Westermann the whole coast of Benin Gulf between the Volta river (in today's Ghana) and the Oueme (in today's Benin) is the land of the Ewe and the consciousness of the unity of this Eweland is essential to an understanding of Couchoro's work. At a very early date Couchoro became involved in Togolese politics. Togo, being a mandate territory had more political freedom than the colony of Dahomey even though in the thirties a more liberal colonial attitude prevailed in Dahomey and allowed the rise of an independent press. Couchoro was the editor of *l'Eveil Togolais/Eveil Togo -Dahoméen* a liberal paper advocating freedom of trade between the neighbouring colonies, a theme that was to be central in his work as well as in Nationalist politics. In 1941 Felix Couchoro left his residence in Dahomey to settle in Anecho, Togo, ten miles from Grand Popo, where he started a business as Agent d'affaires, combining the jobs of public letter writer, lawyer and real estate broker, in essence being a

public man of letters. The war years saw the rise of the Comité de l'Unité Togolaise, a nationalist party led by Sylvanus Olympio, from Agoué, a village near Anecho. Using the special status of Togo as a trust territory of the United Nations after 1945, the party started mobilizing Southern elites by asking for more trade and political freedom from the colonial powers and eventually for independence. Felix Couchoro wrote in several of the party's papers and was a dedicated activist. In 1952 after a riot in Vogon, a village near Anecho, he had to flee the colonialist police and went into exile to avoid being jailed. He settled in Aflao, the border town on the Gold Coast side, near Lomé, where he could retain some of his togolese clients. Life became more difficult, money was scarce with the collapse of his Anecho business. In 1958 with the granting of internal autonomy he took a job in Lomé while still living in Aflao. In 1960 the Nationalists won the elections and Togo became independent. Couchoro was appointed an editor at the Togolese information service. He was then sixty: three years later the nationalists were overthrown and President Olympio was killed, by the first military coup in Black Africa; the man behind the coup was sergeant Eyadema, who is now a general and still rules over Togo (1999). In 1965 Couchoro retired; he died in Lomé three years later.

A colonial novelist

His first book *l'Esclave* (the slave) was published in Paris in 1929, but for many years it was a well kept secret... It was the second novel published by an African in French (the first being *Force Bonté*, by Bakary Diallo, in 1926). *The Bibliography of Neo African Literature* by J.Jahn, in 1965, mentions *l'Esclave* as a serial published in 1962... Robert Cornevin in 1968 mentions also the novel as a serial, but published in 1930... Couchoro wrote to Albert Gérard, before his death, to confirm that the book had indeed been published in book form but that he did not have a copy of it. Curiously the book is not in the National Library in Paris, and escaped the Legal Deposit, compulsory for books published or printed in France. *l'Esclave* did appear in 1929 as a book, published by the *Dépêche Africaine*, which was a paper and was acting as a publishing house. It has now been reprinted several times in Togo and it deserves a place in the literature in French from Africa. The novel did reappear in 1962 in serial form in Togo Presse, the only togolese daily and was introduced thus::

As a first serial, Togo Presse, is happy to present to its readers a novel written by a Togolese writer and whose setting is the togolese countryside. (1962)

However we know and some of his readers must have known that the same novel had been published earlier in Paris, in 1929, by Felix Couchoro, at that time a Dahomean and that at the time there was obviously no reference to Togo and its countryside... It is certainly true that Felix Couchoro settled in Togo and became a Togolese, and that there is nothing specifically dahomean in the novel, but neither is there anything togolese!

This presentation is not a minor detail if we consider what Cornevin called the "regionalism" of Felix Couchoro. The most obvious difference between the two texts is the omission of the preface of 1929. This is an extremely interesting text for the history of literature in French in West Africa. Couchoro proclaims himself to be the novelist of an area, of a "region" : the Mono region. Thus as early as 1929 the novel is associated with none of the colonial entities, but has a point of view that can only be called "nationalist" from an African perspective, or "regionalist" from a French colonial perspective. Felix Couchoro advocates the unity and especially the economic unity of the area along the river. Beyond artificial divisions, expressed by tax differences, Felix Couchoro defends the unity of the people of the river area. The boundaries of his novelistic universe were to coincide with the limits of the Eweland promoted by the nationalist party and this is not a coincidence. At the same time in his preface Felix Couchoro delivers an antiracist message: he claims that the equality of men is proved by their common capacity to suffer a love passion... *L'esclave* clearly belongs to the colonial novel but as Couchoro was to write later, he has a competitive advantage over French colonial writers: being himself an African he writes from an inside knowledge of the African experience... In 1962 Felix Couchoro recycled his novel to suit the new togolese daily: Antiracist proclamation were no longer necessary since the nationalists were in power. Another chapter was also considered superfluous: The 1929 novel ends on a chapter called "renewal" in which the slave's son celebrate his marriage in a Catholic church. This ending consistent with colonial missionary teachings, was probably considered superfluous in 1962.

Couchoro, the chapbook writer

Between his failed career as a Parisian Colonial African novelist in 1929 and his successful comeback as a serial writer in Togo in the sixties, Felix Couchoro attempted another career: he invented Onitsha style chapbooks on the Togolese coast and he partially succeeded for he was a true "entrepreneur": two of his novels were privately printed in Ouidah and sold by himself.

His second novel, *Amour de féticheuse* (Love of a fetish priestess, 1941) was printed by Mme d'Almeida printing shop in Ouidah. This is the first locally printed novel in Francophone Africa. Couchoro felt very bitter; his lack of recognition after his Parisian achievement was hard to accept. His remarkable feat was unnoticed in France and his nationalistic tendencies prevented him from seeking and receiving support from the local colonial authorities. Since the existing commercial distribution for books was either non-existent or controlled by trading companies, Couchoro took it upon himself to sell his book. He kept a stock in his local agent d'affaire office in Anecho and his sister told me years later (Paris, in 1971) that she peddled the book in the market place in Ouidah and in the surrounding areas. Couchoro was thus creating literary "colportage" in West Africa and doing what was to start on Niger several hundred miles east of Lomé in Onitsha. This was truly the beginning of his career as a popular writer, in contact with his audience. His book was reprinted years later, as a serial in Togo-Presse and the name was changed accordingly: it became *Amour de Féticheuse au Togo*. Adaptability was a key feature of Couchoro's technique. Nine years later he published another novel, printed in the same shop,

Drame d'amour à Anecho, 1950, (love drama in Anecho). We located a copy of the book which curiously is the only one not reprinted as a serial. The Anecho chieftaincy rivalry had been a cause of turmoil ever since the departure of the Germans and the manipulations by the French of the subsequent elections. The Capulet and Montaigu of this Togolese Romeo and Juliet were the Adjigo and the Lawson, the two rival clans of which Mercy Latré and Stanley Kuanvi, his heroes, were members. Felix Couchoro does not take sides openly in this political rivalry, although a close reading of the novel would indicate where his sympathies lie. His opinion would probably be that the good nationalists should not fall prey to the divide and rule tactics of the Colonialists... During the first decade of independence it was probably deemed wiser not to resuscitate the quarrels of the past. The book did not bring fame to Felix Couchoro and probably remained known only in nationalist circles. Felix Couchoro was to become well known with Independence of Togo and the publication of his serials. First, in 1962 *L'esclave* (dated 1950!), then *Max Mensah* (dated 1956), then in 1963 *Bea et marilou*, presented as a sequel to *L'esclave*. Then in 1964 *Les secrets d'Eléonore* (E's secrets) published in book form at the same time as *L'Héritage cette peste* (the plague of inheritance). Thus in the first few years of the new paper, Felix Couchoro was able to dispatch most of his literary output of the preceding years, since the new serials had been written as novels during the exile in Aflao, according to the manuscripts we could examine.

Success at last came and his texts became a sale argument for the paper. In december 1962, the headline reads: *Couchoro returns..* From 1964 on, serials follow in quick succession: the recipe for success has been found!

Couchoro, the serial writer

A poll taken by the librarian at the French cultural center in Lomé in 1967 showed the extraordinary thirst for reading in the educated fraction of the population of Lomé (a few thousands persons) One reads to learn, but to learn one reads mystery novels! To such a point that the librarian eager to promote a more balanced reading diet removed from the shelves the french mystery novels, precisely those Felix Couchoro was using as models... Reading habits are not yet well known in Africa, but the poll taken a few decades ago in togo showed enduring trends: a great desire for reading simple and entertaining books, in short novels: that was precisely what Couchoro was willing to write.

Because of the journalistic quality of this story, the author feels it necessary to specify that all resemblance between certain characters presented here and persons living or dead, all similarity of names is due to simple coincidence. Likewise the interpretation of certain events inspired from real life is purely fictional. (Le Passé ressurgit, the past is back p.2)

"Pure fiction..., work of the imagination", the writer wants to be classified outside of the realm of journalism and in that of literature... By the use of this ritualised disclaimers he certainly seeks to protect himself, but more that that to produce the effect of being a true novelist:

The author notes to his readers that the names of the characters in this novel have been chosen purely by chance with the aim of giving local color and of rendering more realistic what is improbable ... (Max Mensah, p.1)

The mechanism of the serial is here revealed very clearly: to be journalistic enough to interest, but to fictionalize to entertain. Felix Couchoro puts his work into categories : *D'Aklakou à El Mina* is a romantic legend (?), *Gangsters et policiers* is a "mystery novel" while *Les secrets d'Eléonore* is simply sold in bookstores as a novel. Other than *Les dix plaies de l'Afrique* (Africa's ten plagues) subtitled "fictionalized documentary" while this is truly a political essay, the 18 serials, -if we put aside the 3 pre-Independence novels, which belong to a different literary project, - can easily be classified in the categories of mystery novels and social novels or simply novels.

The pre-independence novels are set in villages along the coast at the end of last century, when "traditional" structures were still firmly entrenched. The mystery novel takes us to Lomé, which, although far from being the tentacular metropolis as London or Paris, the cradle of the mystery novel of the XIXth century is still a very appropriate setting for crimes and political investigations of all kinds. The social novel is like the mystery novel, but without the violence and with the romance. Police never intervenes and conflicts are settled by the interesting parties. The setting of these novels is Lomé, Aguidah or Anecho, where the principal characters often own large estates. Thus Couchoro's entire serial production can be analysed using a simple combination of content analysis and plot devices. A finer analysis even reveals striking similarity in their construction which have obviously a lot to do with the rapid outpouring of serial between 1964 and the time of his death.

The first novel, *l'Esclave* (the slave) is also the longest, the first to appear as a serial and also the only one having as a hero - a negative hero - a character coming specifically from the North of the country: the slave. This Northerner is also a monster and we have to see in this candid stereotyping the expression of prejudices of the Southern elites which were hidden in the following years, in the name of Nationalism. Curiously enough the colonial stereotype, so well appropriated by the southern "elites" resurfaced in the last decade, to attack the Northerner, Eyadema, who still rules Togo (1999) ... Another feature is unique to that novel: the number of fantastic episodes. Treasons, poisonings, illnesses, deception abound. This characteristic is also found in *Amour de féticheuse au Togo* and in *D'Aklakou à el Mina*: it is as if the village setting was liberating the imagination of Felix Couchoro.

In the mystery novel, for instance, Felix Couchoro perfected a plot device which he uses four times. At the beginning of the novel is a romantic liaison. The man breaks up and is generally the guilty party: the seducer ends up a failure who, "twenty years later" - as in A.Dumas novel- is jealous of the success of his former mistress and tries to blackmail her, threatening to disclose their former affair. The victim defends herself and eventually triumphs. The possibilities of this device are quite rich: they allow Couchoro to write two novels in one: the initial episode is usually a slice of Lomé life in the thirties,

while the second part is contemporary and suits the younger readers. In all the mystery novels the woman is at the center of a plot aimed at ruining her reputation . In Couchoro's universe women hold the central role and this is certainly related to the part women play in the economic life of Togo. Market women- called metonymically "Nana Benz" - have their own organization and can manage important economic and political resources: Couchoro is the chronicler of this original feature of Togolese life. But he cannot really choose between the well tested devices of the colonial novel, in which the dark beauty is often a dangerous seductress and the new social realities giving a place to Christian well educated ladies : his serial novels are a curious and at times incoherent mix of these two point of views.

Plots of the social novel are even more simple. Neither the police nor supernatural forces intervene and conflicts are solved within the family circle ...The moral message becomes very clear and is the purpose of his literary activity: it is the Togolese girl facing marriage. He is of course faced with a difficult contradiction: his didactic purpose is rather biased: he claims to educate, but in a paternalistic way where the only hope for the girl is to conform to what men want, which is precisely the stuff of the " romance" . No pornography, no crude language, just salacious hints , which do not fit the part of the ethics teachers he claims to play... Couchoro is concerned with marriage but more with the conflicts it creates in a society where polygamy is prevalent , and he never condemns polygamy, in the name of man's freedom to do as he pleases...

One often hears the following proverb: "Amedome ma yi kpo"... It is impossible to go and look into the stomach of another . it is from this proverb that the name of our hero , the wicked office clerk of the Sototra "amedome" is taken. as for his victim, his name is: homefa.Innocent... (Les Gens sont méchants, 'people are wicked' ,p.47)

Every serial is based on the division between good guy/bad guy and on rather simplistic manicheism . the names of his characters are in themselves their destiny.

Félix Couchoro is then able to fictionalize newspaper reporting by using heavy stereotyping . He does use successfully another technique of the serial writer: the return of certain characters. But he has more trouble with this device because he rarely uses stream of consciousness narration techniques. .For him characters are defined in essentialist terms: they appear under many disguises, but they never change...

Couchoro , the writer

In the history of literature in Africa, Félix Couchoro deserves a place. He was able to write and publish locally at least three novels, but the size of the Togolese market was too small to sustain publishing ventures and his books never sold. For complex reasons, Felix Couchoro never had the right political support. he was too independent and too critical of the powers of the day . there was in Togo and in Dahomey censorship and no freedom of expression in the 50's. Political newspapers played a role in the

struggle for independence but they were ephemeral and could not become publishing houses as did his first publisher, *La Dépêche africaine*, originally a Parisian paper in the thirties. For these reasons Couchoro who was vaguely aware of the realities of the trade sent his book to a vanity publisher in Avignon, Aubanel, hoping to reprint the book at his own expenses. But he could not succeed in the early fifties and he tried again in 1959, this time hoping a prestigious publisher like *Presence Africaine* would promote him as a nationalistic fighter. In a letter to Alioune Diop, founder and director of *Presence africain*, he writes: "In 1952-53 in togo political climate darkened because of certain repressive measure: this forced a few patriots to the refuge in the British zone. I was one of those political refugees..." (personnal letter to A.D, in Archives).

He was to write few novels in the years of exile. He needed an exchange with an audience. In the preceding thirty years he had written three novels and devoted a lot of energy to their promotion abroad - without any recognition- and at home with a limited success. Illiteracy, economic stagnation, political repression, in short, the colonial situation, inhibited his creative impulse by depriving him of an active and critical environment. He certainly was of the same caliber as the writers in Onitsha, Port Harcourt or Aba, but he did not have a wide audience.

Launched by political patronage, he established himself as a prolific and original serial writer. The personalization of the serial 'Couchoro returns', is a witness to this popularity. He was in good company on the pages of *Togo-Presse*: *Dark Child* by Camara Laye, *Cry*, *Oh Beloved country*, by A.Paton, *The Mysteries of Paris*, by E.Sue, *The Red and the Black*, by Stendhal, alternated with his own texts. Numerous statements, including letters to the editors, have confirmed to us the great popularity of Couchoro in the first decade of Independence: teachers, students, office clerks, priests, shopkeepers, all knew Couchoro and read his serials. The obituary which appeared in *Togo-Presse* gives us a precious account of the communication existing between author and audience. According to the writer of the obituary, Couchoro at the time of his death had the feeling that his novels were "deteriorating" from the feedback of his readers. Struck by their judgment he was preparing to strike "hard" to regain their interest. Here was an author responsive to his readers, close to them and in this attitude lies the interest of his work. He was also preparing to publish his serials in volume form according to a contract signed with Editogo, the local publishing firm. His death interrupted another project, a novel for CLE, at the time the largest publishing house in Francophone Africa Yaoundé. For the first time a publisher of international renown had accepted to issue one of his novels: the manuscript of *Tu ne déroberas point* (thou shall not steal) ends on page 27... The late Janheinz Jahn who was the first to list Felix Couchoro as an African writer and who included his biography in the first *Who's who of African literature* (1972), then signed a contract with his son to issue the serials in book form. Unfortunately the project was interrupted by the premature death of Jahn in 1973.

The Senegalese critic Mohammadou Kane in a remarkably lucid article written in 1967 listed the main themes of Francophone African literature: the cult of the past, the trip abroad, the life of expatriates in Africa, the sense of the absurd. He made the comments that all these novels were published in Paris and that these themes were clearly aimed at a French audience. He could have added that these novels were characterized by an obsessive grammatical correctness and a stylistic elegance that bore the mark of good French publishers. Felix Couchoro who had an African audience for several decades does not treat a single one of these themes. He shows also a boldness in experimenting with language that marks a writer eager to listen to the language of the African street. One of the first African novelist, the inventor of chapbooks in Francophone Africa, the master of serial writing, author of more than twenty novels in French, never went to France and remained committed to his local audience. His stylistic repertory, the plasticity of his plots, easily remodeled, the constant use of stereotype, but the willingness to educate as well as to entertain, were truly the mark of the popular writer. But given the size and the structure of the "literary field" of Francophone Africa at the time, the notion of a "popular position" has simply no meaning: Felix Couchoro was a writer, with an audience in Africa.

Bibliography :

See : Alain Ricard , Felix Couchoro, Naissance du roman africain, Paris , Présence africaine, 1987, for a complete bibliography of Couchoro's works and manuscripts.

S.A.Amegleame, Métamorphoses de l'écriture dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Félix Couchoro, Thèse de doctorat de l'Université de Bordeaux, 1998, is the most complete study of Couchoro's works .