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When the Dictator Ceases to Speak: Absences in

Cheik Aliou Ndao's *Mbaam dictateur*¹

In *Mbaam Dictateur*, Cheik Aliou Ndao breaks with the notion of equating power with the ability to speak. Instead, he depicts how in the case of Wor, an autocratic ruler of an unnamed African state, an excessive lust for power leads to muteness. In the novel, this loss of speech and other human qualities foreshadows a powerful spell by conspirative forces which turns the dictator into a donkey, robbing him ultimately of the possibility to speak.

Wor's silence is also reflected in how his story is narrated: By contrasting free indirect speech and internally focalized narration with the frequent use of direct speech, Ndao creates *meaningful absences* in order to highlight the speechless behavior of the dictator-donkey. The author, therefore, repeats on the narrative level the conspirators' spell which rendered Wor silent within the story of the novel.

The article examines these absences as well as the logic of Wor's transformation by relating Ndao's text to one of Jacques Derrida's posthumously published works, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, where he asserts a proximity between the sovereign ruler and the animal, based on their 'being-outside-the-law'. The analysis shows how speechlessness appears as a key element in establishing the dictator's connection to the animal in the novel, emblemizing Wor's exit from the human community.

ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον [...]· λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζῴων· [...] ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερόν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον·

Aristotle, Πολιτικά²

Ku amul kilifa, seytanee sa kilifa.

Wolof proverb³

1. Introduction

Cheik Aliou Ndao's *Mbaam dictateur* tells the story of Wor, an autocratic ruler of an unnamed African state who turns into a donkey: After a period of brutal rule, members of Wor's tyrannical administration join forces as conspirators, with the aim of ridding the country of his murderous regime and punishing Wor for his transgressions against the people by putting a magic spell on him. From then on, Wor is condemned to live the existence of an immortal ass for eternity.

In the novel, the relationship between humans and animals, and their differences are focused on multiple occasions, but the dictator is portrayed as a separate species

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2 "[M]an is by nature a political animal. [...] [M]an is the only animal who has the gift of speech. [...] [T]he power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and unjust" (Aristotle 1995: 1987f., 1253a2–15).

3 "He who has no teacher, makes the devil his teacher" (Meyer 2013: 25).

as well, separate "from the rest of humanity": Wor is described as a part of the "race des dictateurs" (Ndao 1997: 171, 219), the race of dictators.

The narrator in *Mbaam dictateur* refers to the dictator and animals as two extremes within a spectrum of living beings in order to present an image of humans and their defining qualities. He contrasts humans and their sensual and intellectual faculties, cultural practices and, most importantly, their morals with those of the tyrant and animals in order to comment on the events of the plot. This opposition serves Ndao to ascribe certain qualities to the three parts of this triad (Dictator-Human-Animal) and he draws on their different attributes in order to relate these beings to each other. One of the key elements for the comparison between the authoritarian ruler, humans, and animals is language, and there is a uniting feature between the dictator Wor and animals as they are characterized in the novel: their *lack* of speech. Speech functions as a distinguishing characteristic between human, animal, and dictator and Ndao develops this notion throughout the novel. The reader notices early on that there is a parallelization between the dictator and animals, with speech and language as important markers for their affinity.

The goal of this paper is to retrace the development of the theme of (the lack of) language and to examine the means Ndao resorts to in order to convey the importance of speech and its effects on the life of human and non-human beings. The analysis will show that speechlessness plays an integral part in establishing the dictator's connection to the animal in the novel. In this regard, the novel strictly adheres to anthropocentric conceptions of language; however, for the purpose of this article we will temporarily accept the construction of the animal as a speechless being in order to focus rather on how the text establishes language as an important factor in the transformation of Wor into a donkey.⁴

In order to understand the logic of Wor's transformation, this article relates Ndao's novel to posthumously published works by Jacques Derrida where he critically examines concepts of animality in philosophy and political theory. His collected lectures on the beast and the sovereign (Derrida 2009), in particular, are highly instructive when considering the connection between the tyrant and the animal in Ndao's text: It might seem grotesque at first to turn a powerful dictator into

4 For a survey of the transformation of humans into animals in literature from the perspective of critical animal studies, see, for example, Simons (2002: 140–172).

a donkey, but when Derrida's reflections on sovereignty and bestiality are taken into account, it becomes clearer why and how this transition occurs.

The transformation of kings and other powerful rulers into animals and beasts is a well-known phenomenon in literature and philosophy. In Western contexts, aside from those examples that Derrida refers to himself, such as the tyrant who becomes a wolf in Plato's *Politeia*, there are also, for instance, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where King Midas receives donkey ears as a punishment for his preference for the musical performance of Pan (cf. Ovid 2004: 316–320). These are only examples that pertain to political leaders that (partially) turn into animals – there is, however, a wide field which is dedicated to the study of 'metamorphosis literature'; when analyzing Ndao's novel, one certainly notices that "human-animal metamorphic literature is a part of the social process by which humans have defined themselves" (Asker 2001: vii). Furthermore, the idea of transforming people into animals is common among various African people and traditions, also notably as a form of punishment against wrongdoers, as is the case in *Mbaam dictateur*; Jennifer Hildebrand reviews several anthropological studies in her article on Igbo cultural beliefs in folktales within the African American community:

While the evidence [...] indicates that the belief in the transmigration of the spirits of evil men into animal form is strongest among the Igbo, [...] similar beliefs can be found among the Ijaw, a group which borders the Igbo to the South, and among the Ekiti of the Yoruba, located to the west of the Igbo. It is possible that contact resulting from the slave trade disseminated the views of the Igbo. (Hildebrand 2006: 150, note 48)

In Ndao's novel, the reader learns about a similar practice among the Wolof people, as demonstrated through the transformation of the dictator Wor into a donkey.

Derrida also asserts a proximity between the sovereign ruler and the animal in his examination of various philosophical traditions, which provides this article with a framework that makes it possible to study the connection between Wor and his animal form. Against this background, we can grasp the importance of the lack of speech as a link between the dictator and the animal in *Mbaam dictateur*.

The main hypotheses of this article are, firstly, that Wor is portrayed as an animal well before he is transformed into a donkey and that his representation as a beast-like being is distinctly marked by his taciturn nature, and, secondly, that Wor's speechlessness is expressed not just through a multitude of elements on the semantic level of the plot, but also through the way his story is narrated, that the story indeed hinges on the very question of who is able to speak. The second half of this

paper will, therefore, focus on *absences* which are used in the novel to highlight the silent behavior of the characters.

Finally, it is necessary to ask what the meaning is behind Wor's transformation: To what end does Ndao depict the life of a dictator who turns into a donkey, and why is speech so important for this metamorphosis? Why does the novel refer to the dictator as its own species?

2. The Dictator as a Mute Animal

Very early on, long before the conspirative forces led by the Minister of Internal Affairs in the story, Jaraaf Biir Réew, turn the dictator into a donkey with the help of a 'maître du savoir', an occult sage of sorts, Wor exhibits animalesque traits, which are constantly highlighted within the text. To quote one of the key passages that explicitly refer to Wor's loss of human qualities:

They decided to consider Wor mad. [...] The dictator's malady is a furious madness that renders one blind, deaf and mute. Restraint, civility, cognitive faculties, the sense of shame all vanish from him. He is stripped of these qualities. Now, if man loses all this, he starts to resemble an animal. Once these dispositions are replaced with oppressiveness and maliciousness, man turns into a carnivore that knows nothing besides hunting and killing.⁵

It seems strange that a powerful human being such as Wor loses the ability to speak, that his dominant position "renders" him "mute". This section will show how the dictator and the donkey are, in fact, more closely connected than one would assume and that they do not differ so much from each other in their lack of voice.⁶

One would expect that a dictator is proficient in manipulating language and that his authority is underpinned by using speech to his advantage. However, as can be seen in the quote and at other points in the novel, there is an equivalence between the dictator's demeanor and that of animals. One of the most important uniting cri-

5 "Ils décident de considérer Wor comme fou. [...] [L]e mal d'un dictateur est une folie furieuse qui rend aveugle, sourd, muet. La retenue, la civilité, la reconnaissance, la pudeur s'éloignent de lui. Ces qualités disparaissent de son voisinage. Or, si le fils d'Adam perd tout cela, il devient pareil à l'animal. Ces dispositions une fois remplacées par l'oppression et la méchanceté, l'homme se transforme en un carnivore qui ne connaît plus que la chasse et la tuerie" (Ndao 1997: 219). Unless otherwise noted, all translations of excerpts from Ndao's novel are my own. The translations focus mainly on semantic content rather than stylistic aspects.

6 This fact is sometimes overlooked by scholars due to Wor's authority and power, which is associated with having a voice rather than being silent; the dictator and the donkey, then, are cast as opposite to each other: "the absolutist voice of the dictator whose word is law and the absolutely voiceless donkey [...]. In putting in play the dictator and the donkey, *Mbaam* figures the transformation of the monovocal into the voiceless" (Warner 2012: 86).

teria is – as can also be seen by the reference to the carnivore-, predator-like behavior – the sole adherence to one's own instincts and 'the right of the strongest'. Throughout the novel, we read that it is characteristic of the animal kingdom that the strong reign over the weak (cf., e.g., Ndao 1997: 100, 150 and 289) and that animals are content with "s'habituer" (ibid.: 64), with simply following their habits or instincts. Likewise, in the case of Wor, "his will is confounded with the law"⁷ and "only his desire guides him".⁸ These traits are contrasted with humans and their way of life, their social and cultural norms that are, for example, established through religion – thus, the purpose of Islam is described as to "educate man in order to free him of his inherent bestial nature".⁹

What seems to unite the dictator and animals in the novel is their ignorance of human conventions, or any conventions for that matter. Contrary to humans, according to the narrator of *Mbaam dictateur*, there is no corrective that regulates their instinct-driven existence that is centered on their own will and which grants the strongest power over everything else. This notion corresponds to what Derrida recognized as a shared feature between the sovereign and the beast in Western thought: their 'being-outside-the-law'. This being-outside-the-law can either "take the form of being-above-the-laws, and therefore take the form of the Law itself, of the origin of laws, the guarantor of laws", as is the case for the sovereign, but it can also "situate the place where the law does not appear, or is not respected, or gets violated" (Derrida 2009: 17), as is commonly associated with animals. Both sovereign and animal are, consequently, defined by their being situated "at a distance from or above the laws, in nonrespect for the absolute law, the absolute law that they make or that they are but that they do not have to respect" (ibid.).

Derrida's observations hold true when they are applied to Ndao's novel and its inherent categorization of humans, dictators, and animals: Wor's will and the law under his rule, as has been quoted above, are interchangeable – he is, therefore, at the origin and above the law – in the same way as animals do not follow any kind of law besides their own instincts. There is, consequently, a proximity between Wor and an animal, which is based on their being-outside-the-law (in Derrida's terms), even before he is actually transformed into a donkey.

7 "[S]a volonté se confond avec la loi" (Ndao 1997: 152).

8 "Seul son désir le guide" (Ndao 1997: 165).

9 "[É]duquer l'homme pour le débarrasser de sa nature bestiale innée" (Ndao 1997: 100).

How, then, does this being-outside-the-law affect language and speech? The lack of shared conventions – in the form of social norms, law, or other rules – is, of course, highly pertinent here. The dictator and the animal seem to be situated not only outside the law, but outside of language, too – by not taking part in the community of humans, they are also withdrawn from conventions of language and speech. In his examination of Hobbes, Derrida notes that it is due to language that one can establish a convention neither with God – that entity that Wor gravitates towards in his being-outside-the-law¹⁰ – nor with the beast, because it is defined as the creature that is unable to respond (ibid.: 54–58). Similarly, in Ndao's novel, it is stated that if Wor responded to humans after being transformed, in his donkey form, he would not be considered an animal anymore, "he would drop out of the class of animals".¹¹ Language, therefore – and, more precisely, spoken language – is explicitly indicated as a prerequisite for belonging to the human species.

In light of these designations about speech and language, it slowly becomes clear how a powerful being like Wor can grow silent: By not partaking in human conventions, it is impossible both for the dictator and for the animal to share a common language with humans. As has been shown in the introduction, it is not just the animal but also the dictator who is seen as not being part of humanity, and their lack of speech is a key element in expressing their distance to humans (and their proximity to each other). Wor becoming "mute" is just one of various instances where his speechlessness is hinted at; others include, for example, the way he conducts himself during meetings leading up to the revolution against the old regime: "Wor talks little during meetings."¹² Even his style of ruling is characterized by a relative lack of speech: "He changes at once the way of governing the country. Commands through gestures."¹³ Wor's silence turns into one of his most characteristic features, and ironically so, bearing in mind the etymology of the word 'dictator' (from Latin 'dictare', the intensive form of 'dicere', 'to say' or 'to talk'). It is this taciturn nature, in combination with his 'being-outside-the-law', that foreshadows

10 "He took himself for the master of the Universe, convinced that everything emanates from him. He forgot Him who is to be placed above everything else." / "Il s'est pris pour le maître de l'Univers, persuadé que tout vient de lui. Il a oublié Celui qu'il faut placer au-dessus de tout" (Ndao 1997: 152).

11 "[I]l sortirait du cadre des animaux" (Ndao 1997: 79).

12 "Wor parle peu lors des réunions" (Ndao 1997: 154).

13 "[I]l change aussitôt la manière de gouverner le pays. Parle peu. Ordonne par gestes" (Ndao 1997: 152).

the spell issued on behalf of the conspirators: Before, the animal was merely a metaphor for Wor's demeanor and his position vis-à-vis the law and his subjects, but now his intimate connection to the animal¹⁴ becomes all too apparent. His transformation into a donkey is but the final step in Wor's becoming-animal and the process of him falling ultimately silent, a process that began when he seized power.

At this point, one has to consider the role of speech in Wolof society, which forms Ndao's cultural background. Traditionally, the lack of speech corresponds to a higher social rank or status for the Wolof (cf. Irvine 1975: 4–6, and 1996²: 173, 183). However, this traditional assessment of speechlessness does not directly apply to the circumstances within *Mbaam dictateur* because it is clear that it is an involuntary silence in the case of Wor. Applying Giorgio Agamben's understanding of impotence, Wor is not truly impotent to speak (because this would imply that he is able both to speak and also *not* to speak), contrary to Wolof persons of high social standing who choose to withhold speech (demonstrating true impotence because they are potent *not* to speak, whereas Wor does not have a choice) (cf. Agamben 2008: 292f.).

In the next section, the consequences of Wor's transformation are further examined, in addition to the narrative strategies employed by Ndao to illustrate Wor's muteness.

3. Speechlessness Through Absences

Up to this point, we have seen how Wor's speechlessness is expressed semantically, through his tendency to speak little and his growing mute, and thus increasingly being likened to an animal. But how is his speechlessness communicated to the reader and how is it reflected in the way the novel is narrated, both when he is still a powerful dictator and in his animal form as a donkey? Does the narration shift when Wor is focused on in the text? What narrative strategies does Ndao employ in order to express speechlessness in the novel?

It does not suffice to assert that there is speechlessness in the novel. One is always confronted with the problem of how an author particularly manages to verbally frame speechlessness: "When we begin to consider the occurrence of silence

14 Cf., again, Derrida: "[S]haring this common being-outside-the-law, beast [...] and sovereign have a troubling resemblance: they call on each other and recall each other, from one to the other; there is between sovereign [...] and beast a sort of obscure and fascinating complicity, or even a worrying mutual attraction, a worrying familiarity [...]" (Derrida 2009: 17).

in literature, it becomes particularly evident that we are dealing not so much with silence itself as with talking (and writing) about silence." (Meise 1996: 46) How, then, does Ndao write about silence and speechlessness?

When reading *Mbaam dictateur*, one notices that there is a large amount of direct speech to depict the communication between characters (cf. Bakayoko 2014: 193). When it comes to Wor, however, direct speech is very rarely utilized, even before he is turned into a donkey.¹⁵ Instead, other narrative modes are more heavily employed, as will be shown in the following pages.

This lack of direct speech in moments when Wor is focused on creates *absences* – these absences are an important tool in the representation of speechlessness in the novel. "Like the holes of a Swiss cheese, absence can basically only be perceived in relation to a real or expected presence." (Wolf 2016: 6) In order to perceive absences as meaningful, they heavily rely on contrasts that render them visible. We will need to examine some of these contrasts between presence and absence in order to understand how Ndao foregrounds speechlessness.

Firstly, as mentioned above, there is the contrast between how events involving Wor and other occurrences are narrated. The omniscient third person narrator often switches to internal focalization¹⁶ and free indirect speech when Wor in his animal form (Mbaam ngonk, "l'âne énorme" / "the enormous donkey", as he is referred to repeatedly throughout the novel) is written about. Quoting one illustrative example, when Mbaam ngonk enjoys being petted by the young women in the village, his thoughts are presented as follows:

So, what about the young girl? How can a simple donkey be troubled by the beauty of a woman? Ah! The hand of the young girl on his back. What a desire to dance out of joy!¹⁷

Remarkably, after contemplating dancing like an ostrich as a reaction to the women's caresses, three possible reactions to a donkey moving like a bird are presented,

15 Aside from a few exceptions, Wor's statements are rarely presented in the form of direct speech when he is still the powerful dictator, as is also signaled by the fact that he talks very little at all (which has been pointed out in the previous section). Contrarily, for instance, when the conspirators arrange for the spell to be put on Wor, almost the whole of the process is rendered through direct speech (cf. Ndao 1997: 231–236).

16 We can, therefore, speak of 'focalisation interne variable' in the case of Ndao's novel (cf. Genette 1972: 206–210).

17 "Et la jeune fille alors? Comment un simple âne peut-il être troublé par la beauté d'une femme? Ah! la main de la jeune fille sur son dos. Quelle envie de danser de plaisir!" (Ndao 1997: 148).

in three separate paragraphs, through direct speech. These three remarks are introduced by a short question, "and the comments?"¹⁸ The use of direct speech in opposition to free indirect speech further underlines the difference between the donkey and the world surrounding it.

At another point in the novel, after the people who found the donkey present their story of how it ended up in their village (to Mbaam ngonk's discontent, because, apparently, their version contained several inconsistencies), the narrator states: "Let us listen to *Mbaam ngonk*, the enormous donkey, narrate. The novelist does not influence him. It is himself who narrates."¹⁹ Apart from the metafictional remark, it is interesting that what follows does not differ from the rest of the narration: The donkey is still referred to in the third person and there is no typographic indication that Mbaam ngonk is now narrating. Despite the use of internal focalization, it does not become entirely clear who relates the events relating to how the donkey was found. The text still remains ambivalent later on when we read about the Lawbe people:

In reality, a Lawbe is brave, or maybe he likes the donkey so much as to make any sacrifice for him. Why not finally say that he takes others' property? There is no reason to hesitate. Say it.²⁰

No matter how one looks at it, one cannot assume that Mbaam ngonk is narrating these lines; the interjection "say it" suggests that the heterodiegetic narrator remains firmly in charge of the narration,²¹ contradicting the claim on the previous page of the book that Mbaam ngonk takes over.

Closer examination of these quoted examples shows that both the metafictional remarks and the contrast between direct speech and other narrative modes function as 'significance triggers' (cf. *ibid.*: 5, 19) that allow for absences to be perceived as meaningful in the text. Whether it is the lack of direct speech in the novel when Wor is involved or the narrator pretending to 'passer la parole' to Mbaam ngonk, to let him speak – when, in reality, Wor is never the one who narrates – these absences

18 "Et les commentaires?" (Ndao 1997: 148).

19 "Écoutons *Mbaam ngonk*, l'âne énorme, raconter. Le romancier ne l'influence pas. C'est lui-même qui raconte" (Ndao 1997: 42).

20 "En vérité le Lawbe est courageux ou alors c'est qu'il aime tellement l'âne qu'il est prêt à tous les sacrifices pour lui. Pourquoi ne pas dire une bonne fois qu'il prise le bien d'autrui? Il ne faut pas hésiter. Dites-le" (Ndao 1997: 43).

21 As is characteristic of free indirect speech ('erlebte Rede' in German) (cf. Spörl 2007³: 205). Dorrit Cohn makes a similar point, using her term for free indirect speech ('narrated monologue'): "In narrated monologues [...], the continued employment of third-person references indicates [...] the continued presence of a narrator" (Cohn 1978: 112).

seem to highlight his speechlessness both as a dictator and in his animal form. The significance triggers for these absences are further re-enforced semantically by various references to the tacit nature and the speechless behavior of Wor's two forms, as has been illustrated in the previous section,²² and are thus made even more explicit.

Why did Ndao choose these devices and narrative strategies to write about Wor as a dictator and as a donkey? First of all, the lack of direct speech seems to fit Wor's and Mbaam ngonk's speechlessness: "But the narrator does not relate continually. Whenever direct speech occurs in the text, it is as if the narrator temporarily transfers this function to one of the actors." (Bal 1997²: 8) Instead of "transferring the function of relating" to Wor through direct speech, the narrator filters Wor's point of view through his own words. It is easy to understand that the absence of direct speech puts additional emphasis on Wor's silence, even before he is turned into a donkey. At the same time, when the narrator announces allowing Mbaam ngonk to state his case, the following absence is even more striking. The reader expects a shift in the narration but it is again the omniscient narrator who relates Wor's story,²³ creating an absence which is rendered additionally significant by the semantic context in which the donkey is portrayed as the mute beast. It seems that even though Wor's perspective is somehow rendered through internal focalization and free indirect speech, he is condemned to having his perspective expressed through the speech of others, whether it is 'le maître des cases', the chief of the settlement, who makes false claims about how the donkey ended up with him (cf. Ndao 1997: 39–41), or even the narrator, who pretends to let Wor speak but who never ceases to speak *for* him.

Taking into account that Wor cannot himself express his point of view in the novel and that his speechlessness is conveyed through absences, one gets the impression that the spell which is put on Wor to transform him into a donkey is repeated on the narrative level by not giving him the opportunity to talk. The conspirators who order the spell to be cast on Wor do not just turn him into an animal,

22 Another example would be: "*Mbaam ngonk*, l'âne énorme, a beau aimer les caresses de la femme, parfois il voudrait les faire cesser. Cela lui donne le fou rire. Dire qu'il n'est pas capable de communiquer avec elle. C'est terrible. C'est difficile. Cela dépasse l'entendement." / "No matter how much *Mbaam ngonk*, the enormous donkey, liked the women's caresses, sometimes he wanted to make them stop. That cracks him up. Say, he is not capable of communicating with her. That is terrible. That is arduous. That is beyond comprehension" (Ndao 1997: 137).

23 Bakayoko makes a similar observation in connection to a different passage in the text (cf. Bakayoko 2014: 110f.).

they also ultimately rob him of the possibility to speak. Similarly, the narrator does not simply silence Mbaam ngonk by not letting him talk, but he makes this process visible by asserting first that he will let Wor himself narrate only to remain the sole narrative authority.

If we consider another text by Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), it becomes clear that the asymmetry between humans and animals also results from language and the act of naming or being named. In his analysis of Walter Benjamin, Derrida focuses on the effects of the animal's speechlessness:

[T]he sadness, mourning, and melancholy [...] of animality are born out of this muteness [...], but they are also born out of and by means of the wound without a name: that of having been given a name. Finding oneself deprived of language, one loses the power to name, to name oneself [...].
[...] [B]eing named [...] or seeing oneself given one's proper name is something like being invaded by sadness, by sadness itself (a sadness whose origin would therefore always be passivity of being named, this impossibility of reappropriating one's own name) [...]. (Derrida 2008: 19f.)

In *Mbaam dictateur*, we can observe the consequences of being named after being turned into an animal. Wor, once a powerful dictator, is reduced to a life of passivity by transforming into a donkey. Furthermore, he is denied narrating his own story, as could be seen above; instead, others tell his story for him: his passivity is thus also expressed through his speechlessness. Wor's passivity and his speechlessness, the fact that he is named and narrated by others, is also once more marvelously illustrated by constantly referring to him as "Mbaam ngonk", when previously, still as dictator, he chose a different title for himself and made it obligatory to call him by this title: "Fourth rule: One shall not call him [Wor] by his name. [...] Everyone shall give him the title of NGANG MI, the Great Leader."²⁴ The loss of this title, "the Great Leader" ("le Grand Guide"), and the transition to "the enormous donkey" ("l'âne énorme") show Wor's fall from grace quite plainly.

The silencing of Wor becomes even more apparent at a later point in the novel, when he indeed does get the opportunity to 'talk directly' to the reader. Again, through a metafictional shift, he addresses the fictionalized writer in the second person ("When the writer reaches this stage of the narration, it seems to him that he hears a voice. Surprised, he stops. It is nothing. Do not be afraid. It is me who is

24 "Quatrième règle: l'on ne doit pas l'appeler [Wor] par son nom. [...] Tout le monde doit lui donner le titre de NGANG MI, le Grand Guide" (Ndao 1997: 178).

talking to you. You are trying to tell my story."²⁵) and then the reader ("You who observes the dictator, you who sees him every day, there are things that you ignore."²⁶). What follows, is an apologetic rant which defends the dictator and his deeds – "both [the narrator and the dictator] are, in some sense, struggling for [...] monovocality [...]" (Warner 2012: 86). However, at the end of this digression, the narrator responds to Wor and states:

Wor cannot understand that the writer does not tell what happened in a specific country. [...] It is a mistake to think that the writer addresses someone in particular. If only Wor would keep calm and wait to see how the story is going to end.²⁷

Even in this passage, when Wor seizes his chance to narrate, the heterodiegetic narrator has the final say. The narrator proceeds to tell Wor off and orders him to stay calm or silent, so the narrator can finish the story on his own terms. Wor is effectively silenced and it is only because of this short exchange between the narrator and Wor that the reader comprehends how the dictator is denied to have his say from here on out. Wor's absence on the narrative level is made palpable against the background of his short presence as the narrative voice which is promptly drowned out. The passage shows that 'narrative interferences' from Wor are indeed possible, but after a short glimpse of such an intervention, in the end, Wor does not manage to speak up for his cause. Again, we can observe how the spell which silences Wor in the plot of the novel is repeated by the narrator.

We have seen that Wor's speechlessness is expressed in different layers of the text and that the semantic references to his tacit behavior are complemented with narrative strategies that employ absences in order to illustrate the lack of speech in the novel. For the conclusion, we will further determine the connection between these absences and the content of the novel and also return to the question of what overall purpose the transformation of the dictator into the animal serves within the novel.

25 "Lorsque l'écrivain arrive à ce stade de la narration il lui semble entendre une voix. Étonné il s'arrête. Ce n'est rien. N'aie pas peur. C'est moi qui te parle. Tu tentes de raconter mon histoire" (Ndao 1997: 205).

26 "Vous qui regardez le dictateur, vous qui le voyez tous les jours, il y a des choses que vous ignorez" (Ndao 1997: 209).

27 "Wor ne peut comprendre que l'écrivain ne raconte pas ce qui s'est passé dans un pays déterminé. [...] C'est une erreur de penser que l'écrivain s'adresse à quelqu'un en particulier. Que Wor se tienne tranquille et attende de voir comment l'histoire va se terminer" (Ndao 1997: 210f.).

4. Conclusion

As has been shown in the previous section, Ndao uses absences in *Mbaam dictateur* to mirror the lack of speech that we read about in connection with the dictator. Ndao's use of absences, therefore, corresponds to what Werner Wolf has termed – following an article by J. L. Wing (1993) – the 'iconicity of absence' (Wolf 2005: 114).

The absences described in this article would not be perceivable if Ndao did not choose to use internal focalization and free indirect speech for sequences when Wor is focused on in the novel – these narrative modes are contrasted, for example, with recurring instances of direct speech in the case of other characters in the novel.²⁸ The way Wor is written about is, thus, distinctly different from other figures and his tacit behavior is clearly opposed to their use of spoken language.

Absence in Ndao's novel is most notably iconic when, for instance, the narrator pretends to let Wor narrate (through sentences such as "Let us listen to *Mbaam ngonk*, the enormous donkey, narrate"), when, in reality, it is still the narrator who is in charge of telling the story: it may be Wor's perspective (as indicated by the internal focalization), but the narrator generates an expected presence, a shift in the way of the narration, which is, in fact, never accomplished. This absence forms an iconic relationship with Wor's speechlessness, a way of "'form miming meaning' through *absence*" (ibid.).²⁹ As a result, the reader perceives Wor's silence not just through descriptions in the plot but on the narrative level as well.

In conclusion, the novel expresses the notion that a dictator who violently oppresses his subjects stops being a part of humanity. This notion is developed through likening the tyrant to an animal: the dictator stops adhering to human morals and thus drifts towards a beast-like existence. The analogy between the dictator and the animal has clear ethical implications and is intended to expose the autocratic ruler.³⁰ The loss of speech is one major component in illustrating the transition from

28 For a closer look at the general narrative configuration of *Mbaam dictateur*, see (Bakayoko 2014: 148–152). For the impact of oral traditions on the narration, (cf. ibid.: 100f., 227), and also Gierczyński-Bocandé (2005: 141f.).

29 This iconicity can be described as 'semantic' or 'metaphorical', since the reader is required to understand the absence of speech within the plot of the novel in order to make the connection to how it is expressed on the narrative level and on the level of the signifier (cf. Wolf 2005: 128, 131, note 18).

30 "On découvre [...] que la *spécificité* qu'apporte Ndao dans le traitement d'une telle question [les changements politiques en Afrique] est dans la convocation du règne animal [...]" / "One notices [...] that Ndao's specific approach to this question [the political changes in Africa] consists in the evocation of the animal kingdom [...]" (Diadji 2000: 229).

the powerful ruler who determines the destiny of millions of people to a helpless and insignificant farm animal whose purpose is to serve his owners. Here, speechlessness signifies the exit from the human species, to a 'being-outside-the-law' which cannot be confined within the rules and norms of human society. Ndao takes this connection between dictator and animal to extremes by turning Wor into a donkey, putting the approximation that Derrida described in his lectures fully into effect, the approximation between the sovereign ruler and the beast.

The way this transformation takes place is framed as turning Wor's transgressions against himself:³¹ He is often described as turning human beings into animals; one of his deeds is, for example, to "convert the people into a flock of sheep".³² Speech is, again, one of the deciding human features that vanish as a consequence of Wor's reign:

They let Wor transform his fellow citizens into animals. The dictator did not leave anything to his fellow countrymen but the appearance of humans. [...] Does a man without any choice, without any preference, without any rights, who asks for permission before speaking, [...] does he keep his human essence?³³

As a taste of his own medicine, he is stripped from every human quality³⁴ and ultimately bereft of the potential to speak – a process which he himself initiated and which is indicated by his slowly growing mute even before the actual metamorphosis.

It should be noted that this article assumes a clear-cut distinction between animals and humans in *Mbaam dictateur*. The narrator problematizes this distinction himself in the novel, for example, when he acknowledges that it is not uncommon

31 The conspirators make the conscious decision not to kill Wor, further highlighting the difference between humans and the dictator or the animal: "Ils préfèrent ne pas verser de sang, du reste. Ils ne désirent que la fin du règne de Wor. Ils veulent que leur méthode soit différente de celle employée par le dictateur" / "Besides, they prefer to not spill blood. They only wish for Wor's reign to end. They want their method to be different from the one employed by the dictator" (Ndao 1997: 224), and further: "Certaines façons de donner la mort excluent leur auteur des gens doués de raison" / "Certain ways of taking a life exclude the doer from the people gifted with reason" (ibid.: 205).

32 "[C]onvertir les gens en un troupeau de moutons [...]" (Ndao 1997: 172).

33 "Ils ont laissé Wor transformer ses concitoyens en animaux. Le dictateur n'a laissé à ses compatriotes que l'aspect humain. [...] Un homme sans choix, sans préférence, sans droit, qui demande la permission avant parler, [...] garde-t-il son essence d'être humain?" (Ndao 1997: 261).

34 Save for one: his memory. It is the last remaining human feature left in his animal form which also allows the reader to partake in Wor's reflections on the events of the novel. Mbaam ngonk indeed embodies a paradoxical being when one considers Nietzsche's elaborations on the animal's existence: to him, memory is at the same time the privilege and the yoke of humans, hindering them to reach ultimate happiness because, unlike animals, they are not able to fully forget (cf. Nietzsche 2007²: 249). The intention behind the spell is indeed to make Wor suffer by letting him keep his memory, as a punishment for his crimes against his people (cf. Ndao 1997: 232f.).

for humans to act according to the 'right of the strongest' as well (cf., e.g., Ndao 1997: 150, 289). He also somewhat relativizes the statement that dictators are their own species, separate from humans (cf. *ibid.*: 210). The anthropological implications of the novel and how they relate to the idea of the animal have to be examined separately in order to provide a complete picture of the diverse notions within the text. What the article shows, however, is how Ndao uses speechlessness to illustrate the corrupted nature of a dictator and that the topic of speech and the (in-)ability to speak form central elements of the novel.

The spell that turns Wor into a donkey powerfully demonstrates to him what it means to truly abandon one's own humanity, to fully give in to one's own instincts – one reduces oneself to an animal, passive and mute. Wor's tacit behavior, therefore, foreshadows his own metamorphosis, and his exit from the human community is, in turn, emblemized by his speechlessness.

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