

TRANSLATING A SWAHILI NOVEL INTO “KIZUNGU”: *SEPARAZIONE*, THE ITALIAN EDITION OF SAID AHMED MOHAMED’S *UTENGANO*¹

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This article has a very special meaning for me, because it deals with a work that has involved a lot of my intellectual and emotional energies over recent years: the translation into Italian of the Swahili novel *Utengano* by Said Ahmed Mohamed, which was published in March 2005 under the title “*Separazione*” by an Italian Publishing House, Rubbettino Editore.

This work actually started when I was writing my M.A. thesis about the contemporary Swahili novel, focusing on the thematic and stylistic analysis of *Utengano*, which I decided to complete with an Italian translation of the text (Aiello 1997).

I was not the first student of Prof. Bertoncini-Zúbková’s, nor the last, to pay attention to the translation of Swahili literature into our mother tongue: in fact many Swahili literary works, most of them novels, have been translated into Italian by students of the University “*L’Orientale*” of Naples (cf. Bertoncini-Zúbková 2004). It is quite a long list, which is given at the end of the bibliographical references.

Except for a number of short stories, many of them translated by Elena Bertoncini-Zúbková and mostly published in specialised revues, Swahili prose works and particularly novels have never been published in Italian translation, and I sincerely hope that the Italian edition of *Utengano* will be a pioneer for many other publications, encouraging students and researchers of Swahili literature to submit their manuscripts to Italian publishing houses, even if it is often a very frustrating business.

Editing Swahili literary works in Italian could have two different effects:

- a) firstly, language mediation may make literary works in an African language accessible to other scholars dealing with African literature in European languages;
- b) secondly, even if their edition and distribution would probably be on a very small scale, translations of Swahili creative writings into Italian would open this literary production to new potential readers.

Thus, the publishing of translations might be an important factor in helping to end the isolation of Swahili literature in the field of critical studies of African literatures in Italy. This field very often only deals with African literatures in European languages and is normally part of the academic teaching of the literature produced in what is, for the writers, their former colonial language, mostly English, French and Portuguese. It could encourage activities of com-

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parative criticism and interdisciplinary research, reducing the distance between “postcolonial studies” and African language literatures.

The context of critical studies of African language literature in Italy is quite similar to that in other Western countries. As has recently pointed out by Anja Oed and Uta Reuster-Jahn in their introduction to the 8th International Janheinz Jahn Symposium, “*Creative Writing in African Languages: Production, Mediation, Reception*”², the rich and heterogeneous literary production in African languages is generally still ignored by scholars dealing with African literatures in European languages, a situation well described by Karin Barber in her article on “African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism” (1995).

Analyzing the development of the reception of African creative writing in the West, from the era of ‘Commonwealth’-criticism in the 1960s to the postcolonial criticism of the 1980s and 1990s, Karin Barber claims that western-oriented discourses on African literatures have always given privilege to creative writing in the former colonial languages while marginalising African-language literatures, upholding a fundamental distinction between ‘traditional’, oral forms of verbal arts, generally associated with African languages, and modern literature, written in the (former) colonial languages and influenced by western traditions of creative writing. This dichotomy, though, terribly simplifies the complex relationship between the oral and the written, tradition and modernity in African verbal arts, and tends to ignore that modern literature is not exclusively produced in European languages (Barber 1995: 12).

Therefore, it would be very fruitful to abandon an exclusionist point of view, acknowledging that literatures in African languages are by no means a marginal phenomenon. They co-exist with literary forms in European languages and deserve serious critical attention.

Editing Swahili literature into the more diffused European languages would therefore have a much wider impact, representing an important factor in communication between the different studies of African literatures, separated by problems of linguistic competence as well as the deep rooted misconceptions, and also a potential bridge to any one, in Europe, in Africa or anywhere, who is interested in reading Swahili literature.

When African novels are looked at, for instance, it can be seen that very few Swahili novels or long prose works have been hitherto published in European languages. The first one to be mentioned is the autobiographical narration *Uhuru wa Watumwa* by James Mbotela (1934), translated into English in 1956 with the title “*The Freeing of the Slaves in East Africa*” (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1991: 41).

There are also two editions of Shaaban Robert’s prose writings translated into Russian language, both under the direction of Andrei Zhukov. The first book, “*Moya zhizn*” (“My life”), came out in 1968 in Leningrad (it included *Kusadikika*, *Adili na nduguze*, *Maisha yangu*, *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad*, *mwimbaji wa Unguja* and some essays). A new edition, “*Izbrannoye*” (“Selected works”), was published in 1981, also in Leningrad; it includes a translation

² Symposium held at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, 17-20/11/2004; the introduction by A. Oed and U. Reuster-Jahn is available at the web-page <http://www.jahn-bibliothek.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/8thJJS.html>.

of *Maisha yangu, Baada ya Miaka Hamsini, Siku ya Watenzi wote, Utubora Mkulima* and *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad* (Zhukov 1998: 185).

“Les girofliers de Zanzibar”, a French translation of *Kasri ya Mwinyi Fuad* by Shafi Adam Shafi (1978), was published first by Karthala in 1986 and was re-edited by Serpent à Plumes, Paris, in 2000. The same novel was translated into German by Karin Boden and Monique Lütgens and published in 1997 under the title *“Die Sklaverei der Gewürze”* (Marino, München).

Another work which should not be forgotten is a very long work of fiction by Aniceti Kitereza, *Bwana Myombekere na Bibi Bugonoka, Ntulanalwo na Bulihwali*, whose original version in Kikerewe was translated into Kiswahili by the author and published by Tanzania Publishing House in 1980 (with the editing of Mugyabuso Mulokozi). This prose work was first translated into German by Wilhelm J.G. Möhlig, who did a very scrupulous philological work (Ricard 2002: 3), referring both to the version in Kiswahili and to the original manuscript in Kikerewe; it was edited by Peter Hammer, Wuppertal, in two volumes: *“Die Kinder der Regenmacher. Eine afrikanische Familiensaga”* (1991) and *“Der Schlangentöter. Ntulanalwo und Bulihwali”* (1993). Afterwards it was also translated into French by Simon Baguma Mweze in collaboration with Olivier Barlet, and published by Editions UNESCO/Harmattan, Paris, also in two parts: *“Les Enfants du faiseur de pluie”* (1996) and *“Le tuer de serpents”* (1999). The English translation was produced by Gabriel Ruhumbika and published by Mkuki na Nyota, Dar es Salaam, in 2002, under the title: *“Mr. Myombekere and his wife Bugonoka. Their Son Ntulanalwo and Daughter Bulihwali. The Story of an ancient African Community”*.

In practice very little material has been published, but I know that in the rest of Europe, just as in Italy, there are students and researchers who have written their translations of Swahili novels. I remember, for instance, one German student who came to Naples as part of the Erasmus/Socrates project, and he once told me that he had translated a novel by Mohamed Said Abdulla. At the University of Cologne, Lutz Diegner is working on a translation into German of *Kichwamaji* by Euphrase Kezilahabi. Alena Rettová has translated Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* into Czech language. In France, Xavier Garnier has translated the same novels, *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, into French, and I'm sure that there must be many other literary translations wherever there are students and scholars dealing with Swahili literature.

Translating is a very important form of intercultural communication, which can provide contact with new readers, expected and unexpected ones. An example of this is something which recently happened to me at the University of Calabria, where I have been teaching Swahili Language and Literature since 2004. My students are not specializing in African or Oriental Studies, because at our University extra-European languages are only optional courses, marginal to the programmes of European and American Languages and Literatures. Therefore, my students only come for one year (more precisely for one semester) to learn the basis of Kiswahili and some notions about Swahili literature.

This year the programme of Swahili literature is mostly dedicated to the Swahili contemporary novel, and the students have shown themselves to be very interested in reading Swahili prose works. Of course, after only three months of lessons, they can not have the competence to read the works in the original language, so I have given them the choice of reading three novels from among the available translations, after being kindly allowed by Prof. Bertoncini-Zúbková and her students to make copies of them. In April 2005, then, I received my copies of the Italian edition of *Utengano*, and I went to the bookshop within the University campus to place an order for the students of my course. In the office there was an employee, a young woman who immediately told me that she was really interested in reading the book, and moreover, to my surprise, that she is also a journalist conducting a programme about cultural manifestations and novelties on a local TV station, and that, after finishing the novel, she would be glad to invite me for an interview... a frightening invitation, but also a nice example of the possible effects of translating non-European language literatures into our mother tongue. –

I would also like to stress one aspect of globalisation that may certainly help editing Swahili literature in European translations, namely the easier access to communication through the internet. In my experience, in fact, all the issues relating to the Kenyan Publishing House and the writer's copyright, to the royalties and to the drawing up of the contract were enormously accelerated through the use of electronic mail. –

In the following pages I will describe the main features of my translation of the novel *Utengano* from Kiswahili into Italian, highlighting the main differences between the first version, that I produced as an appendix to the M.A. thesis, and the manuscript that I submitted to the publishing house.

Separazione, the Italian edition of Utengano

Said Ahmed Mohamed's novel *Utengano*, written in 1980, is a unique work in the Swahili literary production, both with regard to the very elaborated style and to the themes treated, a realistic and critical portrait of the post-revolutionary society of Zanzibar.

Core of the narration is the breaking down of Bwana Makuudi's family. Makuudi is a pious and tyrannical man at home, luxurious and corrupted leader outside: two women, Farashuu and Kazija, victims of his abuses, carry out a plan to destroy his whole family, particularly his daughter Maimuna, directing her towards alcohol and prostitution. Lonely and abandoned, Makuudi is also defeated at the parliamentary elections and arrested by the incorruptible policeman Fadhili. Following the fall of Makuudi, a new family will be born, far from the conflicts generated by male aggressiveness. This work appears as a very severe evaluation of the post-independence politicians, ideally socialist, but too much tempted by the urban, western lifestyle and at the same time too conservative to accept other aspects of social change which, apart from the rhetoric of political discourses, would imply the substantial revision of class, generation and gender relations (Aiello 1998: 2).

The translation of *Utengano*, like that of any other work created in a foreign society and culture, implies much more than a good understanding of the language, and the greater the capacity to get deep into the historical, social and cultural dimensions of the text, the better the solutions to the problems of translation (Mounin 1965: 136).

The result is obviously bound to be imperfect. However, translations of African language literatures are an important medium for creating connections between different sectors of African literary studies. For readers they can facilitate encounters with cultures and societies which are normally labelled as either underdeveloped countries, or as an exotic world, nothing more than white beaches, safaris and "traditional" folklore.

As I was considering my translation of *Utengano* an intercultural project, I decided not to "italianize" the text too much, so that the reader would not forget that the novel he is reading was produced in a different cultural context (Aiello 1997: 65).

In some cases I chose to leave the word in Kiswahili and explain it in a glossary at the end of the volume. The words which are left in the original language belong mainly to the field of material culture and to the field of social culture (Aiello 1997: 64). Related to the universe of Swahili material culture are the names of typical dishes (like *kachori*, *katlesi*, *sambusa*), objects (like the *kawa*), names of drinks (like *pombe*) and names of traditional clothes (like *buibui*, *kanga*, *kanzu*, *kofia*).

To the field of social culture belong the appellatives which are normally associated with personal names as a sign of respect (*mzee*, *bwana*, *bibi*); names of family members, especially when they are not used in a literal sense, but as friendly appellatives (*dada*, *kaka*); names of social figures which do not have an exact correspondence in Italian (*shehe*); forms of greetings which highlight the more formal relationships between generations in Swahili communities (*shikamoo*, *marahaba*).

Of course in many cases I could have used a periphrasis to describe the meaning of the word, but this would have had the effect of flattening the text, while, on the other hand, I thought that it would not be too disturbing for the reader to have a look at the glossary and learn something more about Swahili life.

From this perspective, I decided to leave the English words and phrases of the original text also in the translation (Aiello 1997: 65). Especially in dialogues they testify to a sociolinguistic phenomenon, called *codeswitching* (Bertoncini-Zúbková 1987: 344), widely reflected in Swahili prose. The term *codeswitching* refers to a sudden change of linguistic code even in the middle of a sentence, characteristic of the speech of young, well educated people (like Mussa in the novel).

I also tried to render in the Italian translation the mangled language spoken by Indian and Arab speakers in the novel, namely by the vendors Ganji and Ashuru. The first character, for example, speaks in this way: "*Karibu, Mama Jeni, iko veve kuja na geni, iko bibi zuri hii. Sema iko nini taka? Iko sampl umpya.*" (*Utengano*: 67). In the Italian version I employed a

form of language characterised by similar phonological and grammatical faults in order to convey the linguistic peculiarities of the characters (Aiello 1997: 66).

One of the greater difficulties in approaching a foreign literary text is balancing accuracy in the translation with the ability to create a fluent prose in the target language. In this sense, the main problem in the translation of *Utengano* was without doubt the abundance of idiomatic sentences, pictures and proverbs. In every case I tried to find the solution most suitable to the context, which generally was one of the following possibilities (Aiello 1997: 66):

- 1) Idiomatic locution without an exact correspondence in Italian were rendered by a semantic adaptation conveying the same meaning (eg. *hana roho*, *kumpa moyo mtu*, etc.);
- 2) When dealing with images and metaphors extraneous to the Italian linguistic and cultural repertoire, I tried find an analogous image, possibly derived from the same semantic field, like the sentence *Huwa duduvule, haachi mpaka atobowe mti*, was translated into Italian as “*Era testardo come un mulo*” (He was as stubborn as a mule);
- 3) When I could find a precise equivalent of the proverb in Kiswahili, I replaced the original one with the Italian one. For example, the proverb *Paka akiondoka panya hutawala* was translated as “*Quando il gatto manca i topi ballano*” (When the cat’s away the mice will play);
- 4) When the saying in Kiswahili did not have any correspondence in Italian, I simply translated the meaning, using a form of language similar to the proverbial formula, as in the case of the saying *Mdharau biu, hubiruka*, transformed into “*Chi deride prima o poi verrà deriso*” (The one who derides people sooner or later will become an object of derision). Another saying, *Mla nyama ya nguruwe, huchagua iliyonona*, was translated literally, explaining the sense in a footnote, where the reader is told that in a Muslim society pork meat stands for what is morally sanctioned, so that the meaning of the sentence is that if you have to do something forbidden, be sure that it will be convenient for you.

The quantity of footnotes in the text is one of the biggest differences between the translation prepared as an appendix to the M.A. thesis and the manuscript I sent to the publishing house. The version for the appendix was intended to be read principally by scholars and students of Swahili Language and Literature, and therefore all the examples I cited before and any analogous situations were correlated by a footnote quoting the original text. When I was working on the text before sending it to the publisher, I omitted many of these footnotes, leaving only the ones necessary for the comprehension of the text, like the already quoted *Mla nyama ya nguruwe, huchagua iliyonona*, or when a pun or the humour of a sentence would not be clear, like Maimuna’s joke: “*Wewe unayejua ungalikuwa hivyo, Shoka? Shoka gani, huchanji kuni wala hukati magogo.*” (*Utengano*: 113). The play on words is based on the fact the in Kiswahili *Shoka*, as well as being the man’s name, also means axe.

In practice, I limited the remarks about the original language to the situations where they are necessary for the comprehension of the meaning of the text, while I left the footnotes containing information about some historical, socio-political, cultural, religious aspects of the

Zanzibari Islands taken from the novel. However, I did not want to “invade” the translation with a huge apparatus of notes, which could distract the reader from a natural approach to the text.

All the devices I have described here were employed in the attempt to create an accurate translation which could conduct the text towards the reader and vice versa. Unfortunately there are some aspects of Swahili prose which are, to a large degree, lost, especially the playing with word sounds, the onomatopoeias, the assonances and the musicality of the narration so typical of Said Ahmed Mohamed's writing. Another important characteristic which was lost in the translation is the disparity of register between the use of *Kiswahili sanifu* (standard language) and the employment of dialectal forms in Kipemba (Aiello 1997: 67). I could have used one of the Italian dialects to render this difference from the standard, but the choice of one of the numerous Italian dialects would have been not only arbitrary, but also misleading, because in every country the relationship between the standard language and the dialectal forms is very peculiar, involves diverse implications and is differently exploited in literary works.

To conclude, the publishing of translations might be an important factor in building a bridge between Swahili literature and the field of critical studies about African literatures in European languages, encouraging activities of comparative criticism and interdisciplinary research.

In this article I have described my experience of translating the Swahili novel *Utengano* into Italian, which kept me busy especially for the richness of the vocabulary and of the idiomatic formulae. As rigorous as a translation of a literary work may be, it will always result in a more or less successful approximation to the original and it can never have the precision of a mathematical operation; but the challenge for the translator is really this exhausting work of transfer from one linguistic code to another, from one cultural context to another, to be carried out with both method and fantasy at the same time.

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³ This list comprises the titles known to the author, thus it is not exhaustive.

THE ITALIAN EDITION OF SAID AHMED MOHAMED'S UTENGANO

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Mohamed, Said Ahmed. 2005. *Separazione*. Translated by Flavia Aiello Traore. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Iride (Gruppo Rubbettino).

Swahili novels translated by Italian students (cf. Bertoncini-Zúbková 2004):

Euphrase Kezilahabi: *Rosa Mistika* (Rita Vassallo)

Euphrase Kezilahabi: *Kichwamaji* (Filomena Romano)

Kajubi Mukajanga: *Mpenzi* (Graziella Acquaviva)

Ndyanao Balisidya: *Shida* (Antonella Francone)

Katama Mkangi: *Mafuta* (Marisa Barile)

Peter Ngare: *Kikulacho ni nguoni mwako* (Stefania Narducci)

Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed: *Kiu* (Paola Sacco)

Mohamed Suleiman Mohamed: *Nyota ya Rehema* (Valentina Auricchio)

Said Ahmed Mohamed: *Utengano* (Flavia Aiello)

Said Ahmed Mohamed: *Tata za Asumini* (Irene Brunotti)

Said Ahmed Mohamed: *Kiza katika nuru* (Pompea Nocera)

Shafi Adam Shafi: *Vuta n'kuvute* (Maria De Meo)