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SWAHILI LITERATURE IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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Translations of Swahili literature into Russian can be traced back to the 1930s, when African studies in Russia (at that time the Soviet Union) were emerging. Scholars at that time were mainly translating texts of Swahili oral literature (such as tales and fables) for the newly established teaching courses of the language (for details, see Gromova 1995).

Fresh impetus was given to translations from Swahili in the 1960s, when the Soviet Union became a significant player in the African political and economic arena. In the Soviet Union itself, the government was making a point of acquainting the reading public with the culture of newly established independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. For this purpose, most of the major publishers (state-backed, as was everything in Soviet times) organised special departments of foreign literature translations, which dealt with literary texts from many regions of the world; special attention was given, as stated above, to the literature of post-colonial countries. The most notable state publishers were *Khudozhestvennaya literatura* ('Artistic literature'), *Raduga* ('Rainbow') and *Progress*, the latter of which focused on literature in translation. Its major aim was the translation of Russian texts (ranging from Marxist classics to scientific and children's books) into foreign languages; however, it also published many foreign translations into Russian. The criteria for choosing a foreign literary text for translation were, first, the author's ideological orientations (not necessarily pro-socialist but based on "general humanism") and second, the author's importance in the literature of his/her country.

In full compliance with these guidelines, the first (to my knowledge) works of a Swahili-language writer translated into Russian were those of Shaaban Robert, a major figure in modern Swahili writing. In 1968, the first collection of his works, titled *Moya zhizn'* ('My life'), was published in Moscow. In the early 1980s, an extended version of this collection, titled *Izbrannoye* ('Selected works'), was published by a branch of *Khudozhestvennaya literatura* in Leningrad (at that time the official name for Saint Petersburg). All the translators of Shaaban Robert's works were graduates of the African studies departments at the universities of Moscow and Leningrad. What should be noted is the special role of Andrei Zhukov, the country's well-known specialist of classical Swahili literature, who was the figure behind these publications. A gifted scholar (for several decades he headed the African department of Leningrad University) and a great populariser of Shaaban Robert's heritage, he was largely responsible for the selection of works, authored the prefaces to both collections, and also contributed as a translator himself (see list in References).

Another notable publication of a Swahili writer in Russian was Leonid Gankin's translation of two novels of the modern Tanzanian writer Shafi Adam Shafi. A graduate of the African studies department of Moscow University, Gankin also published in Russian several articles on modern Swahili literature. Of course, Adam Shafi was chosen mainly for his revolutionary orientation: his first translated novel, *Kuli (Kuli)*, told about the struggle of Zanzibari workers against exploitation in the 1940s, while the second one, *Usad'ba gospodina Fuada (Kasri ya mwinyi Fuad)*, was about the Zanzibari revolution of 1964. However, in addition to this "ideological reliability", the translator, being a specialist in Swahili language, managed to preserve in his translation all the artistic qualities of the original texts – the rich language and the lively speech of the characters. Generally, all the translations of Swahili texts into Russian were done on a high professional level, which was all the more remarkable because communication between the translators and authors was rarely possible – the foreign contacts of Soviet citizens were very closely watched. According to the communication that I had with some of the translators, the main driving force for them to translate the works of Swahili authors into Russian was not material (although the work of the translator was relatively well paid). They were mainly striving to familiarise the local reading public with the African culture and people – and literary translation for them was one of the most reliable and captivating instruments to pursue this aim.

The critical acceptance of these translations is largely unknown – unless someone ventures into a close search of the Soviet literature-related periodicals of those times. While the reading public of these works was primarily composed of specialists and students of African studies, it can also be assumed to have been much wider. It should be remembered that the printed translations were subjected to the state system of book distribution – which meant that they were available in all the major bookshops in both large and small cities. Moreover, special channels distributed the books to libraries of different levels and types, from public to school and university ones, all over the country. Among other translated works, we could mention several translations of Swahili folktales in the literary almanac *Africa*, published in Moscow from the 1970s to the early 1990s. In the 1990s, which were a transition period for the whole country, literary translation generally declined – only to be revived on a new level in the current century, when it is actively carried out by both state and private publishers. Unfortunately, African literature does not figure largely in the plans of these publishing houses. Although the internationally acclaimed authors of Europhone literature such as Ben Okri and Ahmadou Kourouma have been translated, little attention is paid to literature in African languages. Thus, translations of this literature have moved to specialised editions, published by various organisations related to African studies.

One of the notable examples is the almanac *Pod nebom Afriki moei* ('Under my Africa's sky'), which has been published by the African Studies Department of Moscow University since the year 2000. The title of the almanac is a line taken from a poem by the Russian national poet Alexander Pushkin, who was partially of African descent and very proud of that. The

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almanac publishes texts of various types related to African studies – from scholarly articles to memoirs. Literary translations from various African languages (Amharic, Hausa, Fulani and, of course, Swahili) comprise a large part of every issue; most of these translations are done by senior students of the corresponding languages at the department. Many of these students later make successful careers in African studies. A good example is the translation of the short story *Nguzo yenye uhai* ('A living pillar') by the modern Tanzanian writer Freddy Macha, which in the Russian translation was titled *V chem dusha derzhitsa* ('How come this soul is still alive'; 2000). The translation was done by Natalya Frolova, who graduated from the department with a PhD and now works for the Department of African Literatures at the Gorky Institute of World Literature (Russian Academy of Sciences).¹ In personal communication, Natalya Frolova admitted that she was attracted primarily by the artistic merits of Macha's story, which she has related successfully in the target language. Further issues of the almanac feature several translations from Swahili, both of oral and written literature. For example, Yulia Rupcheva, a student in the final year, translated part of Muhammed Said Abdulla's *Kisima cha Giningi* as *Otryvok iz detektiva "Kolodets v Giningi"* in the 2010 volume of the almanac.² The same volume contains a short article by Natalya Frolova on Swahili poetry, which includes the translation of two poems by Kithaka wa Mberia, *Tikiti* ('Tykva') and *Nyumba* ('Dom') and one by Kezilahabi, *Mwamba ziwani* ('Skala').³ Another volume of the almanac features translations by A. Cheskis, K. Movchanyuk, A.Khamatshin, and V.Kruchinsky, all third-year students. They translated parts of Ebrahim Hussein's *Kinjeketile* ('Kinjeketile').⁴ Such translation projects of Swahili works (mainly short stories) into Russian continue at the departments of African studies at the universities of Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The translations appear in journals published by the departments, such as *Pod nebom Afriki moyei* and *Afrikanskiy sbornik* ('African collection', Saint Petersburg).

References

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¹ In a brief preface to the translation it is indicated that this story by Macha was published in *Mzalendo* newspaper in January 1977.

² It appeared in *Pod nebom Afriki moyei* ('Under my Africa's sky'). 2010. Moscow: Kluch-S. Pp. 190-196.

³ *Pod nebom Afriki moyei* ('Under my Africa's sky'). 2010. Moscow: Kluch-S. Pp. 325-340.

⁴ *Pod nebom Afriki moyei* ('Under my Africa's sky'). 2009. Moscow: Kluch-S. Pp. 204-207.

List of selected translations

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