

A New Mystic Practice? On Charles de Foucauld's Tuareg-French Dictionary

Diogenes
2016, Vol. 61(1) 89–96
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DOI: 10.1177/0392192115615531
dio.sagepub.com


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For C. B.

The publication of the second volume of *La Fable Mystique* by Michel de Certeau (2013) incites not only a deeper reflection of the mystic discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It also brings present attention to the question of knowing if and how, at the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries, a mystic practice had come to substitute for the traditional mystic discourse (Cravetto, 1995: 113).

In the new mystic practice, the unfolding of manners and arts of doing (de Certeau, 1990), together with their singularities and powers, transform an utterance which, like a voice that is muffled, resonates mutely. These manners of doing function in effect from out of the heart of a language that is strange – the language of the other – which is for the subject both a language of exile and of proximity. Absorbed by the universe of the Other,¹ the subject tries to advance, to go further. He puts himself to the test in a very particular form of communication.

This approach seems echoed by the memory of what the Tuareg language was for Charles de Foucauld and the story of the slow formation of his *Dictionary* and its hidden tapestry of threads, whose power is more revealing than the work itself. When I composed a short article entitled ‘History of the French-Tuareg Dictionary of Charles de Foucauld’ for the *Revue des Études Islamiques* (Cravetto, 1979, where the inadvertent error in word-order ‘French-Tuareg’ had slipped into the title), I had reconstructed the series of steps which led from the drafts to the *Dictionary*, of which we have – still today² – only the photostat edition brought out by André Basset (Foucauld, 1951).

As soon as Foucauld perceived that the semantic field of a word was broader than he had thought, as soon as he discovered a new rule of grammar, he amended not only the *Dictionary* but also his other linguistic studies: the *Poems of the Tuareg* (Foucauld, 1925–1930), the *Proverbs* (Foucauld and Calassanti-Motyliniski, 1922), the *Notes for a Trial Tuareg Grammar* (Foucauld, 1920) ... By re-integrating the drafts and the successive edited versions of the *Dictionary* into Foucauld’s linguistic works and his correspondence, one gains a sense of the effort he accomplished to engage with and share ‘from within’ the mentality of the nomad people among who he lived.

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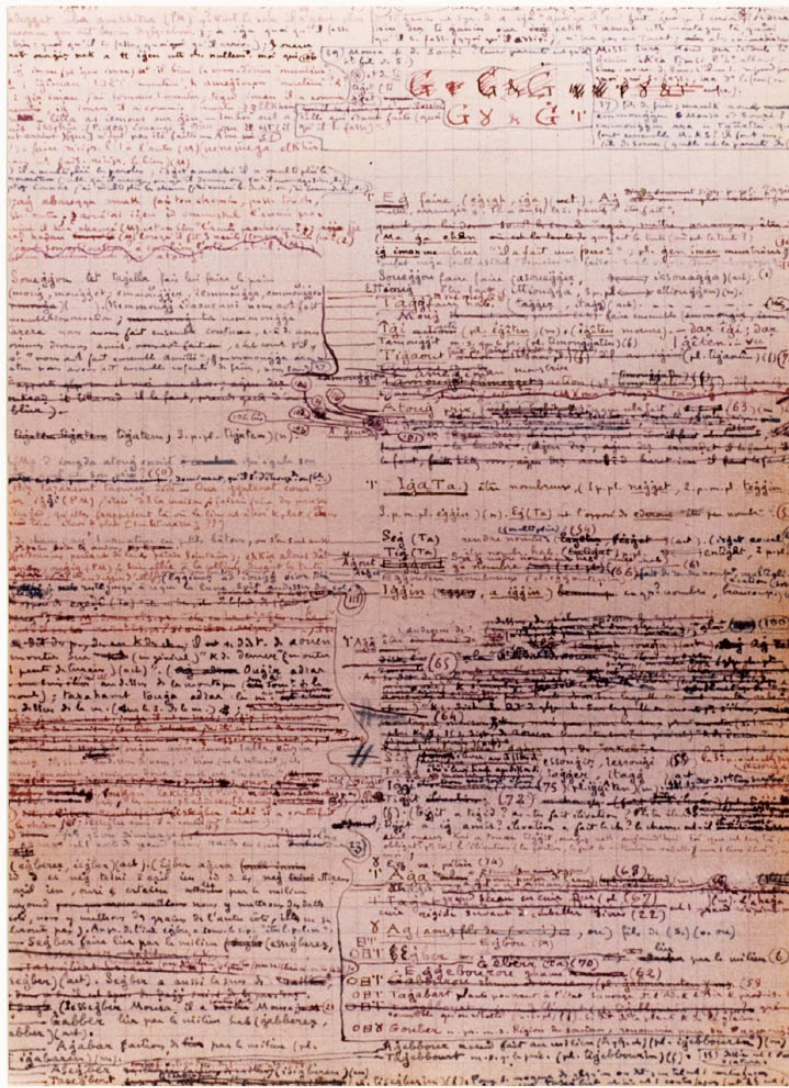


Figure I. FF 39 (b1), p. 49.

This observation struck me when, after having rediscovered the Fonds Foucauld (Foucauld Papers) in their jumbled and dispersed state and removed them to Paris (Cravetto, 1977), I was obliged systematically to classify all the items not previously catalogued by the archivists who had drawn up the general catalogue of Foucauld’s writings (Cravetto, 1977, 2009–10).³ In the course of this extensive task, more and more questions presented themselves. One of these ended up becoming the most urgent: why had so many researchers, admirers of the ‘apostle of the Sahara’, ignored his research devoted to the Berber language?

My wish consisted of bringing to light the significance of this work, a way of working and a personality. I therefore decided to visually synthesize, through photos, the journey which led Charles

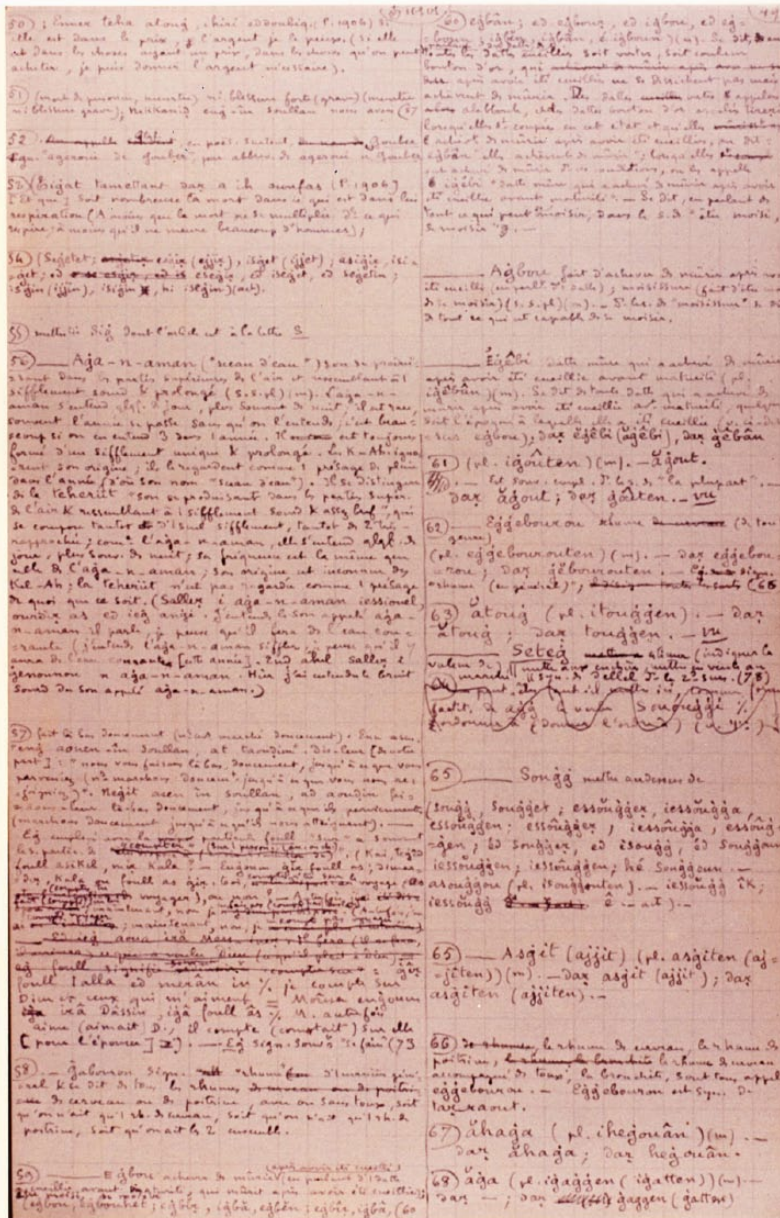


Figure 2. FF 39 (b2), p. 49.

de Foucauld to the ultimate compilation of the *Dictionary*, by choosing to photograph a page of the six redactions of the vocable ‘eg’, meaning ‘to do’.

The two photos presented here were taken of the first draft of the *Dictionary*, the manuscript document FF 39. This script, which I have labelled b (for the French ‘brouillon’ = ‘draft’), is made up of two series of loose leaves: b1 and b2, which were later brought together. The b1 series,

paginated 1–129, constitutes the compilation that Foucauld began during the summer of 1905 when he was on his way to the Hoggar region of the Sahara.

On 13 May he wrote to Mgr Guérin: ‘When I am out for a walk, I busy myself with constructing a French-Tamachek and Tamachek-French lexicon, and with translations of passages of the Old Testament.’⁴ On 13 July he was declaring: ‘I am preparing a very small lexicon and a very small grammar of the Tuareg language.’⁵

On the first photo, the five different shades of ink – red, pale blue, dark blue, violet and black – and the two types of pencil marks reveal different stages of corrections.

The b2 series is also paginated 1–129. It includes as well 91 paper slips; this series contains only additions concerning the words that already have been provided with explanations. Up until when did Foucauld continue his b2 corrections, and when did he begin to compile a new text? In my attempt to answer these questions in the *Revue des Études Islamiques*, I had been able to print only photos taken from the successive versions of the *Dictionary*. The photos of the drafts, with their different coloured inks, pencil marks and attached slips, are immediately striking when seen and point to a concern for preciseness, a passionate dexterity, a stubborn will to open up to the unknown, to accept the unforeseen, to welcome the Other in all its complexity. They bring us face to face with the demand for a particular communication. Did Charles de Foucauld’s tedious work, his doggedly determined labour, arise out of the spirit of a colonizer, or of a missionary, or both at once? Could it be that the embarrassment that the answer might bring is the cause of the silence which surrounds his linguistic writings?

His role as an *initiator* is attested in all the currents that have renewed the Christian spirituality of the twentieth century. In the discussions which led to the Vatican II Council (1962–1965), reference to his experiences takes an important place. Authors from a wide range of backgrounds had already felt prompted to write about this *extraordinary* person, but only a minority of these had gone through the archives. J.-F. Six, who in 1958 published his *Itinéraire spirituel de Charles de Foucauld* [The Spiritual Journey of Charles de Foucauld], had drawn up at the end of his book a two-column synopsis, minutely summarizing both Foucauld’s printed texts and his unpublished writings. To all appearances, the larger part of Foucauld’s works remained unknown.

This observation was rendered all the more astonishing when the note concluding Denise and Robert Barrat’s book came to light, reading: ‘Brother Charles de Jésus left more than ten thousand pages not intended for publication’ (1958: 190). Added to which, the Barrats made only scant mention of the language work which, after the Algerian war had begun, was imperative to be seen as part of his motivation. In that same era, his archives and manuscripts seem to have disappeared at a time when biographies and hagiographic accounts of his life were proliferating more and more.

The biography of a person of edifying character, and one who is presented as a saint, projects, in the same way as that of a person accorded star status, the image of a pure model which links official discourse with repressed desires and hidden memories. This model image pervades the present and calls forth ‘the languages of social anxiety’ (de Certeau, 1970: 7) which bring into the open contrasts of experience and risk, rationality and degeneration, nature and artifice (Stäuble Tercier and Raboud-Schüle, 1999). On the other hand, this same model image elicits a domain of the imaginary which is characterized by the impossibility of distinguishing the real from the unreal (Deleuze, 2003: 93), which prevents comprehension of the complexity of a life experience and the roles that it is made to play.

In 1969 I decided to try to find Foucauld’s archival material again in an attempt to disentangle the confused threads of his life where an existential trajectory had become enmeshed with hagiographic distortion and the fragmentation of this latter into images that were bearers of future innovations. In order to study these documents I found I had to reclassify them.⁶ It was in doing so that, in a second discovery, I was able to observe the differences existing between the manuscripts

and the printed texts. The hand-written drafts had been published after undergoing various types of modifications (Cravetto, 1978). Furthermore, the reworked texture of the linguistic studies had been ignored despite the fact that it bore witness to the radical change in Foucauld.

His spiritual director, the abbé Huvelin, had written to him in Béni Abbès on 18 May 1902: ‘If you have and maintain a hatred of yourself, let it be a hatred as calm as still, deep pool’ (Foucauld, 1957: 197). This hatred of self, which, according to Pierre Legendre (1999: 339–349)⁷ has during the twentieth century turned into unprecedented cruelty and to crime, was for Charles de Foucauld transmuted, during his sojourn in the Algerian Sahara, into a patient assumption of alterity: the alterity of oneself and of the Other.

By renouncing an ideal self, he was able in a very concrete and realist fashion to become one with his desire to ‘go beyond’ in his urgent striving to respond to the unknown. In this undertaking, Foucauld seems to demonstrate an attitude that is strangely close to that of the mystic, as defined by Michel de Certeau (1982: 411):

The mystic is one who cannot cease from travelling on, and who, in the certain knowledge of what he or she is lacking, knows about each place and each object that it is not that, and that one cannot reside in any one place or be content with any one thing.

Close, but in a strange way: for Foucauld totality can be attained, and he desired to attain it. ‘Drowning’ and ‘fearful’, he never ceased deepening his understanding, adding correction upon correction. On 31 July 1910 he wrote to René Basset:

I am immersed (to the point of drowning, I fear) in the verbs. From a close examination of the 600 or 700 conjugated verbs (the most commonly used ones, or ones with interesting forms) that I have collated, I am striving to derive a classification of conjugations: I am up to more than 80 different ones just for the basic forms, without counting some which are distinctly irregular. I will send you the work on the verbs as soon as it is ready, but it is certain that it will be only provisional. The complete classification will not be able to be achieved until after the lexicon is completed, and that will surely throw up still more new conjugations.⁸

During the summer of that year, he worked on this task, but on 16 November he admitted that ‘The grammar has had to be interrupted [...]. I cannot finish the book of verbs without first finishing the lexicon which is presenting here and there some new conjugations.’⁹

He had come to a stop at folio 222 of the grammar where the book of verbs is found (FF 111).¹⁰ A letter to Basset in February 1912 gives us an explanation why, after finishing the *Tuareg-French Dictionary*, Charles de Foucauld did not go on with the interrupted work:

I am working with all my strength on the dictionary; [...] once the big dictionary is finished, there will remain only the jobs of 1° correcting the spelling of all the texts 2° copying everything out again 3° finishing the grammar; this last, this third task scares me enormously ... the rest is nothing, except it will take some time (Foucauld, 1947)

This third task scares me enormously ... Instead of addressing that, Foucauld, after completing the *Dictionary*, preferred to extract from it the abbreviated lexicon at a time when he was ceasing to send René Basset any further corrections concerning the studies already submitted. But the submissions of studies themselves did not cease to multiply and confront us with the wish and necessity for a personal communication which would take us beyond the dissemblance and distance.

Louis Massignon (1963: 773) recognized that Foucauld ‘was imbued with the “colonial” mentality of his time’ and compared the work put into the great dictionary with ‘a rather naïve but nevertheless powerful and exhaustive patience’, with ‘lists of topographical and barometric

observations made [...] in Morocco whose precision is decidedly striking [...]'. These assertions lead us to reflect on the desire for mastery in his study which Foucauld then departed from to become, in Massignon's words a 'mystic in the primitive state' (Massignon, 1963: 778).

The tension which drove Foucauld to abandon a refined life in society to devote himself to the exploration of Morocco would lead him effectively away from 'the secular rage to understand' (Massignon, 1983: 293, 'the honouring of one's comrades of work and the word of truth'; cf. 'A whole life with a brother gone off to the desert: Foucauld', 1947: 64) and lead him towards a pitiless will to asceticism. From his time in Nazareth, his 'pursuit of the infinite'¹¹ was to become more and more dominated by the vigilance he exercised to *become assimilated* into the Christ. This desire came to transmute the ideal of perfection that haunted him while his attention was focused on the *kenosis* of the Christ: transcendence which abases itself to take up incarnation and the Cross. Feeling within himself the drive to imitate this movement, Foucauld gradually abandoned all of his ideas and projects.

He took on the priesthood to bring the '*divine banquet [...] to the lame, the blind, the poor*' (Foucauld, 1947: 5, 8 April 1905). As soon as he was ordained a priest, he took up residence in Béni-Abbès, a locality where caravans met in Algeria, to be as close as possible to Morocco where Christians were forbidden from entering.

The impossibility of restraining his urgent desire, arising out of a boundless excess, imposed on him the will to become, to be, like Christ. This impossibility allowed him to transcend the dualism of the era where 'contemplation' stood in contrast to 'mission', and 'monk' to 'apostle'. This same thrust led him towards a tearing up of roots, one might even say a mental *expatriation* which would lead him towards his language work, in the midst of which the taking up of the cross became a condition of existence which equated with that of Tuareg, a language both of exile and of proximity. The desire to absorb the universe of the Other drove him constantly to be departing, to be discovering, to be tracing unknown paths and to write about them.

The publication of the second volume of Michel de Certeau's *La Fable Mystique* has brought these memories welling up again together with the hope that one might examine more deeply the hypothesis of a new practice of the mystical, of which Charles de Foucauld would be the initiator. Certeau (1982: 411) writes at the end of the first volume:

It seems that, in the culture of the present day, there persists the drive to ceaseless departure, as if by no longer being able to be grounded in the belief in God, the experience retained only the form and not the content of traditional mysticism. It is so said in a poem of Nelly Sachs, *fortgehen ohne Rückschau*, 'leaving without looking back' and by René Char: 'In poetry, you inhabit only the place you leave behind, you create only the work that you lay aside, you reach that which lasts only by destroying time.'

Charles de Foucauld built his life for long years on the belief in God. Then he sought within himself the being of the Christ, the union of the divine and the human, whose realization can be neither ignored nor suppressed. This union drove him to forget himself, to abandon his home, to ceaselessly go towards the Other – the unknown one, his brother – and to write about it and proclaim the radical desire.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Capitalized in the sense employed by Lacan, for whom the subject is formed from elements of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.

2. In his recent study devoted to extracts from the *Dictionnaire Touareg-Français* (Foucauld, 2013), Carlo Ossola uses excerpts from the photostat edition, without ever mentioning in his preface ('A Person of Dazzling White') the manuscripts, which he has no knowledge of.
3. When the archivists of the Postulation had drawn up the *General Catalogue of the Writings of Charles de Foucauld*, they had three complete copies typed out, one of which was to be deposited with the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1947. They had nevertheless not catalogued nor typed up 439 hand-written documents for reasons which could be explained by the prospect of a beatification. These related to works where Foucauld had made a second copy or a résumé, together with linguistic studies, drafts of these latter and seventy-one notes concerning a wide range of other subjects. I have filed these manuscript items under the code FF and provided a description of each one. Each time that it has been impossible for me to refer to a particular hand-written document of Foucauld, I have used the copy and quoted the item with the code-letter C.
4. Unpublished letter to Father Guérin, C-XIV, 28, 13 May 1905.
5. Unpublished letter to Father Guérin, C-XIV, 28, 13 July 1905.
6. Cravetto (1977). The abbé Brazzola, vice-postulator of the process of Foucauld's beatification, gave me permission in May 1971 to remove the typed copy, the books and the manuscripts of Charles de Foucauld to the library of the Saint Sulpice Seminary in Paris (6, rue de Regard). He had previously conserved them at the Saint Sulpice Seminary of Issy-les-Moulineaux and at the Foyer de Charité of the 'Part Dieu' of Poissy. In 1975, on conclusion of my work, the new postulator, Mgr Jacqueline, forbade the consultation of the manuscripts and papers of the Archive that I had classified. In 1995, this collection was removed to the Archives of the Église de France, at 106, rue du Bac in Paris, and then, at a date I am unaware of, to the Conférence des Évêques de France and thereafter to the National Centre for the Archives of the Church at Issy-les-Moulineaux. Finally, in 1999, the collection seems to have been sent back to the new postulator, Mgr Bouvier.
7. The issue of 'hatred' constituted a crucial problem for me. After many years working in the Contemporary Jewish Centre for Documentation in Paris, I wondered whether in mysticism there was a reversal of this sentiment. See Cravetto (1970, 1975).
8. Unpublished letter to René Basset, C bis XLVIII, 164, 31 July 1910.
9. Unpublished letter to René Basset, C bis XLVIII, 164, 16 November 1910.
10. The manuscript deposited in the Archive, entitled *Essai de grammaire touareg (Dialecte de l'Ahaggar)*, consists of three dossiers of notes – FF 109-111 – themselves divided into three books. The third of these, *Verbs and Noun Derivatives*, begins at folio 189 of FF 110 only to suddenly break off at folio 222 of FF 111. If, by reading the Foucauld-Basset correspondence, one can conceive of the reason for this halt, one must restrict oneself to hypotheses to explain why René Basset published *Notes pour servir à un essai de grammaire touarègue* (Foucauld, 1920) without the section concerning the verb, which in any language constitutes the most awkward subject.
11. The abbé Huvelin wrote to him on 2 August 1896: 'You need to be protected against this pursuit of the infinite, which leads to disquiet, and never lets you settle anywhere – such a pursuit is possible only in those hearts where there is never any superfluity' (Foucauld, 1957: 41).

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