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***Investigating intellectual
biographies in African studies***

edited by
Cristina Nicolini and Flavia Aiello

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Contact:

mauro.tosco@unito.it

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Investigating intellectual biographies in African studies

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Preface

It gives me great pleasure to write this preface to a volume whose aim, well demonstrated in its papers, is to use the genre of biography and autobiography as a tool in advancing our understanding of philosophical, literary and ethical dimensions of the ‘lived lives’ of African intellectuals, and the issues and questions that emerge from that exercise. In so doing, the volume exhibits the development of the genre itself as an academic discipline since the 18th century when it had been deemed a poor relation of history!¹

Scholars from different disciplines explore the thoughts and writings of a range of intellectuals who have engaged with personal, national, and regional issues during the colonial and post-independent periods. Each scholar, inevitably, brings to this volume her or his own perceptions and conceptual framework for the analysis of the subject, thus initiating a dual discourse of thought: thoughts of the scholars who have contributed to this volume, and those of the intellectuals whose biographies and autobiographies are subjects of discussion. Such engagement leaves room for extended interpretations, thus making this volume a useful starting point for further dialogue.

A related exercise to the dual discourse of thought is the dimension of what might be termed ‘biographical intertextuality,’ that is, a consideration and discussion of the thoughts and activities of a cadre of intellectuals who have either interacted personally with one another, or whose works demonstrate an interrelationship of shared activities, knowledge or influence. The study of a network of such intellectuals, especially from the same region (and possibly even speaking the same language) might yield interesting insights into the diachronic development of thought in a particular region or among a particular people.²

I am grateful to the editors, Dr Cristina Nicolini and Professor Flavia Aiello, for according me the opportunity of writing the preface to this interesting volume.

London, 8 March 2025

¹ Kendall gives us the confessions of an 18th century historian who states that he had had “several times deviated and descended from the dignity of a historian, and voluntarily fallen into the lower class of biographers, annalists, etc” (Kendall 1985: 3).

² For such an approach related to themes (rather than auto/biographies), see Brenner (2024); see also Bang (2024) for a diachronic discussion of the development of Muslim discourse of ‘modernity’ in Zanzibar, 1920-1940.

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Farouk Topan

Professor Emeritus, Aga Khan University

farouk.topan@aku.edu

Intellectual biographies as an entry point for literary and epistemological analysis in African studies

An introduction

Cristina Nicolini

This volume proposes an investigation and a re-examination of intellectual biographies, as both a genre and a methodology, in African studies. This call was inspired by my research on *Philosophy and Community in William Mkufya's Swahili Novels*,¹ focused on the homonymous Tanzanian intellectual, and engaged in examining methodologies to conduct research in both African philosophy and Afrophone literature studies.

As part of this research project, I co-organised, in collaboration with Flavia Aiello, an international conference on “The Intellectual Biography as an Entry Point for Literary and Epistemological Analysis International Conference,” which was held at University of Naples L'Orientale on the 10th and 11th of April 2024.²

International scholars from Europe and East Africa engaged from different multi and interdisciplinary perspectives with the biographical approach as a methodological entry point for literary and philosophical discussions. Indeed, scholars, intellectuals and researchers in conversation engaged with both well-known intellectuals, political figures, public personas and little-known intellectuals from East Africa comparing them both diachronically and synchronically. The thought-provoking discussions led in different ways of interpreting biographical criticism and even beyond it, thus broadening the horizon of African studies.

Subsequently, a further endeavour to expand the research has emerged: publishing an edited volume that appeals to reflect on the life, the thought and the artistic productions of African intellectuals.

This volume proposes to reflect on research focused on intellectual biographies and autobiographies by riding the wave of ‘conceptual decolonization’ (Wiredu 1995; 1998; 2002)

¹ This research and the editorship of this volume are part of my postdoctoral project “History, Language & Culture. Swahili literature and Afrophone philosophy” funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation in 2023/2024 [Ref. 40.23.0.006SL].

² See also: The University of Naples L'Orientale events: <https://www.unior.it/it/eventi/convegno-intellectual-biography-entry-point-literary-and-epistemological-analysis>; Association for African Studies in Italy ASAI events: <https://www.asiafrica.org/international-conference-the-intellectual-biography-as-an-entry-point-for-literary-and-epistemological-analysis-10-11-aprile-2024-universita-di-napoli-lorientale/>

movements led by “Epistemologies of the South” (Santos 2014) and by bearing in mind the need to expand and compare methodologies to conduct research in both African philosophy and Afrophone literatures studies. Indeed, researching biographies of African literary figures or ‘sages’ (Oruka 1990) endowed with local knowledge and wisdom (Kresse 2007; 2009) triggers multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies that interlink history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, literary critique and philosophy.

The study of the life and the thoughts of an intellectual, a philosopher or a writer, seems to be a privileged entry point to connect the historical and political events lived by the author with not only literary and philosophical streams, but also local epistemologies. This is also an empirical method to further explore interconnections between ethnographies and a deeper reading of texts and intertexts (Barber 2007: 4-5).

Having been ascertained not only the role of African philosophy as academic discipline, but also of literature in African languages as media conveying philosophical thoughts (Wiredu 1980; Hountondji 1983; Oruka 1990; Masolo 1994; 2010; Appiah 2004; Kresse 2007; Rettová 2007; Nicolini 2022), investigating intellectual biographies is aimed at expanding both research methodology and literary critique. The concept of intellectual biography, including both biography writing and a ‘biographical approach’ as a methodology, is aimed at investigating the following points: firstly, exploring the potentialities of the biographical approach as a privileged epistemological entry point to conduct both literary and philosophical analysis. Particularly, focusing on an insightful ‘point of view’ to quote the philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1980: 115-116), who was a representative of postcolonial African philosophy, with the objective to ‘decolonise the mind’ (Thiong’o 1986) and the literary genre.

Secondly, rethinking the role of biography writing, which means moving beyond the historical archives, telling the life and deeds of well-known figures, so as to engage in ethnography, highlighting life and thoughts of little-known sages. This also means to pursue Odera Oruka’s Sage Philosophy project, whose importance has also been stated by recent scholarships on ‘rethinking sagacity’ (see *Rethinking Sage Philosophy*, Kresse and Nyarwath 2023) by engaging with ethnographies including interviews with sages.

Thirdly, introducing biography as a critical approach which can be a new lens to conduct textual analysis by exploring if and how the life and the thoughts of an intellectual or sage are interlaced into their fiction. This analysis can also be of help to determine a peculiar literary stream and historical period, from a bottom-up perspective.

In other words, the biographical approach analyses literature as an ethno-philosophical ontology connecting *bios* (life and thought) with *graphia* (fictional works) to sift epistemologies and philosophies

from the text. The bio approach is an entry point to both conduct textual analysis, revealing further potentials of fictional genres written in African languages, and extend methodology to investigate Afrophone philosophies.

The contributions in the present volume explore different examples of biographies, autobiographies and ‘biographical critiques’ conveyed by different genres, *e.g.* novels, poetry and digital media. The aim is to explore the following questions: the position of intellectual biography nowadays; the meaning of intellectual biographies ‘in-con-text’ (in context and text simultaneously); the possible achievements that can be obtained through ethnographies aimed to investigate life and thoughts of local individuals from the inside; the possibility for biography writing to become a tool to conduct philosophical and literary investigations from a decolonial point of view; the potentiality of a biographical approach to advance textual analysis; and, exploring risks and pitfalls of engaging with a biographical criticism.

The contributions to this volume are mainly focused on Swahili literature from East Africa. In this regard, ‘biography and autobiography writing in Swahili’ not only contributed to the development of Swahili language (Topan 1997: 299), but it also provided insightful sources into African history (Biersteker 2018: 367). Indeed, the first ethnographies known as *Habari* ‘Chronicles’ represented a valuable historical source about the Swahili coasts and their inhabitants (Topan 1997: 299; Bertoncini *et al.* 2009: 22-30). Later, the *wasifu* ‘biography’ was pioneered by Shaaban Robert through his biography on the Zanzibari *taarab* singer Siti bint Saad (Topan 1997: 300), and he also wrote his *tawasifu* ‘autobiography’ *Maisha Yangu* (‘My life’) and *Baada ya Miaka Hamsini* (‘After Fifty Years,’ Topan 1997: 305; Garnier 2012). Furthermore, the Swahili classic epic poems, *utenzi*, conveyed Muslim biographies in poetic forms expressing the connection between biographies and religion (Topan 1997: 301). Particularly, biography writing expresses ‘identity:’ “This is not surprising, as biography is in essence an exposition of identity and of its reinforcement and adaptation through the life of an individual, community, or people” (Topan 1997: 304).

Not only does this volume aim to sift different literary genres so as to unearth biographical elements infused into the narrative, but also to examine literature through biographical lenses as a way into the hidden messages enclosed in the textual canvas.

Moreover, the analysis of fiction, in certain cases, suggests the presence of ‘biographical intertextuality,’ where not only autobiographical but also biographical elements of historical and political figures can be discovered.

Even though the focus is on Swahili literature, the volume broadens the horizons including plural multimedia genres such as documentary films and digital literature in English from Uganda and Nigeria as well.

Indeed, a further objective of this collection of articles is overcoming boundaries and embracing cultural pluralism. Therefore, the volume is characterised by epistemic pluralism and polyphony. The contributions connect not only East and West Africa, Anglophone and Swahiliphone literature, but also plural media poetry, prose, digital literature and films. Most of the articles display long quotations from the original texts, and particularly, the voices of intellectuals and writers can be read through several quotations from interviews.

In the following paragraphs, the structure of the volume, thematically divided into three sections, and the content of the contributions, which consist of different interdisciplinary and multi-perspective articles, will be outlined.

The first section investigates *Intellectual Biographies and Philosophies, Ethics and Aesthetics*:

D. A. Masolo's *Outline of Shaaban Robert's Idealism*, through an insightful text-based philosophical approach, identifies and interprets Shaaban Robert's political philosophical theories. By mastering the Swahili language and by means of innovative story-telling techniques, Robert's novels are accessible to both intellectuals and a broader audience, while they expose a socio-cultural and political critique of his time. Masolo defines Robert as a 'critical thinker' and unearths from Robert's novels the writer's chosen self-identity defined on a cultural basis. Indeed, Robert's philosophy is based on the importance of individual choices to build up communal virtues. Particularly, Robert's novels identify and reflect on the universality of human nature—*utu*, while conjuring the ideal state and its perfect citizens.

Cristina Nicolini's *William E. Mkufya and his Flowers: An Intellectual Bio-Graphy*, firstly, provides a biographical account on the Tanzanian intellectual's life. Afterwards, the article engages with an analysis of Mkufya's novels divided into three main periods according to his life events. This study demonstrates how William Mkufya's intellectual thought development is a lifelong commitment, which progresses in connection with the stylistic development of his narrative. The literary analysis also explores how Mkufya personally develops the concept of *utu*-humanness through his literary productions.

Irene Brunotti's *Sensing Swahili Aesth-Ethics with and through Mzee Farouk Topan's Wor(l)dings* focuses on Mzee Farouk Topan's 'intellectuality.' At first, it critiques the Western scientific perception of life (bio-) and written works (-graphy) as separated entities. Then, it engages with the Swahili tradition of *wasifu* by embracing the bodily perception sprouting from the onto-epistemologies of Swahili words

and their ‘aesth-ethics,’ which is connected to “utu, humanity and humanness” (Topan 2008: 89). The article leads its readers onto a sensory path, paved by words, by awakening the public's psychophysical stimuli to let them see, hear, touch and feel ‘Swahili wor(l)ds.’

The second section explores the interconnections between *Auto/Biography and Historiography*:

Aldin Mutembei, in his article written in Swahili, *Makutano ya lugha, utamaduni na mabadiliko ya kisiasa Tanzania kupitia tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abeid* (‘The criss-crossing of language, culture and political change in Tanzania through the autobiography of Kaluta Amri Abeid’), reflects on the life and the thought of Kaluta Amri Abeid. This is done through both the autobiography of Abeid and a biography devoted to him by Mathias E. Mnyampala. Amri Abeid, as Robert did, chose his own cultural identity as a ‘Swahili,’ despite of his Congolese origins. Abeid, as a scholar, a poet as well as a religious and political leader, was one of the leading figures of the post-independence period, especially the transition phase from Tanganyika to Tanzania. Mutembei also demonstrates how the study of Abeid’s autobiography reflects not only the Tanzanian history but also the development of Swahili as the language of national identity.

Graziella Acquaviva’s *From Auto/Biography to a Historiography of Post-Colonial Tanzania in Swahili Popular Literature* explores biographical elements in Swahili popular literature called *fasihi pendwa* (lit. ‘beloved literature’). By analysing Kajubi D. Mukajanga’s novels *Mpenzi I-II* (‘Lover I-II,’ 1980s) and Freddy Macha’s collection of short stories *Mpe Maneno Yake* (‘Give him his words,’ 2006) alongside interviews with the authors, Acquaviva highlights autobiographical elements that reflect personal memories contributing to draw a historical biography of postcolonial Tanzania. In these texts, both the autobiographical elements and the historical biography of Tanzania are transposed and mixed into a fictional context.

The third section focuses on *Intellectual Biographies and Philosophies through Digital Writing and Film*:

Benedetta Lanfranchi’s *Stella Nyanzi: A Digital Biography* introduces an original way of interpreting and investigating biographies that she termed “digital biography” by drawing a biographical outline of the Ugandan intellectual and political digital activist Stella Nyanzi. The biographical approach is based on plural media sources *i.e.* Nyanzi’s online texts, Facebook posts and Tweets, and a published collection of poetry in English as well as a personal interview and a short film. By displaying extensive excerpts both from the interviews and Nyanzi’s online poems, Lanfranchi highlights not only Nyanzi’s biographical elements, but also the literary and political impact of her digital writing.

Juul van der Laan's *Intellectual Biography in Film: portraying Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé* introduces documentary filming as a medium to conduct empirical investigation on comparative philosophy through the process of filming life and thought of the Nigerian philosopher Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé. This original study, firstly, engages with the comparison between Western and Yoruba concepts of personhood; then, it illustrates Sophie's concept of "binary complementarity" as an approach to phenomenal reality rather than Western binary oppositions. In conclusion, the article illustrates 'filming' as a way to 'philosophise.'

At the conclusion of this volume's overview, I let readers discover life and philosophical thoughts of African intellectuals as reflected into the biographical portrayals depicted by our contributors.

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Cristina Nicolini

University of Turin

cristina.nicolini@unito.it

Intellectual biographies and philosophies, ethics and aesthetics

Outline of Shaaban Robert's idealism

D. A. Masolo

The influence and dominance of Anglo-American philosophy since World War II has left the false impression that the philosophical ideas of thinkers can only be found in either the journals dedicated to the different aspects and branches of the discipline, or in the compendiums and treatises of their authors traditionally regarded to be philosophical within those traditions. I said "false," because it is hardly the case, yet the cultural bias and arrogance that came with colonial power left many people across the colonized world, especially in Africa, believing that philosophy had homes only in European languages and not in any one of their own. To be sure, style is one thing, and the thought content of a thinker's endeavors is a whole different matter. The Western colonial biases in defining what ought to be regarded as philosophy has led to the neglect or underrepresentation of the materials and content of philosophical education in formerly colonized countries and cultures. But this ought not be the norm, as experiential issues thinkers deal with, as well as the styles they present these concerns in, vary from tradition to tradition, and none of them is more valid than another. In what follows I sketch how Shaaban Robert's works can be read and reflected on, despite his unique and eclectic style, as works in social, moral, and even political philosophy. As he says it himself, a good text must be judged by the estimation of the audiences for whom it is written, and this can be the case only if the text appeals to, and stimulates their intellectual and emotional arousal, both of which are functions of the vernacular. Are English, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and any other language out there in the rest of the world, not just vernaculars to their respective native speakers after all? Similarly, and naturally for that matter, KiSwahili is the native language of all those people who consider it their native language through which they experience and think about the world.

Key Words: utu bora/utubora; kusadikika; adili na nduguze; watenzi wote; usawa; (u)radhia/radhi.

1. Preamble

I have enjoyed watching events held to honor Swahili culture and to celebrate those figures who have made the study of Swahili culture both interesting and rewarding as an area of study relatively neglected in African studies as compared to other culture-or-community-based scholarship. Recent

studies by and of Swahili writers and by non-African scholars who have opened up this tradition-rich platform of knowledge are making it possible to bring critical awareness to the centuries-old dynamics of the life practices of the people who identify as the Swahili, as well as of the literal complexity of KiSwahili as a language with multiple originary historical tentacles. In some cases, the politics of nation-building against those of ethnicity and territorial claims of autonomy have dwarfed scholarly attention to Swahili cultures and traditions. While the activities of the families and leaders of the Arab migrants and settlers-turned-political dynasty-founders of the region have been chronicled into history books, local actors, especially pioneers of resistance and intellectuals now claimed to have given this region its recognizable identity have not been given their due and deserved space. When recognized, they have not been fully accorded the right recognition. Shaaban Robert is one of these local intellectuals who have not been recognized, read, or discussed in a deserving manner. In this essay I propose to show what has been missed of Shaaban, given that he was far more than just the literary pioneer he is or is acclaimed to be. Such image—in the limited literary circles—tends to portray him only as a writer of local folktales. And given his style learned through the Madrasas, his stories mirror the style in such stories like *Alladin*, or *Elf Lela Ulela*, an influence that causes some scholars to claim that Shaaban was condescending or outright despising toward African cultures. But this might not be true. The likely the case is that Shaaban was exposed to, and chose to identify himself as culturally belonging to the Swahili community, perhaps on reasonable grounds. Although he may have been told of his Yao genealogy, he did not culturally know what this meant to him.

He was born in Machui where such genealogy did not impact his life in any significant way. However, both his parents, hence his ethnic roots, were known to trace to the Yao community. While little is known about his parents, or how they had arrived in Machui, a little village or town south of Tanga that the family called home, the Yao community is known to be found in the multi-nation region that covers part of southern modern-day Tanzania, northern Mozambique, and parts of south-eastern Malawi. According to J. W. T. Allen, the author of the 'Editorial Notes,' Shaaban "never identified himself as a Yao, but rather was one of those few [people] who always preferred to self-identify as 'the Swahili'" (Allen, J. W. T. quoted in Shaaban 1968: vi). This is interesting in at least one significant sense. Shaaban's preferred identity choice is intentionally cultural rather than ethnic. He appears to have given significance to practice as the way people should be identified. Anyone is a collection of their thoughts, beliefs, and behavior or actions, and this point pushed him to the sharp criticism of those whose behavior does not match how they want to be identified. While desiring to be seen as people who professed and propagated the Islamic faith, Arabs, and most who aligned with them, did not behave in ways—their racist scorn of Natives—that reflected the teachings of Islam, at least as he knew

it from his Madrasa teachers, and from his own reading of the Quran. I contend that Shaaban was first and foremost a critical thinker who, building on his observations of people's conduct as well as social relations at work and in everyday life, was driven to reflections on the racial identities and relations of the different people who populated the world he was born and grew up in. Although his own parents are said to have been Christians, Shaaban converted to Islam, the dominant religion of the region. The dominant political and socio-cultural situation during Shaaban's youth left the largely Muslim coast, including the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, far less catered for in the establishment and dispensation of modern education in contrast to the interior of mainland Tanganyika which was brought directly under the British-colonial and European missionary influence. The relations between the colonial state and the predominantly Arab coast whose allegiance was historically to Oman and the subsequent political powers of the Gulf were, to put it mildly, never warm. Based on these trends and socio-political dynamics of the time, it is likely that Shaaban's formal education and school experiences were limited, not by choice or personal inability, but by availability, to what today is equivalent to the four-year lower primary education which complemented taking lessons in the Madrasas and learning to recite the Quran. And while Quranic recitations may have left the imprint of poetic style upon him, Shaaban may have quickly noticed the contrasts, indeed contradictions, between the apparent unity or oneness of humans as God's special creation as proclaimed in the Quran, on the one hand, and the social and racial rifts, inequalities, hostilities, and discriminations between people of the different races and cultural practices. And the perpetrators of these evils were Arabs toward native Africans, and not the other way round. History lessons at the secular 'Skul,' usually under the District Education Boards (D.E.B), may have opened his eyes and mind to the reality of the historical-colonial migrations that brought non-Black people to the region, and the atrocities of the practices they were associated with. The vision of, and reflections on these contradictions drove Shaaban into his own philosophical insights. If humans are created equal, then what principles justify the injustices observed in both historical and present societies? He argued that if indeed humans are created equal—as he believed from his Quranic lessons—then what is good for one person or one community ought to be good for all, and, similarly, what is bad for one person or community ought to be bad and unacceptable for all, regardless of how they look or what they profess as faith. His works portray deep reflections on the universality of human nature, *Utu*, and their equality, *Usawa*, even if their bodily appearances, *Umbo*, and cultures, *Utamaduni*, may be diverse. For him, therefore—as we see in his brilliantly written *Kusadikika*—the diversity of appearances, and of cultures, do not increase for some humans the claims that address the fundamental values of human nature or diminish them for others. The differential claims and their social perpetrations based on race, gender, or social class are unjustifiable and ought

to be dismantled and replaced with different social orders based on the principles of the universality of human nature and equality of all humans without exception.

Socially and culturally too, Shaaban was aware, and he indicates, of the cultural inter-infiltrations between the peoples of the islands and those of the mainland. Who would have known, as narrated in *Utubora Mkulima*, that Sheha and Radhia were related after all? And how surprising this discovery was to Utubora? (Shaaban 1998: 58-59). This fact was only the more proof to Utubora that people are judged by their own character, and that character is built through the choices that one makes in life, which in turn determine one's fortunes, not one's relations. Although they were related—which we find out only toward the end of the story—Sheha and Radhia bore such contrasting characters. It is at least partly for this reason that Shaaban wanted to be identified only by the choices he made in life, including self-identifying as a 'Mswahili,' which he seemed to define solely on a cultural basis. While he is known to have been a practicing Muslim, Shaaban does not identify himself in his works as a Muslim, nor is any one of his heroes, male or female, lauded in their deeds as the function or result of their religious faith. Furthermore, he was critical of the shortcomings of both Islam and Christianity, as organized religious institutions, in respect to what they did, or did not do, to transform the lives of their followers. But this could also be read as indication of his view that religion is a personal matter between one and their God. What is important is how one lives a life based on rational convictions whose practical consequences are good and desirable for the individual concerned and the world in general. Hypocrisy is the character of an individual divided into two, one whose outward conduct does not reflect their convictions, or one who relates to different people differently based on who they are and the relations between him/her and them.

There is no doubt that Shaaban was a brilliant student both in the formal educational realm and also in the informal arena of the everyday, public socio-cultural and political arena as experienced in the events that characterized the society and region that he called home. Later, as we gather from his comments on foreign political figures or world events, we can infer that Shaaban, as already a brilliant learner, was very aware of some events of the global politics of his time such as the wars, the inequities, and the injustices that defined or drove them. He was also aware of the resistance movements for change against global historical injustices. To change the undesirable and intolerable socio-political states or conditions, action was necessary, and it had to start with a critique and awareness creation and spread through one formidable tool that he knew best: writing. No socio-political change, Shaaban argued in *Utubora Mkulima*, comes to people who do not act to effect, or to bring about positive socio-political transformation into the desirable conditions. Aware that not everyone is aware of, or is affected in the same way by those conditions that need change, nor does everyone know, or even care

about, what needs to be done to improve society. Most people are concerned only with their daily experiences such as where their daily food will come from. They lack critical awareness of the world and how it works. So, Shaaban argues, critical awareness of this type is the function of a higher level of intelligence and the capability to know and understand different types and levels of the good and their relations to daily experiences.

To give force to, and to sustain these sophisticated critiques, Shaaban crafted a depth in KiSwahili, firstly to perform his socio-cultural and political critiques, and perhaps only secondarily to dazzle his readers with good story-telling in never-before-seen styles. Because he knows his language well, and also reflects on his experiences as conceptualized within the broader social, cultural, historical, and political contexts of the time, he finds the best modes to express his critiques in accessible and enjoyable ways without losing the conceptual power of what he intends to say. Shaaban says it himself, that his primary reason for opposing translations, or writing for locals in foreign languages, was because he believed that writing must have the power to capture the reader's attention and draw her/him into getting involved in the subject-matter of the story. But because the majority of us—his readers and others—were not brought up with the habits of abstract thinking, his critiques still remain cryptic yet not too distant behind the story. This is why it is critical to read each and every line, every name of characters, and every locution, in Shaaban's texts with a careful and investigative eye, and listen to every story with an investigative ear and mind. It is not easy, as the targets of the critiques are both present yet also concealed at the same time. And finally, that in order to accomplish these goals, that is, to execute the critiques in a manner that was both incisive and also enjoyable as a reading at the same time, he crafted and used different styles—sometimes using an African story-telling style as in *Utubora Mkulima*, and *Siku ya Watenzi Wote*, and sometimes adopting an Arab style of allegorical imageries acting in an imaginary state, as we see in *Kusadikika*. Based on their themes or subject matter, Shaaban appears to direct these works at different audiences: the first two at Africans because they are about the rejection of oppression and a call to action for social change that leads to a democratic state and order, while the third is directed at multiple audiences, both villains and victims, because it is aimed at exposing the immorality and injustices of the self-imposing aristocracy and assumed but false racial superiority of the Arabs that stood then as obstacles in the path to the ideal state that restores justice for all, because all humans are morally equal as bearers of the universal *Utu*.

Then there is also a third tier of Shaaban's writing—not discussed here—that address, or teach, general moral principles, thus is open, as if in inference or conclusion from the above, to all readers. One work in this category is his *Masomo yenye Adili*. In addition to these philosophically-oriented works, Shaaban also wrote texts to explain the different textual styles. *Kielezo cha Fasili* ('Explaining Style,

Design, or Story Plot'), *Kielezo cha Insha* ('Explaining Essay Composition'), and *Sanaa ya Ushairi* ('Poetry as Art') are titles which could fall under this category. Shaaban's deliberate stylistic originality made him unique and accessible to readers from any and all walks of life, yet, at the same time, also above the casual reader who would only seek to enjoy the characteristic creative language use. I present Shaaban primarily as a philosopher who not only set out to critique the attitudes and practices of the socio-political elites of his time on the basis of his philosophical convictions and principles, but chose to do so in a language accessible to his people or readership while employing a literary style that resonated with what he himself called 'the spirit or humor' that was at the same time new and popular among the literal population of the region in which he lived and worked. The language and style would not only make the subject matter both accessible and intellectually engaging to his primary audiences or readership, its enjoyable narrative style would also make the subject narratable in story form to broader audiences. Thus, perhaps with the exception of *Kusadikika*, many of Shaaban's writings bear elements of African story-telling styles. *Kusadikika* bears this exception due to its complex conceptual nuances as well as layers of social categories that intersect in the socio-political reality of Tanganyika as a socio-political territory, but of the coastal strip in particular, and this in itself is a complex socio-political concept in the book as it blurs but does not ignore or negate the overlap between the Arab-dominated coastal region and the islands with their claimed autonomy and continued political allegiance to Oman and socio-cultural allegiance to the Arab world of the Gulf, on the one hand, and the territory of the British colony which covered the whole of the mainland but only in some intricate ways also the islands. It would be hard to untangle these delicate and complex layers of socio-political histories and their cultural productions while also trying to tell an enjoyable story.

2. The questions: setting up the subject matter

We all can relate to the divisions that define our political worlds. From taxes to freedoms, to public services, and to inequalities and other injustices in society, we all have different opinions on, or desires for how we would like the world we live in to be or to look like. Amazingly, despite their differences and contrasts, most such opinions profess that their goal is to make the world a better place. The problem, as spelled in the radical question "For who?" is that interests, and the means or modalities by which they are deemed realizable, seldom take the Other person or Other people, those on the other side, into consideration, especially when their interests seem to run counter to one's own. It is the realization of this deep-lying sense of self-interest in the behavior of mammals, humans included, that makes philosophy an interesting discipline, at least, and especially, as articulated in the goals of its social branches like ethics, social science, and political philosophy.

Why should the interests of other people matter to us? The answer to this fundamental question has been at the foundation of all moral traditions, both popular and also those produced by philosophers. The Ghanaian philosopher suggests that the realization of the unprofitability of this underlying natural inclination is what defines the human brain's difference from the brains of most other mammals—namely, that it stems the potentiality of irresolvable conflict by a drive to self-preservation through the institution of the what he calls the 'sympathetic impartiality' (Wiredu 1996: 29-33). We all desire organized lives, but sometimes we have fundamental differences about what an organized world means, or how it would be like. But we are able to imagine ourselves in one where all our interests are catered for. Now, if this is what applies to everyone, then, as likely happens in real life situations, then our interests, as imagined in our best possible world, come into direct conflict with the interests of others. The sympathetic impartiality is, then, not just the natural beginning of our moral thinking, it is also an expression of our realization of the fundamental equality of all humans.

'Treat others as thou would like them to treat thee' is a universal moral maxim, called 'the Golden rule,' and is found in most known cultures that expresses an ideal or virtuous conduct. In Western European thought and professional philosophy, it was popularized by Immanuel Kant, and subsequently became the pillar of virtue ethics. Kant elevates it to the level of what he called 'pure practical reason,' meaning he elevated this rule to a pure universal principle known as 'the Categorical Imperative' which is stated thus: 'Act as though the principle of your action was a universal principle.' Shaaban Robert, to whom it was not lost from the indigenous system and strengthened by Islamic education, defends this maxim in *Utubora Mkulima*. Because the conditions of rural life, one in which people generally self-employ, provides the conditions of equality where true moral principles emerge and become applicable in all sectors of life. Shaaban views this to present a contrast to the commercial settings where the social structures are hierarchized and thus are already morally prejudicial. But we see at the end of *Utubora Mkulima* that equality in these places is still possible, yet subject to manipulation into obstacles to moral ideals. One such obstacle to the moral ideal is jealousy and rivalry in society, an evil that can occur even within family structures and break it apart. I have recently written an essay on 'Virtue Ethics in the Philosophy of Shaaban Robert,' in which I argue that the 'corpus of his work in sum' portrays the need for virtues for everyone as the cure for moral infractions and the means to an ideal society and polity. I have also argued in the past (Masolo 2019: 40-72) that Shaaban's focus on virtuousness—a life built on virtues—spells his view of humans as communitarian, in contrast with the liberal-individualist view of humans in the social-political philosophy of John Rawls (1971), perhaps the most influential Western philosopher of liberalism.

The second question could be put this way: Should everyone organize only their own life and the lives of their own families? What is meant by 'organization' in these questions, so what would one do in organizing their life and that of their family? There are matters in your life as an individual that you would not like anyone else to be involved in—like deciding who to love or to marry, what kind of shoes or clothes to wear, or whether, or how many times to shower, and so on and so forth. These are personal preferences, and preferences are that we keep them so, that is, out of reach of other people's judgements. But we have seen that even some of these private-sounding matters have fallen under some kind of public scrutiny and control, at least sometimes. So you ask yourself: aren't there some things that I can do as a human being without anyone else's control or interference? If so, which ones are they, and why? And which ones are those things that I need, or would like to have, but require the role of someone else to organize? Why, and who should perform the task of organizing those specific things of our lives? Who identifies the 'person(s)' to perform those tasks, and what exactly can they do and not do in the course of performing those duties, and why—in other words, how, or what method do we use to identify such persons? What qualities should qualify such people to perform such tasks? How exactly shall or should they perform their duties? And how should I regard my relations to such people when they in the course of performing those appointed tasks—in other words, do they suddenly become superior to me, or what kind of conditions should be created to enable such persons to successfully perform their duties without causing harm to me, and without interference from me or any other person? How long should they be in those positions for, and why? Should their performance be assessed, and who will assess their performance, and how? What happens if they do not perform well? You can see, our social world bares an endless stream of questions pertaining to the interests of all people who share a defined space. Our interests are pursuable in the domain we share with other people, and so we need boundaries that define the limits that separate private spaces from the shared ones, and these limits are not only physical, but, significantly, also social. But we cannot have or enjoy them at the expense of similar interests of others. In other words, they are part of the public good. Now, these questions appear also to address the origin and meaning of this special kind of power—political power and, above all, awareness of its legitimacy as well as of its dangers, and therefore the need for its limitation and careful control by those who the use of the (political) power is intended to serve or benefit.

The above questions are about the public domain we all take for granted as something that comes about 'naturally.' In other words, humans are political animals, they are gregarious, hence the need for an orderly living with others whose needs will, by and large, likely be similar to those of at least most others. But that is just one layer of justification for public or political organization. Another layer, more

fundamental, regards what it is about humans that would not be well if there was no organized form of relations with others. This valuable thing about humans is probably what drives the need and vision for different social scenarios, whether they are moral or political. In other words, why do we need morals, or a political order? Answers to these two questions should articulate the most fundamental reason or value that justifies our beliefs about morals, or about which type of political order is the best or most suited. They co-exist, and compete as functions, i.e., the result, of the identified value, namely that living with others enables us to accomplish our potentials, and even to thrive in exercising our human qualities. And why do I say all these things in an essay about Shaaban Robert? Because he sees the two realms to intersect. One cannot be a good leader if they are not, first and foremost, morally good people. We apply to the public domain what we have calculated in the form of individual personal qualities. In sum, the above ideas are what drove Shaaban Robert to write some of the books he wrote. I say some, because his work is vast, although one gets deceived by the physical sizes of many of them, a matter which, in itself, also tells us something positive about Shaaban, namely that his unrivaled knowledge of KiSwahili allowed him to condense potentially larger volumes by packing complex ideas, sometimes whole theories, into few words, often in the form of carefully crafted personal names. *Kusadikika* is a perfect example of this craft. In it as in other story-like texts, including those written in allegorical form, he formulates value-laden ideas set in dialogical contrasts as arguments between characters to whom he assigned carefully chosen names coined from words designating concepts. Given the theoretical poverty of our colonial education, many readers are not equipped with the kind of conceptual sensitivity that leads to identification of arguments hidden behind what appear to be simple dialogues or conversations. A good example is Shaaban's *Utubora Mkulima*, which many casual readers will enjoy as a story of the adventures of an ambitious but appearing to be misguided young man who abandons a well-paying clerical job in a Clove trader's warehouse in Zanzibar to return to a remote rural community on the mainland Tanganyika where he basically suffers yet offers his free labor and engages in futile conversations about unhelpful abstract ideas with folks who do not understand him. Our education taught us to identify the actors of the plot, and the linguistic beauty of the story, period. In other words, we needed to take the story 'as told,' because the author was merely using his proficiency in the KiSwahili language to tell a fictional story, nothing more. That was how our education was set, and our teachers, both native and sometimes expatriate, knew no more either. Like us, our native teachers were not theoretically equipped either. And many of us have perpetuated this unreflective approach to African authors, especially those who were like Shaaban. Now, I cannot tell that our expatriate teachers did not know the theoretical content of Shaaban's stories, but if they knew, they wouldn't have told us because such theoretical content was subversive anyway. Against them!

The attitude of our expatriate teachers was that our native authors were not known to have gone to Makerere, or Nairobi, or London, hence they could not be deep thinkers. And we? We could not break down the texts right from their very titles. Worse still, the authors did not write in English. They wrote in their 'vernaculars,' the native languages related to non-reflective minds, so neither they nor their readership could have been sophisticated. Their achievement could not have been beyond, or other than in committing their stories to writing. The content, on the other hand, could not have been more than just folktales. These were the layers of the denigration of the native or indigenous writer, and we inherited all this colonial bias.

The social and political environment in which Shaaban grew and worked was complex, with layers of religious, racial, and political tensions. Navigating through these layers must have been daunting, most likely hampering the freedom of expression a commentator felt or knew they had in addressing some issues, or talking about, or saying them in those ways they may have deemed to be potentially precarious to their own and other people's interests. For Shaaban, then, writing in KiSwahili must have been not merely due to his not knowing another tongue, but also, conveniently and importantly, a strategy for navigating the multi-layered the political terrain—the Arab, and the European-colonial. Layers of foreign political authority in colonial Tanganyika included remnants of the influence of the Omani Sultans who had established their Headquarters in Zanzibar in 1840, then the Germans established their colonial authority there in 1891, before the British took over in 1918 and Zanzibar came under the British Protectorate when the Germans renounced their colonial territories for economic reasons following the end of World War I. All the while, however, Arab presence and commercial influence in the upper coastal region of Tanganyika including, and especially in Zanzibar, remained unperturbed. They conveniently accommodated settlers from India whose predecessors had been brought over as coolies by the British to help build the railway lines in East and southern Africa. Many of these Indian migrants stayed on after independence, and their descendants control much of the retail commerce on the mainland while Arabs dominated in Zanzibar and its sister island of Pemba.

3. Social, cultural, and political complexity of the so-called Swahili Coast

Despite the Union and apparent peace, the Arab factor remains a significant influencer in Tanzanian politics and cultural identity. This competition for political and cultural visibility and gain, especially between sections of the coastal people—especially those made up of Arabs and the in-between populations that choose to identify as or with Arabs—on the one hand, and those who identify as Black or indigenous, on the other, continues to play a delicate but significant influence on Tanzanian politics to-date. It puts obvious political and cultural pressure on those people who, like Shaaban or the

community he grew up in, identify as ‘the Swahili.’ What people do not realize, however, is the racial tensions that emerge from the claims and counter-claims on the region, and how those tensions play out in the thoughts and works of writers like Shaaban. What is crucially difficult—because it is sensitive and delicate to do without being seen to fan them further—is how to detect and call out these tensions, including how individuals, depending on how they identify themselves within this complex cultural melting pot, are ready to publicly admit their reality, thus causing them to describe some writers as significant and others as not, and influencing how they conceptually break down the contents of the texts of different writers. Sometimes it comes down to who is doing the analysis, and how the writer in question is ‘ethnically’ or culturally identified in the context of these political and cultural tensions. These matters make Shaaban Robert both special and contestable at the same time. Perhaps his pioneer writing in and subsequent transformation of KiSwahili into a formidable literary medium made him unassailable. And he obviously took advantage of this unique status.

Calling the Swahili Coast a cultural and political melting pot now almost sounds like a cliché that downplays the intensity of the tensions that define this region. While it might be considered a ‘normal’ social phenomenon in this region—extending to the Coastal strip in Kenya as well—to see Arab or Swahili households employ native Africans as domestic servants or shop stewards, the reverse is nearly unheard of, if not virtually impossible, at least not in public display. Why so, when privileges claimed by people of Arab descent ended with the attainment of independence? What about native Africans in Arab literature? These and other questions become a crucial window that opens up to Shaaban’s literary and philosophical world. It is clear that Shaaban’s experience living and growing up in Dar es Salaam, and later moving to make Tanga his home, and working in different departments as a civil servant within the colonial establishment (he was a Customs Officer; an Officer in the Department of Animal husbandry; an Officer in the Provincial administration in his hometown Province of Tanga; and lastly an Officer in the Department of Survey, also in Tanga) gave him the opportunity to observe, and perhaps also to experience these tensions first hand. How, then, could his work be only about folklore? Peeling back and finding the address of these issues in the pages of Shaaban’s work is a challenge because they are not treated in any single, identifiable text or place. Rather, Shaaban addressed diverse issues across all his works of diverse styles—poetry, essays, and allegorical stories, all of which require careful reading and analysis as opposed to superficial story or poetry reading like I hinted at with the example of *Utubora Mkulima* above.

4. The traces

Shaaban has an interesting autobiographical poem in *Koja la Lugha* (Shaaban 1969: 72-74). Here, Shaaban appears to intimate that there was racism in society, and perhaps even at his place of work, although he was personally not treated with racist scorn, bias, or insults. Yet, even here Shaaban sees it necessary to explain that his good and honest work proved to his employers and colleagues at work in the Department of Customs that “race was not a hindrance to equality” (Shaaban 1969: 73). The reciprocal respect and trust earned him a good name among his bosses and workmates alike, an occurrence that has only left them all with good memories both ways. This piece, it seems, was Shaaban’s address to perpetrators of racism toward people like himself that there was no character attributable wholesale to a group of people seen to be alike in any manner. Rather, character was a personal attribute that signifies in a consistent manner the unity between the inner self of convictions of reason and its outward manifestation in conduct. A person’s conduct tells publicly a story about their judgements and sense of responsibility over duties expected of them. And one deed doesn’t cut it, but when they are performed consistently in a certain manner, then they tell a story about their base and drive. Together, in that relational structure, they form one’s character.

We judge whether places are or are not good to live in by what we encounter as the general character of its people. Indeed, in *Siku ya Watenzi Wote* (Shaaban 1968: 2), pre-independence Tanganyika is described as an uncomfortable place that lacked freedom and equality, and we know that this was the reality in Tanganyika when Shaaban worked in the Customs Department. It was the Tanganyika where—as narrated as part of the cause of Utubora’s distress at the beginning of *Utubora Mkulima* which is a mirror of his own autobiographical descriptions of his drives or motivations in life as based on his experiences and observations—some people, meaning natives, Black Africans, were consistently derogatively referred to by their Arab neighbors or workmates, and by those others identifying themselves as such, as having pigmentation similar to tar. Although he had lived a relatively successful life that was admired and envied by many of his peers, still Shaaban knew that he lived in a world that was generally not a good place. So sometimes he wished, just by sarcastic speculation, that he was a black ivory, for he would have been accorded much higher value than Black Africans were thought to have. Or better still, again just by sarcasm, he wished his Master had taken him along with him as this would have saved him from the many hardships that they face collectively as Black Africans. He would have been clothed and fed, and then used his savings to buy his freedom back. But, he thought, all this would have placed him even lower in value than even the most black ivory that had ever existed. Why? Because his work, his services, “would only have been to the gain of someone else. Yet, all these evils were perpetrated by people who thought of themselves as being closer to God than us” (Shaaban 2003:

78-79). These references to the historical Arab interests in East Africa are heart-rending. It is with this kind of experiences that Shaaban grew skeptical about the sincerity of believers who, as a result of these contradictions between faith and action, made religion look worthless to the human good. There is an oblique reference to slavery and slave trade by Arabs who dominated the Indian Ocean slave trade for centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese who also practiced the same before the universal Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. How, in the face of this history, could any Black African see value in Islam, or trust Arabs in their dealings or general relations with each other since they saw Africans as objects?

5. In pursuit of a perfect world

Shaaban's experiences outlined above set him up to seek a better world, the best possible world in which those atrocities and tribulations would not occur or happen to anyone. Scholars concur that Shaaban's *Siku ya Watenzi Wote* (Mulokozi 1975) and *Kusadikika* (Khamis 2001) spell out Shaaban's idealism or utopianism. That is undeniable. I argue, however, that nearly the entire corpus of Shaaban's work was dedicated to articulating not just what this ideal state would look like, but also what it is not, and what it would take to attain it. The opening questions above about the justifications for moral and political order look misleadingly simple, but they are the questions whose answers greatly divide nations across the world. Even when people were to agree that all humans deserve any value or dessert p because of the justifying reason q , there is likely to arise differences, sometimes fierce ones, about which kind of specific conduct, or political arrangements, best lead to the attainment of p . The removal of q alone does not guarantee or lead to agreement about the nature of what ought to follow. I have argued that John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) emerged as the West's philosophical response to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The contrast was huge, not just because Rawls's book is a massive and very sophisticated text on distributive justice built on liberalism while that of Marx and Engels was just a small pamphlet that listed basic socialist principles, but principally because, while what they advocated was similar—*freedom, equality, and fairness* as interests of the individual—their respective suggested manners of attaining those values were poles apart. Similarly, while answers to our questions might not cause a fight due to their probable obviousness, the manners in which answers to them have been executed have been sources of political acrimony and pain to whole populations across history, and people still continue to debate and disagree daily about them. The Cold-War era divisions of the world, including the then-divided Berlin, may either not be remembered by future generations of world history, or will be too abstract by virtue of historical distance to relate to any real experiences the affected people of the time, just like the

present and future generations of Africans can or will hardly fathom the pain still felt by living older generations as a result of arbitrary colonial split and mapping of Africa. Shaaban's references to the plunder of Africa in search of ivory and slaves, both conceived by Arab traders as market commodities, suggests that he believed that moral wrong, especially those that filter down to regulating social relations, are unforgettable as scars in the history of human relations.

6. Equality, freedom, and a just society

Ethics and political theory are in service of basic values which we consider to be conceptually irrefutable or self-explanatory. Shaaban was not different in his belief that humans possess a certain basic value in service of which they ought not to be treated in certain ways that are incommensurate with this universal value—of *Utu*—while, in a negative angle, certain things ought not be denied to them for the same reason. We demand or condemn certain actions based on whether they deny or violate what is considered prescriptive in respect of this basic human value. That value gives humans fundamental rights we call human rights. The rights we claim simply by virtue of being human—having *Utu*. Then there are rights that humans claim to belong to them by virtue of membership to groups that possess these rights, or by virtue of meeting the conditions set for accessing those rights. But no such claims give one group claims of superiority over any other. In other words, according to Shaaban, *Utu* has neither metaphysical nor social gradations, thus it lacks any moral justification upon which one group would possess more of it than another group. Thus, as we see in *Kusadikika*, aristocracy has no moral justification whatsoever. Nor does race have it. Yet, in *Kusadikika*, both racial and aristocratic claims to Arab superiority come as a package. Shaaban has pretty clear ideas, not only of the basic human value, but also of how it—that is, *Utu*—defines an individual's rightful claims in society. But because Shaaban does not set a theoretically or conceptually systematic way of dealing with these matters in deductive format, any commentator is pushed to find and configure how and where the structure of deductive argument hides in the multi-style corpus, and then bring together, that is, systematize the conceptual elaboration. For example, while Shaaban uses *Utubora Mkulima* to critique the effects of the socially hierarchizing world of trade on the idea of self-worth and critical thinking of those who work within it by denying them the opportunity to relate themselves and their conditions to broader socio-political and moral issues, his critique of the ethics of conducting trade, or business ethics, occurs explicitly in *Adili na Nduguze*. Also, while *Utubora Mkulima* treats matters of human nature and human rights that are predicated on the peculiarity of being human, the moral and political implications of these are the subject of *Kusadikika*. *Ubor*a—that is, perfection—which stands as the basis but also the goal of *Utubora*'s endeavors, is not a given. *Utu bora* is not attained by any single action,

although it is the goal that directs the choices that one makes each single time. It is to be pursued at all times as a target that is conceptually visible only to those who approach life selflessly and extraordinarily. And the courage to make these choices, even in the face of adversity but in pursuit of a greater good for self and society, is therefore one of the virtues or character traits that humans ought to cultivate.

According to Shaaban, righting wrongs in society takes acts of great sacrifice and selflessness, thus social change requires bold or courageous action as opposed to idle talk and love of social and material comfort which are transient goods. This is how *Utubora Mkulima* starts. So, the question is: what are the socio-political conditions to which this vision applies? And the follow-up question is: who is Shaaban addressing? Who is Utubora's employer, in this figurative or representational standing in the social and commercial scenario that reveals the identities of the people who dominate this state of things? So, when Utubora rejects the status quo, what statement is he (Shaaban) making? If that is about the dominant coastal trade and its place in the broader socio-political condition of Utubora's time and space, how do we bring in the matters of business ethics in *Adili na Nduguze*? And finally, Shaaban explains that while change of any kind, but certainly socio-political change particularly, must start with a few individuals who understand the circumstances they live in, and then embark on the difficult task of convincing others who may not only lack the intellectual capacity to understand and appreciate that what appears on the surface of everyday life may not be the ultimate good worth of human nature, but, as a result of their ignorance, may also not be ready to make the sacrifices necessary to bring about change aimed at the ultimate good. Knowing this ultimate good is not given to little minds. And when it is explained to them, they may not comprehend either its nature or its true value, especially when they cannot relate it to immediate, visible results. Such are the matters of debate between Utubora and Bihaya, his former Nanny.

Ignorance and complacency are the arch enemies of change and ultimate good as they breed selfishness, individualism, shortsightedness, and superfluous lifestyle. What ensues from here on, through *Utubora Mkulima*, *Siku ya Watenzi Wote*, *Kusadikika*, and even *Adili na Nduguze* paint the picture of Shaaban as a communalist in relation to the social-philosophical discourses that characterized the period of the writing of these texts. Yet Shaaban is still pretty distinct from the main currents of that school of thought. Taken together in light of Wiredu's communitarian theory, the texts rest on one primary premise: We all have, not just the right, but also the duty, to participate, exhaustively, in every debate until we are convinced, on matters that affect our shared lives and experiences. This is a matter that Shaaban talks about with vigor when Utubora rebukes Bihaya for suggesting that his relocation to the Mainland would be a vain and costly sacrifice as she tried to dissuade him from the decision of

abandoning his employment in order to pursue a different kind of lifestyle. What is this lifestyle? And what would make it more attractive than the lifestyle that gave him income enough for living a life of comfort? My suggestion is to underline here the concept conveyed by the term 'comfort,' and why Utubora derides it in contrast to what he describes as: "a life in God's world as was experienced by his [Utubora's and, indeed, humanity's] ancestor Adam" (Shaaban 1998: 9). One can break down the concepts conveyed by these descriptions laden with references to specific values such as, in this quote, freedom as a fundamental human right. Utubora argues that the right to freedom surpasses many other values, even when he appears to dread the unknown future. Still, he argues the freedom to make mistakes is still freedom, and is still worth sacrifice. At this point, the dominant value is just one: freedom as willed by God—that is, from creation, or in human nature as was given to, and experienced by Adam. Certainly mythical, the reference to God and Adam are not only indicators of Shaaban's acquaintance with Islamic literature—not necessarily the belief content—but also signify a sense of what is the characteristic of human life by definition, or by its very nature—from creation, if you want, because we see the influence of religion (his own Islamic lessons, or the Christianity of his father, but it doesn't really matter at this point which specific religious influence is in play). Religion provides the lexicon for conceptualizing the idea of freedom as natural to humans. If this is the case, then any idea contrary to this understanding of freedom as something pivotal to human nature and condition of life must be something to be despised, something rooted in ignorance and therefore to be ashamed of, hence Shaaban's naming of his Nanny as Bihaya, thereby giving the name a contemptuous significance and status.

7. Even nature rejects and despises racism

We encounter another layer of obstacles to human freedom. It is found in Shaaban's characterization of Unguja itself. Obstacles to freedom are not just the trappings of materialism such as Utubora appears to experience by virtue of the employment he has and which gives him material comfort compared to many of his associates. Ability to access modern consumer goods because of one's financial ability was, and remains to-date, one of the greatest allures of modern economy, so individuals were judged by and against their peers based, first, on whether they had a job or not, and secondly on how 'well' they were doing based on their visible material comfort. On these terms, Utubora was definitely socially above his peers, and the conventional expectation was that he should have embraced this social visibility with pride. In his autobiography, *Maisha Yangu Na Baada ya Miaka Hamsini*, he says that his diligence at work made him likeable to his superiors, but also earned him envy from his fellow Africans. But in *Utubora Mkulima*, Shaaban reveals that while this financial advantage gave him a sense of personal

accomplishment, he did not view life in those narrow terms. The world was definitely bigger than that of the individual and his or her accomplishments, so accomplishment needed to be defined on the matrix of the quality of life in and for that bigger world. This kind of thinking was usually expected of people far older than Utubora was, but, Shaaban claims, if it takes intelligence to identify truths in the world, then there is no prescribed age at which one becomes intelligent enough to discern the world's truths, or rights and wrongs, so not only did Utubora show that he was different, his vision was indeed intelligent and unique. What counts is the kind of impact this vision can have on the lives of people. In other words, people needed liberation from several types of undesirable states and conditions of life, and executing change to bring about that liberation does not happen if people sat on their hands or only enjoyed personal accomplishments.

Although Shaaban's claim about the need for social action for the benefit of those in need of liberation from undesirable conditions may be seen primarily through the actions he ascribes to Utubora following his return to Tanganyika's mainland, his allusion to other social tensions and the resultant undesirable experiences are easy to overlook, or indeed to remain untackled. Why? Because they are the kind of issues that, due to their likely negative impact on the political domain, tend to be only quietly hushed. They are the racial issues that go as far back as Arab involvement in Eastern African slave trade to the near Middle East, a matter that was intensified by the transfer of the Headquarters of the Omani Empire by Said bin Sultan from Muscat in Oman to Stone Town in Zanzibar in 1840. Although unspoken, and despite the many decades since emancipation, racial tensions between the descendants of Arab settlers and native Africans have remained and continue, simmering underneath the fragile nature of the union (Tanzania). These tensions remain throughout the entire coastal strip of East Africa. Shaaban's search for a universally-defined *Utu* which carries a sense of moral equality of all 'before God,' and as enshrined in the freedom enjoyed by Adam as the ancestor of all humans, needs to be read as stemming from, and addressing the negative experiences delivered by these tensions. The idea and behavioral character of Makuu in *Utubora Mkulima* is a powerful punch at these tensions and their perpetrators because there Shaaban is arguing that religious faith alone, such as Makuu's Islamism, is not enough to make a person morally good, nor does faith alone change the world. Social change, or change from all those things that afflict humanity, cannot be spontaneous. It takes human good will, and the good will of many people, whether in the same community, nation, or the world at large to bring about needed change. And this can come about only when people become diligent, when they think critically about what and how to bring about change that improves quality of life and protects the environment for all. This observation could be seen as an oblique address to Muslims in general, and therefore, by implication, to those who conduct their lives explicitly by this

faith as ethnic Arabs or Arab-descended residents of the coastal region, in Zanzibar, and elsewhere. Shaaban's description of Unguja as a place or source of unbearable social weight is therefore significant. It is the kind of weight that denies those under it their Godly-given freedom. So Shaaban provides us with an interesting view of two obstacles to freedom: the trappings of materialism as exhibited in the tyranny of employers, and certain social conditions. One suspects Shaaban is complaining about Arab racism rampant in the Island conclave that was once the capital of the Omani Empire.

From here, then—and I leave other analytic details out—attention shifts to the idea of personhood that Shaaban considers as so categorically superior to any kind of earthly benefit that nothing should be allowed to trample or hinder it. This, *Utu bora*, is what is personified in, and characterized through, Utubora's choices in life.

Now, if what Utubora pursues is a characterization of the kind of values that ought to govern human experiences in a manner commensurate with the dignity bestowed by nature, then Shaaban's expository scheme is to define this ideal or perfect personhood, and then tackle, first, the kind of conditions that hinder it at the political level, and then, second, propose the ideal conditions under which humans can reasonably pursue and experience their potential. This scheme puts *Utubora Mkulima* ahead of *Kusadikika* and other texts like *Siku ya Watenzi Wote* and *Adili na Nduguze*. For a logical flow, the texts line up in that order as elaborations or sequels to the major two. By virtue of its title (*Adili na Nduguze*—Righteousness and Its Cognate Virtues), the latter, then, positions itself as an elaboration of Righteousness, Shaaban's primary or foundational virtue, and other, related morals. In this book, however, Shaaban's focus to show (argue) that righteousness applies also to doing business ethically. Shaaban is an idealist philosopher. His works—so deceptively small in material volume but conceptually so huge and complex—attract comparison with, and solicit similar critiques as, other works of social idealism as I primarily compare it to Kwasi Wiredu's work in this specific regard. A critique of the idea of 'democracy by consensus' as developed by Kwasi Wiredu can be simple, quick, and predictable. Yet such critique would be simplistic. According to its main observation, the modern world is so vastly different from those societies where direct or participatory democracy was practically ideal. Growth in human population everywhere today, and the ever-growing complexity of human needs and knowledge of them, makes the suggested pursuit of consensus in the management of large-scale public affairs impracticable. In other words, it is too idealistic, meaning that it promotes an unattainable perfect good. Instead, critics argue, the most effective political strategy for responding to needs is through strong political representation which, they believe, solves the imminent chaos that would emerge from the diversity of needs. It is a liberal view which assumes as false the idea of homogeneity of collective needs assumed by the communalist understanding of needs which they see

the idea of ‘democracy by consensus’ to fall under. Wiredu’s counter—because he is not a communalist in the sense implied by the said liberal critique—is, without implied pun, realistic. He argues (Wiredu 1980: 88 -98) that contrary to considering philosophical recommendations in socio-political pursuits as utopian for their assumed unattainability, human quest is, from a natural standpoint, invariably about ideals, understanding, of course, that the term ‘ideal’ or ‘ideals’ describes what is conceivable as ‘the best possible’ of what is in deliberation or consideration. No sane person consciously desires what they themselves know to be bad, just as no-one pursues what they know *a priori* to be unattainable. Aims are always directed at ‘the best conceivable,’ even if its characteristics are visible only in the mind and not yet ever seen in practice. The ‘utopian’ or ‘ideal’ works as a regulatory target, not a constitutive attribute or norm. if it were so, there would be no need for rules. This is the idea in Shaaban Robert’s *Kusadikika*, translatable loosely as ‘The Best Possible World,’ or ‘The Best State,’ or, yet, ‘The Ideal State.’ So he in fact starts the text by describing the world in (the) mind as ‘abstract,’ or, literally in Kiswahili, *Nchi iliyo angani* ‘the country, or state, in the air’ (Shaaban 1966). Compare this idea, curiously, with what Plato says, at the end of Book IX, of his already articulated vision of the nature of the (ideal) *Republic*: “...the city we were imagining and describing, the one that exists only in theory, for I don’t think it exists anywhere on earth. But perhaps,..there is a model of it in heaven, for anyone who wants to look at it and to make himself its citizen on the strength of what he sees. It makes no difference whether it is or ever will be somewhere, for he would take part in the practical affairs of that city and no other” (Plato 1992: 263). For Shaaban and Plato, separated by two millennia, the concern was to establish a guide for a structure and set of practices that would form the foundation of happiness for folks in the world of their time. For both of them, the structures and practices would, as the function of the virtue of justice, uphold, sustain, and enhance the prevalence of a certain state of things, including the political state and its governance, that sets those conditions that enable the pursuit and attainment of the all-round ideal worth of human nature or perfect personhood, *Utu bora* for Shaaban, and *Areté* in the ancient or classical Greece of Plato, and *Virtus* in the Greco-Roman world. There is excellence of purpose and function in the general or overall nature of humans, and there is excellence or virtue in human activities in every segment of human life, and the person who espouses and consciously lives by such virtues lives within the realm of what is expected of a rational being; she or he rescinds the temptations of living by the attractions of a beastly life (Masolo 2019: 40-72; Shaaban 1968: 21). Hence both authors provide the structure and moral nature of the ideal State that, although pursuable on earth, remains perfect only in the mind—*Kusadikika* for Shaaban, and the *Republic* for Plato. Its perfections guide conduct while remaining removed—up in the air—from actual or real social, moral, and political practices of humans here and there. Wiredu describes them as “*regulative* rather

than *constitutive*” (Wiredu 1980: 88). That is the whole reason and method for judging. We judge to commend, or to blame and admonish, all against a stated or perceived ideal. All judgements are regulative conceptual procedures.

8. Shaaban and the broader universe of moral theory

Shaaban does not say much directly about the meaning or significance of *Ubora* (perfection) like he does with concepts like *Utukufu* ‘Excellence,’ *Uvivu* ‘Laziness,’ *Usahibu* ‘Friendship,’ *Ujana* ‘Youth,’ and so on whose meanings he delineates in *Koja la Lugha* (Shaaban 1969). But he says there (Shaaban 1969: 2) that “meanings or concepts [or understanding] are referenced with words” (Shaaban 1969: 2). The idea of “perfection,” is often indicated only in relation to other concepts that this notion qualifies or describes, like in the now-familiar personal name or noun for character *Utubora*, which I have explained to have been coined from the two words, *Utu* ‘humanity, or human nature, or personhood’ and *bora* ‘perfect, or ideal,’ or, as he renders, *Tendo bora* ‘perfect, or ideal act, deed, or behavior,’ etc. In Greek culture the virtues or moral characteristics of ideal personhood were instilled to become the moral character of individuals from youth through a style of education called *paideia* and combined both theoretical and practical disciplines. And Greek moral ideals have become the subject matter of Western moral theory since then. Shaaban, on the other hand, believed in educational experience that focused on the practical moral life on the one hand, and practical education in the dominant communal economic production on the other. Shaaban believed in the latter as a recognition of the dominant resource—land and agriculture (Shaaban 1969: 34-35)—in the part of the world he hailed from while recognizing different economic practices like trade, or others, for other regions of the world due to differences in natural environmental conditions. Interestingly, although his ethical theory draws heavily from an Islamic background, Shaaban was always skeptical of the true relevance of religion to moral knowledge or virtuous living. Like I said above, Shaaban does not make moral praises of people due to their piety, or blame them for lack of it. In his view, knowing what is morally right and modeling one’s life accordingly is a function of secular intellectual virtue called *Adili*, meaning intellectual or rational diligence. It is the intellect that makes one a *Mtu*, and without it, a human being is just like a tree (Shaaban 1969: 8-9).

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, as I have said, Shaaban was a significant thinker whose thought has not received deserved attention and recognition for their true significance. While the other aspects of his work

receiving attention was also important, they have focused on Shaaban's influence upon Swahili culture's transition from orality to writing, and the style that emerged from his writing, rather than on the thinking this style was about. At that juncture, it did not matter whether the subject matter was delivered orally or in writing. I call this omission serious and a perpetuation of the stereotypical belief among foreigners, Arab and European alike, that Africans—by which I imply a racial distinction—were not capable of abstract, theoretical thinking. The result is a habit of bad readings of the works of folks like Shaaban by the very people for whom he was writing.

Indeed, finding and sustaining a trace of theoretical threads in Shaaban's work is not an easy task, and I have tried to show here that elements of his theoretical lines run through different works, and they are expressed creatively in the form of allegories and, sometimes, opaque sarcasms that are discoverable only when one asks the whys or motivations that would make Shaaban to sometimes use awkward renditions in storylines. Also, even with his solid philosophical stances, Shaaban does not use arguments understood in the Western sense where one would have to look through journal articles and treatises to find arguments, analyses, or treatise accounts. Thus, because of this difference, the key to understanding Shaaban is itself a critical approach that lifts the reader above the proper or character names, titles, and stories. This style, I have suggested, was Shaaban's own deliberate strategy for veiling his social critiques in an environment in which he was delicately positioned.

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D. A. Masolo is affiliated with the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky where he has taught philosophy for more than twenty-six years. Masolo studied in Rome and has taught philosophy across three continents. His research interests and publications span such areas like History of Philosophy, African Philosophy, Africana Philosophy, Social and Political Philosophy, and Comparative Philosophy broadly construed in a global context. His publications include *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (1994), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry* (2000), and *Self and Community in a Changing World* (2010). Currently he is a researcher base at the J-P. Research Library in Siaya, Kenya. He can be contacted at: dismas.masolo@louisville.edu

William E. Mkufya and his flowers

An intellectual bio-graphy

Cristina Nicolini

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

¹ This article is an output of a project funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation in 2023/2024 [REF. 40.23.0.006SL].

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 Smbaa 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 *Psalm 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 wa hila zetu imedhihiri</i>	Free will is imperfect 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 vinateketea!</i>	Blessing to Heaven, the earth and human beings are perishing!
<i>Kwa hekima na hanjari</i>	With wisdom and swords
<i>Dhambi zao, shetani tumezitetea!</i> (Mkufya 1999: 221-222)	Their sins, we devils have defended!

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 communitarianism"⁶² 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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Cristina Nicolini, Ph.D. is a post-doctoral researcher working on Swahili literature and African philosophy. Cristina obtained a PhD degree in "African Languages and Cultures" (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London); a Bachelor's degree in "Oriental and African Languages and Cultures" cum laude (University of Naples "L'Orientale"); a Master's degree in "Sciences of Languages, History and Cultures of Mediterranean and Islamic Countries" cum laude (University of Naples "L'Orientale"); and a II level Master's degree in "Economics and Institutions of Islamic Countries" cum laude (LUISS Guido Carli, Rome).

She has been teaching Swahili Language and African Cultures at the University for Foreigners of Siena since 2023. Cristina Nicolini has recently completed a postdoc research project on "Swahili Literature and Afrophone Philosophy" (REF. 40.23.0.006SL) funded by The Fritz Thyssen Foundation and hosted at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" in 2023/2024. She is currently a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Turin within the framework of InALC – "Investigating African Languages and Cultures" (PRIN n. 2022XMRNF9).

Cristina can be contacted at: christina.nicolini@gmail.com or cristina.nicolini@unito.it

Sensing Swahili aesth-ethics with and through Mzee Farouk Topan's wor(l)dings

Irene Brunotti

In this chapter I argue that intellectual biography as a western scientific method does not allow us to sense Swahili wor(l)ds, because it assumes life (bio-) and (written) work (-graphy) to be separate, primordial entities. In this view, authors and their intellectuality exist prior to—and therefore separately from—their work, and their biographies can be written 'at a distance' by somebody else. What if bio- and -graphy were, instead, inseparable and co-constitutive of the 'becoming intellectual'? How could we then humbly attempt to sense the unfolding becoming of intellectuals with and through their work? Exploring these questions, I engage with Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan's intellectuality through the Swahili tradition of *wasifu*, which is not just a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium. Rather it encompasses a long poetic tradition in oral narrations, and, importantly, it is born across the Indian Ocean, carrying a sense of belonging that is uniquely and specifically Swahili. After introducing the concepting that co-constitutes my reflection, I will attempt to share how I was touched by, and, in reverse, could touch the words of Mzee Farouk in the ways of *wasifu*, an experience of sensing Swahili aesth-ethics that emerges through his own wor(l)dings (wordings and worldings).

Keywords: *wasifu*; aesth-ethics; Farouk Topan; wor(l)dings; touch.

1. Introduction

In engaging Swahili wor(l)dings we are engaging with onto-epistemologies that are co-constituted by emotions, orality, recitation, haptics, practices, that some western modes of wording might fail to sense. In Swahili ways of knowing and being, words are not necessarily cut apart from worlds, they do not represent worlds, rather they co-constitute them. So, in sharing my encounter with Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan, a Zanzibari playwright, anthropologist, scholar in Swahili Studies and religious studies, I need a mode of expression that allows for the relationality between his words and the worlds he helps to unfold. I need to narrate how I came to relate to these worlds through his words, how I sensed his wor(l)dings. And while it might be suitable in a different situatedness, intellectual

biography does not seem an adequate method for my project, because it lacks the sense-ability (Gandorfer 2020: 71) that I need to express how I was touched by Mzee Farouk’s wor(l)dings.

Instead, I chose to engage with his intellectuality through the Swahili tradition of *wasifu*, which is not just a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium, but rather encompasses a long poetic tradition in oral narrations (Topan 1997), and, importantly, is born across the *Ziwa Kuu* (Great Lake), that is the Indian Ocean (Karugia and Khamis 2018), carrying a sense of belonging that is uniquely and specifically Swahili.

I will begin by clarifying how and why biography does not help me as a method, while suggesting *wasifu* as a Swahili mode of sensing and composing, which allows the (bodily) expression and perception of Mzee Farouk’s wor(l)dings. That is how I introduce the enactment of my-self experiencing Mzee Farouk’s intellectuality. By way of an (in)conclusion, I will point out the relevance of the bodily perception of words in sensing Swahili aesth-ethics, while engaging with Swahili onto-epistemologies.

2. On bio-graphy

This book, conceived from a workshop held in Napoli in April 2024 bringing together scholars working on and/or with Swahili intellectuals, suggests the intellectual biography as an entry point for engaging with Swahili literary epistemologies. Yet, what I witnessed during those days was a concerto of places, things, words and personae narrated in ways that intellectual biography as a method, I feel, is not always able to value.

This western scientific method assumes the predetermined existence of the separate entities of life (bio-) and (written) work (-graphy). In this view, authors and their intellectuality exist prior to—and therefore separately from—their work, and their biographies can be written ‘at a distance’ by somebody else. The Non-representational(ism) theorist Nigel Thrift feels suspicious towards both autobiography and biography, defining them as subject-based modes of perception that, as such, invite to fix and ‘monumentalise’ certain individualities, instead of promoting the possibility of an endless re-turning to them (Thrift 2007). In his study’s first chapter, significantly entitled *Life, but not as we know it*, he, instead, insists on the co-constitutive nature of the world, as

made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by many and various spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter, and the violent training that such encounter forces (Thrift 2007: 8).

Similarly, in relational modes of thinking emerging out of African, South American or Indigenous scholarship, like the philosophies of *Utu* and *Ubuntu*,¹ notions like *Nepantla* spaces² or Indigenous Place-Thought (Watts 2013), words are not discrete linguistic entities with essentialized fixed qualities, but are in fact ontologically co-constitutive becomings (Barad 2007). Therefore, there is no worded life account (biography) that exists as de-touched—unfolding without enfolding—from some-body's life and work that it claims to describe. Neither is there any account that presumes, and therefore dictates, a life trajectory in which intellectuality is born, grows old to then die. Rather the life, the works and their account are co-constitutive of an(y) intellectual becoming.

The ways I encountered Mzee Farouk's intellectuality, then, need a relational mode of engaging with them that allows to matter-forth the co-constitutive relationality of his persona and his work, without suppressing any subjectivity, any-body, my body, involved in the experience.

It is perhaps through the practice of *wasifu*, which rests in-between the oral and the written, that we can find a different way to engage with Swahili intellectuality. Certainly, it is through *wasifu* that I can try to express and narrate how my-self experienced Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings and invite you to be touched by it as I was touched by his wor(l)dings. A way, for me, to sense Swahili onto-epistemologies (Swahili ways of knowing and being), without reducing or erasing the aesth-ethics (in Mzee Farouk's wor(l)ding – the *uzuri*) they are imbued with.

3. On *wasifu* as a method to sense Swahili aesth-ethics

Differently from aesthetics, "aesth-ethics takes seriously that sense-making requires attentiveness to the ongoing intra-action of modes of sensing and the being of the sensible (i.e. that which is sensible but not recognizable). Thinking, far from being restricted to human and humanist thought, (un)matters and (un)makes-sense. As such it is both an onto-epistemological and ethical concern" (Gandorfer and Ayub 2021: 2). Aesth-ethics seems to get closer to the meaning and the doing of *uzuri* as the way in which Mzee Farouk words, and therefore co-constitutes, Swahili aesthetics (Topan 2008). *Wasifu* allows me to be open to the continuous (un)mattering of "entanglements that not only shape,

¹ The Swahili *Utu* and the Southern African Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele *Ubuntu* are not just concepts (to be easily translated—as they are in various dictionaries—as 'humanity'). Rather they express relational philosophies breaking free from Western hegemonial intellectuality. For more insights, see Coy (2024), Kresse (2011), Mangena (2016), Mubaya and Mawere (2016), Mugo (2019), Tutu (1999).

² *Nepantla* (a Nahuatl word that can be translated into something like 'in-between space'), like *Utu* and *Ubuntu*, is not just a concept. Rather it is a wor(l)ding which Gloria E. Anzaldúa has thought with and through. It became-with her theories of the Borderlands and the Coatlicue state developed in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). For more insights, see: Anzaldúa (2015).

but are epistemologically and ontologically constitutive of, the very processes of knowledge and meaning production” (Princeton University 2018). And, in so doing, to nurture the attentiveness to the situatedness of Swahili onto-epistemologies.

Wasifu is a Swahili mode of storying³ that is co-constituted by and through the *Ziwa Kuu*, embodying histories, trajectories and aesth-ethics born out of and through the Indian Ocean.

Wasifu’s Arabic root وَصَفَ (*wasf*) carries into the Swahili word ancient Arabic poetry’s wor(l)dings, in which it ex-pressed ‘narrative passage,’ a pause in compositions that poets and readers (or listeners) could enjoy by delving into places and times, meditations and reflections, bringing to the surface certain bodily (physical, psychological and sensorial) aspects to shake up and awaken the public’s imagination. “The original Arabic *wasf*,” says Mzee Farouk, “signified ‘description’ or ‘characteristic,’ applicable to the divine (as *sifat*, usually translated as ‘attributes’) and the human” (Topan 1997: 300). In translating—as in carrying and bringing across—وَصَفَ (*wasf*) into a Swahili wor(l)d, it has come to co-constitute *wasifu* not just as a fixed and delimitating literary biography compendium, but as encompassing a long poetic tradition in oral narrations: not a critical evaluation, but rather didactic and admiring accounts of the many entangled hows, whos, wheres and whats of these lives (Topan 1997).

In the practices of composing, praising, commenting and describing, *wasifu* is enriched (wa Thiong’o 2013) by the Swahili noun *sifa* (quality, trait, attribute, characteristic, feature, reputation, qualification) and the verb *kusifu* (to praise, commend, extol, laud), which are co-constituted by the Arabic صِفَة (*sifa*) and, consequently, وَصَفَ (*wasf*). In its ways, then, *wasifu* rests strongly on the openness to the subjectivities involved in this relational ode, without ever erasing the networks in which all participants are in turn involved.⁴ In other words, *wasifu* leaves the freedom to pull one string rather than another, without aiming at a single, fixed chronological account that would define the trajectory of a before and after, and delimit places and encounters. Rather, it opens itself up to the possibility of multiple subjectivities, of authors and *wahusika* (characters, the ones involved).

I am not sure whether what I composed can be called a *wasifu* of Mzee Farouk, but I was certainly inspired by the wor(l)d (of) *wasifu*, while thinking of a way that could ex-press my encounter with Mzee Farouk’s intellectuality differently, not as something given, rather as something that has become-with him, and, here, with me, and you.

³ For a survey on the biographical ‘genres’ in Swahili, see Topan (1997).

⁴ On the specificities of ‘being involved’—*kuhusika* and *kuhusishwa*—see the enactment.

This Swahili mode of wor(l)ding does mainly three things: It allows me and my body to stay in the picture, to express my experience thanks to, and by way of, a relationality that has been changing me. *Wasifu*, in fact, does not take away either the author's nor our presence in weaving a very situated story. It allows me to sense and make sense of the Swahili aesth-ethics of Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings and to matter-forth that we can, in fact, touch and be touched by words. It opens up to the indefiniteness and innumerability of such experience of touch, that could become-with any other body.

I now invite the ones who have remained with me until this point to read the following enactment, while imagining the possibility of actually—not metaphorically—touching and being touched by wor(l)ds.

4. Mzee Farouk Mohamed Hussein Tharia Topan

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with;
 it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with;
 it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts,
 what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties.
 It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

—Donna Haraway

The first time I met Mzee Farouk it was almost twenty years ago in Bayreuth, when, after my presentation on *Ngoma za Kizanzibari*, he came to me and said: *Pazia lingalikuwepo, nisingelijua wewe si Mswahili*. I had smiled, re-membling my body when my beloved Bi Kidude,⁵ in Kariakoo Zanzibar, told me: *Umetoka katika tumbo la Mswahili*, while she was teaching me to dance *ngoma ya ndege*. A sense of belonging, in a moment of my life when my *kwetu* was in fact also in Unguja, ties attached to the Island, *vitovu* born from my body, buried in the land, a Swahili land, a Swahili world.⁶

⁵ Popularly known as Bi Kidude, Fatuma binti Baraka (c. 1910-2013) was a *nyakanga* (initiation ritual instructress), an expert in natural healing practices, and a *taarab* singer. To me, one of the most fearless and powerful soul and *mwaliimu* (teacher, guide) in and of life I have ever met and to whom I am infinitely grateful.

⁶ The first time I met Mzee Farouk it was almost twenty years ago in Bayreuth, when, after my presentation on *Zanzibari ngoma*—cultural performances involving dancing, drumming and singing—he came to me and said: “If there had been a curtain, I wouldn’t have known that you are not a Mswahili.” I had smiled, re-membling my body when my beloved Bi Kidude, in Kariakoo Zanzibar, told me: “You are born from a Swahili womb,” while she was teaching me to dance a *ngoma*

I had already met him long before though, through the words of his two famous plays that we, as students of Kiswahili, were engaging-with, thanks to our Mwalimu Bi. Elena Bertoncini Zúbková's endless passion: *Aliyeonja pepo* (Topan 1973) and *Mfalme Juha* (Topan 1971a). While I was a student in Napoli, his third play *Siri* had already been woven in Riyadh (Topan 2021), but it was still a *siri* (secret) to all of us, unpublished until 2000.

ZIRAILI: *Habari ya toka jana?*

JUMA: *Nzuri, nzuri, nzuri. Mahali pa starehe hapa.*

ZIRAILI: *Ndio maana pakaitwa peponi.*

JUMA: *Kila uvumbuzi upo hapa.*

ZIRAILI: *Kweli. Kila aina ya uvumbuzi uliopo duniani, ukiwa wa sayansi usiwe wa sayansi, sisi tunao hapa.*

Hata mambo yatakayovumbuliwa baadaye duniani, hapa tunayo hivi sasa.

JUMA: *Starehe niliyoipata hapa toka jana sikuipata kamwe duniani. Wenzangu duniani yanawapita mengi.*

Kama wangejua yaliyopo hapa, hawangebakia huko hata mtu mmoja (Topan 1973: 12).⁷

What a chance is given to Juma, a fisherman from Bagamoyo, who's soul is erroneously brought to heaven, a place of wonders that suddenly turns into a place of im/possible choices. A chain of thoughts and views (also *wasifu*) that are so entangled with one another to the point of not knowing what is good, and what is evil, what is left of *dini* (religion) on the earthly world. *Elimu* (education) and *siasa* (politics) do play a role, Mzee Farouk explains to us in the *dibaji* (preface), in the creation of this entanglement in which, he asks:

[...] ikiwa dini sasa si nyenzo pekee ya kutegemea maendeleo ya mwanadamu kijamii au kitaifa, ikiwa elimu na siasa ni nyenzo nyingine muhimu katika karne hii kwa ajili ya maendeleo; ikiwa dini iwe ikisaidia tu nyenzo mbili hizi bila ya kuwepo haja ya kusomesha habari za pepo na moto; ikiwa dini imefikia hali hii; basi dini kweli itakuwa 'dini'? Ukiyaondoa mawazo ya pepo na moto, basi kazi yake Ibilisi itakuwa nini? Atakuwa hana haja tena ya kubaki duniani. Atapatana na Mungu aende zake mbinguni? (Topan 1973: xii)⁸

called *ndege*. A sense of belonging, in a moment of my life when my home was in fact also in Unguja, ties attached to the Island, umbilical cords born from my body, buried in the land, a Swahili land, a Swahili world. All translations are mine.

⁷ Asrael: How have you been since yesterday? - Juma: Fine, fine, fine. It's an amusing place here. - Asrael: This is why it has been called paradise. - Juma: Every invention is here. - Asrael: That's true. Every kind of invention that existed on earth, be it a scientific one or not, we have it here. Even all those which will be invented in the future on earth, here we have them now. - Juma: The joy that I have felt here since yesterday I have never felt on the earth. Many things happen to my friends on earth. If they knew what is here, they would not have stayed there, not even one of them.

⁸ If religion is no longer the only means to rely on for the social or national development of the human being, if education and politics are now other important tools for development in this century; if religion is only to assist these two tools without the need to teach about heaven and hell; if religion has reached this point, then will it truly still be religion? If you remove the

The answer is to be found in *utu* (humanity), and enacted in *vitendo* (actions). Mzee Farouk does not teach us, but invites us to feel through reading (or seeing) his play.

And what an absurd plot is the one unfolding in the play *Mfalme Juha* (1971a), a story he had encountered in his Gujarati class, as a pupil in Zanzibar. At school the story was narrated to teach the kids to not desire anything excessively, but, more amused by the plot than impressed by its moral, he decided to turn the story into a humorous drama. What an absurd affair this is in which a series of characters are blamed for the murder of three brothers, who died in the rubble of the wall of a jeweller's shop they were trying to rob. The allegation brought before the king by their mother and considered with 'obvious consternation' by the king, triggers a chain of accusations that end up falling on the king himself. 'Poor King Idiot' (*Mfalme Juha*), in order to show, demonstrate and remonstrate his power, winds up commanding to be hanged, deceived by those who weave more words than he does, gullible to the point of thinking that yes, on that day, in that month of the Islamic calendar, if hanged, he would receive a place at God's side in exchange. Mzee Farouk wrote it in 1963, when he was a student in London: a fragment of his past, so present to unfold into a Swahili rhythm, himself the conductor, the pen his baton, and the notes-words tuned by leafing through the pages.

... do you hear them?

In his study of post-independence Swahili works (Topan 2006a), Mzee Farouk, in conversation with Said S. Yahya, explains to us how words are carved out of the writers' feelings such as joy, love, desire and pain, co-constituted by and through their life experiences, their historical bodies, the contexts in which works are written, and the texts themselves, in their content and form, in their aesth-ethics—*uzuri* (Topan 2008). Let me stop and walk around in Mzee Farouk's words; let me re-member how we express feelings in Swahili, that is through and with the body. *Kuona huzuni* (to feel sad), *kusikia furaha* (to feel happy), *kupanda hasira* (to feel/become angry); all these expressions carry the body and the sensorial in themselves (*kuona* 'seeing,' *kusikia* 'hearing,' *kuwa na* 'being-with,' *kupanda* 'climbing, getting on'). In sharing states of being, we also share Swahili concepting of time-place: we cannot just be, we can only be-with and become-with certain places, in an indeterminate time: *upo?*, *nipo!* 'are you here ready to engage, to function, to be here? are you ok?, are we paying attention to each other? Yes, I am, we are!'

concepts of heaven and hell, what will be the work of the Devil? Will he no longer have a reason to remain on Earth? Will he reconcile with God and go back to heaven?

or *tupo pamoja* 'we are together, we feel for each other,' or *nipo hoi kwelikweli* 'I am really overwhelmed,' always someplace and sometime (-po).

We can actually locate feelings and sensations in and outside our bodies at once. The (Swahili) body itself (*mwili*) is a "material inside enveloped by skin with 32, 33 openings. [...] With the skin and with the openings, *mwili* moves in and encounters the outside world while providing an inside in which nonmaterial life-defining forces reside and act. *Mwili* mediates between immaterial forces and the material world" (Nieber 2024: 31), and must be taken care of, by ritual washing, for example, that prevent spirits from entering providing "space for *roho*, *akili*, *nafsi* and *moyo* (English approximations: esprit, mind, self/soul, heart)⁹ to be bound to each other and a bodily material substance to navigate through life's moral landscape" (Nieber 2021: para. 4).

Emotions in Swahili are not pre-determinate states of the body, but are literally co-constituted by and through the relationality of the inside and the outside of *mwili*. "That means," Lobanyi writes, "paying attention to feelings as well as ideas, and viewing feelings, not as properties of the self, but as produced through the interaction between self and world" (Lobanyi 2010: 223). Mzee Farouk, keenly aware of the uniqueness of such a *mwili*, never loses sight of the relationality between the individual, the collective and the land. Elaborating diachronically on what he sees as the paradoxical condition of the Swahili identity (*uswahili*), he underlines the many ways in which it has been used and abused under colonial and postcolonial rulers, pointing out the loss of land as a loss of status, a loss of a sense of belonging, an identity weakened because de-touched from its land, its home and its community (Topan 2006b). Lobanyi continues that we must see this interaction between self and world "not as the coming together of two separate entities, but as a process of entanglement in which boundaries do not hold. It also means taking into account not only conscious feelings, but also what is felt at the level of the body, questioning the body/mind divide" (Lobanyi 2010: 223).

It is in mattering-forth Swahili wor(l)dings that Mzee Farouk expresses the un/making of this divide between the self and the world, the body and the mind, engaging with this wounded *uswahili*, of which "the sustaining ingredients are likely to be language (Kiswahili), sentiment and memory" (Topan 2006b: 65). In so doing, he opens up to a more spacious *uswahili*, and defeats any attempt at breaking the relationality among the person *mtu*, their *utu*, and the community they co-constitute (*watu*). So, while reading 'the texts themselves,' attentive to the significations of words, verses, metaphors and

⁹ In my translation: spirit, mind, life, breath of life; intelligence, intellect, ingenuity, ability, discretion; soul (of human, angel or spirit), spirit, self, a three-month-old human embryo; heart, courage, sincerity.

names, and to the reasonings that might have prompted them, as we have been trained to do, why not also surrender to their touch, and, at once, why not touch them?

As scholars in Swahili Studies, we have already been experiencing how the different styles in speaking and writing can be understood in terms of bodily processes that can affect people in their actions. We know it from the splendid researchers we engage-with, as we know also the power of silent bodies, of sealed lips, of bodies without names, of names without bodies:

Generations of Kenyan women have used their bodies to create a new collective imagination and to nurture justice in our political community by showing nakedness, by offering bodily truths and by converting corporeality into transformative speech. As I tell you these stories now [...] in the silence, I hear the loud clatter of my fingers on the plastic computer keys. I hear the songs of my mothers and my sisters. I hear my voice. (Mwangi 2013: para. 6)

And yet, scholars trained in western modes of thought and analysis refrain from the possibility of thinking words as worlds, as inherently material-discursive; instead, we continuously cut words apart from worlds, as if words could not be blown, drunk or walked (Siragusa and Zhukova 2021; Irvine 2017; Nieber 2021: 2024; Ware III 2014).

How powerful is it that in Zanzibar *wachongaji* (carvers) can touch the words they sculp, *waweza kuyabembeleza ndiyo*—can sooth and calm them, yes—, sensing their im/perfections through their fingers, while shaping them and, in so doing, composing *wasifu* of queens and kings, of spirits of the land and of the sea, powerful enough to protect (or harm) the insides from the outsides (Krause-Alzaidi and Brunotti 2024).

... do you see them?

What would their *isimu* have told us? Not *isimu* just as linguistics, rather *isimu haswa*—an actual *isimu*—the one Mzee Farouk and his students worked with at the end of the 60s.

When I went back to East Africa, to Dar es Salaam, in 1968 and I introduced the teaching of Swahili literature in Swahili, it was a different experience from the way I was taught at SOAS. There it was taught in English, and we discussed the translation. Here in Dar, we were discussing the literature in Swahili. We struggled with terminologies in those early days, terminologies which would be meaningful to the context. And how conceptually meaningful was it to study Swahili literature in Swahili in a new nation in 1968? Just four years after Tanzania was established? Quite a few factors made the process so obvious and desirable – one of them was the enthusiasm of the young people around the seminar table, at a time when both the country and the University were places of dynamism and hope. [...] There was a palpable sense of euphoria in Tanzania at that time (Topan, in Abdalla *et al.* 2023: 31).

In those days, the *isimu* was de-touched or, better, bravely untouched by the constraints in which Western linguistics obliged it to be. It could, and was holding on to its core—sign as presence, message, name(ing)—while exploring itself a potential ‘science’ (*taaluma*) in unpacking the meanings and the doings of words. It was an *isimu* capable to sense authors as becoming-with their texts, words as becoming-with their crafters; *isimu* as movement of words in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, utterances in verses, verses in *tenzi*,¹⁰ a work of weaving, *kufumba na kufumbua* (dis/closing, un/hiding, un/making a riddle), an ode to the very physical sensation (think of *kufumba macho* ‘closing the eyes,’ and also *kufumbua siri* ‘revealing a secret’) that the ‘text itself’ is built-with and builds in its aesth-ethics. That is what Mzee Farouk and his students were so deeply caring for, in the efforts to allow us to sense the Swahili wor(l)dings:

There is no shortcut to theory. That is why I find it totally unhelpful to have so-called ‘literary dictionaries’ in Swahili, or dictionaries of literary terms, which simply translate terminologies, or should I say try to do that, from English into Swahili. As if every facet given in the ‘translated’ dictionary is present in current discourse. *Sasa, je, nadharia itokane na jamii au itokee nje? [...] “Hakuna ubaguzi. [watu, wasomi] Wa ndani na wa nje washirikiane kutumia mbinu za elimu kujenga nadharia. Lakini iwe nadharia inayoeleweka ‘ndani’ pia, si ‘nje’ tu. Yaani, inayoeleweka kwa kimazingira ya fasihi au ya lugha ‘ndani’, si iliyopachikwa kutoka ‘nje’ kama katika mfano huo wa kamusi la msamiati wa fasihi* (Topan, in Abdalla et al. 2023: 35).¹¹

... and this is where his mastery,
his artistry is also clearly revealed

So, what would the *isimu* of Mzee Farouk and his students have told us? Perhaps such an *isimu* would have told us about *uzuri* (being good, beautiful wholesome), that is, Mzee Farouk reminds us, “integral and basic to the concept of *utu*, humanity or humanness, among the Swahili” (Topan 2008: 89), whose perception of self and the environment—that is of an Islamic worldview too—“finds expression in the tenet ‘there is no God but God,’ whose oneness then permeates the world. [And] just as there is only one God, so there is only one reality and, further, [...] no separation within that singular reality between what is termed ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular’ in Western discourse of aesthetics” (Topan 2008: 89). And,

¹⁰ A Swahili poetic tradition on which you can read extensively in Vierke (2011).

¹¹ So, then, should theory come from within societies or from outside? People/scholars from within societies and from outside should cooperate in using scholarly strategies in the process of conceiving. But it should be a conceiving directed to the ‘inside’ as well, not only to the ‘outside’. That means a conceiving that is understandable in the literary or language context ‘inside’, and not a conceiving that is just copied and pasted from the ‘outside,’ like in the case of literary dictionaries.

quoting Mbiti, that “no line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical” (Mbiti 1969: 5 in: Topan 2008: 90). Let me add here that neither is a line drawn between the wordly and the physical, between the word and the world.

... do you feel them?

Perhaps such an *isimu* makes apparent that Mzee Farouk treats words no differently from how he treats objects. It is the playwright and the anthropologist introducing us to the *uzuri* of *usinga* (flywhisk) and *chetezo* (incense burner), and with them, to their material-discursive relevance in mattering-forth *uswahili*: “objects serve as nodes through which cultural meanings are acknowledged and transmitted; collectively the way and the manner of the objects’ usage help to define a people’s identity and self-perception” (Topan 2008: 95).

... mtu ni utu, utu ni vitendo, ubinadamu ni vitendo,
our beloved poet Mzee Haji Gora Haji has taught us¹²

Quoting Kassam and Megerssa, Mzee Farouk continues: “the objects become extension of the self and contributes to the construction or destruction of identity. They project the person, the person’s status and authority in society and situate the individual in social time and space” (Topan 2008: 95). And I remember the historian Rudolf Ware speaking of the practices of Quranic learning in Senegambia, of the embodiment of the knowledge, of the corporeal absorption of Qur’an’s verses (see also Nieber 2021, 2024), diluted and drunk by pupils after the madrasa. In so doing, he says, they respond to how the Prophet was not merely the receptacle and repository of the revelation, rather to how “God’s Word had filled his inner being to the point that he physically embodied the Word. [...] He was the Qur’an walking on the earth” (Ware III 2014: 13).

¹² ... a person is *utu*, *utu* is agency, humanity is agency: Haji Gora Haji, Zanzibari poet of Tumbatu, whom I met during my Ph.D. research in 2002, gifting me, from then on, so much knowledge and a vision of life that is wider than the *Ziwa Kuu*.

... what an uzuri the one which lets us stretch our bodies,
our limbs to touch the soul, and the spirit, and to sense written or uttered words,
which can ultimately walk, and be walked:
uzuri wa utu, mtu ni utu, mtu ni watu, uzuri ndiyo watu¹³

More objects help our bodies to touch words, and entangle also sacred wor(l)dings: rose water is said to be sprinkled and burned in the *chetezo* during, for example, *maulidi* (ceremonies marking the birth of the Prophet). An assemblage, says Mzee Farouk, that “consists of a receptacle for the incense and a bottle-sprinkler for rose-water” (Topan 2008: 93), and extends to the participants to the anniversary, the recitations, the gesturing bodies, the drums, the rhythms, the scents, the atmosphere and the *qasida*: a material-discursive assemblage, not (de)finite, rather becoming-with and co-constituting all these entities through their relationality, giving them meaning, and, vice-versa, being made meaningful (Haraway 2016; Barad 2007). While focusing on the *chetezo* and the rose-water used in the ceremonies of *maulidi*, we are gifted by Mzee Farouk amazing instances of Swahili aesth-ethics (*uzuri wa Kiswahili*): the rose-water, a liquid matter which infuses calm, used to clean bodies and souls, its smokes affecting the senses and the limbs in order to reach a soul-body (*nafsi* with/in *mwili*), a state that is transcending-yet-becoming-with matter. “[...] accepting rose-water in one’s hand or handkerchief and daubing a little on one’s face or forehead, gives one sense of humility and of participating in an act of cleansing ‘dirt’, both external and internal” (Topan 2008: 94). Rose-water mattering purity, life and energy, the condition for bodies and souls to strive towards the paradise, together with the invocations, which might be prayers or supplications, co-constitute such a possibility of purity. There is no inside cut apart from outside of one’s body, there is no word (invocations) cut apart from the world (rose-water), there is no meaning cut apart from sensing.

... do you touch them?

Mzee Farouk himself has always engaged with the material-discursivity of words and objects in a deeply caring way, attentive to their *uzuri* and committed in the writing of their *isimu*. I am thinking of his work on the spirit-posessions in Mombasa and how he describes this experience to his friend Mzee Rajabu, mattering-forth, in fact, a relationality between humans and non-humans that is co-

¹³ The aesth-ethics of *utu*, any human is *utu*, any human is people, aesth-ethics is people.

constituted through the body: when a *mganga anakunywa na kunywa, halewi; si mtu anayekunywa ni pepo*¹⁴ (Topan 2021), or when the spirits speak while “having taken their seat in human bodies” (Topan 1971b: 243).

... do you hear them?

Yet *uzuri*, as *utu ni mtu*, is also radically individual, never the same. If we engage with it affectively, as intensity of *uswahili*, as essence, says Mzee Farouk, we accept it as unique in our different encounters with it:

Navyofikiria mimi, [uswahili] ni kama ni continuum, na hii continuum inakuwa na ile intensity, [...] ila ukiendelea ile inapungua, lakini haipungui kwa kupungua essence, ile essence inakuwa ipo lakini inakuwa complemented by something else. [...] the core is there, the essence is there, lakini ile essence, intensity yake, degree yake is complemented by the culture [...] around [...] (Topan in Abdalla et al. 2023: 15).

And I reply, in conversation with him, “I am thinking also about *makala yako*, From Coastal to Global: the Erosion of the Swahili ‘paradox’ (Topan 2006b): *humo uliandika kuhusu* sentiments, memory and Kiswahili. That could become *Viswahili*—sentiments and memory—and sentiment and memory are very crucial, they are of *mtu binafsi*, and this is also where the multiplicity comes in.”¹⁶ And I continue: “In Italian to say core, we say *cuore*, which translates the heart as well; so, we know that the heart is an organ which is porous and entangled matter, right? So, also *kwa Kiswahili*, instead of using *kiini* to say core, we could use *moyo*...” (Brunotti, in Abdalla et al. 2023: 44).

“Beautiful analogy!” Mzee Farouk replays, “Yes, *moyo*, and of course its emotions” (Topan, in Abdalla et al. 2023: 38). “Yes,” I conclude, “and it relates to the personal, the individual experience, the life experience that one brings in as a person, as a scholar, as an individual, and with-in a collectivity, a *umma*” (Brunotti, in Abdalla et al. 2023: 38).

¹⁴ When a “healer drinks and drinks and drinks, s/he does not get drunk: it is not the person who’s drinking, it’s the spirit.”

¹⁵ In my view, *[uswahili]* is like a continuum, and this continuum is in fact that intensity, [...] but the more you go on, the more it diminishes, but it is not the essence falling short, that essence is always there, but it is complemented by something else. [...] the core is there, the essence is there, but that essence, its intensity, its degree is complemented by the culture [...] around [...].

¹⁶ I am thinking also about your article, From Coastal to Global: the Erosion of the Swahili “Paradox” (2006): there you wrote about sentiments, memory and Kiswahili. That could become *Viswahili* (Swahili language in plural, something like Swahilis), sentiments and memory, and sentiment and memory are very crucial, they are of a person, an individual, and this is also where the multiplicity comes in.

... do you feel them?

And again, because *mtu ni utu* and *mtu ni watu*, *umma* takes an important space in Mzee Farouk's wor(l)dings, a care that he expresses in his writings, them being *michezo ya kuigiza* (plays), *hadithi* (stories, tales) or *kazi za kitaaluma* (scholarly works). The author a different person from the narrator, Mzee Farouk specifies, yet invested of the "tripartite role of historian, as a narrator, and as a craftsman" (Topan 2001: 118). Mzee Farouk the teacher, the scholar, the devout Muslim, the playwright, the translator, the anthropologist, the philosopher, the friend and companion, how many roles conversing through his tireless practice of wor(l)ding Swahili: such a profound knowledge and simultaneously a honest openness to what and who co-constitutes him as part of the *umma*. And to his *umma*, *Ibilisi* (the Devil) eventually confesses:

Mapenzi. Hiyo ndiyo sababu. Mungu ananipenda. Ndiyo sababu ya kumwumba Adamu. Na Hawa. Na dunia hii. Ndiyo sababu ya kunipa dunia hii niimiliki. Ndiyo sababu ya kunipa wafuasi wangu. Nami kila nikiwapotosha yeye anazidi kuwaongoza. Kama baba anavyomdekeza mwanaye. (Anasita.) Sasa nimefahamu. Sasa nimeelewa. Dunia hii ni jengo la kuendeleza ayatakayo. Hivi viumbe ni watoto bandia. Hawana uwezo wowote. Kule yupo Mungu, huku nipo mimi. Na sote sisi ni kitu kimoja, kwa sababu tunapendana. Ndipo aliponiumba mimi mwanzo kabla ya kitu chochote. Nami ndiye nitakayebakia mwisho baada ya kila kiumbe kufariki dunia. Hapo nitarudi kwake mbinguni, ambapo pia ni pangu (Topan 1973: 23).¹⁷

... do you hear them?

Mzee Farouk, like the Swahili poets he writes of and speak to, a crafter of the best values of the community, through personal and individual experiences: feelings in words, words in bodies, words as bodies. I will never forget his interpretation of *Ngoma na Vailini*, a poem composed and performed by Ebrahim Hussein¹⁸ in Dar es Salaam in 1968. I still see his gestures, his body swinging, *vuta n'kuvute* (push and pull), and hear his voice, feel through his shimmering eyes the admiration and the *heshima* (respect) he has for his student, friend, colleague—love through suffering, joy through sorrow.

¹⁷ Love. This is the reason. God loves me. This is why he created Adam. And Eve. And this world. This is why he gave me this world to reign. This is why he gave me my followers. And me, every time I mislead them, he guides them more and more. Like a father who spoils his child. (he hesitates) Now I understand. Now I know. This world is a creation where to keep on what he wants. These creatures are dolls. They don't have any free will. There is God, here is me. And we together are one thing, because we love each other. This is why he created me before everything else. And I am the one who will remain at the end, after all the creatures will have died on earth. At that moment I will go back to him, to paradise, that is also my place.

¹⁸ A former student of Mzee Farouk, Ebrahim Hussein has since become one of the most famous Swahili playwrights and poets.

... do you see them?

If words are worlds, words weave worlds. Mzee Farouk, in his *Approach to the teaching of Swahili literature* (Topan 1968), a study which makes reference to the first class of Swahili literature held in Swahili at the University of Dar es Salaam, and that also translated into a first collection of essays written by his students with him, and edited by him, entitled *Uchambuzi wa maandishi ya Kiswahili* (Topan 1971c; 1977), clearly expresses their commitment to *uzuri* in the project of *kuchambua* (peeling back and looking for the core, the heart of something) Swahili literary works in Swahili, thereby creating wor(l)ds which “are likely to break away from their originals both in the superficial as well as in the deeper meaning, and probably affecting the underlying basis of the concept itself” (Topan 1968: 163). In these essays, I’ve learned how *isimu* cannot be constrained into linguistics, but rather ex-presses the heart of Swahili wor(l)dings. And through the attentiveness to this *isimu*, the *wahusika* encountered in the literary texts they are analysing are treated, spoken to and re-worlded: experts in wording, caring for the written like the sculptors care for the carved Swahili words in Swahili worlds—Swahili worlded words, Swahili wor(l)dings.

Their analyses do not distinguish between Siti Binti Saad, *mhusika* (singular of *wahusika*) of *Wasifu wa Siti Binti Saad*, and Karama, *mhusika* of the novel *Kusadikika* (both works by Shaaban Robert). In both cases, and all along the essays in the collection, *wahusika* emerge for what they are: *wale wanaojihusisha*, *wale wanaohusishwa*, *na kuhusika* (the ones who involve themselves, the ones who are made to involve themselves, and the ones who are involved), the narrator’s essence being co-constituted by the very relationalities above mentioned, in the very moments of writing and reading.

... to learn about a *mhusika*, I must learn to sense their *sifa*, touch their words,
the ones they speak, the ones that make them

Maskini Sirafili. Badala ya kufufua watu sasa afufua paka. Paka nyaul! (...) Sijui wangapi kati yenu mtakapokufa mtarudishwa tena duniani? Baada ya kutia mguu peponi, mtarudi vipi? Wewe, bwana, utarudishwa kwa umbo la jimbi; wewe bibi, kuku; yule bwana pale, punda; yule, mbwa; bibi yule, tausi — watakuhurumia! Bibi yule mwingine, njiwa. Bwana yule anayesinzia, samaki pono. Atalala kutwa kucha! (Topan 1973: 22).¹⁹

¹⁹ Poor you, Israfel. Instead of resurrecting humans now he resurrects cats. Cats miaow! [...] I don’t know how many of you once you die will be brought back to earth? After moving a step into paradise, how will you come back? You, sir, you will be brought back in the form of rooster, and you, Madame, a chicken; and you sir, there, a donkey; and you, a dog; and that

... do you touch them?

A human entangles-with a human entangles-with a word entangles-with a *siri* (secret), taking innumerable turns, weaving and being woven in an embroidery so complex that the touch cannot follow the weave. Might this be the reason why scholars have not engaged with *Siri* (Topan 2000) the way they did with the first two plays? *Siri kwa uhakika imekuwa kama ni siri kweli, kwa sababu hakijulikani sana [...]*.²⁰ Mzee Farouk smiles while telling his friend Mzee Ahmed:

*Niliandika nilipokuwa Riyadh. Liliinjia wazo hili, la kuwa wapo wanadamu ambao wanatumia siri ya watu ili kujiendeleza wenyewe. Kwa hivo unakuta na watu wasiojali au wasiowajali watu wengine ili wao wenyewe wawe wanapanda ngazi, na wakipanda ngazi wanawaponda wale wengine, na njia moja kuwaponda wengine ni kutumia siri zao. Ya kuwekwa mtu anajua siri ya mtu mwengine, badala ya, kama tunavofundishwa na uislamu wetu, kuweka sitara, maana siri za mtu tumwachie mwenyewe, badala yake tunazichukua zile siri na tunazitumia kwa kuwaponda na kuwavunja ili sisi tuendele (Topan 2021).*²¹

A different shape compared to the previous plays, Mzee Farouk confesses, the shape of a *shairi* (poem), a moral philosophy, in Mzee Ahmed's words: "*Labda ndiyo maana hakijulikani, kwa sababu ni siri* (Maybe this is the reason for it not been famous, because it's a secret!)" (Topan 2021).

mimi sina siri... Ati hana siri! [...] Kweli haya?... Kweli! (Topan 2000: 77, 70).²²

No beginnings no ends, just strings pulled and knitted into *huzuni*, *upumbavu* au *ujinga* (sadness, stupidity or foolishness), and the pain of regret: "*majuto yenye pazia, pazia lifunikalo, giza la akili na nyoyo—*regret with a curtain, a curtain that covers, a darkness of minds and hearts" (Topan 2000: 75-76).

"Well, my friend, think about it, for this is the secret of secrets—*Haya, mwandani, yafikiri, kwani haya ndio siri ya siri!*" (Topan 2000: 79).

Madame, a peacock—they will blame you! And that other Madame, a pigeon. That sir dozing, a pono fish. He will sleep all night and all day long!

²⁰ Indeed, *Siri* has become like a secret, because it is not widely known [...].

²¹ *Siri* has become really a secret, because it is not so famous [...] I wrote it when I was in Riyadh. I was thinking about those human beings who use people's secrets to their own interests. So, you can meet people who do not care about other people or who do not care about them climbing towards their own success, and one way they do so is to crash the others by using their secrets. In knowing the secret of somebody else, instead of concealing it, leaving it with its owner, the way we are taught by our Islam, we take it and use it to crash and break this person.

²² "I have no secret" ... "Sure, he has no secret!" [...] "For real?" ... "Yes, for real!"

...pazia

... curtain

5. Afterword: on touching and being touched by wor(l)ds

[...] ‘Ā’isha, wife of the Prophet and one of the early Muslim community’s most important intellectuals, was asked to describe the character of her deceased husband to a man who had not known Muḥammad in life. No stranger to the arts of rhetoric, she answered the man’s question with a question: “Have you recited the Qur’an?” The man affirmed that he had. “Then you know his character,” she replied; “his character was the Qur’an.” [...] “He was the Qur’an walking on the earth.”

—Rudolf T. Ware III

The English word ‘language’ is derived from Latin *lingua*, ‘tongue’: a metonymic relation between language and the tongue that is almost universal. Imagine tongue as intermediary between lived experiences, feelings, gestures, and sensibility; as a space of alchemy that gives meaning a sound. The tongue itself is a tangible zone of contact.

—Yvonne A. Owuor

There is a unique relevance to the act of surrendering to the sensorial, not only because, as you might have felt, the Swahili onto-epistemology of *mwili*, and the practices related to it are materially shifting into the literal, allowing our bodies to sense words. But there is also a particularity in the sense of touch.

Touch does not stand as a metonymic way to sense the feelings produced by listening to or reading words. In Swahili onto-epistemologies a recited word enters the body through the ears—or a written word enters it through the eyes—touches the interior of the body, while the body is touched by the word, literally, in the same way the Qur’an verses, written in saffron, are drunk and flow through the mouth to touch the inside of the body. This inner touch is not a metaphor for ‘how moving a word can be.’ Swahili onto-epistemologies allow for the words to touch and be touched by bodies. To see words, to hear words is in fact to feel them, to be touched by them and, reversely, to touch them. The kind of knowledge that is co-constituted in a touch-being-touched relationality, then, “does not come from standing at a distance and representing the world but rather from a direct material engagement with the world” (Barad 2007: 49). It’s a very situated knowledge that refrains from universalisms, while caring for the individualities that can, or choose, to be curious and brave enough to engage with the world through the body. Touch can be banal yet deadly, humble and pretentious at once, immanent yet transcendental, in its presence and its absence. Touch is reversible and potentially reciprocal—for instance, deafblind wor(l)dings are co-constituted through touch (Edwards 2024)—questioning once again the existence of subject/object, production/reception of knowledge. It has nothing to do with

belief, understanding or graspability; it simply rests on a way to engage with words that refuses to cut them apart from the worlds. It also presumes a choice that has its risks, since touch can be overwhelming, unwanted, consciously pushed away:

Yearnings for touch, for being in touch, are also at the heart of caring involvement. But there is no point in idealizing the possibilities. [...] And if touch deprivation is a serious issue, overwhelming is the word that comes to my mind when enhancement of experience is put at the forefront. Permanent intouchness? With what? Like care, touch is not a harmless affection. Touch receptors, located all over our bodies, are also pain receptors; they register what happens through our surface and send signals of pain and pleasure (de La Bellacasa 2017: 107).

I have not willingly chosen to be touched by Mzee Farouk’s words, I have not consciously engaged with Swahili aesth-ethics through my senses. But, while reflecting on the ways I have experienced them, I could not find any different way to share that with you if not through an enactment that, inspired by *wasifu* traditions, tries to matter-forth Mzee Farouk’s intellectuality, stirring your curiosity towards the possibilities opened by Swahili onto-epistemologies of sensing Swahili aesth-ethics through your bodies. Mzee Farouk *anajali na anajaliwa*—cares about and is blessed and cared for—sharing his wor(l)dings with us, and we, in turn, *tunajaliwa na kusikia, kuona, yaani kuhisi maneno yake*—are blessed and cared about in hearing, seeing, that is: feeling his words.

Mzee Farouk the intellectual *anazaliwa upya kila tunapohusiana na maneno yake*—comes-into-be newly, whether he knows or not, every time we relate to his words. *Kwa wasifu wa nje ... kwa wasifu wa ndani* (Topan 1971c; 1977), Mzee Farouk’s students have written while introducing *wahusika* in their essays—an external view... an internal view—a Swahili worldview which unfolds *uzuri wa maneno unaochongwa nayo*—the aesth-ethics of the words by which it is carved—that is to be touched. In the impossibility of tracing and sharing meanings from afar, I chose to open up to the potentialities of being touched by words—and worlds—in the ways of *wasifu*, which seems to me a more ethical way to engage with Mzee Farouk’s wor(l)dings (and Swahili wor(l)dings at large) without disrupting the relationality through and in which they, and I, and him are co-constituted. My hope is that the aesthetics I enacted in this piece can become aesth-ethics with and through your reading and touching of it. In other words: I hope to have provided a possibility to perceive and sense Mzee Farouk ethically (aesth-ethics)—a possibility to stay with him as an always becoming entanglement and, thereby, to take up our responsibility of mattering him and his wor(l)dings forth so they can co-constitute different and more just worlds.

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Irene Brunotti (Ph.D) is lecturer for Swahili Language and Swahili Studies at the Institute of African Studies, Leipzig University. Coming from a background in Swahili literature, she has worked and published on Swahili cultural performance, literature, digital publics, urban studies, human geography. Working on urban materialities, inspired by Indigenous Studies, Swahili (and other African) onto-epistemologies, Agential Realism and New Materialism, she is now engaging with the potentialities of words as matter (words as worlds=wor(l)ds). Continuously committed to a more just science, she takes wor(l)ds as entry points into the multiple (non-Euro-[phone]-centric) ways of conceptings that help un/write the humanities.

Irene can be contacted at: irene.brunotti@uni-leipzig.de

Auto/biography and historiography

Makutano ya lugha

Utamaduni na mabadiliko ya kisiasa Tanzania kupitia tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abeid
(The criss-crossing of language, culture and political change in Tanzania through the autobiography
of Kaluta Amri Abeid)

Aldin K. Mutembei

Ikisiri: Kaluta Amri Abedi alikuwa miongoni mwa wahusika muhimu katika maendeleo ya Kiswahili kabla, lakini zaidi, baada ya uhuru. Historia ya lugha ya Kiswahili hasa baada ya uhuru haitaandikwa bila ya kutaja jina la Kaluta Amri Abedi. Majukumu mbalimbali aliyokuwa nayo yanadhihirisha jinsi maisha yake yalivyofungamana na maendeleo na kukua kwa lugha ya Kiswahili. Alikuwa mwanasiasa, msomi na kiongozi wa kidini. Wasifu wake unaonesha makutano ya lugha, utamaduni na mabadiliko ya kisiasa. Ni wasifu unaogusia kwa wakati mmoja changamoto na ushindi wa Kiswahili katika kipindi hiki. Michango ya Abedi ni pamoja na, utetezi wa Kiswahili kama lugha ya taifa, juhudi katika kutafsiri hati za kisheria, kusanifisha lugha ya Kiswahili, na kukuza nafasi yake katika elimu na fasihi. Kujadili wasifu wa maisha yake kunaweza kutoa angalu kidogo, uelewa wa jinsi Kiswahili kilivyobadilika katika mazingira ya kijamii na kisiasa katika Tanzania baada ya uhuru.

Abstract: Kaluta Amri Abedi was a key figure in the development of the post-independence Kiswahili. He played a vital role in shaping the social history of the language and made a significant contribution to both religious and political development in Tanzania.

He was a visionary who played a crucial role in the post-independence development of Kiswahili in Tanzania. His work in promoting the language, literature, and culture has had a lasting impact on the nation, helping to shape its social history and national identity. His work was instrumental in shaping the social, cultural, and linguistic landscape of the country, particularly in the context of nation-building and the establishment of Kiswahili as a unifying national language. He was a politician, a scholar and a religious leader. As a Politician he was part of the broader movement led by the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), the political party spearheaded by Julius Nyerere. Abedi's political activities were closely tied to the nationalist agenda of uniting Tanzanians across ethnic and regional lines. He was a strong supporter of Julius Nyerere's vision of *Ujamaa* (African socialism), which emphasized self-reliance, communal living, and equitable distribution of resources. Abedi's political philosophy aligned with Nyerere's emphasis on using Kiswahili as a tool for social cohesion and national development. He believed that language was a key instrument for mobilizing the masses and ensuring that all Tanzanians could participate in the political and economic life of the nation.

As a religious leader, he was deeply involved in promoting Islamic values and teachings, particularly in the context of Tanzanian society. He used his position to advocate for moral and ethical leadership, emphasizing the importance of honesty, compassion, and social responsibility. As a scholar, Kaluta Amri Abeid's intellectual contributions significantly impacted the development of Kiswahili and Tanzanian culture. His scholarly work was deeply intertwined with his roles as a politician, religious leader, and advocate for national unity. He was a prolific writer and scholar of Kiswahili, contributing to the growth and standardization of the language. He authored numerous books, essays, and poems that enriched Kiswahili literature and demonstrated the language's potential as a medium of intellectual and artistic expression. His advocacy for Kiswahili as a national language was not just a cultural endeavor but also a political strategy to foster unity and collective identity in the newly independent nation. His biography reflects the intersection of language, culture and political changes. Kaluta Amri Abeid was indeed a multifaceted figure in Tanzanian history, known not only for his contributions to the development of Kiswahili but also for his roles as a politician and a religious leader. His work in these areas further underscores his commitment to the social, cultural, and spiritual development of Tanzania. Abeid held various leadership positions in local government, where he worked to implement policies that promoted education, healthcare, and rural development. His efforts were particularly focused on improving the lives of ordinary Tanzanians, especially in rural areas. As a politician, he was known for his integrity, dedication to public service, and ability to connect with people from all walks of life. His commitment to social justice and equality made him a respected figure in Tanzanian politics. This article attempts to contextualize the life of Kaluta Amri Abeid within the Tanzania's political, religious and social landscapes.

Maneno ya msingi: Kiswahili; Tawasifu; Utamaduni; Mabadiliko; Uanaharakati.

Keywords: Swahili, autobiography, culture, change, activism

1. Utangulizi

Ingawa 'tawasifu' kama somo linalojisimamia halikuwa limevuta umakini wa wanataaluma (Meister 2017), lakini ni uwanja ambao umejaa maarifa na taarifa anuwai. Benton (2007) anaiangalia tawasifu ya mwandishi kuwa ni kazi mseto, inayoonesha historia ya mahali pamoja na simulizi za maisha ya mtu. Benton anaendelea kusema kuwa mwandishi wa tawasifu kupitia uandishi wake, huwasilisha ukweli kama anavyouona yeye katika maisha yake na wakati huo huo huonesha yale yanayotokea kwa nasibu, yale yanayotokeza usumbufu na yale ya kufikirisha, na yote hayo huyafuma katika uandishi mmoja wa

tawasifu ya maisha yake. Msomaji wa tawasifu hutarajia kupata taarifa za hali halisi, zilizofanyiwa utafiti wa kina na kufasiriwa kwa njia ifaayo ili aipate furaha ya kusoma kazi ya sanaa iliyoandikwa vizuri na wakati huo kuipata historia kuhusu jambo fulani.

Katika utangulizi wa Kitabu cha Abedi cha *Almasi ya Afrika: Maisha ya Sheikh Kaluta Amri Abedi* (2010) Sheikh Mubarak Ahmad ambaye alikuwa muumini wa Ahamadiyya kutokea India aliandika waraka kukizungumzia kitabu hicho akisema: “uchapishaji wake utasaidia kueneza taadhimu ya Islamu na Ahamadiyyat” (Abedi 2010: v). Hii inatuonesha kuwa kupitia tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abedi wasomaji wanaweza kupata taarifa kuhusu mwenendo wa dini ya Kiislamu na kuwapo kwa dhehebu la Ahamdiyya katika Tanzania.

Katika makala hii nimechagua kujadili tawasifu wa Kaluta Amri Abeid kwa kuzingatia vipengele vitatu ambavyo ni lugha ya Kiswahili, utamaduni ambao unaibainisha Tanzania, na mabadiliko ya kisiasa kutoka Tanganyika kuwa Tanzania. Katika makutano ya vipengele hivyo vitatu, ndipo yanapoinukia maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi.

Kwa maneno mengine, tutaangalia jinsi lugha ya Kiswahili ilivyojenga na kudhihirisha utamaduni wa mtu mwenyewe na jamii yake. Kisha tutajadili mabadiliko ya kisiasa na ya kijamii na kuyahusisha na maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi katika mipaka ya lugha na fasihi ya Kiswahili. Akimwongelea Kaluta Amri Abedi, Sheikh Mubarak Ahmad katika utangulizi wa kitabu kumhusu Kaluta Amri Abedi anasema:

aliweza kuishinda hali ya kutawaliwa ...wakati huo huo akawa chachu ya maendeleo ya kisiasa, kijamii, kielimu na kiuchumi katika kiwango cha kitaifa (Abedi 2010: vi).

Kwamba Kaluta Amri Abedi ‘aliabadili maisha na mwenendo kwa ngazi ya kitaifa,’ inatusukuma kujadili jinsi maisha yake yanavyohusiana na suala la kitaifa. Suala hilo si jingine, bali ni utambulisho wa lugha ya Kiswahili. Kwa hiyo, katika kuyajadili maisha yake tutamchunguza Kaluta Amri Abedi kama Mswahili. Ili kufanya haya, hatuna budi kwanza kumfahamu japo kwa kifupi Kaluta Amri Abedi alikuwa ni nani.

2. Kaluta Amri Abedi: kuzaliwa na makuzi yake kuhusiana na lugha ya kiswahili

Kaluta Amri Abedi alizaliwa Ujiji Kigoma mwaka 1924. Alikuwa ni mtoto wa pili wa kiume katika familia ya watoto kumi. Ni vizuri kuangalia hali ya Ujiji ilivyokuwa katika kipindi hiki kuhusiana na Kiswahili ili kuelewa mazingira ya kiisimujamii yaliyomkuza Kaluta Amri Abedi. Akieleza hali ya Ujiji wakati huo McHenry anasema:

The common language for the people of Ujiji is Swahili and most inhabitants are Muslim. Further, although composed of people from perhaps 30 different tribes, most of those who live in Ujiji do not know their tribal language and have discarded tribal customs. Thus the defining characteristics of 'Swahili Culture' appear to be possessed by the people of Ujiji (McHenry 1973: 405).¹

Kutokana na hali hii ya Ujiji, tunaweza kufahamu chimbuko la mapenzi aliyokuwa nayo Kaluta Amri Abedi kuhusiana na Kiswahili. Tunaposhuhudia mchango wake katika kukiimarisha Kiswahili hatuna budi kujua kuwa hali hiyo ina usuli wake kutokea katika mizizi ya makuzi yake Ujiji Kigoma. Uchunguzi zaidi katika familia ya Kaluta Amri Abedi unatueleza kuwa kwa asili jamaa yake ilitokea Kongo ya mashariki ambayo leo inaitwa Jamuhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo.

Baba yake alitokea Kongo ya mashariki katika kijiji cha Karamba. Kujikuta kwake Ujiji ni kwa vile alitekwa na watu ambao hakuwajua na wakampeleka Ujiji Kigoma. Tunaelezwa tu kuwa baba yake alikuwa kutoka ukoo wa kichifu (Abedi 2010). Abedi (2010: 3) anaendelea kueleza kuwa baba yake, Kaluta Amri Abedi, alipenda elimu na moja ya kazi yake wakati wa ukoloni wa Wajerumani na Waingereza ni ya afisa afya ya wananchi akisimamia usafi. Historia kuwa ukoo wa Kaluta Amri Abedi ulitokea Kongo ya mashariki, unaongeza ufahamu wetu kuhusu mapenzi ya Kaluta kuhusiana na lugha ya Kiswahili, moja ya lugha za Jamuhuri ya Kidemokrasia ya Kongo inayozungumzwa zaidi upande wa mashariki (Kaji 2019; Meeuwis 2006). Kaluta mwenyewe anasema kuwa

Lugha ya kawaida kwa watu wa Ujiji ni Kiswahili na wakazi wengi ni Waislamu. Zaidi ya hayo, ingawa eneo la Ujiji linajumuisha watu kutoka labda makabila 30 tofauti, lakini wengi ya wale wanaoishi Ujiji hawajui lugha za makabila wanakotokea na pia wameziacha desturi za makabila yao. Kwahiyo, tunaweza kusema kuwa zile kaida, desturi na mila zinazoutambulisha 'Utamaduni wa Kiswahili' walikuwa nazo watu wa Ujiji (McHenry 1973: 405).

3. Utabiri kuhusu Kaluta Amri Abedi

Yako mambo mawili tunayoweza kuyazungumzia kumhusu Kaluta Amri Abedi. Jambo la kwanza ni utabiri kuhusu jina lake. Wataalamu wengi walioandika kuhusu nafsi ya jina katika maisha ya Mwafrika. Mbiti (1969), Nyamiti (1988), Igboin (2004), Echekwube (2005), Igboin (2014) kutaja wachache, wanakubaliana kuwa jina huakisi tabia, hulka na maisha ya mwenye nalo. Mbiti (1969) kwa mfano, anasema, kwa Mwafrika, jina huwa na maana. Maana hizo hugusa matukio mengi, hali wakati wa

¹ Lugha ya kawaida kwa watu wa Ujiji ni Kiswahili na wakazi wengi ni Waislamu. Zaidi ya hayo, ingawa eneo la Ujiji linajumuisha watu kutoka labda makabila 30 tofauti, lakini wengi ya wale wanaoishi Ujiji hawajui lugha za makabila wanakotokea na pia wameziacha desturi za makabila yao. Kwahiyo, tunaweza kusema kuwa zile kaida, desturi na mila zinazoutambulisha 'Utamaduni wa Kiswahili' walikuwa nazo watu wa Ujiji (McHenry 1973: 405).

kuzaliwa na jina hilo huathiri utu na tabia ya mhusika ikimaanisha pia huonesha utambulisho wake (Mbiti 1969: 119). Echekwube (2005) yeye anasema kuwa jina si suala la ishara tu, bali pia ni alama inayotunesha asili, chimbuko, sifa, kazi na mwelekeo wa kitu, mtu au mahali penye jina hilo. Kwa ujumla, jina humpa ubinadamu na asili kwa upande mmoja na kwa upande wa pili huonesha uhusiano uliopo baina ya aliyetoa jina na yule aliyepewa jina.

Wakati mama yake Kaluta, Bi Joha binti Kakolwa akiwa mjamzito, mumewe, yaani baba yake Kaluta alitabiri akisema kuwa atakayezaliwa ni mtoto wa kiume naye atakuwa 'Simba wa Lumona' (Abedi 2010: 9). Abedi anaeleza kuwa jina la Simba wa Lumona, lilikuwa ni la mtemi maarufu huko Kongo aliyetokana na ukoo wa Kifalme. Jina hili lilionesha mtu mwenye kupendwa na watu kwa vile alikuwa na hekima na busara. Imeandikwa kuwa:

alipoletewa habari za kuzaliwa mtoto wa kiume, [baba yake] alishangilia na kusema: Simba wa Lumona amezaliwa, jina lake ni Kaluta (Abedi 2010: 9).

Jina la Kaluta lilikuwa ni jina la babu yake mzaa baba. Jina lililionesha heshima kwa mwenye nalo. Tangu wakati huo, makuzi ya Kaluta yalionesha mtoto anayependwa na kupewa heshima kubwa. Baba yake alikaa naye katika vikao vya wazee. Na kila alipopata fursa alimtabulisha kwa wazee wenzake na kila mara baba yake alimtabiria, utabiri wa pili.

Kaluta mpenda elimu. Baba yake alitabiri kuhusu mtoto wake, yaani Kaluta akisema:

atakuwa bwana wa vitabu na kiongozi. Atakuwa bwana wa wazungu, atakuwa anapaa angani ndani ya mtumbwi (Abedi 2010: 9).

Utabiri kuwa atakuwa bwana wa vitabu ulimaanisha atapenda elimu ya dunia na elimu ya Uislamu. Utabiri huu, ulitokea katika maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi kwani mara kadhaa akiwa kiongozi Serikalini alikuwa akisafiri kwa ndege ndogo kutokea Dar es Salaam kwenda Kigoma (Abedi 2010: 10).

Utabiri huo wa 'bwana wa vitabu' ulimaanisha kusoma darasani. Abedi (2010) anaeleza kuwa akiwa na miaka sita tu, Kaluta Amri Abedi alipelekwa katika chuo: akapata elimu ya usomaji. Alisoma shule ya kawaida ya elimu dunia asubuhi, na wakati huo huo jioni alisoma Kuruani Tukufu, Hadithi za Mtume, na Historia ya Uislamu (Abedi 2010; Nawaje 2013). Katika Blog yake, *Kiswahili Jukwaani*, Nawaje Benton anaandika hivi kuhusu elimu ya Kaluta Amri Abedi:

Baada ya miaka mitatu ya masomo ya Kurani aliingia katika shule ya masomo ya Kizungu. Ujuzi wa lugha ya Kiarabu, elimu ya Madrasa na ile ya kimagharibi ulichangia kumfanya awe mpenzi wa Kiswahili aweze kukizungumza kwa ufasaha. Jambo hili la mapenzi ya Kaluta kwa lugha ya Kiswahili tutalijadili baadaye kwa undani. Baada ya kumaliza elimu ya awali mwaka 1937 alijiunga na Shule

ya Sekondari Tabora. Baada ya masomo yake ya sekondari Sheikh Kaluta Amri Abed alikwenda kusomea ukarani wa posta Dar es Salaam 1942–1943. Kaluta Amri Abed alikwenda kusoma elimu ya dini Rabwah Pakistan ambako aliweza kufaulu vizuri na kuweza kutunukiwa shahada ya elimu ya dini (Teolojia) (Nawaje 2013; original in a blog in Swahili).

Na kama anayosema yeye mwenyewe Kaluta Amri Abedi, alikuwa amesoma kiasi cha kuweza kutunga mashairi kwa lugha ya Kiingereza, Kiurdu, Kiarabu na Kiajemi (Amri Abedi 1954: ix). Aidha, katika utabiri huo, mwenyewe Kaluta Amri Abedi anasema alianza kutunga mashairi akiwa na miaka kumi na mitatu (Amri Abedi 1954: ix).

Katika makuzi haya, tunaona jinsi utamaduni uliomkuza katika maisha yake Ujiji Kigoma ulimjengea msingi imara katika kupenda kusoma na kupenda kazi. Historia ya familia yake, inaonesha jinsi baba yake mzazi alivyokuwa mwenye maono, hasa kuhusu elimu na uongozi. Baba yake alithamini elimu na alipenda usafi hayo yakamjengea mtoto Kaluta ari ya kupenda kazi na elimu pia. Inaelezwa kuwa:

mwalimu Hamza Hassan aliongozana na Kaluta Amri Abedi kwenda kwa DC wa Kigoma wa siku hizo, John Rooke Johnson akamueleza kuwa Kaluta Amri Abedi alikuwa ni mwanafunzi mwenye bidii shuleni na katika mtihani wa mwisho alikuwa amekuwa wa kwanza (Abedi 2010: 16).

Kuelewa muktadha wa kitamaduni ni muhimu ili kuufahamu msingi uliomjenga Kaluta Amri Abedi ndani ya mifumo mipana ya kitamaduni na kijamii. Utamaduni wa jamii iliyomkuza Kaluta, yaani jamii iliyoshikilia imani na makuzi ya dini ya Uislamu kwa upande mmoja, na muktadha wa utamaduni kuhusu lugha na hadhi yake katika jamii, yaani jinsi hadhi ya lugha ya Kiswahili ilivyokuwa pale Ujiji ikilinganishwa na hadhi ya lugha nyingine za makabila vilimfanya Kaluta kupenda dini na kupenda lugha ya Kiswahili.

Kwa maneno mengine, elimu ya madrasa (dini ya Uislamu) na ya kimagharibi; na ujuzi wa lugha ya Kiarabu, vilichangia yeye mwenyewe kuwa mpenzi wa Kiswahili na kukizungumza kwa ufasaha. Tunaona kuwa alikuwa mwenye maarifa ya darasani hata akiwa darasa la tisa mwaka 1941 alifanya na kufaulu mtihani wa darasa la kumi (Abedi 2010: 48-49).

Kwa ujumla katika kipengele hiki, huu ni ushahidi kuwa utabiri uliohusiana na jina lake na ule uliohusiana na elimu vilirandana na maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi katika uga wa ujuzi wa lugha. Aidha tafsiri ya jina la Simba wa Lumona ilionekana pia katika hedhima aliyoipata katika nyadhifa mbalimbali serikalini. Sehemu ifuatayo inayaangalia maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi kama kiongozi wa serikali na kama kiongozi wa dini.

4. Kaluta Amri Abedi kama kiongozi

Nafasi ya uongozi wa Kaluta Amri Abedi ilionekana kuanzia alipojiunga na shuleni ya sekondari ya wavulana Tabora. Abedi anaandika: “alikabidhiwa mamlaka ya kuwa msimamizi wa mifugo shuleni. Alikuwa na mamlaka ya uangalizi mzuri wa mifugo ya shule na maziwa yalikuwa yakigawiwa kwa idhini yake” (2010: 17). Kuaminiwa huku na kupewa mamlaka kulichanua nyota ya uongozi katika maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi. Maisha ya kidini, ya kisiasa, ya kielimu na ya kiuanaharakati. Maisha ya mtu aliyekuwa mtetezi katika kila hali. Huu ni utamaduni aliojijengea, na uliomkuza akafanikiwa katika maisha. Maana yetu ya utamaduni inachukuliwa kutoka kwa Hoppenau wanafafanua kuwa utamaduni ni

Mfumo wa pamoja wa kiimani, maadili, desturi, tabia, na kazi za sanaa ambao hutumiwa na wanajamii katika kukabiliana na dunia na kati ya mtu mmoja na mwingine, na kwamba hurithishwa kutoka kizazi hadi kizazi kwa njia ya kujifunza (Hoppenau na wenzake 2009: 5).

Katika ufafanuzi huu, tunayaona maisha ya Kaluta ya kiimani, maadili, desturi yake a maisha, tabia yake na hata sanaa yake kupitia ushairi wa Kiswahili. Kwa ujumla tunaona nyota ya uongozi ambayo sasa tunaiangalia hatua kwa hatua katika nafasi zake mbalimbali.

Nafasi za juu za kidini, kisiasa, na kisanaa kutokana na msisitizo kuhusu lugha ya Kiswahili.

Tukiziangalia kazi za Kaluta Amri Abedi tunaona jinsi maisha yake yanavyoathibitisha makutano ya lugha, utamaduni na mabadiliko ya kisiasa ya Tanzania. Tunamwona akiwa ndani ya Tanganyika na mchango wake katika mabadiliko ya kuwa nchi huru na kisha kuwa Tanzania.

5. Kaluta Mbashiri hadi kuwa Sheikh

Tumekwisha kuona hatua mbalimbali za kidini kutoka kuwa Mbashiri, kwenda masomoni Pakistan na kuwa mwalimu wa dini na Sheikh kamili wa dini ya Uislamu dhehebu la Ahmadiyya. Kupanda kwake hivi katika ngazi za kidini kulikuwa na vikwazo, lakini aliungwa mkono na kupita vikwazo vyote. Alipendwa na washika dini, naye aliwapenda. Alitetewa na washika dini, naye alikuwa mtetezi wao katika nafasi na matukio mbalimbali, iwe katika mikutano au mahakamani. Alitetea dini huku akijenga uhusiano baina ya madhehebu na baina ya dini zote bila ubaguzi.

6. Meza wa kwanza Mwafrika wa Jiji la Dar es Salaam

Mwezi Januari mwaka 1960 Kaluta Amri Abedi alichaguliwa kuwa diwani wa Kariakoo. Na baadaye kidogo akachaguliwa kuwa Meza wa Jiji la Dar es Salaam. Hii ilikuwa ni nafasi kubwa kwa Mwafrika.

Tanganyika ilikuwa haijapata uhuru, na ingawa harakati za kudai uhuru zilikuwa zimepamba moto, haikufikirika kuwa ‘mapinduzi’ yangekuja haraka kiasi hicho, na ikitiliwa maanani kuwa dhehebu lake la Ahamadiyya lilikuwa halina wafuasi wengi kama dhehebu la sunni. Katika kuweka habari zake magazetini, gazeti moja liliandika:

Mtu maarufu wa wiki[...]ni mshairi aliyebobea, mwanasiasa makini, na mtaalamu wa lugha ambaye aliweza kuzungumza Kiswahili, Kiingereza, Kiurdu, Kiarabu bila wasiwasi wowote (Abedi 2010: 147).

Gazeti hilo la Sunday News la tarehe 24 Januari mwaka 1960, liliweka kwa kifupi wasifu wa Kaluta Amri Abedi. Kwa maudhui ya makala hii, wasifu huo ulieleza makutano baina ya lugha, siasa na utamaduni wa Kaluta Amri Abedi. Utamaduni wake wa unyenyekevu, kuwa mtu wa ibada, kutokuwa na ubaguzi; na kujishusha kunaonekana katika shairi aliloliandika baada ya kuwa meya. Alisema:

Ujaliwapo makamu, cheo wakakutunuku
Umeshikishwa hatamu, za punda mwenye shabuka
Nawe jifanye ghulamu, Kama mtumwa sumbuka
Kawahudumu kaumu, Khuduma ya kutukuka (Abedi 2010: 149).

7. Mjumbe wa Baraza la Kutunga Sheria (LEGCO)

Baraza la kutunga sharia, ama kwa Kiingereza *Legislative Council* - LEGCO, kwa miaka hii ndilo Bunge. Kwa hivi Kaluta Amri Abedi alichaguliwa kuwa ‘Mbunge’ akiwakilisha ‘jimbo’ la Kigoma. Itakumbukwa kuwa Kaluta Amri Abedi alikuwa amechaguliwa kuwa mjumbe, kamati kuu ya TANU na mwaka uliofuata yaani 1961, alichaguliwa tena kuwa Meya wa Jiji la Dar es Salaam kwa mara ya pili mfululizo. Katika nafasi hizo mbili, ile ya mjumbe wa Bunge la Kutunga Sharia na ile ya Umeja, Kaluta alidhihirisha pia kuwa si tu alikuwa mwanasiasa makini, lakini pia alikuwa mwanadiplomasia. Alikuwa mwenye uwezo wa kuunganisha watu na kuwa kiungo mwenye uvumilivu baina ya dini tofauti, jinsia tofauti na rangi tofauti. Alikuwa akijaribu kila awezalo kuondoa tabia ya ubaguzi na kujenga udugu na ushirikiano. Kwa mfano wa wazi ni jinsi alivyoshiriki katika bunge la Tanganyika, kwa hotuba ya kizalendo aliyoitoa kuwaeleza wabunge wenzake ubaya wa ubaguzi, huku akiunga mkono sera ya kura ya mseto iliyotaka Waafrika, Waasia na Wazungu wote kukubaliwa kuwa ni raia wa Tanganyika na kuwa na haki sawa kikatiba. Hata kabla yake, alipoalikwa kwenda Marekani, alipewa heshima kuwa raia wa kwanza wa heshima katika mji wa Mansfield (Ohio); jambo ambalo lilikuwa halijafanyika kwa takriban miaka 153 ya historia ya Mansfield (Abedi 2010: 166-167) jambo lililothibitisha kuwa msimamo wake, tabia yake na desturi zake zilikuwa zikiheshimiwa na kukubaliwa hata nje ya Tanzanyika.

Kuwa kwake mkuu wa Mkoa wa magharibi (Tabora ya sasa na Kigoma) kuliendeleza suala la umadhubuti wa uongozi wake kisiasa.

8. Waziri wa Sheria na kisha Utamaduni na Maendeleo ya Jamii

Kutoka kuwa mkuu wa mkoa wa Magharibi, Kaluta Amri Abedi aliapishwa kuwa waziri wa sheria wa Tanganyika tarehe 14 Machi, mwaka 1963, akichukua nafasi ya aliyekuwa Waziri wa wizara hiyo, Bw. Abdala Said Fundikira. Na kama mwaka mmoja baadaye, yaani mwezi Aprili mwaka 1964, Kaluta Amri Abedi alichaguliwa kuwa Waziri wa Utamaduni na Maendeleo ya Jamii katika Jamuhuri ya Muungano wa Tanzania. Hii inayonesha kuwa Kaluta alishiriki katika mabadiliko kutoka Tanganyika na kuwa Tanzania akiwa katika nafasi ya Uwaziri. Alikuwa katika mabadiliko hayo kutokea kwenye sharia na sasa kuingia utamaduni na maendeleo ya jamii. Nafasi zote mbili zina uhusiano na lugha ya Kiswahili. Alishiriki katika kutafsiri Katiba kuwa katika lugha ya Kiswahili na pili, alishiriki katika kujenga na kuimarisha matumizi ya Kiswahili kama urithi muhimu wa utamaduni na tunu ya Mtanzania. Hata alipokuwa Waziri wa sheria, Mwalimu Nyerere, Rais wa Tanganyika hakusita kumwambia:

Hata hivyo Wizara hii haina mzigo mkubwa. Natumai utatilia pia maanani uboreshaji wa lugha ya Kiswahili (Abedi 2010: 201).

Hii inaonesha kuwa aliongozana na kuambatana na lugha ya Kiswahili katika makuzi na maendeleo yake, iwe katika sanaa ya ushairi, katika tafsiri na hata katika kuikuza kama tunu ya utamaduni.

9. Mchango wa Kaluta katika kukua na kuenea kwa Kiswahili

Kutokea utotoni Kaluta Amri Abedi alionesha mapenzi katika lugha ya Kiswahili. Mnyampala (2011) anatueleza kuwa wakati Kaluta Amri Abedi akiwa shuleni darasa la sita, wakati huo anasoma elimu ya Kur'ani, aliwauliza walimu wake

Kwa nini tunasoma kama Kasuku, hatuelewi yaliyomo katika Aya za Kur'ani tukufu? Kwa nini Kur'ani haitafsiriwi katika Lugha ya Kiswahili (Mnyampala 2011:10).

Ingawa walimu wake Mashekh walimjibu, lakini Mnyampala anatueleza kuwa Kaluta hakuridhishwa na majibu aliyopewa. Kaluta Amri Abedi aliendeleza jitihada za kudai matumizi ya Lugha ya Kiswahili zaidi kuliko lugha zingine. Kwa hiyo, tunapona baadaye akihariri na kuipitia Kurani iliyotafsiriwa kwa Kiswahili tunaiona dhamira yake aliyokuwa nayo kutokea utotoni ikitimia, yaani kuiona Kur'ani Tukufu ikiwa imetafsiriwa kwa Kiswahili.

Aliipitia na kuihariri tafsiri ya Kurani Tukufu. Kutafsiri Kurani Tukufu kwa Kiswahili juzuu zote thelathini kulifanywa na Sheikh Mubarak Ahmad na kwa kiasi fulani akisaidiwa na Mwalimu Said Kambi kuanzia mwaka 1936 hadi mwaka 1943 ilipochapwa na mashine. Rasimu ya tafsiri hiyo ilipelekwa katika Kamati ya Lugha ya Kiswahili Afrika Mashariki kwa ajili ya kupitiwa na wataalamu wa Kiswahili na kupata ithibati. Kaluta Amri Abeid aliipitia tafsiri hiyo na kutoa mapendekezo mengi yaliyozingatiwa na Kamati ya Kiswahili (Abedi 2010: 78). Mbali na kujihusisha na tafsiri na uhariri, kwa hakika mchango mkubwa wa Kaluta Amri Abeid katika lugha ya Kiswahili ulikuwa kupitia sanaa ya ushairi.

Kutokea utotoni alikuwa akiimba na kughani mashairi. Kuandika kwake Kitabu cha *Sheria za Kutunga Mashairi na Diwani ya Amri* (Abedi 1954) ni kielelezo tosha cha umahiri wake katika ushairi. Jambo ambalo lilimpatia nafasi ya kuchaguliwa kuwa Mwenyekiti wa Chama cha Ushairi cha Afrika Mashariki. Kazi ya kuandika mashairi na Tenzi na kazi ya kutafsiri nyaraka na miswada mbalimbali kutoka lugha nyingine kuwa katika lugha ya Kiswahili, zilimfanya Kaluta Amri Abeid asiwe, mnenaji tu kuhusu Kiswahili bali mtendaji wa Kiswahili. Alihimiza Kiswahili kwenye dini, alihimiza Kiswahili kwenye elimu na alihimiza Kiswahili kwenye sheria na alitumia Kiswahili kwenye siasa. Mnyampala (2011) anaeleza kuwa katika maisha yake Kaluta alifafanua hoja zake kwa jamii ya Watanganyika na baadaye kwa Watanzania akiwaeleza washairi wa lugha ya Kiswahili pamoja na watumiaji wa lugha ya Kiswahili kukienzi, kukitukuza na kuweka nia njema ya ari thabiti ya kujifunza lugha iliyotukuka lugha ya Kiswahili (Mnyampala 2011: 47). Mnyampala akiendelea kuandika maisha ya mshairi na rafiki yake anasema,

Katika Mkutano huo Sheikh K. Amri Abeid alichaguliwa kuwa Karii wa chama hicho. Makarii waliochaguliwa siku hiyo walikuwa wanne (Mnyampala 2011: 45).

Kuwa Karii ni sawa na kuwa mhakiki. Mtu aliyeaminiwa katika uga fulani akipewa kazi ya kupitia kukosoa, kusahihisha na kutoa maoni ambayo yalistahili kuzingatiwa na mwandishi wa matini ya awali. Alikuwa Karii wa Mashairi ya Kiswahili—yaani msomaji, mkosoaji na mwelekezaji wa matumizi na maandishi ya lugha ya Kiswahili (Mnyampala 2011: 46). Maisha yake akiwa mtu wa dini, siasa na jamii, akiwa kiongozi katika nyadhifa mbalimbali yalikuwa ni makutano ya lugha na maendeleo ya Kiswahili. Tunaona jinsi lugha iliyomkuza kule Ujiji, aliishikilia na kuitetea katika nyadhifa zake zote. Utetezi huu unatufanya tuangalie jinsi alivyoitumia lugha katika siasa na uanaharakati, kipengele ambacho tunakiangalia katika maisha yake ya kazi.

10. Siasa na uanaharakati

Mbali na utetezi katika dini na uhuru wa kuabudu, Kaluta alikuwa mwanaharakati akitetea uhuru wa Tanganyika. Mbali na kuwa kiongozi katika nafasi ya Ustawi wa Jamii, Tabora alijiunga na Tanganyika African Association – TAA na mwaka 1949 alikuwa ni Katibu wake. Abedi anaandika kuhusiana na hili:

Inaonekana umaarufu huu ukamrahisishia kukubaliwa kuwa mwanachama wa TAA, kwani Hansard report, ya tarehe 27 June 1962, inaonesha kwamba mnamo mwaka 1949 Amiri alishakuwa Katibu wa TAA wa jimbo zima na kuanzisha chama cha kwanza cha wafanyakazi [The Trade Union] hapo Tabora cha 'The Tailor's Association' na mnamo mwaka 1950 aliandaa mgomo wa mafundi cherehani wa Wilaya ya Kigoma (Abedi 2010: 93).

Jambo kama hili bado linarejelea katika jina lake la 'Simba wa Lumona' na utabiri uliotolewa na baba yake kuhusu maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi. Kaluta akishirikiana na Bwana Ibrahim Abedi wa Tabora, waliandaa mgomo mwingine wa wa mafundi cherehani wa Tabora ili kudai malipo bora ya kazi yao. Hata hivyo, mgomo huo ulizimwa na Maafisa wa Serikali ya Kikoloni ya Mwingereza baada ya kuizuia pasipoti ya kusafiria ya Kaluta Amri Abedi hadi pale atakapowashawishi mafundi cherehani kuacha mgomo. Alitii, mgomo ukaisha, akaruhusiwa kwenda masomoni Pakistani. Kuandaa mgomo miwili wa Kigoma na Tabora kulishtaka kuwajulisha maafisa wa Kiingereza uwezo aliokuwa nao Kaluta Amri Abedi kwa upande mmoja na ushawishi aliokuwa nao miongoni mwa jamii kwa upande wa pili.

Ukweli huu wa uanaharakati, unatadokezea kwa muhtasari upande wa pili unaomwagalia Kaluta Amri Abedi kama mwanaharakati. Kipengele ambacho tutakijadili kwa undani.

Akiwa bado masomoni, Kaluta alikuwa akiwasiliana na mshairi maarufu Saadan Abdul Kandoro. Alielezwa hatua zote kutoka Tanganyika African Association—TAA hadi kuundwa kwa Tanganyika African National Union—TANU. Katika maelezo ya shairi la '*Siafu Wamekazana*,' Mshairi Saadan Abdul Kandoro aliandikwa hivi:

Shairi nililiunga kumpelekea marehemu Sheikh K. Amri Abedi alipokuwa kule Missionary College Rabwah Pakistan ili kumjulisha jinsi wananchi wanavyoingana katika kupigania uhuru na kwamba TANU imeundwa (Kandoro 1972: 138).

Kupitia mawasiliano ya kishairi na Saadan Abdul Kandoro, basi Kaluta Amri alikuwa akielewa na kufuatilia kinachoendelea Tanganyika. Msimamo wa Kaluta kuhusu binadamu kuwa huru, ulikwisha kujulikana hasa kupitia shairi lake la mwaka 1953 lililosema *Uhuru jambo halisi, kuukosa ni taabu* (Abedi 2010: 105-107). Hii inatudhihirishia kuwa, maisha ya Kaluta yalishikamana na dini, siasa (kupitia katika ushairi tunaiona pia) na lugha ya Kiswahili.

Yapo japo mambo mawili ambayo serikali ya TANU chini ya Mwalimu Nyerere ilifanya. Mambo hayo yana chimbuko lake katika harakati alizozifanya Kaluta Amri Abedi. Jambo la kwanza ni hotuba kuhusu Kiswahili iliyotolewa na Mwl. Julius Nyerere kwa mara ya kwanza bungeni Disemba mwaka 1962 akiwa Waziri Mkuu wa Tanganyika (Yakubu na Resani 2022: 9). Jambo la pili ni kuhusu Elimu ya watu wazima.

Mambo haya mawili yanaweza kulinganishwa na mafanikio aliyokuwa ameyaonesha Kaluta Amri Abedi. Kwanza Septemba 1951, Kaluta alikuwa ametoa hotuba yenye kichwa ‘Kiswahili kitumike katika Baraza la kutunga Sheria’ ambapo imeandikwa kuwa mmoja wa wahudhuriaji katika hotuba hiyo Mwingereza aliyekuwa ni Afisa Elimu alipiga kura kuunga mkono hoja iliyotolewa na Kaluta (Abedi 2010: 92). Mapema kabla ya mwaka huo, Saadan Abdul Kandoro alikuwa ameandika shairi mwaka 1948 lenye kichwa cha *Kitumike Kiswahili* akitaka Kiswahili kitumike Bungeni (Abdulrahman 2020). Kwa hiyo, mwaka 1962, inaposikika hotuba ya Mwl. Julius Nyerere Bungeni kwa Kiswahili tunajua ilikuwa ni hotuba iliyoundwa mkono na washairi, viongozi wa dini na wanasiasa wa wakati huo. Ni hotuba iliyokuwa ikizingatia hali halisi ya siasa na ya kiisimu-jamii kuhusiana na lugha ya Kiswahili.

Aidha, tunaona kuwa baada ya kutoka masomoni Rabwah Pakistan na baada ya kuwa ametoka Tabora na kuhamia Dar es Salaam, Kaluta alianzisha darasa la elimu ya watu wazima katika msikiti wa Mnazi Mmoja. Ingawa masomo yaliyokuwa yakifundishwa kwa watu wazima ni Kiarabu na Kiingereza (Abedi 2010: 116), lakini mafanikio yake yalikuwa ni mbegu iliyozaa wazo lenye kufanikiwa ambapo Mwl. Julius Nyerere alilitumia wazo hilo kuanzisha kwa mafanikio Elimu ya Watu wazima na kuanzishwa rasmi kwa Taasisi ya Elimu ya watu wazima mwaka 1963 (Yakubu na Resani 2022: 9). Kwa hiyo tunayaona maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abed katika dini, siasa, elimu. Alikuwa mtetezi wa wanyonge kwa namna mbalimbali. Tangu waandishi wa habari magazetini (Abedi 2010: 128), kuwatetea viongozi wa kidini (Abedi 2010: 135-136), na kutetea wanafunzi (Abedi 2010: 135-136). Alitetea wananchi wote bila ya kubaguliwa wapate haki ya elimu. Na kwa utetezi na msimamo wake alichaguliwa pia kuwa Makamu Mwenyekiti wa Tanganyika African Parents Association (TAPA), na mwaka 1959 akachaguliwa kuwa katika Kamati iliyojihusisha na Elimu ya Waafrika. Labda utetezi ambao unaonesha kuwa Kaluta aliwatetea wanyonge, bila ya kujali walikuwa Waafrika ama la, ni mfululizo wa barua alizomwandikia Waziri Mkuu wa India kuhusiana machafuko nchini India mwaka 1947, na mateso na kunyanyaswa kwa wananchi Wahindi wa madhehebu ya Ahmadiya mwaka 1948. Harakati hizi hazikufungamana na dini tu, hata baadaye katika kudai uhuru wa Tanganyika tunamwona Kaluta akiwa ni shupavu, asiyetetereka na mdai haki na uhuru.

Kama tulivyoona kabla, kuchaguliwa kwake kuwa mjumbe wa Baraza la Tutunga Sheria kuwa Meya na baadaye Waziri, kuliithibitisha sauti ya Kaluta kuwa ni mtetezi wa wananchi, mbali na utetezi wake kupitia dini ya Uislamu ya Ahmadiyya.

Jambo la mwisho, ingawa halimo katika uanaharakati, ni suala lake la kupenda michezo. Alipenda michezo, hasa mpira wa miguu akiwa bado kijana mdogo. Alikuwa mchezaji na pia mara nyingi alikuwa mchezeshaji (mwamuzi) wa mpira wa miguu. Ingawa suala hili halijitokezi wazi kama mengine tuliyoyaona, lakini ni sehemu ya maisha yake, na uwanja wa mpira wa miguu wa Arusha kupewa jina lake ni uthibitisho wa mapenzi yake katika kabumbu.

11. Hitimisho

Kwa kuangalia maisha ya mtunzi katika nyanja mbalimbali, kwa kufuata maisha ya siasa, dini, elimu na utawala, tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abedi imeweza kutumika kama chombo chenye nguvu cha kuangazia masuala ya kijamii na kitamaduni katika Tanzania. Imetumika kuangalia jinsi jitihada za kukuza maelewano, kujenga mazungumzo na kuhamasisha mabadiliko chanya ya kijamii kulivyojenga Tanzania yenye kuelewana bila ugomvi na machafuko baina ya jamii zenye imani tofauti. Kuunga kwake mkono wakati wa sera ya kura tatu, kunaonesha jinsi kupitia maisha yake suala la ubaguzi lilipigwa vita bila ya kuwapo machafuko.

Kuweka muktadha masuala ya kijamii na kitamaduni ya ukuzaji wa lugha ya Kiswahili kupitia tawasifu ya Kaluta Amri Abedi kumekuwa ni mbinu ya mojawapo ya utambuzi wa vipengele vya kitamaduni vilivyojenga umoja na amani kutokea Tanganyika hadi kuwa Tanzania. Kwa kuweka muktadha masuala ya kijamii na kitamaduni ya mtu binafsi, mchambuzi anaweza kupata uelewa wa kina wa makutano kati ya lugha, utamaduni, siasa, elimu na utawala.

Ni matarajio ya makala hii kuwa kupitia tawasifu, mchambuzi anaweza kuzijadili jitihada za mtu binafsi, changamoto katika maisha na mafanikio katika masuala ya kijamii na kitamaduni huku akiviangalia vipengele vilivyounganika katika ama kuleta changamoto au kusaidia katika kuzikabili. Safari ya maisha kibinafsi ya mtunzi inaweza kuhamasisha wengine ili wajihusishe kwa umakini na vipengele kama vile vilivyoona katika tawasifu au vipengele vingine zaidi. Katika makala hii tuliangalia vipengele vya lugha, utamaduni na siasa kama vyenye kufanya makutano katika maisha ya Kaluta Amri Abedi. Tumeangalia muktadha wa kijamii na kitamaduni na jinsi muktadha huo ulivyounda na kujenga uzoefu wa mwandishi wa tawasifu yaani Kaluta Amri Abedi.

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Aldin Kai Mutembei (BA Ed.; MA Ling-Dar es Salaam; MA Lit; PhD-Leiden), is the *Mwl. Julius Nyerere* Professorial Chair in Kiswahili at the University of Dar es Salaam. He is the Director of the Institute of Kiswahili Studies, Spokesperson of ACALAN in Tanzania, and the former Director at the Confucius Institute of the University of Dar es Salaam. He teaches Literature, Critical Theories and Oral Literature. His published *Theory of Literary Criticism* is used by scholars in Universities. He is a member of the Board of the Global Association for the Development of Kiswahili in the World, one of the founders of the Association of Kiswahili Teachers in East Africa. His Research Area is in African Literature and Languages, Literary Communication in relation to Community Health and published five books. His PhD (PhD, 2001, Leiden) was about *Poetry and AIDS in Tanzania*. He also researches about the role of African languages in education. He has travelled a lot giving lectures and being a consultant related to Kiswahili and African languages inside and outside Africa. He is an external examiner of African Literature for more than five colleges. He is a member of the Editorial Boards of various Journals. He has written several book chapters and articles published in international journals in Swahili and English languages.

Aldin can be contacted at: kaimutembei@gmail.com

From auto/biography to a historiography of post-colonial Tanzania in Swahili popular literature

Graziella Acquaviva

This article will present two Swahili popular works: the popular novel *Mpenzi I-II* ('Lover I-II', 1984; 1985) by Kajubi D. Mukajanga and the collection of short stories *Mpe Maneno Yake* ('Give him his words,' 2006) by Freddy Macha.

Mukajanga started writing the novel in 1982 but the first volume was published in 1984 by his own publishing house, Grand Arts Promotions. The environment he describes is that of J.K.T (*Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa*/National Service) of Makutupora where the writer describes daily life as he lived it and according to the law in force in 1977.

The second volume of *Mpenzi*, published in 1985, recounts historically verifiable events as the outbreak of the Second World War; the founding of T.A.N.U (Tanganyika African National Union) with the veiled description of Nyerere; the 1964 uprising that is narrated through the perspective of Mzee Potee's character, and the failure of the Ujamaa's policy. The episodes narrated were really lived by him or by people very close to him.

In Macha's *Mpe Maneno Yake* the autobiographical elements are prominent, and the short stories reflect the author's personal perspective and the narrated events are a representation of how they were experienced by the author.

Although the two works were written and published at different times, the first in the mid-1980s and the second in 2006, both authors utilise autobiographical elements and contribute to the biographical representation of post-colonial Tanzania.

Keywords: Swahili Fiction; Popular literature; Auto/biography; Historiography; Post-colonial Tanzania

1. Introducing Swahili popular literature: definitions and investigation method

The issue of defining the terminology 'popular literature' has challenged the conventional notion of literature. Indeed, popular literature was conceived as a phenomenon associated with the form of cultural model that has emerged in various contexts at different times as a consequence of a technological dimension. The critical corpus is extensive and comprises a multitude of terms that are indicative of this particular type of literary production. These terms vary according to the geographical and cultural context in which they are expressed, including popular literature, para-literature, mass

literature and *fasihi pendwa* ‘beloved literature’ (Kezilahabi 1975; Palmer 1978; Fielder 1979; Knight 1979; Ohly 1982; Lindfors 1991). Popular texts and their writers arouse the curiosity and interest of critics, yet when literary historiographies are compiled, they are marginalised and judged in the light of aesthetic parameters through which they are denied artistic authority. As Rollin (1975) argued, for the critic of popular literature, questions of aesthetic value are irrelevant and limited to the functions of description and interpretation because through hermeneutic investigation the popular text could reveal interaction between text and society.

Since the 1970s onwards, Swahili fiction in East Africa has been characterised by a number of literary genres (short story, romance novel, crime novel and noir) and the separation of popular and academic literature. The status of literary demarcation has been noted by many scholars who in highlighting it have used connotative terms such as *pendwa/dhati* ‘popular/serious, popular/standard’ (Ohly 1982; Madumulla 1991; Zúbková Bertoncini 2019). Gromov (1996) argues that academic writers not only have a high literary capacity that allows them to perfect narrative techniques in classic prose genres, but also to experiment with new literary forms such as, for example, the fantastic parable. Conversely, popular writers continue to conform to the typical patterns of popular production, without any trace of stylistic or genre innovation. Although popular fiction is characterised by the presence of repetitive motifs, it lacks linearity and rhythmicity of narrated events. The popular novel tends to expand in time and space, to diachronically postpone the solution of the intrigue through the introduction of parallel plots (Bordoni 1984). Every literary event—whether acknowledged as such or not—brings together writers (whose presence poses problems of psychological, moral, and philosophical interpretation), books (whose mediation induces problems of aesthetics, style, language, and technique), and readers (whose existence entails problems of a historical, political, social, and economic nature; Escarpit 1958).

In Tanzania, popular writers have redefined their writing to match the demand of the local audience.¹ From the beginning, the production of popular fiction appeared to critics as a form of subsistence within the informal economic sector.

¹ Towards the end of the 1960s, a cohort of young writers and journalists in the Tanga area began serialising their work in local newspapers, which rapidly gained considerable popularity. Adopting a colloquial style, they depicted the contemporary style of rural and urban life in a manner that was accessible to the general public. The ideology of modernisation was a significant contributing factor to the flourishing of the book industry. In the period between 1960 and 1975, there were thirteen publishing houses present in Tanzania. Of these, five were multinationals, namely Longman, Heineman, Oxford University Press, and Nelson Evans Brothers. Two were East African joint agencies, namely the East African Literary Bureau and the East African Publishing House. The remaining five were Tanzanian, namely the Tanzania Publishing House, TUKI (*Taasisi ya Uchunguzi wa Kiswahili*), Maarifa Publishers, Ndanda Mission, and Tanzania Mission Press. In addition to the

The majority of popular fiction genres are linked to the social conditions and contexts of their production and reception, and frequently represent covert forms of political protest and cultural autonomy against local and international bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether the entire popular production is to be considered as a unified entity or whether it is also subject to a kind of internal fragmentation. Despite the absence of a direct equivalent in Swahili for the English terms ‘popular literature’ or ‘popular novel,’ Madumulla (1991) asserts that the most prevalent term is *fasihi pendwa*, which can be translated as ‘beloved literature,’ as already mentioned above. However, there are other definitions that have emerged, including *fasihi maarufu* ‘well-known novel’ and *fasihi ya taharuki* ‘exciting novel.’ The term *fasihi ya mitaani* ‘street literature’ is appropriate when used in reference to the distribution channel of this type of production. However, it is not an accurate representation when used to describe something that is exclusively associated with the street.²

In examining popular literary productions, the fundamental challenge persists in identifying an appropriate methodology for investigating the underlying conflicts of perception that shape the message. It is therefore important to attempt to comprehend the messages within the local context through an inductive methodology, whereby generalisations are represented by observations based on selected criteria that permit a degree of comparison between different cases or examples of phenomena.³ If we consider the novel to be, actually, a social chronicle, a biography and autobiography, it is important to maintain an understanding of it in the context in which it was created.

In recent years, auto/biographical narration has been the subject of study in various academic fields, including literature. The genre of the autobiography is often characterised by a focus on the author’s significant life experiences, encompassing a range of emotions, aspirations, traumatic events and resonances that an individual may encounter throughout the course of his/her lifetime.

Related to this topic, two Swahili popular works are presented in this article: the novel *Mpenzi* I-II by Kajubi D. Mukajanga and the collection of short stories *Mpe Maneno Yake* by Freddy Macha.

aforementioned publishing houses, a number of private local publishing houses were established, including Black Star Agencies, Busara Publications, Jommsi Publications, Mcheshi Publications, Heko Publishers, and Grand Arts Promotions (Zúbková Bertoncini 1986: 526-527).

² It is not infrequent that the critical evaluation is based on the appearance of the publication, such as neglected graphics, unclear printing, and poor-quality paper.

³ This approach was proposed by J. Fabian in his study on the cultural expressions of Zaire (Fabian 1978).

Although the two works were written and published at different times, the first in the mid-1980s and the second in 2006, both authors utilise autobiographical elements and contribute to the biographical representation of post-colonial Tanzania.

2. Kajubi Mukajanga: auto-biographical elements in *Mpenzi*

Kajubi Mukajanga was born in 1957 in Biharamulo, in the Kagera region. After completing his primary education in Singida and Musoma, northern Tanzania, he moved to the Morogoro region and graduated in 1976. Following his employment at the Aga Khan Secondary School in the Tanga region, he was recruited by Tanzanian Airlines, a position he held until 1981. At then, he made the decision to dedicate himself to writing in addition to journalism. He has been a reporter, editor, media critic, media trainer, and publisher. He is also a poet, novelist, and author of several biographies, the best known of which is *Bob Marley, sauti ya ghetto* ('Bob Marley, the voice of the ghetto,' 1983).

The 1980s were very productive for him in the field of fiction, with the publication of novels such as *Kitanda cha mauti* ('The Death Bed', 1982); *Twanze lini?* ('When do we start?,' 1983) and *Mpenzi I-II* ('Lover I-II,' 1984-1985). He is currently the executive secretary of the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT).

Kajubi Mukajanga started writing his novel *Mpenzi* in 1982, but it was not until 1984 that the first volume was published. According to Zúbková Bertoncini (1986), *Mpenzi* is an audacious and critical novel which encompasses a multitude of significant themes, illustrating the last forty years of Tanzanian history through the lives of Mzee Potee and his daughter Shangwe.

The author situates the events that form the basis of the narrative in Makutupora⁴ military training camp known as JKT⁵ (*Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa*, 'National Service'), a location not explicitly referenced in the text but significant in the context of the author's own military training experience as an enlistee in 1977, as he stated when I interviewed him in 1989 during my fieldwork on Swahili

⁴ Makutupora is an administrative ward in the Dodoma Urban district of the Dodoma Region of Tanzania.

⁵ The genesis of the *Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa* 'National Service' can be traced back to 1958, when national leaders undertook a visit to Ghana to attend the country's first-year independence celebrations. Among them were Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere and the former Prime Minister Rashid Kawawa who was also known as *Simba wa Vita* 'Lion of the War.' Kawawa was very impressed by the information given by the former Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mrs. Golda Meir, regarding the manner in which the State of Israel had gathered and prepared young people militarily, and how they subsequently, performed national duties with courage, patience, cooperation and discipline. Although the idea of implementing the Israeli project had already attracted considerable interest among many Tanganyikan politicians, it was only with the enactment of the National Service Act of 1964 that its implementation became a concrete reality within the newly independent State of Tanzania

(<https://www.jkt.go.tz/pages/ns-historical-background>).

popular literature. The author's experience of the JKT is an important contextual factor in the events depicted in the novel.

The JKT was initially conceived as an association of young volunteers, comprising both male and female members, who were required to undergo a period of political, military, agricultural and aptitude training prior to embarking on a subsequent work placement in a 'nation-building' project (Ivaska 2005). Nevertheless, a considerable number of young people were reluctant to enrol in the programme. In 1965, Prime Minister Rashid Kawawa announced the introduction of a government plan to make National Service compulsory for all those who had completed primary and secondary education, as well as preparatory studies for university (United Republic of Tanzania 1973).

Mukajanga attempts to enlighten those who resided beyond the gate of the JKT regarding the actual events within the military camp. His descriptions are meticulous. He gives particular attention to the punishments that were inflicted by the non-commissioned officers on the recruits.

[...] Kijana alipelekwa hadi kambini; akianguka anainuliwa kwa mateke mazito na bakora, akishindwa kukimbia tokana na kuchoka na kuumwa na mwiba uliokuwa mguuni mwake anasukumwa mbele kwa teke na bakora. Ungemwuliza baadae huyu mwananchi, angekwambia anajua nini maana ya polisi ya jeshi la wananchi.

MP [...] aliondoka na mateka wake kuelekea quarter-guard – kule kwenye lango kuu la kuingilia kambini ambako ndiko waliokaa MP, na ndiko mahabusu ilikokuwa. Huko alimwamuru mateka ashone vidole vya mikono yake kama mtu anayesali, kisha alimwamuru alale kifudi fudi, viganja vilivyoshikana chini, na akawa anampa amri za kujiinua juu na kushuka kwa kutumia mikono. "Utapiga push-up mpaka utapike ugali wote wa jeshi uliopata kuiba."

(Mukajanga 1984: 20-21).

[...] The boy was taken to the camp. If he falls, he is made to get up with kicks and sticks, if he cannot run due to tiredness and the thorn in his foot, he is pushed by the kick and the stick. If you had asked this citizen, he would have told you that he knew what People's Military Police meant.

MP [...] left with his hostage towards the quarter-guard, at the main gate of the camp where the MP stayed and where the prison was located. There, he ordered the captive to sew his fingers together like a person praying, then he commanded him to lie on his face with his palms pressed together on the ground, and to lift himself up and down using only his hands. "You will do push-ups until you vomit all the army porridge you stole."⁶

It is within the military camp that Shangwe, the main female character undergoes a series of traumatic experiences including a rape by some camp officials. The traumatic experiences instil in her a deep hate towards men:

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Swahili into English are mine.

Na huku usiku ukipita taratibu, Shangwe aliendelea kuogelea katika bahari ya chuki, hasira na uchungu. 'Mwanadamu, ugeuzwe kinyangarika, mwanasesere wa kuchezeza, chombo cha kumstarehesha mwanamme [...] Ah! Laiti Mungu asingeliumba wanaume. Viumbe wenye umbo la mwanadamu lakini wasiokuwa na utu wowote. Tulikosa nini sie? Kuwabeba matumboni mwetu miezi tisa, tukawatunza na kuwalea kwa mapenzi, tukihimili taabu zote kwa ajili yao, ndilo kosa? Kwa nini wanatudharau? Kwa kuwa hatuna maguvu kamayao? Lakini mbona atokeapo mwanamke kuwa na misuli na maguvu wao humcheka, na hata kuufanya muda daima uwe mgumu kwake?' (Mukajanga 1984: 30-31).

And as the night passed slowly, Shangwe continued to fret in a sea of hate, anger and pain. 'Creature, be you transformed into an object, a doll to play with, a tool to entertain the male [...] Ah! If only God had not created men. They are creatures with a human shape but no humanity. Where did we go wrong? We carry them in our wombs for nine months, lovingly care for them and raise them, enduring every pain for them, Is this the mistake? Why do they despise us? Perhaps because we do not have their strength? But then why when a woman has strength and muscles, do they mock her, making life difficult for her?'

When Shangwe arrives at the camp, she is already pregnant as a result of a sexual assault that occurred while she was still a Secondary school student. As a consequence, she flees the camp with the intention of terminating the pregnancy.

As Mukajanga himself explained, the character of Shangwe was inspired by a cousin of his own age who, after becoming pregnant, was expelled from school and forced to have an abortion.

In the novel, the author often merges with fictional characters. As he himself declares:

Kama mimi ni mwandishi wa riwaya, mimi ni mtazamaji na tena mshiriki katika utendaji wa riwaya. Kwa maoni yangu mimi, ni muhimu sana kuitilia riwaya uhai kwa ajili ya wasomaji wangu, kwa hivyo lazima niishi mimi mwenyewe matendo yaliyoelezwa katika riwaya... kwa kawaida, mwanzoni kazi zangu zote zinaonyesha maisha yangu, hisia zangu, hofu zangu, utu wangu. Baadae tu, kazi hizo zinaonyesha jinsi ambavyo ningependa ziwe au mambo fulani yasiyotokea kama ningalipenda yawe. Katika sehemu ya kwanza ya riwaya, mhusika wa Shangwe ni binamu yangu mimi [...] safari ya Shangwe toka Musoma mpaka Dar es Salaam, ni ileile kama vile nilivyoisafiri mimi mwenyewe. Ndiyo, katika sura hii ya riwaya mi nipo kabisa...Mimi ndimi yule anayeishi matukio yale nikitumia mhusika wa Shangwe.⁷

As a novelist, I'm both a spectator and a participant in the action of the novel. It's important for me to bring it to life for my readers, so I need to experience it myself... generally, at the beginning, all my works represent my life, my feelings, my fears, my being. Only later do they represent the way I would like them to be or certain things to go that I have not experienced as I would have liked. In the first part of the novel Shangwe represents my cousin [...] I made Shangwe experience a trip I

⁷ Personal interview, August 1989.

made from Musoma to Dar es Salaam... Yes, in this chapter of the novel⁸. I am very much present....
It is I who live the event in the guise of Shangwe...

Shangwe represents the generation of young people born in the aftermath of Independence, who are experiencing the uncertainties of the new politics, confusion, and generational conflict. This latter sociological aspect is explicated in the dialogue between Mama Ndomba and a student under whose guise Mukajanga himself is concealed. Mama Ndomba is a former teacher who began to work for the government. This dialogue gives rise to the inherent problems in Nyerere's politics, which extolled the preservation of traditional values by asserting a kind of self-determination, and the corrupt interpretation of the message itself. When Mama Ndomba expresses her disapproval of the younger generation's inclination towards innovation, particularly in the case of the female youth for their unconventional style of dress, the young man challenges her by highlighting her apparent disregard for the traditional cultural norms. He asserts that her disapproval extends to certain innovations originating from abroad, while she supports those that align with her interests and social status (Mukajanga 1984: 79-80).

2.1. From character to the historical biography of Tanzania

Mpenzi is a journey into the historical memory of a small community, depicted through the life of Mzee Potee's family and a few other characters. These family recollections are interwoven with the national memory, thereby offering insights into the collective experiences of Tanzania. The main themes of politics and everyday life are embodied by marginal social actors as represented by the characters in the novel.

In the author's own words, as he stated during the interview, his characters often mirror aspects of his own emotional experiences. This suggests that the author is engaged in a "process of reconciliation with oneself," as Ferrari terms it (Ferrari 2022: 49).

At other times, the characters serve as representations of people who have influenced his life. When viewed through this interpretative lens, the historical narration of this small African community can be seen as a metaphor for the challenges and achievement of Tanzania as a whole.

Mukajanga presents a historical biography of the former Tanganyika and Tanzania through the life stages of Mzee Potee who is a prominent male character throughout the novel.

⁸ See Mukajanga (1984, Chapter 4).

The character of Potee is treated in detail in the second volume of Mpenzi, beginning with his opposition to the colonialists' first abuse to his family when he was a young boy:

[...] wakoloni wakatamalaki ardhi iliyokuwa ikitumiwa na baba yake Potee, ardhi nzuri yenye rutuba. Mkutuo huu ndio uliomaliza baba yake Potee, ukamwamshiria – kikatili – kuingia kaburini mwake, aiache familia yake bila kitu chochote cha kuhimili kimaisha. Aidha, kwa kuwa wakoloni waliweka ardhi yote chini ya madaraka yao, nayo ikawa ya kununua, ilimwia muhali Potee, katika uchochote na umri wake, kuweza kupata walau kijipande cha kulima chakula kwa ajili yake na mama yake, ambaye hivi sasa akisakarika na kuzeeka haraka.

Alipokuwa na umri wa miaka kumi na minne Potee alianza kazi katika shamba kubwa la mibuna la bepari wa Kigiriki, akilipwa shilingi kumi na mbili kwa mwezi, na akianza kazi saa kumi na mbili asubuhi na kumaliza machwea. Yalikuwa Maisha ya dhiki, kazi ikisimamiwa na wanyapara Waafrika wenzao wakiwa na mijeledi na mbwa ambao hawakusita kuwatumia kuwaadhibisha vibarua. Wanyapara hao daima wameghadhabika, wakichachawiza katika kiruu kali bila sababu ya kueleweka, wakiahiria na kunyaparia kwa mori wa kihayawani. Yalikuwa maisha ya udhalili na fedheha ambayo babu zao hawakupata kuyafahamu hapo kabla ya utawala wa Wazungu ... (Mukajanga 1985: 17).

[...] the colonialists took the land his father cultivated, a beautiful and fertile land. It was this last blow that knocked Potee's father down, and pushed him cruelly into the grave, and left his family with nothing to survive on. Moreover, as the colonists expropriated all the land and put it up for sale, it became impossible for Potee at his age with his limited earnings to obtain even a modest plot of land to cultivate for his own sustenance and that of his mother, who was now debilitated and prematurely aged.

When he was fourteen, he started working on a big coffee plantation owned by a rich Greek man, for twelve shillings per month. His working day was from six in the morning until sunset. It was a life of hardship. The work was managed by African overseers, who were provided with whips and dogs, which they used to punish the worker. Those henchmen were always angry, indulging in blind rage for no logical reason, and remaining vigilant and watchful with bestial fury. Their grandparents had non experienced such a miserable and infamous existence before the European colonisation ...

From that time onward, the struggle against the invaders become his primary focus and driving force.

He participates in World War II:

Mzungu kwa Mzungu walikuwa wakipigana. Lo, hawa Wazungu walikuwa wakichukiana sana. Kila mara, kila bwana mkubwa aliwahubiria vibarua jinsi Mzungu wa kabila la Jerumani alivyokuwa mbaya, katili, na akitaka ama kuitawala dunia nzima, ama kuiangamiza yote. Alikuwa akimpinga Mtukufu Mfalme George.

Jina la Hitler likajulikana kote kote. Ukisikika mvumo angani ni ndege ya hitler. Akisikika simba usiku katumwa na hitler. Kukitokea ugonjwa mkubwa hewa imetiwa sumu na Hitler. Na watoto wa vibarua wakafunzwa nyimbo nyingi za kumlaani mwehu aliyetaka kuitawala dunia nzima, mwehu aliyeshika watu wa umati, akawafungia vyumbani na kuwatia moto, mwehu aliyetaka kuwatia ukharithi wanaume wote wa kiafrika... Na waliimba nyimbo za kumtukuza mfalme na malkia wake. Mfalme aliyeleta barabara; mfalme aliyeleta hospitali; mfalme mwenye enzi ianzayo litokezeapo jua haadi lizamiapo, mfalme wa watu ambao

katu hawatopata kuwa watumwa... Na malkia. Malkia mwadilifu; malkia mpole; malkia mwenye huruma; malkia mpenda watoto...

[...]

Waliambiwa vita hiyo ilikuwa kubwa, kubwa sana – ilikuwa vita vya dunia kwa kuwa ilikuwa, nao ilibidi wakapigane. Hitler alitaka kuwateka wao vile vile, halafu angewafanya watumwa, na wanaume wote, kasoro walio mapande ya watu, wangehasiwa. Na hao mapande ya watu wangekusanywa pamoja na wanawake ambao wangechaguliwa kwa uangalifu na wangefungiwa pahala kama nguruwe, walale na kutengeneza watoto!!!

Basi Potee na shemeji yake [...] wakashikwa katika mkumbo wa vijana wa kiafrika waliochukuliwa kwenda kumpigania Mfalme. Kina Potee hawakulipenda wazo la kwenda kumpigania huyo mtu ambaye hawakumjua, lakini kila walipofikiria ubaya wa huyo Hitler, na nia yake ya kuwaangamiza, walijikuta wamechanganyikiwa hawajui lipi bora kati ya kumpigania mfalme na kutompigania. Walijua jambo moja kwa hakika. Kwamba hata wakishinda katika vita hiyo ushindi huo hautawaletea uhuru, bali tu utakuwa ushindi wa kuhakikisha kwamba wanaendelea kuwa chini ya Mwingereza na Jarumani (Mukajanga 1985: 20-21).

European was fighting against European. Oh, Europeans hated each other. Every day, every boss told the workers that the German European was a cruel and bloodthirsty man who wants to rule the whole world or destroy everything. He was in conflict with the Estimated King George. Hitler's name became known everywhere. If you hear a rumble in the sky, it is Hitler's airplane. If you hear a lion at night, it was sent by Hitler. If an epidemic breaks out, Hitler's poison has been spread in the air. The workers' children learned many songs to curse the madman who wanted to rule the whole world, the madman who captured hundreds of human beings, locked them in their houses and burn them, the mad man who wanted to pervert all African males... They sang hymns in honour of the king and queen. The king who had built the roads, the king who founded hospitals, the king whose domain begins where the sun rises and extends to where it sets, the king of people who would never be slaves... And the queen. A fair queen, a compassionate queen, a queen who loves children...

[...]

They were told that this was a big war, very big war-it was the World War and they had to fight. Hitler wanted to subjugate them, then enslave them and castrate all males, except the most vigorous of them. The virile ones would be herded together with carefully selected females, and then locked in places like pigs, to lie and breed!!!

Potee and his brother-in-law [...] were among a group of young Africans who had been recruited to fight for the king. Potee's group did not like the idea of going to fight for someone they did not know. However, whenever they thought about Hitler's cruelty and his intention to annihilate them, they felt confused because they did not know whether it was better or not to fight for the king. They were sure of one thing. Even if they had won the war, the victory would not have signified independence for them. On the contrary, it would have represented a confirmation of their continuing subjugation to British rather than German rule.

During the fighting, one of his eyes was blinded. Despite this trauma, the damaged eye will be the only part of his body to react with its tearing, indicating his profound frustration at being forced to fight for someone who will continue to oppress him and his people:

'... Ndilo jeshi nililolilia sana hili? Ndilo jeshi nililotaka kujiunga nalo (...) Faida gani basi? Tofauti gani iliyopo? Jeshi liko katika mikono ya wale wale tuliowafukuza ...' (Mukajanga 1985: 36).

'... Is this the army I longed for? Is this the army I wanted to join (...) What advantage then? What difference is there? The army is in the hands of those we chased away ...'

Mukajanga's narrative maintains a focus on the character of Potee, through whose life the author describes Nyerere's⁹ ascension to power:

Huyo mtu alizungumziwa san ana kutukuzwa mno. Kijana [...] aliyesoma na katika kusoma kwake akadhihirisha kwamba Mtu Mweusi angeweza kuwa na akili na maarifa kuliko Mtu mweupe [...] Kijana aliyesoma akataalamika, akaimaliza elimu yote Tanganyika, akaenda Makerere, akaimaliza elimu yote huko, akaenda Ulaya, akasoma [...].

Aliongoza harakati ya Uhuru. Aliwakosoa wanazuoni wenzie, akaonyesha jinsi kelele zao zilivyokuwa na nia ya kuwanufaisha wao tu, na si kuwanufaisha Watanganyika wote kwa ujumla... Alikiiita chama chao chama cha anasa, chama cha starehe, chama cha watu wachoyo na walafi waliofikiria matumbo yao tu, bila kuyajali matumbo ya watu [...] waliotengeneza Tanganyika, watu ambao bila wao Tanganyika isingekuwa Tanganyika ...

[...] alikivunja chama hicho cha anasa na starehe na kuanzisha chama cha umma, chama cha siasa, chama cha harakati ya umma (Mukajanga 1985: 25).

This man was much talked about and highly praised. A young man [...] who had studied, and in his studies, he had shown that the Black Man could have more intelligence and knowledge than the White Man [...]. An educated young man who completed his studies in Tanganyika; he went to Makerere where he also finished his studies, and then he proceeded to Europe, he studied [...].

He was the leader of the Liberation movement. He pointed out the faults of his intellectual colleagues showing how their shouting was solely designed to make prosper themselves and not the people of Tanganyika... He called their party as the party of luxury, the party of hedonism, and the party of those gluttons who thought only of their stomachs without concern for those of the people [...] who had created Tanganyika, people without whom Tanganyika would not have been Tanganyika ...

[...] he abolished the party of luxury and pleasures and established a mass party, a political party, the Party of the People's Revolution.

The historical memory of the nation is sustained through the sentiments evoked by Potee at the moment of independence and the representation of the collective enthusiasm for this moment in narrative form:

⁹ The information pertaining to the life and persona of Nyerere, as delineated in the novel, can be found in the biography edited by George A. Mhina entitled *Mwalimu Nyerere na Tanzania* ('Teacher Nyerere and Tanzania') published in 1980.

“Nataka kurudia tena jeshi lakini jeshi tofauti safari hii. Safari hii si jeshi la Mfalme wa Uingereza. Safari hii jeshi la Tanganyika. Ni hilo tu litakalofuta makosa niliyofanya katika siku zangu za ujana”.[...]

“Ndio, nitarudi. Nitarudi jeshini. Sikuziona taabu hizo wakati nilipokimpigania mkoloni, kwa nini sasa nizione? [...] Nilikuwa tayari kupoteza jicho langu kwa ajili ya Mwingereza, sasa niko tayari kupoteza uhai wangu kwa ajili ya Matanganyika [...] Nitakwenda, na nitaonyesha kwamba bado naweza kuishika bunduki, tena sasa, kwa mori zaidi kwani sasa nitashika bunduki kuulinda uhuru wa nchi yangu ...

[...]

Siku moja bendera ya dhalimu ilishushwa, na bendera ya wananchi ikapandishwa. Saa sita usiku, mizinga ikilia, Watanganyika makoo yakiwakauka kwa vifijo na vigelegele, ikapepea katika upepo laini wa saa hiyo na katika gwerida kubwa la heshima [...] macho ya Mama Shafii [...] yaliliona tambo dogo lakini kakamavu la mwandaniwe aliyempenda na kumwenzi, Potee...

Nao Watanganyika walikitazama kitambaa kile kilichokuwa na maana kubwa cha njano, kijani na nyeusi [...] na waliona kimatangaza kufunguliwa kwa kipindi kipya ...” (Mukajanga 1985: 32-34).

“I want to return to the army, but this time it 'll be a different army. Now, this isn't the King of England's army. This time it's the army of Tanganyika. It will be this one that will erase the mistakes I made in my youth”. [...]

“Yes, I'll be back. I'm going back to the army. Did I suffer when I fought for the coloniser? Why should I feel it now? [...] I was ready to lose an eye for the Englishman, now I'm ready to lose my life for the Tanganyikan [...] I will go and show that I can still take up a rifle, and moreover, with greater fervour because I'm now taking up the rifle to safeguard the independence of my country ...

[...]

One day, the flag of the tyrant was lowered, and the flag of the citizens was raised. At midnight, while the cannons were firing and the throats of the people of Tanganyika became dry from the shouts and trills of joy, (that flag) flew in the gentle breeze of that hour.

In the parade of honour [...] Mama Shafii's eyes [...] glimpsed the small figure of Potee, her partner who she respected and loved... and they, the people of Tanganyika looked at that yellow, green and black banner ... they saw in it the proclamation of a new era ...”

The new political and economic system offered a sense of hope and promise for Potee and his homeland. Indeed, Potee chose to name his last two children Tumaini (‘Hope’) and Shangwe (‘Joy’), thereby symbolizing the importance of hope and joy in the new era (Mukajanga 1985: 26).

Between 1971 and 1975, the working class mounted a massive and militant struggle against private and state enterprises accusing their bosses of high-handed behaviour and maltreatment of workers.

Starting from strikes, the movement quickly graduated to the occupation of factories. In their struggle, workers used the party documents like the Arusha Declaration (Nyerere 1968: 231-250) and

Mwongozo ('Guidelines,' TANU 1971) to make their grievances and demands legible to the party and the state. In particular, clause 15¹⁰ of Mwongozo become their battle cry (Shivji 1976: 123 ff.):

Kilitangazwa kitu ambacho kila mvuja jasho alikitazama kama mgeuzo mkubwa na wa ghafla katika mfumo wa maisha. Kitu hicho kilipokelewa kwa shangwe kubwa na kila mfanyakazi kilipokelewa kama baraka iliyohitajika sana katika kiza kinene kilichokuwa kikiwazuilia wafanyakazi kuiona njia, wakawa wakiwaya waya ovyo katika maisha yao bila kujua njia ipi maishani mwao waliyokuwa wakikanyaga, bila kuiona hata meta moja mbele maishani mwao.

Kila mahala palipokuwa na mkusanyiko wa wafanyakazi kitu hicho kulizungumza na kujadiliwa kwa shauku isiyotofautiana sana na shauku isiyotofautiana sana na shauku iliyopata kuwapo muda moja tu – wakati uhuru ulipokaribia.

Ibara ya kumi na tano

Ibara ya kumi na tano

Mwongozo adilifu wa Chama

Mwongozo wa kikweli, njia, maji ya baraka ya maisha (...)

Mwongozo! [...]

Naam, mwongozo ulikuwa umewaingia watu. Lakini mwongozo huu ulikuwa na ibara ya kumi na tano...

Kamati za wafanyakazi zilianzishwa kote kote.

Mfanyakazi lazima ashiriki katika uendeshaji wa kiwanda au shirika. Mfanyakazi lazima ahisi kwa shirika au kampuni ni mali yake, na kazi aifanyayo ni kwa ajili yake na taifa zima.

Kamati zilianza kazi.[...]

Mara, polisi hao! Wanaingia na kuwatisha wafanyakazi ...

[...]

Wafanyakazi mia mbili wanafukuzwa... (Mukajanga 1985: 108-109; 111-112).

What every worker saw as the sudden and great transformation of the system was proclaimed; the proclamation was greeted by every labourer with joy, it was welcomed as a blessing, as a light in the deep darkness that had hindered the workers from seeing a glimmer, they were wavering confusedly in their system without knowing the purpose of their lives that was trampling them without them even seeing a metre in front of them.

Wherever there was a large group of workers, they talked about it and discussed it with passion not unlike the passion there had been once—at the time of independence.

Article 15

Article 15

The Guidelines

The party's right Guidelines

¹⁰ Mwapachu (1973: 383) states that workers argued that the causes of their protests were those connected with the contravention of Clause 15, which was calling for the adoption by industrial management officials of a democratic and participatory leadership style. Management of the affected enterprises contended that the workers' strikes were by and large caused by a lack of clear understanding of this clause.

The Guidelines of Truth, the Way, the Blessed Water of Life (...)

The Guidelines!

[...]

Yes, the Guidelines had made their impact on people. But the Guidelines have Article 15 ...

Workers' committees arose everywhere. the worker must participate in the running of the industry or company. The worker must recognise that the company or industry are his wealth, his work is for his own good and that of the whole nation.

The committees began their work [...]

Police now! They enter and terrorise the workers...

[...]

Two hundred workers are laid off...

For over three years Nyerere watched workers' battles at the barricade. Workers believed Nyerere was on their side. Parastatals were owned by the state and the state was that of workers and peasants, therefore, when the workers went on strike, they armed their own property. In 1974, in his May Day speech, Nyerere came out against workers. His argument was typical of the state bourgeoisie which had ridden on the back of the ideology of Ujamaa (Shivji, Yahya-Othman and Kamata 2020).

When Potee realises the weakness of the new policy, his hopes also fall completely, leaving him in a state of frustration and distress.

One might suggest that the character of Mzee Potee represents a repository of the country's 'episodic memory', which could be defined as the recollection of specific events, locations and temporal contexts (Tulving 2002; Wenger and Shing 2016).

This section of the novel could be described as 'historiographical,' as it highlights transitional phenomena, i.e. the interval between one political regime and another, through the historical biography represented by certain moments in Nyerere's political life. However, it is necessary to emphasize that only the reception of Nyerere's image and the reasons for his popularity can be deduced from the narrative description, rather than the political leader as well as the character in the novel.

3. Freddy Macha: a writer and musician

Freddy Macha was born in Old Moshi, Kilimanjaro district, on 14 February 1955. He spent his formative years in Bumbuli, Tanga District, where his father was employed as a doctor at the local hospital, and the village of Mori. He subsequently attended primary school in Old Moshi.

After completing his primary education, he was admitted to a Secondary School in Ilboru, Arusha District, in 1969. During formative years, two defining traits emerged that would significantly shape

the remainder of his life: an inclination for travel and a pronounced literary talent. Indeed, this period marked the beginning of his engagement with writing.

In March 2014, I conducted an online interview with the author in collaboration with a student of mine, with the aim of gaining insight into the author's work and experiences.

As Macha himself stated:

Nilianza kuona kipaji changu nikiwa na miaka kumi na minne au kumi na mitano hivi. Kwanza, watu mbalimbali walikuwa wakisifia barua zangu. Wakisema “Freddy akikuandikia barua na kama kitabu... Kuna wakati nilikuwa nawasaidia wenzangu shuleni kuandika barua kwa marafiki zao wa kike (girlfriends) wanakopi kisha wananipa fedha. Kila barua nilipewa shilingi moja [...] Nikaanza kuona faida ya kuandika [...]. Nikagundua Kumbe unaweza kupata fedha kwa kuandika?”¹¹

I started recognising my talent when I was about 14 or 15. At first, lots of people liked my letters. They said, ‘For Freddy, writing letters is like writing a book.’ There was a time when I used to help my classmates write letters for their girlfriends. They would copy them and then give me money. For each letter I received a shilling [...]. I began to think about the advantages of writing [...]. I was amazed! Can you really earn money by writing?

Upon completion of his studies, Freddy Macha commenced his training period in the National Service:

[...] nikajiunga na Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa au National Service, mwaka 1975. [...] Ulikuwa msimko mkubwa, kwani Tanzania ilikuwa katika mabadiliko makubwa Ya siasa ya Ujamaa na Kujitegemea na siku zote nilikuwanikiandika na kupiga gitaa langu.¹²

[...] I joined the Jeshi la Kujenga Taifa or National Service in 1975. [...] It was a very eventful period because Tanzania was facing big changes ... for the politics of Socialism and Self-Reliance¹³ ... and every day I was writing and playing my guitar.

The adolescent proclivity for music was instilled in him by his parents; his father, in addition to a practice as a physician, was an expert guitarist and composer of songs, as his maternal uncles were. Furthermore, his family and friends played a role in fostering his interest in literature:

¹¹ Online interview, March 2014.

¹² Online interview, March 2014.

¹³ The 1960s and 1970s were defined by the policies advocated and articulated in the 1967 Arusha Declaration and in Nyerere's political and pedagogical texts, including *Socialism and Rural Development* (Nyerere 1967a), and *Education for Self-Reliance* (Nyerere 1967b). The outcome of these publications was the formulation of a process for the collectivization of the national agricultural system. It was believed that a return to traditional pre-colonial ways of life would be the only means of achieving an ideal socialist state (Nyerere 1968). Nevertheless, the theoretical premises proved to be a mere utopia (Raikes 1975).

[...] Shangazi zangu [...] wote walinipa moyo wa kuandika [...]. Nimekutana na wasanii wengi walionipa moyo. Toka Afrika kusini, Brazil, Marekani, Jamaika na kadhalika. Mdogo wangu, Ndesanjo Macha, vile vile. Ndesanjo ndiye aliyeleta vuguvugu la Mablogi Tanzania miaka zaidi ya kumi iliyopita.¹⁴

[...] My aunts [...] all inspired me to write [...] I've met many other artists from South Africa, Brazil, the USA, Jamaica and beyond. They also inspired me as well as my younger brother, Ndesanjo Macha. Ndesanjo started the blogging movement in Tanzania over a decade ago.

In 1976, he assumed the role of journalist for the *Uhuru* and *Mzalendo* newspapers, a position that contributed to his intellectual maturation and enhanced his sensibility as a writer.

[...] Kazi ya mwanahabari imechangia sana kunoa kalamu na macho yangu. Maana ukiwa mwandishi wa habari unatakiwa umshike mkono msomaji. [...] Nguzo za habari ni kutimiza majibu na maswali: nini, wapi, namna gani, nani na kadhalika. Yote yanatakiwa yajibiwe katika aya za mwanzo. Ukichelewa, msomaji anatupa gazeti kando. Pili, kuijua jamii unayoiandika. Uandishi wa matukio husaidia kuboresha nidhamu na msimamo wa mtu. [...] Wewe ni mtu wa kwanza kujua jambo na aghalabu kuwafahamisha watu nini kimetokea; wasichokifahamu. Hilo ni jambo muafaka kwa mwandishi. Kuwa na msisimko na kuutoa msisimko huo, pamoja na elimu na hamasa, kwa wasomaji wako. Wajibu mkubwa kwa jamii. Inaboresha na kuendeleza sana nidhamu ya kuandika riwaya, hadithi, mashairi ...¹⁵

[...] The work as a journalist has contributed a lot to sharpening my pen and eyes. Because if you are a journalist, you have to hold the hand of the reader. [...] The fundamental principle of journalism is to provide answers to questions like what, where, how, who etc. All (these questions) need to be answered in the opening paragraph. If you delay, the reader puts the paper away. Secondly, to know the society you write about. Writing about events helps individuals improve their discipline and emotions. [...] You are the first person who knows what is happening and you have to make sure that people understand what is happening; what they do not understand. That is the important thing for a writer. To feel and share emotions with readers, teach and care for them. It is a great duty to society. It also helps with writing novels, stories, poems

As has been previously stated, one factor that had an impact on Freddy Macha's life was his experience of movement, which began with his family and continued throughout his adulthood. However, as he himself claims, these constant relocations were not experienced by him as a kind of uprooting, a departure from his culture of origin:

¹⁴ Online interview, March 2014.

¹⁵ Online interview, March 2014.

[...] Nimekuwa daima mtu wa mizunguko ... na napenda hilo ... Watu wengine wanaweza kuishi ndani ya utamaduni yao, lakini wanaufanya nini? Si hoja. Miye nimesafiri kama msanii, yaani mwanamuziki na mwandishi. Popote pale nilipokuwa nimeimba na kuandika nyombo za kusifia uzuri wa kwetu ... Nakumbuka mwaka 1994, nilikuwa nikipiga muziki ndani ya klabu moja mjini Asuncion, Paraguay. Wengi pale hawakuwahi kumwona Mwafrika akiwa vile: akiimba lugha mbalimbali, akiongea Kispanyola, Kiingereza, Kireno, na kadhalika. Nilikuwa naulizwa kama bado tunakula wadudu, tunaishi na nyani, tunalala nje, tunakufa njaa Afrika na kadhalika. Nafasi yangu pale ni kuonyesha zuri la Afrika... Nini kilichonifanya niasafiri? Sababu ni nyingi sana. Kwanza kabisa kutaka kujua. Pili, sikupanga kwenda nilikokwenda. Tatu, ni sanaa za maonyesho. Nne, ni kutafuta ahueni ya maisha, mapenzi, starehe... lakini, kumbel! Dunia nzima ina matatizo na raha zile zile. Labda wajihi na harufu tu ndiyo tofauti ...Kuhusu utajiri ndani ya nafsi yangu ni kama nahau ya kidini au tafakari mambo kifalsafa. Muhimu kila jamii na nchi nilyoipitia - iwe Ugiriki, Kenya, Kanada, Brazil, Ujerumani - popote nilipotuliza miguu na kichwa, ni watu wa pale. Wanadamu. Kitu kigumu labda huwa utamaduni. Mathalan huona taabu sana kwamba Wazungu wanalala na mbwa, wanavuta sigara au wana ubinafsi wa kutoongea ongea sana hadharani na wenzao, tofauti na Afrika... ila kuna mambo ambayo ni mazuri kama kujali kazi, kuwa wakweli na kadhalika. Kila nchi ina ubaya na uzuri wake. Brazil, ilinikumbusha sana Afrika na Ulaya, watu wake ni wepesi sana... Wakyuba ni watu wazuri kuliko wanadamu wowote niliyowaona ulimwenguni: wana moyo wa kusaidia, urafiki... Wakanada ni waungwana na wapole, Wamarekani wanapenda kuona mbele badala ya kulalamikia matatizo, Wajerumani si wanafiki, wakweli sana na kadhalika. Kila nchi ina uzuri wake ...¹⁶

[...] I have always been a nomad ... and I like it. Some people may live within their own culture, but what do they do with it? It is not necessary. I have travelled a lot as an artist, that is, as a musician and writer. Wherever I went, I sang and wrote songs about the beauty of our places I remember back in 1994, I was playing in a club in Asuncion, Paraguay. Many people there had never seen an African singing in various languages and speaking Spanish, English, Portuguese, and so on. I was asked if we still eat insects, live with monkeys, sleep outside, and starve in Africa. It was my chance to make the beauty of Africa known there ... What motivated me to travel? There are many reasons. First, the desire to get to know the world. Two, I never planned to go where I went. Three, the performing arts. Four, seeking the best in life, love, comforts...but, heck! the whole world has equal problems and joys. Maybe tastes and smells are different ... Regarding my inner wealth ... it's like explaining religious topics or philosophical thoughts. What is important is that in every country I have visited - Greece, Kenya, Canada, Brazil, or Germany - wherever I have relaxed my legs and head, I have met people. Human beings. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges is cultural differences. For instance, I have always found it strange that Europeans are used to sleeping with their dogs, smoking a lot of cigarettes, and being cautious in conversation with their friends. However, they also have some good qualities like respect for work and being honest. Every country has both positive and negative aspects. Brazil reminds me of both Africa and Europe, its people are very vivacious ... Cubans are the most beautiful people I have ever met. They have a charitable soul, they are friendly ... The Canadians are quite and friendly, the Americans are more forward-thinking than they are complainers, the Germans are not hypocrites, they are very honest, and so on. Each country has its own beauty.

¹⁶ Online interview, March 2014.

The 1970s and 1980s represent a particularly fruitful period in Macha's career, both in terms of musical output and literary publications. In 1980, he co-founded “Sayari,” the Tanzanian music-poetry band.¹⁷ In 1981 he won a BBC poetry competition. Two publications have appeared in 1984, namely *Twenzetu Ulaya* (‘Let’s Go to Europe’), a small collection of short stories that is characterised by Macha's idiosyncratic language, which reflects the Tanzanian urban slang of the 1980s—and *Mwanamuziki Remi* (‘The Musician Remi’), a biography of the celebrated musician Remmy Ongala.

3.1. Some auto/biographical elements in Mpe Maneno Yake (‘Give him his words,’ 2006)

Mpe Maneno Yake (‘Give him his words,’ 2006) is a collection of short stories. The text is divided into five chapters. Each chapter is preceded by quotations that are like a summary of the content itself. The collection comprises a series of short stories written between 1976, when the author was living in Tanzania, and 1994, when he was based in Brazil. It was during this period that he also produced the final story included in the collection. Each story is distinguished by a title, followed by the place and year in which it is set. This structure gives the impression of a diary, offering insight into the author's life and travels. The scenes described seem like photographs, a strategy for the preservation of memories by means of a sheet of cards and a pen:

[...] Wengi hutaka kujua wapi ni Maisha yangu na wapi sio. Ukweli msingi wa kueleza haya mambo ni kama kupiga picha au kuchora jamii. Siku hizi kila mtu huwa na simu inayotengeneza picha. Zamani nilitumia kalamu na vijitabu kuweka kumbukumbu [...]. Kazi ya mwandishi ni kuripoti, kubuni, kuweka kumbukumbu na kukumbusha. Kwa kifupi, basi, naweza kusema kwamba huu ni mesto wa yaliyonitokea, niliyobuni na niliyoyaona yanigusa...¹⁸

[...] A lot of people ask me where my life is and where it isn't. The way I see it is that it's a bit like taking photos or drawing. These days, most people have a phone that can take pictures. In the past, I used pens and diaries to record my memories [...]. The writer's job is to report, compose, preserve memories and make people remember. In other words, this is a collection of things that happened to me, that I invented, that I saw and that moved me...

¹⁷ In Brazil, he was the lead vocalist of the Os Galas band for a period of several years, as well as the Kitoto Band in London. He is currently engaged in collaboration with Berimbau Blues Band, an ensemble that fuses folk, blues, Afro-Latin, and experimental music, and Kitoto Trio for private events and festivals. Between 1998 to 2001 Freddy promoted World Music Nights in London where he is resident since 1996. He has been involved with Global Fusion Music and Arts, an organisation promoting unknown musicians, hosting events as well as interviewing and making films and videos.

(<https://www.reverbnation.com/freddymacha/song/14552002-kilimanjaro>)

¹⁸ Online interview, March 2014.

Although each narrative represents a personal expression of the writer's creative vision, this analysis will focus on those tales that are rooted in experiences from Macha's own life.

In the acknowledgements page, the author states that the manuscript for the book was drafted several years before its official publication (Macha 2006: v).

The opening short story in the first chapter, entitled *Waswahili, Sir* ('Swahili People Here, Sir'), is *Chizi Balaa* ('Wretched Cheese') written in Burughuni, Dar es Salaam District, in 1976.

It portrays the plight of a young orphan who lives on the streets, surrounded by a multitude of other individuals facing similar adversity, and largely ignored by society.

[...] *Katikati barabara kasimama kiumbe huyu. Magari yanampisha yeye badala ya yeye kuyapisha. Anatazamwa na kutupiwa macho ya hasira na madereva wanaomfokea, wakimkutana, wakimlaani* (Macha 2006: 4).

[...] This creature was standing in the middle of the road. The cars overtook him, rather than let him pass. They looked at him with grim eyes and the drivers shouted at him, insulting and cursing him.

[...] *Kati yao wapo wasichana hawa wawili wenye umri sambamba na huyu mtoto. Wamesimama kando na kaka yao anayeanza kuota ndevu. Wanauliza bila kusita kwa sauti ya kitoto, "Kaka Juma, kwa nini yule mtoto yuko vile? Mbona hajavaa nguo?"*

Kaka atajibu nini? Ana mfano wa jibu? Anajaribu kuutafuta ukweli uliopumzika juu ya kivuli cha mazoea yake. Kwamba hii ni hali ya kawaida mjini. Anajaribu kujibu, "Ah, basi tu." (Macha 2006: 5)

[...] Among them were two girls the same age as that child. They stood next to their older brother whose beard was growing. They asked without hesitation, in their childish voice, 'Brother Juma, why is that child in that condition? Why isn't he wearing any clothes?

What will the brother answer? Does he have any kind of answer? He tries to seek the truth in the shadows of his everyday life. Cause this is the normal condition in cities. He attempts to answer, 'Ah, that's just the way it is'. But they were not satisfied, 'Brother, what kind of madness does that child have?' The brother has nothing to explain. Yes, he started growing a beard.

The author employs the innocence of the two girls as a device to create a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the girls are aware of a highly anomalous situation, an unnatural phenomenon. On the other, the older brother, unable to provide a satisfactory response to their queries, defaults to a convenient answer.

In this short story, Macha does not provide a direct narrative of his personal experience; instead, he offers a biographical sketch of his country, focusing on the lived experiences of street children.

As the author himself stated:

*Chizi Balaa ni mmoja wa Watoto niliowaona kweli. Ana kipaji ambacho kinapotelea barabarani. Angepewa nafasi angefanya mengi katika jamii. Lakini kwa kuwa jamii, jumuiya na serikali zimemkosea, anaishia kuwa “chizi” ... kifasihi hii ni kejeli kwetu sote tusiojaribu kubadili hali hizi mbaya duniani...*¹⁹

Chizi Balaa is one of the children I really saw. He's lost his talent on the road. If he was given a chance, he would make a lot in society. But, since society, community and government have wronged him he ends up being a “cheese” ... this literature is a mockery for all us who do not try to change these bad situations in the world ...

The processes of rapid urbanization and population growth have transformed the urban environment as well as the lives of millions of people, leading to a series of changes, as well as challenges, which are not always positive. One of the many social problems associated with change and poverty is the situation of a social class composed of minors known as *watoto wa mitaani* ‘street children.’

In contrast to other children who are living on the streets but residing in urban slums, the term *watoto wa mitaani* refers to those children who live on their own. They have no contact with their biological families, and lack any form of protection (Lugalla and Mwambo 1999). Many of these children have followed the migration of adults from rural areas to urban centres.

They are without fixed addresses and are forced to sleep on the streets, on pavements close to shops, cinemas or nightclubs, or spend the night in buses or railways stations. During the day, those who are lucky enough to find work in the informal sector are engaged in low-paid jobs. In many East African urban areas, the problem of street children persists (Kilbride *et al.* 2001; Shitindi *et al.* 2023), inspiring writers such as Emmanuel Mbogo who published the short story *Watoto wa Maman'tilie* (‘Maman'tilie's Children’) in 2002.

The decade between the 1970s and the 1980s was a period of great change and challenges for Tanzania. The country was forced to confront a reality marked by the implementation of new development strategies. The transition to independence gave rise to new tensions, with all efforts concentrated on the pursuit of sovereignty and the instruments necessary to achieve it.

In the short story *Barua ya Siri* (‘The Secret Letter’), written in Dar es Salaam in 1983, Macha recounts a day in the life of an important politician, Raimos Halmashauri, who receives a letter that he perceives to be beneficial. However, an excess of commitments and an unforeseen incident prevent him from reading it, and the contents of the letter remain undisclosed. Halmashauri is representative of the typical politician of the period, whose authority is exercised solely for personal gain.

¹⁹ Online interview, March 2014.

An interesting aspect that Macha addresses in this story is the relationship between power and information.

One particularly intriguing aspect of Macha's narrative is its exploration of the nexus between power and information. On the street, Halmashauri is approached by two journalists affiliated with a prominent local newspaper, renowned for its coverage of individuals who have transgressed the tenets set forth in the Arusha Declaration. His response to their inquiries and implications is characterized by a sense of indignation, anger, and fear.

Gazeti hili lilikuwa limeanza kuogopwa na waheshimiwa wabunge na wakubwa wengine. [...] wananchi walilipigania na lilikuwa likiuzika kuliko magazeti yote mengine [...]. Yule Pangusa lazima anyang'anywe uhuru wake wa doria wa kuingilia viongozi wa nchi (Macha 2006: 69-70).

That newspaper began to be fearful of the honourable parliamentarians and other notables [...] the citizens competed for it and it sold more copies than any other newspaper [...]. That Pangusa [the newspaper editor] had to be deprived of his freedom to investigate and spy on the leaders of the country

As Macha confirms, at the time, journalists feared the reactions of the men in power because they had to be careful about what they wrote in order to avoid bad consequences.

Nevertheless, the state of censorship has remained unaltered since the 1970s.

Since the ascendance of John Magufuli to the presidency of Tanzania in 2015, the government has significantly expanded its censorship apparatus. Subsequently, a series of controversial regulations have been enacted, including the 2015 Statistics Act, which criminalised the publication of economic statistics without government approval; the 2018 Electronic and Postal Communications Act, which subjects bloggers to onerous licensing fees; and the 2016 Media Services Act, which conferred upon government agencies extensive powers to censor the media by establishing rigorous accreditation standards for journalists (<https://tdcglobal.org/last>).

4. Conclusions

The genre of the autobiography is often characterised by a focus on the author's significant life experiences, encompassing a range of emotions, aspirations, traumatic events and resonances that an individual may encounter throughout the course of her/his lifetime.

As it was highlighted by the examples drawn from the two selected works, the characters depicted reflect frequently the authors' inner motivations and their perspectives. In the novel *Mpenzi*, Mukajanga presents a historical account in narrative form, from the advent of World War II (*Mpenzi* II,

Chapter II) to the formation of the Tanganyika African National Union, the advent of socialism and its policy's decline as seen through the life stage of Mzee Potee.

Following the attainment of independence, Tanzania was confronted with the challenges of establishing a new government, implementing social change and addressing the emerging generational conflicts. The character of Shangwe represents the emerging generation of Tanzanians, characterised by a complex set of emotions and experiences, including fear, uncertainty and confusion; traits that are moulded by the experiences and expectations of the preceding generation.

In *Mpe Maneno Yake* by Macha, the autobiographical element is particularly prominent. The short stories that are organised according to location and time period, reflect the author's personal experiences and perspectives. In this case, the narrator plays an important role in shaping the narrative, which is not an objective account of the events themselves, but rather a representation of how they were experienced by the author. A reading of *Mpe Maneno Yake* reveals the vision of an individual who aspired to travel the world, immerse himself in diverse cultures, and remain true to his African identity. The author's pan-Africanist vision is made manifest in the introduction to the final chapter of the collection, entitled *Maisha Mapya* ('A New Life'), where he makes his own quotation from Fela Anikulapo Kuti, a Nigerian musician who died in 1997:

Kitu gani ninatafuta katika maisha haya? Umuhimu! [...] Nataka nisimame sawia na watu wa mataifa mengine. Kwa vile unapotembea barabarani na watu wa nchi nyingine, hupewi chapa au muhuri... na ili uwe mtu mkubwa unahitaji taifa kubwa. Ndiyo maana huwa nasema Afrika sisemi Naijeria, Togo au Senegal... (Macha 2006: 170).

What are you looking for in this life? All that is important! [...] I want to be in harmony with peoples from other nations. To be great, you need a great nation. This is why I say Africa, and I don't say Nigeria, Togo or Senegal...

As it has been often observed by critics, the relationship between reality, autobiography, and fiction is much more complex than it may appear. This complexity can be traced back to formalist, structuralist, and semiological literary theories (Shkolvsky 2004; Smithson 1975; Kalelioğlu 2017) that regarded authors' biographies as external to their works and reality and fiction as distinct and antithetical. Nevertheless, alternative critical approaches, such as those based on psychoanalysis, challenge this view and assert that these differences are not as straightforward as it may appear. As Barbieri (2008, 2) stated, it is commonly accepted that it is the thought that generates the representation, and this occurs in both imaginative and autobiographical narration. The latter, in particular, allows for the shaping of memories and histories in a truthful and realistic manner.

In their interviews, both Mukajanga and Macha claimed that their works are the result of a combination of autobiographical and fictional elements. Therefore, it is essential to examine how the autobiographical or even biographical elements are intertwined with the narrative. According to Shinde (2019, 141), the autobiographical truth or the truth expressed in the autobiography becomes a developing content in a complex process of self-discovery, self-portrayal and self-creation.

It can be hypothesised that both works of popular fiction considered in this article could be the result of a writing process defined by Barbieri (2018) as 'trans-autobiographical writing.' This process involves the author drawing on his or her own autobiographical experiences and transferring them into a fictional context. At certain points in the author's autobiography, the narrative transitions into a fantastical domain. This typology of writing allows the author to explore the inner self through a dualistic lens, employing both the auto-biographer's direct perspective and the novelist's indirect gaze.

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Graziella Acquaviva is Associate Professor of Swahili Language and Literature at the University of Turin. She has been doing extensive field research in East Africa (Kenya and Tanzania) on Swahili oral and written literature and has authored many publications in the field of African literature. Her research interests range from Swahili theatre to poetry, lexicography and translations. In collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, she translated from Italian into Swahili Collodi's *Le avventure di Pinocchio: Storia di un burattino*, 1883 (*Hekaya za Pinokio*, 2000) and Carofiglio's *Testimone inconsapevole*, 2002 (*Shahidi asiyekusudiwa*, 2013), and alongside Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi, Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*Ikiwa Huyo ni Mtu*, 2024). She is currently a member of InALC—Investigating African Languages and Cultures, a project funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU—Research Unit at the University of Turin. Graziella can be contacted at: graziella.acquaviva@unito.it

Intellectual biographies and philosophies through digital writing and film

Stella Nyanzi: A digital biography

Benedetta Lanfranchi

This chapter contributes to the volume's focus on exploring intellectual biographies in African studies with a biographical sketch of Ugandan intellectual and political activist Stella Nyanzi. In this chapter I propose a new biographical approach that I term "digital biography", whereby online writings and activity make up the main biographical resource for the biographer. I illustrate this approach through my own digital biography of Stella Nyanzi that has consisted in organizing select, online texts (mainly Facebook posts and Tweets) written over ten years, into a coherent literary corpus, which I have thematically divided into three chronological periods: grief and growing activism (2014-2016); trials, arrests and prison (2017-2019) and running for office and exile (2020-2024). In this chapter I draw on this digital archive, as well as on three other research sources: an extended interview I conducted with Stella in October 2022 in Ferrara, Italy, a short film I made of Stella together with Juri Mazumdar of Juri & Aki films, which was shot in Munich in November 2023, and her published poetry book *No Roses from My Mouth* (2020). I draw on these sources to paint a biographical sketch of one of the most influential figures in Uganda's contemporary political history, showing how her personal and professional experiences have informed her politics, as well as her intellectual and poetic production.

Key words: Uganda, Stella Nyanzi, digital politics, digital activism, radical rudeness

1. Introduction¹

Stella Nyanzi is without a doubt one of the most influential political activists in Uganda's contemporary political history. She is also among the most—if not *the* most—influential digital presences in Uganda's political history, being one of the first activists in the country to make use of Facebook and Twitter (now called X) so prominently and so effectively for her political activities.

¹ My research and film on Stella Nyanzi were all realized under the ERC Consolidator Grant: "Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy" (PhiGe) headed by Professor Alena Rettová at the University of Bayreuth.

Because of Stella Nyanzi's unique use of digital texts, digital platforms and digital mediums in the political sphere, I would cast her as an inaugural figure of Ugandan's digipolitical age, whereby with the term digipolitical I refer to Favarato's theorization of the concept as the "digitally infused, techno-mediated rendition of the political" (Favarato 2025).² According to a 2019 source, Stella Nyanzi had the largest social media following of any Ugandan (Serunkuma 2019), while another source points to the fact that her live-streamed nude protest at Makerere University in 2016 became one of the highest trending stories on social media that year (Tamale 2016). The impact of Nyanzi's use of digital channels and platforms to voice dissent, carry out protest and convey powerful political messages is evidenced by her tortuous journey through the Ugandan criminal justice system, culminating in her exile to Germany in 2022.

According to Kenyan scholar Nanjala Nyambola—one of earliest theorists of the new brand of digitally infused politics we are now experiencing globally—the watershed moment of digital politics in East Africa (and perhaps even more broadly, in sub-Saharan Africa) was the 2017 general election in Kenya, which entailed a massive investment in IT infrastructure for voter identification and result transmission and the involvement of the controversial data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica (Nyambola 2018).³ In her book *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics*, Nyambola skillfully illustrates the double edged power of new digital technologies, which were used by those in power for political control and voter manipulation in the 2017 Kenyan election, while at the same time also embraced by Kenyan citizens as channels of free information and emancipatory politics, as "online forums opened up a new space for political discourse in Kenya that was being stifled in the traditional media and offline society" (Nyambola 2018: 27).

If the 2017 election marks the beginning of the Kenyan digipolitical age, I would argue that Uganda's digipolitical age begins with the legal charges against Stella Nyanzi for 'cyber harassment' and 'offensive communication' under sections 24 and 25 of the Computer Misuse Act 2011 in relation to a Facebook poem she posted on January 27, 2017, in which she referred to the President of Uganda as *matako butako*, meaning a pair of buttocks. The poem was written in anger against the government's

² Favarato's definition of the digipolitical also includes the aspect of post anthropocentrism, but as this is not an aspect I focus on in this paper, I have omitted this third feature of the digipolitical from the quotation, focusing instead on the digital infusion and techno mediation of the political.

³ Cambridge Analytica (CA) was a British political consulting firm involved in a scandal involving the personal data of up to 87 million Facebook users that was obtained without their consent for targeted political advertising.

failure to provide sanitary pads for schoolgirls, which had been a NRM (National Resistance Movement) campaign promise in the run up to the 2016 presidential elections.⁴

In November 2018 she was again charged with the same offense, for another Facebook poem she had posted on September 16, the day after President's Museveni's seventy-fourth birthday, in which she insulted not only the President but also his mother, Esiteri, for birthing him. She remained in custody until her hearing on August 1, 2019, when the Buganda Road Magistrate Court convicted her of cyber harassment while acquitting her of offensive communication. The following day, she was sentenced to 18 months in prison—reduced by nine months due to her time in pretrial detention—to be served at the maximum-security facility Luzira Women's Prison in Kampala.⁵

After serving sixteen months in prison, she was finally released on February 20, 2020, when a High Court Judge overturned the 2018 charges against her, stating that Dr Nyanzi had been denied a fair hearing by the magistrate's court and that it had also ruled beyond its jurisdiction, thereby winning her appeal.

After losing the municipal election as the Kampala Woman Representative and suffering a series of threats directed to herself, her campaign manager and her lover, Stella moved to Kenya for a while before finally accepting the offer of a three-year writers in exile programme run by PEN Germany and relocated to Munich with her three children in January 2022.⁶

2. Writing Stella's biography

My first 'encounter' with Stella dates back to the first rainy season of 2017.⁷ I was offered a three-month affiliation as a Visiting Research Associate with the prestigious Makerere Institute for Social Research (MISR), where Stella was among the first Research Fellows hired by the new MISR Director Mahmood Mamdani. I was given Stella's office for the duration of my visiting period, in the basement area of the main MISR building. I did not encounter her face to face on that occasion, and my contact with her was

⁴ NRM is the name of Ugandan's ruling party, which has been in power under the leadership of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni since 1986.

⁵ American Bar Association, Center for Human Right, Uganda v. Stella Nyanzi, February 2020.

⁶ PEN International was founded in London, UK, in 1921. The acronym PEN originally stood for 'Poets, Essayists, Novelists' and was later broadened to 'Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists.' Today it operates across five continents in over 90 countries, with 130 Centres supporting unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations. To learn more about PEN see: <https://www.pen-international.org/who-we-are>.

⁷ Uganda's climate is largely tropical with two rainy seasons per year, March to May and September to December.

limited to the red paint strokes of her April 18, 2016 nude protest, which still vividly marked the walls of the building and of her office.

It was not until 2022 that I met Stella in person, in the course of a guest lecture she delivered at the University of Bayreuth, where I was employed as a postdoc researcher tasked with writing a book on African philosophy and digital genres.⁸ We exchanged numbers and in October of that year I met her in Ferrara at the festival of my favourite Italian magazine, *Internazionale*, where she had been invited to give a talk on LGBT+ activism.

I was able to conduct a long interview with her in Ferrara, which helped guide my excavation work into her colossal social media digital archive. Creating a coherent narrative from an infinity of tweets and posts has been the great challenge of this research project, due to the sheer quantities of textual production that are enabled by digital mediums. The daunting nature of this task is actually what brought on the intellectual biography as a practical methodological tool to help demarcate a narrative terrain across the vast seas of Stella Nyanzi's digital production. I did this by reading her posts and tweets against a chronology of key dates and key offline events that Stella herself highlighted as having important reverberations onto her online presence and her digital writings:

My father died in 2014, 2015 my mother died, 2016 we lost the election...2016 Mamdani also happened ... 2017 I went to jail, 2018 I went to jail, 2019 I was in jail, 2021 I ran for election, 2022 I did exile...so all my life on Facebook is kind of marked by these events.⁹

On the basis of our Ferrara interview, I was thus able to weave a thematic and chronological sequence across her digital textual production, demarcating three main biographical periods of the last ten years of her life: grief and growing activism (2014-2016); trials, arrests and prison (2017-2019) and running for office and exile (2020-2024).

In this article I present selections from my digital biography of Stella Nyanzi, focusing only on the first biographical period, that of grief and growing activism, due to space limitations. I here propose a reading of select texts from this period in close connection with excerpts from the 2022 interview in Ferrara and from the 2023 filmed interview in Munich, in the course of which Stella so graciously shared episodes of her life and her original and bold thoughts about womanhood, motherhood, politics, feminism, power, life, death and love.

⁸ This is my current book project provisionally entitled *Digital Intellectuals. Fighting for Freedom in Uganda*, of which this chapter is a part of.

⁹ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

3. Grief and growing activism (2014-2016)

I have chosen to begin Stella Nyanzi's digital biography in the year 2014 because it is the year that I believe contains the two major events that shaped all of her subsequent political activism: the signing into law of the Anti-Homosexuality Act and the untimely death of her father due to inaccess to proper medical treatment upon suffering a heart attack. It is also the year she turned forty, an event she celebrated with enthusiasm in a beautiful Facebook poem that she posted on the day of her birthday:

Today I am turning forty years old
with my own Ipsum Car-keys jingling in my hand,
my three babies on my broad black back,
my dreadlocked head has the PhD from London,
my name confirmed in the service of Uganda's oldest university,
my wardrobe full of long three-piece bitengis,
my fourth passport nearly full of cross-border stamps,
my heart: fool of a loveless marriage to an estranged man,
my life full of love from doting parents, three sincere sisters and a few firm friends,
my faith in religion is at a healthy place of querying dogma,
my spirituality is wholesome with eclectic belief,
my right ear-lobe has six holes while my left has just two,
and my forty-year-old body still boasts no tatoo.

Today I am turning forty years old
without enough cash in the bank - the story of my life!
I still have to learn how to save and invest!
I still have to pay off my three remaining debts!
I still have to learn to bake, cook and fry!
I still have to resume my building project!
I still have to start gardening flowers or an orchard of succulent fruit and spicy herbs!
I still have to complete my first monograph!
I still have to brave my first pap smear!
I still have to build regular exercise into my lifestyle!
I still have to learn to stop working without taking a break!
I still have to start dance classes, start dance classes, start dance classes!
I still have to learn how to live well, love deep and laugh much.¹⁰

¹⁰ Facebook post, June 16, 2014.

In the fifth line of the poem, Stella is celebrating her recent appointment as Research Fellow at MISR, where she was hired with an ethnographic research project that analysed the ways in which Anti-Homosexuality laws were affecting the everyday lives of LGBTQIA+ persons in Uganda. Stella had already done research work on sexualities for her PhD in Medical Anthropology at the London School of Tropical Hygiene, with a thesis on ‘Negotiating scripts for meaningful sexuality an ethnography of youths in the Gambia’ (2008). Upon completing her PhD, she had returned home to Uganda where she was employed at the Makerere School of Law by Professor Sylvia Tamale to work on the *African Sexualities Reader* (2011).

Ever since her doctoral fieldwork in the Gambia, Stella’s ethnographic research as a medical anthropologist had brought her in close contact with members of the LGBTQIA+ community, which is why she clearly states that: “my political activism has been related to my academic journey as a scholar of sexuality.”¹¹ 2014 marked a key year in that journey as:

The [Anti-Homosexuality] law was passed in 2014 for the first time and I was actively involved as an ally working with a research community, my research subjects, my interviewees, people who I ate with and who I was writing about who were facing the possibility of death and I couldn’t do research as other academics who sit in the ivory tower and are removed from the communal lives of the people they work with. And so, I became an activist.¹²

The Anti-Homosexuality Act—based on a 2009 Bill known as the Bahati Bill—was passed by the Parliament of Uganda on December 20, 2013, and signed into law by the President of Uganda Yoweri Kaguta Museveni on February 24, 2014. It criminalized same sex relations as well as the ‘aiding and abetting of homosexuality.’ In a Facebook post from the time, Stella describes the grim and fearful mood enveloping the country at the time:

Life continues. We are still eating, drinking and sleeping. We are still breathing, laughing and crying. We are still residing in our country. We may have shifted from one area to another, changed houses for safety or gone visiting for a while, but we are still here. Our hearts are heavy with anxiety, our palpitations pump harder because of fear, but life continues. We fear the arbitrary arrests, homophobic insults, hateful intimidation, beatings and evictions, but our hearts continue to pump blood no redder than yours. We hate the public exposure, and worry about what names are inside the tabloids—is it mine or hers or his or theirs. And yet when you disclose in the public media, we remain alive—hearts pumping faster-faster, but life remains within us. Life continues. We sleep and rise, breathing, breathing, breathing all the time ... The bill became an act among the laws of Uganda, but what did it stop? You go to church and praise the Lord the bill became an act.

¹¹ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, November 30, 2023.

¹² Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, November 30, 2023.

We come to church and praise the same Lord for keeping us alive. What has changed in Uganda today? What did your energies get you? Life continues. Is this what you hoped for? Life continues ...¹³

The law was challenged by ten petitioners, which included academics, journalists, both ruling party and opposition MPs, human rights activists and rights groups. They claimed that it violated the constitutional right to privacy and dignity, as well as the right to be free from discrimination and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Stella Nyanzi was actively involved in organizing for the petition against that law and was in court on August 1, 2014, the day that the constitutional court of Uganda invalidated the law declaring it null and void on procedural grounds.¹⁴

While it was Stella's LGBTQIA+ activism that sparked off her online presence and community, the real growth and expansion started with the death of her father on August 9, 2014, just a few days after the victory in court. The injustice of her father's death, who was unable to access necessary medication upon suffering a heart attack, led her to seek a grieving community.¹⁵ Her preferred platform at the time was Facebook, where she started posting her grief poetry.

My beloved father died mercilessly like a dog.
A medical doctor of four decades,
Heaving and groaning in the backseat of his car.
Driven that dark night by his youngest brother,
Searching in vain from one health unit to another
For a single vial of absent medicine.
His death is on the hands of the dictatorship
Which prized bullets and guns over medicines.
"Give us bullets and guns, not medicine!" (Nyanzi 2020: 49)

In our interview Stella referred to her period of mourning as one of 'the political grieving,' where her personal loss and pain were infused with a growing awareness of deep social injustices in her country:

Part of my crisis is around medicine and pharmacies and yes it was very personal I was grieving and I was out of it but part of what makes it public is that for the first time I realize what poor people that rely on public health services need...all our lives until that time we had been able to get medicine through my father's prescriptions or he'd send us to a specialist, friends of his, and he'd

¹³ Facebook post, March 3, 2014.

¹⁴ The law was reintroduced ten years later and this time it was upheld by the Constitutional Court in April 2024. Homosexuality is now a crime punishable by death in Uganda.

¹⁵ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

pay the bill...as long as he was alive we were protected in very real ways from the everyday grief and sadness and frustration of people who need public health facilities that have medicines provided by government... So I began writing about public funding, public health, pharmacology... so many of the messages at the time were against the government spending on security, tear gas, instead of hospital facilities.¹⁶

The following year, Nyanzi's mother died in very similar circumstances, waiting for an ambulance that never came and reaching the hospital too late to receive any medical assistance.

My sweet mother died senselessly like a frog.
A social worker and patriotic NRM cadre,
Lying under the tree where she collapsed.
Conscious, but unable to lift her elderly body,
Waiting in vain from one hour to another hour,
For an absent ambulance with neither driver nor fuel.
Her death is on the hands of the dictatorship.
Which prefers huge armored vehicles over ambulances.
"Give us Black Mambas and 'Kabangalis' not ambulances!" (Nyanzi 2020, 49)

In mourning her mother, Stella experienced once again the close connection between the personal and the political, and her political awareness and anger grew.

Her growing anger against the NRM government eventually led her to the opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) headed by Kizza Besigye. In a 2016 Facebook post from the time, she describes her change in political affiliation in the terms of an ending marriage with an abusive and sexually disappointing spouse:

'Ssenga' [auntie], my marriage to the NRM disgusts me these days. I am returning the butiiti waistbeads you gave me on the night of our marriage. Even these soft nkumbi cloth [shoulder cloth] no longer have any value in my life. This husband no longer knows what his responsibilities are to me his wife. I am so fed up of this gu-man that whenever he comes to bed with his drum-stick, the drum beat from my skin can only be the hollow mourning of a new widow. Ssenga my first love for my husband the NRM died a long time ago such that whenever he touches me with holy adult lust, I feel ugly, used and abused. Ah-ah, there is nothing for me in this marriage, Ssenga. Making love with the NRM is so painful that we always first fight for my panties before he tears them off my thinning thighs. Over the years, I have been variously hurt so badly by my husband - the NRM that even the 'akachabali' no longer brings the rivers of life to our marriage. I am so fed up with my husband, the NRM that even the doggy-style you taught us no longer brings any electric charges

¹⁶ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

running between my belly-button and thighs. Ssenga, this month I am divorcing the NRM and voting for a new young lover. Kizza Besigye oyeeeeee!¹⁷

The first rainy season of 2016 marked another period of great upheavals in Stella's life. The first was work related, as disagreements with her boss over her contractual conditions led to her staging of a nude protest at the office premises, where she first chained herself to the office gates, smeared red paint on the walls and then undressed. The staging of this protest required Stella to further attune her digital activism skills in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. It was this protest in fact that got her on Twitter, as she explained in our interview:

I wasn't a tweep for a long time, I was on Twitter only to read mainly, I hated Twitter...when I was at MISR I went to a talk by a South African woman who said to us that you have to be consistent—your professional profile on Twitter and on Facebook have to be consistent because people read the two together and I didn't have a very big presence on Twitter but a friend of mine, a feminist lawyer says: "Stella the elite are on Twitter they are not on Facebook"—so what she helped me do was get in the hashtag mode of battle.¹⁸

The incident was investigated by a committee headed by Hajjati Sharifah Buzeki from the public service commission, which largely found Nyanzi culpable of insubordination and failure to honour her employment contract.¹⁹ Still, the incident had opened a new terrain of political activism which Stella was learning to master through increased digital skills, which were proving revelatory in that "the ease of social media—to do something so simple, so affordable, so in my hands and online—you can't fight that."²⁰ These new digital skills increased her online visibility importantly, taking her activism to wider and wider audiences across the country, in defiance of the huge waves of criticism she had already been receiving for her online writings, as elucidated in these two 2014 posts:

¹⁷ Facebook post, February 2, 2016. *Akachabali* is a sexual technique used to enhance female pleasure during sexual relations practiced in Burundi, Rwanda, the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Uganda and Western Tanzania. The reference to *Ssenga*, the auntie, is also connected to female sexual practices, as explained by Tamale: "*ensonga za Ssenga* (Ssenga matters) among the Baganda people of Uganda signifies an institution that has endured through centuries as a tradition of sexual initiation. At the helm is the paternal (or surrogate) aunt whose role is to tutor young women in a range of sexual matters, including pre-menarche practices, pre-marriage preparation, erotics and reproduction" (Tamale 2006).

¹⁸ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

¹⁹ The University Appointments Board eventually agreed on the termination of Stella's contract at its meeting held on December 11, 2018.

²⁰ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

I am a loud-mouthed woman, with strong opinions that I have no problem articulating. I do not agree with everything out there because I have a brain that I use to think for myself. My mother-dearie has received phone-calls on end from relatives who think she should restrain, control, repress and limit me. What is the logic of intimidation and threats given by distant family members who do not agree with me? If they are so concerned about me, why do they call my sweet ageing mother and breathe their complexes through her phone's ear-piece?

"Your Auntie Bee just got off the phone and this time she really got me worried about the things you write on that facebook of yours. She told me to ask you to stop shaming the family-name," my mum implored me.

"Eh-eh, Auntie Bee is running over her fat self," I shot back.

"Stella Nyanzi, daughter of a bullet! This is your auntie, my cousin that you are disrespecting," my mum feigned shock at my irreverence.

"Tell Auntie Bee that my teachers, right from P1, had their hands full trying to get me to keep quiet. I was always punished for talking as a child when everyone else was obediently putting two little fingers on their mouths. Auntie Bee should keep quiet if she so desires, but I say whatever I want to say," I responded to my mother.

"Don't you see that Auntie Bee is acting out of love when she calls and instructs me to ask you to keep quiet?" my mum asked.

"What love is this? Where has she been all these last few years? Why show up now, and only show up to silence me? Atwale eri!" I responded.

Back and forth we went, my mum restating her point, and me not budging. These phone-calls from my parents telling me about relatives who want me silent have become an annoying feature of my everyday life. The concerned relatives read my postings on facebook and then they call my parents. I am not six years old anymore! But even when I was six, my parents always allowed me to speak. ALSO, since these busybodies are probably reading this message too, here goes: I request that you stop bothering my parents' retirement. Call me directly and talk with me. I dare you. If you really know me, claim to love me, and still want me silent, call me and ask me to keep quiet. AS IF!!!²¹

Some academics are very stuffy, boring and take themselves too seriously! I have just been rebuked for being an academic who is active on facebook. The senior scholar who was rebuking me also assured me that I will not make a successful scholar if colleagues learn that I write a daily facebook status. He warned me that I was wasting a lot of precious time on social media; time that would otherwise be spent on academic knowledge production.

"Nobody will take you seriously as a university-based academic, if you continue wasting your time posting things on facebook and commenting on other people's wall," he warned me.

I smiled and let him have his moment quacking. Then I wrote this facebook post.²²

At the very start of 2017, Stella's identity as a digipolitical rebel was further consolidated when on January 27 she published a Facebook poem in which she called the president of Uganda a pair of buttocks. Soon after she published another post in which she criticised the Minister of Education—First

²¹ Facebook post, March 27, 2014.

²² Facebook post, May 6, 2014.

Lady, Janet Museveni—for failing to realize an election promise to provide free sanitary pads for schoolgirls.

Stella was arrested on April 7, 2017 and released after thirty-three days on a non-cash bail. These events, however, mark the beginning of the second biographical period I have organized Stella Nyanzi's biography in, that of trials and arrests (2017-2019), which I do not have the time to go into in the space of this chapter, where I also want to leave some space to present Stella Nyanzi's digital writings not only in their biographical dimension, but also in their adequate literary and political dimension.

4. Radical rudeness—but feminist!

Stella Nyanzi's writing style has often been associated to the Uganda tradition of radical rudeness, especially by journalists writing about her.²³ Radical rudeness is a term coined by historian Carol Summers to refer to a Ganda genre of anti-colonial resistance dating back to the late 1940s and early 1950s when Buganda anti-colonial officials employed it as an act of civil disobedience intended to disrupt the polite social etiquette that was maintained between British colonial authorities and Ganda ruling elite (Summers 2006).

Key examples of the radical rudeness disruption strategy are evidenced by Summers as the 1944 protest pamphlet *Buganda Nyaffe* (Buganda our mother), which openly criticized British-Ganda relations for the hypocrisy of British colonial hospitality and the co-option of Ganda political elites, and a 1948 "scathing letter of eighteen single-spaced typed pages" (Summers 2006: 741) published in the newspaper by radical Ganda activist Semakula Mulumba, in which he publicly declined the Bishop of Uganda's dinner invitation.

Radical rudeness thus has an important intellectual history as a powerful Ganda political genre, used as a tool of provocation, revelation and unsettlement of oppressive political forces. When asked about how she sees herself fitting into this genre, Stella responded the following:

So at the time I first engage with this concept I'm in prison I've been writing and a lawyer says to me a number of thinkers in Uganda associate your work to the radical rudeness tradition and I thought "wow! I even belong to a tradition!" people have said to me: "your work belongs to this genealogy" and many journalists since then have said "oh! You follow in the radical rudeness tradition". I say yes ... to a degree ... but I am not fighting against colonialism, I am fighting against a dictatorship in Uganda...I am not a man, I am all woman! The language that I use has been given

²³ See for example Nothias, Toussaint and Rosebell Kagumire, 'Digital Radical Rudeness: The Story of Stella Nyanzi,' Center on Digital Culture and Society, January 29, 2020.

license to be used by men of a particular political class to which I am not a member of. So, if radical rudeness is allowed to be used by men I don't fall under that tradition. However, what I think that people mean is that components of the poems I have written can be characterised in terms of the content as rude and as radical. I think that also for me radical is important as an invitation that the work that I do has a purpose to change the politics to change ad set agendas that may not be part of the agendas of the public discourse in Uganda. Is all my work under this? I don't think so. My most popular work and social poems that have travelled farthest are the ones that contain elements of rudeness.²⁴

Stella thus sees her gender as a key feature differentiating her from the Ganda radical rudeness tradition, which gives the genre a new and different twist. Her use of sexual metaphors and obscene language, for example, is one such aspect of her feminist infusion of radical rudeness:

When I use sexual metaphors to communicate about the politics in Uganda, I find it a very tantalizing, sort of titillating method of engaging otherwise very dull, disillusioned, passive Ugandan members of society. But infusing the political discussion with sex and sexuality for me is a very feminist method. As a Ugandan woman, as an African woman, part of the strategies that have been used by grandmothers, great grandmothers and all our ancestors as African women have always had an element of rudeness because once a woman in a patriarchal society steps out of line and speaks up to men that is already rude, because in a patriarchal society like the one I come from in Buganda, women have their place. And so for a woman such as myself to speak up! To speak to power! Not with gratitude and thankfulness but criticize and challenge and call out and even insult that to me is very feminist I think its breaking patriarchal hierarchies of respectability and it's stepping out of my place as a woman... I don't think its new...I am not the first African woman to do this.²⁵

While she herself did not make the link with radical rudeness as an established tradition until she was in prison, as described above, Stella was already very clear about her radical feminism and about how this informed her personal and political positioning in the world. In a 2015 Facebook post she writes how she got this from her mother, and describes what for her was her mother's greatest act of defiance to the patriarchy, which was to refuse to be buried in her matrimonial graveyard:

I suckled the origins of my radical feminism from my mother's breasts. Yes. In her death last week, I finally understood the genesis of my passionate desire to know, protect and defend my rights and those of others. At one point in my teenage life, my mother started expressly stating that she was never to be buried in her matrimonial graveyard. Instead, she preferred to be returned to her own family's graveyard. As I grew up, I often heard her telling different people diverse versions of this very same statement." When I die, take me back to my father's land. Don't bury me in Nyanzi's

²⁴ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

²⁵ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

family graveyard,” Mummy would say. And then she died. I was astonished by the numbers of people who came to attend the late night funeral-meeting where the elders made decisions about her final farewell procedures. Mummy had repeatedly told over twenty close friends and significant relatives about her firm decision to be buried among her own patriline. Although her introduction ceremony (*kwanjula*), hen-party (*kasiki*), matrimonial church service and reception bound her through marriage to my father, she wanted to finally sever this connection in her death and last resting place on earth. For many Christians, Ugandans and Baganda specifically, this act of a married woman refusing to be buried in her husband’s family graveyard amounts to taboo. For my mother, this decision was about knowing her desires, rights and entitlements. And indeed, my father’s clansmen and clanswomen graciously agreed to my mother’s expressed wishes. We buried her besides her oldest sister’s grave; in a spot Mummy booked and showed us many times when she was still living. I celebrate my mother's radical defiance! I love my mother’s passionate feminist genes that she passed on to me. Viva Mummy!!²⁶

5. Nude protesting—but online!

Another important genre of political protest that Stella has importantly adopted, as well as digitized and popularised, is that of female nude protesting. This is an established genre of political protest used all over the world, but that has a particularly important heritage in the African continent, as exposed by Professor Sylvia Tamale in her October 28, 2016 inaugural lecture at the Makerere School of Law: ‘Nudity, Protest and the Law in Uganda,’ which was inspired by Stella’s nude protest at Makerere University on April 18, 2016.

Stella’s own take to her nude protesting has been that of a feminist mode of challenging power, one that has proven very effective in the face of what she felt where constant obstacles to obtaining what she believed to be her rights, whether in terms of her rights as an employee or in term of her rights as a Ugandan citizen.

So protesting by undressing for me was really one of the cheapest modes of countering institutional power in court, at Makerere University and in my clan—I had nobody for legal representation but the costs and the time it takes to challenge people in court were too heavy for a lone woman...on my own I had been engaging with the public media, the social media, also communities in the institutions I belonged to but nobody was giving me audience—the only way I was able to create a spectacle large enough to get an audience and set the agenda of the injustices I was meeting was when I undressed.²⁷

²⁶ Facebook post, August 18, 2015.

²⁷ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

In her inaugural lecture, Tamale refers to the pre-colonial West African Oyo Empire, where women of the Oyo-Ile protested naked to show their rejection of Bashorun Gaa's harsh rule in the 17th and 18th centuries. She refers to Igbo women using their traditional practice of *ogu umunwanye* or 'sitting on a man' in the tens of thousands to challenge British colonial policies in 1929, in what became known as the women's war—resulting in the halting of offensive colonial policies and the securing of a few seats in the native courts. She discusses Cameroonian women who in 1958 unleashed the age-old tradition of the *anlu* (a female network from the areas of Kom and Kedjom traditionally used to punish those who transgressed social norms), in a three-year campaign against colonial threats to their farmlands—resulting in the establishment of a women's court and a shadow government that remained in place for one year. Tamale discusses the angry homeless women stripping in the South African Soweto township against police brutality in the 1990s and Kenyan mothers of political prisoners staging a hunger strike and stripping naked in Nairobi's Uhuru Park in 1992; Nigerian women in the Niger Delta against pollution by oil companies in 2001 and Liberian women stripping naked when talks between Charles Taylor and the rebel groups stalled in Accra in 2003 and others still (Tamale 2016).

Like with the radical rudeness genres, also for the case of nude protesting Stella is clearly not the first and is well placed in a proud tradition of African women protestors who have wielded their nudity in defiance of corrupt authorities. Still, she is probably one of the first—if not *the* first—to transfer this genre of protest to the online sphere. Nyanzi staged two major nude protests, the one at Makerere University in 2016 discussed above and one at the courthouse in 2019, both of which are innovative for their digital aspect. Talking about her Makerere nude protesting she describes how:

It was eight, it was raining it was cold there was nobody I was alone... so I undress – I take a picture and I post it ...so when I do the clothes for the first time in my life I record a video – a very short video on my Samsung phone- and I post this – so that is the video that brought [the crowds...] – the phone calls began ... then I saw camera people positioned and I thought I have occupied his office but I need some colour...so I began shoutingso I never put anything on youtube – I don't like youtube, I don't like video, I prefer photos and texts...²⁸

Talking about her other nude protest, she recounts how after she had been convicted under the Computer Misuse Act, she was supposed to be taken back to court for sentencing but instead:

Instead of sentencing me in court ... instead of going down the hill to court I went up to the all-male security prisons and into where capital offenders are kept...I remember my sense of fear and shame

²⁸ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

as I walked through these corridors with men on each side...men who hadn't seen a woman for many years of imprisonment and they were making all these lewd remarks...nobody explained to me that my right to have a fair sentencing in court had been taken away from me...I was taken into a small room with computers and a camera and I felt totally beaten but being the sort of radical woman that I am, thought the court cannot get away with infringing my rights! I am a prisoner surrounded by all these male wardens in a male prison and I thought: what does one do? What does one do to challenge the system? And I very quickly looked at the cameras ahead of me, there was a big screen here I could see the court room, and in that moment of suffering injustice at the hands of the court, I spoke back by undressing. There was a camera provided by the government of Uganda, by the prison system, going into the magistrate as she was sentencing me... I threw off my clothes! And I threw off my bra! And I jiggled my big breasts at her! And I raised my middle finger many times.²⁹

Stella describes the power of nude protesting as helping her shed off shame and providing her with a shamelessness that has been very effective for her activism:

After I undressed at MISR I didn't care—whether I lost a lot, I had won—how do you fight with a naked woman? Men don't know how to fight that because men have domesticated and weaponized the systems and structures—but these other weapons...³⁰

6. Conclusion

There is no real conclusion to this biographical sketch, which is only a small showcase of a much larger biographical project on Stella Nyanzi meant to feature in an even larger publication project on digital politics in contemporary Uganda. The aim of this chapter is to offer readers a glimpse into the original and inexhaustible wellspring that is Stella Nyanzi by piecing together digital texts mainly from her Facebook profile, her published poetry and two extended interviews carried out with her, one of which in the form of a documentary film interview. As mentioned in the Introduction, the biographical sketch presented here relates to the first biographical period I have identified in my ten-year biographical project on Stella, which is the 2014-2016 period in which she consolidated herself as both an offline and online activist. There is much still to be written about her journey after 2016, and it is my honour and my privilege to continue writing her story. For the moment, I will conclude here with a wonderful poem of hers in which she describes her own take on her writing:

²⁹ Film interview with Stella Nyanzi, Munich, November 30, 2023.

³⁰ Interview with Stella Nyanzi, October 1, 2022, Ferrara (Italy).

My writing may be cheap
But it is rather effective.
My poetry may be tasteless
But it is shaking the nation.
My Facebook posts may be tacky
But they grab the balls of the tyranny.
My paragraphs may be repulsive
But they stung the Queen Bee.
My stanzas may be irreverent
But they poked the leopards anus.
My language may be dirty
But it exposed the dictatorship.
My pen never stops writing;
I will write myself to freedom! (Nyanzi 2020; 14)

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Benedetta Lanfranchi is a Researcher at the University of Bayreuth under the European Research Council Consolidator Grant 'Philosophy and Genre: Creating a Textual Basis for African Philosophy.' She is also Adjunct Assistant Professor at the American University of Rome (AUR), where she teaches ethics, political thought and international relations theory. She is author of *Acholi Philosophies of Justice. Responsibility in Times of Collective Suffering* and co-editor of *Critical Conversations in African Philosophy: Asixoxe—Let's Talk*.

Benedetta can be contacted at:

benedettalanfranchi83@gmail.com

Intellectual biography in film

Portraying Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé

Juul van der Laan

Thanks to Sophie Olúwolé, the ancient Yorùbá philosopher Ọ̀rúnmilà is lifted out of obscurity onto a pedestal next to Socrates with her 2014 publication *Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmilà* (Olúwolé 2014). We decided to make a film together, after meeting in 2017 during the book tour of its Dutch translation. Here I reflect on how I portrayed her thought and personality as part of an intellectual biography in a short film. This essay explores how film as an art-form can be an implicitly suitable means of depicting a philosopher, but also how it can act as a means of philosophy in and of itself. The importance of the inextricable role of personality in light of intellectual legacy is recognised here in reflection of Yorùbá traditional thought related to personhood. By providing a translation of my artistic process, while taking into account the ethical considerations related to documentary filmmaking, I demonstrate that the plural, complementary nature of filmmaking can lend itself particularly well to express African philosophy.

Key words: Sophie Bôsèdé Olúwolé, Ifá, documentary film, intellectual biography

1. Seeing is believing?

It might seem easy to reflect someone's being and thinking in a truthful manner through documentary film.¹ The medium tends to be taken as one of the purest possible reflections of reality itself. Documentary film scholar Brian Winston refers to this as the old error—"the camera cannot lie" (Winston 2000: 133). So nothing is less true. To tell stories the filmmaker utilises 'manipulation' within its medium in a similar fashion a painter does who deliberately places and shapes strokes on a canvas. For a filmmaker, by choosing a lens with specific focal length to put on the camera, by framing the shot, by determining the focus, they are already deciding what to leave in and what to leave out of the

¹ With 'film' I do not distinguish between analogue and digital modes of filmmaking, even though the term originally designated 'film' as a material medium. To me, 'film' is not about creating a short clip or a video by pressing record and stop on your phone for example. Although strictly one could call a digital film file a 'video,' I find that a film encompasses a fully invested artistic process towards the expression of something like an idea, and in this case a portrait.

picture. This in turn influences how its subject is being perceived by a viewer with many possible outcomes. Furthermore, other conditions in the process of making, like the size of the film crew, or the location chosen for an interview, has an influence on what happens in front of the camera. These are complex processes which establish a multitude of relations that affect one another. The decisions made by the director, or maker, are of incredible influence on that which is recorded. But this is not where that influence ends, because after recording, a filmmaker moves into the phase of montage. Here the footage enters a level of further selection, choices are made regarding the juxtaposition of images, rhythms are added, colours are corrected, and sound is designed, among others. The focus of this phase of the process is editing the images themselves to establish a certain (audio)visual quality, as well as the spoken text, which is being edited to tell the story of the subject as clearly, and appealingly as possible, whatever that may mean, given the specific context of the subject matter or the release of the work.

These acts of ‘manipulation’ however do not automatically imply a broken connection with truthfulness. It is just that a documentary film should not naively be considered, because of its very nature, more truthful than any other form of film (or art for that matter). Even a fiction film may be more truthful in its expression than a non-fiction (Böker 1978: 127). So, as ethically conscious documentary filmmakers, we are aware that *we do shape* the stories that depict our subjects heavily. And that we also have to work hard artistically, and thus with integrity, to approach truthfulness. Integrity referring to honesty in combination with ethical consideration - which does not necessarily imply truthfulness in and of itself (Ramose 2014: 68).

But finishing a film is not where the interpretative process of the ‘film story’ ends; it continues in the reciprocity between film and its audience, and consequently starts to take on shapes of its own. Susanne Langer reflects in this respect that both the artist and the spectator are actively trying to understand the meaning inherently expressed through an artwork, however they each do so in a different way. For the artist it is an active, intense, and persistent exercise of artistic creation for which maintaining focus is key. For the spectator it is a more gradual process of gaining more or less clear insights (Langer 2023: 70).

It really is a plural and ungraspable project, such an artistic expression. Which is exactly where it delivers its strength in relating people to each other, and to critical ideas. That what is experienced, the feelings generated, the insights as a result, however clear or vague, they act upon everyone involved. Each artwork, such as a film, is in doing so a unique case. Therefore its methods of creation and research (often both at the same time) are by no means scientific. They ought not be quantifiable nor replicable, and they fulfil their expressive role the better for it. As such it is important to keep in

mind that when reflecting on the process of making a particular film as a maker, it could never become a standardised recipe for filmmaking in general. It is merely an exercise in translation of their particular process to gather an insight on how ideas and thoughts can be expressed through another medium than, for example, writing.

With this in mind, for this article, I would like to reflect on my (philosophical) process as a maker in creating a short intellectual biography of Sophie Bòsèdè Olúwólé in film.² All within the framework of the experience of me meeting (and filming) her for the first time in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in May 2017 and for the second time in Lagos, Nigeria, at the turn of November into December 2017. In effect, this project might be considered an act of intercultural dialogue, as well as a dialogue between the traditional-academic domain of philosophy and film.

It is vital here to be aware that the language of film is a language in itself and the transposition of that language into words always is limited. So it might be beneficial to watch the film itself beforehand, and afterwards, to be able to follow and understand the text (for the link see footnote 2). As I will later discuss in more detail, a core facet of Olúwólé's philosophy, being an African thinker, she describes as *binary complementarity*. You may see the film and this article also as existing within each other's complementary light.

2. The short film, the background

As hinted at before, filming, not unlike life, is a complex process involving a multitude of factors that all need to fall into place for its organisation. We can plan the process in advance, but plans are liable to change due to unforeseen circumstances. Perhaps these remarks seem like an open door, but these unexpected confrontations with reality, in fact play a vital part in the (documentary) filmmaking process itself.

I met Sophie Olúwólé for the first time thanks to the book tour celebrating the translation of her book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà* into Dutch in 2017. She visited various places in the Netherlands to present and explain her philosophical vision and deliberations embodied within this book. We met in her Amsterdam hotel, and decided to make a film together about her philosophical and emancipatory work.

²The film is accessible via the link:

<https://juulvanderlaan.nl/portfolio/sophie-vod/> or find the QR code underneath references.

The artistic process³ was roughly scheduled as follows: first a pre-production phase of research to familiarise myself not only with Olúwolé⁴ and her work, but also with the culture of the Yorùbá. Secondly, a writing phase to process the research into concrete storylines and to come up with a plan for filming them. Followed by the production process, in which raw footage for the film is recorded, ensued by the post-production process, in which the montage is shaped. Finally, there is the presentation of the finished film.

I recorded my first interview with Olúwolé the day after we first met, and continued filming during her tour in the Netherlands and during my research visit to Nigeria late 2017. But as early as during this continued research and writing stage, the preconceived plans fell by the wayside. Sophie Olúwolé unexpectedly passed away late 2018. In memory of her I decided to edit a short film based on these early recordings. My aim was to create the film as an introduction to the professor: to her as a teacher of philosophy, and her specific work on Socrates and Òrúnmìlà. The name of the short documentary: *Sophie*. When talking about her, I tend to refer to her on a first name basis, because a special friendship had grown between us, but there are other reasons for this choice of title, which I will expand on later.

What I intend to do in this article is to discuss how I expressed the philosophical concepts involved in Olúwolé's work through the artistic filmmaking process. Starting from the concept that reflecting Olúwolé's personality in conjunction with her intellectual work is paramount in providing a valuable philosophical portrait. The specific Yorùbá ideas around personality, or personhood, are key here. Individual social integrity and personality have to be earned in Yorùbá society (Kazeem 2009: 168). Olúwolé herself analysed this concept surrounding the Yorùbá term *omolúàbí*, which is popularly, and roughly, translated as 'a good person.' She however analysed it within its broader linguistic context, deriving that a 'good' person or personality, is a person who behaves like someone properly nurtured with deep knowledge, wisdom and trained to be self-disciplined and to develop a sense of responsibility that shows in private and public interactions (Kazeem 2009: 168). It extends to the line of thinking that ethics and aesthetics are inextricably linked. The importance of good character as part of personality as well as aesthetics is also illustrated by perhaps one of the best known Yorùbá proverbs: *Ìwà l'ẹwà* (Character is beauty).

³ For practical purposes I am leaving a description of the business side of (independent) filmmaking out, even though it does influence progress of the artistic schedule. However, it is not relevant regarding the central question asked in this text.

⁴ And she familiarising herself with me, and my backgrounds!

Through this text I will discuss a selection of decisions made during the process of the montage. These are examples which I consider to provide clarity in terms of reflecting both Sophie Olúwolé's philosophy as well as her character. Of course to this discussion there are some limitations: I can only reflect on what I consciously did as precipitated in hindsight. The process itself is often guided by many unconscious decisions directly expressed through the medium. However some decisions were consciously made, mostly those related to establishing the frameworks within which the film would exist, such as the thought that this should be an introduction to Olúwolé and her work within the context of me meeting her, it will not be about Òrúnmìlà. Yet, some decisions, or the implications of the results of them, entered consciousness while thinking about the process in retrospect. These latter two types of decisions I can establish here. Even though I will mostly reflect on the decisions during the editing phase, it is relevant to consider my specific approach to recording the filmed material. Because, simply put, how I record images directly influences what I can work with for the montage.

2.1. The title, a name

But let me first go deeper into the title as a first example of dealing with representation of personality in conjunction with intellectual legacy. The title, by the way, was chosen during the editing process. *Sophie*, referencing the name she decided to keep as her first, was inspired by the name (originally 'Sofia') the headmaster of her primary school had given her—in so doing referencing the Greek word σοφία (*sophia*) for 'wisdom,' as the headmaster had considered her to be very clever from an early age (Beier and Oluwole 2001). Even though Olúwolé's work is largely focussed on emancipating traditional African thought, and her second mentioned name on her books 'Bòsèdè' indicates that heritage, I decided to run with 'Sophie.'⁵ To me, it shows what I learned while travelling with her in person: that she loved the Socratic method of questioning, the so called μαϊευτική τέχνη (*maieutiké téchnē*), meaning 'the method of the midwife': let the path of wisdom be born by questioning. This is always a dialogical process, an approach she valued highly. The decision for this first name as a film title stresses the value of what she called 'binary complementarity' which she posited as an inherent African way of approaching the world we live in. She never wanted to exclude any intellectual heritage, she wanted everyone to be valued according to what they can bring to the philosophical table, without bias or prejudice against them based on, for example, racial or gender related categorisations (Olúwolé 2001: 231). In the film she says:

⁵ In the title sequence of the film it is soon after followed by her full name.

Ọ̀rúnmilà said many things like Socrates, but he even said some things better than Socrates.⁶

This does however not mean that she did not appreciate Socrates' legacy, nor that it would contradict her mission to put Ọ̀rúnmilà on the academic map. To reflect this, I chose the title of the film to carry her first name, implicating 'wisdom' in Greek, the language that provided the terminology for the academically accepted field of critical thought. And, as is known, among others in Yorùbá thought, names are important signifiers, carrying meaning regarding an essence of who they're given to. Sophie Olúwolé's main plea having been the acceptance of traditional African thought under this global-Greek umbrella term can perhaps poetically be interpreted as a reference to her personal destiny and intuition, or *Orí*, literally meaning 'inner head,' in Yorùbá. Her strength lies in critical translation through which she could create bridges between cultures. But that is me dreaming on in associations and intangibilities—which is perfectly fine, as I understood it, from an African viewpoint, and in art in general: to be in a free dialogue.

2.2. Research and method

Together with Sophie Olúwolé I traveled through the Nigerian area of Yorùbáland⁷ as part of the research process. After deciding to work together, Olúwolé stressed the importance of me visiting this part of Nigeria and experiencing the culture to better understand what she was talking about in her work.

As mentioned I tend to start filming during the research process. I did this in the smallest capacity possible: my crew was just me. This way the camera forms a part of me in interaction with the interviewee. Not in a hidden way, but with the camera acknowledged as an integral part of the process that demands time to set up, pull the correct focus, set the frame. So for me, there's a direct honesty towards the person I'm collaborating with, regarding what I come to do and how I do it. I make films, and I function in close proximity to this technology which helps me to do the job; so sharing, instead of hiding, the process involved is a form of openness towards the person as subject. But this early presence of the camera also has a more methodological reason. The filming to me is a way to explore the subject I am researching in the moment, through the medium I will be expressing it in. In a way I'm trying to extract myself from the situation as much as possible. Even though this is wholly not

⁶ All quotations from Olúwolé have been taken from the film *Sophie* (Van der Laan 2022) unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ In the past Yorùbáland has variably stretched from South-West Nigeria, to Benin and Togo. (Usman and Falola 2019, 5-6).

possible, it helps me to take on a role of near-pure observation. It provides an openness to take in as much as possible; to hear and see with particular focus. At the same time I'd like to stress that observation itself is never separate from the situation the observing occurs in (Bohm 2002: 181). It is also important to keep in mind that *Ohun t'ó k'ojú síni, èhìn l'óko s'élòmí*, translated by Olúwolé as: "What has its face to one observer, has its back to another" (Olúwolé 1997: 87).

Practically speaking, to try and achieve this mere witness-like state, I made a decision of minimal intervention while filming. I would simply follow and adjust to the occurring situation. At most for example I could say something like: "Oh, wait I have to walk to the other side so that I can take a shot of you walking down that path [which you already decided to walk down]." Yet, I would not forcibly stage a situation in action, i.e.: "Could you go stand there and look up at the sky?," except for when choosing a location to record a static interview. But even then I would let myself be led by the space that I feel is naturally important to the person, Sophie Olúwolé, who gives the guiding perspective.

From a technical point of view this *laissez faire* approach is not always easy, and it demands a more improvisational and spontaneous approach to filmmaking. But I found it important, especially at this stage, to minimise my already very present influence on the process. And I believe that trying to minimise control of the situation gives a lot of unexpected, beautiful, even though often imperfect, material from which I can learn, thus with which I can work. I would rather let it speak to me, than having me speak over it: taking on an inviting attitude in our interaction.

In South West Nigeria Olúwolé showed me important cultural places and introduced me to the system of Ifá by taking me to visit Babalawos near Abeokuta.⁸ To conclude our trip, we filmed an interview in her garden.

While the act of filmmaking forms an important part of my research method, it is not the only one. Important parts of the trip and research process were not captured on film, either because it was not convenient, or well-placed to take out the camera. The experience of being around Olúwolé, her entourage, and visiting these places, off camera, was as valuable to the process of filmmaking as the filmed material itself. In Yorùbá philosophy, and in African philosophy in general, the human person and their society and natural environments are very closely intertwined (Ramose 2005: 57). In addition

⁸ The Babalawo (male counterpart of the female Iyanifa), a highly educated expert of the Ifá corpus, had long been mistaken for, and misrepresented as a priest dealing with divine messages within a for many considered 'fetish' religion. Yet as Olúwolé demonstrates, they are in fact experts in a computational oral tradition that deals with sound scientific and rational philosophical treatises. (Olúwolé 2014) They can be considered a specific figure to visit to restore health, which is intrinsically connected with rationality and argumentative ideas.

to this, further literature study to provide me with a more advanced insight in Olúwolé's work regarding the Yorùbá intellectual tradition over the years, was indispensable.

In the particular case of this short film, due to the circumstance of her passing, the full film production actually turned out to have taken place during the research phase. This is why, from here, I will jump straight to describing the logistics involved in the post-production phase and some of its philosophical implications, before moving into the discussion of the artistic process in creating an intellectual biography of the person Sophie Olúwolé.

2.3. Processing the data and montage

Filming creates a lot of data that needs to be streamlined and processed, both from a technical point of view, but also from an analytical one. And analysis is always a logical procedure within a philosophical framework, consciously or unconsciously providing a vision on the world as a whole. Practically, the film data needs sorting to make sense of. The act of sorting is a vital step in learning and trying to understand Olúwolé's work and the system of Ifá. In addition to that, it is an opportunity to relive the moments that were filmed, from a distance. It offers space for reflection on and interpretation of what was witnessed, this time, alongside further exploration of literature. These steps prepared me for the actual process of montage. Based on the footage I had 'rediscovered' while sorting, I consciously defined the framework within which the short film would exist. However, establishing an initial framework does not mean that the entire storyline had already precipitated at this point. I tend to start with a rough story structure that is being refined, shuffled, intertwined, clarified, etc. along the way. So even though I will be presenting it here as a set story structure, it is important to realise that it was never pre-determined before starting the edit. It evolved through conscious, unconscious decision-making and 'happy accidents' during the process. A former teacher of mine, filmmaker Prof. William Raban, likened it to sculpting, where you start with a big block of stone and discover the real shape of the art piece within it, only while chiseling away. In a way the process can be seen as an inner dialogue, one from which an implicate form is unfolded (Bohm 2002: 188).

Once the storyline is refined, and the images and sounds have found their place, a new process of refinement is entered. In collaboration with sound designer and composer Kit Wilmans Fegradoe we worked on the score, fully aware of the integrative role music has to play within a film, just like the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty stresses in his essay on filmmaking:

Disons seulement qu'elle doit s'y incorporer et non s'y juxtaposer (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 100).

Let's just say that she [the music] has to incorporate herself in it [the film] and not to juxtapose to it.

The music has to be 'embodied within' the storylines and overall view of the film. Other steps in finalising the montage are among others, creating graphics and colour correction. Working on the colours is necessary to refine the visual quality of the images, or stress certain parts of it over others. For this film it was especially important during certain scenes filmed in a rather dark Amsterdam church where Olúwólé presented her book. The dark brown wooden backdrop in some scenes, made the face of a white male professor seated next to Olúwólé jump out much more than hers. Obviously this had to be corrected, the focus 'had to' be on Sophie, through every detail.

So, where I try, as much as reality and logic allows, to be a witness during filming, in the edit I actively shape. And it is this particular part of the process I will further expand on later in this text. Before moving further into the artistic process during the montage, I will describe the framework I established beforehand, based on what I learnt about Olúwólé and her work.

3. A framework: the person, the philosophy

3.1. Defining a framework within which the film should function

Creating a framework by clearly defining the context in which a story is taking place enhances a story's character (Root 1979: 14-15). Furthermore, when having the responsibility of portraying someone through that story, it helps to present her in a more truthful way, relating her to the situation in which she finds herself while being filmed. And last but not least, practical constraints, such as having to work with what you have and not being able to record more footage, are very important to take into account, establishing this framework realistically.

So I decided to stick to the relatively simple context of my first meeting with her as a point of departure for this short film. This direct, spontaneous approach, reflecting our meeting, would align well with it acting as a first introduction to Sophie Olúwólé and her work on Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà for a viewer. Our very first interview in Amsterdam would provide the backbone to the entire film. Our road trip in Nigeria, and her book presentations in various venues in the Netherlands were going to act as support towards the general storyline I would construct based on that first interview.

Secondly, I explicitly decided at the start of the process to have Olúwólé introduce herself to us. No external narrator would be involved in this film. I find it especially important in light of the aftermath of colonial histories and dominant Eurocentric perspectives (particularly in film) that she

would tell us her story directly.⁹ To honour this, yet provide a clear context, I made use of title screens, transcribed from a voice coming from me, the maker at the start. However, the only voice you'd hear is that of Sophie, or people she interacts with on camera.

Thirdly, it was clear: this short film would be about Sophie Olúwolé and her work, not about Òrúnmìlà. Even though she would introduce him to us through her work.

3.2. The person, the message, the settings

The depiction of how someone is in the world, is, according to Merleau-Ponty, one of the main strengths of cinema; but I think he mistakenly stated that it would not be able to express thoughts (Merleau-Ponty 1965, 104). Having Olúwolé on camera speaking her words herself, alongside her gestures and movements, her intonations, and the expressions in her face represent valuable information about her as a person, and provides a clear image of her philosophising: the act of her thinking and talking.

A few things in her work at this point in time particularly stood out to me. Firstly, the importance of the acknowledgment of oral traditions as valuable modes of intellectual transmission and in the case of the Ifá system also as a form of documentation. To Olúwolé:

[...] philosophy is about thinking and talking, writing is just a technique of documentation.

Secondly, the idea of binary complementarity as way of looking at the world, which corresponds to the viewpoints from many philosophies from Africa. Sophie contrasts this with the idea and logic of binary opposition in the Western traditions of philosophy.

And lastly, as one of the key pointers, her attitude when reflecting on a history of colonisation which also affected gender relations.

It is natural that when the Western man came to colonise us, all he can teach me is what he knows. The culture he knows, the philosophy he knows, and so on. He doesn't know my own.

I look physically different.

We may think differently, but that you cannot think ... if you cannot think then you are not a human being ...

⁹ I am particularly adamant about this. Too many reportages exist in which an external -all knowing- narrator, typically from a dominating culture, narrates the histories, behaviours and lives of people from Africa. Through *Multiverse Ghana* (2015), an earlier film portrait I created about scientists in Ghana, I also made this point. Choices like these affect the portrayal of people and their agency immensely in film.

In light of scrutinising this past, she envisions a present and future of dialogue in which one does not discriminate against another. This, between the African and Western world, and between socio-political groups of African societies themselves. Her position as Chairman and Executive Director of the Centre for African Culture and Development underpins this, as she used it to bring these issues of inequity in power and valuation to the fore. Philosophy is in her view strongly connected with struggling for justice in societal and private realms.

Her expressive character, her storytelling as a natural part of philosophy (as it is in the traditional Ifá system), the humour, the constant questioning as a guide in everything she does and everyone she encounters, yet fierce confrontation with logical clarity when the situation required, are a summary of characteristics of her personality; which I experienced both on and off camera.

‘Where’ we met was of big influence on the context in which the recordings were made. This first happened in Amsterdam, a place she had visited before, but was not native to her. The effects of setting on a person, from sitting down in a rather busy hotel lobby for an interview, to moving along the strictly organised, tourists-laden, history-laden city centre streets of the capital of the Netherlands—are tremendous and almost speak for themselves as to someone’s character moving along these spaces. The image is complemented, when set aside seeing her traveling through Nigeria, with its lively business, crossing dusty roads, moving through colourful sprawl and warmer climate. We cannot only see her in these spaces, but also how she relates to her environments. A very telling and concrete example of her personality in relating to her (social) environment is a shot in which we see her enter the stage, under applause of the audience. Instead of immediately sitting down in the chair on stage, she turns around and starts giving an applause back at the audience: she acknowledges everyone in the room by doing this.

4. The artistic interpretation and critical thought

4.1. It’s a manner of reflecting

So, the question is how to reflect a person and her philosophy using film as medium. This requires shaping, like a painter shapes using paint and brush. As my method of filming is highly improvisational—providing a reflection of the encounter of me and Sophie Olúwolé in the settings we visited together—the more active shaping took place in the montage.

After re-discovering what had been filmed during the first phase of post-production, and establishing the framework within which the film would exist, the montage could begin. I will discuss elements of this process following a funnelling and somewhat anecdotal approach. Moving from broad structural ‘strokes’ to characteristic examples of finer detailed work.

4.2. General structure, rhythm and flow

Letting Sophie introduce herself, like she did to me, seemed like a straightforward and clear way to start the film. It was important to hear that she was from Nigeria, studied there, and officially retired.¹⁰ Furthermore, to set the context of where she was coming from, it was important to demonstrate and establish the discrimination against Africans that has been taking place for centuries and, importantly, that African philosophy had not been considered a field when she grew up. It had to be clear that she was here in the Netherlands to prove the non-sense of this and demonstrate what real critical thought looked like.

In the dry, down to earth, matter-of-fact way as she could do, she addressed a crowd at the ISVW (Internationale School voor Wijsbegeerte – International School for Philosophy, Leusden, May 2017):

I am quoting Hegel: ‘The negro mind is incapable of containing any reflective thinking [...]’. Speculation. [...] They should come and see whether what I said is reflective.¹¹

After which we could move on to follow her line of thinking and start with the core question: “What is philosophy?”

It was important for me to follow her reasoning as sharply and clear-cut as possible. Within a short film there is not much time for embellishments, but it would also form an opportunity for showcasing her clarity in reasoning, which started by first questioning our very basic assumptions.

Her love for questioning had to shine through the first part of the film, as I considered it an important part of her character. So it was important soon after seeing her for the first time on screen, to start with a question that is one central to her work, and would be repeated later on:

If the father did not write it, how can the son know it?

In leading with this question without answer, we are opening space to start considering other modes of transmission of knowledge and wisdom. In other words, it sets the scene for critically commenting on the thus far dominant idea that philosophy can only be encapsulated in writing. It makes us think,

¹⁰ Note that she does not throw around titles and accomplishments.

¹¹ This meeting was organised as a memorial for Heinz Kimmerle, who had passed away in January 2016. This German-Dutch philosopher introduced African philosophy in the Netherlands, other European countries, and at Asian, American and African (!) universities during and after his professorship at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam from the 70s onwards. Sophie Olúwolé and Heinz Kimmerle were friends and had a vivid philosophical contact.

if it happens without written texts, how then? The possible answer, the example of the intricate Ifá system, would be introduced later in the storyline.

So, following a clear line of ‘questioning’ (recall the importance of this for both Socrates and Òrúnmìlà’s Ifá system) was vital to the structure of the film. But, this rhythm of her questioning is broken by someone else’s. A younger Yorùbá man, amidst a diverse Dutch audience, asks her a question from the audience during one of the book presentations in the Netherlands. It is a small scene (which I will be talking about in more detail later), but it is fulfilling multiple roles at once. This question and her answer provide important context about the realities in Nigeria today regarding traditional practices, and at the same time demonstrate her sense of story, timing and humour.

After highlighting the existence (still today) and reasons for the epistemic injustices done, that is the denial of African philosophers and scientists by their Eurocentric counterparts, and the Western patronising ‘know-it-all’ attitude towards others and Africans in particular, it was important to move forward and get into the Yorùbá philosophy itself. I selected only a few of her findings that were key to her work on the system of Ifá, for the sake of telling a short story. It included explaining the concept of binary complementarity, the existence of the binary coded Ifá system itself—a completely oral system that has existed for centuries—and a key example of a thesis from Ifá, a name interchangeably used to indicate both Òrúnmìlà as a person, and the collectivity of people trained in Ifá over the ages. In this film I did not have the time and space to further expand on her precise analysis of the texts, but this limitation was fine, seeing that moving too deep into the material would hamper the introductory function of the short film as a whole.

The concrete example I did choose was part of the ones she mentioned to me in the interview in the first place. The one I chose does not only say something about the fact that Ifá poses theses (of complementarity), but it also establishes a link with Olúwolé’s feminist focus in her larger body of work.

Four groups of experienced people should govern the affairs of state: experienced men, experienced women, experienced youths, experienced foreigners. (as Olúwolé translated from the Yorùbá oral text Ówónrìn Òbàrà in the Ifá system)

After stating:

In our place, there’s nothing you do, women must be there.

Here she contrasts the organisation of traditional Yorùbá society with that of the West where women were excluded from these types of duties up until the 20th century. As over her career Olúwolé had done a lot of work relating to feminism, and being a first female PhD in philosophy in Nigeria herself, I

found it important to stress that aspect somewhat implicitly through this particular example from the Ifá system.

Olúwolé's main goal was to highlight the fundamentals of logic beneath Western traditions of thought and those beneath African traditions of thought, and to stress that both can learn from one another to move our societies forward in a beneficial and humane way. In this context she champions African humanism, as inspired by African philosophical traditions. And upholding this vision, she made the strong plea that despite injustices, the African traditions had not been lost, and were there for us to discover. But that it had to be done properly to avert past mistakes of misinterpretation.

This wisdom of hers for the future would lead to the last part of the film. The title of one of her presentations in the Netherlands *What the West can learn from Africa* (Olúwolé, Amsterdam, 24/05/2017) set us up for her final words. Simultaneously it says a lot about her courage and drive, if you consider where she's coming from, delivering it in a central part of Amsterdam that in its historical construction as a city of global importance, had a lot to thank to the wealth gained based on a colonial endeavour.

She makes a strong statement by putting Ọ̀rúnmilà on equal footing with the father of Western philosophy Socrates, well supported by extensive analysis. And at the end of the film, we leave her, seeing her pride, and hearing her wish that fellow Africans should be proud as well.

This particular structuring helped me tell quite an extensive story in a relatively short time; only 14 minutes. As you might have noticed based on the description above, this structure is built out of literal interview quotes as much as showing actions, reactions or situations not necessarily accompanied by literal narration. Furthermore, rhythm, pace, and juxtaposition of images, sounds and text can help shape the story and thus the image of Sophie Olúwolé's personality and intellectual legacy. Let us dive a little deeper into examples of these occurrences.

4.3. Association, image, and truth

"Wisdom is like a road that goes in different directions. Therefore, nobody can be the custodian of absolute truth," a translated excerpt from Ọ̀bàrà-Méjì in the Ifá system (Olúwolé 2014: 30).

Time does not have to be linear in thoughts, nor in storytelling. Rather often a new ordering principle is created by association, which is also what happens when thoughts 'jump.' There has to be room for association and intuition in perception and (philosophical) thought. Moreover, truth is always on the move. This means that truth is always temporal; embedded in time, personal and historical (Merleau-Ponty 1953: 32). David Bohm also highlights this ever-flowing nature, indicating that the word 'truth' as a noun is actually unsuitable. He suggests to use the term 'verration' instead (Bohm 1980: 54).

In his continued endeavour to connect philosophy and art, Merleau-Ponty gives an interesting example of the enduring unfinished character of truth, which would also be applicable to the truth of a film:

Il est parfaitement vrai que chaque philosophe, chaque peintre considère ce que les autres appellent son oeuvre comme la simple ébauche d'une oeuvre qui reste toujours à faire [...] (Merleau-Ponty 1953: 33)

It is perfectly true that every philosopher, every painter considers that what the others call their work, a simple sketch of a work that is still to be made [...]

So, movement in truth, and movement of thought expressed through association and intuition are closely linked to each other, and can perhaps implicitly find its of expression through the moving image. This film, in a way, can be seen as an exercise in reflecting this: it is not an exact chronological recalling of events, but follows lines of thought through association. This also means that I chose the audio-visual elements to be guided by association. This way it is possible to work with both abstract imagery and what I would like to refer to as figurative imagery. The latter sets us up to directly recognise what we see in terms of objects and actions. In other words, clear signifiers are present that immediately give the viewer the idea they can place what they see in a certain context. The joy of working with this latter type of imagery, is combining them with unexpected text, other images, or sound so it gives it new meaning or carries a new perspective. The joy of working with abstract imagery lies in working with something that feels like a pure form, without presupposed, predefined (social, cultural, etc.) meaning attached to it. All these images, and their combinations, can move, stagnate; provide a certain rhythm which establishes thoughtful relations, that might even be felt, without having to put words to it to describe what is seen. It just is. Merleau-Ponty puts this as follows:

Le sens du film est incorporé à son rythme comme le sens d'un geste est immédiatement lisible dans le geste, et le film ne veut rien dire que lui-même. (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 103).

The meaning of film is incorporated in its rhythm like the meaning of a gesture is immediately understood in the gesture, and the film doesn't mean anything other than itself.

Music does this too, in perhaps an even more directly abstract, ungraspable way. When reflecting on the significance of music, Susanne Langer agrees, which might pose problems in writing this article: artistic symbols are impossible to translate; their meaning is determined by the particular form they have taken (Langer 2023: 72). But then again, the article does not try to be the film.

The interchange with abstraction can help us think about relations between things, and establish intuitions towards new concepts. I do not intend to speak of ‘new’ in an absolute way, which would form another impossible project. To the traditional Yorùbá, for example, these concepts are age-old; yet the intercultural exchange between me and Olúwolé could deliver new insights even for someone familiar with the original concepts. This story is about the understanding and discovery of a certain perspective, not about invention. So in the montage I used the aforementioned associations of imagery to keep in line with the core idea of what Olúwolé was doing: uncovering an intellectual tradition that had been undermined by the dominant Western oriented perspective that still reigns supreme today; whether we are conscious of it or not.

4.3.1. Binary complementarity

An example of the utilisation of both abstraction and repetition in the montage, is when Sophie Olúwolé explains about binary opposition and binary complementarity. I use the same images during both explanations, but made them relate differently to each other. The role of sound in these sequences particularly is also very important in enhancing this distinction. Furthermore, in terms of time structure of the film, I first started with the explanation of binary opposition, which is estimated to be familiar to most (as it was to me), due to its more dominant heritage.

About binary opposition in relation to reality Sophie says in the film:

The West have done to define reality. Reality is made up of two elements: the physical, which is material and the non-physical. Most Western philosophers think that matter is real, non-material is nothing. It is not important.

She summarises binary opposition as the conception that matter and idea are independent. While binary complementarity sees them as interdependent (Olúwolé 2014: 124-125). She would sometimes do a demonstration with her hands, where she’d show the back of her hand, then her palm, pointing at them, saying something like: “in the West your hand has a back or a front.” Then she’d flip her hand again to show the back and the palm and say: “in Africa it has a front *because* it has a back; the two are there together.” It can be boiled down to the idea that in the West one typically departs from OR logic, whereas in Africa it is oriented towards AND logic. “Something is good OR evil,” compared to “good cannot exists without evil:” “something is good AND evil” (Olúwolé 2001: 227). Later on in the film, when Olúwolé has explained more about the Ifá system, I follow up on the explanation of binary opposition and introduce her explanation of binary complementarity, ‘the African way.’

I consider this comparison the beating heart of the story. This is why I went about expressing it in the film very carefully. The images I show in these sequences belong to the same world as one of the first scenes we have seen in the film, to generate a sense of recognition: we see a man on a boat, seated in front of us, we look up at him as he speaks, feeling smaller than him, perhaps reminiscent of the perspective of a child, and in voice over Sophie primes us with one of the core questions regarding oral tradition and knowledge transmission:

When the father knows something and he don't write it down, how can the son know it?

When Sophie introduces the concept of 'binary opposition' later in the film, I move us back into this space on the water in the boat. Her line of fundamental questioning that had started with "What is philosophy?" ended in "What is reality?" This props up the explanation of the difference between a Western and an African approach to the answer. Here, wanting to stress the importance of this question, I set in a fast movement, almost abstracting the scenery we are driving past, as if somehow the hard, material figurative landscape transforms into something else, something intangible. Then I move towards the abstract light play on water, at first glance not to be recognised as such. Until we see the top of the wooden hull up close, and we seem to be staring at the reflections on the water as the boat moves forward with speed. While simultaneously using the rhythm of movement in the image to correspond to her words: Sophie remarks a oppositional distinction between the material and the non-material conception of reality in the West. In this sequence we have moved from figurative to abstract to reveal the figurative imagery again. When we are clearly back in the boat, we pick up where we left the question about father and son at the beginning:

Some people are now saying that writing is philosophy [...]

And then, she throws this 'Western' argumentation back at us:

If writing is philosophy, then Socrates was not a philosopher, he did not write anything.

Very straight to the point, I cut back to Sophie talking to us from the chair in Amsterdam at the *italicized* part of the quote.

This is a confrontational set up which underlines the main statement she is making with her book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà*. And it expresses Sophie's character in both a sharp and gentle way.

When later in the film we move towards the explanation of binary complementarity, I use the same imagery again, but I let the light-play off the water mix in with 'the real world' in which Sophie

is present in Amsterdam. A shadow moving aside for her, while she is resting on the elevated steps in front of an old building, perhaps reminiscent of an urban throne. We then fade into the title of one of her presentations: *African philosophy. What the West can learn*.

4.3.2. Moving from space to space

Associations can happen in a myriad of ways. One such example is through moving from space to space. We are transported to Nigeria after a Yorùbá man from the audience during the book presentation in Amsterdam asked her how she was dealing with talking about Òrúnmìlà in Nigeria today, as his name is commonly associated with fetish, to be eschewed. This was an important remark, which at once indicated that Olúwolé's work was in practice quite difficult to accomplish even in her native context. This question, and her answer, said a lot about the context and her personality in relation to it, but doing so without lengthy explanations. I start with providing the first part of her answer. Sophie responded:

I have a daughter, my daughter. She's a Christian. She does not allow me to take this book into her house. (Waving around the Nigerian edition of Socrates and Òrúnmìlà she is holding.) Does that answer your question?

Her continuation of the answer, is picked up later in the film, after first making an associative move to Nigeria. We move into a scene where we literally see where she is coming from. And we continue to dive into the effects of the colonial history in relation to her work. In the montage I play with rhythm, in terms of stagnation, delay, and emptiness. This is complemented by the drum rhythms in the score, which in my mind highlight the kind of irony I wanted to imbue on the montage here.

How can a whole people not think?

Olúwolé's eye line moves downward and I cut to black, where an almost out of rhythm residual drum sound gives an almost awkward little encore. It is as if to say: "Yes, reflect on that for a bit." And then we move on.

4.3.3. Graphics and the system

I made the deliberate choice to make the graphics playful, plural and contemporary, yet incorporating original sources. Again, this was a choice made based on my judgement of Sophie's character and vitality. Examples of original sources are the use of Ifá code representations as given to me in booklet-

form by the Babalawo we see in one of the scenes, and online, partially highlighted screenshots of William Bascom's *Ifá divination: Communication Between Gods and Men In West Africa*, originally published in 1969. I also show an edited version of Raffaello's painting *Scuola di Atene* (translated: School of Athens) to show Socrates thinking and talking (as are the other philosophers in the painting) and transposing it over Sophie Olúwolé's thinking and talking in a public space as seen from almost a bird's eye perspective, zoomed out.

In this film I consider the subtitles to be part of the graphics; this is why I made them dynamic, sometimes popping up larger, and out of line, to stress a remark Sophie is making. When making the film, I felt that it was necessary to use subtitles to make her words come across loud and clear. The reality is that, during one of the presentations given in the Netherlands, one at which I was not allowed to film, the Dutch audience had been struggling to understand her Nigerian-English accent. I realised that a non-Nigerian, non-English general audience would likely struggle following the film without subtitles. So, in light of enhancing accessibility to an audience as wide as possible I decided to work with subtitles. But instead of translating, I kept them true to her actual words in English. It is interesting to reflect on this complementary role of the written and spoken word in this film.

One last graphic move I made, which very few people would (perhaps consciously) notice, is the fact that I extracted Sophie from her background in the Amsterdam hotel lobby interview shots. By using black bars on either side, I framed the background in approximation of the 4 : 3 ratio reminiscent of older film and television formats before HD had arrived: a nearly square framing format that fits inside the currently most utilised rectangular screen ratio of 16 : 9. It is now often adopted for stylistic reasons in (arthouse) films or when dealing with archival footage recorded in that ratio. However, I chose this framing to be able to make Sophie in her chair sit outside, or in front of, this frame within the actual frame. The hotel lobby had circumstantially been her space for the interview, yet it was foreign to her, and when she was talking to me it felt like she was doing so from another place: introducing me to this other way of thinking, this world I myself had not experienced before. Mind you, also in Nigeria she had been working thoroughly outside of the status quo; so it befitted her character to literally place her outside the frame in the interview setting which formed the backbone of the entire film.

5. Philosophical reflection through film

While there are many more details to dive into, even for a short film, I hope the above examples point towards cinematic thought processes that express both Sophie Olúwolé's personality and parts of her philosophy through an introductory intellectual biography.

When working within the field of documentary film in an ethically considered way, with integrity, we have to take into consideration an inherent prejudice towards truthfulness in expression of the subject. Seen the constructed nature of the art form called ‘film,’ and the plural, ever-changing nature of truthfulness in relation to observation, there is a responsibility towards subject, viewer and the collectivities they represent, to take the artistic process of research and expression through the medium seriously. But not all responsibility can be carried by the maker, ideally a viewer should recognise these implications as well when watching and interpreting documentary films.

Taking all this into account, the (documentary) film as a medium lends itself particularly well to expressing philosophy or philosophical concepts, capable of combining both oral, written and artistic forms of expression, as intended to demonstrate in this text. Particularly in the case of expressing African philosophy, there are interesting conceptual parallels that fit quite naturally within the formative process of a film. Its multifaceted production process points to an inherent plurality and complementarity of all elements involved. All of which contribute to an artistic ‘wholeness’ understood in the sense of Mogobe Ramose (Ramosé 2005, 56), that continues to act, and form within the minds of the viewer -and maker- even after the maker needs to consider their film production ‘finished’ because of practical constraints. Cinematic expression, in this case within the domain of the documentary film, can both teach philosophy directly through a thinking and talking philosopher portrayed, but can also actively philosophise, expressing thoughts and ideas through the language of the medium. In the particular case of this short intellectual biography *Sophie*, both were happening at the same time.

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¹² Scan to watch *Sophie*:

Juul van der Laan is an independent artist-filmmaker, based in Rotterdam, NL. Initially schooled in Chemistry (BSc, Utrecht University), she swapped lab equipment for a camera and proceeded her studies in film (MA Documentary Film, University of the Arts London). With a focus on strong research in creating her work, she moves between the overlapping domains of science, philosophy, and art from an intercultural perspective. Her short documentary *Sophie* was a.o. nominated for a Lions Award 2022, pre-screened at the University of Ibadan, and officially premiered at the Lagos Book and Art festival in 2022. She also made *Multiverse Ghana* (60', 2015) and currently works on the ongoing development of the critical AI - essay film installation *IMU* (v2.2 presented at Ars Electronica, 2024; v2.1 at Wageningen University, 2024) featuring Prof. Mogobe Ramose.

Find out more about her work on <https://juulvanderlaan.nl>

Juul can be contacted at: contactme@juulvanderlaan.nl