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Faithful to the Original

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**theories and
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**The Afterlife of
Oyono's *Houseboy* in
the Swahili Schools
Market: To Be or
Not to Be Faithful to
the Original**

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AFRICA, THE WORLD'S SECOND-LARGEST CONTINENT, SPEAKS OVER TWO THOUSAND LANGUAGES BUT RARELY TRANSLATES ITSELF. IT IS NO wonder, therefore, that Ferdinand Oyono's francophone African classic *Une vie de boy* (1956), translated into at least twelve European and Asian languages, exists in only one African translation—that is, if we consider as non-African Oyono's original French and the English, Arabic, and Portuguese into which it was translated. Since 1963, when Obi Wali stated in his essay "The Dead End of African Literature" that African literature in English and French was "a clear contradiction, and a false proposition," like "Italian literature in Hausa" (14), the question of the language of African literature has animated debate. Two decades later, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o restated Wali's contention, asserting that European languages led to African "spiritual subjugation" (9). Ngũgĩ argued strongly that African literature should be written in African languages. On the other hand, Chinua Achebe defended European languages, maintaining that they could "carry the weight of African experience" (62).

But whatever the ability or inability of European languages, including Oyono's French, to carry the African experience, the Kenyans Raphael Kahaso and Nathan Mbwele relied on *Houseboy*, John Reed's 1966 English translation of *Une vie de boy*, to generate the novel's only African translation: the Swahili *Boi*, which appeared in 1976. The lingua franca of East and Central Africa, Swahili is a Bantu language spoken by over 150 million people in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Comoros, and parts of Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, and Mozambique.¹ But it was specifically students in postcolonial Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda that the publisher had in mind when commissioning the Swahili translation. The publisher felt that the theme of colonial brutality and oppression would interest school readers in newly independent East African nation-states, where memories of the colonial encounter were still fresh. There is no doubt that the anticipated school readership influenced not only the choice of texts for translation but also the manner

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of the translation. That the Swahili translation was based on Reed's English version and not on the original French text reflected an Africa-wide postcolonial anglophone-francophone split; it also increased the chance of deviation from Oyono's work.

This essay is a critique of Kahaso and Mbwele's translation. But to apprehend the import of their work, one should first examine the record of Swahili literary translation. The publication of *Boi* occurred at the high-water mark in this history, a history of contending hegemonic and counterhegemonic forces. Translation into Swahili of European and Arabic texts, with their Eurocentric and Arabocentric undertones, stood in opposition to the translation of African classics, which are informed by African ethos and ideologies. The emergence and evolution of modern Swahili literature are inextricably tied to translation, which in part invented it. Imam al-Busiri's four-hundred-verse Arabic panegyric *Hamziyya* is believed to be the first major literary work translated into Swahili. The archaism of the translation's Swahili lexicon indicates an origin not later than the seventeenth century (Mazrui 124). That Arabic was the first language from which literary works were translated into Swahili is a measure of Arabic hegemony at work. *Hamziyya* is religious and hagiographic, elevating the Prophet Muhammad and Islam, as did most of the Swahili poems that came after it.² Arab influence on Swahili classical and modern literature has been evident, to the present day, in the Swahili imitation of Arabic prosody, in the formulaic invocation of Allah at the start of a poem, and in the preponderance and celebration of an Arabic worldview in prose and poetry.³

Despite this early Arabic focus, Swahili literary translation from English increased during East Africa's Eurocolonial period. In the mid-1800s, Johann Krapf and Johann Rebmann, German Anglican missionaries, pioneered in translating portions of the Bible, which were soon followed by myriad

other translations of the Bible, in whole or in part (Mojola 511). A plethora of translations of missionary biblical pamphlets came with them. In harmony with the evangelical and Eurocentric zeitgeist, the missionaries also translated John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Aesop's fables (Mazrui 25, 124).

Swahili translations of English classics proliferated from the late 1920s to the 1940s, owing to the expansion of Anglocolonial education and its literacy project. The translators were almost exclusively British missionaries and colonial officers. Among the translated texts were Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and H. Rider Haggard's *Allan Quatermain* and *King Solomon's Mines*. The choice of texts for translation in East Africa was determined by colonial politics and power. Texts were selected not so much to fill gaps for Swahili readers as to inspire them to model their writing on the English classics and adopt the Eurocentric values these texts espoused. Translations elevated European power while reinforcing the childlike or inferior status of non-Europeans (Mazrui 124–26). As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi have cogently stated, translation has a "shameful history" of being complicit in colonial subjugation (5).

The colonial powers hoped that with this apprenticeship, the emerging literature of East Africa would look to Europe for inspiration and continue to copy the colonial model. Consequently, Swahili literature was not exempted from the European invention of modern African literature to which Simon Gikandi has alluded: the "colonial situation shaped what it meant to be an African writer, shaped the language of African writing, and over-determined the culture of letters in Africa" (54). Modern Swahili literature is thus substantially beholden to Europe for its form and content, and much of its lexicon is indebted to English.

If the Swahili translations of European and Arabic texts attempted to Europeanize or

Arabize Africans, counterhegemonic translations of African texts, emerging only after flag independence, worked to reclaim a receding African essence and restore pride in African values. That the translation of Oyono's *Houseboy* was commissioned by the local branch of Heinemann, a European company, to meet East African educational needs and cash in on the school market does not diminish the translation's role in decolonization as a counter to translations of European and Arabic texts. Economics operated dialectically with the decolonizing politics of the new African translations into Swahili. Among the texts rendered were Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and Wole Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero* (Mazrui 168). The publishers hoped that these works would provide steady school sales in Swahili, just as they had become required reading in East African English curricula.

The translation of African texts into Swahili may appear to have complemented the translation of European classics into that language. But the case was more like one of weeds (European texts) growing in the wheat (African texts). Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere, for example, translated Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* but no African texts, not even Achebe; he preferred translating an author who epitomized the Western canon and was apotheosized the world over.⁴

This dynamic is evident in the conflicting mix of economic, political, and ideological motivations for translation. United Kingdom-based companies such as Oxford University Press, Heinemann, Macmillan, and Evans Brothers dominated East African publishing, where schools were the principal market. As late as 1993 Macmillan reissued Swahili translations of numerous titles in its 1958 series *Tales to Remember*, for schools. As Alamin Mazrui notes, Macmillan hoped that the series would catch curriculum planners' attention and be included in school syllabi (126).

Thus, Swahili translations of European texts, whether undertaken by Africans or Europeans, competed with Swahili translations of African texts for a place in schools and in the hearts of Swahili readers. If the quest for the school market unified the two kinds of translations, it also marked a struggle between the Europeanization and Africanization of Swahili literature. The contest was between works that claimed universality and those claiming to provide an authentic African experience.

The many texts in Heinemann's influential African Writers Series were preoccupied with themes that resonated throughout Swahili-speaking postcolonial East Africa, such as the colonial encounter and cultural conflict between indigenous ways and (European) modernity. Thus, Swahili readers could identify with these originally non-Swahili works. It is in this context that the Nairobi-based Heinemann Educational Books (East Africa) commissioned the *Houseboy* translation.⁵ By thematizing the barbarity of colonial violence and exposing the underbelly of empire and the spuriousness of its civilizing mission, the novel was bound to appeal to newly independent East African readers, although it is set in colonial West African Cameroon.

If Nyerere as a leading African statesman and Tanzania's iconic first president was the most famous Swahili translator, Kahaso and Mbwele were all but unknown. They did not have the reputations of notable translators like Samuel Mushi, who translated Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Abdilatif Abdalla, a former Kenyan political prisoner who translated Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. At times, in fact, publishers commissioned inexperienced high school teachers as translators, believing that teachers knew best not only what kind of texts suited their students but also the vocabulary and other textual characteristics appropriate to school readers, who were largely prudish. Publishers' and translators' consid-

eration of audience also influenced the degree of fidelity to the original. A reading of *Houseboy* in Swahili demonstrates this tension.

Kahaso and Mbwele's text, a translation of a translation, mostly follows Reed's version, which is not always faithful to Oyono's French. For example, Toundi's "first exercise book" is rendered correctly as "daftari la kwanza" (*Houseboy* 7; *Boi* 6), "August" is Swahilized as "Agosti" (9; 6), and "My father, my benefactor, Father Gilbert is dead" is correctly translated as "Mfadhili wangu Padre Gilbert ameaga dunia" (16; 12), albeit with the omission of the affectionate expression "My father," which might have been *Baba Yangu*. *Ameaga dunia* is a Swahili euphemism that literally means "he has bid the world farewell," in contrast with the more direct *amekufa* ("he is dead"). Most linguists concur that the Swahili *padre* comes from Portuguese, brought by the Portuguese traders who arrived on the East African coast in the late fifteenth century.⁶ In the Swahili Catholic linguistic register, *padre* dominates; *Baba* for the religious title "Father" is seldom used, if at all.

The translators frequently deviate from Reed, but when translating sexually graphic passages such as Madame's reckless handling of her sanitary towels and used condoms, they remain largely faithful to the English instead of adopting a prudish approach for the sake of the targeted school readers. "Madame's sanitary towel" becomes "taulo iliyo-tumiwa na Bi-mkubwa kufutia sehemu zake za uke" ("the towel that Madame used to wipe her vagina"; 80; 69). They plainly translate what the innocent Toundi calls "little bags" as "vijifuko" or "vifuko" and "contraceptive" as "vifuko vya kumfanya mwanamke asipate mimba" ("little bags a woman uses to prevent pregnancy"; 86; 73). They are therefore unafraid to depict Madame's sex life in detail that might be jarring to students.

Boi, like any translation, contains mistakes or, more correctly, misinterpretations of Reed. The translators render "wives" as

"wanawake" (meaning "women" but with the negative connotation of having loose morals) instead of the more respectable *wake* (*Houseboy* 29; *Boi* 35). "Afternoon" becomes "mchana" ("daytime"; 100; 80) instead of *alasiri*; "lover" becomes "mzembe" ("lazy one"; 32; 36) instead of *mpenzi*; "constable" becomes "askari kanzu" ("undercover police officer"; 24; 30) instead of the Swahili borrowing *konstebo*; and "sentry" becomes "doria" ("being on the beat"; 25; 54) instead of *mlinzi* or *bawabu*. The translators render European or Christian names inconsistently. Toundi's Christian name, Joseph, is Swahilized variously as Yusufu (22) and Josefu (18), and Sophia becomes Sofia, while most European proper names—Vandermayer, Janopolous, Moreau, Martin—remain unchanged.

The title of the Swahili version is, of course, significant. By rendering Reed's *Houseboy* as *Boi*, Kahaso and Mbwele elide *house*. In Swahili *nyumba* ("house") would be redundant with *boi*, as in *nyumba boi* or *boi wa nyumba*. Yet *boi* is often modified.⁷ For instance, a "boy" who works in the garden is called *boi wa shamba* or *shamba boi*. But, regardless of specific usages, *boi* (or its plural, *maboi* [72]) accentuates Toundi's sense of inferiority and subservience and his tragic fate. The Swahili title contrasts with the erasure of any connotation of subservient boyhood in the title of another classic translation into Swahili: *Mchimba Migodi* ("Mine Digger"), a rendering of the South African writer Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, a Heinemann African Writers Series novel. Derived from English, *boi* refers to a male African domestic servant, of any age, working for white colonists. Swahili speakers adopted it as they communicated with their white masters in a broken Swahili that the linguist Wilfred Whiteley characterized as *Ki-settla*, the settlers' dialect (65). The power differential between African servants and white settler masters is epitomized in the term *boi*. Thus, the bitter colonial experience—the dehumanization of the

natives, especially the emasculation of native men—would have been recognized by Swahili readers the moment they saw the book's title. They would inevitably have seen the novel's Cameroonians as victims like themselves, as psychologically frozen in a juvenile state despite physiological maturity.⁸

Unmistakably racial in its essence, *boi* is applied only to a black person, so it underlines the black-white divide that suffuses Oyono's novel. For example, Baklu the washman cogently remarks, "There are two worlds . . . ours is a world of respect and mystery and magic. Their world brings everything into the daylight, even the things that weren't meant to be" (84). The Swahili version reads, "Hizi zetu ni dunia mbili tofauti kabisa. Moja ya weupe na nyingine ya watu weusi. Ile dunia yetu ni dunia ya heshima, maajabu, na uchawi. Ile yao, haina siri kwani hutoa jambo hata liwe ambalo halitazamiwi kutolewa" (69). In this passage as elsewhere in the translation, Kahaso and Mbwele reconfigure Reed's English. They begin with something close to "These are two different worlds. One is the world of the whites and the other the world of blacks." Where Reed is content with the anaphoric references "ours" and "their," Kahaso and Mbwele specify the antithetical racial categories "weupe" ("white") and "weusi" ("black"). This addition draws attention to skin pigmentation and foregrounds racial difference. The translators might have felt that sharpening and racializing Baklu's conception of the colonial chasm would appeal to recently decolonized East Africans. Yet the translation of Reed's "magic" as "uchawi" ("witchcraft"), which has negative connotations, undercuts Reed's intended elevation of the black world. "Uchawi" is incongruous with Baklu's anglophone estimation of his people's ethos, because the term evokes fear, hatred, and ill will. The more typical Swahili words for magic—*mwujiza* or *muujiza* and *mzungu*—stress its wondrous appeal and thus would have been better.⁹ Interest-

ingly, however, this poor translation of Reed's English drew the Swahili version closer to Oyono's French, in which Baklu speaks of his people's "sorcellerie" ("sorcery"; 123).

It is fascinating how the translators typically render Reed's often repeated group term "European" as *mzungu*. The word means "wonder" or "miracle," but Swahili speakers expanded its scope to include "European," apparently because of the wonders or miracles of Western modernity. Kahaso and Mbwele use *wazungu* and *weupe* ("white") interchangeably, with and without capitalization, throughout the text, although *wazungu*, emphasizing power rather than color or race, is more common in swahiliphone Africa as a reference to people of European descent.

Kiboko, a whip made from hippopotamus hide, is Kahaso and Mbwele's translation of Reed's regrettable South African term *sjambok*. The whip epitomizes the white-black relationship in Oyono's novel.¹⁰ With it the colonial officers (white and black) thrash Toundi and others ruthlessly. *Kiboko* therefore illuminates the differences between the two worlds, both as reflected in the translated text and as experienced in Swahili life. The word originally denoted the hippopotamus itself but became a synecdoche for the animal's hide, from which the *kiboko* was made for flogging errant Africans.

For many East African readers, *kiboko* probably calls to mind the Nairobi incident of 1906, a notorious colonial atrocity. Captain Ewart Grogan, a British colonialist, flogged three African rickshaw "boys" (actually men) before a crowd of three hundred white residents in Nairobi for allegedly behaving indecently toward his sister. Grogan had only listened to his sister's version of what happened. As it turned out, the rickshaw men had simply asked her and her companions to lean forward to make the task of pushing them uphill easier. Grogan's biographer and apologist Edward Paice writes, "A Mr. Cowlie was then called upon to tell the three Kikuyu

rickshaw men in their own tongue why they were being punished and to instruct them 'to tell their own natives that white men would not stand any impertinence to their women-folk.' The crowd cheered, and with that Grogan gave the first man twenty-five lashes with a *kiboko*" (215). The account goes on to tell how two other white colonialists helped him flog the other two rickshaw men. Citations like this make clear that the translators' lexical choices capture the colonial tyranny that Oyono intended.

But the Swahili translators sometimes blunt the linguistic directness of Reed's translation, which already, as David Chioni Moore argues in the introduction to this *PMLA* section, had blunted Oyono's French. For instance, sentences alluding to white clergymen's uttering obscenities, such as "He knew a few words of Ndjem but his pronunciation was so bad that the way he said them, they all had obscene meanings" (*Houseboy* 9) and "[Father Vandermyer] shouted obscenities all night" (16) are excluded from the Swahili. These omissions are not puzzling if one remembers the school audience that the translators and publisher had in mind. Showing high school readers that men of God, whether black or white, could be obscene was and perhaps still is objectionable. In East Africa, where the churches not only sponsor schools but also seek to influence national curricula, it would be unwise to upset the men of God. Given what Farouk Topan terms the "tendency of Swahili fiction to be didactic," students would be "protected" from the expletives of religious leaders (213). The sex life of Madame and other secular colonialists could be depicted because they did not represent the church. Of course, the complicity of clergymen in colonial oppression would be known to any keen reader of Oyono's novel, whether in the original French or in the English or Swahili translation.

Kahaso and Mbwele's deviations resulted from market forces and from the translators'

idiosyncratic grappling with contending priorities. In the Swahili afterlife of *Houseboy*, *Boi* is at once faithful and unfaithful to the original.¹¹ As David Damrosch, following Goethe, states, translations "serve as windows into foreign worlds," forming the bedrock of world literature (15). The exploration of this one translation, taking us from Cameroon to France to England and then to Kenya, exemplifies the interplay between publishing economics and postcolonial politics in the determination of what gets translated and how. This interplay not only dictates the direction translation takes from one language to another, it also shapes world literature.

NOTES

1. There is debate between linguists who claim that Swahili emerged as a hybrid language between Arabs and Bantu Africans and those who claim that it is truly African and existed before the arrival of the Arabs in the sixth century CE.
2. Mazrui analyzes the evolution of Swahili literature from religious and hagiographic to secular themes.
3. See Abdulaziz for an illuminating discussion of the dynamics of Swahili prosody and its Arabic antecedents.
4. Although Nyerere's translations of Shakespeare have been much lauded, some critics find them wanting and argue that his venerated position as founding father of Tanzania influenced their reputation. Faisa Fetejali Devji writes, "It is the authority of Nyerere himself that became the primary issue in the plays' reception" (181).
5. The firm shifted to full local ownership in 1992 and changed its name to East African Educational Publishers.
6. For a thorough discussion of Swahili words derived from Portuguese, see Chiraghdin and Mnyampala.
7. *Boi* as a name or nickname isn't uncommon in East Africa—a reminder of the bitter colonial experience.
8. Colonization in East Africa and particularly in Kenya was so acrimonious that it led to the famous Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s, which the historian Caroline Elkins would describe as "one of the bloodiest and most protracted wars of colonization fought in Britain's twentieth-century empire" (28).
9. Some may argue that "uchawi" was used for "magic" because fewer standard lexical items were available to Swahili translators in the mid-1970s. But this argument

would not hold. As early as 1939, Frederick Johnson's English-Swahili dictionary had entries for *mwujiza*.

10. Most linguists now agree that *kiboko* is originally a Bantu term, found in several Bantu languages (Ki-Rundi, Ki-Sumbwa, Ki-Tabwa, Ki-Guba, Ishi-Tonga, etc. [see Sacleux]), disputing Johnson's claim in 1939 that the word had Persian-Iranian roots.

11. The idea that translation is the afterlife of the original text is Walter Benjamin's (153).

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