Writing as Translation in Africa: The Case of Hama Tuma

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Abstract
With more than 2,000 languages still currently spoken, an average 35 to 40 in each country, Africa is perhaps the richest continent in terms of interlingual activities, past and present. The coexistence and reciprocal influence of so many languages across so vast and diverse a continent has obviously gone hand in hand with translation: from daily communication within and across small communities to the interactions with 'foreigners'; from the oral, intra- or interlingual transfer of tales, legends and even commercial or medical practices to the transposition of sacred texts and official documents. The complexity and wealth of translational activities in Africa – the very notion of translation being purposefully diluted – are inversely proportional to the attention these phenomena have so far received within translation studies. This article aims to contribute to redressing this inversed proportion by casting light on translation activities in Africa, with a special focus on writing as translation in the post-colonial era. After a series of reflections on the development of translation and writing activities over the past decades, the paper focuses on Ethiopian writer Hama Tuma and his ideologically-charged writings in English as translations.

Keywords: translation, writing, Africa, literature

1. Translation and its study in Africa

Africa has been at the core of a number of more or less interdisciplinary approaches to the study of its languages and cultures: at the crossroads of sociology, anthropology, linguistics, theology, post-colonial and cultural studies[1]. Africa is also one of the world's major

[1] I wish to thank Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Associate Professor of African History at the University of Macerata, Italy, for providing the inspiration for this article and granting me constant support in the writing process.

cradles of interlingual communication, with about one third of the world's languages being born there and more than 2,000 languages still currently spoken throughout the continent (Djité 2008); an average 35 to 40 in each country. The advent of European languages with colonisation has only increased the number of languages used in Africa, undoubtedly with varying impact on the relations between vernacular and imposed languages, which we shall touch upon in the next two sections.

The more or less harmonious coexistence and reciprocal influence of so many languages across so vast and diverse a continent has obviously gone hand in hand with translational activities: from daily communication within and across small communities to the interactions with 'foreigners', from the oral, intra- or interlingual transfer of tales, legends and even commercial or medical practices to the transposition of sacred texts and official documents. Translational activities across Africa, just like other cradles of linguistic and cultural interaction beyond Europe and North America, have always been multifarious but hardly ever the object of systematic investigation. The study of translation in Africa has been limited, only recently brought to the attention of international translation scholars and is still underdeveloped. Before the beginning of the 21st century, observations and analyses of translational activities were mainly included in studies by ethnographers, anthropologists, orientalists, and occasionally historians, clearly not representing the core of their interests. If this can be connected with the generalised tendency to attach an accessorial nature to translation and its study, it is also due to a number of other important factors which this paper will attempt to outline. Indeed, a major difficulty in dealing with translation in Africa lies in the extremely complex, multiple and diluted meaning which the very word 'translation' assumes with reference to this continent as a translational context: the old-fashioned concept of translation proper (Jakobson 1959) needs to be overcome straightaway when thinking of Africa, to encompass a host of creative acts of transfer with – as we argue in this paper – writing as translation at the forefront.

The large variety of translation activities in Africa is reflected in the contributions gathered in a volume edited in 2009 by Judith Inggs and Libby Meintjes and entitled *Translation Studies in Africa*. A look at some of the statements made by these authors will help

clarify our point. Paul Bandia, author of the first essay in the volume, sets out by stating the need for "a broader definition beyond the mere passage from one language to another to include the various aspects of translational and transcultural encounters" (2009: 1). He goes on to say that "there is no doubt that translation has played an important role in ensuring communication and exchanges between the numerous linguistic and ethnocultural groups on the African continent", and adds that "given the continent's vast oral traditions and the many non-alphabetised languages, the writing of these cultures can be viewed in terms of translation" (p. 2), thus speaking out one of the main peculiarities of translation-related activities in Africa, namely the passage from orality to writing. Libby Meintjes, editor of the volume but also author of one of the essays, talks about translation as creative writing (Inggs and Meintjes 2009: 68), as an activity subject to intertextual influences, where intertextual is to be understood as inter-con-textual, with interaction among different settings, traditions, cultures, languages. Judith Inggs (p. 137), herself co-editor and author, explores translation alongside re-telling, seeking to identify the different processes at work "within a context of translation and re-telling as mediation, imposition or appropriation". Last but not least, translator and scholar Leon de Kock deals with multilingualism in writing and translating in Africa, talking about "a mish-mash of English and African languages" and "an intoxicating cross-fusion of texture and idiom" (pp. 27-9).

The references above reinforce the image of Africa as a multifaceted translation landscape, encompassing ordinary as well as artistic activities, having a bearing on local interactions but also on international policies, in the past just like today. The next section provides insights into some of these multifarious practices observing them along the temporal axis, whereas section three focuses on writing in English as translation in the past decades, after decolonisation. The final two sections focus on a unique case study: Ethiopian-born writer Hama Tuma and his writings in English as translation of ideas and ideals.

2. Writing and translating before, during and after colonisation

Discussing translation and writing activities in Africa along a temporal axis which revolves around colonisation will almost

certainly induce a negative perception in the readers of this essay. Indeed, such a choice would seem to be in line with the all-too-frequent reference to colonisation as a major historical divide and influential factor in the shaping and reshaping of socio-political identities and interlingual/intercultural communication. And yet, the reference to colonisation carries here no particular connotation and does not wish to represent a historical milestone: it is merely used to provide a simple, tripartite and fairly flexible classification of major trends in translational activities in Africa, which we shall analyse in geometric terms. In other words, by referring broadly to pre-, during and post-colonial times, we aim to see how translation, and writing as translation, has followed trajectories which, contrary to what is normally thought, are not always straight lines.

Paul Bandia, like other scholars investigating translation in colonial and post-colonial settings, refers to what we may term the 'geometric revolution' that colonialism brought about in translation and writing as a passage from horizontal to vertical processes. If writing and translation were carried out in Africa before European colonisation, they occurred mainly in a peer-to-peer manner, i.e. between linguistic and cultural systems of similar status. With the advent of colonialism, as Bandia points out, two major vertical axes came into force, subverting horizontal practices and pushing them to the margins. The advent of European languages brought about the urge to codify in writing what had up to that point been transmitted orally, thus attaching a higher value and power to writing rather than oral cultures. Also, translation processes were by and large re-oriented towards a vertical axis which saw the language of the coloniser as the powerful driving force, sweeping away translations among the vernacular languages.

Although these are undoubtedly true facts, they are perhaps an oversimplification of what happened. Bandia himself seems to go beyond his simplified 'geometric' analysis when stating that:

> Today's culture of modernity assumes precedence over tradition by celebrating writing over orality. Having proscribed African culture to the realm of orality, modernist thinking seems to view translation in Africa mainly as a consequence of the arrival of outsiders with fairly developed writing cultures. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is documented evidence of the existence of many indigenous writing systems,

as well as other mechanisms for intercultural communication and cultural transfer between various ethnic groups and peoples in pre-colonial times. […] Orality played a major role in the expression of African cultures, shaping the language and the various forms of enunciation that were conducive to an oral aesthetic. (Bandia 2009: 3)

If, among other things, Bandia focuses on the great value of orality in transmitting, renewing, and expressing the aesthetic value of African cultures and languages, he seems to overlook the existence of vertical translation processes well before colonialism, with African languages sometimes being at the top of a vertical axis with Western-derived traditions and practices at the bottom. For instance, in the Horn of Africa[2], Ge'ez played a role which is somehow similar to that of Latin in Europe. A South Semitic language by origin, Ge'ez developed in the Horn of Africa several centuries before Christ, with the first attested inscriptions dating to the 5th century B.C. It served as the official language of kingdoms and liturgies[3] in a vast area, and was used in writings until the 19th century. Ge'ez has always been a *written* language, also employed by missionaries and other Western foreigners to familiarise themselves with the religious and political customs of the region. From this language stemmed the (written) development of a number of languages: Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigré and Gurage. Moreover, Ge'ez was used as a point of departure and arrival for many translation processes, its influence having perhaps even benefited from the advent of colonialism. Therefore, taking Ge'ez as an example – which could be further integrated by referring to pre-colonial translation processes involving Arabic – it is clear that vertical translation processes were present in Africa well before colonisation and they were often instrumental to the success of European colonising endeavours.

In colonial times, another type of translational activity became common, i.e. the written codification of attitudes, daily practices, appearances of the local communities by, on behalf and under the guidance of the colonisers. This type of process, which Paul Bandia

[2] We are here referring to the Horn of Africa in its most common, contemporary sense, i.e. the region including Ethiopia and Eritrea.
[3] Ge'ez is still being used for liturgy in this region.

(2009: 5) defines "anthropological translation", is an intersemiotic transfer which implied textual and contextual manipulation, and which perfectly embodies a vertical process of power exertion. However, once again, and as Bandia himself makes it clear in the quote above, the passage from oral to written form was *not* always instrumental to colonisation. On occasions, it was an enrichment of local cultures, such as the case of vernacular languages which were driven by this colonially-induced impulse to give themselves an alphabet and codify their grammatical system: a first effort towards the formation of new national identities.

In all the instances which can be gathered under the umbrella of intersemiotic translation from non-verbal and oral signs into writing, verticality and horizontality have crossed each other's paths in a host of different ways, sometimes even leading to new directions, no longer on the perpendicular axis.

Transversal processes of translation, at different angles and slants, are a typical product of the aftermath of colonialism. In post-colonial times, up until today, a number of new avenues have been designed, especially within the vast realm of new writing as translation. This is the definition that is often employed with reference to African Europhone literature, i.e. the proliferation of literary and non-literary writing in English but also in French, Italian and Portuguese.

The next section attempts to explore these transversal trajectories, with special reference to African writing in English.

3. African writing in English as translation

> An African writer should write in a language that will allow him to communicate effectively with the peasants and workers in Africa – in other words, he should write in an African language. […] Literature published in African languages will have to be meaningful to the masses and therefore much closer to the realities of their situation. (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986: 253)

The statement above, by Kenyan writer and intellectual Ngugi wa Thiong'o, has been often quoted as an example of a reaction against the excessive use of English and other European languages as means of literary expression in Africa. And yet Ngugi wa Thiong'o himself, who had set off as an Anglophone literary author and then decided

to continue solely in his native language, Gĩkũyũ, had to resort to translation into English to ensure international distribution to his works (Bandia, 2009). Moreover, as Joseph Schmied puts it:

> Despite these arguments, Ngugi has found few followers in practice; possibly because he forgot that peasants and workers may be no more literate in an African than in a European language. He may also have overlooked the fact that English is now an African language in some sense, and accepted as such by many Africans. […] On the other hand, it is also important to remember that English has served as a medium of African expression since it first found its way into the continent, and won international recognition with the Nobel Prize award to Wole Soyinka in 1986. For at least two centuries English has been used for letters and diaries, for journalistic reports and accounts of travel, for literary comment and political tracts, for sermons and public speeches and fiction of all types. (Schmied 1991: 120)

Besides his comments on Ngugi wa Thiong'o's social and linguistic attitude to writing, Schmied's words above are particularly interesting on two different levels. First of all, he states that English is considered, at least in some countries, an African language. Secondly, he reminds his readers that English was a medium of expression in Africa before colonialism, which somehow brings us back to section 2 of this essay and to the reflections on the presence and use of writing in Africa before the colonial era. These, like the reflections made in section 2, confirm that colonialism stands out mainly as a negative divide, which changed the perception of events and attitudes occurring before and after its introduction.

Just like the passage from orature to writing, the use of English in Africa after the colonial days has been at the core of controversies, nonetheless remaining extremely lively and dynamic throughout the continent. In this section, we will attempt to provide coordinates to understand the nature and function of African writing in English as translation, with literature as a main reference context and political and ideological stances as a clear, unavoidable backdrop. In order to provide insights into the how and why of English in Africa after the colonial days, we will follow a journalistic-style track: starting with definitions of *what* African writing in European languages as translation is, we will move on to observing the characteristics of the authors of these works (*who*). We will then discuss the use of

English in these contexts (*how*) and finally reflect on the type of texts that result from these writing-as-translation processes (a sort of secondary *what*).

To try and define African writing in English, seeing it as a translational activity, let us rely on quotes from two African translation theorists. In a popular 1992 article, Egyptian scholar Samia Mehrez points out that,

> indeed, the emergence and continuing growth on the world literary scene of postcolonial anglophone and francophone literatures from the ex-colonies as well as the increasing ethnic minorities in the First World metropoles are bound to challenge and redefine many accepted notions in translation theory. (Mehrez 1992: 121)

Mehrez was perhaps among the first scholars to see a movement within translation studies: a movement towards the encompassing of new, intercultural forms of literary expression.

In his writings, Paul Bandia (2006; 2008; 2009) defines the practice of writing in English in Africa, or by African-born writers, as intercultural and translingual. He says this practice, however multifarious it is and may be in the future, is very much a form of translation: translating into a non-native language ideas, experiences and fictional tales stemming out of an African cultural and linguistic *milieu*; adapting the structure and lexicon of what becomes a second, acquired language, to express what does not intrinsically belong to it; writing in English the oral narratives of Africa are all acts of translation, conscious or unconscious. To compare what he terms "postcolonial intercultural writing" and interlingual translation, Bandia says:

> Indeed, several parallels can be drawn between postcolonial intercultural writing and translation. They both involve movement from one language culture into another, except that in postcolonial intercultural writing translation is understood in the metaphorical sense of transgression, displacement, transportation, or movement from a local colonized culture to an alien colonizing language culture. In other words, while interlingual translation usually involves importing foreign language elements into one's own culture, postcolonial intercultural writing as translation involves a movement in the opposite direction, an inverse movement of representation of the Self in the language of the Other. (Bandia 2008: 3)

Among others, the concept of *displacement* evoked by Bandia is particularly worth reflecting upon: in fact, translations – more or less 'proper' – always imply a displacement, a relocation, and a certain degree of hybridity. If they do not suggest displacement and hybridity, they often amount to excessive manipulation and domestication.

But who are the people behind such new writing-translating processes? What are their distinctive traits? With reference to the diffusion of English throughout Africa, Schmied (1991: 27) states that "Calling African nations Anglophone is obviously a gross exaggeration, because all of them – including the nations with a sizeable number of English mother-tongue speakers – are Afrophone. […] The English-speaking and English-using section of African nations is only an educated minority". Borne out of an educated minority, those individuals who choose English as a means of literary and non-literary expression are defined by Schmied "adaptionists" (p. 121), i.e. those who accept English in Africa as a historical fact and consider it a tool in their own hands[4].

Although referring mainly to Francophone African writing, Jacques Chévrier (1978) suggests three extremely interesting categories for the authors of such writing-as-translating activities: *les inconditionels*, *les réticents* and *les réalistes.* The first correspond to those who thoroughly accept the language of the former colonial dominators and enthusiastically embrace it; the second are writers who do not feel at ease with the use of a 'foreign' language but recognise its power; the third are in line with Schmied's adaptionists, i.e. writers and intellectuals who realise that French and English are here to stay and can be exploited to spread their message globally. This last category includes, as we shall see in the next section, Ethiopian writer Hama Tuma.

To move on to a reflection on the language these writers-translators use (*how*), we will here only refer to the most prominent strategies featured in their works. English in contemporary Africa, just like all European languages in post-colonial settings, is a multifaceted, living, ductile entity, its idiosyncratic use by individual writers being as meaningful as the appropriation and reshaping of

[4] Consider the famous quote by Chinua Achebe: "I have been given this language and I intend to use it" (1975: 55).

it by entire communities. Pascale Casanova (2004: 282) defines English as used in writing as translation as a "new idiom" often combining the lexicon and structure of the colonial language with the thought and the spirit of the mother tongue. By virtue of its multifarious and dynamic nature, English, used in this way, escapes definitions and falls outside canons and rules. Interestingly enough, in his reflections Casanova also remarks that African literature in English has the advantage of "assembling a patrimony" (p. 284) for those mainly oral African cultures that would not have been codified otherwise. One is here left to wonder whether these cultures and traditions really needed to be collected and codified as a written patrimony. Or whether they would not fulfil the same 'heritage function' without Europhone, written encoding, which also implies surrendering dynamism in exchange for fixity.

To conclude these reflections on the *what/who/how* and secondary *what* of African writing in English as translation, let us now very briefly focus on the texts themselves, these literary and non-literary African activities in English. If writing-as-translation is *per se* extremely complex in nature, multifaceted and often idiosyncratic; if the language used is hybrid; if the author is in between two or more cultural and linguistic codes, the resulting texts cannot but be hybrid themselves. See, for instance, what Mehrez says with reference to this:

> These postcolonial texts, frequently referred to as 'hybrid' or 'métissés' because of the culturo-linguistic layering which exists within them, have succeeded in forging a new language that defies the very notion of a 'foreign text' that can be readily translatable into another language. (Mehrez 1992: 121)

This is precisely what we find in Hama Tuma and his writings in English. Bursting with energy, dynamic ideologies, wit and a creative use of English, his portrayals of people are realistic yet humorous caricatures. In the next two sections, we shall explore Hama Tuma's production in English by following the path outlined in this section. We shall first of all focus on the author himself (*who*), then on his written production in English and Amharic (*what*) and finally, most specifically, on his use of English as translation.

4. Hama Tuma: English words, revolutionary Ethiopian mind

Hama Tuma is an Ethiopian intellectual, political activist and writer born in Addis Ababa in 1949. Having taken a strong political stance against the Ethiopian regime of emperor Haile Selassie, he fled the country as "persona non grata"[5] in 1969 and adopted the fictional name which has since successfully disguised his true identity. He then lived in Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and travelled across Europe. He spent some time in the USA and currently lives in France. While still occasionally writing fictional stories and poems, Hama Tuma has in the past decade been increasingly active on the political front, working as a journalist but mainly speaking out against the Ethiopian and other African regimes through his website (http://www.hamatuma.com) and blog (http://hamatuma.blogspot.com). Under his real name, Hama Tuma may also be active on political websites and forums.

In terms of literary production, Hama Tuma started off brilliantly in 1993 with the publication of a well-received collection of short stories in English, written in the 1980s and early 1990s, and entitled *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*. The volume, published by Heinemann, was accompanied by a brief introduction by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, himself a social and political activist. Writing and publishing collections of stories and poems in English but also in Amharic, his native language, to then return to English as a main tool for expression, Hama Tuma perfectly embodies the contemporary, heteroglossic African writer. The bulk of his fictional and non-fictional production is in English, with a series of rather harsh, ideologically-loaded collections of essays called *African Absurdities* whose latest issue (No. IV) appeared in 2010. In between, Hama Tuma published another collection of short stories, this time with Infinity Publishing and under the title *The Case of the Criminal Walk and Other Stories* (2006).

With reference to Jacques Chévrier's classification above (see section 3), Hama Tuma's attitude towards writing in English falls partly within the domain of *les réalistes*. Hama Tuma is as a realist in his own terms, as he does not so much write in English to send a

[5] This is what the author himself declares on his website: http://www.hamatuma.com/abouthama.htm, last accessed March 28, 2013.

message to the centre of the Empire (Chévrier 1978), but rather to communicate with his fellow Ethiopians – in the hope of awakening their rebellious consciences – and with the rest of the world, wishing to make it aware of the injustices perpetrated by the rulers of his country in the past 40 years. Nonetheless, the best definition of Hama Tuma's efforts and the effects of his writings in English is provided by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his introduction to *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*:

> The Ethiopia of these stories is full of words like white terror, red terror, anarchists, bolsheviks, capitalists, fascists, kings […]. The trouble is that all this is true and Hama Tuma brilliantly captures the contradictions that make up the real Ethiopia of the twentieth century. The stories open a window into the soul of a nation […]. At the centre of all this drama are the Ethiopian people, and the drama of their lives as they struggle with both the natural and human elements is the real focus of Hama Tuma. (in Hama Tuma 1993: x)

Indeed, two of the aspects highlighted by Ngugi wa Thiong'o are essential to an appreciation and understanding of the stories in this collection: Hama Tuma, still close to the souls, lives and habits of his fellow Ethiopians, captures all of this and tells it with irony but also with melancholy, spontaneity and a true love of the deep soul of his motherland.

In the 2006 collection, *The Case of the Criminal Walk and Other Stories*, the English he uses, the rhythm of his stories as well as the overall themes he deals with vary considerably. As for the use of English, perhaps due to his long pause in writing fiction, to his rather poorly received experiments in Amharic, and most certainly because of his increasing exposure to English as spoken in Anglophone contexts, these new stories appear more fluent, less hybrid, and also somehow less intense. As for the topics and how they are dealt with, this second collection reveals a greater distance from the motherland and yet a harsher attack against the Ethiopian government and social system. The collection also, probably for the first time, tells stories of 'hybrid' Ethiopians: those who have studied abroad, those who have fled the country and then tried to come back, those who, like himself, feel the burden of not belonging (to the place) anymore. For a short semantic and linguistic analysis of Hama Tuma's stories as

translations, we shall at this point only focus on excerpts from the first, more popular collection of his short stories.

5. *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*

In the author's brief note introducing this collection, Hama Tuma explains that in his stories "the name Ethiopia is used in its ancient sense to denote half of the area of Africa" (1993: vii). This assertion serves the purpose of avoiding too straight a reference to places, peoples and facts in his criticism, but it also conveys a deep love of his country, which he wants to keep seeing as strong and powerful as when it was the first empire of Africa. A few lines later in this note, Hama Tuma adds that he "believes that the Ethiopian reality is stranger (and more horrible) than fiction" (p. vii), somewhat contradicting his previous expression of love and revealing the mixed feelings he has for his motherland.

All of these contrasts are juxtaposed in *The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor and Other Stories*, a brilliant, powerful and humorous account of Ethiopian life and spirit, sprinkled with revolutionary outcries and structured as a series of fictional court trials. However, to observe all of this more directly, let us quote from the book itself, starting with the prologue which the author provides. The excerpt below, from the first paragraph of the prologue, reflects Hama Tuma's own character, his awareness of modernity and all that it implies, and yet his profound respect for African traditions and wisdom.

> We live in an age of intercontinental ballistic missiles and inter-space rendez-vous and it would be ridiculous for us to cling to age-old customs and backwards traditions. But, as my father used to say, "If you forget the way of your fathers, the white man will bed your mother and worse you will unashamedly call him daddy". (p. 3)

A few lines below, Hama Tuma embarks on one of the many characterisations of his fellow Ethiopians that the collection of stories abounds in.

> As a people, we Ethiopians are conformists. We hate surprises, especially pleasant ones, and we are comfortable with grim reality. (p. 3)

He clearly puts himself among the Ethiopian people, using a "we" which recurs in his 1993 stories but never appears in those published in 2006. Then, providing his first, socio-cultural portrait of his fellows with reference to the use of language, he states that "the Ethiopian speaks in wax and gold, double entendres, parables and non-sequiturs" (p. 3), thus introducing another recurrent element in his stories, one which is particularly meaningful for our analysis. Using English words to describe the Ethiopian mind, life and attitudes, Hama Tuma often enters the realm of metatextuality, reflecting on the way words are used, i.e. on the importance of languages and how/when/where they are spoken.

One word he occasionally plays with in his stories is 'Europe'. In the prologue, he puts a distorted form of the noun ('Awropa') in the mouth of an old uncle of his; probably a fictitious reference, this serves the purpose of evoking that fuzzy, often unquestioned respect by Ethiopians for a geographical and political reality which they do not actually know.

Moving on to one of the stories, *The Case of the Queue-breaker* stands out as a brilliant – but also melancholic and harsh – depiction of a very special habit of Ethiopians, which is here compared with the custom of peoples in European socialist countries at the time of Tuma's writing. The story focuses, as most others, on the unstable and unfair concept of justice in Africa: by recounting the deeds of a queue breaker sentenced for life after deciding to skip a queue once in his life, it also talks about the wish to be different and try to assert one's ideas.

> Life is one long queue, from birth to death you stand in line with your soup bowl or bread bag. Either you get it or you don't. Queuing is an art, it is a science. It has its own philosophy, its own dialectics and political economy. And no one beats the lucky citizens of revolutionary and socialist lands in this refined art. In Ethiopia, as in Russia or Poland, to queue or not to queue is the question of life or death. […]
>
> Queuing plays a crucial role in the forging of the New Man in Ethiopia. Can he queue is the question asked to find out if one has the patience, determination and stamina to be a worthy revolutionary. […] The queue is anti-capitalist. The queue is a school. Daily, the newspapers carry fascinating stories on what takes place in queues all over the city. There was the story of the married couple whose love bloomed while waiting for their turn outside a bakery. (pp. 64-5)

Life and love are nurtured, distorted or even destroyed by queues, just like life and love are distorted by all social and political impositions. To conclude this story, Hama Tuma offers a piece of wisdom to an unspecified friend, a fellow who, like himself, feels compelled to obey a personified yet distant, almost unfriendly Revolution.

> Some get punishment at the queue. However, the Revolution says we must queue. Nothing comes easy, patience is a virtue, to wait is a duty, penury is our property. Even twins are born one after the other, as the proverb says. To each his time, meanwhile queue up my friend. (p. 72)

In another story, which gives the whole collection its title (*The Case of the Socialist Witchdoctor*), the opening paragraph focuses on one of Ethiopia's – and Africa's – frequently stereotyped attitudes: superstition. This is presented in typical Hama Tuma's style, i.e. with irony, although the irony is in itself complex and stratified. As Hama Tuma says, if Africans are indeed superstitious, often to a significant extent, non-Africans have countless irrational taboos of their own. However, rather than questioning the latter, they prefer to focus on the other's (Africans') superstitious attitudes, which they pretend to know well. A look at the other's faults and irrationalities is often much simpler to handle, while also serving the purpose of reinforcing, by contrast, one's own strength.

In this story's opening sentences, Hama Tuma identifies with the "blacks"; he mocks colonialists and post-colonialists and, most interestingly, he introduces his reflections on the age-old practice of witchcraft by referring to the mistaken and superficial knowledge of African customs by the non-Africans:

> As many old colonialists and modern liberals of the some-of-my-best-friends-are-black variety will surely tell you, we blacks are a superstitious lot. Of course, we do not fear number thirteen or walking under a ladder, but we have other devilish fetishes. If that special bird in the forest sings that special tune early in the morning we cancel even a long-planned trip to visit a mistress. If the Zar woman flings herself into a devilish dance we shake and stutter. Witchdoctors are our lot just as much as military dictators. (p. 30)

In the lines above, the irony takes a number of forms, including the reference to military dictators which recurs throughout the

whole collection of stories. The parallel drawn between witchcraft and military regimes is further developed as Hama Tuma brilliantly defines another distinctive feature of his fellow Africans: faith in fate, i.e. fatalism. This, as we can see below, is summed up in a motto placed by Hama Tuma in the mouths of Ethiopians/Africans:

> Going to witchdoctors is part of our three thousand years of history. Red hens for New Year, white sheep for Christmas, amulets, appeasing the spirits by eating the heart or kidney of a freshly-killed sheep, dead birds as love potions […]. We all know these charms and more, and we use them. Even those who should know better say 'Who knows'? The classic Ethiopian way of justifying resort to ancestral baloney.
>
> Who knows indeed? (p. 35)

The 'who-knows' attitude cleverly permeates the whole story, which actually closes with a known fact, and a touch of African wisdom: "Better the devil you know that the stranger angel" (p. 52).

The third and final story we shall here focus on provides a unique example of what we may refer to as crosslingual and crosscultural metatextuality: in *The Case of the Traitorous Alphabet* Hama Tuma talks about languages, their use and their power in times of war, revolution and reconstruction. Somehow anticipating a series of books to come, on the military power of crosslingual communication (Apter, 2006; Baker, 2006), he juxtaposes English and Amharic and expresses the clash of cultures and systems of thought which the aftermath of colonialism has brought about through the conflict between words and letters of the alphabet. The story recounts the unfortunate circumstances whereby a poor Ethiopian working for the printing press at the service of the regime misspelt a word in an Ethiopian political motto while transcribing it in English. It is a story which, perhaps better than all the others, weaves the translation of Hama Tuma's love of his land and fellow Ethiopians in with his revolutionary outcries. It is a story which conveys the author's mixed feelings, his knowledge of Western trends and attitudes, through a use of English which is, by itself, a continuous act of translation.

> Someone has said that during times of revolution the first victims are the words. Ideals make revolutions but revolutions kill ideals, said someone else, no doubt deceived by the reality of things. But I prefer the Ethiopian

wise man who said that the Revolution murders the alphabet, a profound observation.

The revolution is a multiform battle and the battle over words is as deadly as any other. In Ethiopia, which is officially living in a glorious period of revolution, even letters of the alphabet can have revolutionary or reactionary roles.

Every Ethiopian knows that not only should he speak very little, but he should be wary of words and letters. It's a question of survival. One has to learn slogans, mottos, new war cries, new words and the true nature of inoffensive-looking but dangerous letters of the alphabet. (pp. 73-4)

References to external influences on the author's thought are here repeatedly attributed to a generic "someone", whereas Ethiopians are mentioned openly, in particular a wise Ethiopian man and the poor, unwise Ethiopian protagonist of the story, guilty of letting himself go and trying to use English to promote the motto "Ethiopia Tidkem". His failure, due to his lack of real knowledge of the English alphabet, becomes his own damnation. A spelling mistake carries the burden of an attack against the motherland. A spelling mistake, as Hama Tuma advocates, can lead to death.

It was in fact deliberate: a crime of incalculable proportions, sabotage and treason. "Ethiopia Tikdem" spelt as "Ethiopia Tidkem" in the English newspaper. Let Ethiopia get weak instead of "Ethiopia First". (p. 75)

And finally, English and Amharic are intertwined, each seeking its own political, ideological, translational space.

"True", agreed the judge, "but then tikdem and tidkem are not really English words."
"But d and k are letters of the English alphabet," the lawyer pointed out astutely.
"Within tikdem and tidkem they become Ethiopian. Who are we to deny them the right to change citizenship? The accused knows his language. He cannot make such a mistake." (p. 79)

6. Conclusion

With this struggle for political and social identity, fought through words and letters of the English alphabet called to *translate* African ideals, we come to the conclusion of this article whose primary

focus has been on African writing in English as translation in a post-colonial context. Putting aside the reference to colonialism and its aftermath to avoid any undesired, negative connotation, let us rather recover by way of conclusion the creative dimension of the manifold activities which have been here surveyed, their dynamism, their ductility and power in forging new literary trends and promoting difference. Plurality, or rather, as translation scholar Bowker (1998) put it so well, unity in diversity. This is certainly one of the lessons to be learnt from the observation of such phenomena as discussed above: African writing in English as translation is first and foremost the translation of diversity, plurality of voices, attitudes, resentment or satisfaction, engagement or enjoyment and their projection outside and beyond national boundaries. Another lesson to be learnt is that encouraging the study of non-mainstream literary production, especially within a vast, culturally and linguistically-complex continent like Africa can only bring huge benefits to the development of translation studies.

Life and literary experiences like those of Ethiopian-born, revolutionary writer Hama Tuma, can only enrich the study and the very concept of translation. A more detailed analysis of his use of English as translation, and the way it changes throughout his written production, is certainly among the goals to be pursued by the author of this paper in the near future.

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