

# ***Mwalimu J. K. Nyerere' as an African rewriter: The case of Kiswahili creative translations and rewritings***

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## **Abstract**

Rewriting, in the narrow sense, is the presentation of works of literature to suit various ideological and poetological ends; it refers to the written process of changing genres. In the broader sense, it includes all forms of transforming a text from one culture or text type to another. In that sense, rewriting places the production and reception of literature within the wider framework of culture and history. Translation is one form of rewriting; it transforms a text written in one source language into another target language. States or their leaders can use rewritings for cultural, political, economical and ideological purposes. J.K. Nyerere used rewriting as a tool for ideological, social and Cultural Revolution. Moreover, he used rewriting as a technique of mobilizing and influencing his society towards appreciating religious doctrine and African socialism. This paper examines some of J.K. Nyerere's rewriting contributions into Kiswahili since his country's independence.

## **Introduction**

Translation as a form of rewriting has a significant contribution to the target language community. As an academic discipline, translation helps us to better understand the unique contribution of translation practices to the development of cultural, political, economical and intellectual life. Although it can serve a multiplicity of purposes, translation has always been shaped by a certain force, power, or reason. Aksoy (2001) argues that translation is closely related to progress. All the awakening periods in the history of nations start with translations. As a meeting point of different cultures and civilizations, translation introduces nations to various perspectives on their path to change and development. A deliberate selection of the texts to be translated can guide the nation on the most desirable direction of changes and developments. After independence, the African leaders used various means to make sure that their citizens had proper guidelines in dealing with and appreciating the new changes. Sometimes they acted as teachers, using selected writings to educate their society. In order to expose the evils of capitalism and colonialism, they also translated into local languages some writings that had been used by colonizers to fool the people.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mwalimu* is a Swahili word which simply means a teacher. J.K. Nyerere was known as *Mwalimu* - his profession prior to politics. When Nyerere completed his higher education, he immediately returned to Tanganyika and continued to work as a teacher. He was teaching History, English and Kiswahili. In 1953 Nyerere joined politics and he was elected as president of TAA. Nyerere also served as Tanzania's first president from 1961 to 1985, which has resulted into calling him *Baba wa Taifa* (Father of the Nation) in appreciation of his contribution to leading the nation admirably. *Mwalimu* gave his country fame and respect by leading national and international struggles to liberate the countries of southern Africa and making efforts to resolve political and military conflicts in independent neighbouring states.

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Rewriting is all about wholesale changing the form and style completely although the message remains the same or also slightly changed. It involves harmonizing, rearranging and expansion. Some scholars like Collins (2011) and Baker (2005) see a spectrum, which ranges from minor editorial changes in the received text, to changes so extensive that they are deemed to constitute independent works. Such kinds of transformed texts would be considered different compositions because their forms have changed radically. It is also worth pointing out that there are other different texts which are closely based on the original text, but are generally recognized as distinct compositions in their own right. These texts are often categorized as “Rewritten texts” (Collins, 2011; Smith, 1993). In whatever form, rewriting has been used as a tool for expressing or promoting social, political or economical stance.

J.K. Nyerere used both forms to promote ideological, political, cultural and social changes. Noss and Renju (2007) argue that both his public life and his personal life were guided by the highest ethical standards, while humility governed his actions throughout the time that he held political power as well as afterwards in retirement. Mwalimu Nyerere’s long and distinguished political career was framed by his two major literary contributions to the Swahili language which he championed as the language of the nation. These publications were his translations of William Shakespeare and of Holy Scripture into Kiswahili. In 1963, shortly after he became President, Oxford University Press published *Juliasi Kaizari*, his translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in Kiswahili. Six years later in 1969 it published *Mabepari wa Venisi*, his translation of *The Merchant of Venice*. In 1996, a decade after he left office, a Benedictine publishing house in Tanzania published five volumes of Swahili poetry under the name of Julius K. Nyerere. These poems were his rewritings of the New Testament Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in the form of Swahili epic poems (*tenzi*)<sup>2</sup>. It is the aim of this paper to appreciate Nyerere’s efforts in translating and using rewriting techniques to achieve his purposes. Noss and Renju (2007) argue that the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible are widely recognized as the two greatest influences in the formation of the English language. Nyerere as a rewriter, both of Shakespeare and of biblical texts, may have anticipated that these works could similarly serve him in his quest to achieve literary recognition and stature for his own beloved Kiswahili and the African society.

### The significance of all forms of rewriting

The choice of the works to be translated, and the guidelines and goals of the translation activity are set by certain forces. Since it is performed under certain constraints and for certain purposes, translation takes the form of rewriting an original text. The original text is chosen for a certain purpose and the guidelines of translation are defined to serve this purpose from the translator and/or those who initiate the translation activity. In this case, rewriting in order to fit that purpose, along with fidelity to the original, become the main

<sup>2</sup> The *tenzi* are narrative and didactic poems that were traditionally composed for singing or declaiming by men and women. The themes of the poems during the era of Lamu ascendancy were predominantly religious and historical. Ever popular in Swahili culture today, they are generally serious and informative poems that proclaim religious teachings, recount events of historical import, offer praise of famous people, and pronounce warnings and exhortations. Certain *tenzi* are considered to be epics, such as the well-known *Utendi wa Liyongo* that recounts the heroic life and tragic death of Liyongo, a seventeenth or eighteenth century warrior of Pate, a neighboring island to Lamu. The published volumes of the translations by Mwalimu Nyerere of the Gospels and Acts all use the key word *utenzi* in their titles, for example, *Utenzi wa Enjili Kadiri ya Utungo wa Yohanna*. The second key word in the title is *Enjili* which in Arabic usage may refer to the entire New Testament. Here it refers to the story of Jesus as told in the four Gospels. Through a striking collocation, the titles of these Gospel volumes evoke the traditional *tenzi* form of Swahili poetry as a “poem of exploits or deeds” and those deeds are *Enjili*, an Arabic religious term that refers to “Good News” or “Gospel.” Thus, the title may be translated, “The Epic of the Gospel according to the Composition of John.” The fifth volume in Nyerere’s series of Scripture translations is “The Epic of the Deeds of the Apostles.” (Noss and Renju, 2007).

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issues for the translator. Venuti (1998) argues that most translation projects are initiated by an actor of the domestic culture such as state ideology, cultural climate, the expectations of the target audience, political, economic and social reasons, and foreign texts are selected not only by the translators themselves but also by the actors, who manipulate the whole process. The very function of translation thus becomes the rewriting of the foreign text into the domestic culture in compliance with the domestic cultural norms and resources that make up the overall system of the society. In instances where translations are governed by the state or a similar institution, the identity-forming process initiated by a translated text has the potential to affect social mores by providing a sense of what is true, good, and possible.

In addition, rewriting has been used as a source of literary texts. That means, rewriting has resulted in the production and reproduction of various literary text in the language systems. Carr (2005) demonstrates that rewriting or reconfiguration is and was a normal mode of literary production since the ancient world (Kraft, 2007; Devitt, 2004). While Carr makes a valuable point here in highlighting the pervasiveness in the ancient world of literary reuses of earlier materials, it seems that real differences also exist in the extent, nature and purpose of literary reuse and that it is necessary to take these differences seriously. Rewriters have varied reasons of rewriting, apart from regenerating literary texts. As noted earlier, rewriting can be used as a tool for expressing and influencing ideological, cultural and political considerations of the rewriter (Zahn, 2010a/2010b; Falk, 2007).

When rewriting is done from prose or narrative to poetry it can serve the purpose of influencing decision and help to create significant impact. Poetry is the best and most effective way of conveying a message with an impact. When the message is sung or recited through poetry it is easily retained in the memory of the people. Noss and Renju (2007) contend that it is very common in the Old Testament of the Bible to find scriptures written in the poetic form. There is no doubt that some of the motivations for such literary rendering were emotive. That means it was done for the creation of impact. Mwalimu Nyerere, seeking to accomplish similar purposes among his people, recognized that poetry is the most effective means of reaching people with the best message of all. In the poetic form the message of the Bible could be recited, sung and retained in the memory.

### **J.K. Nyerere's rewritings**

Nyerere used various ways to sensitize his society about their independence, African socialism and cultural revolution as well as the evils of all forms of colonialism. Among other means, he used rewriting through translations and rewriting to poetological ends. Nyerere's use of these forms of rewriting was intended to establish and validate Tanzanian nationhood in terms of culture and political ideology. By using these means, he succeeded to portray the sophistication of Kiswahili, cultural traditions and politics (See the discussion in § 3.1 and 3.2). These efforts were necessary for establishing cultural validation and acted as pre-requisites for the purpose of nation building, especially in the wake of nationalist struggles and independence of African countries from their former colonial masters.

### **Rewriting through translation**

Translation activity takes the form of rewriting with respect to the idea that society is a constituent of a system which comprises categories and norms which influence the translation process with the intention of influencing the audience according to the ideology and poetics of that society. Within this framework, in the early years of the Tanzania's independence, extensive translation activities were systematically pioneered

by the head of the state, J.K.Nyerere, done from English into Kiswahili. The translations were performed through rewriting with the aim of creating a national literature and promoting African socialism and culture that was abused for centuries. Translating into Kiswahili the most famous drama, such as the plays by Shakespeare, was one of the steps towards freedom and total independence from colonialism and promoting African culture. In the introduction to the second edition of *Juliasi Kaizari*, the translator criticizes those who believe that Kiswahili is a language that does not have the capability of expressing profound thoughts or great eloquence without extensive borrowing of new foreign words. His translations indisputably refuted this belief. In this translation there are also features of rewriting. Nyerere (1969a) in his introduction acknowledges that:

*Toleo hili lina mabadiliko na masahihisho mbalimbali. Badiliko Kubwa ni la majina ... nimejitahidi kuyabadili majina yote ili matamshi yafanane na matamshi ya kibantu. Kwa hiyo tangu sasa mchezo huu si 'Julius Caezar' bali ni 'Juliasi Kaizari'!* (Nyerere, 1969a: vi)

*This version has various changes and corrections. The major changes are the names ... I have tried to change the names so that they can match the Bantu phonology. Therefore, this play will no longer be called 'Julius Caezar' but rather 'Juliasi Kaizari' (Author's translation)*

The translator here acknowledges that he indulged in poetic license in using the spelling *Antonio* in some places and *Antoni* in others because of the rhyming of lines. But he says that he did not exercise this 'freedom' often. Nyerere didn't want to imitate even the structure of the source language as a symbol of promoting African culture (i.e. Bantu languages). Wardhaugh (1986) and Lefevere (1999) argue that the structure of a given language determines the way in which the speakers of that language view the world. Usually languages reflect different values and cultures. That means, in an attempt to mediate different languages (i.e. values or cultures) translators normally attempt to naturalize the source language culture to make it conform to the culture of the target language readers. Consequently, translations are rarely equivalent to the original but just rewriting through imitating a certain source language text.

With the translation of *Mabepari wa Venisi* from *The Merchant of Venice* we can observe apparent deviations from the source language text. The reason for such deviation is largely caused by ideological differences (Malangwa, 2005). It seems significant that Nyerere's radical policy of Ujamaa (i.e. familyhood) was preceded by this highly acclaimed translation that involves significant rewriting. The translation is marked by the use of language in a manner that reflects relations of social interactions in the socialist and capitalist societies. *Mabepari wa Venisi* is more than a translation. It is an interpretation of the original text in a different context. The Merchant in the title refers specifically to Antonio. He is a Christian Merchant from Venice who owns a fleet of merchant ships (argosies) that sail to far away places such as Tripolis, Indies, Mexico, England and the Barbary Coast. In the translation, there is a shift from *innocence* of the word *merchant* - *Mfanya biashara* to the ideologically loaded hostile, pluralised, capitalists (*Mabepari*). A translation like this constitutes itself as a site of resistance. This means, literary texts, as Paz (1992) argues, historically functioned as a principal means of colonial acculturation and inscription, a way of socializing the colonized into their proper place in relation to European colonizers and the power of such texts could not be underestimated. Nyerere here is trying to reject the parochial viewpoint of the original which sees the source of the Jew's problem as lying rooted in his character rather than in the pious Christian capitalist society he lives in. The translation offers a more sympathetic approach to the Jew's problem by pinpointing the society of capitalists and

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the system of capitalism which underlie the story. The following examples also verify this argument:

**SL Text**

How like you the young German, the Duke of Saxony's nephew? (Pp.69)

**TL Text**

Na kijana **Jerumani wampendaje**, yule mpwa wa Sultani wa Saksoni? (Pp.9)

**SL Text**

What say you then to Falconbridge, the young baron of England? (Pp.68)

**TL Text**

Wasemaje, basi juu ya Falikani Kivuko, yule kijana **kabaila wa kiingereza?** (Pp.8)

In these examples and in the highlighted phrases there is shift from animate to inanimate of the persons involved (i.e. *Jerumani* and *kabaila* instead of, for instance, *Mjerumani* or *Mwingereza*). This is purely an ideological attitude of the target language society or translator towards the source language ideology. Influences, such as this, occur in works which were produced and then translated in the societies that have different ideologies. Mwansoko (2005) maintains that Nyerere had a substantial reason for translating William Shakespeares works. He translated and used his artistic creativity to condemn all the evils of colonialism and exploitation. Being determined to build a democratic and socialist society, Nyerere translated the two plays so as to express his feelings towards capitalists and the capitalism system. Translating the *Merchant* as *Mabepari* (plural) not even *Bepari* symbolizes that he disliked all the merchants, not only Shylock.

Lefevere (1992) asserts that translation is produced on the basis of an original text with the intention of adapting the original to a certain ideology or poetics of a different audience, and it is an activity performed under constraints of patronage, poetics and ideology initiated by the target systems. As such it is an act of *rewriting* of an original text to conform to certain purposes instituted by the receiving system. He also points out that the different forms of adaptations that writers commonly engage in, including: translation, criticism, commentary, historiography and anthologies, translation is the most obviously recognizable type of rewriting that is influential in projecting and disseminating the image of original writers and their works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin. Moreover, ideology functions as a tremendous constraint in the acts of translation. It is not limited to the political sphere, it is the grillwork of form, convention and belief which orders our actions. When reviewing Nyerere's translation some deviations from the original are observed in religious terms like Jew-Yahudi instead of Myahudi. In these translations, the target text is downgraded or downplayed through rank-shifting or dehumanizing.

### **Rewriting the scripture to poetological ends**

The general tendency regarding sacred and a uthoritative writings is that they are immutable. In other words, such texts are claimed to be unchangeable. However, as noted above, different attempts have been made to generate various text types from sacred and authoritative texts by means of rewriting. This means that the ideal of immutability has been challenged and as such scriptures have been changed from narrative to poetry for varied reasons. The five publications by Nyerere (1996a-e) are among the evidences of such changes from prose to poetry. Nyerere had rewritten the Biblical four gospels including Acts of Apostles from narrative style to poetic style (i.e. epic poems). Observed the following comparison of the Swahili translation of the Bible and Nyerere's creative rewriting:

Kiswahili Bible – Narrative (Acts of Apostles/ Matendo ya Mitume 1:1-2)	Epic Poetry (Utenzi)
<p>1Kitabu kile cha kwanza naliandika, theofilo, katika habari za mambo yote aliyoanza Yesu kufanya na kufundisha, hata siku ile alipochukuliwa juu, alipokuwa amekwisha kuaagiza kwa Roho Mtakatifu wale mitume aliowachagua; ...</p> <p>Source: <i>Biblia Maandiko Matakatifu</i>, 1997</p>	<p>(1) Ewe ndugu Thiofile, Kitabu cha kwanza kile Niliandika kuhusu Matendo ya Bwana Yesu, Na Mafunzo yake pia, Alofundisha Jamia,</p> <p>(2) Tangu awali mwanzoni, Hadi kutwawa mbinguni, Baada ya kuwatumia, Mitume wake rasua Alokwishia wateua, ...</p> <p>(Source: Nyerere, 1996e:5).</p>

By reading these works one would acknowledge that Nyerere is not just a scribe but rather an independent and theological creative author. He is a potential interpreter and creative writer (i.e. poet). Nyerere is referred to as a poet whose interest was always to compose poems. This is also among the reasons why he was interested to translate Shakespeare's plays which are also presented in poetic style in the original text (Mwansoko, 2005). Nyerere, therefore, used his talent to rewrite the scriptures in poetological form so as to motivate and influence the target language audience to read the word of God. Noss and Renju (2007) argue that Nyerere wanted to engage the readers with biblical truths. Polycarp Pengo, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dar es Salaam, in his preface to the five publications, argues that by using poetry Nyerere draws attention to the nation's youth for whom these tenzi may offer a source of hope as they face the future. Polycarp Pengo encourages this spirit because it helps to preach the mission to poets who do not want to read the scriptures in their prose form (i.e. the Bible). It is argued that sometime rewriting presents the stories in ways that render them more interesting. It is reported that even in Jewish literature they treated the scriptures as sources for their literary imagination. It is believed that when these texts are presented in new style it helps to reach as many people as possible (Collins, 2011 and Bannerjee, 2010).

However, with Nyerere there could be something more than just preaching the word using a different style. It could be a symbolic struggle from all forms of colonialism. In fact this is a revolutionary movement ever experienced in all Kiswahili scripture translations and rewritings. Translators and rewriters of scriptures into Kiswahili had been always observing the source language form and style. Nyerere wanted, not only to influence Kiswahili, but also to influence his Swahili-speaking audience in respect to religious style of maintaining peace and love in the socialist society. Ludwig (2001) asserts that from the new beginning of his term as the President, Nyerere attempted to involve the church in promoting cooperation. From independence Nyerere has been composing nationalist and revolutionary songs and poems, including Tanzania, Tanzania. Nyerere involved himself with the church in promoting cooperation and socialism.

Moreover, Noss and Renju (2007) argue that Julius Nyerere was a renowned political leader as well as an accomplished and dedicated poet, teacher, and translator. Having translated Shakespeare into his beloved Kiswahili before becoming President, he took up Bible translation in his retirement. In the Bible translation, instead of the usual prose of the Gospels and Acts, he adopted the ancient but still popular poetic form of the tenzi as the most effective means of conveying his message. In the Bible rewritings his goal was not simply to communicate his message faithfully and clearly, as any Bible translator would

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do, but also used vocabulary that was familiar to his audience and political terminology that they associated with him while he was their national leader. He, further, added extra information or words that are not found in the other Bible translations for the aim of observing rhyme patterns. This also justifies that the epics are rewritings which try closely to imitate certain original texts of the Bible as in the following examples from Luke 24:50 and John 2:15 respectively:

*Akawaongoza njia  
Wakaenda Bethania:  
Mikono akainua  
Akabariki Rasua. (Nyerere, 1996c:123)*

*[Akawaongoza mpaka Bethania, akainua mikono yake akawabariki. Source: Biblia Maandiko Matakatiifu, 1997]*

*Akafanya mjeledi  
Wa ukambaa jadidi,  
Akanza kuwafukuza  
Na wanyama walouza,  
Ng'ombe na kondoo wao;  
Akamwaga fedha zao,  
Meza akizipindua,  
Na watu kuwatimua. (Nyerere, 1996d:14)*

*[Akafanya kikoto cha kambaa, akawatoa wote katika hekalu, na kondoo na ng'ombe; akamwaga fedha za wenye kuvunja fedha, akazipindua meza zao. Source: Biblia Maandiko Matakatiifu, 1997]*

There is no question in these writings of replacing the original scriptures. These are new compositions that draw their source material from the traditional scriptures. As it can be observed here the form of epic is syllabic verse with line final rhyme. There is a pattern of pairing the final rhyme and which could vary from one stanza to the next. This was the poetic form that was the most appropriate for Nyerere and which was a familiar form that was suitable for the development of long and serious themes. Nevertheless, the poet-translator Nyerere found himself obliged to stretch the limits both of poetic form and of translation accuracy. He maintained the biblical format of verses and chapters and sections. In the above examples there are extra words like *njia*, *Rasua* and *jadidi* which are not found in other translations. The function of these additional words and sometimes phrases is primarily to serve rhyme patterns (i.e. to make the verses in the stanza to rhyme with other verses).

### **Conclusion**

In view of the discussion above, the message that Nyerere was trying to convey has not been grasped by most of the African states, including Tanzania. The message was that the process of true liberation will be completed only when African languages have been empowered to say with ease what has already been said in the great literatures of the West. For most states, however, the preference is to use the colonizers' languages and other cultural practices as a symbol of civilization. Although there are notable voices trying to foster and further Nyerere's efforts, these are silenced by the powerful elites who have a stake in the promotion of the colonial languages as symbols of civilized living. This is indeed a perpetuation of neo-colonialism in an independent state. Furthermore, despite Nyerere's efforts to domesticate foreign works, the translated texts have remained inaccessible to the common man. There have been few reprints and there are no efforts

to produce more reprints and circulate them to the intended community. Low readership has also undermined the whole purpose of rewriting these texts. One could further argue that since the rewriter is renowned, even if there are few socio-economic benefits realized from the publications, these publications should be reprinted as a symbol of appreciating these efforts and accelerating same spirit to other Africans. The relevance of literatures that shield, challenge and promote African culture and political stance is unquestionable. Rewriting into indigenous languages is one way of proving to the world the elasticity of local languages and promoting their respectability.

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