

SWAHILI LITERATURE INTO ITALIAN: THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING ABDILATIF ABDALLA'S POEMS

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This article examines the multiplicity and complexity of transfer practices involved in the translation of Swahili poetry by focusing on the author's Italian translation of a number of poems by the Swahili poet Abdilatif Abdalla (published in the volume *Ushairi na Uhuru. Poesie scelte di Abdilatif Abdalla e Euphrase Kezilahabi. Mkusanyo wa tungo za Abdilatif Abdalla na Euphrase Kezilahabi*, edited with Roberto Gaudio). The article discusses the difficulties in the translating process as well as the choices made during it, especially with regard to prosody and dialectal features.

Introduction

The considerations on the translation of Swahili poetry developed in this article originate from a work (carried out with Roberto Gaudio) devoted to the Italian translation of selected poems by two contemporary poets, Abdilatif Abdalla and Euphrase Kezilahabi.

In the following pages, I will talk about this project for which I translated eight of Abdalla's poems.¹ I will concentrate on the textual challenges and the main translation strategies that were adopted in my project. As will emerge, my reflections on the translation strategies for Abdalla's poems started by taking into account some stylistic features of his poetry, namely the language variety and the prosody. Drawing from Umberto Eco's semiotic and aesthetic reflections on translation (2003), this article will attempt to show that the stylistic choices adopted by an author intermingle with other aspects of that author's creative work in constructing the text's whole as it is encountered by the reader/listener.

This is particularly true for poetry, where the subtle relationships which connect the various aspects of expression and content are very dense and sophisticated. The form, thus, in its different linguistic, metric and phono-symbolic spheres has a substance which contributes significantly to building the text and the interaction between the various levels of sense (Eco 2003: 55-56). Consequently, as I will elaborate further, the translator of poetry has, on the one hand, to decide which elements are dominant in a given poetic text (Jakobson 1935, quoted in Eco 2003: 53) and, on the other hand, to apply a continuous process of negotiation, which also takes into account the target language and the reproducibility of textual features.

¹ Gaudio (presently post-doc fellow at the University of Naples "L'Orientale") translated Kezilahabi's poems.

Ushairi na Uhuru: Swahili poetry for Italian readers

As indicated above, the book *Ushairi na Uhuru. Poesie scelte di Abdilatif Abdalla e Euphrase Kezilahabi. Mkusanyo wa tungo za Abdilatif Abdalla na Euphrase Kezilahabi* (hereafter *Ushairi na Uhuru* in short) was prepared in collaboration with Gaudioso and printed by the Printing Service of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, “Torcoliere” (Aiello & Gaudioso 2017). The initial idea behind the publication was to pay tribute to the presence of these two great poets at our university during the study days we had organised, “*Ngoma na Vailini. The worlds of Swahili poetry II*” (University of Naples “L’Orientale”, 31 May - 1 June 2017), which was devoted to Swahili poetry, its translation and performance. We wanted to communicate some of the richness of Swahili poetry to Italian readers/listeners, starting with the study day participants, and also to involve a wider audience through readings to be held in non-academic settings.

The choice of the Italian language, which is not able to reach the wide international readership that English does, was motivated by the desire to involve an immediate, if tiny, audience that is not very familiar with African literatures, especially those written in autochthonous languages.² The book, which includes a bilingual critical introduction, also features two Neapolitan translations/adaptations by the poet Mimmo Grasso, one for each author. The use of the Neapolitan dialect was a kind of translational experimentation, which offered a possible solution to the challenge of capturing Abdalla’s vernacular language; I will be exploring this later. Moreover, it was an attempt to establish connections with the territory where I and my co-editor Gaudioso grew up and where the University of Naples “L’Orientale” is located.

This joint work also aimed to communicate both the beauty and the linguistic, cultural and artistic complexity of contemporary Swahili poetry. This is why we decided to translate into Italian within the same anthology the poems of Abdalla and Kezilahabi, who are so different in terms of geo-cultural origins and style. Abdalla is from Mombasa, a cosmopolitan city on the Kenyan coast, and writes typical Swahili prosody. Kezilahabi, on the other hand, is from Ukerewe island in the continental area of Tanzania and writes free verse poetry, influenced by the oral literature of his region and the foreign literature he encountered during his school and academic education.

The publication of Kezilahabi’s first collection, *Kichomi* (‘Tearing pain’, 1974), triggered a long and intense debate in East Africa, still to some extent alive: the “traditionalists” (*wanamapokeo*) condemned this poetic practice, which they viewed as spoiling Swahili poetry,

² These literary productions are under-researched in Italy and in the West in general, in both postcolonial criticism and comparative studies. These are often entrenched in a prejudicial paradigm opposing “traditional” literature, associated with the verbal arts composed in local languages, to “modern” literature, which is written in former colonial languages (Barber 2010: 672). This tendency is, of course, reinforced by the scarcity of African-language literature available in translation, which can be linked to the commercial strategies of the big publishing houses. These, in turn, are presumably influenced by the dominant orientation in literary studies.

while the “reformists” (*wanamapinduzi*) defended the plurality of Swahili-speaking literatures. As a thorough examination of the complexity of this dispute is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that the critics' commentaries have often remarked upon the cultural tensions between “Swahili people” and “Swahili speakers” (with all their implications in terms of language, religion and identity) by polarising and sometimes simplifying these categories.³ This tendency has, thus, obscured other underlying generational, cultural and political dynamics of that period, expressed in the construction of wider, national and/or transnational collective identities (as well summarised by Mazrui 2007: 45-82).

Our choice for this publication of Swahili poems in Italian translation was, therefore, to show two different, in some respects antithetical, poetics by trying to reproduce in Italian the peculiarities of the original poems. At the same time, the book discloses their numerous connections, which rarely emerge in the often explicitly dualistic critical studies of post-independence Swahili poetry. Indeed, both Abdalla and Kezilahabi bear witness to the existential imperative of poetry, which they experience as a search for truth and freedom. Life and experience, primarily the experience of pain and suffering, inspire their poems. The two poets are also linked through their common experiences at the University of Dar es Salaam in the 1970s, a time of vibrant intellectual debate stirred up by the discussions around Julius Nyerere's idea of African socialism (*Ujamaa*) (Blommaert 1999: 141). Abdalla and Kezilahabi developed a personal relationship, as evocatively shown by the photographs which enrich the volume.

Challenges and translation solutions for the verses of Abdilatif Abdalla

My work of translation, as described above, arose from a desire to help Italian readers get a “taste” of Swahili poetry and, specifically, become acquainted with a protagonist of contemporary East African literature. Abdalla is a prominent personality in many respects, above all, literary (in his role as artist and expert of the Swahili poetic tradition) and political (as an activist who has paid a high price, his freedom, for his explicit criticism of the Kenyan government). Moreover, he is a courageous person, who was not overwhelmed by the trauma of imprisonment. He remains a source of inspiration as his resilience and charisma continue to make a great impact on the younger generations in Kenya.

For Abdalla, born in Mombasa in 1946, poetic practice and political activism go hand in hand, as is also true of many Swahili poets, including Muyaka bin Haji, one of Abdalla's principal literary models. After Kenya's independence, Abdalla became a member of the Kenya People's Union (KPU), the opposition party which was declared illegal and banned in 1968 (Nyaigotti-Chacha 1992: 5). He also wrote a series of pamphlets criticising the ruling party

³ In order to problematise this dichotomy, we may start by considering that not all “reformist” poets come from the African hinterland; Ebrahim Hussein, for instance, is from Kilwa, and Alamin Mazrui is from coastal Kenya. Conversely, not all “traditionalist” poets come from the Swahili coast, as can be seen in the case of Saadan Kandoro, who is from Ujiji, and Mathias Mnyampala, born in a village near Dodoma.

Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by President Jomo Kenyatta. These culminated in the publication of *Kenya: Twendapi?* ('Kenya: where are we going?'), which accused KANU of illegitimate autocratic practices and openly called upon the citizens of Kenya to overthrow the government (Abdalla 1968, reprinted in Beck & Kresse 2016: 76-80). The author was soon arrested, accused of sedition and imprisoned in solitary confinement for three years, until 1972. During this period, he secretly wrote numerous poems, which were smuggled out and delivered to his brother Sheikh Abdilahi Nassir. After Abdalla's release, Nassir used his influential position at Oxford University Press (Kresse 2016: 23) to help publish an anthology under the title *Sauti ya dhiki* ('The voice of agony', 1973).⁴

In the volume *Ushairi na Uhuru*, sixteen Swahili poems are presented to the Italian reader, eight for each author. Seven of the eight poems by Abdalla come from the anthology *Sauti ya dhiki*, while *Ukurasa bikira* ('Virgin page') was composed more recently and kindly offered to us by the author, whom we had asked for an unpublished text.⁵ At the beginning of this publication project, I first had to decide how to choose a mini-corpus for the collection, conscious that the selection process has an impact on how readers perceive an author. In so doing I had to consider three factors: my aesthetic experience of the poems, the schedule for the translation and a selection of poems which reflects the different elements of this *diwani* (despondency, loneliness, homesickness, nostalgia for the beloved, as well as resistance, moral strength and political denouncing), together with its metric and stylistic variety and the highly dialogic dimension of Swahili poetry.

The next step in the translating process was to decide how to render two fundamental traits of Abdalla's poetry: the use of the Mombasa variety of Swahili (*Kimvita*) and respect for classical Swahili prosody. During the post-independence years and in the context of the debate around Swahili poetry briefly outlined above, these two elements identified Abdalla as a "traditionalist" poet and were highly appreciated by many poets and critics from the Swahili coast, who interpreted his language and regular use of Swahili metres as a form of cultural affirmation in reaction to Western cultural influences (see, for instance, the introduction of Shihabuddin Chiraghdin to *Sauti ya dhiki*, 1973: ix-xii).

⁴ After his release in 1972, Abdalla lived in Tanzania for seven years before moving to London, where he worked as a journalist for the BBC, and finally to Germany, where he became a lecturer in Swahili at the University of Leipzig. He participates regularly in various scientific and cultural events in Europe and, since the end of president Moi's regime, has often been invited to Kenya for cultural events, literary prizes, festivals and conferences. Many videos recorded during these events can be found on the Internet. A detailed portrait of Abdalla, including his personal and cultural formation and his political activities in Kenya and in the diaspora, along with a deep analysis of his anthology, have been the subject of a number of extensive critical studies. They include Nyaigotti-Chacha 1992, Walibora Waliaula 2009 and, more recently, the volume *Abdilatif Abdalla: Poet in Politics* (2016), edited by Rose Marie Beck and Kai Kresse, which brings together most of the contributions presented during a symposium held in May 2011 in honour of Abdalla, after his retirement from the University of Leipzig, where he was a lecturer in Swahili.

⁵ The origins of this work are to be found in *Upweke* ('Solitude'), Abdalla's Swahili translation of the Dutch poem *Morgen* ('Tomorrow') by Bert Schierbeek (1984), which he performed during his participation at the Poetry International Festival, held in Rotterdam in 1991. From this first Swahili translation, the author then elaborated a new poem, translated by Ridder Samsom into English on the occasion of a workshop at Humboldt University, Berlin (Samsom 2011: 4).

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However, it seems to me that the association of Abdalla's poetry with a defensive position opposed to other Swahilophone worlds would be misleading as it would reduce to a narrow ideological stance everything that has a primarily existential connotation for the poet, namely, his connections to his family, milieu and cultural heritage. This is why poetry writing became, as he sometimes recalls in public,⁶ an anchor which saved him from madness during the terrible years of imprisonment, a political tool of resistance and a sign of defiance, as remarked upon by a number of critics (Nyaigotti-Chacha 1992, Kresse 2016, Walibora Waliaula 2016). Against a regime that tried to annihilate him as a human being and as an activist, Abdalla replied with his own voice, his mother tongue and his cultural identity. This attitude was also antithetical to the language policies of Kenya, which mainly promoted English at the expense of Swahili.⁷

While Abdalla's voice is in a particular dialect, I chose to use instead standard Italian for my translations. I did this because I was targeting a wider readership than a limited regional one and because I wanted to avoid a language, which would have been unnatural for me. Although I grew up in Naples, Neapolitan has never been the language of my daily life, apart from an accent and a number of vernacular expressions. Nevertheless, while thinking of some poems in particular, I heard in my mind the tones of Neapolitan, which I felt would more appropriately communicate the energy and expressive exuberance of the Swahili texts. For that reason, I proposed the vernacular translation of the poem *Kuno kunena* ('The act of speaking out') to the poet Mimmo Grasso. On the basis of my translation into standard Italian, he created a text in Neapolitan titled *'O pparlà* which is half way between a translation and a rewriting. I quote here below the Italian and the Neapolitan translations of the first two lines of the poem ("*Kuno kunena kwa nini, kukanikomoya kuno?/Kwani kunena kunani, kukashikwa kani vino?*")⁸ in order to show the difference between the two versions (non-Italophone readers may recognise the difference in sounds and the absence of a caesura in the Neapolitan text):

Italian version

Ma questo parlare perché, mi ha qui imprigionato?
Perché 'sto parlare com'è, ch'è con rabbia castigato?

Neapolitan version

I' pe pparlà mo stongo ccà nzerrato,
Pe stu pparlà mo m'hanno mazzariato

To conclude these observations about the use of dialect in *Sauti ya dhiki*, it was precisely the process of translating that helped me recognise a distinctive characteristic of Abdalla's language which I had not grasped in previous readings – its universal dimension despite the strong

⁶ One recent occasion was during the 30th Swahili Colloquium (26-28 May 2017, University of Bayreuth).

⁷ The Inter-Territorial Language Committee, which worked to standardise the Swahili language and its new orthography in Latin characters, was founded in 1930. The variety of Swahili selected for this aim was Kiunguja, the dialect spoken in Zanzibar town and its surrounding area (Mazrui 2007: 24).

⁸ 'Why the act of speaking out, ended up in me being imprisoned?/What is there in my speaking, that made it so much irritable?' (translation by Said Ahmed Khamis 2016: 40).

localisation due to its use of *Kimvita*. This occurs because, with the exception of some place names and religious invocations, its lexicon is substantially devoid of realia and specific geo-cultural references. This aspect differentiates Abdalla's poetry from a number of the poems (and other works) composed along the Swahili coast, which show an abundant cultural lexicon.

For the other distinctive trait of Abdalla's verses, I opted to conserve the metric and rhyme schemes of the source texts. This translating strategy has sometimes been criticised, for instance, by André Lefevere in *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (1975), as concentrating on one single aspect could make the translator lose sight of the textual whole and also because rendering the rhymes in the target language could be mechanical, or even a caricature (Bassnett 2013: 84). To me, the translating strategy of preserving the original metric and rhyme scheme seemed appropriate as it puts in place a process of foreignisation (Paloposki 2011). Below, I will explain my decisions in more detail.

First of all, the use of the rhymes and of metric schemes (*vina na mizani*) is, in my view, a central element of these poems because it forms the basis not only of the prosody employed along the coast, but also of the poetic aesthetic in Swahili culture. It is precisely this rigidity and the limits that are imposed by a prosody handed down across the generations, artificial and a brake on creativity in the eyes of the "reformists" (Kezilahabi 1983: 146), which, for the traditional coastal poet, represent an incentive for verbal creation. This is not carried out as a formalistic exercise but for the pleasure of playing with the language and with the cultural cross references of a production which has been assimilated since childhood.⁹

Moreover, translating into Italian, whose metric forms are different from those of Swahili but equally founded on syllabic quantity,¹⁰ made the reproduction of the original prosody challenging while not too difficult or culturally extraneous. Thus I was able to translate the verses of *Sauti ya dhiki* not in a technical, cold manner, but with a sort of "inventiveness triggered by the rules", not unlike the approach of the traditional poets.

The attempt to reconcile the prosodic regularity with a rendition of the sense of the verses was founded on lexical research, syntactic games, and the linguistic and orthographic licence of the Italian poetic language. Beyond the possibilities of lexical exploration offered by synonymic variety, I resorted in a few cases to some forms of domestication, as in the strophe from the poem *N'shishiyelo ni lilo* ('This is what I hold fast') quoted below. Here the Swahili word *ngome* ('fortress') has been translated as *bastiglia* (Bastille¹¹), with the initial letter in lower case so as to suggest a generalised use of the word (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 48-49):

⁹ This was confirmed to me by the poet Haji Gora Haji who claimed that the task for a poet is "kwanza lugha, na ufinyazi wa maneno yakae vizuri kwenye vina na mizani. Hiyo ndo hali" ('first the language and the moulding of the words so that they lay well in rhyme and meter structures. That's how it is'). Interview with the poet, July 30, 2016.

¹⁰ Furthermore, the internal and external rhymes in traditional Italian verses are built on the basis of a system of mostly open syllables, analogous to Swahili poetry.

¹¹ The medieval fortress and political prison in Paris known as the Bastille represented royal authority in the centre of Paris. It was stormed on the 14 July 1789 and was the flashpoint for the French Revolution.

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<i>Kweli menibaidisha, na huko kwetu mjini</i>	Il vero m'ha isolato, dalla città mia per miglia
<i>Pia menitenganisha, na walo wangu nyumbani</i>	Inoltre m'ha separato, da casa, dalla famiglia
<i>Kuja kuniadhibisha, kwa kunileta ngomeni</i>	Castigare mi ha fatto, portare alla bastiglia
<i>Yote sababu ni nini? Ni kwamba mesema kweli</i> ¹²	Perché 'sta condizione mia? Perché ho detto il vero

Another example can be found in the translation of Abdalla's poem *Nakukumbuka* ('I remember you'), dedicated to his beloved. In order to attain a coherent prosody in the stanza, the final line "*Mwombe uhai Moliwa, na njema hali*", literally 'Pray the Lord for (my) life, and a good condition' was translated as "*Che non veda gli Elisi, prega 'l Clemente*" ('So that I won't see the Elysian fields, pray to the Merciful') (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 62-63). The reference to the Elysian fields, which is clearly a form of domestication, has the value, in my view, of letting an erudite element emerge in the Italian text. This is a feature of the "classicism" (amplified by some archaic forms of the Italian poetic register) which often appears in this anthology, full of literary allusions to poets of the past, such as Fumo Liyongo and particularly Abdalla's compatriot Muyaka. These allusions remain unnoticed by a non-expert reader of Swahili poetry.

It may be seen that some elements in the translation above have been moved from one hemistich to another, but never beyond the border of the line. This respects another principle of Swahili prosody, the concept of *kujitosheleza* ('cause to be sufficient, satisfy'), according to which every stanza is a syntactic, semantic and prosodic unity, something which also applies to the single lines to some degree. For this reason, *enjambement* (hang-over lines) is generally unacceptable (Vierke 2011: 25). While rarely used, this technique is found mainly in the more narrative passages that occur in longer poems and is avoided in those lyrical and dense stanzas which are built precisely around the bipartite structure of the lines, divided into two hemistiches, and around a play on parallelisms. A good example of this is the poem *Siwati* ('Never will I let go'), where the sense of the poem takes shape and force within its poetic rhythm (Vierke 2017: 44) and Abdalla's determination and perseverance correspond organically to the obsessive repetition of the verbal form *siwati*. This anaphora is stressed with a different specification in every initial hemistich¹³ (thanks also to a number of assonances and consonances) and expanded in the second half of the line, as in the following quote:

<i>Siwati ngaadhibiwa, adhabu kila mifano</i>	Non mollo pur se punito, con pene d'ogni guisa
<i>Siwati ningambiwa, 'tapawa kila kinono</i>	Non mollo pur se attratto, con ogni grassa promessa
<i>Siwati lililo sawa, silibanduwi mkono</i> ¹⁴	Non mollo quel ch'è giusto, mai staccherò la presa

¹² 'The truth isolated me, from my hometown/Moreover, it separated me, from my family/It punished me, taking me to the fortress/Why all this? Because I spoke the truth' (my translation).

¹³ Except for the final verse of each strophe, where the rhyme changes, which is no longer ab but bc.

¹⁴ 'Never will I let go, even if I am punished with every sort of castigation/ Never will I let go, even if told that I'll be given all kinds of goods/ Never will I let go of what is right, I won't take my hand away' (my translation).

Within the hemistiches, I often inverted the syntactic structure of the source text. Because the neutral sequence of the elements in the Swahili language is, as in Italian, subject-verb-object, it was sometimes necessary to substitute the emphatic/poetic word order of the Swahili with a linear sequence in Italian translation, and vice versa. An example of the first case is the incipit of the second stanza of the poem *N'shishiyelo ni lilo* ('This is what I hold fast'): "*Walinena walimwengu, wa zama zilopisiye*" (lit. 'Spoke out the people, of the past epochs'), which has been translated as "*Gli uomini dissero, in quel tempo passato*" ('The people spoke out, in that past time') (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 46-47). Two stanzas later I employed the opposite procedure with the line "*Wameniona mbaya, kumshinda Firauni*" (lit. 'They saw me as evil, even worse than the Pharaoh'). In accordance with the prosodic scheme of the stanza, the line has been translated as "*Malvagio mi hanno visto, persino più del faraone*" (lit. 'Evil they saw me, even more than the Pharaoh') (*Ibid.*).

Another thing that I did to conform to the prosodic structure of the source text was to use in some cases a number of less literal translating procedures, for instance, by adding elements which expand the central semantic nucleus. An example of this can be found in the above quoted poem *N'shishiyelo ni lilo*, where the line "*Baruwa sitakikani, kwandika wala kwetewa*" (lit. 'Letters I am not allowed, to write nor to be delivered') was translated as "*Lettere posso ai cari, mai scriver né ricevere*" (lit. 'Letters can I to my dears, never write nor receive') (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 48-49). In just one case, I used a strategy of metaphorisation. This was in a line from the poem *Ukurasa bikira* (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 66-67), where, to preserve the rhyme, the question *Umenuna?* (lit. 'Are you sullen?') was rendered through the image of the cloud, which refers to the Italian expression *rannuvolarsi* ('to get cloudy, to become sullen, worried, discontented'):

<i>Chamba: "Nena, na mimi nakusikiza</i>	Dico: "Parla, ed io sto ad ascoltare
<i>Au guna, aula ninong'oneza</i>	O brontola, o meglio puoi sussurrare
<i>Umenuna? Basi ngaa niapiza!"¹⁵</i>	Tal nuvola? Ora mi puoi bestemmiare!"

Furthermore, the translation strategy of preserving the prosodic structure of the Swahili poems has helped the metric variety of *Sauti ya dhiki* emerge, at least in part. In this anthology the poems belong to two Swahili prosodic categories (*bahari*): *wimbo*, a type of poem whose stanzas are made up of three lines of various lengths, with a final rhyme and one or more caesuras (Shariff 1988: 45), and *shairi*, a form of poem composed of stanzas of four lines (or more) which are divided into two hemistiches, with the same internal and external rhyme in the first three lines and different possible patterns for the last. The number of syllables is generally sixteen (eight plus eight), but there can be also twelve (six plus six or four plus eight) (Shariff 1988: 49).

¹⁵ "I say: Speak out, I will obey/Murmur, nay – whisper to me/You grumble? Well, give me a wink at least." (Translation by R. Samsom, 2011: 4).

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These two poetic categories have undergone a process of uniformity over time, in particular the *shairi*, which has become a powerful means of “ordinary” communication and public debate since colonial times in East Africa, especially in Tanganyika/Tanzania, via newspapers and radio (Topan 1974: 176). The publication of Amri Abedi's book, *Sheria za kutunga mashairi* ('The rules for composing poetry', 1954), which was written with the aim of preventing deterioration of the Swahili poetic tradition caused by the growing number of neophytes, has reduced the variety of prosodic categories and their standardisation all over the Swahilophone world. This is especially true for the *shairi*, nowadays most frequently composed in four-line stanzas of sixteen syllables whose most common rhyme scheme is ab/ab/ab/bc, with few variants in the last line (Shariff 1988: 60).

In *Sauti ya dhiki*, Abdalla appears to be immune to this form of reduction, in the sense that he employs a great stylistic variety for the poems both in *wimbo* (or *tathlita*) form and the *mashairi*, for which he uses seven different metric schemes (Nyaigotti-Chacha 1992: 120-123). In our anthology, I have also tried to allow this characteristic of Abdalla's poetry to emerge. Two different types of three-line stanzas appear there: lines of twelve syllables that are divided into four plus eight with an ab/ab/ab rhyme pattern in the poems *Mamba* ('The crocodile') and *Ukurasa bikira* ('Virgin page'), and lines of thirteen syllables divided into eight plus five, with the same ab/ab/ab rhyme pattern, in the poem *Nakukumbuka*. For the *mashairi*, I included four-line stanzas of the most common typology, namely four-line stanzas of sixteen syllables with a central caesura and an ab/ab/ab/bc rhyme scheme, as in *N'shishiyelo ni lilo*, *Siwati* and *N'sharudi* ('I am back'), as well as four-line stanzas of sixteen syllables divided into two hemistiches of the same length but with a different rhyme pattern, ab/ab/ab/c/d, as in *Kuno Kunena*. Finally, there is the form called *msuko* (Walibora Waliaula 2009: 218), composed of three lines of sixteen syllables with a central caesura, plus a “truncated” final line of only eight syllables, with an ab/ab/ab/b rhyme pattern, as in the single-stanza poem *Tuza moyo* ('Calm your soul').

As observed in the introduction, given the nature of the poetic text, where the intermingling of the various levels of sense is particularly dense and inextricable (Eco 2003: 53-56), the translator finds him/herself in the difficult situation of not wholly being able to render this “*tout qui se tient*”¹⁶ in a different language. Therefore, the challenge of the translation consists of prioritising the levels, deciding which relationships of sense are fundamental and determining how these relationships should be reconstructed in the new text.

Unfortunately, an aspect of the expression which significantly affects the poetic substance may sometimes not be transposed into the target language, as is the case with the poem *Kuno kunena*. Here, Abdalla's indignation over the abusive treatment he suffered after having made his ideas public and his resilience in continuing to exercise his right of expression at any cost

¹⁶ Allusion to the well-known definition by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, “*tout se tient dans le système d'une langue*” (everything holds together in the system of a language).

tug on the readers'/listeners' heartstrings through the phonic flow of the text.¹⁷ This is principally built, beyond a general play on assonances, around the obsessive repetition of two consonant sounds, *k* and *n*, present in the words such as *kunena* ('speak out'), *kukanikomeya* ('imprison me'), *kani* ('rage') (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 56-57):

<i>Kuno kunena kwa nini, kukanikomeya kuno?</i>	Ma questo parlare perché, mi ha qui imprigionato?
<i>Kwani kunena kunani, kukashikwa kani vino?</i>	Perché 'sto parlare com'è, ch'è con rabbia castigato?
<i>Kani iso na kiini, na kuninuniya mno</i>	Una rabbia senza perché, che mi ha sì indignato
<i>Kanama nako kunena, kwaonekana ni kuwi</i> ¹⁸	Caspita questo parlare, malvagio può apparire

Even if I tried to reproduce the effect of this repetition by using, for example, mainly the consonant *p* (in the first line there is *parlare* ('speak out'), *perché* ('why'), *imprigionato* ('imprisoned')), it is clear that the Italian text cannot fully convey that hard and insistent stride derived from the nature of the sounds and the agglutinative structure of the Swahili language itself. However, I tried to maintain an obsessive rhythm in the Italian translation, helped by the caesuras and the regularity of the rhymes.

The poems in the *Ushairi na Uhuru* collection also present the Italian reader with two fundamental characteristics of Swahili poetry which are linked to its intrinsically dialogic nature. These are the use of *mafumbo* (singular *fumbo*), veiled, enigmatic messages, and the practice of *kujibizana* (sometimes called *malumbano* or *mashindano*), the composition of a poem with the aim of provoking a reply or a reaction on the part of other poets, in a sort of long-distance confrontation – and sometimes rivalry (Shariff 1988; Biersteker 1996; Samsom 1996).

On the one hand, Abdalla's use of figurative language (such as metaphors or allegories) complies with a need for security by making censorship more difficult. Yet, on the other hand, it coexists with the poet's artistic and cultural needs, namely, the creative manipulation of language and the dialogue with his readers (Walibora Waliula 2009: 229). Indeed, the reader is actively involved in a cooperative work of textual interpretation, as is perfectly expressed in the poem *Mamba* (Aiello & Gaudio 2017: 60-61). In this poem, the initial stanza clearly articulates the moral imperative of the spoken word, the search for the beauty of language and a reciprocal relationship with the reader, defined through two verbal forms that are

¹⁷ *Kuno kunena* is one of the poems Abdalla often recites in public, see, for instance, the video at the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0soJOZjjCc4>.

¹⁸ "Why the act of speaking out, ended up in me being imprisoned?/What is there in my speaking, that made it so much irritable? /Is it all those baseless allegations that made me hated so much?" (translation by Said Ahmed Khamis, 2016: 40).

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etymologically related to the concept of *mafumbo*, namely *-fumba*¹⁹ ('close, speak in veiled terms') and its derivation *-fumbua* ('unveil'):²⁰

<i>Nami nambe, niwe kama waambao</i>	Ch'io parli, sì come i parlatori
<i>Niupambe, upendeze wasomao</i>	Che l'abbelli, e piaccia ai lettori
<i>Niufumbe, wafumbuwe wawezao</i>	Che lo veli, lo svelin gl'intenditori
<i>Kuna mamba, mtoni metakabari</i>	Tronfio spunta, un coccodrillo nel rivo
<i>Ajigamba, na kujiona hodari</i>	Ei si vanta, e si considera bravo
<i>Yuwaamba, kwamba 'taishi dahari'</i> ²¹	Ei vi conta, ch'in eterno sarà vivo

The poem concludes its *fumbo* by reflecting on the transitory nature of life²² and imagining the death of the crocodile, which critics have generally identified as Kenyatta, but sometimes also as a symbol of the postcolonial African autocrat (Walibora Waliaula 2009: 232). This was a profoundly daring and subversive act for an imprisoned poet:

<i>Akumbuke, siku yake ikifika</i>	Sia memore, il suo giorno arriverà
<i>Roho yake, ajuwe itamtoka</i>	'l suo essere, sappia che s'allontanerà
<i>Nguvu zake, kikomoche zitafika'</i> ²³	Del potere, il termine arriverà

The dialogicity of Swahili poetry also manifests itself in the practice of *kujibizana*, the back-and-forth flow between poets, a sort of dialogue which shifts in time and space and can develop into poetic debates along the Swahili coast (Samsom 1996: 2). In the *Ushairi na Uhuru* anthology, I included an example of this poetic praxis, the poem *Tuza moyo*. This is Abdalla's reply to a person (probably his brother, Ustadh Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo) who had delivered a poem to him, which encouraged him to be patient and to rely on prayer:²⁴

¹⁹ *Mashairi*, which present the audience with an enigma built around an animal, literally "to tie and untie an animal" (*kufunga na kufungua nyama*), are an old tradition in Swahili poetry. They were probably started in Lamu, where they were used during *gungu* ceremonies (Abdulaziz 1979: 51).

²⁰ Through verbal extension *-u-*, which is used to change the meaning of a verb to its opposite sense (Bertoncini Zúbková 2009: 156).

²¹ "I too have words; I'll join those already speaking/I'll gild my verse so it pleases those who're reading/Untwist these words, for their sense may be misleading. There's a croc gliding smugly down the river/ A boastful sop who believes he's brave and clever/He loves to talk, tells the world he'll live forever" (translation by Meg Arenberg, to be found at <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/crocodile>).

²² Transitority and impermanence as essential attributes of human life on earth are key concepts of classical Swahili poetry (and of Islamic philosophic reflections). They can be found, for instance, in the poem *Al-Inkishafi* ('The soul's awakening') by Sayyid Abdalla bin Nasir (c.ca 1820) (Bertoncini Zúbková 2000: 22).

²³ "He should know, someday he'll breathe his last/He too will go, once his die's been cast/Time will show his power finally passed" (translation by Meg Arenberg, <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/crocodile>).

²⁴ *Subira huvuta kheri, ukisubiri ni mno/Nawe zidi kusubiri, wekeze mbingu mikono/Uombe alo Qahari, inshallah hukosi neno/Ushike wasiya huno* ('The patience brings happiness, if you are really patient/ Continue to be patient, and direct your arms to Heaven /Pray to Allah, God willing you'll make it/Take my advice') (Abdalla 1973: xiii; my translation).

<i>Akhi tuliza mtima, uwate kusononeka</i>	Fratello mio placa 'l core, finiscila di soffrire
<i>Hakuna lisilokoma, siku 'kifika 'tatoka</i>	Non v'è che non h'a finire, un giorno potrò uscire
<i>Kusubiri ni lazima, na kumuomba Rabbuka</i>	Aspettar è di dovere, e invocar il Signore
<i>Wasiya wako 'meshika²⁵</i>	Ho colto 'l tuo ammonire

Another great challenge for the translator is how to convey into the target language not only the geo-linguistic varieties of some terms but also their cognitive, cultural and semantic complexity, an exigency which gives rise to continuous negotiation during the translational process. In the above quoted poem, for instance, we find two synonyms which mean 'heart' in Swahili, *moyo* and *mtima* (the second term is used mostly in northern Swahili dialects). The heart plays a crucial role in the codification of emotional metaphoric expressions in Swahili (Tramutoli & Bosire 2014: 100), just as in Italian, and often the terms *moyo* ('heart') and *roho* ('soul') are interchangeable in both languages. In the Italian translation, my choice was to translate the term 'heart' in the title as *animo* ('soul') and in the incipit of the poem as *cuore* ('heart'). This was to take into account both the language differentiation in the source text (albeit imperfectly, given that the regional variant is no longer distinguishable) and the complexity of the figurative use of this word, which is understood as the locus of the emotions and of the soul.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I first presented the translation project that I carried out in collaboration with Gaudioso, which resulted in the publication of *Ushairi na Uhuru. Poesie scelte di Abdilatif Abdalla e Euphrase Kezilahabi. Mkusanyo wa tungo za Abdilatif Abdalla na Euphrase Kezilahabi*. I discussed the main challenges that I faced translating a selection of Abdalla's poems, the choices I made and the solutions I adopted in order to render the source text in Italian. As has emerged in the analysis, the translation strategies were essentially guided by a foreignising approach, with the exception of some domesticating features. This was done to communicate to Italian readers some fundamental aspects of Abdalla's poetry, which is marked by the inextricable coexistence of engagement, stylistic sophistication, sedimented poetic tradition and modern sensibility. This combination captivates the reader, thrills the listener and defies those who wish to translate his work.

²⁵ "Dear brother, take heart, and stop mourning/ There is nothing that has no end, when the day comes I will be free/ It is imperative to be patient, and to pray to God / I have heeded your advice" (translation by Ken Walibora Waliaula 2009: 309).

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