

Translation and Adaptation of Kiswahili Classics: Lessons in Domestication and Experimentation

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Abstract

The translation of the classical 18th and 19th century Swahili poetry into English was an important step in disseminating this art-form to a global audience way beyond the African continent. Not only did this translation and adaptation of the classical poetry lead to the translation of Swahili prose in the early 20th century but it also offered useful insights into the nature of Swahili poetry in general. But, what was the criteria used in selecting the poetry works to be translated? The paper which is guided by the tenets of the Equivalence theory as expounded by Xie (2014) briefly looks at the major arguments for and against this theory in achieving meaning equivalence between SL and TL. In doing this, it explores the style and language of a number of classical Swahili poems and concludes that although it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a perfect equivalence in translating a rigid form such as poetry, varieties in translations are an asset rather than a liability. Secondly, since poetry is a means of expressing personal or national ideology, feelings and attitudes, its translation acts as a bridging tool through which different cultures can get closer. This is best exemplified in case of the translated Swahili classical poetry.

Key Words: Translation, Adaptation, Equivalence, Poetry

Introduction

A number of scholars have set out to translate, comment on or critique the themes and style of classical Swahili. The most prominent among these include Steere (1870), Werner (1926), Hichens (1939), (1962), Greenville (1962), Knappert (1969), Chiraghdin (1969), Allen (1971), and (1971), Nabahany (1972), Abdulaziz (1979) Mbele (1986), Shariff (1991), and Ridhiwani (1997). These and other similar works provide a most useful doorway into the nature of Swahili classical poetry. Secondly, the transliteration and translation of the texts of this poetry including the variation in the wording, pose an interesting aspect of study for

students and researchers in this field. Thus, the overall objective of this paper is threefold to comment on the cultural and literary nature of classical Swahili poetry, to highlight the challenges that the translators of this archaic form of Swahili poetry went through and to point out the salient lessons that can be drawn therein as far as the art and science of literary translation is concerned.

To date, one of the most informative studies on the subject of literary translation and adaptation is the book by R. Wardslaugh (1987) entitled, **Languages in Competition, Dominance, Diversity and Decline**. It is in this text that, a brief but powerful and most inclusive definition of translation is offered in these words:

Translation is functional interpretation, improvement, and recreation of an original text, all rolled into one (p.277).

Since the translation of the earliest recorded Kiswahili literary texts in the 18th century beginning with **Hamziya** in 1748, many other classical texts have been transliterated and translated mainly from Arabic into either English or Swahili. Some of the mostly widely read among these include, **Utendi wa Fumo Liyongo**, **Takhmisa ya Liyongo**, **Utendi wa Al-inkishaf**, **Utendi wa Mwanakupona** and **Ushairi wa Muyaka**. These classics and a number of others, represent a literary tradition that has bequeathed the 20th century Swahili literature a rich content and stylistic diversity. As it will be argued later, modern Swahili poetry owes a lot to the pre-twentieth century classics. This is evident in the works by early 20th century like Mohamed Kijumwa, a prominent poet from Lamu in Kenya's North Coast who died around 1930, Shaaban Robert, regarded as the father of modern Kiswahili poetry and novel as well as the poetry of Mathias Mnyampala, a famous non-Muslim Swahili poet, to mention but a few examples.

Not only did these 20th century poets lift wholesale the prosodic features of the pre-twentieth poetry but also fused religious and secular themes in their compositions. It is important to note that classical Swahili poetry was mainly confined among a small group of coastal-based, indigenous, largely Muslim Swahili poets. However, the translation of this poetry into English and Kiswahili from mid 19th century, first by the Western Christian Missionaries and later on by Swahili scholars, greatly helped to disseminate the literary form to up-country regions and, thus, popularized composition and formal study of this art-form. This argument is well orchestrated by a prominent Kiswahili poet, E. Kezilahabi who has also attempted to translate his own poems from English into Kiswahili (see Kezilahabi 1974:xiv). Thus, the translation of the classical poetry from Kiswahili original into English was an important channel of globalizing it by making it available to a much wider audience.

Historical and Cultural Influence of the Pre-20th Century Swahili Texts

Swahili literature is a milieu of African traditional values as well as the values of the Islamic and Oriental cultures. This synthesis of historical and social experience has been interwoven in the various poetic and prosaic texts that have over the centuries been translated from the Arabic and Islamic traditions into Kiswahili. Examples of epics with such traditions include *Hamziya* and *Takhamisi ya Liyongo*. These external literary and cultural values have thus become a mediator in the modern Swahili literary production, as Allen (1971) observes. In his opinion, any meaningful translation of classical texts basically calls for deep knowledge of the Arabic language in which the poetry was originally written.

After the initial translation and adaptation of the ancient Swahili classics listed above, the next stage saw the tradition of original and Arabic classics that was ushered in by the advent of the British and German missionaries from around 1840's. This historical epoch is closely connected with the activities of Christian missionaries and islamised Swahili scholars. Foremost among these were Dr L. Krapf and Rev John Rebmann of the Church missionary Society based at Rabai, near Mombasa and Bishop E. Steere of the University Mission to Central Africa based in Zanzibar. Dr Krapf and Rev Rebman are credited with translating a chunk of literary material into Kiswahili that were first published in the **American Journal of Oriental Studies** in 1890s and later in Marcel Spandonck (1965). Examples here include Charles Kingsley's **Heroes of Greek Fairy Tales for My Children** (1889) and **Aesop Tales** translated in 1890. These and other books with a religious inclination were translated around this time and soon became household names throughout East Africa as many people read them in English as well as Kiswahili in and out of school. The translations were mainly done by missionary educators and colonial officers.

A number of other titles in this category and which were specifically selected for translation into Kiswahili because of the need to impart Western Christian values of submission to authority, obedience to rule of law and meekness in embracing the new faith and abandoning the traditional African way of life were published. These include, **King Solomon's Mines**, **Kipling's Mowgli Stories** (1929), **Arabian Nights**, **Stevenson's, Treasure Island** (1929), **Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves**, John Bunyan's **Pilgrim Progress** (1927), **The Coral Island**, **Cinderella**, **Lewis Carroll's Alice in the Wonderland**, **Robinson Crusoe**, and Swift's **Gulliver's Travels** to mention but a few examples. The urgency to spread the European and other socio-cultural values inherent in these books edged the translators to shorten the stories and published abridged versions of the English originals. Needless to add here, all the titles were quickly absorbed into the official school curriculum as required reading for all the African schools in East Africa. Some of these popular story books were later translated into many local Kenyan languages.

But in which way have the classics translated into Kiswahili been used to enrich modern Kiswahili literature? Indeed, what motivated their translation and on what criteria were the texts selected for translation? It is important to note that translation of any literary text is an important way of not only making it available to a wider readership but also immortalizing the original work. So what “eternal” and global lessons inspired literary artists of the last three to four centuries to carefully select which poetic classics to translate into English and Kiswahili? Answers to these and other related questions do not have to be sought from far away from the introductions and forwards of these texts.

According to the comments by the translators and critics of their works, each of texts he selected had a kind of literary uniqueness that set it apart from the rest, thus giving it more academic and historical value above the others. It is these sort of characteristics that explain the urge behind their translation, transliteration and adaptation. Apart from the Swahili poets of the Northern Kenya’s coast whose works were transliterated from the Arabic scripture before being translated into Kiswahili, Muyaka wa Muhaji’s poetry was originally written in Swahili Script-Arabic and in Kimvita dialect, the language of Mombasa. In his detailed forward to his authoritative study in which he translates Muyaka’s poetry from Kiswahili into English, Mohamed Abdulaziz has the following to say on the influence of Muyaka’s poetry.

He wrote on almost all subjects within the cultural and political experience of his community, making his writing an important record of the cultural life of Mombasa in the first half of the nineteenth century. His verses abound in metaphor and many of his poetic statements have now become proverbial. Some of the archaic lexical and tense patterns now known in Swahili are to be found in verses of Muyaka, and his work is certainly one of the most important single sources for the study of linguistic literary development of the Swahili language (1979: ix).

In this justification for the choice to study and translate Muyaka’s 18th and 19th century poetry, Abdulaziz emphasizes the agency of the poetry as a medium of cultural and political history of Kenya’s north coast at the time of the life of the poet (1777-1840), particularly, the first half of the 19th century. Secondly, at the literary level, the critic and translator observes that Muyaka’s work exhibits unique literary and linguistic creativity and innovativeness which did not only set new standards in the field but also became a yardstick for later poets to evaluate their own poetic compositions. This canon setting aspect must have been one of the major points of attraction for the translator and critic.

Abdulaziz goes further to establish the ground-breaking nature of Muyaka’s poetry by isolating the personal artistic characteristics of the poet that come to bear on his work. These include his deep and well-balanced sense of humour, his love

for satire, his ability to coin and forge witty propaganda and the commitment and attachment that he had in the contemporary and topical issues of his society. This “secular” nature of the poetry, sets it apart from the work of many of Muyaka’s contemporaries who devoted the bigger part of their poetry to religious and related themes. (Ibid)

Theoretical Underpinning of Poetry Translations

How can we define “Translation?” Translator David Bellos’s way of putting it is that translation “provides for some community an acceptable match for an utterance made in a foreign tongue” (2011: 283). An acceptable translation is one that is adequate—one that satisfies sufficiently. But what are the criteria that need to be met in order to elicit this satisfaction? A match is achieved when an equivalence between the two texts is attained. But words, phrases or sentences can have multiple-layer. How do we find their target-language equivalents? Does *equivalence* or *resemblance* exist?

Views on Resemblance in Translation

There are two divergent views on the need to achieve resemblance in translation of poetry, especially, translation between two languages which are linguistically and culturally different, like English and Kiswahili. The two views are summarized by Xie (2014) as follows:

1. Since it is difficult, if not impossible to translate poetry given its rigid style, form and unique diction, it is pointless to attempt to do so.
2. Variety of translated versions in poetry are not a liability but rather an asset in the creative literary process and studies.

However, the importance of achieving a close or perfect resemblance between the SL and TL versions in translation has been discredited in the recent past. The following views have been advanced for this:

- Although resemblance is good, it is not necessary condition for an effective translation.
- Resemblance is necessary but unattainable;
- Resemblance loses its critical force with the passage of time;
- Resemblance is not an aesthetic quality and therefore irrelevant to the quality of the translation;
- There is no clear guide as to what constituted resemblance; therefore it cannot be invoked as a criterion;
- Resemblance can never be a sufficient condition for judging the quality of translation.

Relevance Theory and Translation of Swahili Poetry

An examination of translated classical Swahili poetry indicates that the translation is aimed, not merely at achieving a resemblance between the original SL English or Arabic and Kiswahili TL versions, but rather at attaining a semantic and pragmatic relevance between those languages and cultures. More importantly, under the relevance approach, translators endeavour to harness the communicative power of translation. According to Gutt (1991), poetry translators pay special attention to the interpretation of the original text. Inference of meaning is strictly guided by adherence to the letter and the spirit of the text and context (Guijarro 1998).

The above position is strongly supported by Rose (1981) as she observes that, “The translator of poetry must be fluent in and sensitive to the source language; he must know the source language's cultural matrices, its etymologies, syntax, and grammar, as well as its poetic tradition. He must culturally and politically identify himself wholeheartedly with the original poet. He must penetrate the exteriority of the original text and sensitively consider the expectations and sensibilities of the poetic tradition of the target language. Thus, the most successful translators of poetry are frequently those who happen to be bilingual and bicultural and, above all, poets in the target Language” (p. 136)

This theoretical perspective is relevant in the study of the challenges of translation of Kiswahili poetry into English; from Arabic into Kiswahili and English and so forth. As pointed out above, the cultural and linguistic divergence between these languages points to the difficulty of achieving a high level of resemblance in the translations. This is borne out by the fact that most of the pre-20th Century Swahili poetry had to be transliterated from the original Arabic script into Swahili-Arabic script and later into the Roman script. This process, needless to stress, posed a number of challenges too.

Challenge of Translating the Puns, Archaic and Idiomatic Language

One important aspect of Muyaka's poetry that Abdulaziz successfully grapples with in his translation from the original Kimvita dialect into English is the use of archaic forms such as the Past Perfect Marker **-le**, which is also variably used by Muyaka as marker of far off distance, and the adverbial marker **-to**. Here are a few examples:

1. *Afileowalifile... (He who is dead, is dead and gone... (p 25.) (past tense)*
2. “....*au mwende mwendo wa kule (au kue)(p.6(far off)*
3. *...kitaka mjuato... (p. 62)*

The use of the morpheme **-le** in poetry is also well discussed in A. Abed's seminal work, **Sheria za Kutunga Mashairi** (1965:17)

Puns

Further usages in the Swahili classical poetry that are challenging to a translator include use of puns and polysemic words in a poem or stanza with the word denoting a different meaning on each line where it appears in the initial position. Apart from serving as a way of emphasis or poetic stress, the poet employed these words just to show off his poetic genius. Here are some examples in Muyaka's work:

Oa (p.98), *Sichi*, 184, *Kimya*, (p.226) , *Jinga* (186)

In the above poems, the key words are used in different meanings as shown below:

Oa: see, look at, marry, swim.

Sichi : this, vinegar, I am scared.

Jinga: a big firebrand, a fool, someone's name.

Idioms

Finally, there is the use of proverbs and proverbial sayings, some of which could be assumed to be the poet's own coinages (See Abdulaziz 1979). Although these proverbial statements serve to add colour and elegance to the poetic composition, they could prove to be a hard nut to crack for a translator without the necessary linguistic and cultural competence in Kimvita dialect in particular and Kiswahili cultural environment in general.

Here are examples of such proverbs:

1. *Msema pweke hakosi.* (p.202)
2. *Mtenda jambo asiche ni kama asiyetenda.* (p.204)
3. *Hindi ndiko kwenyi nguo na wendao uchi wako.* (p.166)
4. *Mwenda mbizi nti kavu hutunua usowe.* (p.170)
5. *Kifo kikikimbizwa funza chawekwa wapi.* (p. 172) (OWN)
6. *Mjenga nyumba halele yulele kiambizoni.* (p.124) (OWN)
7. *Kiwi heri kukipata kuliko kukikosa kamwe.* (p.214)
8. *Kuku wa mkata hatagi na akitaga haangui.* (p.218)
9. *Ufunikiwap okawa...* (p.230)
10. *Majuto hujakinyume* (p.222)
11. *Asiyeona kwa yeye haoni hata akionywa* (p.232)
12. *Wambili havai moja na wa moja havai mbili.* (p.256)
13. *Muata kiwi hanachonachemakimpotele.* (p. 258)

Muyaka's use of puns and allusions reaches its peak in such poems as, "*Licha kifupa kifupi*" (p.4) (Let alone, a lean piece of meat), in which, according to Abdulaziz, the use of the words, *kifupa* (small bone) and *nundu* (lamb) *nakiuno* (waist) could refer to a slender lady or a piece of lean meat). The poet's ability to play off meanings of words as puns or allusions to both well-known events or

personal experiences present a challenge to readers, critics or translator. Other famous poems of Muyaka that fall into this category of illusionary compositions include:

1. *Mwandani wako mwandani* (p.62)
2. *Kumbifu lambile witi* (p.85/151)
3. *Mke wa Risasi* (p.300)
4. *Wangachukua mashoka* P.310)

As a translator, to tackle the challenge of hidden meaning in Muyaka's idiomatic language, Abdulaziz employs both semantic as well as literary techniques. Here is an example:

Muyaka: Mahabanusuwakiya, yakipunguahuwaje?

Abdulaziz: What can be left when a mere half ounce of love grows less?(p.304)

The clause, when a mere half ounce of love is here translated literally.

Challenges of Diction and Style of the Classical Swahili Poetry

The above texts translated into Kiswahili in the 19th and 20th centuries discussed above were purposefully picked to meet the desired goal of imparting certain cultural content regarded as fundamental to enhance and entrench the European and Christian civilization ushered in by the British missionaries and followed by launching of the British colonial government. This carefully orchestrated cultural literary experimentation was carried out in a variety of ways employed in translating the texts into Kiswahili. Some of the devices used are:

(a) Poetic Diction: Allusions

According to Nowottny (1965), diction means the choice of individual words as bearers of connotative as well as emotional meanings and how these meanings fit in the roles assigned by the poet in the poem. This fact, therefore, calls for careful focus by the translator to digest and connect each word and its meaning as intended in the original language. Both the syntax and the meaning of the words in the stanza or entire poem must be in harmony. For instance, in the following example, the translator indicates, he is also aware of the socio-cultural and historical context of the poem:

Kiswahili

Kumbifu lambile witi, "Kimbelembele waume."

Mja mwanzo hajuti, majuto huja kinyume.

Mvundat'i ni mwanat'i, mgenimzompime

Yu utukuniMgwame, huzakapukwamiyaa. (p85)

Translation

The lifeless drooping frond of the coconut tree tells the green sprouting frond, "Rush on heedlessly you men."

A soul does not feel sorry at the beginning, remorse always comes at the end.

The destroyer of the motherland is the son of the soil himself; treat the foreigner with prudence.

Mgwame today is at the open market, selling matting bags for slips of palm leaf.

Familiarity with the Swahili language and, especially, Kimvita dialect used by the poet on one hand, and the social context of the poem is well manifested here. The translator had to dig up the history of the foolish King of Vumba and how he was dispossessed of his fortunes by his cunning friend, the King of Chundwa, as narrated by Taylor in his book, African Aphorisms. This helped him get to the context of the poem. As far as the diction of the poem is concerned, the translator makes an extra effort to add a number of descriptive words, perhaps in an effort to clarify the meaning. All the underlined words are examples of words introduced by the poet to intensify the meaning.

(b) Excisions and Contractions

This is a skill in which the translator deliberately shortens the original text by leaving out some words whose absence would not seriously alter the intended meaning in the target language (TL). Here is an example from William Hichens translation of the cognates found in plenty in S. S. Abdalla's *Al-Inkishafi*:

(i)

- Swahili Original: *Mato mafumbuzi wayafumbile* (Verse no. 35)
- English Translation: *Their eyes closed.*

In this translation, the translator leaves out the first concept of , "*macho yao mafumbuzi*" , which means simply, *their eyes that are normally wide-open....*

(ii)

- Swahili Original: *Nyumba zao mbake zikinawiri* (Verse no 37)
- English Translation: *Their Abodes glittering.*

The adjective *mbake* from verb *waka-* glitter- is not translated. In employing the double stress, the composer intends to emphasize that the houses , which were already brightly painted were then again, glittering in the coastal sun-shine. This idea is completely omitted in the English translation.

(iii)

Original Kiswahili: *...furaha na nyemi...*(Verse no 40)

English: *...happiness and laughter ...*

Again the poet uses these strong synonyms purely for emphasis. However, the translator misses the idea of joy or cheerfulness which the word *nyemi* carries.

Linguistic Simplification and Modernization in Translations

Commenting on the issue of transliterability between languages, in his famous collection of classical Swahili poetry entitled, *Tendi*, J.W.T. Allen (1971:7) observes that the translator's familiarity with the original language and culture is crucial. This is so mainly because, it is incumbent upon the translator and editor of a work of translation, especially from the classical era, to try to impart "modernization" and "simplification" on the translation. It is therefore interesting to examine how translators of this kind of written literature confronted this challenge. In this respect, one can only assume their competence in the Arabic language and script was adequate to enable them interpret the original meaning and adapt the work to an audience living in a different historical era. As far as "modernization" and simplification of classical Swahili poetry is concerned, this was carried out at two levels as below:

(a) Modernisation of Lexicon

As alluded to above, translation of classical Swahili poetry involved an effort to "modernize" archaic lexicon which are no longer heard in current days. This was possible only after the standardization of Kiswahili around 1930, a step that deemphasized use of non-standard dialects of Kiswahili in poetry going forward. Secondly, it also brought about the need to revise and modernize the old texts in the Swahili poetic tradition. Here are some examples from the later translation of *Utendi wa Mwanakupona* (composed around 1858) which was done by Shihabdin Chiraghdin and Ahamad Shekh Nabahany and published in 1987:

Old Kiamu/Kisiu Dialect	Modern (Standard Swahili)
<i>Mchachefu</i>	<i>kidogo, mchache</i>
<i>Sanati</i>	<i>miaka</i>
<i>Ulithiki</i>	<i>zingatia</i>
<i>Ziumbewasio change</i>	<i>viumbewasionidhamu</i>
<i>Akhitariwao</i>	<i>anapofariki</i>
<i>Mkongowee</i>	<i>mkaribishekwa furaha</i>
<i>Mkoo</i>	<i>mchafu</i>
<i>Kowa</i>	<i>kuoga</i>
<i>Makowa</i>	<i>bangili</i>
<i>Angusa</i>	<i>fanyahima</i>

Further similar examples of lexical modernization in translations can be found in *Tenzi tatu za Kale* edited by M. M. Mulokozi (1999). In this book, the author has revisited the style, theme and language of three classical Swahili poems: *Utenzi wa Liyongo*, *Al-Inkishafi* and *Utenzi wa Mwanakupona*. However, the task of modernization in the process of translation has not always been easy. For instance, in his translation of *Al-Inkishafi*, Hichens (1971) attempted to translate from archaic Kiswahili of the pre-20th century but instead of "modernizing" the lexicon,

he ended up using “old” English words that make the translated version sound like King James English of 15th to 17th centuries. Here is an example from that work:

Kiswahili Original

*Uwapi Ali bin Nasiri,
namuwamu wake, Abubakari,
Mwinyi, Idarusi, na Muhudhari?
Wendelepi kuwe mbonya ndiaye.*

Translation

*Ah! Wither gone is Ali bin Nasir
And he, his spouse's sire, Abubakar?
And Sharifs' Aidarus and Muhadhar?
Behold me that far path that they have ta'en!*

The old words underlined were introduced by the translator.

Old word

*Wither
Behold me
Ta'en*

modern word

*where
show me
taken (abbreviation of words was common in old English)*
(Hichens 1971: 85 and 86)

The Problem of Variation of Words in Different Versions

The other level where modernization and simplification was required while translating was in resolving textual variation between different versions of the text of the same poem. According to William Hichens, the translator and editor of the earliest versions of Al-Inkishafi epic, “The translation (of Swahili classic poetry) is presented as a literal one. That is to say, it renders the original Swahili as closely ward for ward or line for line as syntactical and idiomatic differences between two languages and the considerations of rhyme and meter permit” (35). In addition to ensuring conformity to the original in terms of style and form, this particular translator and transliterator made a special effort to simplify and modernize the archaic Swahili vocabulary in which the poetry is cast, in order, to enhance access to this otherwise unfamiliar dialect which would have presented a serious obstacle to the wider readership beyond the northern Kenya coast. The archaic words derive from the Kingozi, Kiamu and Kipate dialects while the rest have an Arabic origin. Although the two word forms do not change the original meaning, the translator should be careful not to alter the intended meaning. Here are some examples:

Original word	Mordern Kiswahili	English
<i>Himdi</i>	<i>sifa</i>	<i>praise</i>
<i>Tumwa</i>	<i>mtume</i>	<i>apostle</i>
<i>Nduye</i>	<i>nduguye</i>	<i>his brother</i>
<i>Nda</i>	<i>niya</i>	<i>is of</i>
<i>Kiza</i>	<i>giza</i>	<i>darkness</i>
<i>Hawa</i>	<i>tamaa</i>	<i>greed</i>
<i>Hela</i>	<i>hebu</i>	<i>just/let</i>
<i>Khitari</i>	<i>chagua</i>	<i>choose</i>
<i>Tatasi</i>	<i>matatizo</i>	<i>problems</i>
<i>Ombe</i>	<i>kina</i>	<i>depth</i>
<i>Mtapaa</i>	<i>mwanang'ombemkali</i>	<i>wild young bull</i>
<i>Ukishishiye</i>	<i>unachokishikilia</i>	<i>what you hold fast to</i>
<i>Enga</i>	<i>tazama/angalia</i>	<i>look/see</i>
<i>Kilabu</i>	<i>mbwa</i>	<i>dog</i>
<i>Mwako</i>	<i>joto</i>	<i>intense heat</i>
<i>Ndeo</i>	<i>kiburi</i>	<i>pride/impoliteness</i>
<i>Shitadi</i>	<i>zidi/stadi</i>	<i>set in/ be intense</i>
<i>Masindizi</i>	<i>usingizi</i>	<i>sleep</i>
<i>Zitefute</i>	<i>mashavu</i>	<i>cheeks</i>
<i>Juludi</i>	<i>ngozi</i>	<i>skin</i>
<i>Launi</i>	<i>rangi</i>	<i>skin colour</i>
<i>Kiradi</i>	<i>kima</i>	<i>monkey</i>
<i>Zipungu</i>	<i>vipungu</i>	<i>hawk</i>
<i>Tame</i>	<i>hame</i>	<i>ruin</i>
<i>Yande</i>	<i>yanje</i>	<i>external</i>

Variation did not just occur at the word level as discussed above but also at the phonetic level as well. This fact is well illustrated by a glance at the following examples drawn from two versions of the *Al-Inkishafi* poem . The meaning changing part of the word that varies is shown in bold.

Version by JWT Allen

Mdadisi (the inquisitive) v.2
Upetwe (...happened to you)
Akayatoa (He produced the)
Bidhaanandeo (goods and pride)
Walimfuteye (they wiped them out)
Zitelesufufu (many)

Version by William Hichens

mdarisi (the studious/ pious)
utetwe (You quarred with...)v.10
akayatua (he put them down)v.17
bidhaayandeo(goods of pride)v.23
ulimfutuye (you wiped him out)v.32
zitlesufufu (many lined up)v.39

Willful Alteration of Meaning

There are instances where the translator will deliberately or out of linguistic incompetence, alter the original meaning by being subjective or trying to mediate a new meaning. If not well controlled, this tendency could lead to diluted or incorrect translation. Examples from Hichens 1971:

Incorrect Translation

Pili (snakes or python)

Correct

chatu means python/s)

Pili is type of snake called **cobra**.

Swahili Original

1. *Moto ukitiwa mara huwaka.* *If cast therein, forthright thy limbs would sear*

Correct Translation

When lit, the fire ignites instantly.

2. *Bongo na wasakha limshushiye.*

Incorrect Translation

And foul from out thy skill, 'twould seethe thy brain.

Correct Translation

Brains and puss flow out freely.

Modernization Idiomatic Expressions

Mvi wa manaya

mshale wa mauti

spear of death

Kuliwabangu

kudanganyika

to be deceived

Dhiki za ziyara

taabu za mautini

grief in the grave

Translation of Cognates for Emphasis and Linguistic Beauty

Mashukiyo walishukiye

they descended the steep decent (death)

Hari na harara

scorching heat

Zehemu na zitumu

pain and suffering

Si shairi si malenga

not a poet nor a skilled ballad

Ndeo na takaburi

bragging and high self-opinion

Hauna dawamu hudumu nao

it doesn't last long, you won't live in it

Eternally

Pulikiza puliko

listen and pay attention (listen keenly)

(Allen 1971: 58-70)

Conclusion

Swahili language and poetry (and now prose) has had a long tradition of negotiating meaning with texts written originally in foreign languages or scripts (Mazrui 2007). One of such languages is Arabic from which Kiswahili has

obtained such classical poetic gems as *Hamziya* by Sayyid Idarus (1652), *Takmisa ya Liyongo* (1780) and *Al-Inkishafi* (1820), the last two works were authored by a famous Lamu poet, Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali Nasir. However, the fact that it is difficult to translate classical Swahili poetry creatively and with a high degree of accuracy is widely accepted in the Swahili scholarly circles. For instance, commenting on this aspect, Ali Mazrui observes;

Almost by definition, great poetry is untranslatable. Yet, paradoxically, only great poetry is worth attempting to translate. Since no two languages carry the same heritage of association and nuance, a poem inevitably loses a great deal of itself as it traverses a linguistic divide. But precisely because a work like *Al-Inkishafi* is a major achievement, the effort to make this poetry available in other tongues must continue (Allen, 1977:7).

Mazrui's view was supported by Nkosi (1981) when he stated thus:

... the attempt to wrestle from language the true meaning of the world that the writer seeks to depict, is always endless and incomplete, incomplete, because in describing the true lineaments of what he sees with his inner eye, language can only approximate the shapes and figures of his imagination. In this respect, therefore, the situation of the African writer is not unique. It is the same struggle with language (6)

Therefore, the struggle to translate poetry and do it effectively, continues.

Secondly, since poetry is a means of expressing personal or national ideology, feelings and attitudes, its translation acts as a bridging tool through which different cultures can get closer. This is well-exemplified by translation of the texts analysed here. Finally, as illustrated by the quality of the translation of the Swahili classical poetry discussed in this paper, it is true that, despite the difficulties which accompany poetry translation, excellent and acceptable translations of masterpieces of world poetry have been produced by a number of translators.

The objectives of this paper were to:

- Comment on the cultural and literary nature of classical Swahili poetry;
- Highlight the challenges that the translators of this archaic form of Swahili poetry went through and
- Point out the salient lessons that can be drawn therein as far as the art and science of literary translation is concerned.

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