

OF PRESENCES/ABSENCES, IDENTITY AND POWER: THE IDEOLOGICAL ROLE OF TRANSLATION INTO SWAHILI DURING LATE PRE-COLONIAL AND EARLY COLONIAL TIMES

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This paper results from an investigation of translation activities in Swahili literature during late pre-colonial and early colonial times.¹ In detail, the paper addresses questions on how, for some specific groups, the choice to translate from particular languages and cultures – or even the choice to not translate at all – was related both to practices of accumulation of prestige and power and to practices of identity construction. Textual analysis, together with the inclusion of cultural-historical facts (contextual analysis), allows a comparison between the nature of literary and extra-literary discourses and therefore uncovers specific patterns underneath translation practices from the 18th until early 20th century. The objective of this study is to emphasise the link between the exercise of power and production of culture, “[...] of which production of translation is part.” (Bassnett & Lefevere 1990: 5), and thus to configure translated literature as playing an active role in Swahili literary and cultural system.

Late Pre-colonial Translation Activities

Given its geographical position, stretching towards the Indian Ocean, the Swahili coast has historically been a contact point for overseas populations. Pushed by the North-Eastern monsoon, people from the Arabic Peninsula and from the Persian Gulf arrived to the coast to exchange trade goods since the 2nd century CE (Nurse & Spear 1985: 1). Apart from pottery, clothes or beads, the Indian Ocean trade route intersected also languages and the literary repertoires associated with them. Translation activities have, therefore, always been part and parcel of the cosmopolitan Swahili coast.

In pre-colonial Swahili societies the oral repertoire incorporated fables and tales which in terms of plots, characters and themes exhibit Arabic or Oriental influences. The Sanskrit cycle *Kalila and Dimna*, stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*, such as the tales about the Arab Abunuwas or the Persian Sindbad, circulated on the coast and became so assimilated that they were not perceived as translated narratives (Tolmacheva 1978: 239; Bertoncini et al. 2009: 20). In addition to that,

¹ This paper was, in a reduced form, presented at the 26th Swahili Colloquium in Bayreuth, May 10-12, 2012. I would like to thank Saïd A. M. Khamis, Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková and Flavia Aiello Traoré who took the time to read the draft manuscript and offered their insightful comments.

translating activities played a prominent role from the very first moment in which oral productions began to be fixed with ink and paper. The oldest manuscripts of Swahili literature, *Hamziya* dated 1652 (Knappert 1979: 103, 1999: 2; Mulokozi & Sengo 1995: 1) or *Utendi wa Tambuka* (also known as *Chuo cha Herekali* or *Chuo cha Utenzi*) dated 1728 (Harries 1962: 5; Knappert 1967: 143; Mulokozi & Sengo 1995: 1) place translated texts among the very first written texts in Swahili literature.²

Nevertheless, literary criticism – that has proved to be quite involved with some post-colonial translations, such as the translation of Shakespeare’s plays by Nyerere or George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* by Fortunatus Kawegere, amongst others – devoted little interest to translations during pre-colonial times. In *Swahili beyond the boundaries*, Alamin Mazrui (2007: 124) gives a short comment about the long-lasting attitude of Swahili language to accommodate translated works. However, he also adds that we must wait until the colonial era to witness a real proliferation of translations. Furthermore, in the view of Euphrase Kezilahabi (1973: 62), the historical epics that took place in Arabia and were so massively translated during pre-colonial times had “very little relevancy to the people living in East Africa”.

From these perspectives the weight of metaliterary processes as well as the ideological role of translation seem to be overlooked. Translation activities during pre-colonial times are not only to be understood as what Roman Jakobson termed “translation proper”.³ The verb *kufasiri/kutafsiri* (to translate) also referred to a variegated series of re-writing processes.⁴ For a deeper understanding of translation practices in the period under discussion, appropriation or adaptation should be considered key-points. Furthermore, if we admit that Arabian narratives had no big relevance for the whole of East Africa, as Kezilahabi is inclined to think, it is hard to deny the special role they had for specific groups in East Africa as a tool to defining identities. This is indeed a point.

² It has to be added, however, that Mulokozi & Sengo (1994: 29) make note of a manuscript in the Library of the University of Dar es Salaam dated 937 AH (A.D. 1517). The “Ode to Mwana Manga” attributed to Fumo Liyongo would therefore be “the earliest manuscript of Kiswahili in existence today” (*Ibid.*) and it is not a translation.

³ In the words of Jakobson (1971: 261) *translation proper* refers to “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language” that is different from *intralingual translation*, “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language” and from *intersemiotic translation* that is “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign system”.

⁴ Until the 19th century the verb *kufasiri* seems to be used, almost interchangeably with *kutafsiri* and *kutarjumi*, with the sense of explaining, making intelligible and commenting. In recent times the verbs *kufasiri/kutafsiri* mostly seem to refer to the translation of a written text and the verb *kutarjumi* for *simultaneous interpretation*.

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***Tendi* from Arabia⁵**

Already at the end of the 17th century, and during the 18th and 19th centuries, in a situation of increased Arabic and Islamic sensibility and influences, a great number of Arabic texts were translated or adapted into Swahili. Almost all of Swahili classical poets were involved with translation – or some forms of it. Swahili classical poetry mainly consisted of *utendi* (pl. *tendi*, also known as *utenzi*, pl. *tenzi*, in the southern Swahili dialects), an Islamic historical and heroic poetry commonly dealing with the life of the Prophet, of saints or heroes, and the wars against the unfaithful.

The reference to the source

A great number of *tendi* addresses the readers and tells them what they are going to listen⁶ is an attempt to re-produce or to translate an Arab source, usually a *hadithi*, (tale, account, tradition), as in the examples that follow:

Nudumu ya Kiarabu
maana khiyakalibu
na kuwayuza harubu
ya Warumu na Rasua⁷

Of the Arabic poem
I transposed the meaning
and I will tell you of the war
of the Byzantines and of the Prophet⁸

Naandikie kikutubu
hadithi ya Kiarabu
kwa khabari ya Ayubu
tumwa wa Mola Rasua
Hupenda kuwakhubiri
kiarabu kifasiri
kwa lugha yetu dhariri
pasiwe yasomwelea⁹

Let me prepare and write
an Arabic story
the history of Job
apostle and prophet of the Lord
I want to tell it to you
translating from Arabic
clearly into our language
so that there may be nothing left unclear
to you

Within the text the translators usually give details of the source they used to their audience and indicate the author of the original:

⁵ Term coined by the Composers.

⁶ The verb to listen is used instead of to read because Swahili classical poetry was composed to be chanted/recited and not to be read (Harries 1962: 12).

⁷ *Utendi wa Tambuka*, ('The Poem of the Battle of Tabook'), Bwana Mwengo, 1728, stanza 13.

⁸ Lines 1 and 2 are my translation. Lines 3 and 4 are from Knappert (1958: 121).

⁹ *Utendi wa Ayubu* ('The poem of Job') by Saiyid Umar bin Amin bin Umar in Amin bin Nasir al-Ahdal, 1835, stanzas 2 and 3 (Allen 1971: 376-377).

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*Lianna niliko nina niya
t'aka kutenda*

Because I am here with the intention
wishing to make

*kitenzi kya siyi Hamziya
kalma*

a versification of this Hamziya, (of) its
words

*Azitungilewo Muhammadi
mwane Saidi*

He who composed them was Mohammed,
son of Said,

*ali Abusiri utoleo wenye
nadhima¹⁰*

he was (from) Abusiri; (it is) a poetic
product.

Awaliye tawambiya

I will tell you its source (...)

Alinena Abdalla

It was told by Abdalla

Bin Abbas Fadhila

son of Abbas Fadhil

Radhiyallahu taala¹¹

(May he rest in peace)

The audience is also provided with information about how the composer got involved in the act of translating. Usually he saw the story in a book in Arabic and felt a burning desire to translate it. A recurring image is that of the heart which propels the translation out of its thrill. In addition to that, common reference is made to verbs such as 'to love', *kuhibu*, *kupenda* or 'to desire', *kutamani* which underline the emotional dimension of the translation process.

Hadithi hii jueni

Know that this story

naliona chuoni

I saw it in a book

ya zita zali Yemeni

is about the Yemeni wars

zamani zake Bashairi

in the days of the Prophet

Hapenda kuyabadilikwa

I want to change it

kwa lugha ya Kiswahili

into the Swahili language

kiarabu ni halili

Arabic is lawful

wajuao kutafsiri¹²

for those who know how to translate.

¹⁰ *Hamziya*, ('The Poem of Hamziya'), Sayyid Aidharusi bin Athumani, 1652, stanzas 6 and 7 (Knappert 1968: 59).

¹¹ *Utendi wa Qiyama*, ('The Last Judgment'), Hemedi Abdallah bin Said el-Buhry, 19th century, stanzas 14 and 15 (Allen 1971: 440-442).

¹² *Utenzi wa Ras il-Ghuli*, ('The Poem of the Demon's Head'), Sheikh Mgeni bin Faqihi, 1855, stanzas 26 and 29 (Harries 1962: 7-8).

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*Mbwene hadithi chuoni
ya tangu tumwa amini
moyowa ukatamani
lugha kuwagauziya¹³*

I saw in a book a story
of the time of the Prophet
and my heart longed
to translate it for you

*Niyawenepo chuoni,
Moyo wangu hatamani
Kubadili kimangani
Kwa kisawahili kuioa¹⁴*

When I saw it in the book,
My heart desired
To translate it out of the Arabic,
And write it in Swahili

Having made reference to pre-existing sources, the reader is, during the narration, reminded of the origin of the poem by phrases of the kind “the Sheikh said”, “the writer of the book said” or “I read in the book that [...]” (Allen 1971: 22). During the composition the translators stress the point that they are just repeating, retelling the fruit of some other’s genius.

*Napenda kuidhukuri
hadithi kutadhakari
bi qauli 'ljafari
Mmaka asiyo tuwa¹⁵*

I like to recall it
and repeat the story
as it is told by Jaafar
of Mecca

*Mbwene hadithi kitoto
Kina maneno mazito
Kina na sifa za moto
Nanyi tawahadithiya¹⁶*

In a small book
I found tidings of weight
an account of the fire
and I will rehearse it

This emphasis on the re-telling compels the translator to clarify that every single word of the composition comes from another text. This is exemplified in the following stanza from *Utendi wa Ayubu*, in which the author says that all that he has written comes from another text and that he has cared to leave nothing out of it:

¹³ *Utendi wa Ngamia na Paa*, (‘The Poem of the Camel and the Gazelle’), n.a., 19th century, stanza 60 (Allen 1971: 86-87).

¹⁴ *Utendi wa Shufaka*, (‘The Poem of Compassion’), n.a., 19th century, stanza 45 (Werner 1918: 122).

¹⁵ *Utendi wa Ngamia na Paa*, (‘The Poem of the Camel and the Gazelle’), n.a., 19th century, stanza 63 (Allen 1971: 88). (translation by the author).

¹⁶ *Utendi wa Qiyama*, (‘The Last Judgement’), Hemedi Abdallah bin Said el-Buhry, 19th century, stanza 12 (Allen 1971: 440-441).

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kinudhumu kikutubu
yote katika kitabu
kabadili kiarabu
kiswahili kawambia

As I composed and wrote
all that is in the book
I turned it from Arabic
and I tell you in Swahili

Tumeyaona zuoni
na katika Qurani
na nyingi angaliani
*sikusaza neno moja*¹⁷

we found it in books
and in the Koran
observe that
I have left out nothing

Authorship is differentiated and the role definition between original author and translator is left unambiguous within the text.

The Reference to the Act of Translating

Another feature that comes from the reading of some *tendi* is the ample references Swahili translators make to the act and craft of translating. As in the example from *Utenzi wa Ras il-Ghuli*, translators talk of the pleasing and meditative exercise of translation, which is conceived as a task or responsibility:

Haona kunipendeza
hifikiri nikiwaza
moyoni nikielekeza
maneno kuyafasiri

I found that it pleased me
thinking and considering it
I set my heart
to translating these words.

Ndipo mi kujikalifu
kiarabu kuakifu
maneno kuyasanifu
*niwape zote habari*¹⁹.

And so I exercised myself¹⁸
by changing the Arabic
composing the words
so that I might give them the whole story

¹⁷ *Utendi wa Ayubu*, ('The Poem of Job'), Saiyid Umar bin Amin bin Umar bin Amin bin Nasir al-Ahdal, 1835, stanzas 6 and 379 (Allen 1971: 376-377; 422-423).

¹⁸ In the text, Harries gives the translation of *kujikalifu* as 'to exercise oneself', but in the Dictionary of Literary Swahili by Jan Knappert and Leo van Kessel (2010: 211) the entry *kujikalifu* has also the meaning of 'to give oneself a responsibility or a task.'

¹⁹ *Utenzi wa Ras il-Ghuli*, 'The Poem of the Demon's Head', Sheikh Mgeni bin Faqih, 1855, stanzas 28 and 30 (Harries 1962: 7).

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Or they talk of the ability, competence and talent they have for translating and reach the meaning:

Kufasiri nimeweza I can translate it
lugha yetu kuweleza and explain it in our speech
na nyinyi mkisikiza and if you attend
*yote myafahamia*²⁰ all will be clear to you

Kisoma sana kitabu With care did I read it
pana hadithi ajabu a tale full of wonder
yandishiwe Kiarabu in that Arabic book
*maana yakaneleya*²¹ and I reached to its meaning

Tendi are usually accompanied by a set of information relating to the translation activity: the background, its implementation, its motivation. On this basis, we could arrive at the conclusion that the writers of these poems want to be seen as translators and want to be seen as fully involved with translation activities. Actually, the translators give their names, and therefore show their identities, in the body of the poem as in these examples below:

Na mtarajimu ni 'aini na ye And the translator is 'ayn and y and d
na dali
re wau na sini zaziwae na r, w and s; he who was born by Uthayma.
*Uthaima*²²

Aliyo fasiri mimu hee mimu He who translated it, is Mohammed,
na dali
mwana wa Jambeni Bakarii the son of Jambeni Bakarii, in truth
*ndiye hakika*²³

²⁰ *Utendi wa Ayubu*, ('The Poem of Job'), Saiyid Umar bin Amin bin Umar bin Amin bin Nasir al-Ahdal, 1835, stanza 5 (Allen 1971: 376-377). In this example also emerges the purpose of dissemination to a wider audience. The scope of *tendi*, as most of Swahili poetry, was mainly didactic. They were intended to give instruction on social behaviour and on religious practices (Harries 1962: 24). This moral-didactic function identifies the *utendi*, as Vierke (2011: 437) has suggested, as a "public text" used in (semi) public occasions in order to spread values and knowledge conveyed in a language that was familiar "rather than the more exclusive Arabic" (Ibid.).

²¹ *Utendi wa Qiyama*, ('The Last Judgement'), Hemedi Abdallah bin Said el-Buhry, 19th century, stanza 10 (Allen 1971: 440-441).

²² *Hamziya*, ('The Poem of Hamziya'), Sayyid Aidharusi bin Athumani, 1652, stanza 482 (Knappert 1968: 54).

²³ U Mbali Suadu, ('Far away is Felicity'), Mohammed bin Jambe(i)ni Al-Bakari, 1852, stanza 84 (Knappert 1971: 160-161).

Translations Doubted

Can we totally believe the words of the authors when they define themselves as translators or when they speak of their work in terms of and only of a translation?

In some cases, as in the case of *Utenzi wa Ras il-Ghulii*, an attested source exists and has been traced. However, the source is only as a point of departure. Translators used the general topic of other poems to build a completely new poem that cannot be termed a translation in its strict sense, but rather a poem inspired by another text.²⁴

In other cases, the very indication of the source is to be questioned. Even if for some poems the original manuscripts have been found (as in the case of *Hamziya* or *U Mbali Suadu*) in some others none of the versions discovered could be appointed as the source for the Swahili narratives, despite the fact that the composers affirm the poem is the translation of an Arabic text from which nothing has been left out. That is the case for *Utendi wa Tambuka*, *Utendi wa Ayubu*, *Utendi wa Miqidadi na Mayasa* or *Utendi wa Qiyama*, for which no direct sources have been traced yet. In those cases we are presumably dealing with pseudo-translation that Paolo Rambelli refers to as “a target-oriented practice of imitative compositions which results in texts that are perceived as translations but which are not, as they usually lack an actual source text” (Rambelli 2009: 208-209).

To put it in other words, pseudo-translation is an original and creative work published by an author as a translated work. The non-existence of Arabic manuscripts corresponding to the Swahili story or the fact that when an Arabic counterpart is found, it is usually much shorter than the Swahili text (Allen 1971: 144), and the fact that the Arabic works on Islamic traditions are generally in prose and not in poetry (Knappert 1983: 48), should make us feel confident in talking of *utendi* as creative and original works. Pseudo-translations are extremely symptomatic of an interest the target culture has in the source culture on the whole rather than in the specific literary expression of it and usually occur when political and social transformation takes place (Rambelli 2009: 211).

(Re)inventing and Adapting: Translation and Identity Construction

We are now at the question “*why* translations were produced in a particular social time and place”, (Pym 1998: ix, italics in original) that is what Anthony Pym defines “social causation” (*Ibid.*). In this case the question is, what was the role of such a big number of Arabic translations or pseudo-translations or poems inspired by other texts or narratives? Such a massive “import” of Islamic works has generally been considered as an obvious consequence of Islamisation. Although it cannot be denied that the histories of the Prophet, his family and followers were meant to give moral

²⁴ This is a kind of rewriting, a process that James Holmes defines a “metaliterary process”, as a poem inspired by another poem, poem about poem, prose translation, verse translation, imitation (1988: 23-24).

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instructions and to propagate the Islamic faith on the whole (Knappert 1999: v), new perspectives could be added.

The over-emphasis on a link with external sources – even in those cases where no real original has been found – is not a negligible factor and it was a common trend in extra-literary discourses from specific groups. In the formation of Swahili societies and later in the maintaining of the established order, the “myth of foreignness” – that is the myth of foreign origin as from Persia,²⁵ Syria,²⁶ Hymiar²⁷ or Yemen²⁸ – played a special role and served as a factor to accumulate prestige. The myth led to “a construct of specialty” (Rothman 2002: 89) and was a tool apt at regulating the interaction between opposite social forces of absorption and differentiation. These forces clashed in the social construct that opposed *Waungwana*, ‘civilised’ and *Washenzi* ‘uncultured’, usually applied to hinterland groups and non-Muslim.²⁹ The élites have traditionally defined themselves in relation to foreign models, and receptivity to foreign influence was often viewed as a virtue. The myth of ancestry based on immigration from places located within the Arabic Peninsula was used by the élite (or by those who aspired to become members of the élite) to maintain social cohesion and to give them an aura of aristocracy. Genealogy was used to measure status even in cases when it could not be considered “biologically or historically true” (Horton & Middleton 2000: 5).

The emphasis on external origins and affiliations came back to the fore more dramatically during the 19th century. The influence from Arabic word experienced a considerable reinforcement, indeed, as it was perceivable from architecture, clothing, affiliation and, more importantly in the revisions of chronologies and chronicles (Nurse & Spear 1985: 30; Spear 1984: 292) which were used to establish the social and political prominence of the ruling clan (Tolmacheva 1978: 237).³⁰

In this overall context, translations – together with chronologies and chronicles – were used by the élite to promote social cohesion among members and to appropriate alleged superior identities. The translation in itself, in its physical and symbolic value was an attribute of prestige. This idea becomes concrete when one looks at some of the first lines of the pseudo-translation:

²⁵ As in the Chronicles of Kilwa (Freeman-Grenville 1962: 75), Mogadiscio (Cerulli 1957: I/26, 97-98), Vumba, Mombasa, Pemba, Zanzibar, Tumbatu, Mafia (Pouwels 1984: 258), Tungi sultanate (Rzewuski 1991: 193, 207).

²⁶ As in the Chronicle of Pate (Pouwels 1984: 258).

²⁷ As in Kitab az-Zanuj (Pouwels 1984: 258).

²⁸ As in the chronicles of the Bajuni (Pouwels 1984: 258).

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of *waungwana/washenzi* ideology see Nurse and Spear (1985: 23-25) and Horton & Middleton (2000: 17-23).

³⁰ An increased Arab influence is mainly in connection with the relocation of the capital of the Omani Sultanate in Zanzibar by the Oman Sultan Seyyid Said in 1832 (Mulokozi 1982: 27). The establishment of the capital of the Busaidi sultanate in Zanzibar was followed by migratory waves from Oman and Hadramawt to Zanzibar and the East African coast in general, which had considerable influence upon the culture and political structure of the coastal region. Cf. Horton & Middleton 2000: 21, 185-187; Saavedra-Casco 2007: 51.

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*Mbwene fumo kuitaka
hadithi ya Nabiyaka
aiwenepo Tambuka
muno ikamutibia*

I saw the king who wanted
the tradition of the Holy Prophet
when he had seen Tabuk
he greatly admired it

*Kimaliza kuihibu
hadithi ya Kiarabu
kanitami kukutubu
tafusiri kinambia³¹*

When he finished (reading it) he loved it
the tradition in Arabic
and he called me to write
“Translate” he told me

In the quotation above, the king is described as able to reading Arabic. Nevertheless he wants, he desires to *possess* the text in translation, and appoints someone else to translate it. He wants to possess and appropriate knowledge and the prestige associated with the knowledge contained in the book.

At this juncture it could be emphasised that the access to Arabic books was already something which only “privileged” people could afford. To possess a text or to deal with it, materially, was a symbol for prestige. As Saavedra-Casco (2007: 41) has observed, books written in Arabic:

[...] were handed down from fathers to sons and became a patrimony for certain clans versed in specific knowledge and for whom these books were part of the tools needed for exercising their activities. [...] obtaining these books was no easy task, for it was necessary to import them from very distant lands such as Syria or Egypt. Only wealthy families from northern cities such as Siyu, Pate, and Lamu could buy religious books [...].

The observation on the material and symbolic prestige associate with a text, and in this case with a translated text, reminds us of what the renowned Israeli translation scholar Even-Zohar (1996: 43) termed the “indispensabilia of power”, referring to possessing versus not-possessing a literature as a way to exercise cultural power.

Dislocated Presences

Translations served as dislocated presences stipulating connections with cultures and ideologies far in time and space. The living presence of the translation served as an additional tool to exhibit external linkages and therefore the intrinsic qualities that elevated people at the *uungwana* (civility) level.

³¹ *Utendi wa Tambuka*, (‘The Poem of the Battle of Tabook’), Bwana Mwengo, 1728, stanzas 7 and 8 (Knappert 1958: 121).

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During the 18th and 19th centuries, translating activities were not at the margins of literary activities, and being a translator while being a poet was a positive attribute and a mark of cosmopolitan culture. Swahili writers wanted to be seen as engaged in translation even in those cases when we could not speak of translation *stricto sensu*.³² The tendency to claim that the poem that was going to be recited had once been seen in an ancient Arabic book became a common trend for a number of pre-colonial translations. And it was so deep-rooted that Mwana Bukhalasi, in her *Utendi wa Masahibu*, was urged to specify that the tale in question should not be considered as a translation. Incidentally, she refers to the fact that her tale was not read in a book:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <i>Khadalika fahamuni</i> | Understand further, |
| <i>hadithi hini wendani</i> | that this story, my friends |
| <i>sikusoma zitabuni</i> | I did not read in books |
| <i>ni hadithi kupokea</i> | it is a traditional tale ³³ |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Ni kigano hutolewa</i> | It was handed down |
| <i>makwetu tukaambiwa</i> | we were told it in our home |
| <i>huyuza yaliyokuwa</i> | it describes events |
| <i>miaka ya zamania³⁴</i> | of long ago |

Early Colonial Translation Activities

Purposeful Absence in Poetry by Europeans

The dislocated presence translations embodied in pre-colonial times is overturned at the coming of the Europeans by what could be termed a purposeful absence. Prior to going further in explaining what is meant here with ‘purposeful absence’, it should be clarified that a systematic observation of translation activities implies not only the study of selection principles but also the study of what has not been selected and therefore silenced (Lambert 2006: 88).

With the advent of European colonialism another massive transfusion of translated texts happens, most of which – apart from Scriptures translations – results in scholastic European

³² This was also the case for a more recent poet, Muhammad Kijumwa. Knappert (1999: 158) says that in presenting transcriptions of poems to Europeans, Kijumwa used to pretend that “he was only the copyist and that the author was a famous poet who had lived long ago. Today we know that Kijumwa himself was the author, who thought that his patrons, Werner, Hichens, Williamson and Dammann, were solely interested in the ‘classical’ authors of the eighteenth.”

³³ This line was not translated in the text by Allen given as reference. (translation by the author).

³⁴ *Utendi wa Masahibu*, (‘The Poem of Adversity’), Mwana Bukhalasi, n.d., stanzas 10 and 11 (Allen, 1971: 132-133).

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classics (Bertoncini et al. 2009: 30-31).³⁵ What is striking about the translation practices of this specific period is an almost complete absence of Europeans in poetry activities.³⁶ European poetry was usually discarded as a potential source text in favour of prose and theatre. A number of reasons could be considered.

It is possible that Europeans decided not to compete with very long-lasting traditions. They were fully aware of the precious heritage Swahili people had in terms of poetic works. Proof of it is the systematic collection and purchasing of the manuscripts of Swahili poetry started at the end of the 19th century. In the early colonial phase Europeans inspect and take possession of the culture of the other. European missionaries, anthropologists, linguists jostle to buy and possess the manuscripts of the poems they were told, to possess what made the “other” a person of letters. The massive poem registration confronted a one-sided exchange. It was not a give and take, it was only a taking and a purposeful not giving.

It is true that colonial subjugation practices made use of cultural products to create the colonial subject (Niranjana 1992). In the same breath, translations served to corroborate the invented prestige and to reinforce imperialist power hierarchies. During colonialism it is mainly Europeans – in other words external agents - who had the right to be translators, while Swahili writers could only help and assist. And the European classics that so profusely were translated, were urgently inserted in the classroom curricula.

Put in the framework of the status of Swahili language, that was being standardised by an exogenous committee, and in the framework of the African subject who was allowed (microscopic) space within the dominant society only on the condition that he had received Western education, translations were intended to differentiate and educate. In this light translations were “prototypes”

³⁵ In the context of this paper Scripture translations will not be dealt with. However, a short note may be added. Rev. Dr. Johann Ludwig Krapf, a German missionary of the Church Missionary Society, arrived in Zanzibar in 1844 and the activity of Scripture translations started shortly after. Krapf translated in Kimwita Swahili the New Testament in 1846 (which was not published) and the Genesis which was published in 1847 (Mojola 2000: 511). A number of other books, as the Book of Jonah, the Psalms, selections from the Gospel and the Epistles, Deuteronomy, Chronicles were translated by Krapf, Rebmann, Taylor and Binns and published between 1878 and 1909 whereas the translation of the entire Bible was completed in 1914 (Ivi: 512). On the Southern portion of the Swahili coast, Bishop Steere of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) translated in Kiunguja Swahili parts of the Old and New Testaments from 1868 until 1881 (Ivi: 514). His texts “became the foundation of the Church on the coast” (Sundkler & Steed 2000: 525). Incidentally, another Christian missionary who worked for the UMCA, Canon Godfrey Dale, was also the translator of the first complete translation of the Quran published as *Tafsiri ya Kurani ya Kiarabu kwa lugha ya Kiswahili pamoja na Dibaji na Maelezo Machache* in 1923 (Lacunza-Balda 1997: 96-97). For a general overview of the translation of the Bible into Swahili through history please see Mojola 2000. For further insights about the topic of translations of the Quran and the critical responses to and different readings of the different versions please refer to Lacunza-Balda (1997).

³⁶ A similar case is detected by Toury in his book *Descriptive Translation Studies and beyond* (1995: 115-116). In chapter 6 Toury discusses how Shakespeare’s sonnets took much more time to be translated than his plays. A possible reason is, in the scholar’s view, that the sonnet had a long-lasting tradition in the Hebrew system, and this prevented the acceptance or simply the release of this genre within the Hebrew literary system.

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offered to give consumers literary lessons. Translations were fixing and spreading the linguistic and literary ideal by which Swahili people “were now expected to abide” (Mazrui & Shariff 1994: 75) at least up to the early years of independence.³⁷

The choice and non-choice of texts are related to questions of construction of self-image. Translations create images (of the self and/or of the other) that will affect the understanding of the culture represented (or deleted) in the translation activity. According to the American scholar Maria Tymoczko (1999: 18), “translation form images of whole cultures and peoples, as well as of individual authors or texts, images that in turn come to function as reality.”

If, as previously discussed, possessing or not-possessing a literature, or in this case a literary repertoire, is considered an “indispensabilia of power” it could be argued that the European absence in translating poetry should be associated to the need Europeans had to present something new. If they were going to show literary and cultural prestige, and if they wanted to differentiate themselves from their colonial subjects – even on a literary basis – they had to give the idea they possessed something which the Swahilis were supposed to have not, and thence prose and theatre.

We have to wait until 1952 to have the poetic silence in translation activities broken. At that date Shaaban Robert published the translation of the *Rubaiyat* by Omar Khayyam, *Omar Khayyam Kwa Kiswahili*.³⁸ Even though Shaaban Robert used the English version of Edward Fitzgerald and in spite of the fact that the translation was published in London, the fact remains, however, that it is a poetic text translated in a poetic void (in terms of translation) by a fervent defender of the Swahili language, who considered Swahili as a pan-language well before the debate on this issue became a topic question. This example leads us quite far in terms of time from the context we are considering.

However, it is useful in introducing the idea of poetry as the place where resistance could be enacted. Indeed, a school of thought recognizes the *tendi* dealing with the wars against the un-faithful as poetry of resistance. The adoption of Islamic plots dealing with wars is supposed to date back long before the 18th century. Andrei Zhukov (2004: 5) explains the appearance of such plots as an attempt of Swahili towns to resist Portuguese “that is Christians” (*Ibid.*). This view was anticipated by Mogyabuso Mulokozi and Tigiti Sengo (1995: 80) who suggested to look at *Utendi wa Tambuka* – a text depicting the first victory of Islamic forces against Christians – *Hamziyya* or *Siri 'Asirari*, as reflecting the resistance to the Portuguese trying to enter the coastal towns scenario. When switching to the 19th century, that is the period on which we are concerned, the *tendi* (both translated and not) which report Islamic wars are identified in their subversive nature

³⁷ It is eloquent to remember one of the aim of the East African Swahili Committee that reads as follows: “giving advice to all prospective authors concerning books which they propose to write” (Whiteley 1968: 83).

³⁸ London: Macmillan. The translator’s preface is dated 1948.

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by virtue of a parallelism between the oppression experienced by Mohammed's followers and Swahili communities of the 19th century oppressed by colonial power (Vierke 2011: 444).

It is through poetry that the portrayal of African resistance to the German conquest is manifested. *Utenzi wa Vita vya Wadachi Kutalamaki Mrima* by Hemedi Abdallah bin Said el-Buhr and *Utenzi wa Vita vya Maji-Maji* by Abdul Karim bin Jamaliddini – although not translations – are a case in point. As Ann Biersteker (1990: 24) has pointed out, such poems represent resistance poetry which constituted “a highly significant mode of political discourse in East Africa at the time of the German conquest.” (*Ibid.*). Criticism and opposition were expressed by the subtle means of poetry (the genre deserted by Europeans) the recourse to which enabled, borrowing from the vocabulary of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), the subaltern to speak although veiled or allusively.

Conclusion

This article has investigated translation in Swahili literature and culture during late pre-colonial and early colonial times as being both a constrained and a constraining activity that is affecting and affected by the political, cultural and ideological environment of the receiving culture. Translators, writing out of their social and cultural background, made use of translation to accumulate identities. And translations were used to gain or construct prestige. Translated texts are always impregnated by other discourses that are of several kinds – discourses concerning power, politics, economics and the like – and inevitably those discourses will echo their voice, veiled or unveiled, in translations.

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