theories and methodologies

Oyono in Arabic

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A RENDITION BY NAYIF KHARMA OF MICHAEL ETHERTON'S THEATRICAL ADAPTATION OF JOHN REED'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION, THE ARABIC VERsion of Ferdinand Oyono's novel *Une vie de boy* is at three removes from the original French. Under the title *Al-khādim* ("The Servant"), the play appeared in 1982 in the series Min al-masraḥ al-ʿālami ("From World Theater"), published by Kuwait's Ministry of Culture. Since to all effects and purposes Etherton's theatrical adaptation is Kharma's original, it is necessary to begin by describing how the Zambian-born British writer who taught drama at the University of Zambia in the 1960s adapted his source, Reed's *Houseboy*, before discussing how the play was later Arabized.

Etherton was the artistic director of the Chikwakwa ("grassroots") Theatre, created as a reaction to the racially segregated expatriate theater clubs after Zambia gained independence in 1964. *Chikwakwa* refers to an open-air theater built in 1967 and to the movement connected with it, launched in 1969 by the newly established University of Zambia to promulgate Zambian humanism, President Kenneth Kaunda's version of socialism. As Patrick Idoye explains, Chikwakwa theater "became one of the vehicles used to disseminate awareness about the national ideology" (xiii). Its primary objective

> was to develop and take to the local people drama which reflected Zambian social reality by drawing on the rich Zambian heritage of dance, music, storytelling, and using both English and Zambian languages. This objective was realized through a variety of means: provincial drama workshops, traveling theatre groups, promotion and publication of locally written plays (mainly by the university students), the construction of open-air theatres, and theatrical productions over Zambian radio and television networks. (66)

Idoye further explains that

> Chikwakwa plays were designed in the manner of the agit-prop, with simple plots and themes that were usually presented with minimum complexity. The production style resembled that advocated by Brecht: music,

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> dance, improvisation and story-telling devices were integral parts of the plays. These techniques were utilized to make the audience accept the messages of the plays. The techniques also helped to make the theatrical medium attractive and familiar to the audience. (118)

Etherton's dramatization of *Houseboy* was performed in the annual festival of the Theatre Association of Zambia, which was then dominated by white theater clubs. This "drew the Chikwakwa into the centre of the controversy regarding the nature of the theatre in the country" and "posed questions about the future of expatriate theatres" (67). The play was subsequently performed several times in Lusaka before going on tour.

Consistent with the objectives and techniques of Chikwakwa, Etherton's dramatization of *Houseboy* performs two operations on the original story that I would describe as localization and intensification. Localization aims at making a story of French colonial racism in West Africa relevant to the southern African context of nations newly independent from Britain or still in the grip of apartheid. Etherton does not change the setting: the action still takes place in French Cameroon and Spanish Guinea, and the French characters are identified as such, although they actually speak English. According to the stage directions, the African characters should speak to each other in the local language spoken where the play is performed and use local rituals whenever possible (34, 72). The directions also specify that actors supply local references: in the prologue, for instance, when the Host and the Narrator "drift onto the front of the stage area, laughing and joking in a desultory way—a reference might be made in the language of the area where the play is being performed to some local public figure caught in the act of some illicit sex" (33). Similarly, the musicians who join the cast and serve as chorus—a characteristic of Chikwakwa derived from traditional Zambian performance—play local music. Moreover, the musicians function as a dramatic link between the audience and the actors:

> The musicians enter in a song procession which moves through the audience who should recognize the song chosen by the producer. The song should be one which celebrates the rich normality of African life—either in the towns or in the country, and which amply demonstrates, particularly to any whites in the audience, that there is a huge world of vibrant culture that lies beneath the peeling world of colonial or neocolonial veneer. The musicians take up their seats as near to the audience as possible and within their constant view as much as an avoidance of masking will allow. (33)

The musicians' physical proximity to the audience—indeed, their position between spectators and actors—and the flexibility of song choice anchor the action in the location where the play is performed. This localization allows the audience to identify with the African characters and promotes both pan-African anticolonialism and the idea of "rich . . . vibrant culture" that, though it needs to be demonstrated "particularly to any whites in the audience," also needs to be demonstrated to Africans themselves.

In that sense, localization through dialogue, music, and song is one element in the play's construction of pan-African racial identity. The other element, intensification, brings into even sharper focus the Manichean nature of the colonial world depicted in the novel. The play contains an intensification of character, scene, and message. First, some of the characters' defining physical and moral features are exaggerated: the Narrator reads in Toundi's diary that the prison director, Moreau, "is big and powerful like an elephant" while his wife "is tiny and sniffling like a mouse" (40). Also more pronounced in the play is Moreau's vulgarity (63, 66, 72) and anxiety about his working-class background (56, 58). Father Kandermeyer (Van-

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dermeyer in the French original and Reed's translation) becomes a sadist and a repressed homosexual who "takes pleasure in making [unmarried African men who have sex with women] do naked penance in front of him" (40). The white schoolteacher, Silvain (Salvain in the novel), who suggests that sexual morals in Paris are no different than in Africa, becomes a revolutionary agitator in the play. In fact, the scene in which he appears is expanded from one page in the novel (50) to four pages in the play (50–53), where it features an extended verbal and physical assault on Silvain by almost all the French characters present, while in the novel the argument is between him and the doctor only. In another intensified scene, Madame rails at Baklu for not washing the laundry well: in the novel she throws items of clothing "at [his] head" (74), but in the play "[a]ll sorts of clothing is thrown about the stage—or into the audience" (69), literally airing her dirty laundry and underscoring the scandalous moral character of whites. In the same vein, a letter Madame receives from Moreau is read out loud by servants in the play but not in the novel (72).

Etherton also intensifies the play's language, especially where racism is concerned, to drive home its message. In the scene of the quarrel with Silvain, Gullet refers to the natives as "straight out of the trees" (50), which he does not do in the novel. Likewise introduced are epithets like "dirty nigger" (66, 77) and "baboon" (69). In the play Madame calls the Empress Josephine "a Negress" (51), whereas in the novel she says, "[T]he stepfather of . . . Empress . . . Josephine was a Negro" (53)—a subtle yet significant change that more dramatically undermines the racist binary supporting the colonial sense of superiority. Later on, when Toundi is being tortured (among other things by a "sjambok" [100], the hippopotamus-hide whip used by police in apartheid South Africa), the Agricultural Engineer calls him a "kaffir" (97), an Arabic word meaning "unbeliever" or "heathen" that whites in southern Africa employed as a racial slur. Etherton's introduction of words like "kaffir" and "sjambok" intensifies the language of racism in the play and localizes the story, making a Cameroonian tale resonate more powerfully in Zambia. Toundi's dying words in the novel, "what are we blackmen who are called French" (4), becomes a refrain in the play, repeated for emphasis at the beginning and at the end, where it becomes the penultimate statement (36, 37, 104). As for the play's final words, they are addressed directly to the audience, counterpointed for heightened dramatic effect by the last action in the play. Seen laughing at the back of the stage throughout the final scene, in which Toundi is being tortured, the white characters move forward until they reach the front of the stage. As they "leer at the audience and at each other, and take a repertory curtain call," Toundi "[f]rom the back of the auditorium calls out: WHO CLAPS THE WHITE MAN?" (104). He implicates the audience directly in the dramatic situation and demands that they demonstrate their moral and political stance by violating theatrical convention and withholding applause.

If the Chikwakwa theater movement's objective was to raise the political consciousness of the masses and in the case of Etherton's adaptation to sharpen the moral of Oyono's anticolonial tale and make it accessible to Zambian audiences that included illiterate spectators, in Arabic the play becomes a *Lesedrama*—a play for reading rather than performance. Translated by Nayif Kharma, a Palestinian professor of linguistics, and revised by Muḥammad Ismāʿil al-Muwāfi, an Egyptian professor of English poetry, who both taught in Kuwait University's English department, the play was published in 1982 in Min al-masraḥ al-ʿālami ("From World Theater"), an extensive series of world drama in translation sponsored by Kuwait's Ministry of Culture and edited by Aḥmad al-ʿUdwāni. Plays in the series were published every two months from October 1969 to November 1998,

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when the series began to include works in other genres and changed its name to Silsilat ibdaʿāt ʿālamiyya ("World Creativity Series"). (As of this writing, the current volume, number 388, published in June 2012, is a translation of Pascal Quingnard's *Villa Amalia*.)

In view of the Arab cultural elite's European orientation, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of plays translated for the series by 1982 were by European playwrights, with the exception of the francophone Lebanese writer Georges Shehada (vols. 31, 41, and 73), the francophone Egyptian poet and novelist Andrée Chedid (vol. 67), the Nigerian playwright and poet Wole Soyinka (vol. 77), and the Japanese dramatist Chikamatsu Manzaemon (vols. 100 and 109). Volume 152, entitled *Mukhtarāt min al-masraḥ al-ifrīqi 1* ("Selections from African Theater 1"), includes Oyono's play along with the South African writer Harold Kimmel's play *The Cell*, which were chosen from Cosmo Pieterse's edited volume *Five African Plays* (1972) and translated by Kharma. The Arabic volume begins with an introduction by the American literary scholar Juris Silenieks, written especially for this edition and also translated by Kharma. Silenieks provides a general background to African literature, addressing such issues as orality and the use of European languages, and devotes sections to poetry, the novel, and drama. He also discusses three of the plays in Pieterse's volume, although only two of these three plays were actually translated. Over the next two years, subsequent volumes in the series featured more African plays, by Kwesi Key, Kobina Sekyi, Soyinka, James Ngugi, Tom Omara, and Sam Tulya-Muhika.

The publication of *Al-khādim* and other African plays represents an attempt to introduce African writing into the overwhelmingly Eurocentric library of world literature available in Arabic translation. The sheer quantity and pace of publication in the series suggests that the plays were intended for highly literate readers rather than for theatrical production—for it is difficult to imagine theaters in Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, or even Egypt producing the large number of foreign plays published in the series, in addition to those written by national playwrights and enjoyed by the majority of theatergoers. In fact, unlike its source text, *Al-khādim* betrays no attempt on the translator's part to adapt the play to any local setting, nor is there any evidence, as far as I can determine, that it has been produced on any Arabic stage. All in all, the aims of the series in which the play was published, the translator's strategy, and the linguistic and cultural difficulties he faced produce a mixed effect: Arabic readers' political identification with Oyono's and Chikwakwa's anticolonialism is complicated by the ambivalence that has marked Arabic relations to Europe, a cultural model to be emulated and a colonial power to be fought.

Whereas Etherton's *Houseboy* is a theatrical adaptation, *Al-khādim* is a literary translation. Etherton takes liberties dictated by genre (deleting some scenes, expanding others, introducing more dialogue than narration, and so forth) and ideology (localization and intensification), making colloquial a literary text hitherto accessible among Africans only to a Euro-literate social elite. Kharma effectively reverses this trajectory when he translates the play into Arabic: it becomes a literary text intended for the cultural elites who are the primary readers of the plays published in the series. This is evident in the use of *fuṣḥa* Arabic in the translation. Arabic has at least three linguistic registers: *fuṣḥa* (the language of the Qurʾan and classical literature, considered to be the highest register and the most formal); Modern Standard Arabic (or MSA, a somewhat simplified form that is the lingua franca of education, newspapers, formal speech, writing, and modern literature and the official language of Arab states); and *ʿāmiyyah*, colloquial Arabic, comprising many regional spoken dialects, which are rarely written. Al-

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though a few novelists have used *ʿāmiyyah* in dialogue, it is considered nonliterary, and the oral poetry and popular theater using it are regarded as subliterary genres. Literary drama and translated plays are written in *fuṣḥa* or MSA and occasionally produced for smaller and more select audiences. This being the case, the translator of drama faces an immediate choice between a linguistic register appropriate for literature (and used in the plays published in the Kuwaiti series and elsewhere) and the dialect of the Arab state where the play will be performed, in which case the play must be heavily adapted for local relevance.

As a translation of "world" drama, *Al-khādim* does not hide its status as a foreign literary text. Kharma does not suggest that the director should rely on speech, song, and references specific to the social context of performance to localize the play. On the contrary, the style is elevated beyond verisimilitude. To give one example among many, Toundi uses the highly literary expression "artaʿidu farqan" ("I shiver with fright" [55]), instead of the synonymous and much more common "artaʿidu khawfan." *Khawf* ("fear") belongs to *fuṣḥa* and MSA, and because it is also used in most Arabic dialects, it would have been immediately intelligible to any Arabic speaker, regardless of education level. By contrast, *farq* rarely appears in modern prose and, when it does, the word more commonly signifies "difference," which is its primary meaning today. Thus, most readers would need to consult a dictionary to ascertain the sense in which the semiliterate domestic servant uses the word in the play. In fact, the translator felt the need to explain a number of other words in footnotes (43, 54, 56, 154), a textual procedure inappropriate for theatrical performance but acceptable in a *Lesedrama*.

By the same token, linguistic and cultural challenges would have faced the translator had he attempted to localize the play, although Kharma finds a creative solution to at least one of them. Etherton's stage directions indicate that, in the scene in which the Commandant mocks Baklu, the former speaks "in a very bad imitation of pidgin English" (44). Kharma inserts, between parentheses, "ʿarabiyya" ("Arabic") after "inglīziyya" ("English") and adds the following footnote: "We decided here to use the kind of Arabic spoken by foreigners who have not mastered it, such as the Greeks or Italians who live in Egypt, in order to make clear what is intended in the original" (70; my trans.). Kharma uses this strategy again when Gullet mocks Toundi in the same manner (*Houseboy* [1972] 49), and Kharma adds another footnote referring the reader to the previous one (although the page number is incorrectly given as 23 instead of 70 [*Al-khādim* 81]). However, this approach would not have worked in the scenes where the servants speak to each other in their native language in the presence of whites (*Houseboy* [1972] 70, 79, 80, 87, 89, 100), since by and large the multiple registers of Arabic are mutually comprehensible and would not, therefore, reproduce the asymmetrical dynamic of colonial bilingualism staged in those scenes. Furthermore, the play could not have been localized without omitting beliefs incompatible with Islam (e.g., that the soul of Pedro, who refused to convert to Christianity before dying, has turned into an owl [*Houseboy* (1972) 47]) or certain cultural practices (e.g., the use of drums to communicate news [43, 46, 50, 54, 56, 102]). By contrast, retaining such religious and cultural references in a literary translation familiarizes readers with aspects of African culture.

Aside from that, the difficulties facing the Arabic translator of the play begin with its title. No single word, or two-word combination, in Arabic conveys the racialized sense of *houseboy* as "a young male domestic servant or employee, esp. in some former British dependencies" or "any non-white male domestic servant, irrespective of age" ("House"). Kharma chooses a generic word, *al-khādim* ("servant"), but even *al-khādim al-ifrīqi* ("the

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African servant") would be only slightly better, since it still falls short of conveying the colonial and racial meaning of the word. This problem recurs throughout the play, when *boy* is rendered as its literal equivalent, *walad* ("male child"), which signifies neither racial nor class difference (139, 140, 149, 160), and as *ghulām* ("male child," "servant"), an archaic and nonracial word (168). Similar hesitancy marks the handling of the name of the police chief: the original French "Gosier-d'Oiseau" is translated by Reed as "Gullet," which Etherton retains but Kharma transcribes first as "Gulīth," then as "Gulaih" (approximating the French pronunciation of "Gullet" [40, 58]). Reed's "Michael" is likewise frenchified as "Mīshail" (which sounds like the French original, "Michel"). Other names are replaced by their Arabic equivalents: "Joseph" becomes "Yūsif," and "Paul" is given as "Būlis."

Kharma's hesitancy regarding whether and how to Arabize (through English or French) reflects an ambivalence about the cultural frame of reference (Arab or European) appropriate for interpreting the African experience and ultimately about whether to identify with the African or the European. The following two examples bring this ambivalence into focus. First, Kharma simply transcribes the loaded word *kaffir*, discussed above, into Arabic, where it originated but also where its negative weight is religious, not racial (176). Consequently, instead of witnessing a French man use racist language, readers of Kharma's text are reminded that native African religions are fundamentally different from the monotheism that Christianity and Islam have in common. Through this paradoxical error (a failure to replace an Arabic word that acquired a new meaning in English with another Arabic word that communicates that new intention—or, differently put, to translate from anglicized Arabic into Arabic) the translation conveys a sense of identification with Europeans and disidentification with Africans. By contrast, the second example suggests racial solidarity with Africans in the face of white racism: when Etherton has Baklu refer to the servants as "us blacks" (81), Kharma translates this as "naḥnu al-mulawanīn" ("us coloreds" [147]). Since the literal equivalent to *blacks* (*al-sūd*) was readily available and would have been perfectly correct and intelligible in Arabic, Kharma's decision to substitute "colored" for "black" seems to be motivated by the desire to include Arabs in a broader racial category that acquires meaning only in a racial binary in which the opposite term is *white*.

On the one hand, therefore, the act of translating the play into Arabic, especially in a series overwhelmingly devoted to European drama billed as "world" drama, expresses Third World political solidarity and an opening up to cultures beyond Europe. After all, who in the early 1980s could more readily identify with the struggle against racism and colonialism than a Palestinian? On the other hand, Kharma's translation strategy, renditions of key words, and occasional mistranslations underscore the cultural distance between black Africa and the Arab world, as well as the powerful spell of European culture. Whereas Etherton's adaptation of Oyono aimed at eliminating the distance between French Cameroon and British Zambia, Kharma's Oyono is at once a political ally and a cultural other.

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