

# The Task of The African Translator

MUKOMA WA NGUGI

*Translation's ultimate purpose is to express the innermost relation between languages*<sup>1</sup>

WALTER BENJAMIN

## INTRODUCTION: LIMITING THE INFINITE IN AFRICAN TRANSLATION

Given the number of languages and cultures, different histories either before or after the advent of colonialism, and uneven support of African languages in individual countries such as Kenya and Tanzania, anything loosely termed African translation will have to flow in a myriad of ways. We must not have an African Theory of Translation but rather a plethora of Translation Theories that are particular in part or in whole to African languages. Nevertheless as with anything of infinite possibilities, it is crucial to capture or frame a few foundational principles that will make discussion possible.

The first principle, which will help make the debate manageable, is that at a minimum three kinds of translation exist in relation to African languages: Where the African Language is the source and therefore translation flows outwards; where the African language is the target and the source a language outside of the continent; or where the act of translation is between African Languages. Translating into and between African languages suffers from the worst kind of neglect – very few translators are translating into and between African languages, and even fewer have attempted to particularize translation theory to African languages.

The second of these principles, closely interacting with the first, is that each act of African translation will have a set of problems that are universal to any translator no matter what language or flow of translation. This is to

say that there are problems a translator between French and Italian faces and the African translator in any of the above three configurations will also face. For example, lack of equivalents, or in the case of poetry, lack of corresponding form - the questions of whether to engage in a metaphor, a literal phrase for phrase translation, and when do what John Dryden calls an *imitation*<sup>2</sup> – “where the translator... assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense but to forsake them both as he sees occasion” (146).

The third principle is that a target language related to but distinct from the source language will behave differently in an act of translation than when it is not related to the source language. Each act of translation will raise a different set of problems and call for different solutions. When translating between Kiswahili and isiXhosa, the problems and solutions will be different from those faced when translating between isiXhosa and English. This is to say that linguistic features such as morphology are very much at play.

Due to Africa's historical relationship to the world, there is a fourth organizing principle. Translating, in a situation where one language has a history of imperial domination and the other of resistance, is also a political act. African translation theory has to look at questions of language power relations in this age of globalization, the question of imperial versus resisting languages. In short, translation is a dynamic act in which the living historical questions determine what is being translated, into what language, and the process, which is to say the nature of the act of translation itself.

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## KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION

The theory that underpins Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* also informs African translation. European languages in the African Continent and in Europe developed at the direct expense of African languages –and knowledge produced by Africans has traditionally flown one way - Africa to Europe, through translation. Novels, philosophies, and systems of thought are translated into European languages. But seminal European philosophers, writers and scientists are not translated into African Languages; their ideas remain sealed in languages that only the African elite have access to. The majority of the African population in this exchange has served as a laboratory for others; cultures studied and quantified, needles poked into bodies to extract medical data, and labor and raw materials converted into European goods.

Language was used by colonialism to discipline. By divorcing the African from his or her culture, access to the world through one's own lens was also lost. In the colonial framework, African languages had no political, scientific or economic function. The only participation possible in the political, scientific, and economic colonial worlds was through mastering the colonizing language. As European languages became the containers of new scientific and philosophical knowledge, African languages were in an agonizing process of atrophy. They became social languages spoken in the privacy of homes and at social events. As the relationship between African and European languages continued through neo-colonialism and now globalization, African languages found that the world had left them behind.

Therefore translating, let's say, a science fiction novel that uses pedestrian physics on time travel into Gikuyu will require much more invention and coinage of new words than it would if I was translating it into a European language which has from the beginning kept up with the debate of time warps. If I want to translate Stephen Hawking's rather accessible physics book, *The History of Time*, having never read a physics, chemistry, or philosophy book in Gikuyu, I will run into problems that a German translator will not. The German language has been keeping up with new theories and inventions. Gikuyu has not – new knowledge for the Gikuyu speaker is stored in the English language. In short, I have more work to do. This is not an immutable condition: Gikuyu language is behind existing knowledge due to carefully designed colonial education policy that promoted English at the direct expense of African languages

This is not to suggest that African languages do not

have the capacity to carry scientific knowledge, but to point out that translating into an African language will require more than fluency and the target language dictionary. Some words and concepts, depending on the text, simply do not exist. Every translator, no matter the language, faces this problem. But for the translator translating into an African language, the gaps will be much larger and perhaps in this regard, the African translator should ideally have a community of other translators and native speakers to constantly fall back upon. Imperialism wanted to fossilize African languages – it did not quite succeed – and therefore the translator has much to work with. But nevertheless, out of languages whose speakers have been convinced they cannot carry physics or medical terms, the translator must convince them that it is indeed possible.

In the coinage and invention of words, an act that languages naturally perform as they engage the world around them, an act that is constantly undermined when it comes to African languages for any number of reasons, the translator has to make sure the translated text is intelligible. The translator's mandate is not to create a new language, but rather have the translated text live intelligibly in the target language. The translator therefore has to keep checking with others. Can *kahindagakunje* (literally 'folded' time in Gikuyu) mean *time warp* or is it too much of a stretch? Would it in fact sound ridiculous to the Gikuyu ear? Are there philosophical concepts that perhaps can convey the idea of time warp? Conversely it will require updating words in the African language to carry multiple meanings. In Kiswahili the word, *mtandao* means *internet* as well as *spider web*. Here, a word with one meaning, now has another.

The magnitude of the problem before the African translator should not be hidden behind the argument that the lack of equivalents is a problem that exists between all languages. The African translator is historically handicapped – a handicap that he or she must overcome by engaging his or her language with the rest of the world and with existing and growing knowledge in all its complexities.

This will, and it is nothing if it is not first a will to do justice by African languages, is a political act.

## THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATING INTER-AFRICAN LANGUAGES

For most peoples, the idea that you can have a national literature expressed in the former colonizer's language is strange to say the least. The Chinese would laugh at

the idea of a national literature in Japanese. But not only has the idea of a national literature in English or French been accepted, writing in an African language is actively resisted. Therefore, an African translator translating into an African language has to fight the same battles and counter the same arguments as a writer who is writing in an African language. That is – translating into an African language makes for a small market (in which case there would be no Danish or Swedish literature) with not enough literate readers (though one is more likely to be able to read in his or her language than English), promotes ethnic chauvinism while the European language promotes national reconciliation (if one forgets colonialism and global imperialism) – and the arguments continue. Translating between African languages ironically requires fewer resources since most Africans speak more than two languages. African translation as a literary field will not lack for candidates.

This resistance to working in African languages has an immediate and pragmatic problem. In a continent that intellectually mimics Europe, a translator who takes the leap might find a publisher who is willing to publish a translated work of Shakespeare or Wordsworth, itself an important accomplishment. But a translation from, let's say, a text in Spanish, Hindi or Chinese, into Kiswahili or Kikuyu will not find a publisher. Neither will the African translator translating between two African languages. Masizi Kunene's poetry will not exist in Yoruba for example, because no publisher will touch such a translation. By the same token there is very little literary criticism being produced in African languages. Thus the writer, the critic, the reader and the publisher, the educational and political system are all complicit in the atrophy of African languages. Yet just like the few writers, literary critics, publishers and starved readers who are slowly expanding the playing field for African languages, the translator simply has to jump in with both feet. The translator makes possible what the African writer or critic cannot. The translator makes possible a conversation between two, three or more African languages.

Translating between African languages involves concerns that are shared by all translators. But these concerns become peculiar by virtue of taking different shades depending on which of the three political acts (from, to and inter-African languages) of translating the African translator engages in. One concern might diminish while another is heightened. In order to highlight the often glossed over differences let us look at how these principles interact with one another in the translating of Shaban Robert's poem, *Titi La Mama* from

Kiswahili into English, and Kiswahili into Gikuyu, and Langston Hugh's *A Dream Deferred* from English into Gikuyu. These two poems, short, deceptively simple, accessible and aesthetically beautiful are widely popular in their respective orbits. Following the analysis are the original poems and their translations as well as literal translations (trots).

#### TRANSLATING THREE WAYS – KISWAHILI INTO GIKUYU AND ENGLISH INTO GIKUYU AND KISWAHILI INTO ENGLISH

A superficial separation between the social context that produces the poem (what for the duration of this essay I will call the *under-text*) and the language and words contained in the text, allows us to tease out the differences in the three instances of African translation outlined at the beginning. A poem does not exist in and of itself; the times the poem is written in and the times in which the poem is read give meaning to it. Therefore the culture that produces the poem and the culture into which the poem is translated will influence the choices the translator makes. Anyone in the United States reading Langston Hugh's *Dream Deferred* today will not help but hear echoes of Martin Luther King Junior's *I have A Dream* Speech even though the speech was given thirty or so years after the poem was written. The poem and the speech have become intertwined in a common tapestry of continuing African American marginalization – the continued deferment of freedom. Time has added another layer of complexity to the poem. Time and space are therefore factors that will influence the choices the translator makes.

In a move therefore that appears counter-intuitive, to translate the poem into Gikuyu the translator does not need Vladimir Nabokov's mountain of footnotes to carry the history and social context in which the poem was written. The poem resonates with the same collective tragedy in Gikuyu. The trials and tribulations of Kenyans with colonialism and flag independence make the poem immediately accessible. Suffering has made Gikuyu and African American cultures mutually intelligible. However, the same poem perhaps in a European language where the social context is not living, where African/African American suffering isn't part of that society's undercurrent, footnotes might be needed in order for the reader to grasp or tap into the full tragedy of the poem.

But what happens to the *under-text*, the living history of *Titi La Mama* when I translate it from Kiswahili into Gikuyu? A contemporary poem in that it was written in the 1960's, the main worry for the translator becomes the

questions of sound. Because both languages live next to each other, are close together in the Bantu family of languages, the task of the African translator will have more to do with the internal workings of the poems as opposed to the under-text that informs the original. An example will suffice: When translating into English the word *mbwa* (in the context of the poem meaning female dog) becomes *sow*. The translator does not want the word *bitch*, the correct translation, for obvious reasons. In the Kiswahili original, dog is used to show that even in the lowliest and dirtiest of animals, puppies will love the mother's milk. But in an English context, where dogs are loved as pets, the contrast loses its power. But when translating the poem into Gikuyu, *mbwa* becomes *ngui*, a terrible insult in Gikuyu thus keeping the shock in the contrast alive.

In the Gikuyu translation of the Kiswahili poem, the under-text, much like in the case of *A Dream Deferred*, is not lost. People who have not lost a language might not grasp the extent of the tragedy. A culture that is imperialist will not allow the poem in without wanting to ingest it and spit out a translation that has at least been made palatable. The English language resists the Kiswahili poem because the historical context is lost, because it can only be impervious to it. But the poem in the original language does not need to mention colonialism, or the civilizing missions that denigrated African cultures, that loved the caricatures it produced; the poem's edifice is this history itself.

A good Gikuyu translation will not need to hit the reader over the head with living history, colonialism and the psychosis of it, the psychosis of loving someone else's mother is the template. Immediately I mention language and mother, a history of loss has been tapped into. Thus the title of the Gikuyu translation, *Iriaria Ma itu* (the milk of our truth and at the same time my mother's milk), is a choice made purely because *RunyondorwaNyina/Maitu* (A/My Mother's breast) sounds terrible even when it conveys the same meaning as *Titi La Mama*. The English translation, in order to carry the politics, has to do more work though. Hence the title changes from *A Mother's Breast* to *Kiswahili* in order to hint at the politics of language. Words like *salve* and *wounds* are used to try and contain this history. Because history has done this work for it, the poem can go on to do other things, like create beauty through intricate sound patterns.

In translating the poem from Kiswahili into English, sound is sacrificed for meaning. However, because both Kiswahili and Gikuyu share the same concord noun system, alliteration, cacophony or other manipulations of sound are easy to maintain. In sound, the Gikuyu translation is more faithful than the English translation. In fact once the Kiswahili original establishes the history

of colonialism and the politics of language, it runs on the beauty of sound. In this regard, it is not a cerebral poem, you do not think its meaning, you hear it first. From the very start, with the high conga sounds of *Titi la mama litamuhata*, beauty is being woven through sound.

It is this beauty that the English version loses with the awkward but necessary – *A mother's breast*. The Gikuyu translation to the English ear might sound harsh, perhaps even to the Kiswahili ear but standing alone, it does weave intricate sounds as a result of the linguistic features that flow with Kiswahili – such as concord noun agreements. In both languages, the linguistic features contribute to the overall meaning of the poem – beauty and intricacy of human language.

There are other things that the Gikuyu translation can do better than the English translation – it can borrow and easily own Kiswahili words. The Gikuyu word for perfume is *magutamagutaririka* which would be too heavy for this translation. But there is another Gikuyu word that was borrowed from Kiswahili which is commonly used for perfume – *Maraci*. Kiswahili, because of the linguistic structure, lends itself more easily to being owned by Gikuyu.

Because the complexity of the poem lies in the under-text of a complex social world, and the words that are on the surface weave beauty through sound, translating in English risks either fossilizing the poem or infantilizing it. In short translating the words on their surface without translating the roots infantilizes the poem. There is a difference here between simplicity and regressing the poem. Both poems, *Titi La Mama* and *A Dream Deferred* run on simplicity – the words are easily accessible, the images are practically everyday. But they are also very complex poems that use the familiar to defamiliarize the reader into looking at the world anew. Yet in the English translation, the following line – *A mother's breast is the sweetest, a sow it may be* – risks becoming something other than the first line in the Kiswahili original. In the Gikuyu translation of *Titi La Mama*, even if some of the grace is inevitably lost, the complexity is not lost. Whereas the Hughes poem does not lose its grace of simplicity or get transposed into another historical era when translated into Gikuyu because it finds an equally complex if different social under-text, *Titi La Mama's* translations into English border on being terrible – some use *Thou* and *Thee* when addressing the language thus turning the poem into a biblical relic.

The point here is not to suggest that the Kiswahili poem is not translatable into English – far from it. For the non-African English speaker, the poem stands on its own. It will have its own aesthetic and political beauties. The English translation does in some instances defamiliarize such a reader with ideas and concepts as “sow's breast”

or milk. By the same token it challenges the English reader to think about other languages and English itself. As it should be. Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales* against the high tides of Latin and French. English in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Century was the sow's milk, unwanted, bitter, disgusting, uncivilized to drink, but writers like Chaucer insisted that it was sweeter to the native speaker than French and Latin. English did not come into its own until Romanticism and even then it still had its own share of detractors who wistfully looked back to the days of Latin and French.

The point then is not to value one kind of translation over another, or one language over another, which has indeed been the colonial project, but rather to value all languages through translations that flow freely from and into multiple languages. This also calls for welcoming translation theories that recognize a common humanity. Consequently such theories will recognize the universality and peculiarities of the translator's task depending on the languages in conversation.

### THE TASK OF THE AFRICAN TRANSLATOR

The Task of the African Translator, which is to contribute to the growth of African languages, at minimum, can therefore be seen as setting out to accomplish the following:

- i) Translating between African languages. In translating inter-African languages, there must be a recognition that different African languages will call for different approaches. In addition to universal questions such as those of equivalence and compensation, there will be other sets of questions depending on how close, linguistically and socially, the source language is to the target language.
- ii) Putting African Languages in conversation with other languages that offer a historical and political solidarity, e.g. Spanish. There is no reason why Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* should not be translated into Kiswahili or Gikuyu.
- iii) Translating from European languages into African languages – so that other forms of knowledge are stored and accessed in an African language. There is of course a crucial point here which relates to how we choose what to translate and what not to translate. That which the United States calls its best works of literary imagination might be exclusive of literatures that are in solidarity with African literatures. Thus the

translator will translate different peoples' literatures including those of African Americans, Native Americans and Women writers.

- iv) Contributing to the growth of African Translation Theories. The African translator should while translating also consider how the choices he or she is making are applicable outside the work at hand – and how they can be systematized.

The act of translating African literature is a political act. The task of the African translator is therefore political.

#### Poems: Originals and Translated<sup>3</sup>

Titi la Mama  
Shaban Robert

Titi la mama litamu, hatalikiwa la mbwa,  
Kiswahili naazimu, sifayoiliyofumbwa,  
Kwawasiokufahamu, niimbeilivyokubwa,  
Tokakamamlizamu, funikapalipozibwa,  
Titile mama litamu, jinginehalishihamu.

Lughayanguyautoto, hatasasanimekua,  
Tanguulimimzito, sasakusemanajua,  
Ni sawanamanukato, moyonimwangunapua,  
Pori baharinamto, napitanikitumia,  
Titile mama litamu, jinginehalishihamu.

### KISWAHILI

A Mother's breast is sweet to her young. Even a sow's!  
My mother-tongue I declare - I will sing of your  
brightness  
to the blind and those who have long forgotten you.  
Mother, feed, flow, salve our wounds and unclog our  
choking veins.

*A mother's breast is sweet, another simply will not fulfill*

Mother, as a child my tongue was weighed down. Ñow  
that I can speak I see you were all around me, a  
perfume  
to my heart and senses. Whether through the  
wilderness  
the river Nile or the Indian ocean - Mother, you carry  
me across.

*My mother's breast is sweet, another won't satisfy my  
longing*

**IRIARAMAITU**

Runyondorwamaiturwi-cama. Onarwirwangui  
 Githwerinindatua, ndoigakurimatarakuririkana  
 nguinauriauwegamuhithe, uriawimunene  
 Maitutiririka, umatarimukihauhaturekuriakuhingikite  
 Runyondorwamaitu,  
 rwimuriyorungirutininagathuti

Kumarurimirwakwarwiruritondimwana, nginyagiariu  
 ndakurirenakwarianinjui, ruthiomirwakwanita  
 maracimagicanuka kana magitararikangoroini  
 Weruini kana gatagatikairia, ningithagioni we.  
 Runyondorwamaiturwimuriyo,  
 rungirutingininathuti

**A DREAM DEFERRED**

Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
 like a raisin in the sun?  
 Or fester like a sore—  
 And then run?  
 Does it stink like rotten meat?  
 Or crust and sugar over—  
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
 like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

MwihokoWaGwitiriria

Mwihokoungiitererithiori  
 Ni kiigikikaga?

No kumanakugoda  
 tathaburiyuaini?

Kana nikuho ta kironda  
 nginyaukoimiamahira?

Utararikaga ta nyamabuthu

Kana umagakuma  
 Ta ngogoyonduru?

Kana mwihokouhohaga  
 Ta murigomuritu?

Kana, niututhukaga?

**KISWAHILI/GIKUYU/ENGLISH TROTS:  
 MOTHER'S BREAST AND A DREAM DEFERRED**

*Titi la Mama*  
*Runyodorwanyina*  
*A mother's breast*

Titi la mama litamu, hatalikiwa la mbwa,  
 Runyondo rwanyinarwi-camaonarwirwangui  
 Breast of mother is sweet even if a dog's

Kiswahili naazimu, sifayoiliyofumbwa,  
 Githwerinindatuawegawakumuhithe  
 Kiswahili I have decided wellness yours hidden

Kwawasiokufahamu, niimbeilivyokubwa,  
 Kurimatarakuririkana, nguinaurawimunene  
 To those not remember you sing how it is big

Tokakamamlizamu, funikapalipozibwa,  
 Uma tarimukihakunikakuriakuhithe  
 Come like vein close/undo where it is covered

Titile mama litamu, Jinginehalishiamu.  
 Runyondorwanyinarwimuriyorungirutininagathuti  
 Breast of mother is sweet another does not finish desire

Lughayanguyautoto, hatasanimekua,  
 Ruthiomirwakwandimwanaonariundimukuru  
 Language mine of child even now I am old

Tanguulimimzito, sasakusemanajua,  
 Kumarurimiruritoriukwarianinjui  
 Since tongue heavy now speak I know

Ni sawanamanukato, moyonimwanganapua,  
 Ni unduumwe/nangoroiniyakwanamaniuru  
 Same as perfume heart in mine and nose

Pori baharinamto, napitanikitumia,  
 Weruini kana mayini, niingagangikuhuthira  
 In the wilderness or ocean I cross using you

Titile mama litamu, jinginehalishihamu.  
Runyondorwanyinarwimuriyorungirutininagahamu  
Mothers breast is sweet another does not finish longing

A Dream Deferred  
MwihokoWaGwitiririo

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Nikiigikikagawikiroto/mwihokomurarie/mwitiririi

Does it dry up  
Ni kumaumaga

like a raisin in the sun?  
tathabiburiyuaini?

Or fester like a sore—  
Kana nikuhoha ta kironda

And then run?  
Arabugigateg'era?

Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Kana gitararikaga ta nyamabuthu?

Or crust and sugar over—  
Kana kiumagakuma

like a syrupy sweet?  
Ta ngogoyonduru

Maybe it just sags  
Kana kihohaga

like a heavy load.  
Ta murigomuritu

Or does it explode?  
Kana nigituthukaga?

## NOTES

- \* An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Getting Heard: (Re)claiming Performance Space in Kenya* ed. KimaniNjogu, Nairobi: Twaweza Communications, 2008.
1. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000. 15-23.
  2. John Dryden, "Preface to *Ovid's Epistles*." *The Translation Studies Reader*. Ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge, 2000. 144-159.
  3. All translations by Mukoma Wa Ngugi

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