

## From VVU/UKIMWI (HIV/AIDS) to UVIKO-19 (COVID-19) An epistemological analysis of pandemics in Tanzania through Swahili literature

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This paper deals with a theme that has been a topical issue since the beginning of 2020, the outbreak of coronavirus, by comparison with the philosophical and epistemological aspects of HIV/AIDS as they are reflected in different genres of Swahili literature. I will illustrate findings obtained through my analysis of William Mkufya's novels dealing with HIV/AIDS in a prospective way with the upcoming literature dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. The conclusions I have drawn from the analysis of the philosophical novels, by the Tanzanian intellectual William Mkufya, will be the departure point for my follow-up research on the epistemological, ontological and phenomenological aspects of Covid-19 in Tanzania through different genres of Swahili literature. The potential objectives of this forthcoming research will be the following: firstly, to establish a fictional genre that articulates knowledge about Covid-19; secondly, to explore the evolution of Swahili language used to communicate messages on Covid-19; thirdly, to illustrate the changes undergone by literature after the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak; and finally, to investigate the philosophical perspectives characterising this literary stream: Humanist or post-humanist?

**Keywords:** HIV/AIDS, Covid-19, Swahili literature, genre, Afrophone philosophies, epistemologies, Tanzania

### 1. Introduction

I have been investigating Swahili literature on HIV/AIDS from multiple perspectives and through interdisciplinary research since 2011, and more recently, I have focused on the philosophical and epistemological aspects of HIV/AIDS through different genres of Swahili literature, namely plays and novels (Nicolini 2021). The importance of this research, which analyses an illness as a philosophical topic, has been emphasised by the current coronavirus outbreak, for literature on HIV/AIDS illustrates how to deal with the collateral aspects of an epidemic. In fact, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is well-digested and not alive any longer; thus, not only are there substantial data available by comparison with the data about the novel coronavirus pandemic, which is still in progress, but also, since HIV/AIDS is not

an emergency issue anymore, the floor is open for other discourses such as philosophical speculations and debates about knowledge.

The major finding of my current research was to establish the coexistence of plural epistemologies in the philosophical dissertations, concealed in the shape of novels dealing with HIV/AIDS, written in Swahili, by the Tanzanian intellectual William Mkufya, one of the major participants in my research project. My conclusions will be the departure point for my follow-up research on the epistemological, ontological and phenomenological aspects of Covid-19 in Tanzania through different genres of Swahili literature.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Possible Comparisons between the Two Viral Outbreaks in Tanzania: A Phenomenological Pathway

The starting point of this paper implies drawing a possible comparison between the two viral outbreaks in Tanzania. On the one hand, HIV/AIDS, in Swahili named *VVU/UKIMWI* (*Ukosefu wa Kinga Mwilini*<sup>2</sup> ‘the lack of body defences;’ BAKITA 2004), of which the first reported case dates back in 1983 in the Kagera region; and, on the other hand, the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, in Swahili named *UVIKO-19* (*Umoja wa Virusi vya Korona* ‘the cluster of coronaviruses;’ BAKITA 2020), of which the first imported case has been identified at Kilimanjaro International Airport (KIA) on 16 March 2020 (Tarimu and Wu 2020).

Professor Aldin Mutembei, who is an expert on the socio-linguistic aspects of HIV/AIDS in the country, has been studying the impact of HIV/AIDS in Tanzanian oral literature since his PhD thesis (2001) in which he conducted an in-depth analysis of metaphors and metonymies in a corpus of oral literature in the Luhaya language (1985 - 1998) in relation to socio-behavioural aspects of AIDS, particularly in connection with gender relations. Afterwards, Mutembei (2009a) examined myths and metaphors in a corpus of Swahili poetry published in several national newspapers (1982 - 2006). According to Mutembei’s thorough studies on HIV/AIDS (2001; 2005a, b; 2007; 2009a, b; Mutembei *et al.* 2002; see also Lugalla *et al.* 2004), the metaphorical expressions illustrate how local people’s reactions followed a pathway from denial and uncertainty about the “unknown disease,” via realisation, fear and despair, to understanding, comprehension, reaction and prevention.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented this paper “From VVU/UKIMWI (HIV/AIDS) to UVIKO-19 (Covid-19): An Epistemological Analysis of Pandemics in Tanzania through Swahili Literature,” at the 8<sup>th</sup> Asixoxe (*Let’s Talk!*) Conference on African Philosophy: “The Genre of Reality: African Philosophy in the Covid-19 Crisis”. Online conferences, 15th – 16th June 2021, organized by the Centre of Global Studies, Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences- Prague (Czech Republic), and the Centre of African Philosophy, University of Bayreuth (Germany).

<sup>2</sup> Another acronym for AIDS that was popular in the Eighties is *MAHABUSI*: *Matokeo ya Hali ya Burungiko la Silaha za mwili* (‘the result of the upsetting state of body defences;’ EMAU 1987).

This phenomenological evolution was accompanied by artistic expressions engendering the “Culture of AIDS” (Barz and Cohen 2011) through multiple genres, starting from oral poetry, “African orature” (Mugo 1991), verbal arts, via proverbs and myths to theatre and performance (Mutembei 2011a,b; Askew 2015), which particularly demonstrates the clashes between western epistemological paradigms regarding AIDS and local ideologies and worldviews. Finally, the HIV/AIDS theme spread in novels (Mutembei 2013; 2015; 2016).

A similar phenomenological pathway can be detected in contemporary Tanzania concerning the coronavirus pandemic (*utandavu wa virusi vya korona*).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the former president John Pombe Magufuli, after questioning the accuracy of the coronavirus testing kits (*kivunge cha vipimo vya virusi ya korona*), because Tanzanian laboratories obtained positive responses from tests on papayas, jackfruits, paw paws, sheep and goats, declared the country virus free in May 2020.<sup>4</sup>

This first denialist phase, which was characterised by the rhetoric of “Self against the Other” (Mbembe 2001; Santos 2009), or the myth of *umetoka kwao si kwenu* (‘it is coming from them (the strangers) not from us;’ Mutembei 2009a: 15f.), perceived the virus as an imported threat coming from abroad to be denied and concealed. For instance, in the Eighties it was believed that black-market dealers, commonly known as *Abekikomela*, who dealt at the Tanzania-Ugandan borders, or *Vijana wa Juliana* (‘the young of Juliana’), who smuggled the American brand textile “Eagle” into the country (Mutembei 2009a), and those who sold Euro-American second-hand clothes in Tanzania, were indeed the ones to blame for spreading the HIV virus.

This phase was followed by understanding and the adoption of preventive measures. In fact, in February 2021, the government started officially encouraging the wearing of face masks (*barakoa*), hand sanitisers distribution (*dawa ya kutakasa mikono*), social distancing (*kuepuka msongamano*), and the closure of churches, mosques, schools and other places of social aggregation (*mikusanyiko ya watu*).

The approach of Prevention and Awareness Campaigns pinpoints that being a viral disease, only its symptoms can effectively be treated, and not the virus itself as shown in this poster of public health announcement:

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<sup>3</sup> Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa – BAKITA. 2020. *ISTILAH ZA KORONA*.

<sup>4</sup> Sources:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/3/tanzania-president-questions-coronavirus-kits-after-animal-test>;

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52966016>;

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tanzania-idUSKBN22F0KF>;

<https://www.africanews.com/2020/05/06/tanzania-how-can-goat-papaya-pawpaw-test-positive-to-corona-morning-call/>

*Ugonjwa wa homa ya kirusi cha Corona unatibika? Ugonjwa huu hauna chanjo wala tiba ya moja kwa moja, hivyo kama yalivyo magonjwa mengine yanayosababishwa na virusi, matibabu hufanyika kwa kuzingatia dalili zilizopo na ufuatiliajiwa karibu* (Source: *Elimu ya Afya* No: 659)

Can the fever caused by coronavirus be treated? This disease has neither direct prevention nor specific treatment, as for other diseases caused by a virus, treatment consists in curing symptoms and clinical observation<sup>5</sup>.

Thus, exactly as it happened for HIV/AIDS, this is the phase in which prevention and awareness campaigns are conducted to stop the transmission of an incurable and dangerous disease caused by a virus that can have mortal effects. In fact, the importance of not underestimating the corona disease is stressed: it is dangerous and can kill: *Tusipuuzee Watanzania Corona ni Hatari na Inaua* ('Tanzanians, do not ignore coronavirus; it is dangerous and can kill'); protect yourself right now: *Jikinga Sasa* (Source: WHO on Facebook). The importance of preventive measures is also emphasised. A TADB (Tanzania Agricultural Development Bank) advert also reminds people the importance of good nutrition to boost the immune system, among other measures to protect oneself from the virus: *kumbuka lishe bora ni kinga muhimu dhidi ya virusi vya korona* ('remember, good nutrition is an important protection against coronavirus'). This important point is also supported by traditional healers and local medicinal plant dealers. Particularly after the election of the first ever female Tanzanian president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, on 19 March 2021, further preventive measures against Covid-19 were implemented in the country. However, it seems that there has not been any attempt to procure vaccines in the meantime.

Indeed, during the third phase of uncertainty and fear, the coronavirus vaccination is at the centre of an ongoing debate:

"I know a vaccine is a game-changer in fighting an incurable disease. But the science behind this Covid-19 vaccine is incomplete," said the director of NIMR, Tanzania's National Institute for Medical Research, during a symposium on African awareness and Covid-19 attended by university students and streamed live on 7 March 2021 on Azam.tv Tanzania<sup>6</sup>

The director of NIMR maintains that the Covid-19 vaccines are still experimental: *chanjo ya majaribio*, and that they were "rushed" by pharmaceutical companies for commercial interests.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> All the translations from Swahili to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. All emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Source: <https://z-p4-upload.facebook.com/azamtvz/posts/1957665954399636>

<sup>7</sup>Source:

<https://www.scidev.net/sub-saharan-africa/news/top-tanzania-scientist-says-Covid-19-vaccine-experimental/3May21>

The NIMR's director statement: *Chanjo za magharibi zinazotumika sasa huko duniani hazijathibitisha kukinga Covid-19!* ('western vaccines currently used in the world have not proven to protect against Covid-19')<sup>8</sup> ignited an animated discussion which is available on the Web.

For instance, here are three selected reactions retrieved from the Azam TV page on Facebook of 7 March 2021:

The first person (\*1)<sup>9</sup> is optimistic about the vaccine and maintains that the debate about it demonstrates that the government has started accepting the virus's existence and taking important measures to fight against it.

The others are sceptical about the vaccine and have more confidence in traditional healers and diviners. One of the two (\*2) complains that 'desk research' has not obtained any valuable results and suggests entrusting traditional healers to find an effective vaccination against coronavirus by 'bird divining.'

The third person (\*3) simply discourages Tanzanian people from using the imported vaccines and supports local laboratories and national experts instead, reminding people how many times local herbal remedies have been proven to be effective in treating diseases for which European medicine failed. In the end they encourage Tanzanian people to trust African resources and experts.<sup>10</sup>

I also want to draw attention to one particular reaction to the discussion rising from the NIMR's director statement, which expresses doubts about the effectiveness of vaccination, retrieved from *Jamii Forums*, the most popular Tanzanian social forum webpage, on 31 March 2021:

*Blogger 1*<sup>11</sup> seems to be sceptical about herbal remedies. This blogger argues that it is dangerous to encourage people to use the herbal medicine called *nyungu* by telling them European immunity is not guaranteed, and to discourage them from being vaccinated, because if something goes wrong, they will not be compensated. In fact, the blogger reminds people they will not be compensated for the harm caused by *nyungu* treatment either.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, even European themselves do not trust vaccine as it is confirmed by the discussion arisen about AstraZeneca Vaccine and the danger of unusual blood clots as a side effect<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: <https://z-p4-upload.facebook.com/azamtvz/posts/1957665954399636>

<sup>9</sup> Names and pseudonyms of all the people and bloggers have been anonymized for data protection.

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://z-p4-upload.facebook.com/azamtvz/posts/1957665954399636>

<sup>11</sup> Names and pseudonyms of all the people and bloggers have been anonymized for data protection.

<sup>12</sup> Source:

<https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/nimr-tunafanyia-utafiti-dawa-7-za-kitanzania-kama-zinatibu-Covid-19-chanjo-za-magharibi-bado-hazijathibitika-kuinga.1844325/>).

<sup>13</sup> For example, look at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-56674796>; <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-debate/20210316-risky-precaution-will-eu-astrazeneca-suspension-do-more-harm-than-good>.

The fourth phase of understanding and awareness, in these globalised and technological times, suggests spreading awareness is a much faster process than in the Tanzania of the eighties. In fact, awareness of Covid-19 has been reported very high at 93% among the national population (Ipsos Survey April 2020).

The poems written in Swahili and Luhaya and published in all the main national newspapers to convey messages on HIV/AIDS during the eighties and nineties, nowadays have been substituted by local television (58%), local radio (52%) (Ipsos Survey April 2020), but above all by the Web.

The main media used to communicate about Covid-19 seem to be, firstly, leaflets, booklets, and billboards, sponsored by International Health Organisations and NGOs, even though they did not have an effective impact on the local population in the campaigns against HIV/AIDS because they were considered to pertain to an exogenous cultural and epistemological framework (Mutembei 2014; Beck 2006; Offe 2001).

For instance, the leaflets by *Elimu ya Afya*<sup>14</sup> (No: 644; No: 2092) give clear advice on how to recognise the symptoms of, and how to avoid the virus transmission responsible for *homa kali ya mapafu unaosababishwa na virusi vya corona* ('the acute respiratory syndrome (pneumonia) caused by coronavirus,' @elimuyaafya na: 644), encourage the use of preventive devices such as *barakoa* (the face mask): *Najikinga na Corona...huku nikipendeza na barakoa yangu* ('I protect myself from coronavirus while I am lovable wearing my face mask,' @elimuyaafya na: 2092), and foster the importance of implementing socio-behavioural changes such as social distancing, personal hygiene and sanitation of the environment (cdc.gov/coronavirus). Finally, according to the latest news, the Tanzanian government does seem to have started moving towards taking part in the COVAX vaccination campaign.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, during summer 2021, a few people have voluntarily received vaccine jabs distributed even from government hospitals such as *Bunju* Hospital in Dar es Salaam (p.c.<sup>16</sup>).

In addition to this, social initiatives to educate and prevent coronavirus have been implemented in the country. For instance, a "Covid-19 Information Desk & Resources" has been established at the University of Dar es Salaam (www.udsm.ac.tz), and among the "University of Dar Es Salaam Initiatives Against Covid-19 Pandemic" prototypes of different hand washing machines have been experimented by students in the faculty of Science and Technology.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Source: <https://www.facebook.com/Elimu-Ya-Afya-180970129181238/>; <https://elimuyaafya.co.tz>.

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://www.dw.com/sw/who-tanzania-kuomba-kujiunga-na-mpango-wa-covax/a-57940795>.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication; the informant's name will not be disclosed for data protection.

<sup>17</sup> Source: 20200717\_082856\_UNIT\_75\_CUSTOM\_PAGE\_UDSM%20INITIATIVES%20to%20COVID%2019.pdf.

It is important to note the contribution of the *Soma Book Café* ([www.somabookcafe.com](http://www.somabookcafe.com)), founded in 2008 in Dar es Salaam, to promote reading through multi-media literary expression and storytelling, and to be a hub for storytellers and children. Here, booklets for both adults and children on Covid-19 can be found, distributed by means of initiatives such as the *Children Corona Virus Writing Challenge!!!*<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, those booklets and posters spread alongside locally produced murals, for instance, the wonderful eye-catching and multi-coloured murals designed by the young street artists of VAS (Visual Aided Stories) in Kigogo, Dar es Salaam. One of the posters delivers the message: *Zingatia huku Maisha yanaendelea* ('observe (the rules) as life goes on') – respect the rules (showing people washing their hands with either soap and tap water or sanitisers) so that life can continue. In addition, pungent vignettes of political satire circulate widely on the Web, such as posters on Facebook which criticise the Tanzanian phase of Covid-19 denialism ([@thisisafrika.me](https://thisisafrika.me) @Facebook; DW Kiswahili @Facebook). For example, there is a poster that illustrates politicians declaring the country virus free, while the government was not testing people, or another poster which shows government members criticising the effectiveness of face masks, while the politicians themselves are wearing masks on their eyes, instead of covering their nose and mouth.

Local discourses about coronavirus are conveyed through multi-media channels such as posts on Twitter and Facebook, videos on YouTube and Instagram, as well as in virtual forums such as *Jamii Forums* and the *Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions Students Organization* (TAHLISO) forum online and BlogSpot.

I would like to highlight the public health campaign managed by *Jukwaa La Kidijitali La Elimu Ya Afya Kwa Umma – Digital Forum for Public Health Education* (<https://elimuyaafya.co.tz/>), whose slogan is: *Afya Yangu, Mtaji Wangu* ('My Health, My Capital;' @elimuyaafya). This multi-media website offers online educational courses, tv and radio podcasts; and it relates to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube channels.

I was particularly impressed by the Tweet, on the page of *Elimu ya Afya kwa Umma*, showing the metaphor: *watu wanapukutika*: "people are falling off," which metaphorically means perishing quickly and in great numbers. This metaphor has also been one of the most common images used to represent the mortal effect of HIV/AIDS, as shown in the play for teenagers *Kilio Chetu* 'Our Lament;' MAF 1996): *Watu walipukutika, wakapukutika kama majani ya kiangazi* ('People were falling off, falling off like summer leaves;' KC 1). This published play, which taught on the secondary school syllabus, aims to educate

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<sup>18</sup> See: <https://www.somabookcafe.com/soma-presents-children-corona-virus-writing-challenge/>.

school age children and teenagers on the risks they could encounter when they become sexually active, such as sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy.

Finally, there are also examples of live performances, such as the videos about the “Tanzanian Joker” raising awareness about the virus in night burials which have been circulating on social media in Tanzania<sup>19</sup> In addition to this, poetries and songs circulating in the social media have their role to play, such as in the song: *Shairi linalotoa tahadhari juu ya Ugonjwa hatari wa Corona* (‘The Poetry that warns about the dangerous disease of Corona’) available on *KIZARO TV* YouTube page;<sup>20</sup> the wonderful melody of *Washairi Wa Tanzania – Shairi La Corona* (‘Corona Poetry’) by the band “Tanzanian Poets” of Dar es Salaam, available on *Life Vibes* YouTube page,<sup>21</sup> which describes Corona as a foreign calamity worse than HIV/AIDS; and, *Ushairi Kuhusu Korona* (‘Corona Poetry’), posted on the *UMATI*<sup>22</sup> blog;<sup>23</sup>

<i>Korona ugonjwa gani, umezua taharuki</i>	Corona, what kind of disease is that? It has start triggering anxiety
<i>Chanjo haipatikani, Ulaya hakukaliki</i>	A vaccination is not available yet, Europe is uninhabitable
<i>Tiba haijulikani, Dunia haifurukuti</i>	The cure is unknown, the World is wiggling out of it
<i>Korona ina maafa, Kujikinga ni LAZIMA [...]</i>	Corona is a Calamity, protecting us is a MUST [...]

(Dr Himidi Mwaitele and Dr  
Lugano Daimon, 07.04.2020)

In Tanzania, the literary expressions dealing with Covid-19, which consists of songs, poems and performance, demonstrate once again, as it was for HIV/AIDS, that the genre determines the contents, or *vice versa*, the authors choose the genre according to the specific message they want to express. During epidemics in particular, genres reflect the phase of the epidemic, articulating different related messages also according to the historical period. For instance, in the first phase of the crisis, theatre and poetry expose the health issue and its socio-political implications, prioritising distribution of

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<sup>19</sup> Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52505375>.

<sup>20</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqBYUdk4Ufc>

<sup>21</sup> Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B57a0TdOqbk>

<sup>22</sup> UMATI is a national NGO that provides sexual and reproductive health education and support in Tanzania. See: <https://www.umati.or.tz/>.

<sup>23</sup> Source:

<https://www.umati.or.tz/index.php/umati-media/blog/95-announcements/145-ushairi-kuhusu-korona-covid-19>



educational messages and preventive measures; whereas novels seem to be the medium for much broader philosophical speculation, usually developed at a later stage of the epidemic when the illness is not an emergency any longer. The illness becomes a metaphor for social issues and prompts contemporary reflection.

### 3. A Tanzanian intellectual's communication and the theory of *UKIMWI wa Kijamii* (Social AIDS) in relation to Covid-19

At this point in the discussion, I would like to introduce a Tanzanian intellectual, one of the most prominent novelists dealing with HIV/AIDS, William Mkufya, and his viewpoint on an “Epistemology of Epidemiology in Tanzania” (document emailed on 2 May 2021). I am grateful to him for having shared his opinions for the purpose of this paper.<sup>24</sup> The main points raised by Mkufya are as follows:

Covid-19 is a new disease which has foreign origin, and which was brought to Tanzania by human mobility. Since Covid-19 has symptoms that resemble the common influenza, pneumonia, and other respiratory diseases, which people in Tanzania have been experiencing for ages, there have been local therapies in use since even before the introduction of western medicine. For instance, the herbal remedies administered for melting mucus clogging in patients' throat called *Kufukiza nyungu*, which is a medical treatment that works by steaming herbal concoction extracted from Tanzanian medicinal plants, and that it is administered to patients via steam inhalations so as to unclog lungs. The Tanzanian psycho-social approach to the Corona disease is cautious to avoid creating social panic and fear of the rapid killer virus of Covid-19. Therefore, a national declaration to depend on faith, 'God would intervene and save the Nation', has been made.

Mkufya refers to Magufuli's call for collective prayers against the Corona disease (source: TAHLISO):

Furthermore, the Tanzanian government declared that there are not satisfactory statistics about the progression of the disease (numbers of infections and deaths) in contrast with the data gathered by International Health Organizations. This results in a political controversy raised both in East Africa and globally, which tends to blame Tanzania as a nation that is not inclined to observe the international efforts to control Covid-19. The first consequence has been sanctioning local and international travellers and tourism. Moreover, Tanzania considers the early administration of vaccines to its people as unsafe and as a National Health security risk, until when much more evidence of its medical

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<sup>24</sup> I am also grateful to William Mkufya for having been the *mhusika mkuu*- main participant in my research for the last three years.

effectiveness will be available, attempting to protect people from being used as guinea pigs. Finally, the Tanzania refusal to lock down (*zuio la kutotoka nyumbani*, BAKITA 2020), which would have resulted into serious socio-economic consequences, was based on defending the economic progress of the country.

In fact, Mkufya supports Tanzania's prudence in implementing measures against coronavirus, which he defines as "the audacity of rejecting medication" (Mkufya p.c., 09-08-2021).

In conclusion, according to Mkufya, the debate raised by the corona epidemic is rooted in neo-colonial implications as he discussed in his first novel on HIV/AIDS, *Ua La Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation,' Mkufya 2004), through the concept of *UKIMWI wa kijamii* ('the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome of society,' Mkufya 2004: 357).

*UKIMWI wa kijamii* ('social AIDS') explains metaphorically how all the traumatic events endured historically by African societies made them fragile, vulnerable to any external aggression and catastrophic event. This is a collective problem, because "the humanity of African people" (*utu wa mwafrika*) assaulted by the collective African history of slavery, colonisation, and neo-colonialism (Mkufya 2004: 361; Rettovà 2007b: 116), has lost its integrity as well as the traditional values connected to the concept of *utu*, which Mkufya translates as humanity, identity and human dignity (Mkufya's email 08-2020).

*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 at a time when already we were suffering from social AIDS. It found our society already affected by a social immune deficiency syndrome which rendered our society unable to protect itself from everything that could assault us, such as famine, drought, drug abuse and political struggles. This social AIDS had already eaten our human dignity, our patriotism, our wisdom and our traditional beliefs. Now we find ourselves within national boundaries created by Europeans, and we accept as truthful their beliefs, their culture, and their interpretation of humanity and nationalism.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> My translation edited by Mkufya. Emphasis mine.

In this novel, AIDS is not only a medical condition, but also a metaphor for socio-political and economic issues in contemporary African societies (*UKIMWI wa kijamii*), and thus for establishing a philosophy of medicine through literature. In fact, the use of viruses as metaphors reflects the postmodern and postcolonial reality in Tanzania, where people have lost their cultural and societal immune systems, suffering as they are from *UKIMWI wa Kijamii*. Indeed, viruses can infect bodies, but cultural customs can also be infected by the global transmission of cultural replications (Samuels 2021), because according to Baudrillard (1993) modern people have been liberating themselves from all past constraints, so they have lost the capacity to prevent new and/or foreign ideas and images from infecting their own cultural purity (Baudrillard quoted in Samuels 2021: 7-23). As this was the cause of a cultural form of acquired immune deficiency syndrome in the eighties, nowadays viral infiltrations in African literature seem to continue through the ongoing SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

#### 4. A Philosophy of Medicine in William Mkufya's *Diwani ya Maua* (The Poetry of Flowers)

My latest fieldwork research, carried out in Dar es Salaam,<sup>26</sup> was focused on the empirical work of participant observation that I conducted in William Mkufya's life and fictions. I spent a period living at Mkufya's place together with his family and the cooperation between me and the author consisted in alternating formal interviews, discussions, and his lectures with countless friendly conversations.

The trilogy *Diwani ya Maua* ('The Poetry of Flowers') is devoted to thorough philosophical reflections on "life and death: the two pillars of philosophy" (Mkufya, p.c.) disguised in the narrative shapes of novels, where the author embarks on an intellectual pursuit of: the meaning of life, death, faith, human sexuality, fears of death, the existence of an afterlife, and existential absurdity in relation to HIV/AIDS<sup>27</sup>.

The flowers (*maua*) are a vivid metaphor that represents both the delicate and fleeting existence of human beings as well the existence of decent and compassionate persons in this world. Human beings' life cycle is like that of flowers: "the flower of humanity is the short period of time when human beings, like flowers, are alive and blossoming" (Mkufya 2019: 448):

*Watu ni maua, yakiishi ndipo yamechanua [...] Uhai, ndilo ua la kuwa kwetu! Sisi ni maua yake, tumedhihirika kwa kuchanua kwa kila rangi* (Mkufya 2019: 448)

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<sup>26</sup> Six months (2018 – 2019) of fieldwork research conducted as part of my PhD degree approved by the School of Oriental and African Languages of London.

<sup>27</sup> "A story in three novels about HIV/AIDS, fear of death and existential absurdity," Mkufya unpublished (email received in January 2019).

People are like flowers; they blossom while they are alive. [...] Life is indeed the flower of our existence! We are the flowers of life, we become real by blossoming in every colour, giving off every scent, and assuming the most attractive shapes.<sup>28</sup>

The trilogy consists of two published novels: *Ua la Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation,' 2004); *Kuwa Kwa Maua*<sup>29</sup> ('The Existence of Flowers,' 2019); and a third novel still in progress.

Mkufya through the mouth of Dr Hans, the main character and the real flower of the Maua trilogy, a medical doctor and a philosopher, illustrates the complex encounter between scientific progress and local knowledge and culture. This interaction is explored through a discussion revolving around a hypothetical vaccination against HIV/AIDS in Tanzania:

Dr Hans: *Ukitaka utamaduni wako ushamiri, ufungulie, uweke wazi na uruhusu unufaike kutoka kwenye tamaduni nyingine ili zineemeshe ule wa kwako. Lakini uchague cha kuiga. Sisi huwa hatuchagui. [...] Tukiletewa chanjo na kulazimishwa tuchanje watoto wetu, hatukai chini kwanza na kuchunguza usafi na ubora wa hizo chanjo. Ni rahisi kwa mtu mwovu huko Ulaya kuingiza kitu kibaya cha kuteketeza vizazi vya baadaye. [...] Chanjo ni muhimu sana. Mimi ni daktari na ninajua umuhimu wa chanjo. Ninachopinga ni kule kutozikagua kwa makini...* (Mkufya 2004: 358-9)

Dr Hans: If you want your culture to be spread, be released, be open and allow it to profit from other cultures so as to be more comfortable with your own culture; however, you must choose what to imitate. We are not choosing [...] Take as an example the vaccine; if vaccination is imported and we are obliged to vaccinate our children, we are not reflecting and evaluating the security and effectiveness of these vaccinations. Like this it is easy for an evil European man to bring a dangerous mechanism to destroy our future generations. [...] Vaccines are really important. I am a doctor and I know the importance of vaccination. The one who opposes, is the one who is not examining carefully...

Dr Hans: *Kitu ambacho kitamtatiza mwanadamu daima ni kifo [...] kutodumu wake. [...] teknolojia ya wanadamu itakapofanikiwa kuondoa magonjwa yote duniani, watu watakuwa sasa wanakufa kwa uzee [...] hivyo havina dawa.* (Mkufya 2004: 418)

Dr Hans: What has always been challenging for a human being is death [...] transitoriness [...] when human beings' technology will succeed in overcoming all the diseases existing in this world, then people will die because of old age [...] for this there exists no treatment.

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<sup>28</sup> My translation edited by Mkufya. Emphasis mine.

<sup>29</sup> I thank William Mkufya for having given me the unique opportunity to follow closely the final adjustments of the novel *Uwa wa Maua* ('The Being/Essence of Flowers') for a period of one year, from October 2018, when I was in Tanzania for fieldwork research, to October 2019, when the novel was finally published as *Kuwa Kwa Maua* ('The Existence of Flowers'). Finally, I thank Mkufya for having acknowledged me in the first published edition of this novel (Mkufya 2019: 5). See also Nicolini (2021).

Mkufya is denouncing what he calls *Utu-guni* ‘the defective human identity’ (Mkufya 2004: 361), which is the result of the troubled history of the African people from slavery to colonialism and neo-colonialism. This concept is similar to the idea of “fragmented-self” introduced by the contemporary and prolific Tanzanian author Said Khamis (2003; 2005; 2007). The “fragmented-self” is a broken or blurred identity, vague, ambiguous, and baffled by the hostile environment which characterises the post-colonial setting and has been exacerbated by globalisation (Khamis 2003: 80-1).

Nonetheless these defective and fragmented identities play the role of “metonymical weapons” (Cooper 2008) or “metonymy of presences” that are “*almost the same but not quite*” (Bhabha 1984: 130), and which by standing metonymically to the hegemonic colonial presences can undermine them from the inside. The result of this subversion is to achieve and promote “*ustaduni* – culturally specific civilization” (Mkufya 2004: 363). Mkufya coined this neologism, *ustaduni*, which I translated as “culturally specific civilization” (Nicolini 2021), by playing with the Swahili language. In fact, he joins the Arabic loan word *ustaarabu* that means civilization, by hinting at the Arabo-Islamic domination on the Swahili coasts, with the word *utamaduni* that means national culture and traditional customs. Therefore, Mkufya’s *ustaduni* is a culturally specific counter-epistemology, which aims to countering the hegemonic western episteme.

Swahili literature dealing with HIV/AIDS aims to take care of the future generations who are exposed to multiple dangers. In the play *Kilio Chetu* (1996), children accuse their parents and relatives for not having listened to their cry, making them fall into the trap of HIV/AIDS, hidden as it is by the metaphorical presence of *Dubwana*, the giant phantom, protagonist of the allegorical folktale. According to Igbafen’s (2017) notion of “African existentialism,” childbearing and procreation are the compulsory requirements to qualify the deceased to become an ancestor, capable of protecting their progeny, and thus, these are the sole prerequisites for a “good death.” Conversely, the advent of HIV/AIDS puts the continuation of entire clans and lineages at risk, because either young people die before giving birth, or young people who are HIV-positive cannot procreate (Mutembei 2001; Setel 1999; Dilger 2008; 2009; 2010). The importance of procreation, as the only human strategy for overcoming death, is strongly supported by the character of Dr Hans in *Ua La Faraja* (2004):

*Anayekufa ni yule ambaye hakuzaa!* (Mkufya 2004: 385)

“Who actually dies is the one who doesn’t give birth!”

On the one hand, in *Ua La Faraja*, Mkufya describes HIV transmission as sexually transmitted, spreading through sexual networks among adult characters, and mortal, unless you have given birth. On the other hand, in *Kuwa Kwa Maua* (2019), a novel that focuses on children, HIV is a “blood borne infection”

(Wilton 1997: 5), which is spread by either mother to child vertical transmission, as in the case of the young character Haji, or by direct contact with infected blood, as in the case of the young heroine of the novel *Tumaini* (Tuma). It is also a chronic treatable disease. ARV therapies have transformed HIV/AIDS from an incurable disease into a treatable chronic illness. It means that *kuokoa kiasi cha maji ambayo hayajamwagika* (Mkufya 2019: 145) ‘to save the amount of water that has not been poured yet’ has now become possible by means of therapies.

In conclusion, by means of my empirical research into the life and work of an author, William Mkufya, who is not part of the academia, but a self-trained writer and a philosopher, I demonstrated that Swahili literature is a formal platform for Afrocentric discourses and an expression of Afrophone philosophies (Nicolini 2021).

### 5. The follow-up research: What’s next?

On the wave of what I called elsewhere the current “movement of rise of counter-epistemologies” (Nicolini, *Asixoxe* 2021), which is in progress in multiple disciplines in the forms of a “reconfiguration of the epistemological landscape” (Mbembe 2021),<sup>30</sup> characterised by a shifting (not fixed) centre of gravity, and which is described by the concept of “Epistemologies from the South” (Santos 2007; 2014; 2018; 2020; Mignolo 2009; 2011; 2013), I intend to engage in a “South-South intercultural translation” (Santos 2014), focused on “African-centred Knowledges” (Cooper and Morrel 2014). The Afrocentric counter-epistemological movement is part and parcel of the project led by the ‘Global South,’ aimed at validating underestimated and concealed knowledge systems “born in the struggle against colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy” (Santos 2014; Santos and Meneses 2020).

Here, I argue that a philosophy of medicine can be established, by investigating philosophical discussions and the epistemological pluralism which can be identified in Swahili literature dealing with modern and contemporary illnesses such as HIV/AIDS and Covid-19. Particularly when viral pandemics and viruses are concerned, it means dealing with the always unknown, because how ever advanced scientific knowledge might be, “viruses endlessly evolve in new forms with ever-growing capacities to transmit and replicate themselves, especially in an open and interconnected world” (Kavey and Kavey 2021). In fact, local responses with traditional beliefs and practices are described in literature, which also illustrates an “evolutionary epistemology” (Mac Cormac 1985): the development of new cognitive

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<sup>30</sup> Mbembe, Achille. “Keynote Conversation on Decolonising Knowledge Production.” University of KwaZulu-Natal and SOAS University of London joint webinar on *Contested Spaces: Epistemic (A)Symmetries, Mobilities, Identities*, virtual symposium 25 February 2021.

and physical processes as adaptational strategies to survive according to the ever-changing environment that tends progressively to be even more hostile towards humanity.

Therefore, the inter and trans-disciplinary study that I am introducing will consist in empirical research made up of a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and a thematic and stylistic analysis of language and texts aiming to answer these research questions:

How is the novel coronavirus and its impact described in Swahili literature? Through which genre?

What are the literary streams characterising Swahili literature post the Covid-19 outbreak?

Can a philosophy of medicine be established? What are the epistemologies appearing in the literature dealing with coronavirus and post-pandemic issues?

What is the social impact of this prospective literature? Is it capable of overcoming the new communication issues, created by social distances and face covering, for the readers? Certainly, digital literature such as blogs and posts on social media have already demonstrated how they are fundamental tools to overcome social distancing and to connect people; but, what about the narrative genres?

The research objectives will be the following: firstly, to identify fictional genres that articulate knowledge about Covid-19, since for the time being it seems to be mainly discussed through social media, such as Twitter and Facebook posts, and in social forums such as *Jamii Forums*.

The second objective will be to explore the evolution of Swahili language used to communicate messages on Covid-19. The focus will be not only on the new scientific vocabulary, which has already been collected by BAKITA, the National Council of Swahili Language (2020), but also on the new metaphors, metonymies, myths and proverbs, illustrating and/or concealing the virus, as happened before for HIV/AIDS (Mutembei 2001; 2009a; 2007).

The third objective will be investigating the role played by traditional healing therapies to prevent and heal coronavirus that seem to have been active since the beginning. Nonetheless, local herbal therapies and treatments to be tested and approved would need the investment of a huge amount of money that many African countries cannot afford yet.

Finally, the main objectives will be analysing the changes undergone by literature after the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak, and investigating the philosophical perspectives characterising this literary stream: Humanist or post-humanist?

## 6. Swahili Literature and Philosophy post the Covid-19 Pandemic

In other words, unexpectedly enough, in this globalised and digital era, we, human beings from all over the world, have been experiencing the surreal situation of coping with a new virus that scientists do seem to believe escaped from a laboratory where experiments on animals (bats) were conducted. Indeed, the ever-increasing mutation capability of RNA-viruses increases the occurrence of spill-over events towards other species (Mori *et al.* 2020; news-medical.net). As a result, the characteristic features of this globalised and interconnected world allow the virus to spread extremely fast, and it turns out to be a human made pandemic.

Therefore, by engaging in a “comparison across culturally distinct philosophical traditions” (Connolly 2015: 24), the objective would be to obtain a “dynamic commingling” of global philosophical interactionism (Connolly 2015: 198) so as to investigate what are the phenomenological reactions of human beings, who seem to have been bitten by their own scientific advancements?

More specifically, how is the phenomenology of Covid-19 portrayed in literary productions in African languages (Swahili)? In which genre? Through which philosophical perspective? Humanist or post-humanist? In other words, do human beings, pushed once again in front of the invincibility of death, realise the fragility and transitoriness of their lives by rediscovering their humanity or humanness? Or, do they try to develop a new “humandroidness” through fostering sci-fi and the Afrofuturism stream?

Therefore, I would like to explore the new characteristic features of what I baptise as ‘the post-Covid-19 outbreak, or ultra-modern phase of Swahili literature,’ which will probably be digital literature, and which follows the experimentation of the post-real and post-modern “new” Swahili literature (Khamis 2005; 2007; Gromov 2014; 2019; Rettová 2016; Bertoncini *et al.* 2009; Diegner 2018; Aiello 2015).

The relationships that have been intermingling Swahili literature, philosophy and illnesses since Tanzanian independence can be summarised as follows:

In Swahili realism we have read how Euphrase Kezilahabi (1944 – 2020) in his novel *Kichwamaji* (‘Hydrocephalus,’ 1974) describes “African communalistic existentialism” (Wiredu 1980, quoted in Reháč 2007: 148-9), where the main character Kazimoto, after the birth of his hydrocephalic son, self-sacrifices for the benefit of the community of which he is part, so as to save the next generations from oppression, misfortune and illness.

In post-realist and post-modern Swahili literature, the canons for experimentation are widely open and the “signs” which determine “the uniqueness of the Swahili new novels” (Khamis 2005; 2003: 90; 2007) are not only the “self-reflexive narrative,” which, by shifting narrative person, chronology



and narrative discourse (Khamis 2007: 177), implies that “African writers are writing back to self” through looking inward into their texts (Mwangi 2009: 6 -8), but also “fragmentation” (Khamis 2003). This is crafted through metafictional aesthetic devices such as the insertion of chunks of oral literature, stories within a story, mythologies, intertextuality and the conjuring of magical realist spiritual ontologies (Khamis 2003). Thus, experimental literature operates a dissolution of ontological, epistemological and aesthetic boundaries between realism and marvellous realms (Rettovà 2016).

Swahili neo-realism suggests instead the return to a philosophy of *utu* ‘humanity’ and humanism that implies being human by showing humanity towards others. An expression of “modern African humanism” (Gordon 2008: 188), which was born in response to racism, the slave trade and colonialism, is described in Mkufya’s *Diwani ya Maua*.

Tanzanian bloggers’ discussions on social media and online forums about Covid-19 show the epistemological clash between different healing traditions and the philosophical reflections stemming from the coronavirus pandemic. They illustrate how the virus, conversely to HIV/AIDS, lacks the existential aspect of a life-lasting condition, because it can result in either dying or recovering; however, it does have a deep and long-lasting impact on different aspects of human social life, freedom to move, and personal interrelationships. Human beings are forced to keep their distance, yet they are connected through technology. In this sense Mohamed’s novel *Dunia Yao* (‘Their World,’ 2006) was prophetic in predicting an insane character Ndi-Ye, playing with the Swahili pronoun *ndiye* ‘he himself,’ who splits his own personality in *Ndi* and *Ye* and who self-isolated in his room dialogues with a computer that is then humanised.

I argue that the coronavirus pandemic illustrates how antagonistic strengths compete in the same field: humanity, nature and the non-human others, which are all part of the same circuit of existence. On the one hand, the battle can be interpreted through ecocritical lenses, with the virus representing nature’s revolt against humans’ claims of superiority over all other living beings, and the pollution they caused. This perspective is indeed the one endorsed by Mkufya both in the *Maua* trilogy and in his ecocritical novel *Face Under the Sea* (2011), where he suggests that: “Nature always works to achieve a balance” (Mkufya 2011: 148) between rights and responsibilities, towards an environment that is inhabited by plural ontologies, which deserve to be recognised as actual existing beings. On the other hand, the human made pandemic can be interpreted as the self-destruction of humanity either reminding us of our fragility and transitoriness, or boosting us through biotechnology, looking towards a future inhabited by cyborgs.

Therefore, the advanced literary choice could be, on the one hand, more prone to describe the existence of human flowers in this world and their humanness (*Ua La Faraja*, Mkufya 2004; *Kuwa Kwa*

Maua, Mkufya 2019). Or, on the other hand, it can choose to describe “their world” (Dunia Yao, Muhammed 2006) and the other-worldliness of a futuristic and dystopic world inhabited by posthuman ontologies and humanoid creatures or cyborgs.

In conclusion, the aim of Afrophone literatures should be to enhance a “preemptive style of writing” (*écriture préemptive*, Nganang 2007; Vierke 2019) to overthrow a possible contemporary reconfiguration of both *UKIMWI wa kijamii*, the societal AIDS (Mkufya 2004: 357), and “necropolitics:” “forms of subjugation of life to the power of death,” or “necropower:” “forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe 2003: 39-40; 2019), caused by the latest socio economic reordering of the world following the new pandemic.

## 7. In the guise of a conclusion

These conclusions do not aim to be conclusive; on the contrary, the object of this paper is to open up the boundaries of my existing research, which will be a springboard for new discourses to be developed in follow up research involving the novel coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. This paper works as a connector between the solid background upon which my existing research is built and new research questions.

In my current research, by conducting an interconnected study of the medical topic of HIV/AIDS and to the study of language, texts, and philosophy, I was able to demonstrate that Swahili literature is a device for developing Afrophone philosophies.

I have also illustrated how literature and reality are entangled ontologies. In fact, both the genre of reality and the genres of fiction share ontological aspects; they are interconnected, entangled systems, which, fluid and contiguous, inter-act, and thus, cannot be described or studied independently (cfr. quantum entanglement in physics<sup>31</sup>). Swahili literature is not mere representation of reality, yet both fictional works and real-life events influence and reflect each other, “writing beyond representation” (Kezilahabi 2015: 46).

In conclusion, the new research focus will be on exploring new possible ontologies, epistemologies and life philosophies conveyed through thematic and aesthetic forms such as stylistics, narratology, but above all the plural literary genres, which will characterise the prospective multi-generic examples of Swahili literary productions reflecting the phenomenology of the coronavirus outbreak.

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<sup>31</sup> Rozatkar, Gaurav (16 August 2018). “Demonstration of quantum entanglement.” OSF. <https://osf.io/g8bpj/>

Furthermore, I would also like to continue examining William Mkufya's trilogy on HIV/AIDS, which is still in progress. In fact, I have been analysing the first two published volumes, while the third is currently in progress. Since I have established the philosophical potential of this trilogy, which revolves around the theme of HIV/AIDS as a trial to investigate philosophical thought and to engage in philosophical discussions, I would like to continue analysing it in a comparative way with the genres of Swahili literature dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

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