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The metatext of culture and the limits of translation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1982)

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Abstract
This paper examines Ngũgĩ's translation of his first Gĩkũyũ language novel *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ* into English, with a view to showing how the author translates Gĩkũyũ culture and idiom into English. Starting from the premise that the act of literary creation inevitably starts within a culture, the paper proceeds from the position advanced by Nadine Gordimer that literature in indigenous African languages must be confident that it can connect with the literary culture of the outside world on its own terms (2003, p. 7). The paper goes further to shows how Ngũgĩ attempts to ensure that his translation of the novel into English does not become complicit with the linguistic and cultural hegemony of the English language while at the same time making sure that the translated text is intelligible to the English reading public. This shows the primacy of the indigenous gnosis, its language and worldview in Ngũgĩ's practice as a writer and translator and the foremost advocate of writing in African indigenous languages. The paper comes to the conclusion that Ngũgĩ's translation of the novel into English as Devil on the Cross makes deliberate efforts to resist the absorption of the indigenous culture and language by English.

Keywords: *Devil on the Cross*, culture, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, postcolonial, translation

Public Interest Statement
There is a fundamental contradiction in African literature where most writers use ex-colonial languages to express their culture. While writing in African languages may be the ideal way to resolve this problem, African language texts have often to be translated into European languages in order to reach a wider audience. However, the ex-colonial language is not an innocent tool. It has the potential of perpetuating the hierarchical structure of power not just between the coloniser and the formerly colonised but also between the elite and the rest of the people in the post colony. This paper discusses the translation as a counter-hegemonic practice which the translator can use to resist the appropriation of his or her culture by the dominant European language.

Introduction

Literature is one of the most cultural discourses. Whether writing in English or an indigenous African language, the act of literary creation inevitably starts within a culture. As Tymoczko rightly observes, the author's culture and tradition serve as a metatext that is explicitly or implicitly re-written as both background and foreground to the text (1999, p. 21). In Ngũgĩ's English writings this cultural metatext was largely relegated to the background through a process of translation in which it was subordinated to the English medium of the texts. His decision to write in Gĩkũyũ changed the dynamics of the relationship between the cultural metatext and the text. Effectively, it meant bypassing the English language as the intermediary and directly accessing the original embedded in his indigenous culture and language. This is because language is not merely a means of communication but also a carrier of culture. In other words, the choice of language was not merely a choice of medium but was in fact a privileging of an alternative culture and literary tradition other than the Western culture and its literary tradition in which the author had hitherto practiced.

Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ (Devil on the Cross) Ngũgĩ's first novel in Gĩkũyũ brought to the fore the cultural metatext which would have been suppressed if the author wrote in English. Presented in an allegorical style, the novel tells the story of the exploitation of peasants and workers in neo-colonial Kenya by local and foreign capitalists. The story revolves around Warĩĩnga, a naive girl who is sacked from her job when she rejects Boss Kĩhara's sexual advances. Her landlord then evicts her from her house in a Nairobi slum. The story deploys the journey motif as Warĩĩnga travels by *matatu* with other members of the oppressed class to IImorog in the outskirts of the city where local capitalists are competing in displaying their skills in theft and robbery before their Western mentors.

Ngũgĩ's translation of the novel into English raises the question of how elements of the indigenous culture – its literary nomenclature, conventions, and worldview – are transposed into English. This question is given agency by the fact that as Africa's foremost advocate for writing in African languages, the author-translator is ideologically opposed to the use of English which he regards as inadequate for the expression of African culture and experience. His decision to write the novel in Gĩkũyũ was therefore implicated in the need to express his culture in its own language. It is an attempt to recoup and give voice to the perspectives of a people whose voices have been muffled by a transcendent modernity and it's Englishness. But as Paz notes, "language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation" (1992, p. 154). The Gĩkũyũ language for instance has historically developed as a highly polyglot language that effectively expresses the cultural hybridity and linguistic diversity of contemporary Gĩkũyũ culture. It appropriates as part of its idiom many translations from the diverse languages with which it has come into contact over time. These include, for example, the language of Christianity and other colonial discourses including the English language. This problematizes the very notion of an African or European language and of an indigenous

or foreign language. In this context, translation is a highly contentious and manipulative activity which involves all kinds of transactions in the transfer across linguistic and cultural boundaries. It encompasses much more than the translation of an expression from one language to another and includes "the translating of one culture into the terms of another, translating the particularities of historical experience into the broader grasp of humanity, and translating specific personal experience into that broader grasp" (Overvold, *et. al*., 2003, p. 2).

Ngũgĩ has admitted that he found translating *Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ a* challenge. He first thought of translating as if he was writing the novel in English. This would have involved trying to render the feel of Gĩkũyũ speech into English. Then he decided this would be the wrong approach "because anybody who really wants to feel the rhythm of speech and syntax and so on can learn Gĩkũyũ language. I don't need to prove anymore that the character is really speaking an African language, that the character is really an African peasant" (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 207). Ngũgĩ's predicament in translating the novel is significant in two respects. First, it is an acknowledgement of the problems involved in translating literary discourse from one language to the other. Secondly, it reifies the fact that full translatability of the indigenous culture is impossible.

Given these challenges Ngũgĩ opted to convey the "essence" rather than the "reality" of the Gĩkũyũ language and culture in the translation. However, although *Devil on the Cross* is deeply embedded in Gĩkũyũ gnosis, culture and language, Ngũgĩ minimally uses such strategies as annotation to explain to the English reader some of the cultural terms used in the text. As a promoter of writing in African languages, he makes a pitch for his indigenous language by challenging anybody who wants to fully understand the translated text to learn the language. The author-translator seems to be saying that cross-cultural dialogue should not happen only when indigenous language African texts are translated into European languages but should also involve the speakers of European languages also making an effort to study African languages.

The Limits of Cultural Translation

One of the major differences between the Gĩkũyũ and the English texts is that in the translation Ngũgĩ has dispensed with the traditional opening formulas used in Gĩkũyũ oral storytelling. He has also omitted the prefatory statement, a kind of literary manifesto, which linked the original text with the indigenous tradition of Gĩkũyũ orature and his experience at Kamĩrĩithũ where working with the peasants and workers of his home village, Ngũgĩ came to appreciate the potential of Gĩkũyũ as a literary language. The reason for this erasure is that unlike the original text, the translation is targeted at an English readership that would be more conversant with the conventions of the modern novel. By eliding these details Ngũgĩ considerably downplays the performative as the context within which the original text was received. While the Gĩkũyũ text mimics an oral narrative in performance, the translation is presented like any other conventional novel.

The story deploys the journey motif as Warĩinga who has just lost her job in the city travels back home to Illmorog by *matatu* where she meets other members of the oppressed class. These people are travelling to IImorog in the outskirts of the city where local capitalists are competing in displaying their skills in theft and robbery before their Western mentors. The *matatu* is adorned with an inscription that lures travellers with the promise of "true" gossip and rumours. The suppression of the word "ma" (true) in the translation suggests that the talks in the *matatu* have no truth value (*DOC*, pp. 25-26). However, this is not the case as it soon becomes apparent that the conversations in the *matatu* – the "gossip" and "rumours" –

actually reflect the truths of the nation are its realities. From these debates we deduce that the postcolonial state is characterised by injustice, inequality and rabid abuse of human rights.

Parodying Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Ngũgĩ depicts Warĩĩnga's as a journey from the City of Desolation to the Celestial City: from the "darkness" of political ignorance to the "light" of political awareness. Like Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress,* Warĩĩnga meets "Evangelists" – agents in the novel – who guide her towards gender and political consciousness. In other words, it is an allegorical journey, a physical and symbolic journey of enlightenment during which helped by her co-travellers Warĩĩnga gradually transforms from a political novice into a revolutionary. But it is the way Warĩĩnga's journey is presented that shows the nuanced way in which the author-translator handles translation. The appropriation of *The Pilgrim's Progress* which he then "translates" into a tale of postcolonial Kenya is a hallmark of Ngũgĩ's translation strategy in *Devil on the Cross*.

The novel is divided into parts with the several numbered subsections in each part suggesting that like in an epic oral narrative, the story could be told in episodes over a span of time. The story starts with an oratorical introduction by the traditional Gĩkũyũ *gĩcaandĩ* performer's grandeur of speech that promises delivery in the mode of a performed narration. The presence of untranslated cultural terms like *gĩcaandĩ in* the novel reflects Ngũgĩ's approach to translation as a practice that reifies the artistic forms of the indigenous literary tradition. They reflect his desire give prominence to the indigenous culture in resistance to the hegemonizing tendency of the dominant European culture.

Indeed, Ngũgĩ's contestation with the Western literary tradition and culture is reflected in the way language is used in *Devil on the Cross*. The title of the novel, for instance, alludes to Christianity and Biblical discourse. A pointer to the pervasive role Christianity has played both in Gĩkũyũ culture and in the formation of Ngũgĩ's literary consciousness the title foregrounds the multiple levels of translation behind the English text. Both the Gĩkũyũ and the English texts show how Ngũgĩ translates his experience and personal interpretation of Christianity into fiction. The word "devil" – a translation of "caitaani" in the Gĩkũyũ text – is a derivative and phonetic translation of the Kiswahili term "shetani". This suggests that the most appropriate translation of the word should have been "Satan".

But the concepts of both Satan and devil are alien to indigenous Gĩkũyũ epistemology which marks Christianity as a foreign imposition. However, owing to its long presence in Gĩkũyũ culture, Christianity provides a popular idiom of representation that is readily accessible to even the uneducated audience of the original text. As a proper noun, translating "caitaani" as "Satan" would have implied that Ngũgĩ is writing about the unworldly and brought the text closer to Christian eschatological notions. In this sense, "devil" as a translation of "caitaani" is more appropriate because it is a more flexible term that refers to the "supreme spirit of evil". More relevantly, Satan / devil is also used informally to refer to wicked human beings. The same is true of the translation of "mũtharaba" (cross) which is frequently used in Gĩkũyũ popular discourses to refer to punishment or other unpleasant consequences of certain actions. Ngũgĩ's radical reversal of Christian discourse in which we see the devil instead of Christ on the cross signals his intention to appropriate Christianity and use it in a popular but non-traditional role. But who is the "devil" and what kind of punishment is meted to him?

To answer this question one has to consider the allegorical way in which Christian language is used in *Devil on the Cross*. Only through gradual revelation as the story unfolds do we come to appreciate the significance of the title as a metaphor for evil and punishment. As noted above, the story starts with a heightened lamentation by the traditional *gĩcaandĩ* player who describes himself as "mũrathi" (seer / diviner). This is interesting because although the

traditional artist was supposed to be well versed in all aspects of the Gĩkũyũ temporal and spatial experience, *gĩcaandĩ* player in the novel is fashioned on the great Biblical prophets. This is evident in the *gĩcaandĩ* player's rhetorical style which mimics the additive style of delivery inspired by the Bible: "Happy is the man .... Happy is the traveller ..." Characteristic of the formulaic expression of thought in oral traditions (Lord, 1987, p. 54), the oratorical style prepares the audience to anticipate a dramatic tale. By casting himself as a surrogate of the traditional storyteller / performer, Ngũgĩ deploys the oral forms to indigenise the novel. His intention, however, is not to reproduce the form of the *gĩcaandĩ* in *Devil on the Cross*. Rather, he aims to creatively fuse old and new forms into an aesthetic that suits his purposes in the context of contemporary public culture.

As stated by the narrator in the novel, Ngũgĩ's purpose which he shares with the *gĩcaandĩ* player is to denounce the devil who would lead people into "the blindness of the heart" and "deafness of the mind". The narrator calls on the devil to be "crucified". The language is metaphorical and polyglot: it echoes indigenous Gĩkũyũ ontology and Christian eschatological notions. However, unlike in Christianity, where judgment day awaits the return of Christ and the ascension to heaven, the devil is to be punished now. Care must, however, be taken that his acolytes do not lift him down from the cross to continue building "hell" for what the Gĩkũyũ text refers to as "mũingĩ" and the English text translates as the "people" on earth (*DOC*, p. 1). In other words, the devil is "translated" from a sacral to a physical being. Similarly, "hell" and "heaven" no longer exist in the hereafter but are part and parcel of daily life right here on earth. Characteristically in Ngũgĩ's upgrading of the indigenous language to mediate the new post-colonial public culture, the translation of "mũingĩ" (populace) as the "people" is inflected by his Marxist class analysis of the Kenyan public sphere. In the novel, the people – in Marxist terms the oppressed – discuss the connection between their situation, Biblical narratives, and the country's political predicament. Mũturi, the most politically conscious of the "Evangelists" in the *matatu* gives the rationale for Ngũgĩ's secular translation of Christian and Biblical discourses. He explains: "I believe that God and Satan are images of our actions in our brains as we struggle with nature in general, and with human nature in particular" (*DOC*, p. 57). Such usage shows how the author apprehends neo-colonial public culture in terms of the Gĩkũyũ egalitarian culture in which communities bond together to pursue communal good. This upgrading of the idiom of the indigenous gnosis is central to Ngũgĩ's use of language in the Gĩkũyũ text.

Christianity is essentially an Other-Worldly religion. But by turning Christianity on its head and linking it to temporal concerns, Ngũgĩ expresses his disapproval of the emphasis on its other-worldliness that was introduced by the missionaries and perpetuated by the Church in the post-colonial era. This made the religion seem like an ally of the oppressor classes. To counter this alliance between the sacral and secular authorities, Ngũgĩ retools Christianity as a discourse that can prophetically intervene in the public sphere in the neo-colony. This prophetic role is taken up by the *gĩcaandĩ* player, who, as I have noted, is a composite of the traditional artist and the Biblical prophets. Thus in a language that patently echoes that of the Bible, the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator ends his rhetorical introduction with a call to all to "come and reason together" before passing judgement on our children. In the Bible the Lord calls on the Israelites to reason with Him with the promise of forgiveness for their "sins", which though they are "like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah, 1: 18). In the novel however, the Biblical notion of "sin" is translated from a sacral to a secular reference to oppression. The "devil" and his followers who are responsible for the suffering of "our children" are to be excluded from the "reasoning" to which the narrator calls the public, as one of the issues to be discussed is about how to punish them. In other words, the sacral language of the Bible

and Christianity is translated into a language of secular political discourse.

Nevertheless, although his language is heavily inflected by Christian discourse, the *gĩcaandi* narrator's language basically draws from that of the ancient and now almost extinct *gĩcaandi* poetic genre on which the novel is modelled (Pick, 1973, p. 149). The first chapter of the novel establishes a clear dialogism between the novel and the oral tradition that Ngũgĩ sees as the foundation of an authentic tradition of modern African literature. The novel mimics the *gĩcaandĩ* genre, a dialogic art form in which two competing artists pose and compete in unravelling riddle-like enigmas. The central riddle in the novel relates to the identity of the devil. Mimicking the participatory exchange between storytellers and listeners in the oral tradition, the novel imagines for itself a lively community of storytellers and listeners. And just like the oral artist would not shy away from embracing new ideas and experiences (Lord, 1987: 63), the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator exhibits a full knowledge of the spectrum of life and the diversity of languages that articulate culture in the post-colonial public sphere.

The resuscitation of indigenous epistemologies and art forms leads to the resurgence of cultural terms that are not translatable in the English text. They include such terms as *mwomboko*, (dance for men and women) and *nyaangwĩcũ* (a dance for youths) (*DOC*, p. 11, p. 27). These traditional oral art forms were banned by the British during the agitation for freedom in the 1950s. Ngũgĩ's recuperation of these forms is an act of historical intervention in discourses that "perpetuate a hegemonic 'normalcy' of unequal relations between nations" (Njogu, 1999, p. 56). They demonstrate the capacity of such indigenous domains of knowledge and aesthetics to reappear and construct a counter-discourse that challenges dominant colonial and neo-colonial discourses.

Translators frequently retain cultural terms to preserve "local colour" in translation. In *Devil on the Cross* however, the untranslated elements are not adornments in this sense. They express areas of the indigenous cosmology and epistemology and a sphere of experience that is well beyond the grasp of the English language. Apart from oppressing the poor, the other serious charge pressed against the "devil" in *Devil on the Cross* is that he would lead people into "the blindness of the heart" and "deafness of the mind". The translation of the terms "ngoro" (heart) reflects the difference between Gĩkũyũ and English worldviews. The concept of the "mind" does not exist as a separate ontological category. One thinks in or with the heart (ngoro), a term that refers to a wide range of essences of the inner man such as the soul, spirit and conscience. The result of that thinking process is what is called "meeciria" (thoughts). The difference in worldview and perception between this two cultures and languages is so significant that Ngũgĩ is compelled to use a footnote to draw attention to the different ways in which Gĩkũyũ and the English language mean (*DOC*, p. 45).

I have argued that for reasons that have to do with the impulse to preserve his indigenous culture, Ngũgĩ does not strive to achieve full translatability of the indigenous language. As a result, while some cultural terms such as "ngwati" which refers to part of a foreskin that was left after a man's circumcision are elided from the translation (*DOC*, p. 17), others are just carried over into the English text. These strategies are based on the recognition that while indexing or annotation might provide a prototypic lexical definition this would not adequately represent the complex cultural concepts these cultural terms encode. The presence of untranslated terms was partly informed by his conviction that any foreign reader who wanted to get a "feel" of Gĩkũyũ could do so by learning the language. In this context, the untranslated is an invitation to the reader of the English text to strive to learn not just about the word but also about the extra-textual world in which it means (Granqvist, 2003, p. 64, p. 65). This is in line with his commitment to the promotion of indigenous African languages. In this context, the failure to translate is one way of prompting the reader of

the English text to learn the indigenous culture and language by acquainting him / herself with the untranslatable words in the text. This is significant in a situation where translation has almost always been one directional. Almost always it is African and other postcolonial cultures and languages that are translated into European languages but rarely the other way round. Ngũgĩ's translation strategy not only seeks to claim space for his indigenous language but is also, more importantly, in contestation with the Western expectation of complete translatability of African languages into the dominant European languages.

Even as a translated text, *Devil on the Cross* reifies the capacity of Gĩkũyũ and its oral literary tradition to engulf and appropriate the novelistic genre. These oral forms enhance the dialogic relationship between the "European" form novel and the oral literary tradition. An example is Warĩĩnga's narrative in which she allegorises her plight in the fate of a fictional character named Mahũa Kareendi (*DOC*, pp. 11-21). Without any annotation or indexing, the English reader is likely to take the fictional character's name as a proper name. In reality, "mahũa" (flowers) has been transposed into a proper noun to represent the beauty and delicate nature of a poor, naive girl trying to survive in Nairobi. The second name is a diminutive form and phonetic transposition into Gĩkũyũ of the English term "lady". Together, the two names literally mean "beautiful young lady". From this narrative, it becomes clear why the actions of people like Boss Kĩhara who sacks Warĩĩnga when she rejects his sexual advances are exploitative and morally repulsive.

The challenges involved in translating indigenous language literatures are not restricted to the translation of cultural material. Finding ways to transpose the meaning of the names of characters may be of concern to the translator. This is particularly so in the case of Ngũgĩ because he has a tendency to use even proper names symbolically to reflect the character's position in the oppressor / oppressed dichotomy. Warĩĩnga's name, for instance, alludes to her role as a worker. Similarly, although it is a common Gĩkũyũ name, when transposed into an adjective, the name of Warĩĩnga's boss, "kĩhara" (bald), recuperates cultural beliefs where baldness was associated with age and, more significantly, with wealth. When Boss Kĩhara talks about having a "ngwati", a term that has been erased in the translation, he is not using the term in its literal cultural sense but rather as an epithet to demean Kareendi's boyfriend. The implication is that being young the boyfriend in his view is just a boy (i.e. not circumcised). But a contextual reading of his usage of the term also shows how traditional notions have been infused with new meanings in the postcolonial public sphere. Thus, the idiom of the Gĩkũyũ circumcision ceremony is being arrogantly used to refer to new class relations. It is no longer enough, as in traditional culture, to be circumcised in order for one to be a man. In the new capitalist dispensation, a real man must also be rich. In the postcolonial capitalist dispensation, Kareendi's boyfriend is uncircumcised not because he has not undergone the surgical procedure but because he is poor. Everything about Boss Kĩhara – his behaviour, his age and even his wealth – point to his depravity as a representative of the exploiter capitalist class who are imagined and allegorised as the devils in the novel.

The link between oppression, moral depravity and capitalism is suggested by the fact that the cross on which the devils are to be crucified is adorned with the imprints of the currencies of the major capitalist countries. In this context, Warĩĩnga's oral narrative about Mahũa Kareendi is a satirical commentary on post-colonial public culture. The narrative reifies the capacity of traditional genres, popular culture and the novel to mutually appropriate and "speak" in each other's language and codes. The oral genres find a new embodiment in the novel but in the process, the novel accesses an arcane language of representation that it could not otherwise possess. In Warĩĩnga's story, for instance, Kareendi's boyfriend is referred to as Kamoongonye. The name alludes to a Gĩkũyũ ballad in which a girl laments

her father's attempts to force her to marry Waigoko, a rich old man with a hairy chest, instead of Kamoongonye her young but poor lover (see, footnote: *DOC*, p. 14). The narratives and ballads staged in the novel present another level of translation in *Devil on the Cross*: the translation of oral genres into written discourse.

At this level translation involves the re-tooling and upgrading of the cultural and linguistic codes of the indigenous culture and giving them a twist in line with Ngũgĩ's ideological intentions. In the ballad, for instance, Kareendi, Kamoongonye and Waigoko allegorise human relationships in the contemporary public sphere. People like Boss Kĩhara are the new Waigokos. In other words, the novel does not just intervene in discourses that authorise unequal relations between nations but also between people. It equally satirises traditional and neo-colonial patriarchies as well as class and political oppression.

The inter-illumination between traditional oral genres, name symbolism and the representation of oppression in the post-colonial public sphere is also reflected through the other characters in the novel. A highly politically conscious character, Mũturi bears a name (literally: smith / builder) that echoes a traditional folktale in which a man leaves his expectant wife and goes to work in a distant foundry. While he is away, an ogre pretends to assist his wife. The ogre, however, has a more insidious intention which is aborted when a little bird discovers what is happening, flies to the foundry and summons the man, who rushes home and kills the ogre. In this case, however, the woman's pregnancy allegorises the nation whose hopes for rebirth are under threat. Among its tormentors are Gĩtutu wa Gataangũrũ (Big jigger / tapeworm) and Kĩhaahũ wa Gatheeca (shocker / piercer), ogre-like characters who bear epithets for names. They are depicted as allegorical types who symbolise the parasitic nature of the capitalist class. These are among the group of capitalists who gather at the den in IImorog to showcase their expertise in modern theft and robbery. As a character that epitomises resistance, Mũturi holds the promise of the extermination of these ogres. Ngũgĩ translates and upgrades the language of the indigenous gnosis and orature into a new idiom of representation of the exploiter class. But *Devil on the Cross* is a multi-speeched novel that also uses the language of Christianity to represent capitalist oppression.

Ngũgĩ translates Biblical tropes such as the Parable of Talents and Christian testimonial into secular tropes. The wiles of the capitalist class are presented as "talents" (*DOC*, pp. 78-79). Similarly, the capitalists' bragging about their skills in thievery is described in a distinctly Christian idiom as "ũira" (testimony) (*DOC*, pp. 97, 107, 162, 178). By dramatising the excesses of the capitalist bourgeois class, the spectacle at the den of thieves gives us insights into the "stage-managed nature of public culture" (Hofmeyr, 2004, p. 207). Ironically, through these Christian idioms and tropes, the capitalists show themselves to be guilty of oppression as charged. Translation then becomes a pedagogical tool through which the audience is instructed on the moral bankruptcy of the capitalist ideology and a medium of satire.

A discourse that is deeply entrenched in culture, Christianity melds with other elements of Gĩkũyũ popular culture to inflect the language in *Devil on the Cross*. In Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, it is the narrow road that leads to the Celestial City and salvation. In Ngũgĩ's novel, this order is reversed. As a teenage girl, Warĩĩnga like the fictive Kareendi, harbours big ambitions for her life after school (*DOC*, p. 142). However, when she falls under the charm of the "Rich Old Man", Warĩĩnga forgets her dreams. As she is beguiled by the high life he shows her, Warĩĩnga's life journey takes a turn for the worse. She sees "a brilliant light illuminating a road that was broad and very beautiful" (*DOC*, p. 144). This road leads to her ruin. Just like Boss Kĩhara who hopes that Warĩĩnga might become his "gacungwa" (literally: little orange i.e. girlfriend, mistress) (*DOC*, p. 16), the "Rich Old Man" makes Warĩĩnga his "gacungwa" but abandons her when she gets pregnant (*DOC*, pp. 139-154). In

Bunyanesque idiom, these are the "trials" and "temptations" that Warĩĩnga endures in the hands of the "devils" in her life. Ngũgĩ's translation of "gacungwa" as "my little fruit" is an attempt to contextualise and make the term intelligible (*DOC*, p. 16, p. 17). In a culture where men like Boss Kĩhara regard having young mistresses as a matter of lifestyle, the men begin to entice the young beauties into the high life as soon as the girls emerge from puberty and their cheeks bloom like "nyaanya ya igaanjo" (a tomato that grows on rich soil of an abandoned homestead) (*DOC*, p. 137). This metaphor mirrors how the egalitarian ethos of the indigenous culture shapes the idiom of Gĩkũyũ language. It was popularised in post-colonial Gĩkũyũ popular culture by the musician Francis Rugwĩti. Rather than index this metaphor in the translation, Ngũgĩ substitutes it with the expression "wait for her cheeks to bloom", an interpretation of the original expression.

As a novel that is based on the aesthetic ethos of the Gĩkũyũ oral literary tradition in which song is an important component of storytelling, *Devil on the Cross* makes extensive use of songs. These include traditional, political, Mau Mau, and Christian songs. However while it is easy to translate the text of the songs, in English the songs can no longer be sung because the words will not match the sound of the language or any accompaniment. This problem is not only limited to the translation of songs but extends to the translation of other vital elements of spoken Gĩkũyũ such as ideophones, onomatopoeic expressions, riddles and proverbs. Like the *gĩcaandĩ* artistes, Ngũgĩ engages in linguistic games in the novel. This is evident in the use of riddles but, more subtly, these games are seen in the play with the sequences of sound patterns. Examples include the use of such ideophonic expressions as "bata ndũbatabataga" (problems don't have wings) (*CM*, p. 13; *DOC*, p. 13) and the ideophonic expression, "nywee" (running smoothly) (*CM*, p. 14; *DOC*, p. 15). Ngũgĩ says that he indulged in these linguistic games for "the sheer kick of it" (Martini *et al*., 1981, p. 120). However, some of these elements are puns that parody the English language. An example is the expression "nguundi waka Mĩthita Mũgwate, nguundi waka" used by Wangarĩ in narrating her encounter with a black man and his white boss while looking for a job in a hotel in Nairobi (*CM*, p. 37). Wangarĩ is attempting to speak English, reporting to her co-travellers in the *matatu* the words she heard the white boss speak to the black man. In the English text, "Mĩthita" (penises) is transposed into the honorific "Mr". Its collocation with "Mũgwate" ostensibly the black man's name is satirical because in Gĩkũyũ the name suggests sexual liaison. In other words, the Gĩkũyũ text represents the liaison between the local bourgeoisie and their foreign masters as a homosexual relationship. Because character names cannot be translated, this allusion which is very significant to Ngũgĩ's critique of the symbiotic relationship between foreign capitalists and their local lackeys is lost in the English text.

The translation of riddles and proverbs poses a different kind of problem. As linguistic puzzles, riddles are open-ended forms that test the recipient's cultural knowledge. Writing turns riddles into fixed forms and conveys the false impression that the recipient will always be able to unravel the puzzle (*DOC*, p. 42). In reality, this is not always the case and the recipient is frequently forced to give the poser a *kĩgacwa* (token) in order to be given the answer (*DOC*, pp. 68-69). We see this in the episode where Mũturi challenges Gatuĩria to unravel a riddle (*DOC*, p. 54). While the prolific use of proverbs, sayings and riddles gives the reader of the translation a sense of the richness of the indigenous language, a fuller understanding of the indigenous culture and its literary codes would require the reader to study Gĩkũyũ orature. This is because in translating *Devil on the Cross*, Ngũgĩ seems more interested in making the translation feel natural to the English reader rather than in fully translating the indigenous language.

Proverbs are the staple of traditional Gĩkũyũ discourse. They distil the accumulated wisdom of the people into an elegant statement and are in themselves miniature tales refined to their simplest form. For this reason they feature prominently as important sources of signification in *Devil on the Cross*. Ngũgĩ skilfully weaves the proverbs into the fabric of the novel not just to drive a point home but also as a way of capturing the flavour of spoken Gĩkũyũ. Because they are deeply embedded in Gĩkũyũ egalitarian culture (Kĩrũhĩ, 2006, pp. 1-3), the translation of proverbs presents problems as it is not always possible to convey the cadences of spoken Gĩkũyũ in translation. Conveying the cultural allusions embodied in the proverbs through translation is difficult because while it may be possible to express some of the essence of the proverb through such strategies as paraphrase, the allusion itself is often lost. As expressions of culture, proverbs are therefore only fully intelligible within the cultural and environmental contexts in which they are embedded. Thus when the *gĩcaandĩ* player asks: "Githĩ gũtierirwo atĩ ndĩthũire mũmĩoni ta mũmĩanĩrĩri?" (Was it not said that *it* does not hate the one who sees it as the one who shouts about its presence?) (*CM*, p. 1), the cultural insider can easily fill in the ellipsis from the body of cultural knowledge he shares with the author-translator. In translating such forms, however, the translator has to be mindful that the reader of the translated text has no access to such knowledge. Ngũgĩ, for instance, translates the above proverb as: "Is it not said that the antelope hates less the one who sees it than the one who shouts to alert others of its presence?" (*DOC*, p. 2). He substitutes the pronoun "it" with the noun "antelope" thus interpreting the proverb for the English reader. Naming the referent removes the puzzle and dilutes the allusive richness of the language of the original text.

The same is true in the translation of the metaphorical proverb "Kaihũ gacangacangi gatigaga kwao gũgĩthĩnjwo" (literally: a restless mongoose leaves home just as a goat is about to be slaughtered) (*CM*, p. 14), in which the "mongoose" (kaihũ) becomes a "restless" child (*DOC*, p. 15). Likewise, in translating the proverb, "Ĩrĩ kũhũma gũtirĩ mũtĩ ĩtoomba" (literally: when it gets tired it will perch on any tree" (*CM*, p. 27), Ngũgĩ identifies "bird" as the referent of the pronoun "it" (*DOC*, p. 28). Such translation strategies diminish the fun speakers of the indigenous language find in unravelling such coded expressions. Like in ordinary discourse, proverbs and riddles embellish speech but they are not merely adornments. Rather, they underscore the communitarian ethos expressed in the *gĩcaandĩ* narrator's call to the oppressed to reason together and find solutions to the problems that bedevil their lives.

The dialogism between Gĩkũyũ oral and linguistic codes on the one hand and Ngũgĩ's ideological vision is further reflected in the way he translates the political discourse in the novel. Scholars like Derek Peterson have shown that there is a long history of contestation between Gĩkũyũ and colonial culture (2004, p. 118). The result of this was that Gĩkũyũ words were inflected with meanings that were often at variance with their original meanings in culture. Ngũgĩ learns lessons from his predecessors in the making of modern Gĩkũyũ language. But whereas they were concerned with the tooling of their language to contend with colonial culture, Ngũgĩ's language work takes place in a postcolonial setting where his burden is to confront neo-colonialism. Reading the *Devil on the Cross* some critics have openly wondered what Gĩkũyũ words the other uses for words for such ideologically loaded terms as "capitalists", "imperialists" and the "masses" or "peasants" and other ideologically loaded terms the proliferate in the novel (Nkosi, 1995, p. 205). In answer to this question, I would argue that Ngũgĩ appropriates the language of the Mau Mau and the indigenous gnosis. This "new" grammar which is mostly forged in the crucible of Gĩkũyũ history of struggle against colonialism avails terms like "ahahami" (capitalists), "thũkũmũ (imperialists), "mũingĩ" (masses) and "arĩmĩ anyinyi" (peasants)which provide the author-translator with a rich and

powerful idiom for the representation of his own Marxist and anti-imperialism ideology.

Ngũgĩ has said that his involvement in translation made him "re-evaluate the whole tendency" of African writers using European languages "to portray characters who would of course never speak those languages" (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 207). But as his translation of *Devil on the Cross* shows, writing in an indigenous language is no panacea to that contradiction. Both the Gĩkũyũ text and the translation show that no language guarantees a stable site of "pure" linguistic or cultural identity. The texts are replete with manifold languages which include Kiswahili, English, French and even Latin associated with the Christian discourses in the novel (*DOC*, pp. 4, 5, 21, 23, 73, 173, 194). It is however clear that as a translation from Gĩkũyũ; *Devil on the Cross* significantly alters the character of the English language. It creates an idiosyncratic form of English that is heavily inflected by the Gĩkũyũ indigenous culture, popular culture and literary codes.

Conclusion

From this paper it is evident that there are limits beyond which one culture, its idiom and worldview cannot be translated into the language of another culture. The paper shows that whereas the English language is well suited as a means of communication, it is woefully inadequate as a medium of cross-cultural communication. This can be seen in the presence of numerous untranslatable Gĩkũyũ cultural terms such as *gĩcaandĩ* which point to the limits of cultural translation. These elements speak to the author-translator's commitment to recuperate and assert the artistic forms of the Gĩkũyũ culture and literary tradition. Overall, Ngũgĩ's translation strategy can be viewed as an act of resistance against the possible absorption of his indigenous culture into the mainstream of English culture and language. It affirms the supremacy of the indigenous culture and worldview in his creative praxis. This most obviously evident in his reluctance to use such translation conventions as footnotes, a glossary or other forms of cultural indexing to explain untranslatable cultural terms.

Abbreviations

CM – Caitaani Mũtharaba-inĩ
DOC – Devil on the Cross

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Disclaimer Statement

This paper is extracted from an ongoing monograph on the poetics of language in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's writings. The paper represents just about a third of the relevant Chapter and an insignificant fraction of the monograph when it is completed.

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