

William E. Mkufya and his flowers

An intellectual bio-graphy

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This study reconsiders the role of biographies as a privileged entry point for literary and philosophical analysis to sift epistemologies and ethical pillars through fictional texts. Indeed, this research is devoted to a Tanzanian intellectual, William Eliezer Mkufya, a writer, but also a translator and an editor, and to his novels *i.e.* *The Wicked Walk* (1977); *Kizazi Hiki* ('This Generation,' 1980); *The Dilemma* (1982); *Ziraili na Zirani* ('Azrael and Zirani,' 1999); *Ua La Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation,' 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ('The Existence of Flowers,' 2019).

The empirical research has been conducted through a methodology that can be framed into the project of philosophical sagacity and that includes both ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth textual analysis. The textual analysis on the novels will illustrate not only how themes and styles of the texts developed tightly interlaced to author's life and thoughts, but also how these texts illustrate the shaping of Mkufya's interpretation of *utu*, humanity.

The analysis of Mkufya's fiction demonstrates that Swahili novels are a privileged genre to produce knowledge and philosophy with a particular focus on ethics and community development.

Keywords: intellectual biography; Swahili literature; African philosophy; *utu*; ethics.

1. Introduction¹

This study² sheds light on the life and the thought of a writer and philosopher, William Mkufya, and his Swahili novels, through the prism of an intellectual bio-graphy.³

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² This paper inspired the topic and was presented at the international conference on "The Intellectual Biography as an entry point for Literary and Epistemological Analysis", which I co-organised at the University of Naples L'Orientale, 10-11 April 2024. The organisation of this conference was part of my postdoc research project funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

³ By spelling "bio-graphy," I intend to highlight the interconnections between two distinct ontologies Mkufya's *bios* (life and thought) and Mkufya's *graphia* (fictional works). Moreover, by *graphia*, I hint at both 'writing up' Mkufya's biography and analysing his pieces of 'writing.'

Taking the move from recent scholarships stating the importance of not only ‘rethinking sagacity’ (see *Rethinking Sage Philosophy*, Kresse and Nyarwath 2023) by engaging with ethnographies, but also investigating fictional and non-fictional genres as philosophical media (Rettová 2021c; 2023), this study reconsiders the role of biographies as a privileged entry point to conducting literary and philosophical analysis.

Indeed, this article explores the potentialities of a biographical approach as an epistemological entry point, combining a close encounter with the texts and an engagement with an intellectual’s life and thought, to analyse Afrophone philosophies.

Therefore, this research, drawing from my experience of engaging with a little-known author’s life, thought, and literary production, will demonstrate how the interconnections between *bios* and *graphia* consent to unearth ethical and epistemological principles through an insightful “point of view” (Wiredu 1980: 115-116).

I devoted this portrayal of an individual thinker, or *wasifu* ‘biography’ (cf. Topan 1997: 300), to the Tanzanian intellectual and self-trained bilingual (Swahili and English) writer William Mkufya, a peculiar case of *graphia* developing tightly interlaced to the author’s *bios*.

I first met Mkufya at the 30th Anniversary of the *Swahili Colloquium* in Bayreuth in 2017, when he was attending the presentation of *Blume des Trostes* (2016) the German translation of his novel *Ua La Faraja*, translated by Barbara Schmid-Heidenhain.

Afterwards, in 2018, our first meeting in the hustle and bustle of Dar es Salaam took place. Since that moment we started an ongoing relationship of reciprocal knowledge exchange.⁴ In between 2018 and 2019, during my PhD fieldwork, I spent a long time with Mkufya in Dar es salaam where we alternated formal interviews with extensive informal talks. Since not only did I select Mkufya as the most prominent author of Swahili novels about HIV/AIDS through the lens of philosophy, but I also estimated the potential of his Swahiliphone literature, philosophically and stylistically, I decided to extend the research embarking on a project focused on Mkufya and his fictions at 360-degrees.

Therefore, after a few years of remote communications because of the Covid-19 pandemic, as part of this project, I conducted further essential intellectual exchanges with Mkufya in Dar es Salaam in 2023. The methodology I adopted this last time was more creative and informal. In fact, I spent much time with Mkufya having not only interviews, but also extensive talks alternated with several literary discussions based on the reading from selected passages from his works.

⁴ I am grateful to Mkufya for not only his availability, but also his endless thirst for knowledge and intellectual richness.

Mkufya's intellectual thought development is a lifelong commitment, which progresses in connection with the development of the style of his works and fictional characters. Since Mkufya's life and works have a significant impact on each other, this peculiarity renders an intellectual biography on this author extremely interesting.

I will describe Mkufya's life events as interlaced with his fiction proceeding on a parallel between *bios* and *graphia*, thus introducing a new mode of biography writing aimed to sift ethics and epistemologies through the ethnophilosophical ontology of fictional texts. To do so, I conducted an in-depth analysis of texts that can be explored as ethnographic fields themselves (Barber 2007: 4-5) rich in self-reflexivity (Mwangi 2009: 6-8).

2. Humanity and sagacity

Mkufya is a 'free-thinker philosopher' (Kresse 2007), who is not part of the academia, but he is a self-trained intellectual and a "philosophical sage" (Oruka 1990a: 28) endowed with "*hekima na busara*" "wisdom and common-sense" (Kresse 2009: 151). Mkufya does not define himself as a philosopher, distancing himself from academia; however, he is indeed part of the community with whom he communicates through *utu*, humanity.

The philosophy of *utu* can be defined as a humanistic philosophy regarding humans and their interrelationships: "humans can only become fully human in and through community" (Rettová 2020a: 32, 34; Gordon 2008). The principle of developing humanness in communion with other humans (Metz 2017: 64; 2023) is rooted in "African communitarianism"⁵ (Masolo 2010: 245-54; Masolo 2004; Menkiti 1984; 2004; Gyekye and Wiredu 1992; Gyekye 1995).

Utu means "humanity in the moral sense" (Masolo 2019a: 33) and is a culturally contextualised expression of "African humanism": "the ideal of mutual interdependence between humans" (Masolo 2019a: 51; Kresse 2011: 246). Particularly, in Swahili literature, Shaaban Roberts's novels (*e.g. Utubora Mkulima* 1968) suggest the philosophy of "*utu bora*": "the ideal personhood/humanity as manifested in normative conduct" (Masolo 2019a: 33), which is aimed to foster the "righteous community/ community of righteousness" that guarantees human wellbeing (Masolo 2019a: 51; Masolo 2010: 98) by a collaborative and reciprocal endeavour (Masolo 2010: 246; Gbadegesin 1994: 69).

⁵ According to Wiredu (2008): 'communitarianism' designates contemporary African theorisation about individuality and community; 'Communalism' describes traditional social formation based on kinship relationships (Wiredu 2008: 335; see also Masolo 2004).

Definitions of the concept of “*utu*, humanity or humanness” (Topan 2008: 89) are enclosed in Swahili proverbs (Kresse 2007: 139-40; 2009: 158; 2011; Rettová 2020a: 37): *mtu ni utu* ‘a human being is humanity,’ where *utu* implies “morality and goodness” (Kresse 2007: 139) or *mtu ni watu* ‘a human being is human beings (social beings)’ (Kresse 2007: 139-140). Furthermore, *utu ni kitendo* ‘goodness is performing good actions,’ “putting knowledge into action” (Kresse 2009: 164).

The philosophy of *utu*⁶ is an ideology developed and expressed both through politics (Kasanda 2015; 2018; Kresse 2011; Masolo 2004) and literature (Rettová 2007b; 2020a: 35; Kresse 2007; Nicolini 2023). In politics, the “philosopher kings” (Wiredu 1996: 146; 2008) laid the basis for African socialisms: Senghor’s “Négritude” (1962; 1964a), Nkrumah’s “Consciencism” (1964) and Nyerere’s “*Ujamaa*” (1964). Particularly, Nyerere’s philosophy of *Ujamaa* (lit. ‘familyhood’) is a “social ethic” deeply rooted in the traditional concept of African family (Nyerere 1979: 10) and whose basic principles are human dignity and social equality (Nyerere 1979: 17, 58) as well as freedom and unity (Nyerere 1964); Tanzanian socialism is also a secular concept that places religion in an individual and personal sphere (Nyerere 1979: 38; cf. Topan 1970, Preface).

In Swahili literature⁷ *utu* can be either a religious concept: a “transcendent source of value” (Rettová 2020a: 35) or a secular concept as “*conditio humana* in the world” (Rettová 2020a: 54; Leslie 2010).

Even though *utu* is a universal concept, dropped into a local cultural context, it has individual realisations. Indeed, I gathered similar but not the same definitions of *utu* from some intellectuals. Firstly, Faruk Topan explained that *utu* is an all-embracing concept that includes every aspect of being human (personal interview London 5-11-2023); secondly, D.A. Masolo described *utu* as a movement of reconstruction and unification of Swahili identity (personal conversation 17-01-2024). Finally, Mkufya defined “*utu as uhusiano/utendeano mwema miongoni mwa watu*” (‘excellent relationship among people’), and he added “*utu ndio msingi wa imani yangu*” (‘humanity is at the base of my faith’) (personal interview 8-12-2023). In particular, he suggests overcoming religious interpretations to return to a secular definition of *utu*.

Mkufya describes humanity from both an ontological and a culturally contextualised normative perspective by playing with the Swahili language to rediscover “*utu wa Mwafrika*” (‘African humanity’

⁶ I focus on the East African concept of *utu* avoiding intentionally to include the much popular South African variant of *ubuntu* (Ogude 2019; Ramose 1999; Tutu 1999). Even though both share the principle of communitarianism, the two theories have distinctive features in connection with cultural regional variations that illustrate the plurality of African cultures.

⁷ See also: George A. Mhina’s novel *Mtu ni Utu* (1971) that reflects on the manifestation of *utu* (‘humanism’) during the period of *Ujamaa*.

Mkufya quoted in Rettovà 2007b: 120). This can be interpreted as an effort of “humanism of reconstruction” (Chapman in Marzagora 2016: 175) reassembling African damaged identity (Fanon 2001; Gordon 2008; Mkufya 2004). Lastly, this makes his texts to be engaged with the metaethical debate in African moral philosophy between religious or humanistic origins of morality (Metz 2017: 71; Wiredu 2004: 15-16).

This study can also be framed inside the framework of *Sage Philosophy* (Oruka 1990a: 28; 1990b; Presbey 2023), which highlights “sagacious reasoning” (Graness and Kresse 1997: 15), by involving fieldwork and original interviews to introduce local intellectuals and their thought (Kresse 2007; 2018a: 41; 2023).

Mkufya can be considered as a 21st-century philosophic sage and “critical independent thinker,” who employs his philosophy “for the ethical betterment of the community” (Oruka quoted in Oduor 2023: 38-9; Graness and Kresse 1997: 254). “A moral obligation linked to *utu* is to acquire knowledge through critical questioning and to apply it in practice for the good of the community” (Kresse 2011: 257).

A philosophic sage not only “passes on knowledge of the community but also critically evaluates tradition by individual reasoning” (Graness 2018: 63), producing critical points and suggesting alternatives (Kresse 2011: 251). Mkufya, as a philosophic sage himself, “passes on ‘enlightening’ education” (Kresse personal conversation 8-02-2024) and as a humanist makes philosophy “sagacious” (Oruka in Graness and Kresse 1997: 251-60) by being committed to the promotion of human dignity and welfare “building a humane society” (Kresse 2013: 25, 28; Graness 2012; Nyarwath 2012).

Mkufya does this through his fictional texts, which will be “hermeneutically” scrutinised (Gadamer 1981; Serequeberhan 2015), because “we are always subject to the effects to effective-history” (Gadamer 1981: 267): “A text is historical written by someone in a given time and in a specific language as well as the writer him/herself are construction of cultural factors” (Gadamer quoted in Masolo 2018: 185; Hallen 2002: 59).

Therefore, my research has a double-focus both on an individual intellectual ‘bios’ through interviews/discussions and on texts ‘graphia’ through a detailed hermeneutical examination of his in-text and inter-textual application of philosophy.

3. Mkufya's bios⁸

William Eliezer Mkufya was born in Mlalo, a fraction of Lushoto district (Tanga) on the 18th of June 1953 to a Lutheran family of the Sambia ethnic group, the third of six children. He grew up in Mlalo, a village divided between Muslim and Christian communities. He was enrolled at a Christian missionary primary school (Hohen lower primary school), and he also studied for one year at the local Muslim school (Fufuin upper primary school). In 1961, a significant episode in his life occurred. Suddenly, one afternoon at home, he saw something like a knife cutting the sky from east to west and then a white cloud seemed to explode. As a child, he feared that it was the end of the world. Then, he discovered from the news that what he saw cracking the atmosphere probably was the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin making his first spaceflight in 1961 to be also connected to its prequel event: the first Russian satellite into the earth orbit (1957) (Mkufya personal interview 17-11-2023). Later, this episode was the spark that inspired the novel *Ziraili na Zirani* (1999).⁹ Mkufya, in light of the power of scientific advances, refused *kipaimara*, the ceremony to be converted to Lutheranism, in 1969 (Mkufya personal interview 17-11-2023). Then, he started developing secular thought entrusting scientific progress (Mkufya's email April 2024).

In 1965, Mkufya moved to a boarding school, Mbuzii upper primary school located between the cities of Lushoto and Soni. Mkufya at that time was really inspired by his paternal uncle, Richard Juma, who had studied creative writings in the USA. At Mbuzii primary school, Mkufya was named as librarian at the school library after the request of his uncle to the school master so that he started nourishing his insatiable thirst for reading.

During the years between 1968-1971, Mkufya was enrolled at the St Andrew College Minaki secondary school. At Minaki library, he read many Afro-American revolutionary writers, who represented an input to his religious criticism, as well as British literature and African authors writing in English. At Minaki, Mkufya firstly discovered his passion for poetry and composed both his first poem *Cry Behind the Beaches* and wrote his first prose work *The Claws of Fate*, a picaresque short novel

⁸ The detailed information on Mkufya's life has been extracted from a personal interview on 17-11-2023; Mkufya's CV updated as per 2023; and documents provided to me by Mkufya in (2023).

The personal information from the interviews and from an unpublished account of Mkufya's life entitled *Maisha ya W.E. Mkufya. Kwa ufupi*, have been quoted with the signed permission of William Mkufya given on 28-04-2024 and 23-01-2025.

⁹ Cf. The description of the war flaring up in Heaven (Mkufya 1999: 9) and the poem describing Heaven as "*marapurapu*" ('shreds/rags', Mkufya 1999: 201).

unpublished. Mkufya started his career writing in English¹⁰ mainly influenced by *African Writers Series* published by Heinemann and circulating in school libraries in that period.

In between 1972-73, he moved to Mkwawa¹¹ High School, Iringa, where he started studying physics, biology and chemistry. However, he cultivated his passion for literature as a hobby. In fact, not only was he a passionate reader of English romantic poetry, but also, in 1972, he became a member of a juvenile literary club together with K. Kahigi, J. Madumulla, and E. Sembaza. Mkufya composed the poem *My Africa* that won the Mkwawa club prize and was published in the school magazine. As part of the literary club activities, Mkufya and the other students proposed a competition to read as many books as possible among those published in the *African Writers Series*. Mkufya was deeply influenced by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Peter Abraham, Elechi Amadi, Léopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Okot P'Bitek and especially Christopher Okigbo. Okigbo (1932-1967), the Nigerian poet who fought and died supporting Biafran Independence, was a model of inspiration for Mkufya, as demonstrated by the quotes from Okigbo's poems in Mkufya's early works.¹² The influence of Swahili literature in that period was mainly from Shaaban Robert's works.

At that time, Mkufya had already written a collection of poems that will evolve in the poems published in *Ziraili na Zirani* and the first draft of his first published novel in English *The Wicked Walk*. This novel was thematically influenced by the trend of 'prostitute literature,' characterising East African literature of that time, and whose forerunner was P'Bitek's *Songs of Malaya* (1966) (cf. Senkoro 1982). *The Wicked Walk* prose was deeply influenced by D.H. Lawrence's novels, especially *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), which have a narrative style that Mkufya told me he loves.

After high school, he was conscripted in the compulsory national service *Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa* (JKT) at the camp of Oljoro, Arusha, in 1974. In that period, he was intellectually trained on Nyerere's *Ujamaa*

¹⁰ In his youth, Mkufya also used to write traditional *fika* (religious compositions recited during ritual offerings to the ancestors) in Sumbaa language (personal conversation 29-11-2023; Mkufya's WhatsApp message 31-05-2024).

¹¹ Mkwawa High school was a significant institution, which contributed to the development of the Swahili language studies. In 1970, this school inserted a first syllabus called SHE (Swahili History and English) to extend Swahili studies at schools to form 5 and 6. Mkwawa high school students, in the years 1970-1, such as M. Mulokozi, F. Senkoro, J. Madumulla, K. Kahigi and M. Msokile contributed significantly to the development of Swahili language and literature as academic disciplines. The first Swahili teacher at Mkwawa was J. Mwakipesile followed by E. Kezilahabi (Mulokozi 2019: 26).

¹² In *The Wicked Walk* (1977), and its translation *Kizazi Hiki* (1980), Mkufya inter-textualised the poem *Heavensgate* (Mkufya 2012: 85; 1980: 114) and in *Ziraili na Zirani*, a character in Hell is Okigbo himself, who recites some of his own poems translated into Swahili by Mkufya (Mkufya 1999: 90, 91, 92, 184, 200).

na kujitegemea ‘Socialism and self-reliance’¹³ ideology. After JKT, he enrolled at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), where he completed a BSc in Chemistry and Biology in 1977. In the same year, *The Wicked Walk* was published by the Tanzanian Publishing House (TPH). Since his BSc, Mkufya has been living in Dar es Salaam, which has become the favourite setting of his realist novels.

After graduation in 1977, he got a job at a government forensic science lab. Then, he worked as a biochemist trainee at the Tanzania Food and Nutrition Centre (1977-1979). In this period, Mkufya started writing his second novel manuscript. Mkufya experienced a great dilemma between his passion for literature and science. In fact, when he was offered the possibility of pursuing his scientific studies with a scholarship for an MA in Uppsala or in India, he gave up because he wanted to write. Therefore, he enrolled in a Postgraduate Diploma in Education at the University of Dar es Salaam, which Mkufya calls “a Marxist revolutionary university.” The University of Dar es Salaam was the main intellectual revolutionary hub of East Africa (Thiongo 1993: 166), and in that environment, he was trained in ideologies such as Pan-Africanism, Négritude, Marxism: an influential theory in Africa post independent societies (Wiredu 1980: 63), and African socialisms: Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* (1964) and Nkrumah’s *Consciencism* (1964).

After graduation in 1981, he established the Mzumbe secondary school chemistry department, becoming a chemistry teacher at Zanaki and Mzumbe secondary schools (1980-1981). However, his main purpose was writing; thus, he asked for a sabbatical year to complete writing his novel. Then, he decided to quit school teaching and went back to Mlalo, where he could complete the novel *A Solitary War*. This is an imponent, ambitious manuscript of 400,000 words inspired by Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, written between 1977 and 1982. The manuscript has never been published, although it not only represented an important lesson for Mkufya, who learned a lot as a writer, but also that “failure” gave him even more ambitious inspirations which built the basis for his milestone work *Ziraili na Zirani*, as he himself told me (personal interview 17-11-2023).

A Solitary War is a realist novel inspired by Marx and Engels’ dialectical materialism. The protagonist of this story is Heri Rashid, who not only is an autobiographical character, but he is also the first prototype of Mkufya’s hero. Indeed, Mkufya moulds his creatures giving them part of his thoughts and life. Heri is a young and stubborn revolutionary hero precursor of *Zirani* (Mkufya 1999) and Dr Hans (Mkufya 2004; 2019), who fights for egalitarianism, but he realised that the socialist ideologies as developed at college are not applicable in real life. The system was not responding to the

¹³ The manifesto of the political and philosophical ideology of *Ujamaa* is *Azimio la Arusha* (the Arusha Declaration) 1967 (Nyerere 1964; 1968; 1972; 1974; Blommaert 1997; Topan 2006).

revolutionary idealism of the youths. Not only was this period strongly influenced by Marxist and Pan-Africanist ideologies circulating at UDSM, but it was also the apex of Mkufya's religious critique. Later, in the 1980's, after the completion of *A Solitary War* and during the writing of *Dilemma*, he experienced an ideological crisis returning close to Christianity, and he tore away some pages from the manuscript that he felt as atheistic.

Once the manuscript was completed, Mkufya relocated to Dar es Salaam in search of a publisher. While he was looking for a publisher for *A Solitary war*, he met Chachage, Seithy C., who was an editor at the Tanzanian Publishing House, and who gave him inspiration to translate *The Wicked Walk* into Swahili, which was published as *Kizazi Hiki* in 1980. The self-translation¹⁴ experience was fundamental for Mkufya, who since then started writing mainly in Swahili.

When Mkufya was living in the neighbourhood of Tandika, his partner was pregnant. Thus, since he was temporarily unemployed, he wrote the anglophone novel *The Dilemma* (1982), commissioned by the Press and Publicity Centre. Mkufya's firstborn child was born after the publication and Mkufya devolved all the money earned with *The Dilemma* to take care for the baby, before travelling to Hungary.¹⁵ In fact, Mkufya had won a scholarship from National Development Cooperation Dar es Salaam in glass manufacturing, and he moved to Hungary, where he worked in a glass technology factory (TUNGSRAM) for six months. In Budapest, he studied with interest and obtained a Diploma in Glass Technology (April 1983). During the nine months, while he was living abroad, Mkufya learned the Magyar language at a beginner level and was fascinated by Magyar history and legends.¹⁶ However, since he felt not so confident in a foreign city, he devoted much of his time off work reading, and thus, preparing the firm intellectual background for *Ziraili na Zirani*.

In 1983, after the experience in Hungary, when he came back to Tanzania, Mkufya started working as an engineer in a Glass Factory and Light Source Manufacturers at National Development Corporation Dar es Salaam (1983 – 1991), and he had enough time to read and write after work. He was inspired by the soil of literary experimentation and debates, especially about epic and free-verse poetry, which had been commenced in the 1970's by intellectuals such as Mulokozi, Hussein and Kezilahabi. Afterwards, Mkufya left the job at the factory in 1988 and moved to the Dar es Salaam neighbourhood of Buza Yombo, where he started being self-employed in farming.

¹⁴ The trend of self-translation in Tanzania was pioneered by Ebrahim Hussein with the English self-translation (1970) of his Swahili drama *Kinjeketile* (1969).

¹⁵ Mkufya's life account *Maisha ya W.E. Mkufya* p. 8.

¹⁶ Mkufya's email 26-09-2023.

In that period, he was reading classical epics and translated the first three chapters of Homer's *Odyssey* into Swahili. He told me that those readings were the stimulus to write *Ziraili na Zirani* aiming to create "a real African epic," which includes "*Wafrika wa mbingu na mbingu ya ki-Afrika*" ('African people in Heaven and an African Heaven,' Mkufya personal interview 8-12-2023).

Ziraili na Zirani was published by *Hekima Publishers* in 1999. Even though *Ziraili na Zirani*'s first draft saw the light in 1980,¹⁷ only the fifth version of the manuscript could be published after winning the Best Swahili Fiction Manuscript Award by the National Book Week Committee Tanzania in 1999. During all those years, Mkufya read an impressive and massive amount of different Western and African literary and philosophical texts: classic epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*; as well as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*; Niane's *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (1960); and epic novels by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Melville, Joyce. He also read both Swahili classic poetry and international poetry in English; Greek and Shakespearean theatre; countless treatises of world history, philosophy and religion; Holy books: The Bible and the Qur'an; and Swahili literature, especially Shaaban Robert, Farouk Topan, Ebrahim Hussein and Euphrase Kezilahabi.

During the writing up of *Ziraili na Zirani*, the author experienced an ideological and spiritual crisis which brought him close to Christianity in between 1991-92, when he contacted a *mlokole* (revivalist Christian).

The major criticisms received by the earlier editions of the manuscript were, firstly, about the sensitive religious content that could result offensive for some readers. Secondly, the textual structure, overwhelmed by content and references to historical, philosophical and literary figures, made the novel difficult to read.¹⁸ On the other hand, the published novel was acclaimed with enthusiasm by the critics as "an epic with national and universal value," "written in a beautiful Swahili" (Chachage 2000: 4), and where "Mkufya reclaims his humanity by refusing to bow to the dictates of odious mediocrity clothed in false universalism" (Chachage 2000: 5).

When Mkufya realised the potential of *Ziraili na Zirani*, he started translating the manuscript into English to reach an international audience. Indeed, Mkufya claims that if he had written in English, he would have had much more success. The self-translation entitled *Pilgrims from Hell* is a *tarjumi*,¹⁹ an aesthetic translation, quite far from the Swahili original text which has not yet been published. As he

¹⁷ *Development of Ms Ziraili na Zirani*, unpublished document provided by Mkufya in November 2023.

¹⁸ Mkufya showed me the reviewers' assessments on the manuscript.

¹⁹ An inspired not literal translation.

explained, he struggled in translating his own 'African' imaginary into English, so he attempted to draw "Black symbolism painted in white" (Mkufya personal interview 8-12-2023).

In the same year of *Ziraili na Zirani* publication (1999), not only Julius Nyerere passed away and Mkufya dedicated the book to him (Mkufya 1999: iv), but also Mkufya married the woman with whom he was in love since 1989, and who is now mother of three children.²⁰ After the completion of the manuscript, Mkufya left the job at the glass factory. Indeed, I would say that *Ziraili na Zirani* was moulded from glass.

Afterwards, Mkufya was employed as an executive secretary at UWAVITA – *Umoja wa Waandishi wa Vitabu Tanzania* (Writers Association of Tanzania), when he composed the novel *Ua la Faraja* completed in two months only and published in 2004. The manuscript won the TEPUSA (The Network of Technical Publications in Africa) "Best Novel Manuscript Award" in 2001, and its first edition was supported by the Tanzania Cultural Trust Fund. Then, the book won the national prize for "Best Novel Award" of the year 2006 awarded by PATA (Publishers Association of Tanzania).

Mkufya remained at UWAVITA for one year only (2000-2001) and in that period, he also translated into English *Kiu* (1972) by Mohamed S. Mohamed as *The Thirst* (still unpublished).

Subsequently, he worked as an executive secretary and editor at BAMVITA (Book Development Council of Tanzania) (2002-2005), where he started writing children's books. His first tale was *Mtawa na Binti Mfalme* ('The Hermit and the Princess,' 2002). This is an ecocritical story that defends wild animals from poaching. In 2006, Mkufya could afford to establish his own company *The Mangrove Publishers* in Dar es Salaam.

In 2006, Mkufya, who had attracted the attention of European scholars, was invited to spend four months at the University of Bayreuth (Germany) to complete the trilogy on HIV/AIDS.²¹ There, he started writing the second novel, which took a long time to be completed from 2006 to 2019; in fact, the author started writing it in 2006. Then, the writing started again after the Bayreuth *Swahili Colloquium* in 2017, and the novel was completed at the author's office, which he calls *kambini* 'at the camp', in Dar es Salaam; finally, the manuscript was published in October 2019 as *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ('The Existence of Flowers').

²⁰ Mkufya's life account *Maisha ya W.E. Mkufya* p.11.

²¹ The names suggested for the two novels that are sequels to *Ua La Faraja* (2004), at the time when the first novel was published, were: *Maua Nyikani* and *Ua Limenyauka* (Mkufya 2005; Bertoncini 2005).

Furthermore, Mkufya is a major contributor to the Children's Book Project for Tanzania and CODE - Canadian project to develop children literacy,²² writing both books for children and young adults in both English and Swahili. For example, the short Swahili novel on albinism *Wema amwoko Noa* ('Wema saves Noa's life,' 2009) and two anglophone young adults' novels: the ecocritical novel *Face Under the Sea* (2011), and the magical realist short novel *The Raid and the Eclipse* (2016), which both won the CODE's "William Burt Literary Award"²³ for young readers of African literature.

Lately, Mkufya is a self-employed writer, translator, self-translator and senior editor in chief at the *Mangrove* publishing house in Dar es Salaam, where he is currently living. Recently, he completed the translation of 'Dinosaur Fragments' by Heumann *et al.* from English into Swahili as *Vipande vya Dinosaria*, which was started in 2018 and published by *Mkuki na Nyota* in 2021. Furthermore, Mkufya started writing the third volume of the trilogy in 2020, which manuscript was submitted to the Julius Nyerere Literary Prize in 2022. However, Mkufya was not happy with that draft, so he withdrew the manuscript from the competition, and he is currently working on the final draft. In 2023, Mkufya also received the COSOTA (Tanzanian Copyright Society) prize.

4. Mkufya's graphia

In the following paragraphs, I will, firstly, analyse Mkufya's novels contextualised into his life events and intellectual influences; secondly, the biographical approach will be the lens to conduct textual analysis exploring the peculiarity of the historical period, literary phase, and philosophical stream from an insightful perspective. Mkufya's ethical view and the way to design his own realisation of *utu* through fiction will also be analysed.

I have divided Mkufya's *graphia* in parallel with his *bios* into three periods: firstly, the young revolutionary period; secondly, the adult revolutionary phase and the embryo of human ontology; and finally, the humanist phase and the revelation of flowers.

²² CODE (Promoting every child's right to read) Literary Awards: <https://code.ngo/approach/literary-awards/> (last accessed on 02-01-2025).

²³ CODE's Burt Award for African Young Adult Literature: <https://www.burtaward.org/wemkufya> (last accessed on 02-01-2025).

4.1. The young revolutionary period

This period is characterised by realist postcolonial novels influenced by Marxist ideology, Marx and Engels's dialectical materialism, and African socialisms, especially *Ujamaa: The Wicked Walk* (1977/2012) and its Swahili translation *Kizazi Hiki* ('This Generation,' 1980); *A Solitary War* (unpublished); and *The Dilemma* (1982).

The Wicked Walk, and its translation *Kizazi Hiki*, is a realist and disenchanted novel that introduces the first epistemological and ethical pillars of Mkufya's thought. The novel not only expresses both cognitive materialism and agnosticism laying the basis for a religious critique, but it also advocates for an epistemology of youth, who express themselves and their struggles, and to whom Mkufya entrusts his hope for the future.

Mkufya's ethical pillar implies considering the socio-political and economic environment where people and characters live as well as the reciprocal influence between environment and behaviour. Following from Fanon's "On Violence" (2004: i): "the colonist turned the colonised into the quintessence of evil" (Fanon 2004: 6), Mkufya claims that colonised people, who suffered violence, cannot easily escape from the damages brought about it. Later, Mkufya develops this theory through the concept of *UKIMWI wa kijamii* ('the AIDS of society,' Mkufya 2004: 348) in the trilogy.

This novel offers a realist portrait of life in the suburbs of Dar es Salaam, which is narrated by an external narrator speaking in the third person from more than one perspective. This novel is a tragedy, which seems inspired by Sophocles' classic works. However, when the author wrote the novel, he was only a secondary school student, and he told me that he was not yet familiar with the Greek tragedies. Stylistically, he started drawing a dramatic texture in a novelistic text. However, Mkufya adds to the tragic end a characteristic final solace *maombolezo* or 'mourning.' Nevertheless, *kudra*, the ill-fate for the tragic heroine, Nancy, is a major theme of this novel.

The plot begins with a flashback prologue, which corresponds to the epilogue of the story: Maria's suicide. Nancy is the daughter of the incestuous relationship between a prostitute, Maria, and her brother. Although Nancy is in love with a young and good employee of a factory, Deo, she falls victim to the factory manager, Magege. Finally, Nancy gets pregnant by Magege and when she tries to reclaim her life through an abortion, she dies alone, and her mother, Maria, hangs herself.

Nancy falls into Magege's trap, the wicked businessman, not only as a matter of individual choice, but also because of the dangerous environment she lives in, as a young girl without any experience of the world. Mkufya paid also attention to describe generational conflicts in a period of historical

changes.²⁴ Although Maria tried her best to protect Nancy, the young girl was deaf to her mother's advice, because of their difficult relationship, which can be interpreted as an example of *Electra complex* (Freud 1923).

During the 1980s, prostitution was a recurrent topic in African literature following the lead of Okello Oculi's *Prostitute* (1968) and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Malaya* (1971). "*The Wicked Walk* portrays the city as the microcosm of neo-colonial society prostituted by the capitalist system" (Senkoro 1982: 36-37). Mkufya's novel is part of a popular literary stream, known as the "protest of tradition" which utilises the character of the prostitute to denounce socio-political and economic injustice (Senkoro 1982: 20): the working class is a prostitute, who sells labour and sweat to survive, and neo-colonial societies are huge brothels. Sugar daddies, *vibaba sukari* (Mkufya 1980: 89), like Magege are a metaphor for the political oppression and economic exploitation of both women and the working class.

Furthermore, Mkufya also illustrates disillusion for *Ujamaa na kujitegemea*²⁵ that, at first, recognised the right to work and be 'self-reliant' to women; however, some women fell into the city's pitfalls, where they were forced to sell their own bodies to survive. "*Ujamaa era novellas*" illustrate the risks for unmarried women workers, who migrated to cities looking for autonomy from patriarchal structures (Callaci 2017: 46).

Maria is just a worker; however, she is judged as a 'prostitute' *Malaya* (Mkufya 1980: 1) and her daughter Nancy as *dhambi* ('sin' Mkufya 1980: 2). Religious morality gives judgement on people without recognising that certain behaviours are caused by the difficult condition in which people are living and not by peoples' nature to be disciplined.

[...] *Tabia inajengwa na mazingira. Twazaliwa na asili zetu lakini tunakuwa kufuata asili ya mazingira yetu...*
(Mkufya 1980: 73)

[...] behaviour is built in relation to the environment. We are born with our inborn nature, but we adapt according to the nature of our environment²⁶...

The title *The Wicked Walk* refers allegorically to *Psalm* 12:8,²⁷ where king David calls for God's help in front of a society full of deceptions and weaknesses. The allegory refers to evil-hearted people, who,

²⁴ Cf. Hussein's play *Wakati Ukuta* ('Time is a Wall,' 1970).

²⁵ See the gender policy in the Arusha Declaration (Nyerere 1979).

²⁶ All the translations from Swahili into English are mine unless otherwise indicated. Emphasis mine.

²⁷ BibleGateway (*Psalm* 12 King James Version): <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2012&version=KJV> (last accessed on 02-01-2025).

constituting the bourgeoisie, are spreading wickedness all around. The victim is *Kizazi Hiki*, “This Generation,” the title of Mkufya’s Swahili translation that is also a quote from *Psalms* 12:7. “This generation” stands for the youth: “The youth are the victims of our society’s sex morals coming and going” (Mkufya 2012: 102). Indeed, the Swahili version shifts the focus from the passive hope of receiving justice to an engaged social fight that is up to this generation. The novel is set in a period of class struggles in Tanzanian cities to defend the rights of the working class against bourgeois and to overthrow the “compartmentalised word” (Fanon 2004: 5).

If postcolonial societies lack *utu*, the youth can show ‘humanity’ fighting together ‘the wicked walking’ around. Mkufya, as a young Marxist revolutionary, urges ‘this generation’ of youth to be responsible for social changes:

vyama vya vijana pekee; sisi wenyewe tunaoumia ndio tukaoweza kusawazisha mambo (Mkufya 1980: 137)
[...] twajua vijana peke yao hawawezi kufanya mapinduzi, itawabidi wawe chini ya mwongozo wa chama kinachowawakilisha wananchi. [...] Tunapozungumzia vijana kwa mstari wa mbele katika harakati hizi za mapinduzi, katu haimaanishi tunawasahau wakulima na wafanyakazi. (Mkufya 1980: 139)

only the Youth League, only us, the victims ourselves, can solve our own problems (Mkufya 2012: 103) [...] We know youth cannot make a total *change* on their own; they have to be under the guidance of a party which represents the people. [...] When we speak of youths being in the forefront of our national struggles, we can’t misinterpret the roles of peasants and workers. (Mkufya 2012: 104)

Comparing the original English novel and its Swahili translation, the Swahili version judges more severely those ‘evil, wicked people.’ The Swahili translation is also much less self-censored, for instance, Deo calls for *MAPINDUZI* (‘REVOLUTION,’ Mkufya 1980: 138) instead of “Change” (Mkufya 2012: 103).

The Dilemma (1982) is a psychological novel, dealing with unconscious internal conflicts. The story has an intricate plot made up of flashbacks, and uses a dualistic perspective drawn from the points of view of both the hero, Ernest, and the heroine, Maryam, who are internal narrators speaking in the first person.

The narrative style is a memoir like a confession, where the characters let the voice of their conscience speak. The characters recall and tell respectively their memories and emotions of remorse and guilt, following the stream of their conscience: Ernest while he is in prison waiting to be sentenced for having killed his wife’s lover and Maryam before poisoning herself.

Mkufya explained that the novel is the product of a period dedicated to gender equality and women’s rights, which can be analysed through the lenses of psychoanalysis (Freud 1923; Ellman 1994).

Mkufya not only pays attention to the contrasting ‘double-sided’ psychology of the male and female protagonists and their evolution, but also, the relation between self-control and inner instinct is an application of Freud’s *Ego, Id and Superego* (1923): “when you lose control of the superego, the id comes up, as well as the human beast” (Mkufya 1981: 59).

This novel suggests being inspired by Camus’s *The Stranger*, as the similar reactions of the protagonists, respectively Mkufya’s Ernest and Camus’s Meursault, and their feeling of alienation illustrate.

Furthermore, Mkufya further develops his theory that the environment has the strongest influence on people’s behaviour and the constitution of an ethical code. Therefore, socio-political and economic weaknesses in an unstable society create an unfavourable and hostile environment for the characters. Especially women, who take recourse to “prostitution in disguise” (Mkufya 1981: 89).

In the end, the dilemma remains at least threefold: how to find a balance between self-control (superego) and inner instinct (the id)? Who is the victim and who is the real culprit: the murderer or the adulterer? Which is the right choice between real love and economic and social security?

4.2. The adult revolutionary phase and the embryo of human ontology

This phase is characterised by experimentation in both content and style. *Ziraili na Zirani* (henceforth ZZ) (‘Azrael and Zirani,’ 1999) is an allegorical, polyphonic and “polymorphic novel²⁸” (Wamitila quoted in Diegner 2005: i) “rich in intertextuality” (Diegner 2005: 27), which describes an intellectual war fought in human minds against ideologies.

This is Mkufya’s first philosophical novel, which investigates “general and universal questions of mankind” (Diegner 2005: 33) such as: the enigma of the existence of God and an afterlife, which remains a mystery in this novel; the meaning of transient life for mortal beings and their compatibility with free will; the problem of evil; and the essence of reality and truth (Rettová 2005; 2007a, b; 2016a, c; 2021a, b; Mkufya 2005; Nicolini 2022; Rodger-Johns 2015; De Giuli 2012). Above all, this is a humanist text, which supports a defence of human willpower as well as cultural and ideological relativism.

The novel reveals a deep reflection on religion, inspired by an episode known as the ‘war of Mwembechai,’ a Dar es Salaam neighbourhood, where a religious conflict between Muslim and

²⁸ The critics have also labelled Swahili experimental prose as ‘postrealist,’ ‘postmodern’ and ‘Swahili new novel’ (Diegner 2017: 27; Gromov 2019; Khamis 2005; Aiello 2015).

Christians erupted because of butcher shops selling pork.²⁹ Since the late 1980's, religious riots, which had been pacified by Nyerere, started resurfacing in the country (Mkufya personal interview 21-11-2023).

Mkufya created this epic novel with the objective of producing an African epic. The reasons underpinning this ambitious work were both historical and ideological. Firstly, in the 1970's, in Tanzania, there was the so-called "African epic controversy" (Mulokozi 2002: 1) aimed at opposing Finnegan's (1970) statement: "epic does not seem to occur in Sub-Saharan African literatures" (Finnegan 1970: 108; Barber 2007: 48). This statement triggered the impulse of demonstrating the existence of an African epic as a proper genre and defining its features (Mulokozi 2002: 1-2).

Secondly, the novel, by criticising apologetic literature, especially Christian apologetics, denounces the lack of black African representatives in Holy and classic epics; since Africa did not have an institutionalised religion nor a recognised prophet, even though African traditional religions are antecedent to Islam and Christianity, African people seem to be doomed to darkness (Mkufya personal interview 8-12-2023). In *Ziraili na Zirani*, this topic is discussed both when the protagonist meets African historical figures in Hell, such as "the prophetic figure" (Mkufya 2005: 59), who is none other than Okigbo, *Kasisi wa Enugu* ('the Priest of Enugu' ZZ 89), and when the angel Ariel is shut out of Heaven's doors representing the rejection of Africans from salvation (ZZ 11-2).

Mkufya wrote this epic inspired by the giant narrators of epics of the past: Homer, Virgil, Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* (1308 - 1320), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) as well as by African authors³⁰ (Topan's *Aliyeonja Pepo* 1970 and Robert's *Kufikirika* 1967).

Mkufya also differentiates between *utenzi*,³¹ classic Swahili epic poem, and "*epiki ya kifasihi*",³² 'literary epic,' like novels and sagas, wherein he classified this novel (personal interview 30-11-2023).

The text shows all the epic features, *i.e.* the length (238 pages), the aulic language (a rhythmic prose adorned with interval of free verse poetry); the epic structure: proem, protasis, narration and

²⁹ The 1990s was a period characterised by an increase in both Christian and Islam radicalism, when "the pork and hijab controversies" (Mbogoni 2004: 153-69) and "Muslim *mihadhara* (public lectures) against Christianity" enflamed the country (Mbogoni 2004: 171-193).

³⁰ An influence can also be the *mi'raj* the Prophet's journey to Heaven narrated through Swahili *utenzi* (Topan 2001).

³¹ For the *utenzi* or *utenzi* genre, which was also used as a medium for "projecting Islam" (Topan 2001: 107), see Rettová (2010; 2020b), Acquaviva (2019) and Knappert (1967). Cf. Barber (2007: 48-9) on Swahili *utenzi* and Haya *enanga* epic genres.

³² Mkufya, William. "*Je Ziraili na Zirani ni Epiki?*"—an unpublished paper presented at the international conference on "The Intellectual Biography as an entry point for Literary and Epistemological Analysis," at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," 10 April 2024.

the cathartic epilogue corresponding to the 'Judgment Day' (*Kiama*, ZZ 212-26). The narration begins with a proem set in 1099, the year of the Siege of Jerusalem during the First Crusade, which describes three events occurring in the three 'capitals' of Abrahamic religions. Firstly, Baghdad, where the young Iqbal Faisal is setting off for the jihad and where the *Elfu Lela Ulela* (*One Thousand and One Night*) and *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhud* (*The Epic Battle of Uhud*, Chum and Lambert 1962) are mentioned; in Rome, Marcus son of Gadi is setting off for joining the Christian crusade and *Utenzi wa Pepo* (Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, ZZ 4) is mentioned; and, Jerusalem, cradle of all the three Abrahamic religions, is where all the Holy books: the Bible, the Gospels, the Quran and the Torah are preserved (ZZ 1-7).

The protasis is featured by the image of Solomon's temple, which he erected to thank God for granting him wisdom (ZZ 8). Here, it is introduced the leitmotif of the religious critique: religious war and violence; the novel denounces the politicisation and instrumentalisation of religion as well as an anthropomorphic representation of God.

The episodes are arranged according to classical epic themes: war, religion, interdimensional shifts between life on earth and the afterlife, Heaven and Hell as well as mythical, historical and spiritual characters such as angels and demons (Diegner 2005: 27).

The three main characters are Ziraili, the angel of death and collector of souls; Lucifer, who, as shown by the choice of the Latin name,³³ was inspired by Milton's poem protagonist, is a central antihero in this novel along with his minions; and Fikirini Zirani,³⁴ the soul of an atheist history teacher,³⁵ who in life led the radical movement ARM, *African Revival Mission* (African traditional cultures and religions, ZZ 34).

Zirani is a religious apostate and the prototype of a young African revolutionary intellectual. He is the evolution of the Marxist revolutionary characters Deo (*The Wicked Walk* 1977) and Heri Rashid (*A Solitary War* unpublished).

Mkufya rides the literary and philosophical debate concerning Swahili free verse poetry, whose well-known representative was Kezilahabi (Rettovà 2016a: 221; Gaudio 2020; Topan 1974; Mazrui 1992), to create something new. Poetry is part and parcel of the book as a strategy to elevate the language and effectively present the argument when prose fails. When human limited cognitive

³³ The choice of Lucifer rather than Iblis was done for the etymological meaning of 'light-bringer,' who brings the light of knowledge against superstition.

³⁴ The name is made up of two verbs in the plural form of the imperative that mean: "You all must think and abstain/boycott/reject" (Rettovà 2005: 17; 2007a; Diegner 2005: 32).

³⁵ Zirani is also an autobiographical character, a schoolteacher, as Mkufya was a chemistry teacher at *Mzumbe* secondary school.

capacities fail, superhuman entities intervene to mock humanity through irritating alliterative sounds so as to sow discord and destabilise their conventional pattern of thought. Demons, “fracturing the prose” with poems, introduce other epistemologies and philosophies (Rettovà 2021b: 12), and thus, from the ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 1981) of this novel an “hetero-epistemic textuality” is unfolded (Nicolini 2022: 263).

Mkufya designed an original style of poetry, which he calls *ushairi wa ki-dithiramb-korofi*³⁶ ‘the impertinent dithyrambic style of poetry,’ which performs the role of *korasi ya kikorofi* “satirical arrogant anti-chorus” (Nicolini 2022: 72). These original poems consist of a combination of styles and forms: Greek Dionysian dithyrambs are inserted in Swahili free-verse poetry (Rettovà 2016a: 221) and spiced with the tradition of *utani* ‘joking.’

Mkufya, inspired by the *Bacchae* by Euripides, composed these poems with sarcasm, irony, satire, and joke; they are revolutionary not only in forms as the Swahili free-verse poetry, but also in content recalling the hymns sung to praise Dionysus, the divinity of wine and pleasure. Mkufya’s intention was to create a Swahili style of dithyramb (personal interview 28-11-2023), which he also calls *vijembe* (‘sharp critical statements;’ Sheikh 1994) to convey religious criticism in the form of a “confrontative commentary” (Rettovà 2016a: 221) or anti-chorus discussion. The demons use dithyrambs to make a joke of human intelligence and free will, gifts received from God, which they cannot use properly.

In *Ziraili na Zirani*, the poems are interlaced into a chain of sounds (alliteration) and meaning (paronomasia) inspired by Okigbo’s collection of chained poems *The Labyrinth* (1971). In *Kuwa kwa Maua* (2019), Mkufya transforms the poetic style into a dramatic style and the anti-chorus is no longer recited as poetry but discussed through dramatic dialogues and ‘dialogic relationships’ (Bakhtin 1981).

Zirani’s ideology, influenced by philosophers like Epicure, Voltaire and Marx (ZZ 34), is ‘a political ideology based on human equality’ (*siasa ya usawa wa binadamu*, ZZ 36) and atheism. In fact, he refuses both his mother’s Christianity and his father’s Islam, because of the following reasons: firstly, Africa already had religions before the advent of Arab and European colonisers; secondly, he argues that there is no reason to fight one another as monotheistic religions have historically been doing, while the aim is to establish religious tolerance: *kujenga hisia za Imani* (‘to build a feeling of faith,’ ZZ 33). Thirdly, he argues that if people are chasing the afterlife, they waste their short time on earth. Finally, even though human beings are fully responsible for their choices, the environment does exert an influence on those choices.

³⁶ Mkufya discussed this topic in several conversations in Nov./Dec. 2023.

Indeed, another character called Tito³⁷ Dedan³⁸ (ZZ 84) argues that violence is generated whenever people are oppressed (Mkufya 2012; 2004; cf. Fanon 2004); conversely, religion does not look for the origin of evil but threatens people with the idea of a punishment in Hell or cheats them with the promise of Heaven.

If there is no justice in wealth distribution, violent behaviour can be developed.³⁹ That is the case of Africa, according to Mkufya, who claims that the perfect social system reaches *mgawanyo sawa wa neema za ulimwengu* ‘an equal distribution of universe wealth’ (personal interview 8-12-2023).

Mkufya is a humanist, and he defends human beings through the characters of both Zirani and the demons, even starting from different premises.

According to the demons, the huge mistake that jeopardised both the creation and the creator was to endow Adam with free will: *ndiyo siri ya kuikosa heri* ‘that’s the secret of missing blessing’ (ZZ 49). Humanity is endowed with reason and will, but human souls driven by desires and senses, are captive in a mortal body of flesh and blood, which makes them fail to manage willpower and be prone to do evil (ZZ 41-3).

Nonetheless, Lucifer decides to train Zirani at the demons’ school (ZZ 46-53) and this is a message that Mkufya gives: people must work out their intellect and improve their intellectual capacities making the most out of them: *Ukiidekeza hekima* (‘If you work wisdom out’ ZZ 42).

<i>Lusifa: “Ole wako! ole wako!</i>	Lucifer: The worse is coming for you! the worse is coming for you!
<i>Kiumbe uliyeumbwa, mwanga utakuumbua.</i>	Creature who was created, the light [of knowledge] will expose you.
<i>Ni kwa Heri umeumbwa, ila hiari yakusumbua</i>	You have been created by blessing, even though freewill bothers you.
<i>Kwa Heri! Kwa Heri! Ni kwa hii Heri umetambua.</i>	With blessings! With blessing! With this blessing you obtained consciousness.
<i>Ukiidekeza hekima, hutaweza kufumbua.</i>	If you work wisdom out, you will not understand.
<i>Kwaheri, Kwaheri...”</i>	Goodbye, Goodbye...
(Mkufya 1999: 42)	

³⁷ Josip Broz Tito (1944- 1963).

³⁸ Dedan Kimathi (1920-1957), the Kikuyu spiritual leader of *Mau Mau* revolt in Kenya (1952-62).

³⁹ See also *Face Under the Sea* which is a kind of ‘spin-off’ narration.

Demons with their cynical attitude, hypercritical towards their evil role, towards God's creation and towards humanity, reveal themselves to be the real philosophers. Demons are eternal supernatural creatures with superior intellectual capabilities than humanity, and thus they can use an elevated complex language⁴⁰ to baffle and mock them questioning materialism. However, demons are the defenders of humanity: *Shetani mja*⁴¹ *twamtetea na dhambi zake twazisherekea!* ('we demons defend the servant of God, and his sin we celebrate!' ZZ 51). Evil comes from human failure to control their volition, and the fault is on Heaven to have entrusted men with intellect and free will, with no time to learn how to master these gifts.

Demons are double figures, on the one hand, they tempt humanity to do evil; on the other hand, they teach humanity to make good use of their intellectual gifts. They test human free will not only to demonstrate the imperfection of creation, but also to improve human intellectual capacities, teaching them how to use their willpower.

The objective is to overcome the concept of evil as per religious paradigms, maintaining that there is no absolute good or evil, yet both are relative concepts. The novel can also be interpreted as a parody of the religious interpretation of evil and good, where the Devil and God are just role performed on the stage of phenomenal life as well as angels and demons are part of the same clockwork, as shown by Lucifer, who wish to be given another role other than tempting humanity when the world crumbles (ZZ 43):

Lusifa: Aheri! Aheri!

Lucifer: It is better! It is better!

Shari iibashirie

Adversity [the war] will predict

*Ahera heri*⁴²;
Upya, mbingu zin'kadirie!
(Mkufya 1999: 43)

Blessing for Paradise;
Anew, the heavens will estimate me⁴³!

⁴⁰ Cf. Hussein's play *Mashetani* ('The Devils,' 1971), where the character *Shetani* 'the Demon' opens the play introducing himself through a free verse poem sung in a 'devilish language' ('*lugha ya kishetani*,' Hussein 1971: 1-3).

⁴¹ *Mja* lit. 'God's servant' or human being is a term usually used in the Islamic context (Rettová 2020a: 35).

⁴² Paronomasias of homophones. Cf. ZZ 183.

⁴³ And for Lucifer a new job could be given!

Once Zirani completes his training at the demons' school (ZZ 52-3), he becomes a leader among the hell-dwellers in the “*kambi ya dhahara*” ‘the camp/the circle’⁴⁴ of what is evident/manifest’ (ZZ 68), where the souls of atheist and materialist philosophers are settled, and where the “ideology of *udhahiri*”⁴⁵—evidence or manifestness of things” (Rettovà 2007a: 251; 2005: 17) is professed:

Kambi ya roho za binadamu walioamini itikadi ya udhahiri wa vitu, hali, jinsia na maumbo kwa sifa zao zionekana au kutambulika kwa hisia na vipimo vya binadamu na sio kwa sifa za Imani au dhana peke yake (Mkufya 1999: 68)

Camp for souls of humans who believe in the ideology of the manifestation of things, essences, forms and states that can be detected by human senses or their instruments and not through belief or any form of idealism (Mkufya's self-translation).

The *Wanadhahara*, the souls inhabiting “the camp of Manifesto,”⁴⁶ whom I call ‘the revolutionaries of manifestness,’ are materialist and atheists’ thinkers, who reject metaphysics and beliefs as a Kantian noumenon to focus on the physical world of phenomena and matter, in connection with the philosophy of *uyakinifu*, ‘cognitive materialism’ (Nicolini 2022: 62):

Falsafa ya uyakinifu wa harakati za hali, maumbo na mikinzano yake; maumbile na udhahiri wake (Mkufya 1999: 71)

Materialistic and dialectic methods of human thoughts; the substance form and its evidence (Mkufya's self-translation)

Udhahiri is “a cognitive and ontological aspect of reality” (Rettovà 2007a: 252); “true being is a matter, a substance,” which is evident and adequate to human cognitive capacities: the five senses and reason (Rettovà 2007a: 253-255).

This embryo of *udhahiri* philosophy is grounded in defining it from the ontological perspective as evident matter through which human beings perceive the phenomenal world by sensory experience. In this phase, *udhahiri* is also based on both a Marxist perspective: overcoming class struggle for promoting the equality of human beings, and a communitarian perspective: *mtu ni watu*: people are

⁴⁴ The description of the war-camp, where the revolutionaries of manifestness are located, evokes Dante's infernal circles.

⁴⁵ “The abstract noun *udhahiri*, stemming from the adjective which means manifest/evident, can be translated as the “manifestness of things themselves defined by sensory experiences” (Rettovà 2007a: 251).

⁴⁶ Rettovà (2005: 17) translates *kambi ya dhahara* as the ‘camp of the manifesto’ to render both the meaning of the Swahili word *dhahara*: evident/manifest and the ideological allusion to Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848).

humane by supporting other people. This definition in embryo of the human being ontology will evolve into the revelation of human beings' existence and individual life in *Kuwa kwa Maua*.

Evident matter clashes with immaterial ideas as well as materialism (*uyakinifu*) and phenomenology (*udhahiri*) clash with idealism (*udhanifu*). *Akirikifuk* (ZZ 59) is a warning sign posted on Heaven's gate, and it is also a book located in the 'camp of manifestness,' which contains knowledge based on materialism to destroy idealism and superstitious beliefs. The palindromic word *Akirikifuk* (spelled backwards *Kufikirika*) not only is an indirect quote from Robert's novel *Kufikirika* ('Thinkable' 1967; Diegner 2005: 28) or "The Nature of Ideas" (Masolo 2010: 162), but it also represents Mkufya's theory based on the distinction between *kufikiri*, to think as imagination, and *kutafakari*, reason. *Kufikirika* is 'fantasy,' as Mkufya self-translated this term (*Ysatnaf*, backwards Fantasy),⁴⁷ the fantasy preached by religion and idealism that clashes with *udhahiri*, the manifestness of materialism. However, 'in hell words and statements must be read backwards' (ZZ 92; Rettová 2021a: 335); thus, *kufikirika* is uttered as *akirikifuk*, a magic spell used as a weapon by the apostates during the war to neutralise and destroy idealism as well as immaterial entities: angels and demons (ZZ 170).

The revolutionaries of manifestness are led by a Senate of materialists and atheist thinkers such as Zeno and Epicure along with the representative of European Enlightenment and other European philosophers of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries (ZZ 70-78). By introducing those philosophers, Mkufya told me (pers. comm.) that he attempted to put himself in their shoes and think as those philosophers would have thought. In the novel, this is a case of meta-philosophy (Overgaard *et al.* 2013; Gordon 2008: 8): European philosophers' explanations are reinterpreted in an African context by an African intellectual. This endeavour can also be observed through Kezilahabi's "bifocal" lenses whose criticism includes the encounter with the West (Kezilahabi in Lanfranchi 2012: 75): "We shall use Heideggerian, Nietzschean and Marxian lenses on our own eyes, and we shall try as much as possible not to bring into our discussion vulgar anthropology" (Kezilahabi 1985: 239).

Any ideology must be tested and proved through scientific empirical evidence, according to Descartes:

Kwa chochote nitakachoambiwa, nitasita kukiamini kwanza, kisha nitakichambua mpaka nipate uhakika. Kama nitashindwa kukihakikisha basi heri nibakie kwenye shaka kuliko kukiamini (Mkufya 1999: 73).

⁴⁷ Mkufya completed the self-translation of *Ziraili na Zirani* into English as *Pilgrims from Hell* in 2005. However, the manuscript is still unpublished.

For everything I have been told of, I will doubt believing at first, then I will analyse it until I can prove it. If I fail to prove something, I prefer to remain in doubt rather than believe it.

However, the test of science is not the sole test, and it is limited.

Since an idea can only be defeated by another idea, the *wanadhahara* ally with Hell and wage war against Heaven under the demons' command, who in turn, through their mysterious enchanting and baffling language of satirical poetry, instrumentalise human will so as to support their own claim to Heaven's throne.

Demons tempt and test humanity to demonstrate the weakness of human free will or, better say, the incapability of human beings to control their will power as newborn creatures who are not yet developed enough to make good use of it. Notwithstanding, demons advocate for humanity who cannot be judged because of their sins or praised because of their good actions.

<i>Rahabu: Vita mbingu zimevikiri</i>	Rahab: The heavens have succumbed to the
	war
<i>Hakuna wa kuzisetiri!</i>	There is nobody to protect them!
<i>Hiari ina dosari</i>	Free will is imperfect
<i>wa hila zetu imedhihiri</i>	by our temptations it has been revealed
<i>Aheri aheri, shari imeiletea</i>	It is better, it is better, adversity [war] has
	brought
<i>Ahera heri, dunia na waja</i>	Blessing to Heaven, the earth and human
<i>vinateketea!</i>	beings are perishing!
<i>Kwa hekima na hanjari</i>	With wisdom and swords
<i>Dhambi zao, shetani tumezitetee!</i>	Their sins, we devils have defended!
(Mkufya 1999: 221-222)	

Furthermore, in the end, the two angels, *Babu na Bibi Kizee*, reveal the plan of God:

Mbingu zilipima utiifu wenu kwa Mungu na hiari yenu ya kumpenda na kumtii bila kushurutishwa (Mkufya 1999: 225).

The heavens tested our obedience to God and our will to love and serve Him without coercion.

Human free will, weak as it can be, is fundamental to make every mortal's choice count, becoming a necessary attribute for limited beings and finitude is its precondition (Rettová 2005: 22).

In this novel, the war between Heaven and Hell is a metaphor for colonialism wherein the revolutionaries of manifestness represent the Global South waging war against cultural imperialism and confront imported religions to Africa as a symbol of decolonisation of the mind (Nicolini 2025: 18). The war is also an allegory of life: *usahihi ni nguvu ama utu wa Waafrika* 'the correct answer is might'⁴⁸ or African humanity?' (Mkufya personal interview 8-12-2023).

The origin of *UKIMWI wa kijamii* ('the societal AIDS' Mkufya 2004) is explained in the manifesto of the ARM, *Africa Revival Mission*:

Wafuasi wa ARM waliamini kwamba Mwafrika amevurungiwa maadili na falsafa yake ya Maisha [...] moja ya sababu ya upotofu huu ni kupokea tamaduni na dini za watu waliowatawala na kuwatumisha (Mkufya 1999: 35)

The followers of ARM believed that the African person had lost her/his ethics and their philosophy of life [...] one of the reasons for this alienation is to have welcomed cultures and religions of the people who ruled and enslaved them.

Additionally, the source of Mkufya's suggested crisis: *ustaduni* ('cultural civilization' Mkufya 2004) can be found in African *utani*, joking pan, suggesting cultural pluralism as recited by the hell-dwellers:

*Wangindo: Chopichopi twazunguka
uungu*

The Ngindo people: Slowly with jokes
we play around the concept of divinity.

*Urabu na Uzungu si utawala wa
mbingu,*

Neither Arabs nor Europeans are the
ruler of the sky,

*Wenye haki kuzitia pingu,
na kuharamisha mila za walimwengu!
(Mkufya 1999: 216)*

Who have the right to put handcuffs,
and make illicit the cultures of the
inhabitants of the universe!

⁴⁸ Cf. Thrasymachus' arguments in Book I of Plato's *Republic* "might makes right" and Shaaban Robert's *Kusadikika* ('Believable' 1951).

Kinjeketile Ngwale, who led the *Maji Maji* revolt (1905-1907) reuniting ethnic groups of South Tanzania against the German invaders through the symbol of ‘water’ (*maji*) (ZZ 96-8), is located in Hell, because he chose to worship the traditional deity Bokero (ZZ 101).

The message of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism is conveyed by Azazel’s pan:

Azazel: *Mungu mmoja, imani
mbalimbali!*

Mama mmoja, baba mbalimbali

Wali, wali, haunogi wali!

sharti kwa kachumbali!

(Mkufya 1999: 52)

Azazel: One God, several beliefs!

One mother, several fathers.

The rice, the rice, cannot be delicious if

eaten alone!

It should be a mixed spicy salad!

To sum, this polyphonic novel shows a clash of plural epistemologies: the revolutionaries of manifestness are partisans for *udhahiri* ‘manifestness of things’, cognitive materialism (*uyakinifu*), positivism of science and atheism; the angels in Heaven represent idealism (*udhanifu*), metaphysics and religious beliefs; finally, demons, who are the real philosophers, are hypercritical towards themselves, the heavens, humanity and suggest what I call, a cynical epistemology of doubt and disbelief (Nicolini 2025: 11).

Different epistemologies are conveyed by an heterogeneric or “hetero-epistemic textuality” (Nicolini 2022: 263): the epic prose conveys the revolutionaries’ materialism, whereas the poetry conveys the demons’ “sophisticated critique of positivist epistemology” (Rettová 2021a: 332), but above all poetry introduces a hypercritical view criticising a single ideology, including faith, in favour of “radical scepticism, cultural pluralism, cognitive relativism and agnosticism” (Rettová 2021a: 332-335).

Moreover, the demons’ poems extend the cognitive experiences with an epistemology of *yaelekea* ‘probability’ (ZZ 155) that includes multiple possibilities behind and beyond the phenomenal appearances and the cognitive patterns available for humanity through their *kauli telezi*, *falsafa zenye kifafa* and *hekima za kubabaisha*, ‘slick statements, defective philosophy and incomplete wisdom’ (ZZ 153, 212-213), which is based on intellectual endeavour and empirical attempts.

Lastly, when Zirani destroys the throne of Heaven, humanity faces the void. The novel demonstrates the non-existence of truth, but relativism as the prism of reality. Mkufya left all the possible ways of interpretation open to the readers, without offering an answer, aiming to make people think with their free minds (Nicolini 2025).

4.3. The humanist phase and the revelation of flowers

This phase is characterised by a return to realism or “neo-realism”, and it is Mkufya’s humanist period that generated the trilogy on HIV/AIDS. “New realism” or “neo-realism” is the new way of writing realism adopted by writers, who have experienced experimentation and who decide to write again in a realist mode (Rettová 2016c: 16, 24; Diegner 2017: 39). However, some experimental features can be sieved from a prose characterised by genre-blending that stirs realism and surrealism.

The trilogy *Diwani ya Maua* (‘The Poetry of Flowers’) consists of two philosophical novels:⁴⁹ *Ua La Faraja* (henceforth ULF; ‘The Flower of Consolation’ 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua* (‘The Existence of Flowers’ 2019; henceforth KKM).

Mkufya also calls the novels *Utenzi wa Maua* (‘The Poem of Flowers’) because he crafted a poetical narrative for his novels, inspired by the *utenzi*, Swahili classic epic poems. Natural elements in the novel represent a poetic symbolism that embellishes the prose giving to it a scent of lyrical narrative, and his heroines and heroes are *walimwengu-watu* ‘human world-dwellers’ (KKM 69-70), portrayed through the symbolism of ‘flowers.’ Human beings’ existence in this world is fleeting and fragile like that of flowers, as well as graceful and compassionate persons like flowers exist in this world, who demonstrate their humanity through consolation and tolerance towards the others (Nicolini 2022: 201).

By calling the trilogy *utenzi*, there is also an intention to connect it with the epic novel *Ziraili na Zirani*. The trilogy, especially *Kuwa kwa Maua*, unfolds the metaphor of *Ziraili na Zirani*, and the heroic deeds of Zirani and the apostates of manifestness, who wage war against Heaven, are converted into everyday life struggle in a neighbourhood of Dar es Salaam. The aulic language of angels and demons’ poetry is translated into dramatic dialogues and the characters lay down their weapons in favour of tolerance, yet the intellectual war of the philosophical characters continues to develop (Nicolini forthcoming).

Mkufya designs these novels stylistically like theatrical plays, organised into acts and scenes as well as characters’ behaviours, speeches, and gestures are lively painted (Bertoncini 2005). The first volume encloses a comedy celebrating life, while the sequel is a tragedy celebrating death, and together the two novels represent the human life cycle (Nicolini 2022: 174).

The two novels are a family saga: a long narration that tells the interlaced life events of three families over many years and which extends over two generations of characters. The first novel (435

⁴⁹ The third novel is forthcoming.

pages) covers a period of six years and the sequel novel (477 pages), which starts about ten years after the last events narrated in its prequel, covers another six years (Nicolini 2022:177).

The protagonists in the trilogy, who are portrayed as fluctuating between “popular wisdom (folk-sages) and didactic wisdom (philosophic sages)” (Oruka 1990a: 28), are James Omolo *Jaluo* and his wife Grace; *Dkt* Hans Jumbe and his wife Kristina; and Asha Kabeya *Manyema*. Those characters evolve becoming more mature and self-reliant according to the maturity of the author.

Ua la Faraja is a realist novel in which Mkufya explores the meaning of life in the face of HIV/AIDS through the lens of existentialism (Bertoncini 2005; Rettovà 2011; 2015; 2016b). In doing so, Mkufya describes the opposite characters’ reactions in the face of an impending death.

On the one hand, the character of Queen falls into the absurd and commits suicide; on the other hand, the absurdist character of Omolo, a meta-figure of Antoine Roquentin (Sartre’s *Nausea*), is a cynical atheist, who could not see any meaning in life:

Alihesabu kuzaliwa kama adhabu na sasa alikuwa amepewa adhabu kali zaidi: adhabu ya kufa kwa UKIMWI, tena UKIMWI wenyewe ulisababishwa na tendo la kipuuzi: ngono (Mkufya 2004: 114).

He regarded being born as a punishment, but now he has been given an even worse punishment: the punishment of dying of AIDS; furthermore, AIDS itself is caused by a stupid action: sex.

However, he does not succumb to the absurd supported by Dr Hans, who opens his heart to love, convincing Omolo to create a family, finding a meaning in life through procreation that overcomes death, and acknowledging that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 2005: 119). This novel ends with the solacing and hopeful birth of a baby girl, Tumaini (‘Hope’), and Omolo will die fat and happy in the second novel.

Dr Hans, a virologist, not only is a materialist and atheist philosopher, but he is also a humanist, the real flower of consolation in this novel. Stylistically, Dr Hans is a meta-figure of Dr Rieux (Camus’s *The Plague*), who fights hopelessly against the impending death, and when he falls in despair, his Christian wife solaces him with her prayers (Mkufya 2019: 200; cf. Nicolini 2022: 190; Diegner 2024).

The novel illustrates the socio-political situation of the country during the advent of HIV/AIDS as well as after the implementation of SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs) and the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s (Lugalla 1995; Mbilinyi 1993; Brooks and Kessy 2017; Sanders 2001), which generated a form of neocolonialism and “de-moralisation” (Ferguson quoted in Kresse 2011: 247). In this novel, Mkufya completed his theories of *UKIMWI wa kijamii* (‘the AIDS of society’) and *ustaduni* (‘cultural civilization’).

This is also a postcolonial novel, which is committed to overcome “the crisis of self-identity”, produced by the superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems, (Wiredu 1992: 59) encouraging “conceptual decolonization” (Wiredu 1995; 1998; 2002):

Wengi wao walijikuta njia panda: si Waafrika na wala si Wazungu au Waarabu, na sehemu kubwa ya utu wao wa asili ikawa imefutika (Mkufya 2004: 48).

Many of them [Africans] found themselves at a crossroads: neither Africans nor European nor Arabs, and a big portion of their original humanity had been erased.

Arab and European customs and habits have enslaved African people: *msahau kwao ni mtumwa* (‘who forgets his/her origins is nothing but a slave,’ ULF 357) generating what Dr Hans called *UKIMWI wa kijamii*:

Huu ugonjwa wa UKIMWI usababishwao na virusi umetukuta tayari tunaugua UKIMWI wa kijamii. Umekuta jamii yetu haina kinga ya lolote linalotuvamia iwe njaa, vita, ukame, madawa ya kulevya au migogoro ya kisiasa. UKIMWI wa kijamii umeshakula utu wetu, uzalendo wetu, busara zetu na Imani zetu. Sasa tumebaki ndani ya mataifa tuliyoundiwa na Wazungu, kisha tukasadikishwa Imani zao, mila zao, na tafsiri yao ya utu na utaifa (Mkufya 2004: 357).

This illness of AIDS, caused by a virus, encountered us while we were already suffering from social AIDS/the AIDS of society. It found our society [already affected by a social immune deficiency syndrome] without any protection from everything that assaults us such as famine, war, barrenness, drug abuse and political struggles. Social AIDS had already eaten our humanity, our patriotism, our wisdom and our beliefs. Now we have remained within nations created by Europeans, then we accept as truthful their beliefs, their cultures, and their interpretation of humanity and nationalism.

In this novel, HIV/AIDS is also a metaphor, which denounces the alienated identity of contemporary African nations. This modern “collective alienation” results in defective people endowed with defective humanity (Rettová 2007b: 116-20; 2015: 379). Indeed, *utu wa Mwafrika* ‘African humanness,’ has nowadays become “*utu-guni*” (ULF 361), a defective and diseased humanity, because of the infiltration of foreign cultural elements and historical violence in the form of “epistemicide” (Santos 2014: 149).

Wazungu waliuua utu wao na kuunda utu mpya wa Mwafrika. Utu usio Uzungu wala Waarabu wala Uafrika. Utu kama shairi guni – Utu-guni, usio na mwangwi wala lahani. Wakafanikiwa kuwatawala hao watu-guni. (Mkufya 2004: 361).

The Europeans killed their [African people] humanity and created a new African humanity. A humanity⁵⁰ which is neither European, nor Arab, and not even African. A humanity that is like a defective-poem – a defective humanity, like music without melody nor echo. Then, they succeeded in ruling those defective (flawed) people.

However, Dr Hans suggests a new ethical code aimed at “provincializing Europe” (Chakrabarty 2008) grounded in local customs and practices:

Tuache upuuzi wa kutaka usta-arabu au usta-ingereza. Tuwe wasta-duni! Msta-duni ni mtu anayefuata utamaduni wake wa asili na anayeheshimu tamuduni za wengine bila kuzichukia au kuzidharau [...] Ustaduni wake unazifanya tofauti za uasili wao kuwaimarisha badala ya kuwahitilafisha (Mkufya 2004: 363).

Let's stop the absurdity of aspiring to imitate the Arab or the English civilisations. Let's aspire to be “culturally civilised”! A culturally civilised person is someone who is contented with and follows hers/his own traditional culture, and who respects habits and customs of the others without detesting nor ignoring them. [...] Their “cultural civilisation” enables their diverse characteristics making both stronger and less defective.

Since both the terms *ustaarabu*⁵¹ ‘civilisation’⁵² and *utamaduni*⁵³ ‘national culture and traditional customs,’ are Arabic loan words, Mkufya suggests a neologism which stems from the crisis of both the terms: “*ustaduni*” (ULF 363), which I translate as “culturally specific civilisation” (Nicolini 2022: 185-186). The “epistemology of *ustaduni*” is the knowledge at the foundation of a “culturally specific civilisation” and identity that cannot be denied (Nicolini 2022: 186, 199). Thus, it works as counter-epistemology against the epistemic impositions from the “Global North” (Santos 2014), which is aimed to rediscover *utu wa kweli*, ‘actual humanity.’⁵⁴ Indeed, if a population loses contact with their own past, those people will lose their own identity: *utu wa mtu ni ukamilifu wa jadi yake. Mtu asiye na jadi ni ndondocha...* (‘the humanity of a person is the accomplishment of their own traditions. A man who does not have traditions is a zombie.’ ULF 415).

According to Mkufya, African cultures were suppressed by Islamisation, Christianisation and colonisation resulting in *utu-guni*, a defective identity and endured humanity. Therefore, a first

⁵⁰ Mkufya's interpretation renders the concept of *utu* as not only humanity but also human values, dignity and identity.

⁵¹ This term refers to the Swahili coastal culture and identity which is “Arab-like,” as the etymology of *ustaarabu* illustrates (Suriano 2008).

⁵² Or ‘Arabness’ (Topan 2008: 89).

⁵³ From the Arabic “to be urbanised” (Topan 2008: 89).

⁵⁴ Cf. Senghor's “Négritude and humanism” (1964b) and Fanon's humanism: “Let us decide not to imitate Europe; [...] Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth” (Fanon 1963: 313).

reaction consists in “divesting” (Wiredu 1998: 17) African identities from imported cultural customs and rediscovering *utu* through local cultural customs.

Utu implies a ‘person connected to other persons’ and *utani* is traditional diplomacy and a cultural particular way to co-exist pacifically avoiding ethnic conflicts; life itself is a joke, and joking is the right way to conduct interpersonal relationships as the character of Asha says in *Kuwa kwa Maua* (Mkufya pers. comm. 21-11-2023). *Utani* is a culturally contextualised expression of *utu* performed, for examples, during burial ceremonies to alleviate sorrow:

watu walicheka na majonzi yakapungua. Usiku ule uliendelea kwa utani baina ya Wachaga, Wasukuma, Waluguru na Wanyawezi wakiwashambulia watani wao: Wasambaa, Wabondei na Wazigua (Mkufya 2004: 378).

people laughed and the sorrow was solaced. That night went on with jokes between Chagga, Sukuma, Luguru and Nyawezi who confronted their jokers: Sambaa, Bondei and Zigua.

Furthermore, the novel shows *utu* through *faraja* ‘consolation and solace’ for those in need as well as through good relationships between people: respect, support, and kindness. Tabu cares for her children until her death, and after her death Omolo takes care of them. Asha establishes a trust for HIV/AIDS orphans (ULF 339-40). Ngoma repents because of his daughter, Aisha, and revokes the divorce from Tabu (ULF 299) (Nicolini 2022: 191). Dr Hans supports not only Tabu until her death but also Omolo to overcome absurdism. As highlighted in the *Diwani ya Maua*, Mkufya’s reading of *utu* is tolerance and respect towards the others, by performing good actions (Kresse 2007: 140) as illustrated by the extended families supporting one another during hardships and by acknowledging plural ideologies and beliefs as in a field of different species of coloured flowers.

Finally, *Ua La Faraja* not only refers to the wreath of flower used during funerals, but also Dr Hans is like a flower offering knowledge and consolation:

Namuomba mke wangu aje tuweke ua la pamoja, buriani kwa mwenzetu, ua la faraja kwa watoto walioachwa (Mkufya 2004: 389).

I ask my wife to come and place a wreath together, a farewell to our friend, and a flower of consolation for the children she left.

In the end, the message of *Ua la Faraja*, through Dr Hans, is to appreciate life: “*Maisha yapewe wakfu*” ‘life should be valued’ not the afterlife as Mkufya stressed (personal interview 8-12-2023).

Kuwa Kwa Maua ('The Existence of Flowers,' 2019) is not only a philosophical dissertation, but it is also a neorealist novel, which encloses a tragedy. This symbolist novel, rich in prophetic and poetic metaphors and symbols, discloses a quest for the meaning of life weaved into an intergeneric textual canvas.

The characters involved in this sequel are Dr Hans and his wife Kristina; Omolo and his wife Grace and their daughter Tumaini (Tuma); and Asha Kabeya, who takes care of the single mother Hadija and her son Haji.

The novel begins with an indirect biblical quote on Solomon's wisdom: *Lakini mbuyu haukudai hekima kama Sulemani* [Wafalme, 3, 9-14] ('Yet the baobab did not ask for wisdom as Solomon did', 1 Kings 3:9-14⁵⁵ quoted in Mkufya 2019: 8). Not only does this quote shape stylistically the protasis of this novel as an epic genre, by introducing the topic of the search for meaning in life (Nicolini 2024: 55), but it is also a link to connect this novel to the protasis of *Ziraili na Zirani* where Solomon's temple is also mentioned (KKM 8).

The experimental structure of this novel implies a combination of genres: a novelistic prose, enriched with lyrical and oral elements, interwoven in a dramatic texture. The novel, which is divided into six parts, includes a novelistic narration (parts I, II, III), where a tragic drama in three acts is implanted (IV *Tanzia* 'tragedy'; V *maombolezo* 'mourning'; *Epilogue*). The enclosed drama is encircled by parodos (KKM 8-9) and exodus (KKM 288), which consist in choral songs, sung by the spirits inhabiting the baobab tree and the owl: the symbols of tragic prophecy (Nicolini 2022: 202).

The parodos consists in an ominous and prophetic chant, which can be compared to the three witches' prophecy in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, whispered by the spirits of the ancestors inhabiting the baobab branches, a link between the world of the living and the world of the spirits (Warnes 2009). "The world of ancestors is conceived to be continuous and analogous to that of the living" (Wiredu 2010: 36).

Mbuyu, ma-hyuyu, huna uhail!

Mbuyu, ma-hyuyu, huna uhail.

(Mkufya 2019: 288-289)

Mortal baobab, you shall die!

Mortal baobab, you shall die!

(Mkufya's translation)

⁵⁵ BibleGateway (1 Kings 3:9-14 King James Version): <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%203%3A9-14&version=KJV> (last accessed on 02-01-2025).

As the Swahili says: “*baada ya kisa ni mkasa*”, ‘after the legend/premonitions, the tragedy takes place’ (Mkufya pers. comm.); the climax is the advent of the great tragedy, which foretold by premonitory symbols, happens in one day by triggering a chain of deaths.⁵⁶

The Aristotelian criteria for the theory on tragedy (*Poetics*)⁵⁷ seems to be contemplated in the novelistic form:⁵⁸ the tragic hero is neither a villain nor a hero but represents oppressed people: Asha represents women who stand against patriarchy, and Tumaini represents the youth who stand against gerontocracy. The heroines fall because of a personal error (*hamartia*): Tuma is arrogant and a rebel, she can’t stand any kind of injustice, and Asha is victim of misjudgement. The letter communicating the HIV positivity of Tuma is the real reversal of the events that makes people believe that the virus was spread during Tuma and Haji’s assumed intercourse (*peripeteia*). However, both Asha and Tuma need to perform a cathartic action (suicide) before the truth, that is, Tuma got infected fighting at school and not because of her relationship with Haji, was eventually revealed (*anagnorisis*).

Stylistically, Mkufya’s tragedies challenge classic tragedies, which usually end with the hero’s death, by exploring the post tragic situation when life goes on and death gives a meaning to it. The novel teaches that as we celebrate life, we should celebrate death: the completion of our journey on earth.

Thematically, Mkufya’s tragedy touches the deepest love of parents for their children, who are the meaning of life, and who are victims of tragic events (cf. *The Wicked Walk*). However, children are entrusted with the hope to build a humane society for tomorrow.

This novel is indeed humanistic and illustrates *utu* through examples of good relationships towards others, especially genuine familiar and friendly bonds.

Firstly, motherhood is particularly emphasised not only as biological, as demonstrated by Hadija’s and Grace’s love for Haji and Tuma, but also as adoptive, as demonstrated by Asha’s love for Hadija.

Secondly, friendship is illustrated by the two children: Haji, who was born with HIV, and Tumaini, who, despite the worries of their parents and the scandalmongers of the neighbours, are bonded by a solid and sincere friendship⁵⁹ (Nicolini 2023: 82):

⁵⁶ Omolo, Asha, Tumaini, Hadija and Grace.

⁵⁷ To know more about the influence of the Aristotelian *Poetics* on modern Swahili plays see also Hussein 2003; Mutembei 2011; Nicolini 2016.

⁵⁸ Mkufya (pers. comm.) told me to have intentionally applied the Aristotelian theory of tragedy inspired by Shakespearean dramas.

⁵⁹ See also the friendship bond between the two children, protagonists of *Wema amwoko Noa* (Mkufya 2008), a novel that teaches inclusion for people with disease and disabilities (Nicolini 2023: 86).

Bila kujali dhana kama zile za wazazi, watoto hawakujiwekea mipaka ya ushirikiano, wala kutambua mipaka waliyowekewa. [...] Wakiwa peke yao, mamlaka ya wazazi, kama wingu la mvua, iliondoka na kuacha jua la utoto liangaze ulimwengu wao huru (Mkufya 2019: 4).

Without caring about preconceptions like those of their parents, children did not erect boundaries in relationships, nor did they recognise the boundaries erected [by their parents]. [...] When they were alone, their parents' authority disappeared like a rainy cloud that leaves space to the childhood sun to irradiate their free universe.

Thirdly, being humane implies offering sensible and concrete support to the community. For instance, Asha Kabeya not only establishes both a foundation to support orphans and a research centre for HIV/AIDS but also bequeathed her inheritance to Haji. Likewise, Omolo and Grace raise Aisha Ngoma, Grace's niece after Tabu's death. Kristina and Hans adopt Hadija's son, Haji, after his mother's suicide. Then, they also take care of Masumbuko, Grace's son, after she dies in childbirth.

In this novel, communal humanity, *utu*, is applied through the "intellectual tradition or knowledge-oriented practice" (Kresse 2018b: 14) of *utani*, 'joking relationships', which are a strategy not only to revert cultural imperialism, but also to avoid internal conflicts and ethnicity.⁶⁰

Mzee Ibrahimu is a folk sage and the spokesperson of the community, who takes part in crisis, pacifying conflicts and giving solace. Mzee Ibrahimu intervenes during the great conflict generated by the accusation against Haji of having raped Tumaini (KKM 57). He also appears when the police come to collect the main characters' corpses and at their burials.

Furthermore, *utani* is used as "tonic ya Maisha, life-boosting tonic" (Mkufya 2005: 55) to restore friendship between Omolo, Hadija and Asha, when the suspicions of the assumed rape of Tuma by Haji are dissolved:

Omolo: Sharti leo Asha ulipe mahari yangu. Mjukuu wako kuchagua binti wa Kijaluo. (Mkufya 2019: 65)
Asha akajibu, Mgoni halipi mahari! [...] Sasa alipe mahari ya nini? Maarusi wakishajuana, fidia ni maelewano. (Mkufya 2019: 65).

Omolo: Asha, today you must pay my bride price. Your nephew chose a Luo maiden.

Asha replied: A Ngoni person does not pay the bride price! [...] What bride price should he pay? Since the bride and the groom know each other already well, let's say compensation and consensus.

⁶⁰ See also Mkufya's short novel *The Raid and The Eclipse* (2016), which criticises ethnic rivalry and human cruelty, describing a conflict between farmers and breeders pacified by two clever children, who teach the community respect for each other to live peacefully together.

Finally, *utani* characterises the celebrations for Grace’s pregnancy, who is Asha’s *nyumban’tobwa* (the pregnant wife of Asha):

Wewe ni wangu tu, katika nyumban’tobwa yetu! Nyumba hii ni ya mimi na Jaluo. Wewe ndiye mke wetu!
(Mkufya 2019: 283).

You are mine, in our *nyumban’tobwa*! This house is Jaluo’s (Omolo) and mine. You are indeed our wife!

Nyumban’tobwa is a traditional expression of *utu* among the Luo from Musoma (KKM 276, 283-4), which consists in a traditional marriage between two women. One of them generates a child for the other, who cannot bear a child herself.⁶¹

Furthermore, Mkufya cares for both self-realisation and social commitment, living harmoniously within the community. Thus, he agrees on Gyekye’s (1992) model of “moderate communitarianism⁶²” which recognises the dual responsibility of “self and community” (Gyekye 1992: 121). Indeed, Mkufya criticises some traditional establishment such as patriarchy and gerontocracy.

Mkufya gives life to female sages: firstly, Asha is a self-reliant woman. She develops philosophical thoughts and expresses existentialism as reflected in her hymn to life, which is an example of Mkufya’s dithyrambic style of poetry. Asha’s hymn encourages people to enjoy material life and immanent pleasures ‘as a joke’ (KKM 107) (Nicolini 2022: 220-1).

*Maisha huitwa hiyo kwa kuwa yanaisha, hayadumu, ni ma-isha*⁶³. (Mkufya 2019: 106) [...] *Yafaidi kwa faida za kila jambo lenye furaha!* (Mkufya 2019: 107).

Life is called this way because it ends, does not last, and is ‘made up of consuming things’ [...] Do make profit from everything that gives you happiness!

Secondly, Kristina, a fervent Christian, supports a theist thesis and represents idealism and faith by preaching tolerance and respect for both humans and nature. Kristina’s teachings develop from *Face*

⁶¹ This practice is a strategy for saving family wealth. After the marriage between two women, one of the women will pay a man to impregnate her wife. After the other woman gets pregnant, the man is completely excluded from the family and has no longer any rights on the woman or on the child.

⁶² Cf. Menkiti’s (1984; 2004) model of “radical communitarianism” where the community precedes the individual.

⁶³ Mkufya is always playing with the language: *ma-isha* ‘life’ is made up of *mambo ambayo yanaisha*, ‘things that are going to end.’

Under the Sea, whose message is for people to seek to obtain a *balance* and to be contented with what is *enough* without exceeding and going back to nature; nature itself will smile back to them giving happiness (Mkufya 2011: 145). “The point of life is not to accumulate wealth, but to achieve a state of balance” (Eastermann quoted in Graness 2019: 158).

Kristina reflects back to the self through her prayers believing that to believe is a “process” that must undergo doubts to reach knowledge (KKM 246).

Uzuri wa ua liitwalo mtu ni kujitafakari ili limtafakari Mungu (Mkufya 2019: 464).

The beauty of the flower called human being is to reflect upon themselves so as to reflect upon God.

Her prayers give strength to Dr Hans’s scientific reasoning, thus idealism and materialism complement each other as ‘two sides of the same coin’ (KKM 195).

Thirdly, Tuma, though just a child, is the young heroine, who cannot accept any form of oppression and injustice and who tames the adults engaging against gerontocracy and articulating an epistemology of youth (Nicolini 2022: 217). Tuma confronts gerontocracy refusing to greet an adult woman, because that woman was unfairly accusing his friend Haji of having raped her, and she doesn’t fear to fight to say the truth: *Simwamkii!* (‘I will not show her my respect!’ KKM 51); *N’tasema tu!* (‘I will state (the truth)!’ KKM 56). Tuma’s qualities are clearly acknowledged by the community:

mtu imara, mkweli, jasiri na asiyekubali kuonewa [...] Chanzo cha hekima ya mtu ni ujasiri wa kuutafuta na kuusema ukweli tangu utotoni (Mkufya 2019: 57).

a determined person, honest, brave, and who does not accept being bullied [...] The source of a person's wisdom is the courage to seek and tell the truth from childhood.

Tuma rebels against an unfair world that gave her HIV and deprived her of her relatives committing suicide. After Tuma’s suicide, the new hero becomes Haji, the child philosopher inspired by Dr Hans.

Finally, Dr Hans is the philosophic sage, whose dialogues illustrate Mkufya’s maturity of thoughts and style. Dr Hans is the philosopher of *udhahiri* and represents the evolution of the young Zirani. While, at the end of the novel, Zirani repents in the face of the void and cannot solve the mystery of Heaven’s existence (Mkufya 1999: 224), Dr Hans radicalises his atheist statement and develops a form of epicurean hedonism: there is no God, no afterlife, do enjoy life!

Dr Hans's theory (KKM 445-8) is based upon three points: firstly, there is no death (Epicurus⁶⁴ quoted in Mkufya 2019: 445). Secondly, there exists no afterlife. Thirdly, there exists life, whose purpose is procreation to defeat death, and whose meaning is to be happy. Therefore, Hans's *udhahiri* evolves from Zirani's materialism into hedonism.

Kuwa kwa watu hudhirika kwenye maisha pekee na si kabla yake au baada yake. (Mkufya 2019: 425).

The existence of human beings becomes evident during life neither before nor after it.

Watu ni maua, yakiishi ndipo yamechanua [...] Uhai, ndilo ua la kuwa kwetu! (Mkufya 2019: 448).

People are like flowers; they blossom while they are alive. [...] Life is indeed the flower of our existence [the revelation of our Being]!

In *Kuwa Kwa Maua*, *udhahiri* is what I defined as “the evident (moment of) existence or the (cognitive) evidence of existence” (Nicolini 2022: 246-8). *Udhahiri*, as an ontological aspect, is “the living moment” that we call life, after birth and before death (KKM 445-6). *Udhahiri*, as a cognitive aspect, is the ‘revelation of being’ (*kudhirika kwa maua*): the cognitive period when existence reveals itself to us. Therefore, *udhahiri mtu aujua ni uhai pekee!* (‘the evidence that a person experiences is life only! KKM 445-446).

Udhahiri, as materialism and atheism, is defeated in the metaphysical and transcendental dimension (the afterlife) of *Ziraili na Zirani*; and yet, when human beings are thrown into the immanent level (life) once again, *udhahiri*, as revelation of human being existence, becomes the privileged ideology. Therefore, a “philosophy of revelation” (Nicolini forthcoming) sprouts to teach tolerance among plural co-existing ideologies, thus becoming the thesis that makes this novel *a roman a thèse* (‘thesis novel’).

Indeed, Mkufya's characters not only develop with their author's maturity, but they also illustrate the complementarity of different philosophies and plural epistemologies through ‘double-voiced discourses’ (Bakhtin 1981). In the end, the characters in *Diwani ya Maua* have also shown to exemplify “*mtu bora*: the embodiment of ideal personhood:” righteousness, justice, moderation, courage,

⁶⁴ Epicurus in Lucretius (1948), *On the Nature of Things* Book III: 806-834 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 445; cf. Milton *Paradise Lost* book 5: 7-8.

kindness, peace, faith, learning, love and intelligence (Masolo 2019b: 51; see Robert's novel *Utubora Mkulima* 1968).

To conclude, the allegorical meaning of *Ziraili na Zirani* is revealed in this novel, which I argue is Mkufya's masterpiece. Indeed, not only does the author's maturity provide the readers with clear explanations of his theories, expressing his ideas through dialogues, but also the prose is more fluid with less quotations and intertextual instances, the voice of the author is clearer, and the story is more accessible to a wider audience.

5. A survey: the critique

As part of this research, to investigate the reception of Mkufya's novels and the critique surrounding them, I conducted a small survey study in 2023-24. This involved engaging in scholarly conversations and discussions, delivering lectures to students and presenting papers at international conferences. These activities were held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), at the University of Dar es Salaam, the University of Naples L'Orientale, the University of Bayreuth and the Humboldt University of Berlin. Each presentation was focused on different aspects of Mkufya's literary productions so as to trigger debates and elicit different opinions on this author and his works from the audience.

Mkufya's novels are extremely appreciated by academics although little-known especially among young non-academic readers and writers. The survey among students shows that most of them have never read Mkufya's novels, because these are not part of the compulsory syllabus. The survey among the new generation of contemporary writers in Tanzania shows that they acknowledge Mkufya as an élite writer. Finally, among the academic community both in East Africa and in Europe, Mkufya's writing is particularly appreciated as a fine writer and complex author.

Despite all Mkufya's efforts to be close to the community, he seems to be perceived as an élite author, little-known among the wider public. In fact, after the initial scarce popularity of *Ziraili na Zirani*, which, as Mkufya told me (pers. comm. 18-12-2023), has remained misunderstood for a long time because of the complex style which doesn't attract readers, he started designing the realist trilogy to translate into a simple language the complex arguments of the first novel. Indeed, in *Kuwa kwa Maua*, which I consider his masterpiece, he presents all his philosophy in a graceful and attractive shape of flowers. Notwithstanding, the philosophical complexity of this work is preserved, and his literary production does not become so simpler. Furthermore, any work of art is not meant to be completely unveiled.

This survey is not completed nor comprehensive, yet it could be an interesting project to be pursued in further research.

6. Conclusions

Mkufya is an extremely cultivated and ambitious author, who is self-critical and receptive to his readers' critique as demonstrated by the choice of Swahili as a writing language to speak to his community, though he lost a broader international audience. Furthermore, he unfolded the metaphorical 'signifier' as conveyed in *Ziraili na Zirani* into a 'signified' that is the *Diwani ya Maua*, two novels that can be read and enjoyed by every reader. Thus, he challenged himself from *A Solitary War* to a philosophy of flowers.

Mkufya during his writing career has been positioning himself in between *ujasiri* 'bravery' and *utu* 'humanity,' since he develops freely his thought and critique, yet he is committed to his community, dealing with universal problems inserted in the Tanzanian context by using the Swahili language and painting local portraits.

Mkufya's objective is to foster a philosophy of *utu* building an environment of tolerance as well as co-existence of plural epistemologies and philosophies. Another objective is to make people reflect, leaving his readers in front of a *Dilemma* by presenting a thesis, an antithesis and plural hypotheses. Lastly, Mkufya intends to produce a liberation of mind by extricating people from imported cognitive patterns. Mkufya as a humanist encourages his nation to think, as he said: "*ukombozi wa Afrika ni kusoma vya kutosha*" ('liberation of Africa is reading enough', Mkufya personal interview 18-12-2023).

Mkufya's novels postulate an Afrocentric ethical knowledge, balancing universalism and particularism. To sum up, *utu* in *Ziraili na Zirani* is manifested by the defence of free will and humanity, transient and weak beings doomed to suffer. In *Ua la Faraja*, humanness is connected to the building of self-identity and is shown through good relationships between people, respect, support and kindness. Finally, in *Kuwa kwa Maua*, humanity consists in finding a meaning and purpose in life: living well the short time on earth without fearing death nor the afterlife and giving birth. The novels both construct and foster a philosophy of humanity.

The study of Mkufya's fiction has demonstrated that the author's philosophical reflections are a lifelong commitment, which evolve in connection with both the development of his fictional characters and the progress of the narrative style.

To conclude, Mkufya can be described as a philosopher and a humanist, who focuses on being human and humane by supporting people to make the most out of their individual reflective

consciousness while simultaneously contributing to extending human intellectual capacities by writing novels.

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