

## Michel Leiris

### Ethnologist in Search of Meanings

Aleksandar Bošković

Dès cet après-midi, avec Abba Jérôme, je vais voir Emawayish et lui remets des plumes, de l'encre, un carnet pour rédiger elle-même – ou dicter à son fils – le manuscrit, laissant entendre que le chef de Mission, s'il est content, lui fera le cadeau désiré. ... Paroles d'Emawayish cet après-midi quand, lui parlant du manuscrit, je lui disais qu'il serait bon surtout qu'elle écrive des chansons amoureuses, comme celles de l'autre nuit: *Est-ce que la poésie existe en France?* Puis: *Est-ce que l'amour existe en France?*

(31 August 1932 – Leiris 1996: 614–615)<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction: The Man and His Work

Michel Leiris was born on 20 April 1901 in Paris and died on 30 September 1990 in Saint-Hillaire (France).<sup>2</sup> There is perhaps no single figure that influenced so strongly French ethnology and anthropology, and at the same time exercised a powerful influence on the whole "critical" anthropological movement in the 1980s, exemplified by the book "Writing Culture" (Clifford and Marcus 1986).<sup>3</sup>

Michel Leiris was an artist, poet, writer, critic, traveller, surrealist, and ethnographer, a true "Renaissance Man" whose friends included Breton, Bataille, Giacometti, Picasso, Césaire, and Métraux. He was also a great innovator in modern confessional literature, writing several autobiogra-

phies and keeping the diary from 1922 until 1989. This confessional and very personal style influenced the creation of his first major ethnographic work, "L'Afrique fantôme" (Paris 1934. Phantom Africa), based on the notes and diaries from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. The publication of this book brought Leiris instant fame, but also condemnation of most French ethnologists/anthropologists, from Griaule to Mauss. On the other hand, Leiris' critique of colonialism brought him acclaim in anthropology in the 1980s and 90s, with authors like James Clifford and Clifford Geertz referring to him. Always an outspoken critic, just as he opposed European colonial practices and was member of the French resistance during the Second World War, Leiris was vocal against the war in Algiers (he was one of the signatories of the "Manifeste des 121" in 1960) and protested with other intellectuals against the policies of the French Communist Party in 1972.

Leiris had several undergraduate degrees – a certificate in history of religions and sociology (1936, under Mauss), as well as diplomas in Oriental languages (1937) and religious studies (1938). In 1935 he started working in the Musée de l'Homme, and was Research Director of the CNRS (National Council for the Scientific Research) from 1943 until 1971. Alfred Métraux helped Leiris secure resources for the extensive stay in the French Antilles, between 26 July and 12 November 1948. This period of field research under the influence of his friend Aimé Césaire also contributed to his understanding of (and enthusiastic support for) the movement known as *negritude* in France – the appreciation of "black" culture in all its aspects, from jazz to plastic arts and oral literature (Price et Jamin 1988: 35 f.).

Leiris' first contact with colonial practices came during the 1927 trip to Egypt. He was appalled by what he perceived as brutishness of the Europeans in Africa, referring to some of them (especially within the colonial administration) as "sinister idiots." In January 1931, following the recommendation of G. H. Rivière (Deputy Director of the Ethnographic Museum, later Musée de l'Homme), Leiris has been recruited by Marcel Griaule as the secretary-archivist and researcher (for the sociology of religion and ethnology of the secret societies) of the ethnographic and linguistic mission Dakar-Djibouti. The French Parliament unanimously adopted a special law about the mission, setting aside a considerable sum of money and making this project something truly of national interest. The Mission took place between 19 May 1931 and 17 February 1933, producing an enormous amount

1 The same passage is quoted by Geertz (1988: 129): "Right away this afternoon I go with Abba Jérôme to see [the Ethiopian woman] Emawayish and give her pens, ink, and a notebook so she can record for herself – or dictate to her son – the manuscript [of her songs], letting it be understood that the head of the expedition, if he is pleased, will present her with the desired gift."

Emawayish's words this afternoon when I told her, speaking of her manuscript, that it would be especially good for her to write down some love songs like those of the other night: *Does poetry exist in France?* And then: *Does love exist in France?*

2 Basic bibliographic references are in Leiris 1996 and Armel 1997. The interviews conducted by Price and Jamin (1988) provide some personal and very interesting accounts. Professor Jean Jamin (EHESS) in particular has written extensively on various aspects of Leiris' work.

3 A book that became "burdened with significance" (Clifford 1999: 643).