Deconstructing and reconstructing holy meanings through an 'exegesis' of W. E. Mkufya's novels

Cristina Nicolini

This study introduces an original reading of William Mkufya's Swahili novels through an investigation of not only direct and indirect intertextual links from the sacred texts, namely the Bible and the Qur'an, but also explicit or implicit references to them.
Mkufya either refers to or critiques some religious prescriptions deconstructing and reconstructing meanings as an exercise to 'decolonise the mind' (Wa Thiong'o 1986). Beside this, Mkufya in his novels experimented with style and genre-blending to articulate plural philosophies and epistemologies.
This 'exegesis' of Mkufya's novels has been conducted through a combination of personal conversations with the author and in-depth textual analysis of the following novels: *The Wicked Walk* (1977) which Mkufya self-translated into Swahili as *Kizazi Hiki* ("This Generation," 1980), *Ziraili na Zirani* ("Azrael and Zirani," 1999), *Ua La Faraja* ("The Flower of Consolation," 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ("The Existence of Flowers," 2019).

Keywords: Swahili novels, intertextuality, Bible, Qur'an, conceptual decolonisation.

1. Introduction[1]

This study represents an intra-textual and inter-textual reading of selected Swahili novels written by the Tanzanian intellectual and novelist William E. Mkufya. Particularly, this paper consists in a hermeneutics of Mkufya's novels through the 'exegesis' of intertextual connections to the holy books *i.e.* the Bible and the Qur'an.

The interest in this research was sparked by thorough textual analysis of Mkufya's novels, where not only extensive direct and indirect quotations from Christian and Muslim scriptures but also explicit or implicit references and allusions to them can be sifted. The reading was strengthened by interviews,

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discussions and informal talks with the author, whom I acknowledge and with whom I am in ongoing conversation.

In addition to this, the idea of devoting a paper to this targeted investigation of Mkufya's novels was further encouraged by Diegner's statement on Mkufya's novel *Ziraili na Zirani* (1999) that displays: "a lot of intertextual links to religious texts" (Diegner 2005: 28).

Mkufya is a writer, translator, self-translator, and editor in chief at the Mangrove Publishing House in Dar es Salaam. He is a prominent author of Swahili philosophical novels,[2] appreciated by academics, but little-known among the wider public.

William Mkufya was born in 1953 to a Lutheran family of the Sambaa ethnic group from Lushoto (Tanga). He told me[3] that he had started examining religion from a young age. Mkufya especially criticises conflicts and violent reactions caused by religious differences. Then, he seems to have embraced a secular perspective as expounded in his novels.

The novels which have been selected for examination here are *The Wicked Walk* (1977), which Mkufya self-translated into Swahili as *Kizazi Hiki* ("This Generation," 1980); *Ziraili na Zirani* ("Azrael and Zirani," 1999); and the *Diwani ya Maua* ("The Poetry of Flowers"), consisting of two novels:[4] *Ua La Faraja* ("The Flower of Consolation," 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ("The Existence of Flowers," 2019). I argue that the milestone novels are *Ziraili na Zirani,* an epic narrative adorned by poetry, and *Kuwa Kwa Maua*, a tragic drama implanted in prose. In both works, Mkufya's experimental aesthetic moves from a simple to a complex novelistic genre (Bakhtin 1981), which articulates plural beliefs, epistemologies and philosophies by experimenting with style and genre-blending (Nicolini 2022; Rettovà 2021 a, b).

2. Textuality and style

Since human understanding is always and inevitably interpretation (Gadamer quoted in Hallen 2002: 59), 'historical' texts need to be hermeneutically scrutinised (Gadamer 1981: 267).

[2] Nicolini, Cristina. 'William Mkufya and his Flowers: An Intellectual Bio-Graphy,' paper 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] Personal interview 17-11-2023.

[4] The third novel is forthcoming.

Methodologically, this study is based on the technique of "reading closely" text and textuality (Veit-Wild and Vierke 2017: ix, xiv). Since "reading is a process of moving between texts and intertext" (Allen 2000: 1), intertextuality (Kristeva 1986: 37; Allen 2019) will be used as a conceptual framework.

"Any text is constructed as a mosaic of citations; every text is the absorption and transformation of another text" (Kristeva quoted in Diegner 2005: 27; Allen 2000: 35-7). "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 1977: 146) offering "insights of person, community and cultural traditions" (Barber 2007: 205) "through its specific textuality, its specific way of being a text" (Barber 2007: 13).

Furthermore, 'entextualisation' is a process that "freezes" discourses into text but detached from their original context and recontextualised in a completely new context (Barber 2007: 22-3, 79). This process is especially applicable to the sacred texts that in order to be preserved and transmitted, it is not enough for them to be written down, but they need "to be doubly entextualised—first by being written, second by being taken out of normal textual transmission" (Barber 2007: 27).

Indeed, intertextuality also implies quotation between genres, "when one genre incorporates chunks of other genres and subsumes them to its own project—but in such a way that they retain recognisable features" (Barber 2007: 78).

Dealing with textual genre, novels are a 'heteroglot' and 'heterogeneric' "complex system of styles and dialectics" (Bakhtin 1981: 25), wher "social heteroglossia dialogised" (Bakhtin 1981: 273) structured in the "artistically organised system of novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 300). A 'polyphonic novel' is rich in "dialogic relationships and double voiced discourse" (Bakhtin quoted in Allen 2000: 24-5). The plurality of belief systems is expressed in the mouths of 'ideologues' (Bakhtin 1981: 333-5): all characters and narrators who possess their own discursive consciousness (Bakhtin quoted in Allen 2000: 22-3). Furthermore, the plasticity of novels can produce a "novelization of other genres" (Bakhtin 1981: 39), and/or "incorporation of other genres" (Bakhtin 1981: 320).

As I have argued elsewhere, "Swahili novels are a promising genre through which to develop and communicate philosophical elaboration of alternative epistemologies" (Nicolini 2022: 68), because of the plastic and inclusive nature of the prose which encloses and discloses a 'hetero-epistemic textuality' (Nicolini 2022: 263).

"It is intertextuality that creates the possibility of a dialogue between disciplines, dialogues between genres and dialogue between the split-self" (Kezilahabi 2012: 114). Therefore, Swahili 'post-realist' (Diegner 2018; Aiello 2015) 'experimental' novels (Bertoncini *et al.* 2009; Garnier 2013; Gromov 2019) led the evolution to the dialogic discourse of a polyphonic novel (Bakhtin 1981: 38), where "the clash between doxa and para-doxa" (Barthes quoted in Allen 2000: 92) is expressed through the stylistic

power of a post-structural text. Indeed, Swahili contemporary novels blur the conventional boundaries of genre through "metareferences to genre other than prose, especially drama and poetry" (Diegner 2021: 128; 2017), and by formulating 'inter-genre' sections, they insert poems or dramatic dialogues in the frame of the narrative prose (Diegner 2021: 132-133). Poetic elements and dramatic texts, woven into the narrative canvas, articulate alternative knowledge to that conveyed by the prose (Nicolini 2022; Rettovà 2021b), thus becoming the textual kernel.

3. The translations of the Holy Books into Swahili

The critique, as examination of validity (Wiredu 1998: 17), of monotheistic religions imported to Africa, Islam and Christianity, is an integral part of the discussion as well as the question "convert from/into what?" (P'Bitek 1986: 56, 65). In Tanzania, the "Cross and the Crescent" (Mbogoni 2004) are the main faiths co-existing together[5] and Swahili was adopted as a religious doctrinal language by both Christianity and Islam (Topan 1992: 342-3; Mazrui and Mazrui 1998; Chesworth 2022). Therefore, in the nineties, Swahili went through a process of 'secularisation,' because "the adoption of Swahili by Islam and Christianity gave it an ecumenical status, but the language was made to function in a way that suited the theological temperament of the respective custodians" (Topan 1992: 343; Mazrui and Mazrui 1998), as the use of passages from the Bible and the Qur'an in Swahili Muslim and Christian tracts demonstrated (Chesworth 2008: 3).

The translation[6] of both the Bible and the Qur'an into Swahili had a critical impact not only on indoctrination, but also on the standardisation and development of the Swahili language (Topan 2008a: 253-7).

The complete modern edition of the Swahili Union Version Bible (SUV) in standard Swahili, supervised by H.J. Butcher (The Church Missionary Society) and A.B. Hellier (The Universities' Mission to Central Africa), was published as *Maandiko Matakatifu ya Mungu Yaitwayo Biblia* ("The Holy Scripture of God, named the Bible") by the Bible Society of Tanzania and the Bible Society of Kenya in 1952 (re-edit 1997; Firsching 2015: 81; Cassuto *et al.* 2020: 84; Mojola 2017; Chesworth 2008; Mojola 2000). The

[5] However, this co-existence has not always been peaceful over the centuries. Julius Nyerere, in the process of nation-building through his political ideology of *ujamaa* "familyhood," Tanzanian socialism, suggested a secularisation process that places religion in an individual and personal sphere (Nyerere 1979: 38). Indeed, Art. 33 of the constitution of the Tanzanian republic guarantees the right of religious freedom (Makulilo 2019: 137). Conversely, the 1990s was a period of religious controversies prompted by a radicalisation of both Islam and Christianity (Mbogoni 2004: 153-69; 171ff).

[6] For the history of the Bible and the Qur'an translations into Swahili see: Mojola (1999a; 2000; 2002; 2017), Chesworth (2008; 2022), Firsching (2015), Topan (1992), Vierke (2009), Pawlikova-Vilhanova (2006).

SUV became the most popular Bible, called the "King James Version equivalent of the Swahili speaking world" (Mojola 2000: 521; 2017: 42; Chesworth 2008: 140; Firsching 2015: 81).

The Swahili versions of the Qur'an recognised as adequate are both *Qur'ani Takatifu* ("The Holy Qur'an"), the translation by the Zanzibari Sheikh Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy[7] compiled between 1950 and 1967, and the translation by Sheikh Ali Muhsin Barwani, a Zanzibari as well, published in 1995 (van de Bruinhorst 2013: 206). However, the more established version is al-Farsy's[8] (Chesworth 2008: 150; Yusuf 1992).

The work of translation induced a process of 'enculturation' (Wafula 2017: 192) and 'hybridization' of languages and cultures (Mojola 2017: 52), as illustrated by the different translations in use for the concept of divinity.

The Swahili word *Mungu* "God" includes the characteristics of both the precolonial Bantu superhuman being and the monotheistic Abrahamic[9] divinity or the 'Supreme One' (Frankl 1995: 207; P'Bitek 2011). The Bantu noun in *m/mi* class, *mungu,* has as its plural *miungu,* showing that this 'Supreme Being' originally does not belong to a monotheistic culture but is part of a pantheon that includes plural "lesser divinities" (Mbiti 2011: 29). However, missionaries and Christian anthropologists started interpreting African deities in terms of the Christian God[10] as a 'High God[11]' and describing African people as immersed in religion (P'Bitek 2011: 22-7; Mbiti 2011: 15).

The most popular names of God that can be found in the translations of both the Bible and the Qur'an are *Mwenyezi Mungu* "Ruler of the Universe" (Frakl 1995: 209) and *Bwana Mungu* "Lord" (Cassuto *et al.* 2020: 94), which are used alternatively to the Swahili word *Muumba* "the Creator" (Frankl 1995: 208).

The Arabic loanword *Mola* in n-class is the Islamised monotheistic divinity as well as *Mawla* "Lord" (Frankl 1995: 203). Conversely, the Arabic lexeme Allah is seldom used in Swahili translations and is absent even in the Qur'an (Cassuto *et al.* 2020: 93; Frankl 1995: 202). Allah in Swahili was substituted by

[7] https://archive.org/details/swahili-Qur'an-translation/00-Introduction-Utangulizi/

[8] According to Topan (personal communication 4-3-2024), nowadays the most popular version for an oral use is al-Barwani's and the more established version for a written use is al-Farsy's.

[9] *Mungu wa Israeli* "God of Israel" is also common; cf. *2 Sam* 23:3 SUV and choral trucks such as *Hallelujah, Mungu wa Israeli* by Michael Burkhardt (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkXrRult9ho).

[10] This provoked a significant controversy among historians of religion in the last century. For instance, Raffaele Pettazzoni's refutation (1957) of the theory of "primordial monotheism" (*Urmonotheismus*) previously postulated by Father Wilhelm Schmidt.

[11] Particularly, missionaries' translations of religious concepts appropriate words in African languages and interpret them according to Christian theology (Egeland 2024: 45; Topan 1992: 336, 340).

Mwenyezi Mungu, which is a combination of *mwenye* "possessor" + *-ezi* coming from an Arabic root meaning "might" and the Bantu *Mungu* "God:" The Almighty God (Topan 1992: 343).

Mkufya[12] started examining the Bible when he was a secondary school student and a thirsty reader in the Minaki school library; at that time, he also started writing his first novel. Then, he investigated thoroughly both the Bible and the Qur'an when he experienced a spiritual crisis in the period while he was writing *Ziraili na Zirani* (1980-1999). Mkufya told me that he did not translate himself the quotes from the Bible and the Qur'an in his works. Thus, from the literature examined, it can be determined[13] that Mkufya probably consulted the Swahili Bible Union Version[14] (SUV) (1952, 1997) and *Qur'ani Takatifu*, al-Farsy's translation.[15] Conversely, in English he consulted the King James Bible.[16]

4. A juvenile protest in prose

The *Wicked Walk* (WW) (1977/2012), and its Swahili translation *Kizazi Hiki* ("This Generation," 1980) are realist and postcolonial novels, which are part of the 'prostitute literature' trend of the 1980s (P'Bitek's "Song of Malaya," 1971; Senkoro 1982: 36-37).

The title itself, "The Wicked Walk," refers allegorically to *Psalm* 12:8. When evil-hearted people hold high rank and become the ruling class, wickedness will spread throughout the whole society. Especially, evildoers will deceive innocent people with flattering words, like the young protagonist Nancy, who dies during an abortion caused by the old patron of a factory. The victim is *Kizazi Hiki*, meaning "this generation," the title chosen by Mkufya for the Swahili version, which is also a quote from *Psalm* 12:7. 'This generation' stands for the younger people, and the working classes, who are the most vulnerable, but who are also those who have the right and duty to rebel and fight for social justice rather than passively succumb to injustice.

Psalm 12:7-8 is also inter-textualised in the prologue (Mkufya 1980: vii; Mkufya 2012: ii), and the whole *Psalm* 12:1-8 is quoted at length in the epilogue (Mkufya 1980: 134; Mkufya 2012: 100) of the novels.

[12] Personal interview 17-11-2023.

[13] Mkufya was not sure about all the editions he consulted over the years.

[14] https://biblics.com/sw/biblia/swahili-union-version

[15] Mkufya directed me to buy al-Farsy's translation in the mosque at the city centre of Dar es Salaam in 2023.

[16] Mkufya personal communication 6-3-2024.

7 Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, Thou shalt preserve them from this generation forever. 8 The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted. (A *Psalm* of David 12:7-8[17] quoted in Mkufya 2012: 100).	*7 Wewe, BWANA, ndiwe utakayetuhifadhi,* *Utatulinda na kizazi hiki milele.* *8 Wasio haki hutembea pande zote,* *Ufisadi ukitukuka kati ya mwanadamu.* (A *Psalm* of David 12:7-8[18] quoted in Mkufya 1980: 134).

Deo, the male protagonist and a young revolutionary, opposes the message of *Psalm* 12:7, where King "David expresses assurance that God will intervene on behalf of the oppressed;"[19] he explains that people should not passively wait for God to save them, but must save themselves and fight for their rights through social revolution.

> *Sikubaliani tena na hii tabia ya wanadini ya 'kuumia kimya kimya' ama ya Wakristo ya 'kutoa shavu la pili lichapwe'. Ukumbukwe ya kwamba mtu waweza usikubaliane kabisa na Wakristo, lakini ukubaliane na machache yaliyozungumzwa kwenye Biblia. [...] Mimi nitasema ya kuwa 'umma utawafukuzilia mbali wanafiki wote na wakaidi'* (Mkufya 1980: 136)

> I am no longer tied to the Christian "suffer silently" business [or 'turn the other cheek to be hit']. One can be over with Christianity, but still follow some of the arguments in the Bible [...] I say, "the people shall cut off all hypocrites and saboteurs" (Mkufya 2012: 102)

Deo argues that people should detach from Christianity even though some teachings can be retained and applied in a secular way. Mkufya also inter-textualises in these novels the last stanza of Christopher Okigbo's poem *Heavensgate* (Okigbo quoted in Mkufya 1980: 114; Mkufya 2012: 85) in the chapter named "Labyrinths" (Mkufya 2012: 73), after Okigbo's homonymous poetry collection (*Labyrinth* 1970). When Deo is informed about the tragic death of his fiancée Nancy, who has been abused by his own employer, he reads Okigbo's poem as a hymn of the war that should be waged by oppressed young workers against the 'wicked' ruling class.

[17] https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Psalms-12-7/

[18] https://www.bible.com/sw/bible/164/PSA.12.SUV

[19] https://www.bibleref.com/Psalms/12/Psalms-chapter-12.html

5. An adult intellectual and spiritual battle in epic and verse

The philosophical *Ziraili na Zirani* (ZZ) ("Azrael and Zirani," 1999) represents the phase of experimentation of 'new novels' (Gromov 2014; 2019; Khamis 2005, 2007). This polyphonic and 'polymorphic' novel (Wamitila quoted in Diegner 2005: 25), which has been defined as a "patchwork of genres" (Gromov quoted in Rettovà 2016a: 216), "rich in intertextuality" (Diegner 2005: 28), is designed as an epic[20] canvas, in which intervals of poetry and puns are entextualised.

Mkufya[21] differentiates between *utenzi*, the classic epic poem of the Swahili tradition, which was also used as a medium for "projecting Islam" (Topan 2001; Knappert 1967), and *epiki ya kifasihi* "a literary epic," such as novels and sagas, which he employs as a strategic medium to critique religion.

Furthermore, Mkufya created an intercultural kind of poem made up of three elements: Swahili modern free verse poetry (Topan 1974b); Greek dithyrambic poems, which were sung as hymns to praise the divinity of pleasure and wine Dionysus; both are spiced with the third element, Swahili *utani* "joking relations" (Kezilahabi 2015: 40). Mkufya calls this satirical and sarcastic kind of poem *ushairi wa ki-dithiramb-korofi* "the impertinent dithyramb," which plays the role of *korasi ya ki-korofi* "arrogant anti-chorus" (Nicolini 2022: 72) by challenging the classical function of the Greek chorus as *vijembe* (Sheik 1994), pungent commentaries.[22]

Mkufya[23]'s experiment aims to transform the dithyramb into a Swahili literary expression, and to make of it a laic expression to *kuiumbua dini*[24] "expose religion." Indeed, these poems are a device to examine religion: the divine, the human and their relationship.

This technique is an exercise in 'generic fracturing' (Rettovà 2021b:2): "intervals of heterogenous genres (commonly poetry into the novelistic prose) which fracture the prose of the novel" to introduce "alternative aesthetics, epistemologies and ontologies" (Rettovà 2021b: 3-4).

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[20] Mkufya's main sources are classic epic authors such as Homer, Virgil, but also Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* (1308 - 1320), which he called *Utenzi wa Pepo* (ZZ 4), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) as well as Tanzanian authors such as Topan's *Aliyeonja Pepo* (1974) and Robert's *Kufikirika* (1967), in addition to *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Elfu Lela Ulela*, ZZ 1). Another influence could also be the *mi'raj* the Prophet's journey to Haven narrated by Swahili *utenzi* (Topan 2001).

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

[22] Mkufya, personal communication 28-11-2023.

[23] Personal conversations with Mkufya on 29-11-2023; 12-12-2023.

[24] Mkufya, personal communication 14-4-2024.

The allegorical epic battle, fought in people's minds, implies, by illustrating a clash of ideologies, an intellectual war waged by the "revolutionaries of manifestness" (*wanadhahara*) who represent positivism, materialism and atheism, and are supported by Lucifer and the demons who are the real philosophers advocating for relativism and pluralism (Rettovà 2021a; Nicolini forthcoming) against the Throne of Heaven including religious beliefs and idealism. However, when the Throne of Heaven is overthrown, the human warriors face the void. The mystery around God's existence remains unresolved, nevertheless thorough speculations on time, existence, free will, truth, and evil have been explored.

This novel was completed in a period of tension between Christians and Muslims in Tanzania; they competed with each other through "crusades," evangelisation campaigns (Chesworth 2022: 13), and Muslim *mihadhara* "public discourses" (Mbogoni 2004: 171). The novel was published a few years after the conflict known as the 'war of Mwembechai,' a neighbourhood in Dar es Salaam, where the Muslim community assaulted Christians' butcher shops because pork meat was sold,[25] and three Muslim brothers were killed in 1993 (Makulilo 2019: 131). Indeed, this novel criticises inter-religious conflicts.

Particularly, this epic criticises the lack of adequate representation of African protagonists in both the Scriptures and apologetic literature, especially Christian apologetics, which are mocked as: *Kwa ngano*[26] *tetere mwamtetea babu* "You are defending the old man with weak folktales"[27] (Mkufya 1999: 205).

Azazel: Kwa ngano tetere mwamtetea babu	Azazel: You are defending the old man with weak folktales.
Ila kwa kujaribu babu kaharibu	Though grandfather tried hard, he ruined [his creation]
Mtu kamwe asingebaki bubu!	A man would never remain silent![28]
(Mkufya 1999: 205)	

Mkufya explained that since in Africa there are no prophets recognised by the sacred texts or an institutionalised credo, African people seem to be doomed to darkness.[29] African historical figures are located in Hell, as *hawa wenye jadi ya kuzimu* "those whose traditions are doomed to hell" (Mkufya 1999:

[25] Mkufya, personal interview 21-11-2023.

[26] The pun is based on the interplay of the polysemic word, *ngano* which means "wheat, fable, cackles" and particularly in this poem apologetic writings to defend the 'old man' (Abrahamic God).

[27] Apologetic literature.

[28] All the translations from Swahili to English are mine unless otherwise indicated. Emphasis mine.

[29] Mkufya, personal interview 8-12-2023.

188) or *massa damnata* (Dawson quoted in P'Bitek 2011: 2), because traditional African religions, which had existed long before Islam and Christianity, were denounced as animism, superstition, and fetichism by the colonisers: "Both Christianity and Islam employ all kinds of methods to reduce traditional religions to ashes and historical anachronism" (Mbiti quoted in P'Bitek 1986: 89; Kuykendall 1993).

Funguka pepo utukarimu	Open the Paradise to welcome us
Jema lako kwetu pia ni tamu	Whatever is good for you, it is also sweet for us
Sisi waovu wa kudumu	We eternal sinners
Hata hawa wenye Jadi za kuzimu! [30]	And even they whose traditions are doomed to hell!
(Mkufya 1999: 188)	

Besides, "a peculiar interpretation of Christianity became an institutionalized agency of colonialism" (Eze 2011: 69). Using selected passages from the Book of *Genesis*, "Christian missionaries refer to Africans as the cursed descendants of Ham" (Eze 2011: 68); thus, they justified colonialism as "a necessary evil in order to save the savages from the wrath of God and bring light and salvation to this cursed race of Africa" (Eze 2011: 68).

Mkufya describes historical figures such as the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo,[31] "the prophetic figure" (Mkufya 2005a: 59), priest of the Igbo divinity Idoto, who fought and died supporting Biafran Independence; and Kinjeketile[32] Ngwale, who, possessed by the spirit Hongo, communicated with the deity Bokero and led the *Maji Maji* revolt (1905-1907), which reunited the ethnic groups of South Tanzania against the German invaders through the symbol of water (*maji*; Mkufya 1999: 96-8). Okigbo and Ngwale are described as being prophets of equal values to those mentioned in the sacred texts.

The novel begins with a proem set in 1099, the year of the Siege of Jerusalem during the First Crusade, and it tells the story of both a crusader and a mujahid, departing from Rome and Baghdad respectively to fight for God (*kumpigania Mungu*, Mkufya 1999: 8). Jerusalem, the cradle of Abrahamic religions, symbolically connects all the holy books *i.e.* the Torah, the Bible, the Gospels, and the Qur'an that descended upon their prophets (Mkufya 1999: 6; cf. Tottoli 2021: 37). The first figures appearing in the protasis are protagonists of the Old Testament narratives that are parallel in the Qur'an and the Bible. The first figure mentioned is King David, the warrior king (the second Patriarch, son of Saul),

[30] "The black humans with cultures of darkness" (Mkufya's translation).

[31] A character in Hell is the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, who recites some of his own poems from the collection *The Labyrinth* (1971) translated into Swahili by Mkufya (Mkufya 1999: 90, 91, 92, 184, 200).

[32] Cf. Ebrahim Hussein's drama *Kinjeketile* (1969) and the homonymous English self-translation (1970).

leader of Israel and a "reconstructionist" of "post-fallen" humanity (Adamo 2018: 32), to whom many Psalms are attributed (*Zabur*, Mkufya 1999: 7). Indeed, David is a prophet in the chain of messengers "sealed" by Muhammad (Qur'an 33:40; cf. Tottoli 2021: 37-38), to whom the Book of *Zabur* was revealed (Qur'an 17:55; 21:105).

The protasis also features the image of Solomon's temple, one of the wonders of the world, erected to thank God for having granted him wisdom (Mkufya 1999: 8). Solomon (son of David and Betsabea, his abducted wife) is known for his extraordinary wisdom (II *Samuel*, I *Kings*, II *Chronicles*) and his knowledge of the language of all the animals, including birds and ants (Qur'an 27:15-19).

A quotation from *Matthew* 2:18 (quoted in Mkufya 1999: 9) stands at the beginning of the flashforward chapter when the war in Heaven is flaring up. The quotation refers to the massacre of the Innocents ordered by King Herod's edict commanding the execution of all male children, and it hints at the human tendency of self-destruction, which is often justified by religious wars.

Sauti ilisikika Rama, *Raheli akiwalilia Watoto wake* *Asikubali kufarijiwa, kwa kuwa hawako.* (*Matayo* 2:18 quoted in Mkufya 1999: 9)	In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.[33]

Mkufya uses both Biblical and Qur'anic appellations for God *e.g. Mungu* (ZZ 8) and *Muumba* ("The Creator" ZZ 8, 19), or *Mwenyezi (Mungu)* ("The Almighty God;" ZZ 8; Topan 1992: 343), *Maulana* (ZZ 18) and *Mola* (ZZ 51); the monotheistic God is also satirically called *radi* hinting at "Zeus thunderbolt" (ZZ 8). God never appears as a character and the Throne of Heaven is always described as empty; Heaven's representatives are the archangels Jibrail, Raphael, Mikhael, and Ziraili[34] (Azrael), the angel of death and collector of souls, who is described as the messenger of Abrahamic religions imported to Africa: *suriama wa Mzungu na Muarabu* "a mixed blood between a European and an Arab" (Mkufya 1999: 24).

The lord of darkness, *Ibilisi aliyeitwa Lusifa* "Iblis who is called Lucifer" (ZZ 46) is called with his Latin appellative throughout the whole novel as per *Isaiah* 14, which means "the light bringer" who brings *mwanga* "the light" of knowledge against superstition (Mkufya 1999: 38). The character of Lucifer, inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), is a hero in this novel, together with his emissaries,

[33] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%202%3A18&version=KJV

[34] Cf. Ziraili in the play *Aliyeonja Pepo* ("A Taste of Heaven;" Topan 1974a), a powerful bureaucrat in an Islamic paradise who has a bottle of *wiski* on his desk (Topan 1974a: 15; cf. Kruisheer 1999).

the other fallen angels, who convey their messages through a complex and baffling language of poetry.[35] Their verses are aimed at "opening up the way to another concealed dimension of reality behind the phenomenal world and beyond human cognitive capacities" (Rettovà 2016a: 218).

The demons, who represent all human vices and embody the seven deadly sins, are protagonists in this novel, particularly Azazel, who appears in the form of an East African goshawk (*kozi*), Asmodeusi as a goat (Mkufya 1999: 12), Beelzeebu and Rahabu.

Azazel and Rahabu play complementary roles: Azazel defends humanity and their sins and tries to improve human creation by leading them to use their will power properly: *Shetani mja*[36] *twamtetea na dhambi zake twazisherekea!* "We Demons defend the servant of God, and his sin we celebrate!" (Mkufya 1999: 51). Conversely, Rahabu, a demon probably inspired by the homonymous prostitute heroine in *Joshua* 2:1, who in this novel represents the sin of lust along with Lilith (*Lilitu* ZZ 46), is the most cynical and sceptical demon towards human intellectual capacity that he mocks with cruelty as: *wajuzi [...] na kauli zao telezi!* "newborn creatures with their weak philosophy" (Mkufya 1999: 153). Likewise, the two demons, Asmodeus and his mistress Lilitu *wanapeana chambi* "sexually stimulate each other," while they were dancing *msapata*, a traditional dance performed by a man and a woman in a circle, which is described as an orgy (Mkufya 1999: 46), and their *ashiki* "sexual desire" is a satirical expression criticising the narrow-minded human beings who, deceived by religious influences, call sex adultery.[37]

Azazel, the demon who brings secret knowledge to humans in this novel, is a fallen angel in *the Apocalypse of Abraham* (23:6-11), the Book of *Enoch* (10:8) and Qur'an 23:7, where he appears as the tempting snake, and he is also the scapegoat in the prescription for the Day of Atonement (*Leviticus* 16:8, 10, 26; Pinker 2009: 2; Blair 2008: 24, 30; Helm 1994). Iblis as well as Azazel were the favourite angels, who refused to prostrate themselves in front of the human creation moulded from clay (Qur'an 2:34; 7:11), and for their arrogance were chased away from Heaven. Iblis decided to seek revenge against Adam and his progeny by tempting human beings so as to make them fall as he had fallen. However, why did the omnipotent God permitted Iblis to tempt humanity for centuries? That is the question Iblis asks himself in the play *Aliyeonja Pepo* (Topan 1974a: 23):

> *Mimi namkamilisha yeye na yeye, Mungu, ananikamilisha mimi. Ukamilifu wetu na mapenzi yetu ndiyo yanayoipa uhai dunia hii* (Topan 1974a: 25)

[35] Cf. Hussein's play *Mashetani* ("The Devils," 1971), where the character *Shetani* "the demon" opens the play introducing himself through a free verse poem.

[36] *Mja* lit. "God's servant," a term usually used in the Islamic context to indicate human beings (Rettovà 2020: 35).

[37] Mkufya, personal communication 2-01-2024.

> I complement him and he, God, complements me. Our complementarity and our love are indeed what gives life to this world.

According to a reading of the Qur'an, the devil was allowed by God to tempt humanity and make some of them wrong (see also: Satan allowed to test Job in *Job* 1:6-22 KJV). Indeed, Iblis's monologue in this play was inspired by the *Surah al Saad* (the letter Saad 38:71-88) as Topan told me.[38]

> 82. (Iblīs) said: "Then, By Thy Power, I will Put them all in the wrong," —
> 83. "Except Thy Servants Amongst them, sincere and purified (by Thy grace).[39]"

Mkufya as well endorses the complementarity of evil and good that justifies temptation: *mbingu zilimruhusu shetani kumjaribu mtu na kumpotosha awezavyo* "the heavens gave permission to the Devil to test and pervert humanity as he could" (Mkufya 1999: 16).

Temptation started with the myth of Adam[40] and Eve who ate the forbidden fruit (*Genesis* 4-5; Qur'an 2:41-42). Azazel's poem tells that when Adam was endowed with reason and will power, the demons were put aside, so they are now avenging themselves by tempting humanity to put aside Heaven (Mkufya 1999: 12-13), hinting at the fall from Heaven as in *Genesis* 3:22-24 and Qur'an 2:34, 41-42:

> *Azazel: Pepo ilimtunuku Adamu kipaji cha tafakuri, sisi tukawekwa pembeni. Pepo ikamkabidhi Adamu Hawa. Sisi tuko pembeni. Nikamzuga hawa akanikumbatia pale mwembeni, yeye na mumewe wakawekwa pembeni. Sasa tafakuri na hiari ya mzao wao vyazichanja mbingu kwa nyembe. Popo tutaiweka pembeni! Pe!pe!pe! pembeni! Mbe!*[41]
>
> (Mkufya 1999: 12-3)

> Azazel: Heaven endowed Adam with intellect, and we were cast aside.
> Heaven entrusted Eve to Adam
> As we waited beside.
> I seduced Eve ...
> Willingly, she embraced me
> ...Under the mango tree,
> She and her husband were cast aside. Now human intellect in free will are tearing the heavens apart,

[38] Personal interview 5-11-2023, London.

[39] THE HOLY QUR'AN. Translation by A. Yusuf Ali: https://Qur'anyusufali.com/38/

[40] For the esoteric meaning of Adam's sin see Baffioni (2022).

[41] Azazel's Chagga sarcastic expression, meaning "My Lord" (ZZ 13), suggests a link to the Chagga scapegoat purification ritual, which is a case of parallelism with *Leviticus* 16:5-22 (Mojola 1999b).

...Either...
Heaven or the Earth must be cast aside.
What a score for a kingdom so proud!
(Mkufya's translation).

In this epic novel, the demons convince human beings to destroy their own creator by waging war against Heaven, as in *Genesis* the snake tempts Eve.[42] Mkufya (personal communication) used Milton[43] as an intermediate source to refer to the Book of *Revelation* or the *Apocalypse of John* 12:7-10, the final book of the New Testament, where the fallen angels wage war against Heaven to take God's place. Likewise, Mkufya's demons enter human beings' minds and convince materialists and atheist thinkers, through mysterious verses that recall the allegorical language of the Apocalypse, to ally with Hell so as to overthrow Heaven and take the Throne:

Azazel: Unashangaa?	Azazel: Are you surprised? Are you surprised?
Unashangaa?	
Na mbinguni vita zimezagaa!	The war in heaven is spreading around.
(Mkufya 1999: 12,16)	

"And there was war in Heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon"[44] (*Revelation* 12:7).

Therefore, the sacred texts (*maandiko ya manabii* "the scriptures[45] of Prophets;" ZZ 14) descended upon the prophets: the Psalms on David, the Torah on Moses, the Qur'an on Muhammad, the Gospels and the Bible on Christ and the Bhagavad Gita for Hinduism, are seen on fire and are withdrawn from Earth by the angels (Mkufya 1999: 14). The descent of the holy books upon the prophets, which is told in *Surah Al-A'raf* 7:142-144, and the descent of the *Ten Commandments* upon Moses on Mount Sinai (*Exodus* 20:1-7; *Deuteronomy* 5:2-22) are events that—though none of these holy texts were revealed in sub-Saharan Africa, according to Mkufya should be interpreted as a message of inter-faith tolerance that did not last for long.

[42] Cf. Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book IX: 1-23.

[43] Milton Book VI (The war in Heaven).

[44] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%2012%3A7-10&version=KJV.

[45] Cf. the Qur'anic expression *ahl al-kitab* "the People of the Book" (Hebrews and Christians; Tottoli 2021: 48).

Another text becomes a holy book in this novel, *Akirikifuk* (*kufikirika*[46] read backwards, Mkufya 1999: 59), which Mkufya translated [47] as *Ysatnaf/Fantasy*. The book was written by *mazimwi* "ghouls/ogres" and *Wazamzumi* (Zamzummim is the name given by the Ammonites to the giant inhabitants of the Transjordanian territory whom they dispossessed, *Deut.* 2:20), who left Heaven to move to the island of *Mwanga* (the "knowledge" or "light" of science dissipating religious obscurantism) in Hell. The book was written using as a source a page stolen from the book used by the two angels,[48] Hârût and Mârût, who, during the reign of Solomon, complained about human weaknesses and tempted humanity by teaching sorcery and black magic in the city of Babel: *Malaika wawili, Harut na Marut, katika (mji wa) Babil* (Qur'an 2:102 al-Farsy's transl. 1994: 25). The page was torn from that book and stolen by the evil spirits when Jibrail went in Babel to destroy the book. Hârût and Mârût and their teachings are described in Qur'an 2:102 (quoted in Mkufya 1999: 20, 82): "We are only for trial so do not blaspheme." [...] But they could not thus harm anyone except by God's permission."[49]

Thus, the word *Akirikifuk* became a spell used as a weapon during the war to destroy idealism and metaphysics (Mkufya 1999: 170) in favour of *udhahiri* "the ideology of manifestness of things" (Mkufya 1999: 68; Rettovà 2007: 251) and *uyakinifu* "cognitive materialism" (Nicolini 2022: 62).

In Hell, another symbol of witchcraft is *mizakumu* (Mkufya 1999: 88), Mkufya's original Swahili translation of the Zaqqum tree, *Euphorbia Abyssinica*, commonly known as the desert candle, which is the 'cursed tree' of Hell[50] mentioned in Qur'an 17:60 as *mti uliolaaniwa* (al-Farsy's transl. 1994: 379), and also in Qur'an 44:43, 49; 37:62-8; 56:52 as *mti wa Zakkum* (al-Farsy's transl. 1994: 677), whose fruits are demons' heads (Qur'an 37:65).

Wanadhahara "the revolutionaries of manifestness" (Mkufya 1999: 68) were invited by Lucifer: *Ole wako*[51] *roho yenye hiari!* "woe upon you soul with freewill!" (ZZ 15) and his delegation of demons representing the seven capital vices to a banquet to seal the war agreement (Mkufya 1999: 152-3). The

[46] The palindromic word is an indirect quote from Robert's novel *Kufikirika* ("Thinkable," 1967) (Diegner 2005: 28).

[47] Mkufya completed the self-translation of this novel as *Pilgrims From Hell* in 2005; however, the manuscript is still unpublished.

[48] The angels in the Qur'an are usually mentioned in couples and to this evil couple is opposed the good couple of Jibraeel and Michael (2:97-8; Saccone 2011: 26).

[49] https://Qur'anyusufali.com/2/

[50] In the Bible the cursed tree is the fig tree mentioned in *Mark* 11:12-20 (cf. the fig tree in *Gen.* 3:7).

[51] Cf. Surah 75:34; *Ecclesiastes* 10:16; Milton Book I: 22 and Dante's Inferno (III:1-9): *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate* ("abandon all hope, ye who enter").

banquet[52] symbolises the Last Supper (see Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians and Qur'an 5:114, where Jesus, son of Mary, announces a feasting table); indeed, the demons betrayed God by fixing an alliance with His creatures against Heaven's Throne.

Heaven's gate of religion and superstitious beliefs, where the *Akirikifuk* warning is posted, is eventually broken down by dinosaurs and east African Zinjanthropus, which are symbols of Darwinist evolution (Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* 1859) that destroys the religious myth of creation (*Genesis* 1:26-28[53]), as Samson killed all the Philistines (*Judges* 16:30):

> *Viumbe hao walijihami kwa mawe ya kuchonga, magongo ya miti na mataya ya mifupa kama ule Samsoni aliwoulia Wafilisiti* (Mkufya 1999: 176).
>
> The creatures armed themselves with carved stones, wooden clubs and jaw bones like Samson the one who killed the Philistines.

Heaven's armies are set to stop the invaders from Hell. The patriarch of all the Abrahamic religions is mentioned, Jacob, renamed Israel by God (Mkufya 1999: 194; *Genesis* 35:10 KJV; Qur'an 2:130). On the one hand, King David as the warrior king is leading Heaven's armies. King David is one of the patriarchs mentioned in the Books of *Kings*, *Deuteronomy*, *Chronicles*, *Samuel*, and especially in the *Psalms*. The Book of *Psalms*, *Zaburi* in Swahili (an Arabism), is described in the Qur'an as the holy book revealed to the prophet David after he has killed Goliath. The episode narrating David killing Goliath, or Jalout, is narrated both in *Samuel* I: 17:45-54 and in Qur'an 2:247-252. The Philistines, among them Goliath, worshipped a divinity called Beelzebub in the Bible (II *Kings* 1:1-18) or Ba'al in the Qur'an 37:123-132, who is a character among Mkufya's demons (Mkufya 1999: 206), and thus, they opposed the advent of the Abrahamic God:

Goliati: Sabaoth mtetezi wa taifa dhalimu	Goliath: Sabaoth[54] the Defender of a cruel nation
Kiburi, umewapa wana wa Ibrahimu,	Pride, you gave to Ibrahim's sons[55]
Twakukana kwa ngoma na baragumu	We are rejecting you with drum

[52] Cf. Kezilahabi's collection of poems *Dhifa* ("the Banquet," 2008), which is an allegory for the principles of the *ujamaa* philosophy ravaged at the banquet of the bourgeoisie. In Mkufya's novel all religious principles of love and tolerance are eaten up.

[53] https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-1-26/

[54] *Yahweh ṣĕbā'ōt*, or "Tzevaot," "Lord of Hosts," lit. "Armies."

[55] Cf. *Revelation* 7:1-17, the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob's descendants).

and trumpet
Pepo yako tukiipangua kwa zamu! Step by step, we will dismantle your
(Mkufya 1999: 206) Paradise!

Then, the Christian army prays and *Psalm* 148, which is also paraphrased in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (*Adam and Eve's Morning Hymn,* Book 5), is quoted:

> *Mtukuzeni Mungu kutoka mbinguni,*
> *msifuni kutoka vilele vya anga.*
> *Msifuni, enyi malaika wake,*
> *msifuni na nyinyi majeshi.*
> *Msifuni, enyi mbingu za mbingu*
> *Enyi nyamngumi na vilindi vyote msifuni!*
> (*Psalm* 148 quoted in Mkufya 1999: 194).

> Praise ye the Lord. Praise ye the Lord from the heavens: praise him in the heights.
> Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts.
> Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light.[56]

On the other hand, the four Rashidun Caliphs, namely Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman and Ali, are named among other Muslim leaders and soldiers who died during the first great battles[57] of Islam (Mkufya 1999: 195; cf. Lo Jacono 2003: 25-77), "bearing witness to faith" (Haq 1984: 171). Then, the Testimony of Faith, the first pillar of Islam (*Shahadah*; cf. Ventura 2008: 120), is quoted:

> *Hakuna Mungu ila Yule pekee aitwaye Mola Na Muhammad ni mjumbe wake!* (Qur'an 3:18 quoted in Mkufya 1999: 196)

> There is no Lord but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah (Haq 1984: 171)

In contrast with the apostates' ideology, which, as postulated by Mkufya, appears as a form of African socialism and which is an aggregating factor teaching tolerance (Mkufya 1999: 187), different religious beliefs appear as a disaggregating factor. In fact, Heaven's armies fight together against the invaders but pray separately (Mkufya 1999: 210), as illustrated by the Islamic philosopher Averroes,[58] a fighter in Heaven's army: *Lakini kwa kuwa dua zetu zinapingana, kila moja asome yake peke yake* "since our prayers

[56] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20148&version=KJV

[57] *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhud* (Chum and Lambert 1962) was also one of Mkufya's sources.

[58] Ibn Rushd wrote *The Decisive Treatise* (1126–98) in which by criticising al-Ghazali he admits the possibility of connecting Islam and philosophy (Averroes 2006; Campanini 2007).

fight each other, each person will pray separately" (Mkufya 1999: 210). Averroes is located by Dante in the Limbo of unbaptised persons among 'great souls' such as Homer and other Greek and Arab philosophers: *Averrois, che 'l gran comento feo* "Averroes who made the great Commentary" (*Inferno* IV: 144); whereas Mkufya, criticising Christian apologetics, places him in a Paradise inclusive of Islam, Christianity and plural doctrines and beliefs.

> *Walimwengu wanahitaji tafasiri mpya ya Uungu, tafasiri pana na pevu zaidi inayothamini utu na uumbwa wa walimwengu wote. Tafasiri ambayo shina lake sio Ismail na Isaka peke yao. Tafasiri itakayoanza kutuita Walimwengu badala ya kutuita Bin Adamu* (Mkufya 1999: 9)
>
> The inhabitants of the universe need a new translation for Divinity, a more wide and mature translation that gives value to humanity and the creation of all inhabitants of the universe. A translation which root is not Ismail or Isaac alone. A translation which starts calling us Inhabitants of the Universe rather than Sons of Adam.

Indeed, Mkufya opposes the use of the Arabic loan term *binadamu*—the sons of Adam - as a symbol of cultural imperialism, because it attributes the origin of humanity to the Middle East and Judaeo-Christian culture. He believes, proudly, that the cradle of humanity resides in Olduvai in Tanzania, where the Germans have found important skeletons and archaeological remains.[59] Thus, he suggests using the holistic term of *walimwengu watu* "human world-dwellers." Mkufya transforms the pessimistic view of finitude and imperfection of "creation" (*viumbe*) into a much more optimistic approach towards humanity, introducing the neologism *vihai* "living beings" who inhabit the phenomenal universe (Mkufya 2019: 448).

In the end, after the world crumbles, Lucifer wants to exchange his evil role with the holy role of Jibril, the angel messenger of the "revelation" *wahyi* (ZZ 229) (*wahy:* inspiration; Tottoli 2021: 31) delivered to the Prophet Mohammad (Surah 42:51) for Islam, and who descended as *roho mtakatifu* "the holy spirit" (ZZ 229) for Christianity.

In fact, in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is translated in Swahili as *Roho Mtakatifu*, where *Roho* refers to a living being with its adjective in class 1 (Topan 1992: 342); whereas, in Qur'an 2:87, Jesus is strengthened by *roho takatifu* "a sanctified spirit or soul" in class 9 (Topan 1992: 342).

The archangel Gabriel or Jibril is the messenger of both the Annunciation and the first revelation to Muhammad. He is indeed the one who was sent to announce to Mary that she was pregnant with Jesus (*Luke* 1:26-38), and the one who let the revelation of the Holy Qur'an to descend upon the prophet

[59] Mkufya, personal communication.

Muhammad with the words *Iqraa Bismi Rabik!* "Read in the name of Allah!" as explained in the *surat-al Alaq* 96:1[60] (quoted in Mkufya 1999: 229), the first surah revealed in Mecca to Muhammad.

Lucifer's wish to exchange his role with Jibril can also be interpreted as a parody of the religious interpretation of evil and goodness. Indeed, Devil and God are just roles performed on the stage of phenomenal life as well as good and evil are relative (Mkufya 1999: 110) and complementary concepts that make the world work (cf. Iblis's final monologue in Topan 1974a: 25: *Yeye anavuta kule, mimi navuta huku, na dunia inakwenda* "He pulls there, I pull here, and the world goes on").

6. Mature philosophical speculation through dialogues and sermons

The *Diwani ya Maua* "The Poetry of Flowers" speculates on the meaning of life in the face of HIV/AIDS and in connection with sexuality, death and religious beliefs. The philosophical speculations are enclosed in the poetic symbolism of flowers, which are a metaphor for the fragile human existence on earth and the existence of gracious but impermanent people like flowers.

The novels are a family saga that narrates the interlaced lives, disrupted by HIV/AIDS, of three families over many years and through two generations of characters. The trilogy consists in 'new/neo-realist' novels, where some experimental features can be sieved from an overall realist narration, which is sometimes blended with enchanted elements (Rettovà 2016b: 16, 24; Diegner 2017: 39; 2018).

I define *Kuwa Kwa Maua* (KKM) "The Existence of Flowers" (2019) as a philosophical treatise in the shape of a symbolist novel (Nicolini 2022: 201ff). The novel displays intervals of poetry and songs,[61] and a tragic Aristotelian-like drama is implanted in the half of the narration in prose; the narrative is divided into six act-like parts; then, from parts four to six, the subgenre of tragedy takes place (KKM 288-477).

Metatextual references to other genres (Diegner 2017; 2021; Fludernik 2003) are widespread throughout the narrative prose: poetic symbolism, children's songs,[62] lullabies and traditional songs in *Manyema* and *Sambaa,*[63] as well as religious hymns and gospel songs,[64] but above all the drama. The

[60] Cf. Al-Farsy's Swahili translation: *Soma kwa Jina la Mola* (1994: 925).

[61] KKM 11, 27, 140, 282, 288-9, 443, 458-9, 464, 476.

[62] KKM 11, 27.

[63] KKM 140, 282, 443.

[64] Mkufya quotes some *nyimbo za injili* (cf. Mkallya 2016), gospel songs, especially songs by the Tanzanian singer Rose Mhando (KKM 312) and songs from the collection *Tumwabudu Mungu wetu* (no 301, 330, 377) from the Lutheran liturgy by the Lutheran Church of Tanzania (KKM 459, 464).

tragedy is introduced by a choral prologue where the spirits inhabiting the baobab cavities utter their prophecy and an owl chants a mysterious spell (Mkufya 2019: 288-9) to beseech *mahyuyu* "the mortal beings," which recalls the three witches' appearance and their spell in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* (Act 1 scene 1; Act 4 scene 1).[65]

Mkufya in his maturity portrays an environment of tolerance and the co-existence of plural ideologies, especially through the mouths of the protagonists: Dr Hans, a virologist and a philosopher, advocates for an atheist, materialist and hedonist view of 'being' in this world through his dialogues and lectures; and his wife Kristina, a fervent Christian and an idealist, expresses herself through prayers and sermons.

In the end, Dr Hans finds meaning in life through procreation that overcomes death: *hakuna kufa* "death is nothing to us" (Epicurus[66] quoted in Mkufya 2019: 445), stating that Epicurus was a real prophet.

Since the *Diwani* is devoted to the search for meaning in life, the central reference is King Solomon and his preaching in the Book of *Ecclesiastes*: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (1:2 KJV). Mkufya's objective through his characters, both the atheist Dr Hans and the Christian Kristina, is to demonstrate the opposite: life has indeed a meaning: enjoy life and give birth to overcome death (Mkufya 2019: 445-8).

In the first novel of the trilogy, *Ua La Faraja*, the absurdist character Omolo reflects on the transience of life of *waja* "human beings who are coming and going on earth" (Mkufya 2004: 423).

Omolo's viewpoint collides with the absurdism of King Solomon as expressed in *Ecclesiastes* (1:3): "life under the sun is transient and vain;" thus, he is not annoyed by the idea of dying in itself, but he is more annoyed by the idea of dying from a shameful disease such as HIV/AIDS (*Ecclesiastes* quoted in Mkufya 2004: 342). Life on earth is described as "vanity" (*lahw*) and as "a game" (*la'b*) in contrast with the afterlife in several Qur'anic verses (6:32; 29:64; 47:36; 57:20; Corrao 2023: 4). Omolo's scepticism and agnosticism make him see life without a transcendental purpose as vain:

> *Mtu huzaliwa, huishi na kisha hufa. Hakuona faida yoyote ya kuwemo katika mzunguko huo. Aliona kama mchezo wa kitoto usio na maana yoyote* (Mkufya 2004: 113)

[65] Mkufya was inspired by the Shakespearean dramas *Macbeth* and *Othello* while scripting some scenes of his tragedy (personal interview 18-12-2023).

[66] "Epicurus in Lucretius (1948), Nature of Things Book III: 806-834" quoted in Mkufya (2019: 445); cf. Milton book 5: 7.8.

> A person is born, lives, and then dies. He didn't see any advantage of being inside this compulsory circle He perceived [life] as a nonsensical/meaningless children's game.

The first chapter of the second novel, *Kuwa Kwa Maua*, is stylistically shaped as the protasis of an epic narration, which introduces the topic *i.e.* the search for meaning in life through wisdom that comes from extending human intellectual capacities, by means of an indirect biblical quote from Solomon, who asked God for "an understanding heart" (1 *Kings* 3:9). The baobab, which is the shelter for the spirits of the ancestors, extends its branches towards the sky as Solomon prayed God to receive wisdom; however, it does not need to ask for wisdom from a Christian God, since it already has its ancient wisdom (Mkufya 2019: 8).

> *[...] mithili ya mtu anayesali kwa kunyoosha mikono juu na kuzitazama mbingu kuzidai kipato, afya au hekima. Lakini mbuyu haukudai hekima kama Sulemani [Wafalme,* 3:9-14*] Alipoipewa akaiona batili* [*Mhubiri* 1: 12-18]. (Mkufya 2019: 8)

> [...] like a person who prays by stretching his hands up, and looking at the heavens asks for income, health or wisdom. 'Yet the baobab did not claimed wisdom as Solomon did' (*1 Kings* 3: 9-14[67] quoted in Mkufya 2019: 8). When he was endowed by it [wisdom], he saw it [life] meaningless (*Ecclesiastes* 1:12-18 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 8)

The reference to King Solomon is also a strategy to link this novel to the protasis of *Ziraili na Zirani* where Solomon's temple is mentioned (Mkufya 1999: 8).

King Solomon, to whom the Book of *Ecclesiastes* (a translation from the Hebrew meaning "preacher") is attributed, once he obtained the gift of wisdom, embarked on a quest for the meaning and purpose of life. Since "For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:18),[68] he discovered that if the meaning in life is solely connected with seeking material pleasure, all efforts are vain. "Life under the sun" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:3) is transient and if you do not prepare for an afterlife believing in God, it has no meaning. According to Kristina, life is meaningless because of its ephemerality, as she explains quoting from the Bible:

> *Mambo yote ni batili. Mtu ana faida gani ya yote ayafanyayo chini ya jua?'(Mhubiri 1:3) Lakini Sulemani aliona ubatili wa maisha yake aliyoishi kwa kuwa yanamalizika, hayadumu* (*Ecclesiastes* 1:3 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 200)

[67] Cf. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Kings%203%3A9-14&version=KJV

[68] https://www.bible.com/bible/1/ECC.1.KJV

> 'All is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?'[69] Solomon saw his life as meaningless because it was doomed to end.

Conversely, Mkufya, through Dr Hans (KKM 248), advocates for the opposite view: ephemerality is the feature that makes life more precious and valuable. Life indeed loses its value faced with the notion of an afterlife, because this idea either makes mortal beings afraid of dying and being judged, or humans, cheated by the promise of an eternal reward, are distracted from taking advantage of their sole, immanent life on earth. For instance, Dr Hans, quoting from the Bible, illustrates how King Solomon became an absurdist because, approaching death, he started fearing punishment in Hell.

> *[...] Nabii Suleiman (Mhubiri 1: 1-18) aliuona ubatili wa maisha kwa sababu alikihofia na kukijutia kifo kwenye uzee wake, pia alidhani akishakufa uwapo wake unaendelea kwenye uwapo mchungu kuzimu*. (Mkufya 2019: 451)

> The prophet Solomon (*Ecclesiastes* 1:1-18 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 451) felt the absurdity of life because he started fearing death while approaching old age, and he thought that his existence would continue afterlife in the bitterness of hell.

Dr Hans criticises the myth of Adam and Eve (Mkufya 2019: 426-8), which, as narrated by the monotheistic doctrines, both Islam and Christianity, and in contrast with scientific theories on reproduction, casts blame on sex as a sin to be severely punished (Tamale 2014: 161) or as a taboo to be concealed.

> *Hekaya hiyo imesababisha ngono, iletayo uzazi, ilaanike badala ya kutukuzwa. Ikaitwa aibu, ikaonwa kinyaa, ikawa majuto ya kukosa utiifu kwa Muumba kwa kuzini na hawara, aibu hiyo ikafichwa kwenye sehemu za siri.* (Mkufya 2019: 427)

> This tale has caused sex, which brings procreation, to be blamed instead of being glorified. It was called shame, it was looked down upon, it became regret for not obeying the Creator by committing adultery with a mistress, that embarrassment was hidden in private parts.

After having eaten the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve in the Book of *Genesis* (3:3-13) felt ashamed and started covering up with fig leaves from the garden. In Qur'an 7:19-22, the apple episode is clearly referred to an illicit sexual act, with the sexual outcome much more evident than in the Bible (Amoretti 2009: 214-215). However, in the Qur'an there is not the concept of original sin inherited by mankind,

[69] *Ecclesiastes* 1:3 KJV. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes%201-6&version= KJV.

rather the habit of covering up the body "to preserve their modesty" as explained in *Surah an-Nur* 24:30-31 (Amoretti 2009: 214-215).

The "veil" (*khimar*) in the Qur'an appears in 24:31 and a total body protection or "cloak" (*jalabib*) in 33:59 (Pepicelli 2018: 28), which find correspondence in 1 *Corinthians* 11:4 that also recommends women cover their heads with a veil in front of God.

Zinaa, adultery and fornication, is one of the seven deadly sins as illustrated in *Deuteronomy* 22:22, "they shall both of them die, both the man that lay with the woman,"[70] and in Qur'an *Surah an-Nur* 24:2, "As for female and male fornicators, give each of them one hundred lashes."[71]

Therefore, people who grow up with religious education tend to be scared of sex, as explained by the character Asha Kabeya, who promotes instead the traditional initiation rites to adulthood as valid education about sexual and reproductive health:

> *[...] Watoto wanaogofywa mno kuhusu ngono. Kuna dhana zinazosema ngono ni kama uchafu, laana, najisi, matusi, dhambi ambayo wahalifu wake wanastahili kupigwa mawe hadi wafe!* (Mkufya 2019: 69)
> *[...] Ni ngariba pekee unyagoni au jandoni aliye na uhodari na namna za kufunda vijana bila kigugumizi.* (Mkufya 2019: 70)

> [...] Children are made to be scared about sex. There are beliefs stating that sex is dirty, blameful, impure, vulgar and sinful and the lawbreakers deserve to be lapidated to death!
> [...] Only the *unyago* or *jando* instructor, the *ngariba* has the ability and skill to teach the youth without stammering.

Nevertheless, for those who believe, faith can be a tool to give support to others, as demonstrated by Kristina, who prays to help her family and friends. For instance, when Grace loses both her husband and her daughter, she prays God to give her the strength of *Job*:

> *Imani ya Ayubu haikutetereka. Mpe Grace imara huohuo.* (Mkufya 2019: 419)
> Job's faith did not shake. Give Grace the same strength.

The story of *Job* (1:13-22) is a biblical myth meaning that there are no explanations for the evil and suffering in this world acceptable for human limited cognition. Job discusses with God the presence of evil in the world, which usually pushes people to choose atheism. Likewise, in Mkufya, when there is inexplicable evil such as in Grace's case, either faith can remain unshaken or, if both science and

[70] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+22%3A+22%2C23+&version=KJV

[71] https://Qur'an.com/an-nur/2

religion fail, the supernatural intervenes. In fact, Grace and Omolo's progeny is hit by *kinda la mlapeke*, which literally means "a chicks who eats alone or a child who loves only himself;" this fictional curse or hereditary fatalism[72] describes someone whose existence destroys the existence of their close relatives (Mkufya 2019: 476). For instance, Omolo is an orphan, his daughter Tumaini kills herself, and his son Masumbuko, whose name means agony, kills his mother in childbirth (Nicolini 2022: 241-242).

Kristina's main arguments are delivered in the form of a sermon at Omolo and Tumaini's funeral (Mkufya 2019: 462-464), where she extensively quotes from the Bible: the Book of *Proverbs*, the *Psalms* and *Genesis*. Firstly:

> *Kumwogopa Mungu ndio mwanzo wa hekima na kumjua Mungu ni kufumbukiwa* (*Mithali* 9:10-11)" (*Proverbs* 9:10 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 462)
>
> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: And the knowledge of the holy is understanding. (The *Proverbs* of Solomon 9:10 King James Version)

Secondly:

> *Kumpendeza Mungu kwa mwanadamu ni kwa kumtafakari. Tangu zamani yamewahi kuchanua maua mazuri ya tafakuri ya Mungu, kama mfalme Solomoni, Daudi, watakatifu Agustino, Tomaso na wengine* (Mkufya 2019: 463) *[...] Uzuri wa ua liitwalo mtu ni kujitafakari ili limtafakari Mungu. Na Mungu siyo yule wa Waebrania pekee.* (Mkufya 2019: 464)
>
> Being devoted to God as human beings means to reflect upon Him. Since ancient times, beautiful flowers of God's contemplation have flowered, such as King Solomon, David, Saints Augustine, Thomas and others [...] The beauty of the flower called human being is to reflect upon himself so as to reflect upon God. Yet God is not only the Hebrew one.

In *Genesis* (*Mwanzo* 1:24-27 quoted in Mkufya 2019: 463), God creates humanity and endows humans with reason so they can reflect upon themselves and upon God.

Thirdly:

> *Nabii Daudi alituambia 'Mpumbavu kasema moyoni mwake, hakuna Mungu' (Zaburi 14). Lakini pia wasadikio bila kutafakari ni wapumbavu.* (Mkufya 2019: 464)

[72] Inspired by both the Greek interpretation of adverse fate and the Yoruba myth of *Abiku* a child predestined to death (Mkufya personal communication 14-4-2024); see also Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991).

> In the Psalms, the prophet David told us: "The fool hath said in his heart" (*Psalm* 14[73]); however, who believe without reasoning is a fool as well.

Since humanity has been gifted with reason, they must use it and show their love for God by reflecting upon him. This means that believing blindly without having reasoned about it is as foolish as rejecting faith. According to Kristina's idealism (KKM 202-4), the meaning of life is loving and acknowledging God, yet by means of a free exercise of reasoning and knowledge.

Kristina's prayer showing the meaning and purpose of human life on earth seems also to be a quote from *Matthew* 22:37:

> *Maana kuu ya maisha ya mwanadamu ni kumpendeza Mungu kwa kumfahamu na kumtafakari.* (Mkufya 2019: 204)
>
> Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. (*Matthew* 22:37[74])

To sum up, Kristina quotes selected passages from the Bible for the following purposes: firstly, to encourage an environment of tolerance and peaceful co-existence between all human beings and the natural environment; secondly, to foster multiculturalism; thirdly, to highlight the meaning in life; and finally, to push people to reflect and make the most out of their intellectual capacities.

Furthermore, I argue that Mkufya enriches the novel with ecopoetic symbols (cf. Aghoghovwia and McGiffin 2023) so as to design a lyrical narrative where the poetic tradition, in the form of natural elements, intersects with the prose. In fact, Swahili poetry, both classic and contemporary, displays natural elements not only as a continuous sign of African cultures, but also as objectified metaphors of the dramatic state of the soul or *anima mundi* (Acquaviva 2016: 185, 197).

In the trilogy, the title itself, *Diwani ya Maua*, means the poetry or a collection of poems about flowers, the flowers symbolising the being/existence of kind-hearted and virtuous people. This narrative supports an ecocritical 'ecology of knowledge' (Santos 2007; 2014; Medina 2006; 2011) where humans and nature complement each other. Precisely, in the novel there appear many kinds of flowers: the rose (*waridi*) is a new-born baby (KKM 448); the hibiscus (*mjohoro*) hides a dangerous secret (HIV/AIDS) for Tumaini (KKM 15), whereas the mango tree (*mwembe*) is a simile for an adolescent boy like Haji, and the mango fruit (*embe*) is connected to the appealing body shape of an adolescent girl like Tumaini (KKM 210); the *mkole* tree represents the wisdom of an *unyago* instructor such as Asha Kabeya

[73] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2014&version=KJV

[74] https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2022%3A37&version=KJV

(KKM 135; cf. Swantz 1986), and *mkungu*, the Indian almond (*Terminalia catappa L. Combretaceae*), which in *Jeremiah* 1:11 symbolises waiting for fruit to mature to let a new era begin, in this novel symbolises the wise teaching passed on from old Dr Hans to the young Haji (KKM 245). Finally, the baobab (*mbuyu*) is the symbol of prophecy and the link to the realm of the spirits (KKM 288); the baobab cavity is inhabited by an owl (*bundi*), who in many African cultures is the symbol of witchcraft (Mkufya p.c) and in the Hebrew Bible is the avatar for the demon Lilith (Blair 2008: 24).

At the beginning of the novel, many prophetic symbols adorn the narrative. For instance, the young character Haji offers a flower of *mchongoma* to his friend Tumaini, but the flower has an insect inside which is an omen of the HIV virus that will ruin the lives of both the children and their relatives (KKM 18). *Mchongoma*, the Indian plum (*Flacourtia indica Burm.f. Merr - Selicaceae*), is quoted in *Ezekiel* 28:24 as a prophecy of Israel's liberation from 'thorns.' In Mkufya's reinterpretation thorns are a bad omen: the HIV virus, a bug that intrudes in characters' lives. Likewise, the *mjohoro,* iron wood (*Senna siamea Lam. Fabaceae*), represents the shadow, or the secret omen enclosed in the two children playing house (*kijumba*), where they were believed to have had sex, triggering the peripeteia of the tragedy. Additionally, Haji and Tumaini experience the loss of their pet goat (KKM 28), and to remember their departed friend, they often play *kibunzi*, a children's game that symbolises the circle of life and death and that is usually played dancing around the fake grave of a goat (Baringo 2005).

Mkufya, with the sacrificial goat *kibunzi* that is tragic omen announcing the illness of the two child protagonists, seems to play with an interesting parallelism. Indeed, a traditional Chagga (Bantu ethnic group from the Kilimanjaro region)[75] scapegoat purification ritual can be compared to *Leviticus* 16:5-22, where the prescription for the Day of Atonement (*Lev.* 16:8, 10, 26; cf. Helm 1994) and the ritual of the scapegoat to be offered to Azazel are described (Pinker 2009: 2). In fact, the demon Azazel, "a minion of Satan" (Mojola 1999b: 74) in the Hebrew Bible is "the goat that is sent off," the "go away goat" or "the scapegoat" (Blair 2008: 24, 30). However, the Chagga scapegoat purification ritual is pre-existent to Christianisation and thus not connected to the Scriptures as explained by Mojola (1999b: 79).

The hidden presence of Azazel highlights the links between *Ziraili na Zirani* and *Kuwa Kwa Maua*, where the aulic language of demons' poetries is translated into dramatic dialogues.

[75] See: ISO 639: https://www.ethnologue.com/language/old/

7. Conclusions

Clashes of ideologies, between theism and antitheism, are conveyed by "double voiced discourses" (Bakhtin 1981) in Mkufya's *Ziraili na Zirani*, where the epic genre and apologetic literature constitute a Genette's hypertext (Allen 2000: 107-8). Moreover, the epic narration is 'fractured' by poetry (Rettovà 2021b) and 'entextualisation' (Barber 2007) of genres takes place.

The prose of *Kuwa Kwa Maua* is enriched by both metareferences to poetry and drama (Diegner 2021; 2017) and a "novelization of other genres" (Bakhtin 1981: 39), including poetic symbolism and a tragic drama incorporated into the narrative prose of the novel. Especially, the tragic drama inserted into the novel produces what I call inter-genre implementation, and the ideological clashes evolve into an environment of 'co-existence' (Nicolini 2022: 251).

A text and intertextuality not only "depict or disclose" reality, but they also "produce" it (Barber 2007: 106), by writing with 'différance,' which means to re-write a text with "difference" and "deferral of meaning" (Derrida 1978; 2016; Allen 2000: 65).

Just as, in Kezilahabi' s novel *Nagona* (1990), a mummified corpse holds the Bible in one hand and the Qur'an in the other (cf. Khamis 2003: 89; Diegner 2005: 30), as well as in Hussein's poem *Ngoma na Vailini* ("The Drum and the Violin," 1968), an oxymoronic combined identity wears "a Muslim kanzu and a Christian cross" (Topan 1974b: 180-1; Ricard 2000: 116; Gaudioso 2020: 17-20), Mkufya in his novels offers a *mchanganyodini*, intertextual intermingling of religions (cf. *mchanganyondimi* "intertextuality;" Khamis 2007: 51,57). This outlook is aimed at reassembling the "fragmentation of self-reflexive narrative" (Khamis 2003: 78) through Kezilahabi's "bifocal lenses" (Kezilahabi quoted in Lanfranchi 2012: 75), by exploiting awareness of the colonial past to overcome it 'decolonising the mind' (Wa Thiong'o 1986).

This study demonstrates the importance of two combined kinds of ethnography: the 'anthropology of text' (Barber 2007) and the 'anthropology of philosophy' (Kresse 2007).

The extraordinary potential of a hermeneutical close reading of Mkufya's novels, along with discussions and conversations with the author, have demonstrated how Mkufya has been able to conduct a religious examination and critique from the inside. Even though Mkufya supports a secular view, he postulates a landscape of pluralism, tolerance and inclusion for diverse ideologies and different beliefs as the main goal.

Furthermore, I have also highlighted how Mkufya's intellectual maturity is interconnected with the evolution of his characters' thought and the stylistic development of his novels. The characters who espoused social revolutionary ideologies have become messengers of a peaceful individual

enjoyment of life as well as the experimental prose has developed into a blended style, where realism and enchantment are stirred together.

Mkufya's novels tell a story that retells the Story. Indeed, the novels introduce an original new reading of the sacred texts by either criticising some doctrinal prescriptions or minding moral guidance but reinterpreted from a secular perspective. In fact, ethics detaches from religious morality to rediscover "*utu,* humanity or humanness" (Topan 2008b: 89) as "*kitendo*: performing good social actions" (Kresse 2007: 140; 2009) and "*utu bora*: the ideal personhood/humanity" (Robert quoted in Masolo 2019: 33). Therefore, the retold *ngano* "ancient tale," overcomes any religious conflict by encouraging an environment of intercultural and interreligious co-existence and tolerance.

To conclude, Mkufya's objective perfectly fits into the framework of Wiredu's 'conceptual decolonisation' (Wiredu 1995; 1998; 2002; 2004). Indeed, Mkufya's authorial role is to spread *ukombozi wa hekima,*[76] a "liberation of wisdom," by disentangling his readers' minds from imported cognitive patterns and by "divesting" (Wiredu 1998: 17) people's thoughts from any form of cultural imperialism while simultaneously fostering a multicultural approach.

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[76] Mkufya, personal interview 8-12-2023.

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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 2023/24.
She is presently 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: cristina.nicolini@unito.it