

Kaha Mohamed Aden
An Afro-Arabian Shawl

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By courtesy of Edizioni Nottetempo

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Kaha Mohamed Aden’s collection of short stories, *Fra-intendimenti*, was published in 2010 by Nottetempo. As Alessandra Marino points out, this title “introduces the central theme of the precariousness of intercultural communication as a border practice. The deconstruction of the Italian word *fraintendimenti*, literally meaning ‘misunderstandings’, refers both to the migrants’ condition of living in-between (fra) languages and discourses (intendimenti), and to the risk of failure that is embedded in the exercise of cultural negotiation” (Rev. of *Fra-intendimenti* by Kaha Mohamed Aden, *Anglistica*, 15. 1, 2011: 139).

“In ‘Uno scialle afro-arabeggiante’ [An Afro-Arabian Shawl], Kaha Mohammed Aden reconfigures the problems of mutual understanding as a problem of translation. The main autobiographical character of this short story is an ‘interprete’ [interpreter] (Kaha 2010: 83), who finds herself in the difficult position of mediating between two languages and cultures that struggle to find a contact point. The main character has to create a bridge of communication between a Somali refugee and a Swiss policeman, who respectively believe they are involved in an interrogation and a conversation. The ‘interprete’ accuses linguistic translation of creating a misunderstanding between the two characters: ‘Interrogatori oppure colloqui? Misteri della lingua ...’ [Are they interrogations or interviews? Mysteries of language ...] (Kaha 2010: 83). Switzerland is envisioned as both a multilingual space, where three languages are officially spoken, and a liminal space, stuck outside the linguistic boundaries of three major national languages.” [From Simone Brioni’s *The Somali Within: Language Race and Belonging in ‘Minor’ Italian Literature*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2015: p. 36]

I have to get dressed as quickly as possible if I don’t want to miss the bus, which in turn would make me miss the train, which in turn would not take me to the barracks, where, according to the people who work there – who are, for the most part, policemen – they carry out interviews, while numerous immigrants consider that they are being interrogated. Well! Are they interviews or interrogations?

Mysteries of the languages... Oh, I forgot, my role in this world is an Interpreter.

Rushing, rushing! Punctual, I arrive at the secretary’s office.

The secretary: Hello Madam! Today you should be working with Mr D. He’s waiting for you in his office. So I go straight to Mr D’s office. An office which is precisely and neatly organised yet colourless.

With the officer is an old Somali lady who is wrapped up in an Afro-Arabian shawl.

As I sit, the conversation immediately begins – there is no time to lose: “you must produce!” is the

motto in this place.

The rules of the 'game': Mr D (the officer) asks questions, I translate them to the woman, who responds, and I translate this back to Mr D.

They both start talking to me at the same time. The day is off to a good start!

I ask the officer if he minds me listening to the woman. A little annoyed, he gives me his permission. After a brief presentation, the conversation always starting with his questions, it is clear that he is the better actor on this stage.

The woman: Who is this man, my dear? Is he your husband?

Me: No.

The officer: What is she saying?

Me: She wants to know who we are.

The officer: I'm telling you that I'll ask the questions. How old is the woman?

Where I come from you should greet your elders and initially only they can ask the questions... This woman isn't someone who makes concessions. In fact: "If this isn't your husband, what are you doing here in this room with him?"

I look at both my interviewers and I scratch at my hair, messing it up.

The lady orders me to bring my head closer, she takes hold of my hair and says: "Dry hair, unstyled, with a man whose role is unknown; satisfy my curiosity: your mother doesn't live in this country, does she?"

Me: No!

The woman: I knew it! And tell me again: in what language were you speaking with the man with the light eyes?

The officer: For heaven's sake! What is all this chatting between you two? Did you ask how old is she?

Me: No, she wanted to know what language we were speaking.

The officer: Tell her, then she'll stop asking questions!

Me: We were speaking in Italian, Ma'am.

The woman: Ah! So are we in Rome?

Me: No, we're not in Rome. We're in another country.

The woman: What country are we in?

Me: We're in a country in which they speak lots of different languages like French...

I'd barely named French when the lady interrupted me again.

The woman: Are we in Paris?

Me: No, but they speak German too and we aren't in Berlin!

The officier: What are you talking about?

Me: She wants to know which country we are in.

The officier: I heard a series of capitals, not nations. And I have not heard of Switzerland.

Me: I was trying to explain it now! You know, we Africans have time ... more extended.

Officer: Yeah, you're famous for this! I want to know how old the lady is.

The officier is getting nervous, it is in the midst of a dialogue in which he does not understand anything, he is totally excluded. The only way to enter the fray is to stamp his authority, and unfortunately (for me) my old lady is deaf to the questions that she does not like. Once, her authority as an old person gave her this freedom, and I do not think she will easily give up this privilege which she has exercised for so long. I explain to the lady that we are in a country where they speak three languages and it is called Switzerland.

In the meantime, our officier has moved the few items that were on his desk, then he has returned them to their places. Frowning, he interrupted us, and again with a gruff voice asked how old the lady is.

This time, before I talk to the lady, I hasten to ask: "Ma'am, how old?"

The woman: You said three languages? Um, and they live in peace?

Me: Yes!

The lady: Daughter, They must be good... We haven't be able to understand each other with one language... You know? The war...

I searched in my heart and my brain reasons that allowed me to be a cold professional, to justify why I do not understand it to say, lady I understand your problem and I'm sorry, but now we have to do this and that. My research has found a simple solution, thinking about my cash point.

I held my breath for a while, then I expired and I said: "In this office, people want you to answer to some questions concerning how old are you".

The madam answered: "What a rude ways to force a person to say that her death is close! I am a woman who passed twice forty years, and one can see that..."

"Why should one insist on my age?"

"Why should one count the time after a certain age?" "How old am I? Nobody knows. Me neither..."

The madam collected her thoughts and started to prey. She had slammed the door on my face.

We do not deserve her attention, she addressed someone higher: God.

The officer was tired of waiting for an answer, and started to write.

I was there alone, left in a conversation where all subjects should address me in order to speak and act. I take a peep at what the officer is writing and I see that he has written: "The lady is reticent to answer my questions etc., etc., etc... Suddenly the woman started to sing".

Me: The lady isn't singing, she is praying.

The officer: Ah, she is praying. I do not want to know why she is praying.

Everybody wants something. Instead, I want no longer to float through all these emotions, which others produce, even with silence.

For today, I would have stopped being an emotive cable and so be it.