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TRANSLATING KEZILAHABI'S *NAGONA* AND *MZINGILE* INTO FRENCH

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Translating a Swahili literary work into French poses specific problems due to the small number of translations existing so far and the imaginary representations associated with these two languages in the translator's mind. In the case of Euphrase Kezilahabi's novels *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991), the task is complicated by the very peculiar nature of these narratives, whose apocalyptic substratum does not refer to an identifiable cultural universe but to the interstitial space between a world condemned to die and a world yet to be born. In this article I will provide some insights from my experience of translation of these two Swahili novels.[1]

Introduction

I would like to share some thoughts about my experience of translating into French two Swahili texts, namely *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991) by the Tanzanian novelist Euphrase Kezilahabi. This translation was published in 2010 by Éditions Confluences in Bordeaux as part of the French research project *SWAHILI-Dimensions de l'objet swahili: textes et terrains* ('Dimensions of the Swahili object: texts and grounds') directed by Alain Ricard from 2007 to 2011. Let me start by saying that I have limited experience of translation: this was an opportunity for me to improve my knowledge of the Swahili language and to increase my ability to understand the meaning of a text that had remained in many respects enigmatic to me. I would like to comment on the conditions of translating in a postcolonial context, which seems to be conducive to individual initiatives and often unpredictable approaches. Many translations into French from African languages happened for anecdotal reasons: friendships between the author and the translator, student academic work or a personal commitment to the Swahili language. This unpredictability of the act of translation is perhaps a chance for literary life.

In my case, I started to translate *Nagona* and *Mzingile* because of my great interest in the earlier novels of Kezilahabi, which I had discovered during my Swahili studies at the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* (Inalco) in Paris. The apparent break, both stylistic and thematic, found in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* appeared to me as a mystery that only translation would be able to elucidate. These two initiatory narratives, which put the dizziness of the main character at their centre and which portray mystery and silence, present interesting challenges for the translator in search of meaning.

[1] This article is a revised translation from an article published in French (Garnier 2012). The original article can be viewed online at the following link: https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/ela/2012-n34-ela0827/1018474ar.pdf

Encounters between Swahili and French

In the history of the Swahili language, the contact between Swahili and French is limited. There was some cultural exchange in the colonial period. Charles Sacleux published his famous Swahili-French dictionary in 1939, which contains many translations of proverbs or aphorisms in support of the various entries. Thomas Geider, in a very thorough article devoted to literary translations into Swahili, pointed out that two French authors were translated in the colonial period: Molière[2] and Voltaire[3] (Geider 2008: 75). One of the objectives of translation at that time was to produce prose texts for schools. This explains why only a few complete works were translated, while many were abridged.

In the post-independence period (1960 to the present), translators are interested in Francophone African novelists, for example, Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy*[4] or Mariama Ba's *Une si longue lettre*.[5] In both these cases, the translations appear to have been made from the English versions of the novels.[6] Due to the socialist context of the *Ujamaa* period, Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* was translated twice: in 1977 (from the English translation of the book) and in 1978 (directly from French).[7] Recently, Marcel Kalunga Mwela translated two plays, one by Victor Hugo (*Le roi s'amuse*) and the other by Jean-Luc Lagarce (*Les règles du savoir vivre dans la société moderne*), which appeared in one volume in 2013.[8] Three years later, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le petit prince* was translated by Philipp Kruse and Walter Bgoya.[9]

Translations from Swahili into French also reflect the individual choices of the translators rather than an integral, strategic approach. So far, five Swahili works have been translated into

[2] Molière, *Tabibu asiyependa ngwana*. Translation of *Le Médecin malgré lui* [1666] by A. Morrison. Dar es Salaam: [Publisher not cited], 1945 [Editors' note: The Swahili title of *Le Médecin malgré lui* is *Tabibu asiyependa utabibu* published by Best African Standard.]; Molière, *Mchuuzi mwungwana*. Translation of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* [1670] by A. Morrison. Dar es Salaam: [Publisher not cited], 1948. Reprints: Nairobi. East African Literature Bureau, 1969, 1970, 1971 [Editors' note: *Mchuuzi mwungwana* was published by East African Literature Bureau for the first time in 1966]; Molière, *Mnafiki*. Translation of *Le Malade imaginaire* [1673] by L. Taguaba. Dar es Salaam: [Publisher not cited], n.d. [1950s] [Editors' note: *Mnafiki* was published by Tanzania Publishing House in 1973].

[3] Voltaire, *Hadithi ya Zadiq*. Translation of *Zadig, ou la destinée* [1748] by Abdulla M. Abubakr, Zanzibar: Universities' Mission to Central Africa Press, 1950. Reprint: Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1963; Voltaire, *Hadithi za Kandidi*. Translation of *Candide ou l'Optimisme* [1759] by L. Taguaba. Dar es Salaam: Dar es Salaam: [Publisher not cited], n.d. [1950s].

[4] Translated in 1976 as *Boi* by Raphael Kahaso and Nathan Mbwele, Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, *Waandishi wa Kiafrika* (African Writers Series).

[5] Translated in 1994 as *Barua ndefu kama hii* by Clement Maganga, Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

[6] Concerning Mariama Bâ's novel see Flavia Aiello Traore (2013). About Ferdinand Oyono, see Ken Walibora Waliaula (2013).

[7] The first translation, *Mafukara wa ulimwengu* was done by Ahmed Yusuf Abeid. London: Transafrica, 1977. The second one, *Viumbe waliolaaniwa* was done by Gabriel Ruhumbika [Editors' note: together with Clement Maganga]. Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House. Concerning these two translations see Alamin Mazrui's book on translation in East Africa (2016) chap. 3 "Translating Fanon in socialist Tanzania: between the wretched and the damned", pp. 65-91.

[8] *Tamthilia mbili za Kifaransa*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

[9] *Mwana mdogo wa mfalme*. Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2011.

French: *Maisha ya Tippu Tip*,[10] Shafi Adam Shafi's *Kasri ya Mwinyi Fuad,*[11] Aniceti Ketereza's *Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka, Ntulanalwo na Bulihwali*,[12] Shaaban Robert's *Maisha yangu*,[13] Euphrase Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile*,[14] and *Safari za Waswahili* published by Carl Velten in 1901.[15] This makes a quite variegated picture. Translations are made on a piecemeal basis, responding to various and often random criteria, such as encounters and opportunities. One could theorise about the conditions of the intercultural encounter in postcolonial contexts, which seem to be marked by randomness because they are not subject to concerted editorial strategies.

Imaginary representations of Swahili and French

To get an idea of (albeit unconscious) linguistic interferences in the mind of a translator who is translating a Swahili text into French, it may be useful to briefly look at some basic imaginary representations that are associated with each of these languages, as a result of their history and their social status, from the perspective of a French translator. It should be pointed out that these representations have no objective value but refer to what I had in mind (more or less confusedly) when I started to translate Kezilahabi's text.

A language is never neutral, it is always embedded in a network of cultural representations that envelop it and act on the one who learns it. As far as Swahili is concerned, three simultaneously concurrent and contradictory imaginary representations can be distinguished. We have in the first place the imaginary representation of a refined coastal language, linked both to the way of life of the Swahili civilization and to a very old literary tradition. Another imaginary representation of Swahili is that of a vehicular language, which developed along the road in the wake of caravans: a language suitable for business contacts with the hinterland, a language available to everybody and useful for contacts. This imaginary representation does not take into account the symbolic status of Kiswahili as a refined and highly cultural language. A third imaginary representation is that of standard Swahili, as it was developed during the colonial period by the Interterritorial Language Committee[16] (founded in 1930). Here, Swahili is perceived as the language of modernity, it is "under the control" of government institutions

[10] *L'autobiographie de Hamed ben Mohammed el-Murjebi Tippo Tip (ca 1840-1905)* (1974), translated and annotated by François Bontinck, in collaboration with Koen Janssen. S.C.J. Bruxelles: Académie royale des sciences d'outre-mer, coll. *Mémoires*: Nouvelle série, Classe des sciences morales et politiques, 42, 4.

[11] Translated in 1986 by Jean-Pierre Richard with the title *Les girofliers de Zanzibar*. Paris: Karthala. Reprinted in 1996 and 2000 by Le Serpent à Plumes.

[12] *Les enfants du faiseur de pluie* (1996) and *Le tueur de serpents* (1999), transl. by Simon Baguma Mweze in collaboration with Olivier Barlet. Paris: UNESCO L'Harmattan.

[13] *Autobiographie d'un écrivain swahili, Tanzanie* (2010), transl. by François Devenne. Paris: Karthala, coll. Lettres du Sud.

[14] *Nagona* suivi de *Mzingile* (2010), transl. by Xavier Garnier. Bordeaux: Editions Confluences, coll. *Traversées de l'Afrique*.

[15] *De la côte aux confins. Récits de voyageurs swahili* (2010), transl. by Nathalie Carré. Paris: CNRS Editions.

[16] The Committee was renamed East Africa Swahili Committee upon transfer to Makerere College in 1952, and afterwards Institute of Kiswahili Research upon transfer to the University of Dar es Salaam [Editors' note].

and becomes an official language, based on explicit grammatical rules, an approved lexicon, and so on. As far as I am concerned, these three imaginary representations of Swahili came to me mainly through the teachings of Swahili I received at Inalco, as well as during extended stays in the eighties on the island of Zanzibar and in the town of Bukavu (in the Kivu Province of Eastern Zaire, where Swahili first appeared to me as a vehicular language).

Translating African language literature into French cannot be a neutral activity if we take into account the fact that Africa was the biggest part of the French colonial empire. With respect to French, it seems to me that two great imaginary representations are at work: a classical one and a romantic one. According to a perception that developed in the classical age (17th and 18th centuries), the French language is associated with a classical concept of universality, whose keywords are *reason* and *clarity*. According to this imaginary representation, the French language is supposed to be rational, almost beyond the reach of real persons, whether French or foreign. Humans in their totality, as reasonable beings, are supposed to tend towards that abstract universality with which the French language is associated. The Romantic reaction, influenced by the Herderian imaginary representation of languages as expressions of the *Volksgeist*, gave rise to a concurrent imagination of the French language as the language of the nation and the property of the French people.

From this entanglement of imaginary representations arise multiple questions regarding translation: do we suppose, in accordance with the romantic vision, that African languages are always the authentic expression of peoples? In this case, what kind of French language will we adopt for our translation? Are we going to Africanise? The clarity and neutrality of classical French may be another choice, but to what perception of African languages do they correspond? Does this choice refer to a clarification of what is implicitly understood in the African text? Is the French translation then to be considered as a kind of rational explanation?

The language of Kezilahabi

The two novels of Kezilahabi (*Nagona* and *Mzingile*) can be considered as experimental texts, taking the form of initiatory narratives. They were written during a stay in the United States and are strongly marked by a certain conception of so-called postmodern literature. We have a text that follows the deterritorialisation movement of the main character. The centre of gravity of the plot is a nuclear catastrophe that has destroyed the world: the stories take place in an interstitial space between a world that is dying and another world yet to be born, beyond the catastrophe.

Before writing these two initiatory narratives, Kezilahabi was regarded as a realistic novelist, very committed, with all his critical distance, to the political debates around the *Ujamaa* revolution and Nyerere's policy of African socialism. In his first four novels, it was possible to observe how he played with internal lexical variations in Swahili. Kezilahabi is not a writer from the Swahili Coast. The substrate of his Swahili is Kikerewe, the language of Ukerewe

Island on Lake Victoria, and his prose integrates the principle of lexical variation, characteristic of vehicular languages. Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* contain numerous Kikerewe words (not listed in dictionaries and thus translated with the help of the author himself). In a very Bakhtinian text dealing with the importance of writing in African languages, Kezilahabi assigns three objectives to this literature:

> The role of African writers writing in African languages is therefore to try to recapture inner movements of the discourses of consciousness which take place in the quotidian, reshape these discourses into collective articulations and make projections through pre-understanding. African literature will then be understood as the creation of a proper space for the negotiation of the people's needs and desires. In Tanzania scattered desires and needs of different ethnic groups are brought together and given a proper bearing through Swahili. Interests of one ethnic group can hardly subsume national demands, and social experiences are no longer performers of what is expected of them by the other. Through Swahili we have become people who live our own literature. We have now taken it for granted that Swahili is not separable from our own being and that it is only through it that serious thinking can take place. (1988: 134)

Of course, this type of crossroad writing, "understood as the creation of a proper space for the negotiation of the people's needs and desires", is very difficult to render in translation. The idea of a multiplicity of languages intermixed within Swahili is very complex to render into French. If literature is for Kezilahabi a dynamic process of unification of the people, one can understand the difficulty of the French translator, who finds himself unable to recreate this dynamic with a French language that was once radically unified and is supposed to dislike lexical heterogeneity.

The issues of lexical repetitions

A specific difficulty of translating Swahili into French is the total indifference of Swahili to lexical repetition, which is considered clumsy in French. Kezilahabi's writing does not escape this peculiarity of language, and I chose to translate these lexical repetitions almost systematically. I think that the almost obsessive repetitions of key terms in Kezilahabi's prose are related to the writing process itself. Let us take an example with the word *mlango*, 'door':

> ***Mlango*** *wa nyumba hiyo ulikuwa umefungwa kama ilivyokuwa* ***milango*** *ya nyumba nyingine zote. Niliusogelea kwa kusita. Nilijaribu kuchungulia ndani kwa kupitia nyufa za* ***mlangoni****. [...] Niliutazama* ***mlango*** *uliokuwa mbele yangu. Niliugonga mara tatu. Polepole* ***mlango*** *ulifunguka kwa mlio hadi ulipofika mwisho. Niliingia kwa wasiwasi, maana sikuona mtu aliyeufungua. Nilipoingia tu* ***mlango*** *ulijifunga wenyewe nyuma yangu.* (Kezilahabi 1990: 2, emphasis added)

> La **porte** de cette maison était fermée comme toutes les autres **portes**. Je m'approchai. J'essayai de lorgner à l'intérieur par les fentes de la **porte**. [...] Je regardai la **porte** qui était devant moi. Je frappai trois fois. La **porte** s'ouvrit doucement en grinçant sur ses gonds jusqu'au bout. J'entrai avec inquiétude car je ne voyais personne. Une fois que je fus entré, la **porte** se referma toute seule sur moi. (Kezilahabi 2010: 14)

> The **door** of this house was closed like all the other **doors**. I approached. I tried to ogle inside by the cracks in the **door**. [...] I looked at the **door** that was in front of me. I knocked three times. The **door** opened gently, squeaking on its hinges to the end. I entered with anxiety because I saw no one. Once I came in, the **door** closed on me alone.

The text seems to twirl around the pivotal word mlango/porte/door here. This seems to me to be part of an attempt to write in a labyrinthical way: the words come back constantly in a set of repetitions and variations. In explaining the difficulty of transposing these lexical repetitions into French, I would like to refer to the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari (1975) between "minor languages" and "major languages," or more exactly between the minor and major uses of languages. The major use of a language consists, for Deleuze and Guattari, of attaching a fixed cultural background to the language, that is associating a set of connotations with each word (*Ibid.*). It is therefore understandable why lexical repetitions of words are cumbersome and unwelcome in a French translation. Upon each repetition all the weight of the connotations returns and finally becomes crushing. If the minor use of languages consists of disconnecting the words from any cultural background – that is the meaning of the word "deterritorialisation" in Deleuze and Guattari's writings (*Ibid.*: 38-50) – words can more easily enter into rhythmical repetitions. This remark on lexical repetitions can be related to another phenomenon characteristic of these two narratives: the salient syntactic fragmentation of Kezilahabi's text.

How to fill the void between the utterances?

This deterritorialisation of the text is consistent with the plot of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, which takes place in the interstitial space between a world that is dying and a world yet to be born. The style of Kezilahabi is very specific in these two texts, which seem to prohibit any form of psychologisation. The sentences are short, as if it were important to multiply the spaces between the sentences. The text takes the form of a radically linear narrative that proceeds by shortening the utterances. Kezilahabi seems to want us to hear the silence (emptiness) under the narrative.

The whole narrative is punctuated by a simple word: *Kimya*, which I translated into French as *silence*. I was surprised by the incessant return of this simple word throughout the text. Everything makes sense if one does not consider *Kimya* as a word but as a sign that there is no word there. The inscription of *Kimya* throughout the text is a strategy to make us feel that under the phrases there is nothing, only the pure void. Both Kezilahabi's narratives exceed realism by a technique of floating utterances. This is technically easy to translate, but the intended effect is more difficult to render. This fragmentation produces an effect of disorientation of the Swahili language: between the words we are invited to hear the silence of the cultural interstice, which is the condition of all initiatory narrative. Once more, this difference of effects is related to the problematic of "minor" or "major" uses of languages.

Conclusion

One might conclude on the question of opacity, which is one of the important aspects of Kezilahabi's writing. After deploring the general tendency toward pedagogical clarity, which presupposes a state of initial ignorance of the people, Kezilahabi announces his writing project:

> But as long as literature is 'life' there can never be such a thing as absolute clarity in literature, for it is not absolute clarity that makes life worth living. What is blurred is what makes the contours of life worth pursuing – 'the hidden god'. (1988: 135-136)

Hence the paradox for the translator. If the writer espouses opacity by writing in an African language, what strategy must be adopted by the French translator, who is supposed to put the works at the disposal of a public that has been so long accustomed, according to the supposed universality of classical French, to having clarity and insights on the *Other*? The question remains open.

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