

Serena Talento. 2021. *Framing Texts/Framing Social Spaces: Conceptualising Literary Translation in Three Centuries of Swahili Literature* (“Verbal Art and Documentary Text of African languages,” Volume 42). Köln: Rüdiger Köppe. 408 pages. Paperback. Euro 69.80. ISBN 978-3-89645-742-4.

Translation practices in the Swahili-speaking context have a long history and have been the object of growing interest on the part of several scholars who have carried out different linguistic, literary, cultural, and socio-political studies, including some articles by the author of this review. Among these publications, the volume *Framing Texts/Framing Social Spaces: Conceptualising Literary Translation in Three Centuries of Swahili Literature* by Serena Talento constitutes one of the few comprehensive studies, which stands out as innovative in the field on two levels. Firstly, it investigates the construction of a discourse on literary translation into Swahili from a sociological perspective in the following contexts: the pre-twentieth Swahili coast and colonial and post-independence East Africa. On the other level, it has a solid conceptual and methodological framework which draws on European sociological studies by critically and proactively applying these theories to the Swahili context. In so doing, this research contributes to the development of the study of translation in Africa and to the trend of decentring the international field of translation studies by bringing attention to an East African context and to an African-language textual tradition. The author, Serena Talento, has been Assistant Professor of Literatures in African Languages at the University of Bayreuth in Germany since 2015. There, she also gained her PhD after completing a MA at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” in Italy where she specialised in Swahili language and literature and translation studies. The present work is based on her PhD dissertation.

The book consists of the acknowledgements, an introduction by the author, five chapters, concluding remarks, four appendices and a rich bibliography. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical framework adopted in the study, which employs the sociological theories of Bourdieu, Casanova, Heilbron and Sapiro to develop a conceptual framework apt for understanding the dynamics of production and circulation of knowledge, culture, and arts in the Swahili-speaking world. Here, concepts such as *field*, *capital*, *habitus*, *doxa*, etc. have been carefully discussed as means to help contextualise and conceptualise the East African sociocultural dynamics, and they are consciously adapted to the East African context. Chapter 2 illustrates in detail the methodology adopted in this research, which comprises various elements, namely an examination of translation flows on a large scale, an investigation of the discourse on translation through the analysis of selected texts, para-texts and extra-texts, socio-historical facts, and a contextualisation of the literary field and of the roles and activities of translators. The following chapters are devoted to the three historical periods under

examination. Chapter 3 focuses on the pre-twentieth century literary space of the Swahili coast, an area of intercultural contacts at the centre of networks connecting the Indian Ocean world and the East African continental regions which also experienced Portuguese occupation. The author explores the construction of a discourse on translation by analysing a selection of Swahili classical poems composed in the stanzaic metres *utendi/utenzi* and *kawafi* dating mostly from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century and preserved in manuscript form (in the Arabic alphabet). Talento's research on these Swahili verses shows that the poets' notion of translating did not correspond to the current common understanding, i.e. of a linguistic transfer from a source text to a target text, but, interestingly, included a wide range of activities combining various modes of translation of one or multiple sources and original poetic creation. On a social level, the author argues that translation was used to reinforce claims of patrician descent in a context where Oman's suzerainty over the Swahili coast threatened the position and influence of local elites. Furthermore, translation offered the poets an opportunity to negotiate their socially and culturally expected humility, looking for fame and high-ranking status. In chapter 4, the discursive practices on translation during British rule in East Africa are investigated as part of a system of unequal power relationships. The literary translations in that period were carried out by British residents, mostly colonial administrators, educators, and missionaries with the collaboration of East Africans whose role was often effaced or obscured. The chapter focuses on the literary translations which were undertaken within the framework of the Inter-Territorial Language Committee. This was a colonial institution created in 1930 to standardise the Swahili language in British East Africa (on the basis of the Kiunguja dialect of Zanzibar) and to produce a corpus of prose translations into standard Swahili to be employed in colonial schools. These were mainly translated works of British novels for young people (such as *Treasure Island*, *The Jungle Book*, *Robinson Crusoe* etc.); many of them were undertaken by the secretary of the Inter-Territorial Language Committee, Frederick Johnson, who was also the author of a *Standard English-Swahili Dictionary and Standard Swahili-English Dictionary* (1939). The author, who has investigated the various elements which frame these works of translation (such as the prefaces, notes, mode of translation etc.), convincingly argues that beyond the notable literary impact, these translations were a component of the colonial dominion, which on a cultural level was also exercised over language and literature. British translations conveyed to the Swahili literary space a new genre, written prose, in a context where prose was mostly transmitted orally and in a new language, standard Swahili, in a context in which literature was created in local Swahili varieties. These translations, thus, were intentionally used to reduce or obliterate the literary and symbolic capital of the Swahili classical poetic tradition. Considering this, the author proposes the concept of *deconsecration* as a contrast to Casanova's notion of *consecration* in the work *The*

World Republic of Letters, as a more adequate means to describe the presence (or absence) of literary exchanges in a context of political, economic and cultural subjugation. Chapter 5 is devoted to literary translations into Swahili in post-independence Tanganyika and later Tanzania (the Republic resulting from the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar in 1964), focusing in particular on the first decades which correspond to the period of implementation of *ujamaa*¹, the Swahili word used by the first president Julius K. Nyerere to illustrate his project of African socialism. The Swahili language, which played a prominent role in spreading the campaign for independence, was considered by Nyerere as a fundamental medium for his project of *ujamaa*, for building Tanzanian national identity along with a decolonised, non-ethnic, modern, egalitarian society.² In this chapter, Talento investigates the symbolic contribution of translations into Swahili to the process of forging a new nation and to the validation of Swahili as a national and literary language, a process defined by Talento as *reconsecration* in opposition to the above-mentioned *deconsecration* carried out during British rule. Translation ceased to be the prerogative of colonial administrators and educators, with the often invisible collaboration of a few educated Africans. Now it was undertaken by Tanzanian activists, mostly political and academic figures. However, Talento notes that the small presence of women translators remained a constant in this period, as it had been also in the colonial era. In post-independence times there was an enlargement of the geographical provenance of the source texts, a differentiation of the source genres, and the number of translations into Swahili rose consistently.³ From the 1960s to the 1980s there were three main translation flows into Swahili: Western classics, especially Shakespeare, translated in Tanzania by J. K. Nyerere and Samuel Mushi (Promoter for Swahili in the Ministry of National Culture), Anglophone African authors such as Achebe, Armah, wa Thiong'o, etc. and texts from countries committed to communism or socialism, particularly China and the Soviet Union.

Another interesting aspect of the volume is that the author offers new insights into the historical developments of modern Swahili literature by showing the impact of translated texts, despite their small number compared to creative works on the Swahili literary scene. This is particularly true of the translations provided by influential figures, one such being J.K. Nyerere, who chose to translate two of

¹ *Ujamaa* means brotherhood, sense of cohesion amongst the members of a family or, more broadly, of a community.

² For that reason, after the Arusha declaration (*Ujamaa and Self-Reliance*, 1967) and the adoption of the policy of "Education for Self-Reliance" (1968), Swahili was introduced as the language of instruction in primary education and the adult education programme.

³ As it emerges from the catalogue of literary translated texts into Swahili compiled for this study, published translations rose from 27 during British rule to 141 in just the first two decades after independence.

Shakespeare's dramas, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*,⁴ in their entirety and respecting their verse form. This was in contrast to colonial times when Shakespeare's work had appeared in Swahili only as short prose texts.⁵ As pointed out by Talento, Nyerere's translation strategy consisted in "merging heterodoxy and orthodoxy" (see 5.7.4) i.e. domesticating Shakespeare's verses by employing a Swahili metre, the *shairi*, but at the same time innovating this same form by eliminating the rhyme, one of the basic principles of Swahili poetic tradition. This groundbreaking choice by an authoritative intellectual and political leader paved the way for the innovative poetic research of the younger generation. Inaugurated by Ebrahim Hussein and Euphrase Kezilahabi, this triggered an intense debate in East Africa between the "traditionalists" who condemned this poetic practice, and the "reformists" who defended their verses, influenced by Western literature as well as by other verbal traditions in Bantu languages. This literary dispute, which is still to some extent alive today, has conveyed identity issues, as well as generational, cultural, and political dynamics, and has been investigated by several scholars in the field of Swahili literary studies. The present volume contributes significantly to the study of modern developments in Swahili poetry by highlighting the activity of the East African translators of English poetry into Swahili, people such as Nyerere and Mushi, as well as the discursive practices around these translated texts.

Finally, the book has four appendices, useful tools for researchers in the field: 1) "Corpus of translations pertaining to the pre-twentieth century period"; 2) "Corpus of translations pertaining to the period of missionary activity and colonial power"; 3) Corpus of translations pertaining to the early post-colonial period"; 4) "Catalogue of literary translated texts into Swahili (1663-2021)."

Considering all the above points, this volume is a remarkable study of literary translation into Swahili from a sociological and historical perspective which enriches scholarship on Swahili literature and also international research on translation.

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⁴ *Julius Caesar* was translated twice, the first time retaining the original title (1963), and the second time entitled *Juliasi Kaizari* (1969). *The Merchant of Venice* was entitled in Swahili *Mabepari wa Venisi* (The Capitalists of Venice) and published in 1969.

⁵ Based on *Tales from Shakespeare*, an English children's book written by Charles and Mary Lamb in 1807.