

## THE DANCE OF THE SPINNING TOP: TRANSLATING RESISTANCE IN THE POETRY OF MUYAKA

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The 19th-century Swahili poet Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy composed several poems in opposition to the Omani Empire's invasion of his native Mombasa. In this paper, I focus on one such poem, "Ngoma ya Kizungup'ia", which has not been studied as comprehensively as many others. I unpack the cultural, choreographic, and poetic significance of the *kiumbizi* dance form, which serves as one of its central tropes. In light of Muyaka's poetic invocation of this dance and the historical, political and performative context of 19th-century Swahili war poetry, I apply the rhetorical and literary framework of Signifyin(g) to gain a deeper understanding of the political intentions and poetic execution of Muyaka's resistance poetry, as distinguished contextually and ideologically from his earlier war dialogue poems. Finally, I reflect on my own experience translating the poem into English using methods of creative transposition, and conclude that the inextricability of the poem's hermeneutic and poetic values renders it especially difficult to translate.

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### Introduction

The notion that translating poetry is an exercise in failure is so widely accepted as to be aphoristic. Robert Frost called poetry "what is lost in translation" (in Untermeyer 1964: 18) and Roman Jakobson said "poetry by definition is [...] untranslatable" (2000: 118), while translation was itself dubbed "the art of failure" by John Ciardi (1961: 17). Taken in concert, these assertions are redundant: If poetry is indeed what is lost in translation, then it follows that what is most poetic is by definition untranslatable, and that translating poetry is bound to fail. Nevertheless, I have spent the last year focusing the brunt of my creative energies on translating the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Swahili poet Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy (1776-1840), who did much to popularize the mashairi quatrain form with his complex, innovative, and socially salient poems. These were composed in his rather archaic idiom of Mombasa's Kimvita dialect, while incorporating many lexical features of the poetically prestigious Lamu-Pate dialect group (Abdulaziz 1979: 69). Because I learned to speak Swahili in the wildly dissimilar linguistic context of 21st century Dar es Salaam, you might say I am embracing the inevitability of failure with an especially pronounced gusto. As evidence of my masochism, I would like to explore "Ngoma ya Kizungup'ia" ("Dance of the Spinning Top"), one of Muyaka's poems that I found especially challenging to translate – as I believe was also the case for Muyaka's most prolific translator, Mohamed H. Abdulaziz.

Muyaka's poems were not dated, but this one was very likely composed between 1828 (when Omani Emperor Sayyid Said conquered Zanzibar) and 1837 (when he finally conquered Muyaka's native Mombasa). During this period, Muyaka composed several poems opposing the imperialist

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aggression of Oman. This two-quatrain poem is an especially intriguing example, though its political intent and poetic execution have not been satisfactorily interpreted, let alone translated:

Gongwa la Mwana Mkisi kwamba wataka lingia  
Kaageni wenu mbasi wake na watumba goya  
Muje kwa p'epo za kusi mupate kuangukia  
Ngoma ya kizungup'ia Wagongwa waipigile.

Hayahitaji *dasisi* kusema haya na haya  
Kama ya kunu Nuhasi kwamba mumeazimia.  
Na tuzione rakisi kiumbizi kiumbia  
Ngoma ya kizungup'ia Wagongwa waipigile.

*Gongwa is Mwana Mkisi's land, (you should do well to remember that) if you want to attack it;  
Go say farewell to your friends, wives and gadding sweethearts;  
And come by the South winds so that you are sure of reaching these shores.  
As for the game of war, the people of Mombasa know well how to play it!*

*It doesn't require too much pondering, arguing the pros and cons  
If you really intend to come to Mombasa  
Let us see your vessels in full sail doing the tacking.  
As for the game of war, the Mombasans know well how to play it. (Abdulaziz 1979: 132-133)*

### **Interpreting Muyaka's Paronomasia**

I should preface my comments on Abdulaziz's translation with an expression of deep gratitude for his study of Muyaka. I do not know that I could have seriously taken on translating Muyaka were it not for Abdulaziz's extensive work identifying many of his archaic word choices and cultural allusions. Muyaka did not title his poems, so I supply the title "Ngoma ya Kizungup'ia" from the poem's refrain. Abdulaziz's translation of this hemistich "As for the game of war" is curiously vague. He footnotes an explanation, "Ngoma ya kizungupia = vita = lit. game of top (war)" (*ibid*: 132). Muyaka employs the image of a spinning top elsewhere in his work, one example being the penultimate line of a nine-stanza poem that Abdulaziz titles "Mashairi ya Uhusiano", "Dunia ni mdawari huzunguka kama p'ia", or "The world is round, turning round like a top" (*ibid*: 200-1). This poem meditates on many topics, such as social mores, tension between friends, and indeed

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death. However, war is not one of these topics, indicating that the spinning top was more versatile as a metaphor than merely serving as a war cliché.

Jan Knappert warns that Muyaka's poetry "can usually be interpreted at two levels of profundity at least, one obvious, one political, and one amorous or even obscene" (Knappert 1982: 136). This encourages us to interpret his phrases as flexibly as possible – which will be especially important within the conceptual context of Signifyin(g) discussed later in this paper, as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan explains, "the hearer is thus constrained to attend all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems" (1973: 314). Take away the aspiration mark (as Abdulaziz does in his footnote), and *pia* more commonly means "also". The root *zungu* refers to rotation, but additionally serves as the root of the word that refers to Europeans (the early colonists, with all their comings and goings, seemed to be wandering around in circles). "Ngoma ya kizungu pia" could mean "dance of the spinning top" or it could mean "the European dance, too". The humor of bragging about the whiteness of one's dance moves aside, Mombasa accepted status as a British protectorate from 1824-1826 as a desperate ploy of resisting Omani rule. Muyaka appears to be wielding that connection in a monitory manner – after all, the British Empire was one of few entities powerful enough to give pause to Sayyid Said. Such choreographic shapeshifting, polysemic multivalence, and geopolitical subtlety does not emerge in Abdulaziz's translation. I could not manage it in so few English syllables, either; paronomasia is indeed the major factor behind Jakobson's assertion of poetry's untranslatability (2000: 118). But even if the spinning top was such a common and self-evident war metaphor, why obfuscate the image? As we will see, the act of spinning is in fact the crucial conceit on which this entire poem hinges.

The penultimate line of the poem "Na tuzione rakisi kiumbizi kiumbia" is just as significant, and just as rich in paronomasia, as the refrain. Abdulaziz glosses *rakisi* as "matanga – sails full of wind" (1979: 132). I can find no other source ascribing *rakisi* the meaning "sails," but I have no strong reason to contradict the lexicography of a native Mombasan linguist. However, as is typical of Muyaka, the word certainly has additional meanings. *Rakisi* also happens to be the Swahili name for the Hercules constellation, from the Arabic "al-rakis", "the dancer" or "the trotting camel" (Allen R. 1899: 242). And if we consider all potential meanings, we should also note the sonic similarity between *rahisi* or "easy" and *rakisi*<sup>1</sup>. This allows us to hear a boastful claim as to the ease with which Mombasa would beat back Oman's army, a message also conveyed by the poem's allusion to dance (*ibid*: 128). It would be quintessential Muyaka for the phrase to encompass all

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<sup>1</sup>This similarity will be even more pronounced if the listener is aware of the "h" in "rahisi" deriving from the harder-sounding voiceless uvular fricative of the Arabic letter *kha*. Although Omar and Frankl note that Swahili speakers usually pronounce it more softly, the awareness of its derivation can be seen in the common interchange of /h/ and /kh/ in its romanized transcription (Omar & Frankl 1997: 66). This interchange occurs frequently in transcriptions of Muyaka's poetry, where we have "khatimae" for "hatimaye", "khasa" for "hasa", and interchangeable use of "khabari" with "habari" and "khatia" with "hatia" (Abdulaziz 1979: 220, 306, 310, 286, 254, 284, 126)

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three meanings (sails, stars, ease). I find the constellary interpretation “let’s gaze at the dancer’s stars” most figuratively valent, suggesting that ultimately fate will decide which army is victorious, while referencing the stars that the Omani warships would have used to navigate their way to Mombasa, and reinforcing the dance allusion in the line’s crucial second hemistich “kiumbizi kiumbia.” Abdulaziz footnotes this latter hemistich as “st. ya kitwaa. matao = manoeuvring (of ships)” (1979: 132). This is confusing, because he glosses the similar phrase “kiumbizi kiumbile” as “the ‘war’ dance in progress” when it appears in the poem “kimya” or “silence” (*ibid*: 194). He is correct in the second instance when he identifies *kiumbizi* as a dance. But the social context and choreography of this cultural trope is highly consequential when interpreting the political intent and poetic execution of “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia”.

### **Interpreting *Kiumbizi* as a Cultural Trope**

The earliest detailed description of *kiumbizi* appears in *The Customs of the Swahili People*, originally published in German in 1903, although the relevant notes were taken in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

This is in the form of a fight. They play the chapuo, the vumi, the *upatu*, and the pipe. The dance starts at 4 P.M. and goes on until midnight. It is danced under a tree that gives good shade, such as a mango. The young men come dressed in their best kanzu, and the piper plays: Come, devil, come, devil, We will whitewash him. The young men throw their sticks to each other, meaning that one is inviting another to dance with him. They dance with the sticks, and at first they dance properly with gestures, the sticks clashing together with no ill will; but if one is dancing with one whom he dislikes, for taking his wife or some long-standing disagreement, their enmity comes out in the *kiumbizi*. When they wish to break off such a *kiumbizi* at sundown, they play a *bondogea* roll, and they play with thin sticks and dance with them. Thin sticks are given to children to learn the *kiumbizi*, and men use them for dancing with children. The *kiumbizi* is now danced at weddings; but in old days it was danced at any time. (Bakari 1981: 87-88)

I record several additional historical references and contemporary instances of *kiumbizi* in the Appendix. Nearly all<sup>2</sup> can be traced to Zanzibar (Pemba in particular) or Lamu (where *kirumbizi* is the preferred spelling). None, however, reference Mombasa, which is surprising since Mombasa lies between the two geographically. This is reinforced when William Ernest Taylor (who along with Mwalimu Sikujua collected Muyaka’s poetry while stationed in Mombasa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) demonstrates his ignorance of *kiumbizi* by his footnote on Muyaka’s poem “Kimya”.<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>2</sup> The exception, as detailed in the appendix, is Krapf’s dictionary comparing *kiumbizi* to a dance in Mrima (1882: 87). Krapf did most of his research in Mombasa in the decade after Muyaka’s death; that he does not identify *kiumbizi* with Mombasa is additional evidence that it was relatively foreign (though not completely unknown) to Mombasa.

<sup>3</sup> This poem “is said to refer to an unexpected lull in the wars with Sayyid Said. Muyaka is warning his compatriots not to take peace for granted” (Abdulaziz 1979: 195). He does so with a series of oxymoronic descriptions of silence,

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has *kiumbizi* as “ku-umbia, to soar about, glide round” and translates the hemistich as “like a soaring (bird) has it soared” (Taylor 1891: 33). Perhaps Muyaka's interest in *kiumbizi* arose from his personal connection with Pemba. Abdulaziz notes, “it is conceivable that Muyaka had Pemba connections on either the maternal or paternal side [...] According to notes in the Taylor/Sikujua manuscripts Muyaka went to Pemba at least twice, once to inherit from a dead relative” (1979: 108). While the dance's exact origins cannot be determined for certain, to the extent it is identified with Zanzibar as opposed to Mombasa, Muyaka's choice of trope is all the more culturally targeted.

### Muyaka's War Poetry in Context

Farouk Topan discusses the first stanza of “Ngoma ya Kizungup'ia” as an expression of Muyaka's nationalism, which he contextualizes, “the Swahili coast was divided into ‘city-states’ each of which was essentially a geographic entity that was self-sufficient and independent,” until, that is, “the Omanis were successful in taking control of Zanzibar [...] and now had their designs on Mombasa” (Topan 2006: 105). But the fraught nature of Muyaka's political position (and indeed the position of anyone operating as a public figure while remaining either a feudal or de facto colonial subject) is apparent in the scholarly debate about his political role. Chacha Nyaigotti-Chacha counts his support of the Mazruis<sup>4</sup> against him, portraying their rule as “foreign domination” rather than independence and depicting Muyaka as more stooge than patriotic nationalist:

It is quite explicit from these same poems that these people would continue being under a foreign domination, even with the defeat of these people whom they regard as their enemies [...]. Otherwise Muyaka, being as patriotic as other critics such as Mulokozi besides Abdulaziz would like us to believe, should have been able to tell us in his poetry the consequences of these struggles. He should have been quite open to state that nothing would change as far as the lives of these people are concerned. (Nyaigotti-Chacha 1987: 143)

The idea that there was no practical difference between the Mazruis and Sayyid Said is a bit absolutist. In fact, the Mazruis had cut ties with Oman in the prior century, with the result that their position in Mombasa depended on popular support. They intermarried with native Mombasans, adopted many Swahili customs, regularly distributed wealth among prominent clans and sought their consent on major decisions. Meanwhile, Sayyid Said wished to subordinate Mombasa with his more extractive designs of dominating all coastal and interior trade (Abdulaziz 1979: 24-5, 28, 135).

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for example comparing silence to a noisy and bellicose dance. Since this poem was addressed to his fellow Mombasans, it indicates at least some awareness of *kiumbizi* in Mombasa.

<sup>4</sup> The Mazrui governors Abdulla bin Hemed (r. 1814 – 1823) and Salim bin Hemed (r. 1825 – 1834) appear to have had an especially close and patron-type relationship with Muyaka (Abdulaziz 1979: 106).

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Mulokozi, on the other hand, promotes Muyaka as a seminal anti-colonial figure who “used poetry as a tool of resistance against Arab attempts to subjugate Mombasa” and views the Mazruis as anti-colonial figures whose invasions of other Swahili states “can only be understood as an attempt by the rulers of Mombasa to dislodge the alien imperialist” (Mulokozi 1976: 130-131). Yet he complicates this idealized treatment of the Mazruis by citing Muyaka’s poem beginning with the line “Waungwana Pate Yunga hawataridhia p’ingu” (*ibid*: 131) or “The freeborn men of Proud Pate will not agree to shackles”. Muyaka depicts the ill-fated 1819 invasion of Pate as hubristically hegemonic, not liberating; even the Mazruis’ star poet was not so starry-eyed about their motives.

To the question of whether the Mazruis were resisters of Arab subjugation or themselves subjugating Arabs, I would answer that they were clearly both. There were surely sound practical reasons for Mombasans to support them (especially over Sayyid Said), as well as to oppose them, and Muyaka composed poems doing both and everything in between, perhaps most memorably with his bristling ambivalence about the Mazrui residence: “Ngome imetuumiza, naswi tu mumo ngomeni!” (Abdulaziz 1979: 18) or “The fort has hurt us, and we are still in the fort”. However, there were many more occasions where he spoke in unison with his patrons, including cheering on skirmishes with other Swahili states, as in his dialogue poems with Lamu so thoroughly studied by Ann Biersteker and Ibrahim Noor Shariff (1995). Historically speaking, these dialogues set the stage for Muyaka’s resistance poems, not least in that their climactic event (the Battle of Kuduahu or Shela) so destabilized the region that Lamu invited Sayyid Said’s protection, granting Oman a foothold on the Swahili coast (Pouwels 1991: 363-4). It is thus instructive to consider certain motivations and tactics at play in the dialogues:

The poems suggest that Mazrui diplomacy not only recognized and utilized divisions in Kiswahili speaking communities, but also recognized and attempted to utilize what united these communities; i.e. their language and their poetic traditions (metaphors and symbols, a shared poetic dialect, and the *kujibizana/challenging dialogue tradition*). That Muyaka bin Haji (and/or his poems) was sent to influence Zahidi Mngumi and Lamu public opinion suggests that at this time the Mazrui had a rather astute awareness of how to influence public opinion in this community. (Biersteker & Shariff 1995: 67-8)

J. De V. Allen also comments on the performative context of Swahili war poetry, though he downplays its diplomatic subtlety and ideological significance:

Swahili settlements [...] had no shortage of land for agriculture and other purposes, but were desperately short of manpower. As often happens in such circumstances, their wars included marching round, beating drums and gongs and invoking religion and witchcraft, and also versifying, but relatively little actual bloodshed [...]. The ‘official poets’ of the respective armies were only a little less important than the war-leaders themselves, and their ‘war-songs’ an alternative to battle, designed to make the enemy flee, rather than an incitement to it. Muyaka’s war-verses, his constant glorification of Mombasa’s past and warnings to its enemies to beware, need to be read in this light

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and not just in terms of ‘patriotism’ or ‘incipient nationalism’ (Allen J. 1982: 234).

Allen’s description is a useful insight into the traditional reception of poems like “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia”. However, he does not consider how Sayyid Said’s imperial designs may have upended the region’s population density. As Zanzibar was rapidly transformed to a plantation economy, Loimeier (2009: 22) estimates its population doubling or tripling from 5,000 to 10,000-15,000 between 1819 and 1835, while Ogot (1979: 178) cites an estimated slave population of 100,000 by 1849. With these increased reserves of “manpower”, Sayyid Said was not bound to observe any face-saving ceremonies. Muyaka’s poems resisting Oman thus require a different contextual understanding than his earlier war dialogues. Lamu had been the underdog against better-armed and better-allied Mombasa (Biersteker & Shariff 1995: 67). Against the empire of Sayyid Said, however, Mombasa assumed the underdog role. A dialogue implies relatively equal footing, as well as a shared language. Because Sayyid Said was not Swahili, he did not share Muyaka’s poetic language – according to his daughter’s memoir he did not even allow languages other than Arabic to be spoken in his presence at the palace (Ruede 1907: 39). In short, Muyaka’s poems of resistance required a format that would transcend or circumvent dialogue, where superior wit might upset brute force.

### **Signifyin(g) as an interpretative framework**

Comparisons between East African and African-American cultural expressions risk a glib false equivalency. But in light of the power imbalance between Mombasa and Oman, it is appropriate to consider Muyaka’s war poetry through the framework of Signifyin(g), a rhetorical strategy of indirection which, according to Henry Louis Gates, “connote[s] the writing implicit in an oral literature” (Gates 1988: 88). This suggests its utility for interpreting Muyaka’s poetry, perhaps especially his war poetry, given its intended oral reception. Furthermore, the rhetorical strategies by which disempowered black Americans leveraged their wit and ingenuity can shed insight on Muyaka’s own strategies when faced with a more powerful adversary. In *Black Language*, Malachi Andrews and Paul T. Owens explain, “the *signifier* creates a myth about someone and tells him a *third* person started it. The *signified* person is aroused and seeks that person [...] Signifying is completely successful when the *signifier* convinces the chump he is working on, that what he is saying is true and that it gets him angered to wrath” (Owens & Andrews 1973: 95).

This trinary construction recalls the triangulation employed by the Mazruis to persuade the British to offer their protection: “The extent of Mazrui determination and political acumen can be seen by their open intimation that they would seek French protection if the British failed them, a fact that perturbed [British Captain William F.] Owen greatly” (Abdulaziz 1979: 135). Gates elaborates on Andrews and Owens’s definition, “I cannot stress too much the import of the presence of this third term, or in Hermese E. Roberts’s extraordinarily suggestive phrase, “The Third Ear,”

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an intraracial ear through which encoded vernacular is deciphered” (Gates 1988: 70). This “Third Ear” is indeed crucial when we interpret Muyaka’s own rhetorical handiwork. He proves himself just as adept a trickster as his Mazrui patrons by running poetic interference between Oman and Zanzibar. To consider his resistance poetry as a Signifyin(g) act, we can apply Claudia Mitchell-Kernan’s definition:

Labeling a particular utterance ‘*signifying*’ involves the recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function, which is potentially obscured by the surface content or function. The obscurity may lie in the relative difficulty it poses for interpreting (1) the meaning or message the speaker is adjudged as intending to convey; (2) the addressee – the person or persons to whom the message is directed; (3) the goal orientation or intent of the speaker. (Mitchell-Kernan 1973: 314, emphasis original)

I have already discussed a few instances where Muyaka’s wordplay obscures certain meanings and messages, including his coded reference to Mombasa’s relationship with the British in the hemistich “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia”. In Topan’s discussion of the poem’s first stanza alongside the first stanza of the contextually similar war poem “T’umwi Ukifika Zinji”, he touches on the duality of the poems’ addressees, and hence the trinary nature of its players:

He praises the bravery of the Mombasans and taunts the Omanis to come in large numbers so that they could be killed. At the same time, he appeals to the indigenous Zanzibaris, the children of Queen Aziza, to not ally themselves with the Omanis. The mention of Queen Aziza is significant, for it is meant to evoke a legendary past when it was believed that the city-states were ruled by queens; the queen of Mombasa was Mwana Mkisi. (Topan 2006: 106)

In “T’umwi Ukifika Zinji,” Muyaka’s addressees are obscured because the poem is filtered through the putative addressee of the “t’umwi” or “messenger”. In “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia,” he is ostensibly addressing Oman as Mombasa’s would-be conquerors, but his most pointed message is for the conquered Zanzibaris. Muyaka invokes Queen Aziza in other war poems, too, such as the poem beginning “Mgogoto wa Zamani” or “Ancient rumbling drumbeat”. He extolls the battle-readiness of Mombasa, Pate and Lamu while expressing shock that the “children of Queen Aziza” (i.e. the mercenary Zanzibari soldiers helping to populate Sayyid Said’s army) are aiding the attack on Mombasa (Abdulaziz 1979: 129). Aziza’s name would have resounding meaning to any Zanzibari ears hearing the poem, but negligible meaning to Omani ears. This can be understood as loud-talking, a subtype of Signifyin(g) described by Gates, “one successfully loud-talks by speaking to a second person remarks in fact directed to a third person, at a level just audible to the third person” (1988: 82). Rather than engaging in direct dialogue, he employs rhetorical strategies of indirection. The more he exalts Zanzibar’s Swahili identity, the more he underscores their apparent betrayal of the Swahili cause.

Name-checking ancient queens is not the only way Muyaka leverages Zanzibar’s Swahili identity. In the second stanza of “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia” (not included in Topan’s discussion),



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Muyaka asserts Mombasa's *kiumbizi* dancing prowess. On its surface, this is a provocation, especially to the extent that *kiumbizi* was a celebrated Zanzibari (as opposed to Mombasan) cultural expression. And this brings us to the third part of Mitchell-Kernan's definition, that Signifyin(g) obscures "the goal orientation or intent of the speaker" (1973: 314). When Muyaka claims Mombasa can "hit" this Swahili dance, he also implies that the exogenous Sayyid Said cannot; the provocation is linked to the mercenaries selling out their Swahili identity. He reminds Zanzibar how it has been insulted by Oman, masterfully assuming the anti-mediating trickster role, "between two forces he seeks to oppose for his own contentious purposes, and then to reconcile" (Gates 1988: 56). Muyaka seeks to goad Zanzibar into opposing Oman. But inasmuch as Signifyin(g) relies on shared cultural knowledge and known symbolic values (Mitchell-Kernan 1973: 326, 315), it also interpellates the Zanzibari people as subjects of a united Swahili populace. And it is through such culturally-attentive interpellation that he simultaneously seeks reconciliation.

### **The Politics of *Kiumbizi***

It is not inaccurate for Abdulaziz to describe *kiumbizi* as a war dance, for its choreography is certainly bellicose. Pemba-based journalist Salmin J. Salmin records Juma Masefo, a *katibu* or "secretary" of a *kiumbizi* dance troupe, identifying the dance's origins as anti-imperial self-defense during Portuguese rule of Zanzibar, which encompassed the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries:

Hii ngoma ilibuniwa namo miaka ya nyuma kwenye utawala wa Kireno [...]. Wareno walikuwa wakitumia bakora sana katika utawala, kwa hivyo wakaamua wajifundishe jinsi ya kukinga. Walichukuana wazee kutoka Pujini, Matele na Tangani. Hao wazee walikaa [...] sehemu ya porini [...] wakafundishana jinsi ya kukinga bakora.

This dance was created in years past during Portuguese rule [...]. The Portuguese were using canes very much in their reign, so they decided they should teach themselves how to defend. They gathered elders from [Pemba towns] Pujini, Matele and Tangani. These elders stayed [...] in an area of the forest [...] and taught each other how to defend against the canes. (Salmin 2016)

This 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century origin story suggests *kiumbizi* as ideal for resisting any invading empires of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the context of cultural expressions can be volatile; paradoxically, this war dance is also a wedding dance. This was true in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "the *kiumbizi* is now danced at weddings; but in old days it was danced at any time" and it was likely true during Muyaka's lifetime as well, presuming "in old days" encompasses a timespan of greater than half a century (Bakari 1981: 88). It remains true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as detailed by Rebecca Gearheart:

Perhaps the most highly celebrated of male wedding events in Lamu Town is the stick dance, known locally as both *ngoma ya simbo* and *kirumbizi*. This much-anticipated, all male affair, performed for grooms whose personal preference warrants the ceremony, takes place in an outdoor public space in which men from the whole town are invited to participate [...]. There is quite a bit of mystical symbolism related to the stick dance, which is associated with protecting the groom from evil spirits, as his social

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status betwixt and between bachelorhood and adulthood makes him particularly vulnerable to attack [...]. Though rarely sung anymore, kirumbizi lyrics welcome evil spirits to the stick dance so that the dancers and musicians can confuse and divert them from attacking the groom. Reference to these spirits also signifies any ill will harbored by disapproving relatives, who are not supportive of the marriage. Anyone with a grievance is encouraged to get it out of his system at the stick dance [...]. After the bwanaharusi has had a chance to spar with his friends and relatives, the musicians signal the grand finale [...] the groom and the father of the bride face off against each other. Though the script of this final scene is well known in Lamu Town, several of the men with whom I spoke said they found dueling with their fathers-in-law to be more stressful than anticipated. Hitting the stick hard enough to maintain dignity among one's peers while simultaneously exhibiting a certain degree of deference to one's elder turns out to be more precarious than it looks. (Gearheart 2015: 274-275)

Like the *kiumbizi* dance itself, Muyaka's poem is a marriage proposal masquerading as a battle cry. Biersteker and Shariff observe of the war dialogues: "*Gungu* [dance] and similar types of competitive dialogue presumably had long had a role in conflict resolution within and between Kiswahili speaking communities. But in this case a regional power attempted to use this tradition" (1995: 68). Muyaka also applies the conflict resolution function of Swahili dance and poetry, and the *kiumbizi* trope contains the blueprint for that resolution. Gearheart's description "hitting the stick hard enough to maintain dignity among one's peers" (2015: 275) is similar in sentiment to Allen's description of Swahili war poetry as a sort of face-saving (and life-saving) alternative to battle (1982: 234). Gearheart's description of diverting evil spirits from attack (2015: 274) dovetails with Allen's description of war poem performances "invoking religion and witchcraft" (1982: 234), not to mention Muyaka's diversionary Signifyin(g) tactics. Gearheart explains: "Anyone with a grievance is encouraged to get it out of his system" (2015: 275). Muyaka may have had grievances with the mercenary Zanzibari soldiers fighting under Oman's banner, or else there would be no need for Signifyin(g) on them. But his Signifyin(g) treats them as fellow Swahili people – disagreeable in-laws, perhaps, but still family. Indeed, Odile Racine-Issa quotes a research informant in Pemba who describes *kiumbizi* as "*utani, kama shemegi kwa shemegi...c'est-à-dire de 'plaisanterie, comme entre beaux-frères et belles-sœurs', célèbre la réunion des deux moitiés autrefois sans contact ou même hostiles,*" or "*utani, kama shemegi kwa shemegi [...]* that is to say 'a joke, as between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law', celebrating the meeting of two halves in the past contactless or even hostile" (Racine-Issa 2001: 216). Allen's analysis that Muyaka's poetry was "designed to make the enemy flee" (1982: 234) underestimates the poet. He didn't just want the enemy to flee; he wanted them to mutiny, joining Mombasa's ranks and rising up against Oman. He encodes this appeal within the trope of a wedding dance, hiding in plain sight his hope that they would unite as one despite the ceremony of battle.

## THE DANCE OF THE SPINNING TOP: TRANSLATING RESISTANCE IN THE POETRY OF MUYAKA

### **The Poetics of *Kiumbizi***

If Muyaka's politics were complex, his poetry was even more so. And just as the *kiumbizi* trope embodies his complex political intentions, it also embodies his complex poetic achievements – not to mention the complexity of translating them! After all, *Customs of the Swahili People* uses 191 English words to explain to a foreign audience the meaning of *kiumbizi*; for his own audience, Muyaka only requires a single eight-syllable hemistich. Moreover, those 191 words fail to describe a highly pertinent aspect of the dance. While the pair of dancers are sparring with sticks, they simultaneously revolve in circles.<sup>5</sup> This explains why Muyaka employs the conceit of a spinning top in his refrain. It is not a metaphor for war, but rather a metonym for the warlike wedding dance. With the alliterative phrase “kiumbizi kiumbia” he overtly mimics the clatter of sticks. Less overtly, the quasi-reduplicative nature of the phrase, typically serving as an intensifier in Swahili, has an additional effect of conveying dizziness. “Kiumbizi” and “kiumbia” have the same first three syllables, as if one is seeing (or hearing) double, but then their final morphemes distort, as if whirling off in different directions. The mashairi quatrain form itself, with its abababbx rhyme scheme, also imparts a rotational sensation. In the first three lines, the ab hemistiches are like a left foot and a right foot alternating steps. But in the final line, there is an inversion, a pivot; the b rhyme takes a double step, then twirls into the x rhyme that links each stanza together. Mitchell-Kernan argues, “it is the intricacy of the allusion to shared knowledge that makes for the success of these [Signifyin(g)] speech acts” (1973: 326). When the spinning dance “kiumbizi kiumbia” is linked by rhyme with the spinning top “kizungup’ia”, Muyaka is not just boasting of Mombasa's dancing prowess; he is reenacting it with intricately kinetic poetics. He invokes *kiumbizi* as a trope, and proceeds to trope upon that trope with the metonym “kizungup’ia” and poetic devices mimetic of that metonym. This a classic instance of metalepsis, as defined by Harold Bloom: “A word is substituted metonymically for a word in a previous trope, so that a metalepsis can be called, maddeningly but accurately, a metonymy of a metonymy” (1980: 102). Metalepsis is further classified as the quintessential Signifyin(g) device by Gates (1988: 52). Muyaka's poetic virtuosity is a Signifyin(g) act in of itself, as well as an intensifier of his Signification.

### **Creative Transposition and the Art of Failure**

When Roman Jakobson wrote “poetry by definition is untranslatable” he allowed “only creative transposition is possible,” citing as one example, “from one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting” (2000: 118). This is a good description of how I ultimately tried to translate this poem. When I workshopped an early draft of my translation, I told

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<sup>5</sup> For modern footage of *kiumbizi* see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dbi-26mXCfw> (Mawio TV 2019, last visited April 18-04-2023). A survey of available footage reveals more spinning in the Zanzibari dances, which may explain why Gearheart does not mention spinning, either.

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my colleagues I wanted to make the poem spin, just as Muyaka’s audience would have been able to see and hear the spinning of the dancers. One workshop member pointed out that my use of the word “dilly-dally” evoked a quality of dizziness – in similar fashion to “kiumbizi kiumbia” in the original text. But given the poem’s complexity, I felt a more radical transposition was necessary. Essentially, I did not merely want to translate Swahili into English, but to simultaneously translate poetics into choreography, and dance into verbal art. My radically revised translation (which was featured at *Harvard Review Online* in January 2023) reads as follows:

**Dance of the Spinning Top**

Mombasa  
is Mkisi’s land.  
If you wish to invade  
her, then say farewell to  
your friends, and your frivolous  
sweethearts. Set sail with the southeast  
winds, so you can fall on these shores. This  
spinning-top dance of war; Mombasa can hit it,  
too. This needs no dilly-dally, no this-that  
and the other, if you are destined truly  
to attack us where we are. Clattering  
*kiumbizi*. Shall we gaze at the  
dancer’s stars. This spin-  
ning-top dance of  
war; Mombasa  
can hit it  
too.

My choice to leave *kiumbizi* untranslated speaks to its untranslatability. I resorted to visual transposition instead by constructing a concrete poem that assumes the form of a spinning top. Toward the end of the poem, I also hyphenated the word “spin-ning-top” across lines to give the words and shape of the poem a sensation of whirling in place. This radical use of the page to layer a visual metonymy atop a verbal one attempts to imitate Muyaka’s metaleptic layering of tropes. Other transpositions include interpolating the word “clattering” to visualize and auralize the dance and replicate Muyaka’s onomatopoeic alliteration. While I cannot fit all three possible meanings of “tuzione rakisi” (stars, ease, sails) into one hemistich, I transpose “set sail” to the first stanza to

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establish a maritime context. Although breaking up the mashairi quatrain is anathema to my formalist translational instincts, I did not feel the poem could properly spin within a traditional rectangular formation. Still, a careful reading will reveal my attempt to replicate the mashairi rhyme scheme with “land/friends/winds” and “her/hearts/shores/war” corresponding to the rhymes of first stanza, while “dally/truly/kiumbizi” and “other/are/stars/war” correspond to the second. My decision to write rhyming translations is informed in part by Ridder H. Samsom’s anecdote of an interaction with the late Zanzibari poet Haji Gora Haji:

I had made a translation into Swahili for Haji Gora, who had asked me how Dutch poetry sounds and about what kind of things Dutchmen make poems [...]. After a few days Haji Gora approached me with two poems, one in Tumbatu and one in Unguja Swahili. He had turned my translation, that was almost inter-linear, following the Dutch in terms of amount of lines and words, into two Swahili poems, the Unguja one in the form of a ‘song’ [*nyimbo*], nine stanzas each of three [rhyming] lines of eight plus eight syllables, the Tumbatu one in the form of a *shairi*, eight stanza’s of each four [rhyming] lines. (Samsom 2011)

If a contemporary Swahili poet like Gora Haji refused to recognize a non-rhyming translation as poetic, imagine how Muyaka would have felt, having had no contemporaries (i.e. Euphrase Kezilahabi) to expose him to the concept and existence of free verse poetry. For Muyaka and many poets following in his footsteps, rhyme was not a mere aesthetic choice so much as a culturally inalienable imperative, a worldview unto itself, insisting that a chaotic universe can be put into order – no small matter during the upheaval of Muyaka’s lifetime. The Tanzanian blogger Princely H. Glorious meditates on translating Swahili poetry, proposing culture as an exigent element that should receive more priority:

I theorize that there are two precisions at play in translating Kezilahabi (perhaps just in translation more broadly), only one of which the Western translations I read seem concerned with. The first is a precision of meaning/authorial intent, this they capture quite masterfully. The other is a precision of language-as-being, of essential Swahiliness, which any translation destroys but which a Tanzanian lens might recontextualize a little more precisely. The nuance of what the Swahili would *sound like* to a native. Not just what the author wanted to say to said native. (Glorious 2021)

Interestingly, Glorious locates culture not within the hermeneutics of the text, but within its poetics, as an essential component of a poem’s form and sound. Huda J. Fakhreddine has argued, “literatures nascent or marginal especially compared to English, are often the victims of strictly hermeneutic readings which flatten them and put them at the risk of becoming cultural representations” (Fakhreddine 2018: 823). I happen to agree that the Swahili verse tradition in particular is poorly-served by the lack of more literary translation that would convey the richness of Swahili poetics. Although I am not East African (and certainly not a citizen of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mombasa), my background as a poet informs my concern with “language as being” and what Muyaka’s Swahili would “sound like”, even if my understanding of the nuances thereof may not

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be so implicit. Case in point is my treatment of *kiumbizi*. While it took me great effort to uncover its hermeneutics, once I uncovered them, I elected to focus on its poetics, transposing its sound and choreographic form into poetic sound and concrete visual form. I do not want my translations to merely “represent” culture, but rather to embody it.

Walter Benjamin writes in his iconic essay on translation, “[a literary work’s] essential quality is not communication or the imparting of information” (Benjamin 1996: 253). But “Ngoma ya Kizungup’ia” proves a perplexing case. Swahili war poetry did have certain propagandistic and diplomatic functions; it was an act of communication.<sup>6</sup> Muyaka’s war poetry simply happens to be a highly literary form of communication employing intricately artistic rhetorical strategies to impart its information. While the rhyme, alliteration, imagery, metonymy, and other devices are important, the true ingenuity of the poem lies in the hermeneutic subtleties embedded in its wily paronomasia (i.e. “ngoma ya kizungup’ia” and “tuzione rakisi”), its reenactment of an arcane cultural practice (“kiumbizi kiumbia”), and ultimately its Signifyin(g) stance – which is poetic and figurative in essence, but also hinges on context and the highly hermeneutic act of encoding. In each case, the hermeneutics are inextricable from the poetics. Assuming I succeed in making my translation embody culture, how can a foreign reader experience that embodiment if the cultural information is not transmitted?

I see the poem spinning, mimetic of its own trope. Benjamin reminds us, “yet any translation that intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but communication – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations” (*ibid*: 253). I know that behind the trope there lies rich political and cultural history. I do not want my translation to transmit; I want it to spin. But even when it assumes the literal form of a spinning top, I cannot spin it into a state of transparency that would transmit its rationale for spinning. In the absence of shared cultural knowledge, Signifyin(g) signifies nothing. Without an extensive footnote (or perhaps a rambling academic paper), I cannot grant the reader that necessary knowledge. If the reader is not familiar with the trope behind the mimesis, and the historical significance behind that trope, then the spinning of the poem is nothing more than wheels spinning within wheels. And that leads us back to where we began – lost in translation, by definition untranslatable, and above all, failing – no matter how artistically.

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<sup>6</sup> In an equally iconic essay that has little to do with translation, Benjamin mentions “epic poetry” as one of a handful of art forms that provide for “simultaneous collective reception” (Benjamin 2010: 1065). So it is likely he would have distinguished Muyaka’s oral poetry of war and resistance from other literary works and recognized communication as an essential component of its exhibition value. But that does not mean he would have approved of a translation that merely transmitted communication instead of “produc[ing] in that [target] language the echo of the original”, as I hoped to achieve by replicating Swahili poetic devices and dance forms in English (Benjamin 1996: 258).

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### Appendix

The earliest dictionary entry on *kiumbizi* appears to be Steere's handbook from Zanzibar, "a peculiar way of beating the drum; the people sing the while" (1870: 315). Steere consulted Krapf's lexicographic legwork, which had been collected earlier (Krapf was stationed mostly in Mombasa from 1844-1852) but not published until 1882, when it lists *kiumbizi* as "a beating of the drum accompanied by the song 'Shetani ndo, tupigane fimbo'" later compared to the additional term "gongue s.; - ni ngoma wa ku teza watu wa mrima (*cfr.* kiumbizi) wakipiga fimbo za muaka" (Krapf 1882: 163, 87). Conceivably they both misconstrued the ever-polysemic *ngoma* as "drum" rather than "dance," perhaps due to misinterpreting the function of the sticks. It is unclear whether they came upon this definition independently, or one consulted the other's work. Krapf "on first reading [Steere's] book considered it plagiarism" (Krapf 1882: x). For his part, Steere admits influence but says Krapf's Mombasan dialect and inexact spelling rendered his work less than useful (Steere 1870: v). Krapf assigns the latter term "gongue" to Mrima, which he locates at "the coast-line opposite Zanzibar and inland for two days' march, about twenty miles" (1882: 244). This is the only source I have found assigning (a possible version of) *kiumbizi* to anywhere other than Zanzibar or Lamu. Madan's 1903 dictionary collected in Zanzibar in 1890 finally has: "Name of a kind of dance with sticks" (Madan 1903: 169). R. Skene supplies another early description as a wedding and circumcision dance in Lamu by the name "Ngoma ya Fimbo", possibly an understandable mishearing of *ngoma ya simbo*, identified by Gearheart as synonymous with *kiumbizi* (Skene 1917: 416, Gearheart 2015: 274). W. H. Ingrams indicates that *kiumbizi* was prohibited in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Zanzibar (Ingrams 1931: 401). This is eerily reminiscent of how capoeira, another martial dance form developed in resistance to the Portuguese empire, was banned in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil. Ingrams cites an elderly Arab "historian" that the dance is "Indian in origin" (*ibid.*: 125). However, this "historian" cites this information as evidence for his theory that the ruins of Pemba (presumably either the Pujini or Ras Mkumbuu ruins) were "built by Indians," which suggests he is a less-than-reliable source regarding cultural and artistic provenance (*ibid.*: 125). Peter Lienhardt mentions *kiumbizi* dances taking place in Lamu and describes them as "in association with spirit cults which are naturally anathema to strict Islam" (Lienhardt 1959: 238). In practice, *kiumbizi* was and still is an identifiably Swahili dance. A recording "Kirumbizi" was included on the album *Music of the Waswahili People of Lamu* (Boyd 1985). The Pemba-based dance group Kiumbizi performed it at Zanzibar's annual music festival Sauti za Busara in 2017, as did the Pemba-based Hiyari ya Moyowo in 2005. It is traditionally performed on the first day of the annual Lamu Cultural Festival (Kahuno 2017: 103). It would be excessive to cite every retrievable video recording, but a YouTube search for "kiumbizi" or "kirumbizi" will yield several additional contemporary instances.

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