

Translation: A Vehicle for Peace, Cultural Dialogue and Democracy in the Sudan *

Abdelgabar Abdalla Abdelwahab **

"Dreams and the golden if,
Conjure the promised sea,
Of ripe corn growing"

To those of us who speak Arabic among the audience and participants in this conference, this stanza by the famous German poet and dramatist Bertold Brecht, possibly translates into:

الأحلام وإذا الذهبية
تتاجيان البحر الموعود
بسنابل قمح ناضجة
تنمو .. تنمو ... تنمو ..

Inspired by this optimistic view of the correlation between dreams and reality, I do believe that the purpose of our being here, is not to curse or damn the tragic and bloody history -and probably the present- of our war-torn Sudan. We are neither here to replay John Osborne's famous play "Look Back in Anger". Though, I'm well aware of the fact that, at least one aspect of the entire conference, has something to do with the cult of "looking back in anger". This partially includes this paper, simply because only one such a look, serves as an unavoidable prerequisite for looking ahead and aspiring for a better future, a more peaceful and accommodative tolerant country.

This being our ultimate rational goal, It will help me contribute positively by focusing on the subject – matter of this paper "Translation A vehicle for peace, cultural dialogue and democracy in the Sudan".

So where to start from ?

I guess the best starter is to clarify and define our concept of translation itself. Most of us tend to understand translation as the process whereby the content or meaning of a certain text, is conveyed or transferred from one language into the other. This is absolutely true and it has its strong support in most authorized and reliable dictionaries. (1) But does it function in our case, trying to give translation quite a constructive and instrumental role among the cultural components of peace and democracy in Sudan? How can translation-



in its limited conventional meaning- do the job properly?

In his linguistic and semiotic approach to translation, Roman Jakobson defines the process quite differently. He argues that the very nature of our human perception of the various phenomena around us, is based on the replacement of the signs of one language, by the signs of another. In that sense, translation is an inseparable aspect of the daily linguistic behavior of all human societies, no matter how advanced or primitive they are.(2) He also argues that, human perception is based on a translation process, conducted in three different ways.

- a. The internal replacement of the linguistic signs of the same language. The best example of this is the interpretation of complicated texts and simplification of classical literature in modern styles and languages.
- b. The replacement of the signs of one language by the signs of another. This denotes translation in its conventional and typical sense.
- c. The replacement of linguistic signs by non linguistic equivalents, such as colours, music, dance, miming gesture language, and vice versa, in order to convey a certain meaning.

All three types of human perception or translation are essential and have different, but correlated functions to do separately or collectively. Nonetheless, it is the third non conventional type of translation that has the much wider scope and potential for dynamic cultural dialogue between various Sudanese groups. At times, especially in artistic appreciation, we may fail to grasp the words used in a given work of art and understand their specific meaning. Nevertheless we appreciate it and it leaves behind, its emotional and possibly mental effects on us! To make sure, let us listen to this song from south Sudan. A foreign work of art –the language of which we did not even hear before- still moves us, rises many questions in our minds, arouses our curiosity and thirst for knowledge and artistic beauty. A much more striking example of the mystery of artistic appreciation, is the attitude of the street boys of Sudan to film watching. A group of "Shammasha", as they are nicknamed, gets into the movies hall. They sit and gaze attentively at the screen showing an Indian, a cowboy or an action film. And the moment the film is over, they rush out into the street to meet their other street mates who couldn't afford for the tickets, but eager for their "delegates» to tell them what the film was all about. Story telling would be the natural expectation I guess. But to your amazement, it's an entire make-belief show! These little uneducated kids take roles in the dramatic reproduction of the film. They imitate the characters, do the shooting and the other sound effects, sing the songs and repeat at least the key words uttered by the characters in the film! It's just amazing. I do believe in the mystery of the human brain, in the magic of art and its universally unifying faculty. To sum this up to our point, the enjoyment and appreciation of a work of art, does not necessitate full understanding of its linguistic components.

In this sense, only if enough freedom of cultural and artistic expression, only if equal cultural opportunities are provided, I assume the Sudanese themselves –ordinary men and women- will make the best translators of the most unifying elements of their diverse cultures and national heritage. What applies to artistic appreciation, also applies to a major part of folklore and material culture. But unfortunately there is no full freedom of cultural and artistic expression, nor equal cultural opportunities so far. We only hope



that things dramatically change for the better, in the aftermath of signing the latest peace agreement between the SPLA and the government of Sudan, theoretically designed to initiate a settlement process of all armed conflicts in the country, and bring about genuine and lasting peace.

The Arrogant Psych!

We are looking ahead, but we need to have a quick glance at the past and present situation, in order to look forward with better open eyes. From a pure cultural perspective, I have my own interpretation and understanding of political and cultural arrogance and despotism in Sudan. I see it as a clear and direct manifestation of an arrogant psych, deeply rooted and submerged in its own mirage and illusions of religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural superiority over the others. This is quite typical of the ruling circles in northern Sudan, which heavily invest in relations of cultural and religious dominance, in order to perpetuate their monopoly of power and economic wealth. But at the same time, and at different levels and degrees, the same arrogant superior psych is common and deeply rooted among sizable communal groups in northern Sudan. It is high time to admit that it's part and parcel of the predominant social consciousness in the north. It's no coincidence that most – if not all- northern Sudanese tribes and ethnic groups, compete and strive in tracing back their genealogy to the grand father of prophet Mohamed, who originated in "Quraish" the largest and most privileged tribe in the Arabian peninsula, during the life time of the prophet.

The tendency of course is aimed at focusing on the purity of "Arabian blood", coupled and reinforced with announced and unannounced denials of having any ties with the indigenous African roots of all Sudanese. In marriage proposals in northern Sudan for instance, the first fitness check of the personality of the would be husband or wife, primarily focuses on their "blood purity" and whether they have an "African root within them. A well known Sudanese colloquial Arabic proverb for this is " Akhata al'rig aazole, al'rig dassass" the English equivalent of which is "mind the root.. it sneaks in and hides somewhere"! To explore and find out where it hides, a serious thorough investigation is carried out by the family to which the marriage offer is made. It is true that other personal and family qualities are investigated as well, but the "root factor" is mostly decisive and crucial in accepting the marriage offer or rejecting it. The best fit may be turned down simply on racial basis. Few exceptions do occur of course, but they are really few. And To our public shame, the same stigmatic practice, continues to be passed on to generations after generations of many northern Sudanese, including the most educated, enlightened and even progressively minded. It's possibly being maintained and practiced here in Canada and elsewhere by some members of the Sudanese communities in the Diasporas. The trend is slowly and gradually declining, due to many factors of social and economic change. But tribal consciousness maintains its ugly discriminative face, remains tribally inherited and hardly changes. On the other hand, African ethnic groups of Sudan also have their own version of racism. But in any case, I don't think it has something to do with any illusions of "purity of blood".

We all know that Adolph Hitler is the damned monster ever, for his criminal atrocities



and his stark and open racism. But in my view, I argue that history is unfair, labeling him the soul racist in the whole world. In fact, there are so many versions of Hitler and "Nazisms" going on around the world. The Janjaweed campaigns in Darfur are an exemplary small-scale Neo-Nazism project, instigated and sponsored by the government of Sudan. That's why I consider Adolph Hitler the black sheep of the racist mind, though his notoriety remains beyond doubt.

Taking the same racist discriminative psych to the very center of power politics, what would you expect then? Here are but a few indicators.

- 1- The government and state apparatus should be monopolized and centered in the hands of the ethnically and religiously privileged.
- 2- Arabs and Muslims are superior by ethnicity, religion and tongue.
- 3- Islam is the official religion of Sudan and Arabic its official language.
- 4- The African zones in Sudan are but a dark cultural and religious vacuum, needs to be filled in and illuminated by the light and faith of Islam.
- 5- The term "Sudanese Culture" basically stands for Arab-Islamic culture, spiced and decorated with some assimilated African ingredients.
- 6- Arab-Islamic culture is the "melting pot" for unification and formation of the national identity.
- 7- The national mass media serves as the mouthpiece of the predominant culture.
- 8- Education is consciously and intentionally designed to stabilize the status quo of political, economic and cultural hegemony.
- 9- Similarly, the "Janjaweed" genocide campaigns in Darfur, fall within the domain of the same arrogant psyche, geared up to its highest criminal and hateful level.

And if by metaphor, Archimedes famous principle of buoyancy is applicable to the cultural politics of Sudan, it should be noted that, the huge steamer of Arab-Islamic culture, could only float on top the sea surface, because it displaces many a river and cascade of other indigenous cultures. But the irony of Archimedes and his physics principle is that, the weight of the displaced cultural fluid is much greater than that of the buoyed up object. What a great loss of human diversity and cultural multitude! To ensure buoyancy of the monistic dominant culture, it requires totally displacing and overruling the other. "The other is Hell" in a dehumanized misinterpretation of Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase!

The Linguistic & Ethnic Setting in Sudan

Not to be misunderstood, it should be clearly stated that, this critique of Arab-Islamic hegemony, has nothing to do with anti Arab-Islamic sentiments. I myself speak Arabic as a mother tongue and adhere to the faith of Islam by birth. Moreover, it should be emphasized that blame for cultural displacement and exclusion policies, is not to be put on Islam, nor on Arabic culture itself. In fact the whole problem lies in the socio – political forces which tend to manipulate Islam and Arab culture and use them as a sacred ideological tool for religious and cultural coercion. Without this manipulated repressive tool, both Islam and Arab culture are major contributors to the cultural and religious heritage of our nation. Arabic language is spoken by the majority of Sudanese. More than half of total population are Muslims, most living in north, where they constitute around 75 percent or even more, of total population there. Additionally, major Muslims, but non



Arab groups, are Nubians in the far north, Beja tribes in northeast, and Fur among many others, in western Sudan (Darfur Region). (4)

By comparison, Christianity prevails in southern Sudan, where African ethnic groups are substantial and sizeable. The biggest among these groups is Dinka tribe, comprising over 10 percent of total population, and 40 percent in south. Then come Nuer and shiluk tribes, along with a variety of smaller Nilotick ethnic groups. A part from south Sudan, smaller African minorities, whether Christians or adherents of other indigenous faiths, are also among the inhabitants of northern Sudan. Notable among these, are the populations of the Nuba mountains in Kordufan province, and similar ethnic groups living along the southern bank of the Blue Nile (5).

In a more recent and complete survey of Sudanese languages (6) the results show that there are 142 languages, of which 134 are still alive, while only 8 are extinct. That is a striking cultural and linguistic treasure. But unfortunately, it gets obscured and eclipsed by the central government. However, this cultural and linguistic map leads us to raise a major question: void of political and economic interests, does Arab culture -including Arabic language- need to elbow and exclude others, in order to be the number one culture of the country? I believe the more democratic and less repressive it is, the more it flourishes and expands. It even qualifies as a unifying factor, but never through coercion and oppression.

What translators and linguists can do

1- Conservation and development of the existing languages. This is essential because most non Arabic languages are unwritten, less developed and narrowly used within the boundary of their demographic "habitat". Therefore, the list of extinct languages is likely to lengthen, due to the decreasing trends among the speakers of these languages. A serious threat is posed by two major factors:

- a. Wide and continuous internal and external waves of immigration.
- b. The continuity of cultural and linguistic assimilation policies by the centre.

2. Campaigning for more democratic, cultural and linguistic policies. The specific target will be the proposition of more elaborate linguistic policies, to be included in the legislations of Sudan. So far the recently signed constitution between the government of Sudan and the SPLA, provides for "Arabic as the official language, and that the state shall allow the development of other local and international languages". But this is only the beginning. This paragraph and the like, needs to be fleshed out and detailed- in further legal appendixes, memoranda and laws.

3. Encouragement of new language education strategies, methods and concepts.

4. Focus on inter-cultural translation between the languages and cultures of the different Sudanese groups: Folklore, customary laws, religious, written and oral literature, folk songs, dance, and the fine arts in general.

5. Help reproduce these translations in book form, magazines, newspapers, documentary films, cassette tapes, video films and CDs.

Sudanese Cultures Translation Project (SCTP)

In order to translate these dreams and ambitions into a reality, there must be a national



translation project, dedicated to the fulfillment of the above mentioned tasks. The general outlines of this project are:

- 1- It shall be an affiliate of an academic institution or a cultural organization, preferably with one head office in Sudan –not necessarily in Khartoum- to be supported with five subsidiary offices located on five major geographical and ethnic regions.
- 2- To guarantee its continuity- in case of any political instability or regression in Sudan- it must have an affiliation to an international college, university or cultural organization.
- 3- It has to have a website administered and run from within Sudan and abroad.
- 4- It has to be a non-government , non-profit organization
- 5- Membership is open to all Sudanese and non Sudanese linguists and translators who share the values of the project and accept its culturally oriented goals.
- 6- The project shall be financed by subscription fees and donations.
- 7- It shall operate on a renewable 3-5 year plan.
- 8- The major objective is to collect, classify, translate and disseminate cultural materials carefully selected from the different regions and cultures of Sudan.
- 9- The methods, organization and techniques to be applied in this project, shall be compatible with recognized international translation projects standards. (7)
- 10- Major translation languages shall be selected along the lines of inclusion and democratization of the national linguistic and cultural scene.

Conclusion

Early in 1958 – only two years after independence- and in response to a southern parliamentary member who claimed that English language should be declared as a second official language, the minister of education then, sheikh Ali Abdelrahman, harshly dismissed that claim by openly stating that "Arabic is the language of Sudan and whoever feels irritated or uncomfortable with that, is free to go and seek for another substitute country" (8) Again, this was His Highness, the minister of education of our first national government ever. What a crooked beginning!

- This is exactly why focus and attention should be given to the cultural ingredients of peace and democracy in our tragically afflicted country. And this is where translation serves as an influential tool in stimulating and enhancing cross- cultural dialogue. Through the exchange and share of cultural signs, people will come to know each other much better, mutual trust and confidence will build up, while psychological barriers get eliminated, slowly and gradually over the years.

Translation is not a dull, lifeless desk work. It is dynamic, creative and proactive. It has the potential to transform the entire social consciousness. It has the ability to show that, **"Sudan is a gigantic ship and therefore, it should accommodate for every single Sudanese onboard"**.



References

- 1- See both The Oxford & Merriam-Webster English Dictionaries
- 2- Roma Jakobson, On the Linguistic Aspects of Translation, Oxford University Press (1966) pages 232-239
- 3- One of the biggest government illusive games is to give the impression that the south is the only source of conflicts and that the north is ethnically, religiously and politically united, stable and at rest. But this is obviously, a sheer ideological fallacy, because the same repressive policies, carried out by the central government against the majority of northern Sudanese themselves, are a major source of civil and political conflicts in the north itself. To make sure, just have a look at the wide political opposition in the north. Prior to that, have a look at Darfur, the Beja tribes in the east and the turbulent Nuba Mountains in the west. All last three civil war areas are a geographical and political part of Northern Sudan.
- 4- Francis A. Lees and Hugh C. Brooks, The Economic and political Development of the Sudan, The Khartoum Bookshop, 1977, pages 13-27
- 5- Ibid, pages 28-32
- 6- See the Ethnologue Report for Sudan: <http://www.ethnologue.com>
- 7- Mildred L. Larson, Meaning-Based Translation, University Press of America, 1984, pages 465-485
- 8-Dr. Mansour Khalid, South Sudan in the Arab Imagination: The Superficial Image and Historical Repression, Turath publishing House, London, 2000, Page 368

(*) This paper originates in a proposal for the obtainment of a PhD in translation, prepared by its presenter. The proposal carries the same title of this paper.

Abdelgabar Abdalla Abdelwahab

Email Address: gabarw@yahoo.com

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** **Abdelgabar Abdalla Abdelwahab,**

Translator, journalist and former lecturer in Traductology, University of Khartoum and Alahliyya University, Sudan.

