Clash of Faiths and Recentralisation of Beliefs in William Mkufya's Early Novels[1]

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ABSTRACT

The study of religious beliefs in Africa has represented for a long time a clashing encounter between "civilizations" (Huntington 1993). Therefore, pioneers of the movement of "conceptual decolonization" (P'Bitek 1971; Wiredu 1995) supported not only the use of African languages in literature and philosophy, but also the re-examination of African traditional religions as pillars to decolonise African knowledge.

This paper aims to connect the theory to the practice of philosophy by investigating the critique of imported religions to Africa in William Mkufya's Swahili novels from his juvenilia works to *Ziraili na Zirani* ('Azrael and Zirani' 1999). Indeed, the study analytically investigates philosophical speculations on the existence of God and the afterlife, the problem of evil and the role of human free will in *Ziraili na Zirani* to illustrate how the Tanzanian intellectual deals with the plurality of faiths and recentralisation of knowledge.

Keywords: *Swahili literature; Afrophone philosophies; African Philosophy of religion; conceptual decolonisation; epistemologies.*

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1. Introduction

This study, aiming to connect the theory to the practice of philosophy, investigates Swahili literature to highlight its contribution to contemporary African philosophical debates such as knowledge decolonisation and the recentralisation of thought and discourses.

Particularly, I will investigate the critique of religions imported to Africa, Islam and Christianity, in William Mkufya's early Swahili novels, with a focus on *Ziraili na Zirani* ('Azrael and Zirani' 1999).

The first part of this work describes the project of "conceptual decolonisation" through language and religious studies. The second part investigates philosophical speculations on the existence of God and an afterlife, the logical problem of evil, and the role of human free will in Mkufya's novels.

Methodologically, this study engages with both the life and the fictions of a Tanzanian intellectual, who performs "the self-reflexive and auto-critical activity of philosophy" (Kresse 2007: 236), as a privileged epistemological entry point. This will be done by an "engagement with and from Oruka's sage philosophy" (Kresse & Nyarwarth 2023: 4; Oruka 1990a), a combination of both ethnography and a biographical approach[2],

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[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",

including interviews and several discussions with Mkufya, with whom I am in ongoing conversation[3], alongside close reading and in-depth analysis of texts that are media to investigate Afrophone philosophies (Rettovà 2021c).

2. Conceptual Decolonisation through Language and Religion

Since early European missionaries' discourses (15th century), the study of religion in Africa has been a case either of "clash of civilisations" (Huntington 1993) or "clash of definitions" (Said 2012: 523).

Therefore, pioneers of the movement of "conceptual decolonization", namely Okot p'Bitek, Kwasi Wiredu, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, supported not only the use of African languages in literature and philosophy, but also the re-examination of African traditional religions and communalistic ethics as pillars to decolonise African knowledge (Wiredu 1995: 22; 2004: 15-6; 1998: 44; 2011: xxxvii).

Kwasi Wiredu theorised the project of "conceptual decolonization" as a strategy to overcome "the crisis of self-identity" produced by the superimposition of foreign categories of thought on African thought systems (Wiredu 1992a: 59; 2004: 1):

> "It is the elimination from our thought of modes of conceptualisation that came to us through colonization and remain in our thinking owing to inertia rather than to our own reflective choices" (Wiredu 2002: 56; cf. Wiredu 2004: 15; 1995: 22; 1998: 17)

"To unravel the conceptual entanglements" (Wiredu 2002: 54) "is for African philosophers to try to think philosophically in their own vernaculars" (Wiredu 2002: 56), producing a conceptual framework in one's own language (Wiredu 1996: 104; Wiredu & Kresse 2000: 30; Kresse 1999; Hallen and Sodipo 1997:16).

This effort started first by "decolonising the mind", which is "a politics of rediscovering local language in African literature" (Thiong'o 1986: 108; 1981) by "creating in the mother-tongue" (Mlama 1990: 5), and then, in philosophy to "connect pen and tongue" by "philosophising in African languages directly" (Thiong'o 2013: 161).

For instance, Swahili literature represents a "counter hegemonic discourse" "rooted in the intangible power of African languages that is inseparable from our being" (Kezilahabi 2012: 106) to "think globally, act locally" (San Juan quoted in Kezilahabi 2012: 113) by "writing people" (Kezilahabi 2015: 41). In the nineties, the Swahili language went through a process of "secularisation", away from the ecumenical status it gained when Islam and Christianity adopted Swahili as their doctrinal language (Topan 1992: 343; Mazrui & Mazrui 1998).

The critique of imported religions to Africa is an integral part of the discussion (Wiredu 1998: 17) on "provincializing Europe (Chakrabarty 2008) and deprovincializing Africa" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3). Indeed, the act of conversion implies "a shift of identity"/ "centre of gravity" (Mbembe 2001: 228-9), which involves "a mechanism of epistemicide" (Santos 2014: 154; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 12).

Okot p' Bitek, in his *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1971), examines all the misinterpretations of African religions generated by scholarship in social anthropology, which studied African religion "to serve western interests" rather than from a genuine intellectual curiosity (p'Bitek 2011: 1; 1971b: 1).

p'Bitek (1971b; 2011) retraces the history of this scholarship since the 15th century, when early European missionaries' and anthropologists' studies described African people as "primitive savages" whose religion was "paganism", "animism" and "fetishism" (Oladipo 2004: 355-6; see Hegel 1956).

In the 20th century, "Christian apologists' scholarship", engaged in demonstrating the superiority of western culture and the existence of Christian God (p'Bitek 1971b: 40), started interpreting African deities in terms of a "High God[4]" and describing Africans as immersed in religion (p'Bitek 2011: 22-7; Van Pelt 1971).

As a counterargument, African nationalists, and the so-called ethnophilosophers[5] (Tempels 1945; Griaule 1948; Kagame 1956; Senghor 1964; Mbiti 1969; Idowu 1973), started describing African people as pervasively religious since before the advent of imported religions: "For Africans, the whole existence is a religious phenomenon"; "African man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe" (Mbiti 2011: 15). In addition, the "Supreme Being" (Mbiti 2011: 29; Idowu 1973) had been "Hellenised and Christianised" (p'Bitek 2011: 39-42; 1971b: 47) with attributes identical to the Christian God (Mbiti 2011: 30; Idowu 1973; Gyekye 1995: 71, 77).

Since the myths both of "primitive mind" and the "High God" are products of western rhetoric, p'Bitek (1972; 1971b: 57) urged people to "reflect, reject and recreate" the western "Idea of Africa" (Mudimbe 1988). In his *Religion of the Central Luo* (1971a), a sceptical tendency, rather than a pervasive religiosity, surfaces: "traditional Africans as atheistic in their outlook" (p'Bitek 1971b: 100; 1971a: 160; cf. Gbadegesin 1991: 83-4).

Wiredu, "pursuing the universal by way of the particular" (Wiredu 2011: xxi), examines the Akan worldview (Gyekye & Wiredu 1992), highlighting basic differences between African and Christian cosmology and eschatology. Christian doctrine explains Heaven and Hell as metaphysical, isolated from this world, whereas "African eschatology" has a "this-worldly orientation" (Wiredu 1992b: 136; 2010: 36; 1992a: 64-5); the afterlife is a continuation of earthly life inhabited by "living dead" (Mbiti 2011: 119). Continuity and contiguity of life after death are demonstrated by a relationship of reciprocity with the ancestors, "quasi-materials or quasi-physical beings", who communicate with humans (Wiredu 2010: 38; 1992b: 141; 2011). Christianity introduced the concept that life is a preparation for the next, whereas in African cultures, meaning in life means qualifying to become ancestors (Wiredu 1992b: 142), who are venerated as "guardians of morality" (Wiredu 1998:31-3; 2010: 36; 1992b: 144). Finally, there is no eternal life, for "the force-based ontology" disintegrates over time and the spirits remain active until they have living progeny who remember them (Metz & Molefe 2021: 405).

Africans believe in a "Supreme Being" (Mbiti 2011: 29) who is the creator of the world and is not detached from the universe rather than transcendent (Wiredu 1998: 29); this Supreme Being is a "cosmic architect" who "fashioned the world out of some pre-existing raw material" like "Plato's demiurge" (Wiredu 1998: 30; 1995: 29) rather than creating it *ex nihilo* (Gyekye 1995). God is omnipotent in accomplishing a *well-defined* project but has not absolute omnipotence (Wiredu 1998: 38; 2010: 41). The Supreme Being is at the top of a hierarchy of beings and co-exists with a pantheon of "lesser divinities", spirits

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[4] Particularly, missionaries' translations of religious concepts appropriate words in African languages and interpret them according to Christian theology (Egeland 2024: 45; cf. Topan 1992: 336, 340; Frankl 1995).

[5] Oruka's (1978/1990b: 13-20) classification of the four trends in African philosophy: ethnophilosophy; nationalist-ideological philosophy; sage philosophy and professional philosophy.

and the ancestors (Wiredu 1998: 31-3); thus, God is not omniscient. Lastly, evil in the world exists either as a result of human free will (Gyekye 1995: 116) or it is a necessary component of the universe co-existing with the good (Wiredu 1998: 40).

In sum, African traditional religions have a non-institutional character (Wiredu 2010: 35; Gbadegesin 1991: 85; Oladipo 2004: 359-61), are "non revealed", and do not involve proselytising (Metz & Molefe 2021: 406).

The Tanzanian context is a particular case; Tanzania is a multireligious nation where mainly the "Cross and the Crescent" (Mbogoni 2004) live together, though their cohabitation has not always been peaceful over the centuries[6] (Chesworth 2022; Becker 2008).

In post-independence Tanzania (1960s), where "Swahili writers write between euphoria and pain" (Topan 2006), Julius Nyerere's philosophy of *Ujamaa* (lit. 'familyhood') produced the soil for the development of secular thoughts in the country. Tanzanian socialism places religion in an individual and personal sphere: "man's relationship with his God is a personal matter for him and him alone" (Nyerere 1979: 38). Therefore, well-known scholars, educated in the intellectual revolutionary hub of the University of Dar es Salaam, such as Mugyabuso Mulokozi, Farouk Topan, Ebrahim Hussein and Euphrase Kezilahabi, developed critical arguments on politics and/or religion in their literary productions (Gaudioso 2020: 79-80; Mulokozi 1974: 47-8).

Despite this first period of stability, when religious freedom was guaranteed (Art. 33 of the Tanzanian Constitution; Makulilo 2019: 137), since Christianity and Islam are both "missionary religions" (Chesworth 2008: 1), they continued to compete with each other through evangelisation and *da'wa*, "calling others to the faith" (Chesworth 2008: 1-2).

In the 1990s, the presidency of Hassan Mwinyi (1985-1995) was characterised by religious tension, caused by an increase in both Christian and Islam radicalism (Mbogoni 2004: 153). That period is remembered for "the pork and hijab controversies" (Mbogoni 2004: 153-69): a group of Muslims assaulted butchers selling pork meat in Dar es Salaam neighbourhoods such as Mwembechai, where three Muslim brothers were killed in 1993 (Makulilo 2019: 131); some Christian schoolmasters in mainland Tanzania forbade Muslim girls to wear their hijab; "Muslim *mihadhara* (public lectures)" and evangelistic "crusades" enflamed the country (Mbogoni 2004: 171-93; Chesworth 2022: 13).

3. William Mkufya's Religious Critique

William Eliezer Mkufya was born in Lushoto in 1953, to a Lutheran Christian family of the *Sambaa* ethnic group. Mkufya is a self-trained bilingual (Swahili and English) writer of novels, a translator, and editor in chief at the *Mangrove Publishing* house in Dar es Salaam.

Mkufya began his writing career in English. However, after translating his first novel, *The Wicked Walk* (1977), into Swahili as *Kizazi Hiki* ('This Generation' 1980), his subsequent writing was mainly in Swahili. The anglophone novels *The Wicked Walk* (1977) and *The Dilemma* (1982) represent the author's first phase of literary realism. This was followed by the phase of experimentation of "new novels" (Gromov 2014; 2019; Khamis 2005) like *Ziraili na Zirani* ('Azrael and Zirani', 1999), before he returned to "neo-realism[7]" (Rettovà 2016b; Diegner 2018) with the trilogy[8] *Diwani ya Maua*

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[6] The presence of Islam in Tanzania dates back to around the 8th century (Horton and Middleton quoted in Topan 2001: 107), as shown by the presence of Pate Island Mosque (830 AD) as well as Ibn Battuta's records (14th century) (Mugane 2015), Christianity to 16th century with the Portuguese conquest of Swahili coasts (Sahlberg 2020: 1-10).

[7] "New/neo-realism" is the new way of writing realism adopted by writers who have experienced experimentation and who decide to write again in a realist mode (Rettovà 2016b: 16, 24; Diegner 2017: 39).

[8] The third manuscript is forthcoming.

('The Poetry of Flowers'), which includes *Ua La Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation', 2004) and *Kuwa Kwa Maua*[9] ('The Existence of Flowers', 2019).

Mkufya's literary creations take place between *ujasiri*, audacity and *utu*, humanity. Indeed, his novels have been developing a thorough religious critique since the juvenilia. Imported religions are questioned, but particularly, instrumentalisation and politicisation of religion as well as a "High God" representation are challenged. The criticism is addressed not only to violence and war, which spring from religious differences, but also to colonisation of thought, caused by doctrinal conversion (Mbembe 2001).

Mkufya told me about a significant episode in his life. In 1961, when he was a little boy coming back home from school, he saw something like a knife cutting the sky from east to west and then a white cloud seemed to explode. Then, he discovered from the news that what he saw probably was the Russian cosmonaut making his first spaceflight[10]. Thus, deeply influenced by the power of scientific discoveries, Mkufya has been examining religion from a young age as reflected in his novels.

This episode inspired *Ziraili na Zirani* (1999) as illustrated in the description of the war flaring up in Heaven: *Mbingu zilipiga ufa* ('the heavens cracked' Mkufya 1999: 9):

Azazeli: […] Si kufuru tukisema	Azazel: […] It is not blasphemy if we say
Kupambanua ukweli ni vyema,	That it is good facing the truth,
Kwamba mbingu ni marapurapu!	That Heaven is [ripped as] rags[11]!
(Mkufya 1999: 201)	

The novel was composed in a period when religious riots intensified in Tanzania, such as the "war of Mwembechai", which sparked Mkufya's reflections as he[12] told me recalling Nyerere's speeches stating that a nation could be united notwithstanding religious diversity.

4. When 'The Wicked Walk', 'This Generation' Stumbles

Mkufya's first published novel, *The Wicked Walk* (1977/2012), was written when he was a secondary school student at Minaki High School and published when he completed his BSc in chemistry and biology. Later, Mkufya translated it into Swahili as *Kizazi Hiki* ('This Generation', 1980).

In this novel, the criticism is focuses on religious morality, which tends to judge and punish people's behaviour, without considering the influence of sociopolitical and economic factors. The protagonists are blamed by a moralising society "preaching […] weak-kneed morality" (p'Bitek's *Song of Malaya* 1971c: 161-2): in the first pages of the novel, Maria is judged as "*Malaya*" ('prostitute' 1980: 1) and her daughter Nancy as "*dhambi*" ('sin' Mkufya 1980: 2), since she is the daughter of incest between Maria and her own brother. Moralists and hypocrites are those who create the conditions for prostitution to exist and those who establish a body-politics which imposes control over sexed bodies according to religious patterns and "instrumentalization of sexuality" by patriarchal-capitalist powers (Tamale 2014: 155; Foucault 1998; Senkoro 1982).

In this novel, Mkufya lays the foundation for an ethical view disentangled from religious morality. The novel denounces preachers for not behaving equally to all

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[9] However, the analysis of the *Diwani ya Maua* will be object of another paper (Nicolini forthcoming).
[10] Mkufya personal interview (17-11-2023).
[11] All the translations from Swahili to English are mine if not otherwise indicated. Emphasis mine.
I thank Mkufya for the support in clarifying certain aspects of the translation of the poems. However, any shortcomings are my responsibility.
[12] Mkufya personal interview (21-11-2023).

believers and churchgoers for being leaders of social hypocrisy. For instance, Maria refuses to go to church, because she knows the hypocrite Sunday churchgoers will judge her, forgetting that the previous night they had been her clients (Mkufya 1980: 35-7):

> *Watu wakubwa ndio wenye uwezo wa kuwa Wakristo wazuri zaidi ya wengine…* (Mkufya 1980: 36-7)

> I never go there. Only big men go because they have a better chance to be more Christian than all of us (Mkufya 2012: 28)

The title *The Wicked Walk* refers allegorically to *Psalm* 12:8 where "David expresses assurance that God will intervene on behalf of the oppressed"[13]. The allegory refers to evil-hearted people who represent the ruling class spreading wickedness all around. The victim is *Kizazi Hiki*, meaning this generation, the youth and the working class; *Kizazi Hiki* is the title chosen by Mkufya for the Swahili translation, which is also a quote from *Psalm* 12:7.

Psalm 12:7-8 is also quoted in the prologue (Mkufya 1980: vii) and *Psalm* 12:1-8 in the epilogue (Mkufya 1980: 134). Deo, the young revolutionary protagonist, opposes the idea suggested by *Psalm* 12, explaining that oppressed people should not passively succumb to injustice, hoping to be rewarded in the afterlife, but must save themselves fighting for social justice.

Conversely, Deo states that Christianity seems to invite people to either judge the others or be meek victims of wicked people.

> *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)

Mkufya, as a young Marxist revolutionary, spurs 'this generation' of youth to be responsible for 'social changes' (Mkufya 2012: 103) and "*MAPINDUZI*" ('revolution', Mkufya 1980: 138).

5. Clash of Faiths: From Holy War to Intellectual War

The apex of Mkufya's reflections on religion is reached in his experimental epic *Ziraili na Zirani* (henceforth ZZ), which investigates human cognitive war against religion. Human beings are not capable of solving the enigma of the existence or non-existence of God and an afterlife, which remains a mystery even in this novel. This philosophical novel includes reflections on the meaning of transient life on Earth, the essence of reality and truth and, finally, on whether infinite/imperfect beings like humans are compatible or not with free will (Diegner 2005; Rettovà 2005; 2007a).

The novel, which was written between 1980 and 1999, not only reflects a spiritual crisis of the author[14], but it also deals with a sensitive topic, individual faith and

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[13] BibleRef.com: Online Bible Commentary: https://www.bibleref.com/Psalms/12/Psalms-chapter-12.html (last accessed 26 June 2024).
[14] Mkufya personal interview (17-11-2023).

interrelations with different believes, through a complex style; it is indeed an intricate text to interpret[15].

This polyphonic novel is characterised by an epic[16] narration in prose that Mkufya[17] calls *epiki ya kifasihi*[18] ('literary epic') to differentiate it from *utenzi*, the classic Swahili epic poems which convey Islamic messages (Topan 2001).

The prose is adorned with an original style of poetry[19], which Mkufya baptised as "*ushairi wa ki-dithiramb-korofi*" ('arrogant dithyrambic style poetry' Nicolini 2022: 72). These poems, which Mkufya[20] calls *vijembe* ('severe critical commentaries'), consist in a mixture of: Swahili free-verse poetry (Rettovà 2016a: 221); a reinterpretation of Greek dithyrambs, hymns which praise Dionysus, the God of ecstasy and material pleasures; and a jiff of *utani* ('jokes'). The poems are connected in a necklace of sounds and meanings like Okigbo's chained poems (1971) and the "necklace of verses" braided in *Mwana Kupona* (1858; Topan 2006: 104).

Indeed, the novel features a heterogeneric textuality (Bakhtin 1981), where intervals of poetry fracture the prose (Rettovà 2021b: 12), disclosing a "hetero-epistemic textuality" (Nicolini 2022: 263), meaning that each genre introduces clashing ideologies: the epic prose conveys the revolutionaries' materialism, whereas the poems convey the demons' critique of positivism and scepticism (Rettovà 2016a; 2021a).

Ziraili na Zirani begins with a proem set in 1099, the year of the Siege of Jerusalem during the First Crusade. It describes two young fighters leaving their families and setting off respectively from Baghdad and from Rome, one to join the jihad and the other the crusade in Jerusalem. This introduces the leitmotif of the religious critique: Holy war and religious conflicts. Monotheistic religions are described as violent creeds which impose their dogmas and push people to fight in the name of God (*kumpigania Mungu*, ZZ 8).

Likewise, Shabaan Robert (1968: 16) wrote: "*Twafikiri kwamba hapo ndipo kanisa na msikiti viliposhindwa. Huwapeleka watu katika msalaba na jihadi vikawaacha huko*" ('We feel that's where the church and Islam went wrong. They lead people to the cross and to the jihad only to abandon them there' Robert quoted and translated by Masolo 2010: 99).

Mkufya[21] told me that he intended to write "a real African epic" which includes the African people in Heaven. In fact, by criticising apologetic literature, especially Christian apologetics, the novel denounces the lack of black African representatives in both holy books and classical epic narrations; since Africa lacks an institutionalised religion and a recognised prophet, African people seem to be excluded from salvation and doomed to darkness.

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[15] Mkufya revealed the metaphorical contents of *Ziraili na Zirani* moulded into another shape in the *Diwani ya Maua* (2019).

[16] This novel was inspired by not only the giant narrators of epics of the past, Homer and Virgil, but also Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia* (1308 - 1320), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) as well as African authors: Topan's *Aliyeonja Pepo* ('A Taste of Heaven' 1974); Robert's *Kufikirika* (1967) and *Utenzi wa Vita vya Uhud* ('The Poem of the Battle of Uhud', Chum & Lambert 1962).

[17] Personal interview (30-11-2023).

[18] He was inspired by African authors of epics such as D.T. Niane in *Sundiata* (1960) and p'Bitek in *White Teeth* (1989).

[19] In *Kuwa kwa Maua* (2019) Mkufya will replace poetry with dramatic style and the anti-chorus uses dramatic dialogues.

[20] Mkufya discussed *korasi ya kikorofi* on several occasions 28/29-11-2023; 12-12-2023.

[21] Personal interview (8-12-2023).

Apologetic literature is panned by Azazel as: *Kwa ngano*[22] *tetere mwamtetea babu* ('You are defending the old man with weak folktales, ZZ 205). This literature locates African historical figures in Hell as "*hawa wenye jadi ya kuzimu*", 'those with traditions doomed to hell' (ZZ 188) or "*massa damnata*" (Dawson quoted in p'Bitek 2011: 2), because traditional African religions that existed since long before Islam and Christianity, were denounced as animism, superstition, and fetishism by the colonisers. Since in Africa there are not institutionalised religions, Africa has been described as being without history or religion: "the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (Hegel 1956: 91; Kuykendall 1993: 572). Furthermore, "Christian missionaries refer to Africans as the cursed descendants of Ham" (Eze 2011:68) to justify 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).

In reaction to this, Mkufya describes African historical characters such as Okigbo, "the prophetic figure" (Mkufya 2005: 59), and Kinjeketile, who dwell in infernal circles inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy,* as prophets of equal value to those mentioned in the sacred texts. Christopher Okigbo[23], *Kasisi wa Enugu*, the priest of Enugu, is the Nigerian poet who became a priest of the Ibgo divinity Idoto, and fought to support Biafran independence, dying as he predicted during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) (Mkufya 1999: 89). Kinjeketile[24] Ngwale, possessed by the spirit Hongo, communicated with the deity Bokero and led the *Maji Maji* revolt (1905-1907) reuniting the ethnic groups of South Tanzania against the German invaders through the symbol of water (*maji*) (ZZ 96-8). Kinjeketile, as a character in this novel, converses with the protagonist Zirani, and they discuss whether they should return to African traditional religions, rejecting Islam and Christianity, or adopt science and atheism (ZZ 101).

In contrast to the war images described in the proem, the protasis projects the image of Solomon's temple, which he erected to thank God for granting him wisdom (ZZ 8). The readers are then cast into an allegorical war of clashing ideologies and dogmas. The war is no longer physical, but intellectual; the allegory of the whole book is an ideological battle fought in people's minds, as the character of Voltaire says: *kwa maneno mengine ni kwamba vita vyetu vyapiganwa vichani kwa watu walio hai* ('in other words, our war is fought in living people's minds', ZZ 79).

The protagonist of the novel, Fikirini Zirani, whose name means "You all (two plural imperatives) must think and reject" (Rettovà 2005: 17; 2007a; Diegner 2005: 32), is a young African revolutionary and atheist, who in life led the movement *Africa Revival Mission* defending African Traditional religions from the advent of Islam and Christianity (ZZ 33).

Zirani, influenced by materialist and agnostic philosophers like Epicurus, Voltaire and Marx (ZZ 34), rejects all religions: *alikuwa mmoja wa watu wasiokubali kabisa uwepo wa Mungu* ('he was one of those people who deny completely the existence of God', ZZ 26). Zirani argues that, firstly, Africa already had religions before the advent of Arab and European colonisers; secondly, monotheistic religions cause conflicts rather than: *kujenga hisia za Imani* ('to build a feeling of faith', ZZ 33); thirdly, if people are

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[22] Azazel's pun is based on the interplay of the polysemic word, *ngano* which means wheat, fable, cackles and particularly in this poem apologetic literature composed to defend the 'old man' (Abrahamic God).

[23] Mkufya, deeply influenced by Okigbo poetry, quotes several poems from the collection *Labyrinths* (1971) which he translated into Swahili (ZZ 89-92, 184, 200) as prophetic poems predicting war in Heaven.

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

chasing the afterlife, they lose their short time alive in the world. The reward or punishment of the afterlife creates a suspension of judgement that releases people from both duties and rights (ZZ 36). After his death, he refuses to succumb to the idea of being judged by an idea he refused all his life, and escapes from Ziraili, the angel of death and collector of souls, slipping out from a hole in his bag.

Ziraili[25] is indeed the messenger of monotheistic religions: *suriama wa Mzungu na Muarabu* ('a mixed blood between a European and an Arab' ZZ 24) comparable to a bureaucrat of the colonial government[26].

In Hell, Zirani is captured by Lucifer who, inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is the sympathetic anti-hero[27] of this epic. Pleased with Zirani's atheism, Lucifer decides to train him at the demons' school (ZZ 46-53). Afterwards, recaptured by Ziraili, Zirani is shut in a dark cage that evokes Plato's "Allegory of the cave" (*Republic*, Book VII: 514a-520a), waiting for the final judgement. However, Zirani refuses to agree with a myopic representation of reality and escapes again, following the light of knowledge; thus, he reaches the "camp of manifestness" on the "island of light" in Hell. In the camp, he is trained by the *Wanadhahara,* 'the revolutionaries of manifestness', who are planning an atheistic epic war against Heaven in the light of knowledge and reason.

5.1 Materialism and Positivism clashes with Metaphysics

Zirani becomes a leader among the hell-dweller in the *kambi ya dhahara* ('the camp of what is evident[28]'**,** Mkufya 1999: 68), where the souls of atheist and materialist philosophers are settled, and where *itikadi ya udhahiri*[29] (ZZ 68) "the ideology of manifestness of things" is professed (Rettovà 2007a: 249-51; 2005: 17; 2016a; 2021a).

In other words, *udhahiri* describes both "a cognitive and ontological aspect of reality" (Rettovà 2007a: 251-2; 2016a: 216). This positivist philosophy corresponds to *uyakinifu* that I translate as "cognitive materialism" (Nicolini 2022: 62).

> *Kambi ya roho za binadamu walioamini itikadi ya udhahiri wa vitu, hali, jinsia na maumbo kwa sifa zao zionekanazo au kutambulika kwa hisia na vipimo vya binadamu na sio kwa sifa za Imani au dhana peke yake. [...] wanakambi hawo waliamini kwamba vyote vilivyopo vipo, si kwa sababu vimewekwa na nguvu zozote za anga kwa makusudi Fulani, ila tu vipo kwa sababu vipo* (Mkufya 1999: 68)

> Camp for souls of humans who believe in the ideology of the manifestation of things, essences, forms and states that can be detected by human senses or their instruments and not through belief or any form of idealism. [...] The profile also indicated that the members of the camp believed that all existing things existed not because any supernatural being had made them for a specific purpose, but they simply existed[30]

This embryo of *udhahiri* philosophy is grounded in defining it from the ontological perspective as evident substance and matter through which human beings perceive the phenomenal world by sensory experiences. "The *al-zahir* accommodates the secular worldly knowledge accessible to the human mind by balanced thinking and experiences" (Mahmoud 2016: 67).

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[25] Cf. Ziraili in Topan's play *Aliyeonja Pepo* (1974).

[26] Cf. the character *Majivuno* ('Pride') in Robert's *Kusadikika* ('Believable' 1951).

[27] Lucifer can also be interpreted as a political rebel against colonialism (Issa 2017)

[28] Rettovà (2005: 17) suggests the translation "the camp of Manifesto" to render both the meaning of the Swahili word *dhahara:* evident/manifest and the ideological allusion to the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engles (1848).

[29] Literally, the abstract noun *udhahiri* stems from the adjective *dhahiri* "evident, manifest, exterior" (Rettovà 2007a: 250).

[30] Mkufya's translation.

In this phase *udhahiri* is also based on community, both from a Marxist perspective: overcoming class struggle for promoting the equality of human beings, and from an ethical perspective grounded in "African communitarianism" (Masolo 2010; Gyekye 1992).

Udhahiri as materialism, positivism and atheism, clashes with *akirikifuk* (backwardness *kufikirika)*, idealism, including religious beliefs and metaphysics. The palindromic word *kufikirika* not only is an indirect quote from Robert's novel *Kufikirika* ('Thinkable' 1967; cf. Diegner 2005: 28) or "The Nature of Ideas" (Masolo 2010: 162), but it also represents the distinction between *kufikiri*, to think, which Mkufya rendered as " *Ysatnaf!"* "Fantasy" in *Pilgrims from Hell*[31], and *kutafakari,* reason. *Kufikirika* is the fantasy preached by religion, an "illusion" (Freud 1961: 14, 30-1) that clashes with *udhahiri,* the positivism of science. However, in hell, words and statements must be read backwards (ZZ 92, 170; Rettovà 2021a: 335) and *Akirikifuk,* which is a quote from the book used by Hārūt and Mārūt to teach black magic in Babel (Qur'an 2:102 quoted in Mkufya 1999: 20), becomes a magic spell used during the battle against Heaven as a weapon to neutralise and destroy metaphysics. Heaven's gate of religion and superstitious beliefs, where the *Akirikifuk* warning is posted, is eventually broken down by dinosaurs and east African Zinjanthropus, symbols of Darwinian evolution (Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* 1859) that destroys the religious myth of creation, 'like Samson the one who killed the Philistines' (*kama ule Samsoni aliwoulia Wafilisiti,* ZZ 176).

The demons insist humanity break down the gate because allegorically it represents a test of human free will: they must freely choose to be atheist and destroy myths and superstitions (ZZ 188-9).

5.2 The Problem of Evil and Free Will

In *Ziraili na Zirani,* the eternal supernatural ontologies of demons are indeed the philosophers who mock humanity through irritating alliterative sounds to sow discord and destabilise their conventional patterns of thought. Lucifer[32] and his emissaries express themselves through a kind of free verse poetry[33] created on the model of dithyrambs. This Swahili dithyramb-like style of poetry not only plays the role of *korasi ya kikorofi*, an arrogant anti-chorus, aimed at revealing the shortcomings of religion: "*kuiumbua dini*[34] " 'to expose religion', but it is also a form of *utani,* jokes, to mock humanity, implying "a sophisticated critique of positivist and materialist epistemology" (Rettovà 2021a: 332).

According to the demons, human beings are weak creatures driven by their senses and captive in a shell of flesh and blood, who cannot master intellect and willpower. Heaven's mistake that jeopardised both creation and creator, was to endow humanity with free will (ZZ 49). Demons plan to instrumentalise human beings' free will by supporting their ideological war, not only to demonstrate Heaven's mistakes, but also to improve the potential of creation.

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[31] Mkufya self-translated *Ziraili na Zirani* in English. However, the manuscript is still unpublished.
[32] The choice of the Latin name rather than Iblis is done for the connection with Milton's poem hero and for the etymological meaning of 'light-bringer', who brings the light of knowledge against superstition.
[33] Cf. Hussein's play *Mashetani* ('The Devils' 1971) where the character *Shetani* 'the demon' opens the play introducing himself through a free verse poem sung in a 'devilish language' ("*lugha ya kishetani*", Hussein 1971: 1-3).
[34] Mkufya personal communication (14-4-2024).

Asmodeus: Mungu kawapa hiari wafao,	Asmodeus: God endowed mortals with free will,
sasa kawashindwa wapingao.	now He is defeated by the opponents[35].
Tutawatumia kama ngao,	We will use them as shields
kuiaibisha anga yao!	to discredit their Heaven[36]!
(Mkufya 1999: 134)	

The apostates ally with demons, metaphysical creatures powerful enough to destroy Heaven, because an idea can be beaten by another idea only; demons in turn instrumentalise human will so as to conquer the throne that cannot stand without a master. Thus, Lucifer mocks humanity with a pun:

> *Pengine tuko tayari, nyinyi hamko tayari; pengine mko tayari, sisi hatuko tayari […] Yaelekea* (Mkufya 1999: 155)

> Maybe we are ready, you are not ready; maybe you are ready, we are not ready […] **it seems so**.

By criticising human vacillatory volition, which depends on chance and probability, *yaelekea* (Mkufya 1999: 155), Lucifer introduces an epistemology of doubt and disbelief.

Evil comes from human failure to control free will; this makes them prone to evil, as Lucifer admonishes: *Ni kwa Heri umeumbwa, ila hiari yakusumbua* ('You have been created by blessing, even though free will causes you problems' ZZ 42). Nonetheless, demons tempt and test humanity, demonstrating that human intellectual capacity can be worked out: *Ni kwa hii Heri umetambua. Ukiidekeza hekima* ('Through this blessing you obtained consciousness. If you work wisdom out' ZZ 42).

Therefore, good and evil are complementary concepts[37], whose balance is what allows the universe to turn: *mbingu zilimruhusu shetani kumjaribu mtu na kumpotosha awezavyo* ('the heavens gave permission to the Devil to test and pervert humanity as he could', ZZ 16). In fact, good and evil depend on human choices by testing free will:

Lusifa: [...]	Lucifer: […]
*Lakini ni **hiari** yako kuwa **huru** ama **heri**[38].*	However, it's your **choice** to be **free** or to be **blessed**.
Peponi kuna heri, lakini motoni kuko huru[39].	In Heaven there is blessing, but in Hell there is freedom.
[...]	[...]
Twakukaribisha motoni kwa hiari	We welcome you in Hell by your choice,
Iwapo utatutolea kafara[40].	If you offer us a sacrifice.
(Mkufya 1999: 15)	

Good and evil are relative, context-dependent concepts; there is no absolute good or evil, yet everything is relative as shown by Lucifer, who wish to be given a better role

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[35] The atheists will be used by the demons as weapons against Heaven. Thus, God seems not to be omnipotent nor omniscient.

[36] And to disgrace Heaven's creation.

[37] Cf. Iblis's final monologue in Topan's *Aliyeonja Pepo* (1974: 22-25); it explains that God created humanity to give even more power to his first angel Iblis. This monologue was inspired by Sura 38:71-88, which deals with the discussion between Allah and Iblis about the creation of Adam, Topan told me (personal interview 5-11-2023 London).

[38] Paronomasias of homophones.

[39] Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), Satan's speech in Book I: 22 "Better to reign in Hell, than serve Heav'n".

[40] If you offer your soul to Lucifer. Cf. Faustus signing the contract with Mephistopheles in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1588-9) Act 2 scene 1.

than tempting humanity when the world crumbles. Lucifer's wish can be interpreted as a parody of the religious interpretation of evil and good; indeed, Devil and God are just roles performed on the stage[41] of phenomenal life.

Lusifa: Aheri! **Aheri!**	Lucifer: It is better! **It is better!**
Shari iibashirie	Adversity [the war] will predict
Ahera heri;	**Blessing for Paradise**;
Upya, mbingu zin'kadirie![42]	Anew, the heavens will estimate me[43]!
(Mkufya 1999: 43)	

Demons are not happy about human free will because humans are newborn creatures not yet developed enough to make good use of it; Rahab, who embodies lust, is the most sceptical of and arrogant towards the 'newborn creatures' (*wa-juzi*) and their weak philosophy consisting of 'slippery/shaky statements' (*kauli zao telezi*, ZZ 153).

However, demons reveal themselves to be defenders of humanity, educating them to control willpower by strengthening human intellectual potentialities (ZZ 46-53), thus contributing to improving God's creation.

Rahabu: Vita mbingu zimevikiri,	Rahab: The heavens have succumbed to the war
Hakuna wa kuzisetiri!	There is nobody to protect them!
Hiari ina dosari	Free will is imperfect
Kwa hila zetu imedhihiri	By our temptations it has been revealed
Aheri aheri, shari imeiletea	It is better, it is better, adversity [war] has brought
Ahera heri, dunia na waja vinateketea!	Blessing to Heaven, the earth and human beings are perishing!
Kwa hekima na hanjari	With wisdom and swords
Dhambi zao, shetani tumezitetea!	Their sins, we devils have defended!
(Mkufya 1999: 221-2)	

The angels are convinced by the demons' test that the human beings are too immature to receive reason and willpower, so, this time, they suggest waiting for humanity to be more mature: *Safari hii tusiwe na pupa ya kushusha utambuzi* ('This time we should not have pressure of making reason to descend [upon humanity]', ZZ 228).

On the other hand, the angels *Babu na Bibi Kizee* reveal the plan of God: *Mbingu zilipima utiifu wenu kwa Mungu na hiari yenu ya kumpenda na kumtii bila kushurutishwa* ('the heavens tested our obedience to God and our will to love and serve Him without coercion', ZZ 225). Therefore, free will is a necessary attribute for limited human beings and finitude is its precondition (Rettovà 2005: 22).

5.3 The Nature of God

Through the exercise of meta-philosophy (Gordon 2008: 8; Overgaard et al. 2013) in the novel, European philosophers' theories are explained and reinterpreted in an African context; Mkufya[44] told me he tried to think as those philosophers would have thought. This endeavour can also be observed through Kezilahabi's "bifocal" lenses which criticism includes the encounter with the West (Kezilahabi in Lanfranchi 2012: 75): "We shall use Heideggerian, Nietzschean and Marxian lenses on our own eyes, and we shall

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[41] Cf. The epilogue of Kezilahabi's novel *Rosa Mistika* (1971: 119) which suggests that are men those who judge themselves hidden behind religious curtains and wearing a mask of divinity.
[42] Cf. ZZ 183.
[43] And to Lucifer a new role could be given!
[44] Personal communication (25-11-2023).

try as much as possible not to bring into our discussion vulgar anthropology" (Kezilahabi 1985: 239).

The characters Voltaire and Epicurus lead the core discussion on theism against antitheism, saying that if God exists and admits evil into the world[45], he lacks either benevolence or omnipotence (ZZ 111-2; cf. Hume 1779; Mill 1874):

> Voltaire: *Mungu ameshindwaje kuepusha janga hili? Je Mungu ana chuki na wanadamu?* (Mkufya 1999: 73).
>
> How could God fail to avoid this calamity? Does God despise human beings?
>
> Epicurus: *Ama Mungu ana uwezo wa kuzuia uovu na mateso ya dunia lakini hataki, hivyo ana nia mbaya kwa wanadamu; au duniani upo uovu, mateso na uonevu lakini Mungu hawezi kuuzuia, hivyo si muweza wa yote* (Mkufya 1999: 74).
>
> Either God has the power of preventing evil and sorrow in the world, but he does not want to do so; in this case, he has a bad intention for human beings; or there are evil and sorrow in the world, but God cannot prevent them; in this case he is not all-powerful.

This debate provides evidence that God does not exist at all, as argued by the influential critic of religion Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity* 1841): *"ndoto ya akili ya binadamu" isiyokuwa na ukweli wowote* ('a dream of the human mind which is not real at all', ZZ 75).

Another proof of the non-existence of God is his anthropomorphic representation, which reveals both that he is a mental creation: *Mungu ni dhana* ('God is a concept' ZZ 115) and the limit of human cognitive capacity (ZZ 41).

5.4 The Nature of Truth

Azazel, who appears in the form of an East African goshawk (*kozi*) in this novel, is the demon who opens human minds to knowledge behind and beyond phenomena.

By means of a poem rich in alliteration, Azazel reveals that the nature of truth, including religion and justice, is *mlinganisho*: a relative concept, elusive and illusory[46] (ZZ 109-10). Religion is not an absolute truth as expressed by the sacred texts but is part of people's cultural customs[47] and evolves in space and time, undergoing a continuous "deferral of meaning" (Derrida quoted in Rodgers Johns 2015: 69). Even if religion were related to truth, 'truth is continuously changing' (*Kweli kigegeu haitulii*, ZZ 110) until you wish to 'divorce it when it loses logic' (*kuitalikitaliki inapovia kwenye mantiki*, ZZ 110). Likewise, Nietzsche stated that having faith means not wanting to know what is true and that Christianity is the opposite of reality (Nietzsche 1977: 38).

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[45] The evil in the world is described in *Duniani I* (ZZ 120-33), where on the fictional island of Nguu, near the island of Mafia, in front of Bagamoyo the coastal city symbol of the slave trades, the followers of a Satanic cult established a farm for breeding human beings to conduct scientific experiments. In the laboratories, scientists challenged creation by producing human beings, who were herded like animals deprived of brain and tongue. Not only did human will and hybris contest deeply a theist model, but also the damage brought about the abuse of scientific knowledge demonstrates the fragility of the idea of heaven. Furthermore, (*Duniani II*, ZZ 134-40) the reputation of Heaven continues to be doubtful because of the warfare between the countries of *Mwendashari* ('Angered') and *Sharihaswa* ('Pure Rage') which symbolises religious wars between Islamic and Christian fundamentalists as well as between colonisers and colonised. Humanity destroys themselves unchallenged, challenging the existence of Heaven.

[46] Cf. "the impossibility of proving the truth of religious doctrines" (Freud 1961: 27) that are "illusions" (Freud 1961: 30).

[47] The character of Kristina in *Kuwa kwa Maua* describes the historical evolution from African Traditional Religions to Christianity and talks about religion/to believe as a process continuously evolving with the passing of time (Mkufya 2019: 462-4).

Azazeli: Kweli si kweli, kwelikweli.	Azazel: Truly, there is no absolute truth.
Kweli hubadilika ukweli.	Truth changes its validity.
Ukweli leo si kwelikweli, kesho wawa	What is truth today, tomorrow it will be
kichekesho.	ridiculous.
Kweli ni mlinganisho, kila kweli hufika	Truth is relative and each truth comes to
mwisho.	an end.
Iwapo kweli yawa kweli, kisha huwa si	Whenever the truth is taken as truth, then
kweli.	it comes out that it is not.
[...]	[…]
(Mkufya 1999: 110)	

Even justice is arbitrary: what is right for one is wrong for another, and *Japo kiukweli haki haihakikiki Akikwamakwama Maliki.* ('Though truly justice is not ascertained. If the King is continuously stuck' ZZ 110); these lines of the poem seem to refer to the conflict between Islam and Christianity, making of it the strongest atheistic statement in the novel, suggesting that God is not omnipotent, since he cannot pacify different faiths.

Therefore, the demons criticise any single ideology, including faith, in favour of relativism and multiculturalism (Rettovà 2021a: 336), articulating an epistemology of "radical scepticism, agnosticism, cognitive relativism and cultural pluralism" (Rettovà 2021a: 332-5). Indeed, cognitive truth is not a transcendental reality, but an "opinion, a point of view" (Wiredu 1980: 115-116).

5.5 Time and Existence

Ziraili is the keeper of 'the mysterious duality of the universe-dwellers: life and death' (*fumbo la uwili wa malimwengu, yaani: kuzaliwa na kufa*, ZZ 17), which Mkufya defines as "the two pillars of philosophy".

Zirani opens a discussion about time: the universe and its inhabitants are ruled by time. The perception of time comes when a perishing creature obtains rational thinking and consciousness about death; however, death is not divine punishment but the end of that portion of time assigned to human beings on earth (ZZ 21); whereas superhuman eternal creatures, such as angels and demons, do not care about time because they simply be.

> Beelzebub: *kuwepo kwako, tayari kunakupa haki na udhahiri wa uwepo. Katika anga, chochote kikishakuwepo, haki na udhahiri wa uwepo wake huwa papo hapo.* (Mkufya 1999: 49).

> Beelzebub: For your type, becoming, now or after, gives you the right and manifestation of existence. In the universe, whenever anything becomes, its manifestation and right to be becomes there and then.[48]

Human beings exist in a four-dimensional spacetime, subjected to the interaction of physical forces as per Einstein's theory of relativity[49]. Mkufya describes a Heidegger's *Dasein* "existence in this world" (1927) with existential meaning (Rettovà 2018: 443); "there is no time when man has not been" (Heidegger quoted in Gupta 1960: 163); whereas demons are ontologies whose essence (*uwa*) occupies alternative spaces outside time:

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[48] Mkufya's translation.
[49] Einstein, Albert (November 28, 1919). "Time, Space, and Gravitation". The Times. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/EDU_Einstein_ENGLISH.pdf

Binadamu wana historia [...] kabla ni giza na baada pia ni giza […] mwanadamu ana baada na kabla. Sisi mashetani hatuna kabla […] hatuna baada wala badala ya baada! (Mkufya 1999: 50)

Humanity has history before and after is darkness. […] A human being has a before and an after. We demons do not have any before […] we have neither an after nor anything instead of an after.

Mkufya, through Lucifer (ZZ 40-1) explains the difference between a locative and non-locative existence by playing with the Swahili language: a locative existence in a limited time and space *(kuwa-po),* which materialises in front of its opposite state, non-existence *(kutokuwa-po)* or nothingness (Sartre 2003), is an attribute of human beings and mortal creatures; a non-locative existence or essence *(kuwa)*, which describes being everywhere or anywhere without boundaries of time and space, is an attribute of God, devils, and all the immaterial and eternal entities[50].

Non-existence cannot be attributed to eternal entities as Lucifer explains: *Nilikuwa. Na, kuwa kwangu hakukuweza kuepukika. Ilibidi niwe. Na, daima siwezi kutokuwa.* ('I was. And, my existence could not be avoided. I must be. And, I can never not be, ZZ 40). Complementarity of good and evil is a *sine qua non* to balance the universe, but Lucifer also challenges the infinity of God, because two infinities nullify each other. Mkufya wrote *nilikuwa*, as if demons were not created but always existed, like God, thus nullifying His attribute of infinitude.

5.6 Udhahiri: An Ontological Definition

At the height of the battle, Ziraili and the philosophers Marx, Proudhon and a beheaded Voltaire switch from a physical to a verbal conflict that has typical features of the *malumbano* tradition, "verbal warfare" (Mbatiah 2023: 90), and the dialogic-style poetry of *ngonjera[51],* a dispute in verse.

The dispute between idealism and materialism reveals the main pillars of Mkufya's philosophy: human bodies are perishable beings subjected to time and space: *dahari imetuenzi Maisha, ambayo sharti lake ni kuisha* ('time has favoured us by giving life, whose ultimate end is to end' ZZ 212) and because of their mortality that nullifies all 'philosophical speculations' (*udaku wa falsafa*, ZZ 212), humans cogitate "imperfect philosophy and defective wisdom" (*falsafa zenye kifafa; hekima za kubabaisha*, ZZ 212-3). However, humans must not fear death, yet the unique purpose of life is to glorify the brief time alive that materialises with evidence (*udhahiri*)[52].

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[50] Mkufya's email 20-08-2019; cf. Nicolini 2022: 225; Rettovà 2007b: 112; 2018: 452; Wiredu quoted in P'Bitek 2011: xviii.

[51] A "dramatized poem-play" (Askew 2015), created by Mathias Mnyampala (Mnyampala 1970; Rettovà 2016a).

[52] These arguments are unfolded thoroughly through the protagonist of the trilogy Dr. Hans (Mkufya 2019: 445-8).

Proudhon akaongeza: Mbona kifo mwakihofu?	Proudhon adds: Why do you fear death?
Kuwa mtu ni wajibu kuwa mfu!	Being human, you are doomed to die
Maisha ndiyo matukufu	**Life is indeed glorious**
Yapambwe yawekwe wakfu	**And it should be coronated/glorified**
Sio hofu ya mbingu ya wafu	Not the fear of an afterlife
yenye tanuru kutuchoma tusiosikifu!	with a furnace that will burn us who do
(Mkufya 1999: 212)	not obey in hell!
Ziraili: Kwa kifo nadhihirisha	Ziraili: By death I reveal
Upofu wa hayo Maisha	The blindness of this life
Na **hekima za kubabaisha!**	And its **puzzled wisdom**!
(Mkufya 1999: 213)	

All products of human beings' intellectual curiosity and reflection, including religion, science and philosophy, are limited and relative. Humanity must work their intellects out to overcome superstition and improve their control on willpower: *unapoogopa tafakuru. utaanza kuhofu kufuru* ('when you fear reflecting, you will fear blasphemy! ZZ 213).

5.7 Religious Tolerance

Religion is described as a disaggregating factor which sows discord, as illustrated by the Heaven's armies that fight side by side against the invaders but pray separately (ZZ 210). Indeed, the Islamic philosopher Averroes[53], a fighter in Heaven's army, says: *Lakini kwa kuwa dua zetu zinapingana, kila moja asome yake peke yake* ('since our prayers fight each other, each person will pray separately', ZZ 210). Mkufya seems to challenge Dante, who located unbaptised persons such as Greek and Arab philosophers among "the great souls" in Limbo ("Averroes who made the great Commentary" Inferno IV: 144); so, criticising Christian apologetics, Mkufya locates Averroes in a paradise which includes all religions, as illustrated by the character *Mfalme Ashoka*, Ashoka the Great (Mkufya 1999: 8-9[54]), the Indian emperor who is an example of Buddhist tolerance and "conquest by dharma[55]".

The apostates' ideology, postulated by Mkufya as a form of African socialism, is an aggregating factor teaching tolerance despite religious differences (ZZ 187). The Ngindo (ethnic and linguistic group from South Tanzania) utter a *utani*, joking pun, fostering cultural pluralism and religious tolerance:

Chopichopi twazunguka uungu	Slowly with jokes we play around the concept of divinity
Uarabu na Uzungu si utawala wa mbingu,	Neither Arabs nor Europeans are the ruler of the sky,
Wenye haki kuzitia pingu,	Who have the right to put handcuffs,
na kuharamisha mila za walimwengu!	And make illicit the cultures of the inhabitants of the universe!
(Mkufya 1999: 216)	

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[53] 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).

[54] Cf. The character of Kristina, spokesperson of religious tolerance, in the trilogy (Mkufya 2019: 196).

[55] Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ashoka (accessed 7 January 2024).

5.8 Shifting the Centre of Beliefs

Religious protests are a strategy of reorienting towards "Africa-centred Knowledges" (Cooper & Morrell 2014). Zirani's argument is a case of decolonisation of thought through language by challenging the use of the Arabic loanword *binadamu*, Adam's son, symbol of cultural imperialism that attributes the origin of humanity to the Judaeo-Christian culture, suggesting instead the holistic term *walimwengu watu*, 'human world-dwellers':

> *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 Isaak alone. A translation which starts calling us Inhabitants of the Universe rather than Sons of Adam.

Lucifer and the demons advocate for a decentralisation and reorientation/recentralisation of knowledge and beliefs: *Turekebishe mbingu msatatili!* ('Let us reframe the Heavens[56]! ZZ 156-7), by *"moving the centre"* (Thiong'o 1993) of faith from religious moral codes to a communitarian ethics based on *utu*, humanity (Masolo 2019: 33), which places humanity at the centre detached from metaphysical aspirations: *Upya mtu anga zimkadirie!* ('Let the skies reconsider human being anew! ZZ 183).

Asmodeus: Kipengele kwa kipengele[57]	Asmodeus: Pieces by pieces
Mbingu wakizipangua	By disarranging (destroying) the heavens
Waledi wenye kengele	Educated people with a bell
Dunia wataitengua!	They will **twist** the world!
(Mkufya 1999: 135)	

5.9 The Unknown

In the end, *kiama* ('the Judgment Day') arrives. Zirani sneaks to destroy the throne of Heaven, and the end of the world occurs, leaving humanity to face a biggest mystery: a void that triggers reflection. Zirani succumbs to the idea he has been fighting for all his life, and he calls for God *Mungu wangu!* ('My God!' ZZ 224). However, God, the representation of the "unknown factor[58]", never appears as a character in the novel and the throne is always described as being empty. Both God and the purpose of creation remain the mysterious 'secret of Heaven' ("*siri ya mbingu*" ZZ 237).

The end of the world is the outcome of the war. Firstly, according to Rettovà's reading (2007a), the aim of the angels' and demons' game could be to investigate all infinite possible combinations to create the "best of all possible worlds" (Leibniz quoted in Rettovà 2005: 15). According to Leibnizian optimism, God created the best of all possible worlds, despite the evil in it[59]. Alternatively, this fragile universe is already the best; it just needs more eons of time to be consolidated, because perfection does not exist. In this case, idealism would have defeated materialism.

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[56] Re-orienting religious faith in the world.
[57] Alliteration of the sound of a bell or the metallic sound made by handcuffs beaten in the attempt to be broken. Cf. ZZ 183, 201, 214.
[58] Mkufya personal conversation (25-11-2023).
[59] Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/best-of-all-possible-worlds (accessed 7 January 2024).

However, the novel also suggests that humanity is doomed to be defeated outside the physical world, and thus, it encourages an ontological turn, leaving aside metaphysics. Secondly, the "creation of a new world" can also be interpreted scientifically as a Big Bang theory. According to the principle of thermodynamic, energy and matter are neither created nor destroyed (Atkins 2007), so the destruction of the world is only a phase of transition. Metaphorically, the demons pushed humanity to break down the door of superstition through rationality and science. In this interpretation of the novel, science wins over religion and over human beings as well, who cannot control the power of energy and matter, because they are part of the same matter. This reading also projects "Afro-modernity" and universal enlightenment (Comaroff & Comaroff 2012: 8). Therefore, the novel stages two trials, against both physics and metaphysics (Nicolini 2022: 70)

Thirdly, the war can also be read as metaphor for colonialism and cultural imperialism represented by Heaven and Hell, as described according to imported religions to Africa, versus the revolutionaries of manifestness, who represent all oppressed from the Global South. The novel confronts imported religions to free the minds, and the metaphorical war waged by *wanadhahara* and the demons versus Heaven is against western imperial endeavours. However, the defeat of colonialism cannot really guarantee a full decolonisation, as shown by contemporary forms of neocolonialism and globalisation. Thus, it is an individual right and duty to decolonise one's own mind. The war is an allegory of Africa's troubled history, so Mkufya[60] asks: "*usahihi ni nguvu ama utu wa Waafrika*" 'is the correct answer might[61] or African humanity?'

6. Conclusions

Ziraili na Zirani demonstrates to be a fictional application of Ngugi's "decolonization of the mind" and Wiredu's "conceptual decolonisation", which uses the three pillars of African languages, critical examination of religion and humanistic ethics.

Firstly, the Swahili language is privileged, and its potential is highlighted by Mkufya's creativity, for he chose Swahili as the language for his philosophical thoughts to write to his people.

Secondly, the novel questions the totalitarian tendency of Abrahamic faiths, retracing holy wars from the First Crusade in 1099 to the religious riots that enflamed Dar es Salaam in the 1990s, and it can be read as a criticism of religious aggressive proselytising. Conversely, Mkufya fosters a message of moderation and tolerance disentangled from religious moral codes.

Thirdly, the apostates of manifestness, who allegorically wage war against imperialism and "epistemicide" (Santos 2014), unite as a community of social and humane human beings (Kresse 2007: 139-40) inspired by African socialisms[62], especially Nyerere's *ujamaa na kujitegemea* 'socialism and self-reliance[63]'.

Furthermore, Mkufya confronts readers with a *Dilemma* among clashing epistemologies: idealism, as faith (*udhanaifu*) in Heaven; the *wanadhahara*, who are partisans for materialism (*uyakinifu)*, atheism and positivism in the form of the ideology

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[60] Personal interview (8-12-2023).
[61] Cf. Thrasymachus' aphorism "might makes/is right" in Plato's *Republic* (Book I, 338c) and Robert's *Kusadikika* (1951).
[62] Senghor's "negritude" (1964), Nkrumah's "conscienscism" (1964) and Nyerere's "ujamaa" (1964).
[63] The manifesto of the political and philosophical ideology of *ujamaa is* the Arusha Declaration 1967 (Nyerere 1964; Topan 2006).

of *udhahiri*; and finally, the demons who, cynical and hypercritical, introduce relativism (*mlinganisho*, Mkufya 1999: 110; Rettovà 2021a: 336) and cognitive truth as "a point of view" (Wiredu 1980). This polyphonic novel demonstrates the non-existence of absolute truth, as claimed by religious credo, yet relativism is the prism of reality.

Even though Mkufya is an advocate of science, he leaves open all possible interpretations. Indeed, Mkufya doesn't provide readers with the right answer, because his main objective is to make people reflect freely, engaging in "*ukombozi wa hekima*[64]" 'liberation of wisdom'.

Mkufya also demonstrates he is a humanist, who defends human beings' free will by making philosophy "sagacious" for the improvement of the community (Oruka in Graness & Kresse 1997: 251-60) and since humanity is puzzled in a metaphysical afterlife, a this-worldly orientation of life is encouraged.

To conclude, Mkufya's philosophy is a lifelong commitment, which develops in progress with his novels through narratology and style. *Ziraili na Zirani,* is a hetero-epistemic and hetero-theist novel, which narrates clashes of faiths and encounters between plural ideologies, and which reflects the revolutionary ideas of a young Mkufya. The clash blossoms into a revelation of the meaning of life in *Kuwa kwa Maua* (2019), which unfolds the allegorical meanings conveyed by the intellectual war against religion and demonstrates the author's maturity of thought.

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[64] Mkufya personal interview (18-12-2023).

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