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"THUNDER" AND "RELIEF"[1]: CONTEMPORARY POPULAR WEB WRITERS AND THEIR COMMITMENT TO SWAHILI LITERATURE

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This paper investigates the latest development of 'Swahili popular web literature' that I call *fasihi pendwa pepe* in 21st century Tanzania. With the enhancement of communication technologies, further boosted by the Covid-19 pandemic, Swahili online literature has been mobilised on the social media. The objectives are not only to support its flourishing as a window displaying writers, attracting readers and contributing to the vibrant environment that surrounds it, but online literature is also ethically committed to community building. This study proposes a philosophical reading of digital popular novels that bridges the gap between élite and popular literature and contributes to the discipline of Afrophone philosophy. The original case study analyses two magazines that circulate on the social media, *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* ('The Author's Roar', Mwambe) and *Tulizo* ('Comfort', Masai), as well as two novels, *Harufu ya Kifo* ('Smell of Death' Mwambe 2020) and *Mwimbula* ('The sacrificial animal', Masai 2023).

1. Introduction

This article is a preliminary study to be developed into a wider research project, which investigates contemporary evolutions, challenges and objectives of Swahili popular literature online from Tanzania. I alternatively describe it as literature "on the move". Indeed, Swahili online literature, which mobilises debates on the social media, not only supports its flourishing as a window displaying writers, attracting readers, and contributing to the vibrant environment that surrounds it, but it is also ethically committed to community building.

This paper aims to contribute to two fields of study and debates: African studies and Afrophone literature and philosophy. It explores contemporary 'Swahili popular web literature' that I call '*fasihi pendwa pepe'*, and which is fighting to suture the tearing between "élite" and "popular" literature (Gromov 2008; Bertoncini 2019).

Moreover, I argue that Swahili web literature has the potential to articulate philosophical insights, contributing to the field of "Afrophone philosophies" (Rettovà 2007a). Popular web writers distribute their literary productions on the social media and "mobilise" their novels and magazines by taking up contemporary social issues. I argue that they are committed to ethically improve their community through humanness. Indeed, writers of popular literature are actively engaged in establishing a literary 'web' through fictions to provide actual support to their community and develop 'Swahili web literature'.

[1] "Thunder" and "Relief" are my free translations inspired by the titles of two popular web magazines, respectively *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* ('The Author's Roar'), published by Richard Mwambe, and *Tulizo* ('Comfort'), published by Frank Masai.

Firstly, this research will introduce the historical background of Swahili popular literature in Tanzania, including writers and publishers, through a review of existing literature. Then, it will focus on two original case studies.

2. Historical background of Swahili popular literature

Since 1970s Swahili literature has been divided by scholars between "*fasihi dhati*", "serious or élite literature" and "*fasihi pendwa*", which is roughly translated in English as "popular literature" (Bertoncini 2019; Gromov 2008; Bertoncini & al. 2009). This divide was initially perceived as between, on the one hand, popular literature, which includes romance, crime fiction, and didactic stories, targeting readers with a medium or low level of education (Bertoncini 2019); and, on the other hand, élite literature, characterised by sophisticated content and aesthetic qualities, targeting university graduates and the middle class (Bertoncini 2019; Gromov 2008). Lately, since the 21st century, popular literature has moved online (Diegner 2018), where online fiction has been developing, as will be illustrated.

Since the 1970s and the 1980s popular fiction has been characterised by two prominent genres: romance (Mulokozi 1992) also called "love fiction" and "crime and detective fiction" (Mbatiah 2019). However, the profusion of Swahili popular literature took place between 1980s and 2000s (Gromov 2008), and the most prolific genres were "police novels" (Gromov 2008), "detective stories" (Bertoncini & al. 2009) and "crime fiction" (Gromov 2012) written by authors such as Ben Mtobwa (1958-2008), Aristabulus Elvis Musiba (1950-2010) and Hammie Rajab (1940-2011). These writers are acknowledged by the youngest writers as "*wazee wetu*" ('our elders', Shigongo interviewed by Reuster-Jahn 2008a: 30) and as the most inspiring generation of crime fiction writers.

Retracing the development of this genre, the father of Swahili detective and crime fiction was the Zanzibari author Muhammed Said Abdullah, who wrote the novel *Mzimu wa Watu wa Kale* ('The Spirits of the Ancestors' Shrine', 1960[2]) and whose pen created the charismatic amateur detective, Bwana Msa. According to Khamis (2012: 170), in this novel, Abdulla detached from realism and imbued the novel with mysterious elements rooted in the Zanzibari culture to investigate "the enigma of human nature in a popular novel" (Khamis 2012: 171). Another forerunner of the genre was Faraji Katalambulla with his novel *Simu ya Kifo* ('Death Call', 1962) (Bertoncini & al. 2009; Gromov 2012; Mbatiah 2019). Crime novels in the 1960s were characterised by the figure of a private or police detective, who fights against a criminal gang (Reuster-Jahn 2012).

Detective stories were a major trend in 1970s and 1980s, a period typified by the "Hall of fame of the Tanzanian crime novel" (Gromov 2012: 151), including thriller writers such as John Simbamwene, Faraji Katalambulla, Eddie Ganzel, Juma Mkabarah, and Kassim Chande as well

[2] Before being firstly published in 1960, this thriller won the first prize in the Swahili story-writing competition 1957/58.

as Sam Kitogo, Jackson Kalindimya, and Hammie Rajab (Bertoncini & al. 2009; Mulokozi 1992; Gromov 2008). The novels pertaining to this period were characterised by the figure of "brave inspector or amateur detective", designed as a "carbon copy of American thrillers" (Kezilahabi quoted in Gromov 2012: 152) and they were aimed at entertainment only, without social commitment (Gromov 2012).

In between the 1970s and the 1980s, police detectives started being accompanied by secret agents to chase after international gangs and spies (Reuster-Jahn 2012). This marked the beginning of a subsequent period characterised by "investigation cum spy novels" featuring private detectives or secret agents, who are also known as the "Swahili super detectives/Swahili James Bonds" (Diegner 2018a: 33). The most famous super detectives are Aristabulus Elvis Musiba's Willy Gamba and Ben Mtobwa's Joram Kiango. Kiango is portrayed as "the ironic, cynical, reflexive and careful private detective" (Gromov 2012: 153), and he is the character of a series of books, including ten titles from *Lazima ufe Joram* ('You must die Joram' 1983) to *Mtambo wa Mauti* ('Device of Death' 2004).

"The resolute hero" is a common character in both Swahili popular and political novels and connects fiction with the fable tradition (Garnier 2013: 114). Swahili political novels (Garnier 2013: 114-127) include the successful genre of Tanzanian spy fiction, which is set in international spaces. It deals with sociopolitical issues of the African states by means of "popular heroes", who are also political activists committed to an endless fight against different kinds of evil (Garnier 2013: 107). The society attacked by crime, violence and corruption is in the end redeemed by resolute heroes (Garnier 2013: 127ff) such as Mtobwa's Joram Kiango and Musiba's Willy Gamba.

Spy thrillers or "political thrillers" (Gromov 2012: 157) are characterised by complex plots, international settings and "social drawings" (Gromov 2012: 157) that introduce to the historical and sociopolitical Tanzanian situation. This genre of "socially committed thrillers", set by Mtobwa and Musiba, has been further developed by younger authors, such as Beka Mfaume in *Mhanga wa Ikulu* ('Victim of the statehouse' 2010; Gromov 2012: 159).

After 1995, crime stories focus on the issue of police and judiciary corruption (Reuster-Jahn 2012). This trend has a didactic purpose that is to seek remedies for corruption. According to Reuster-Jahn (2012: 173-183) the following three novels are promoters in the same measure of this literary trend: Abdul Ntandu's *Simanzi* ('Grief' 1995); Izengo Amos's *Bora Ujiue* ('You'd better kill yourself' 1996) and Hamees Suba's *Kila la Kheri Nishita. Mateso ya Msitu wa Pande* ('Good Luck Nishita. Torture in Pande Forest' 2008).

In 2000s, "best seller thrillers" were written by Eric James Shigongo (Gromov 2008), who is an exponent of the "new generation of Tanzanian writers" (Bertoncini & al. 2009: 131), and who, after a long past of serialised novels, published his first printed book *Rais Anampenda Mke Wangu* ('The President Loves my Wife') in 2003 (Gromov 2008; Reuster-Jahn 2008a).

Finally, I argue that a contemporary proliferation and revitalisation of popular literature in the 21st century was due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent increase in communication technologies. This demonstrates that Swahili popular literature is anything but not in decline.

3. Publishing Swahili popular fiction

Publishing popular fiction in post-Independence Tanzania was firstly characterised by printed books of lower quality, but highly affordable prices (Gromov 2008; Reuster-Jahn 1995; 2008a). Additionally, newspaper serials and novels published in serials in both newspapers and magazines have a long history in Tanzania since the 1960s (Reuster-Jahn 2008a,b; 2015; 2016; 2017). In the mid-1970s, the decline of political philosophy of *ujamaa* produced an urban revolution that gave birth to new figures: "popular public intellectuals" (Callaci 2017: 2) and "briefcase publishers", who produced self-published crime thrillers and romance novellas (Callaci 2017: 8). In this period, popular writers and self-publishers in most cases were also editors of popular magazines featuring popular literature (Reuster-Jahn 2016).

Between the 1990s and 2005, a key player in the popular fiction publishing sector was the *Ndanda Mission Press*, a publishing house founded by the *Benedectine Christian missionaries* in South Tanzania in 1934 and active in entertainment publications since the 1970s (Reuster-Jahn 1995: 340; 2008a,b; Gromov 2008). The *Ndanda Mission Press* launched a thriller collection conveying the message "crime does not pay" (Reuster-Jahn quoted in Bertoncini & al. 2009: 134) to boost "the moral immune system of the reader" (Reuster-Jahn 1995: 344). After the decline of the *Ndanda Mission*, other publishers rose up such as *Heko Publishers* run by Ben Mtobwa as managing director. This was just before the advent of the "best seller thrillers" of Eric James Shigongo, who also upgraded to a "bestseller design" by its publishing house *Global Publishers* (Gromov 2008).

In the 1990s, after the privatisation of the media, serials returned to be the most popular form of fiction (Reuster-Jahn 2008a: 25). The major modern exponent of this trend is Eric James Shigongo, owner of the *Global Publishers*, which was founded in 1998 (located in Sinza Dar es Salaam), and which produces the tabloids in which Shigongo's novels have been serialised before being published in book format (Reuster-Jahn 2008a). Newspapers and tabloids serials came first, and then private publishing houses and their infrastructure, such as websites, became the most important support to produce and market books that have always been suffering from "non-existent distribution infrastructure" (Reuster-Jahn 2008a: 34; 2017; Suriano 2021).

Afterwards, serialised fictions published in printed tabloids moved online, and the web has been the new platform for publishing Swahili fiction since 2007 (Reuster-Jahn 2017). In fact, writers and publishers started marketing and distributing their productions on a new platform, the Internet. Particularly, the website *Global Publishers* owned By E.J. Shigongo and the Facebook site *Kona ya Riwaya* 'the novel corner' (Reuster-Jahn 2017) were the exponents of this trend.

Kona ya Riwaya is "a writers' self-help project" (Reuster-Jahn 2017: 276) created by four writers: Hussein Tuwa, who is a popular contemporary crime fiction writer. He is famous for his novel *Utata wa 9/12* ('The Struggle of 9/12', 2013), which Diegner defines as "a paradigmatic postcolonial text" (Diegner 2020: 2). Other creators are Ibrahim Gama, Beka Mfaume and George Mosenya. Their small bookshop and publishing house (located in Kinondoni Dar es Salaam) moved online and began serialising on Facebook from early 2013. At first, the group launched the website called *Kona ya Riwaya*[3] 'the Novel Corner', then after a viral cyber-attack, it was reopened with the name of *Kona ya Riwaya Reloaded* in the same year (Reuster-Jahn 2017).

Later, in 2016, the members of *Kona ya Riwaya* created a new writers' association called UWARIDI, which is an acronym for *Umoja wa Waandishi wa Riwaya wenye Dira*, 'the Union of Novelists with a Direction/compass' (Diegner 2020) or 'Determination' (Reuster-Jahn 2017), and whose president is Hussein Tuwa. The full name of the association, UWARIDI, has also been interpreted as "being in rose" or "*uwaridi-zation*" (Diegner 2018a: 36), which is a metaphor hinting at the aesthetic quality of popular novels be they thrillers or romances (Diegner 2020: 4). Moreover, the UWARIDI writers' association launched a smartphone app in March 2017 (Diegner 2018a; 2020).

I am reporting below the periodisation of Swahili popular literature publishing, starting from 1975, as shown by Diegner (ibid.). In the 1970s-1980s, the first phase of popular literature was represented by private editors running entertainment magazines in Swahili, such as the photo-novel magazine *Film Tanzania* launched by Faraji Katalambulla in 1969 (Reuster-Jahn 2016: 226). This time was also typified by the phenomenon described by Callaci (2017) as "briefcase publishers": publishing soft-cover books to be distributed among stalls along Dar es Salaam streets. Notable writers of that period are also H. Rajab and B. Mtobwa.

The second phase was characterised by the publication of popular fiction online and categorised as the "Shingogo-ization" effect (Diegner 2020: 3). Indeed, Shigongo revolutionised Swahili popular fiction publishing in serials both on tabloids and online through his media company, *Global Publishers* starting from 1998.

Thirdly, popular fiction online started being serialised on Facebook. This renovation, which was labelled as the "Facebook-ization" phase (Diegner ibid.: 4), developed around the group of *Kona ya Riwaya* and their Facebook page *Kona Ya Riwaya Reloaded* in 2013. Novels serialised on Facebook make use of the technique of "cliff-hanger-ization" (Diegner 2020: 4) so as to push the readers to buy the hard copy of the books.

The fourth phase is characterised by the distribution of popular fiction through Apps. This makeover, categorised as "App-ization" (Diegner ibid.: 15), according to Diegner (2018a;

[3] In fact, the first version of the Facebook page was not called "Uwanja wa simulizi", as noted in Reuster-Jahn (2017:276), but "Kona ya Riwaya." (pers. comm. Reuster-Jahn 05.11.2024).

2020), aims to "bridge gaps": firstly, gender gaps, by giving space to women writers; secondly, age gaps, by opening the arena to upcoming writers; and finally, gaps between élite and popular literature that seems to have become "a middle-class phenomenon" (Diegner 2018a: 45).

Lastly, I have found out that the use of Facebook has not been a transitory phase, but it is indeed in vogue as an important contemporary means to advertise writers and fictions as well as to attract new readers. Those "phases" are not alternative but complementary to each other; for instance, Facebook as an advertiser tool works jointly with WhatsApp that is the communication and distribution media.

Therefore, I will explore two case studies that I have been investigating online, especially through Facebook, since early 2022. I was attracted by popular writers and publishers who posted pictures of the covers of their newly released magazines, accompanied by their WhatsApp numbers to request a free copy of the magazine. By following their profiles, I have also been reading the serialised novels on their pages when available. Recently, the writers' trend seems to consist more in publishing selected sections of the novels; then, by using cliffhanger endings, they push the readers to buy the entire book, either in soft or hard copies. Furthermore, many writers are also posting attractive pictures of themselves with the printed hard copies of their novels on their social media pages as well as colourful, eye-catching digital vignettes. These vignettes advertise the novels and provide details about prices and bookshops where the printed books are sold. Most of the time, the authors' WhatsApp numbers are displayed on each posted vignette.

The first contemporary online magazine to be launched was *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* ('The Author's Roar', Mwambe), which has been issued monthly since October 2021. A second example was *Tulizo* ('Comfort', Masai), which was issued monthly from January to December 2022, with one issue in spring 2023 and one issue in January 2024 (14 issues in total). A third example, *Kalamu Tulivu* ('the Peaceful Pen'), edited by Hussein O. Molito and distributed through WhatsApp, had only three issues (from November 2022 to January 2023). However, this magazine is also linked to a homonymous Facebook page *Kalamu Tulivu*, dedicated to different entertainments such as book and film reviews. Molito is the CEO of *Kalamu Tulivu* company, which offers publishing services, and the author of a Facebook page and YouTube channel called *MolitoBrand*[4]. Molito has been publishing popular novels since 2007. Among his ten published titles, the novel *Chawa* ('louse' 2022), which was serialised on the Facebook account *Kalamu Tulivu*, was launched at the literary event *Elite Mjue Mtunzi* ('Know the Authors') in July 2022 and published by *Kalamu Tulivu Publishers*.

In the following sections, I will focus on two selected web writers Richard Mwambe and Frank Masai, who are respectively the editors of the online magazines *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* ('The Author's Roar') and *Tulizo* ('Comfort') as well as the writers of the two selected novels

[4] The *Molito App* is no longer working.

Harufu ya Kifo (‘Smell of Death’ Mwambe 2020) and *Mwimbula* (‘The sacrificial animal’, Masai 2023).

4. *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* and Amata Ric

Richard R. Mwambe was born in Dar es Salaam, and lives in Iringa[5]. He is a prolific writer who has been cultivating his passion since he was a primary school student; in that time, he wrote his first unpublished story *Msitu wa Solondo* (‘the Solondo Forest’).

Mwambe is a crime fiction writer, creator of the detective hero Kamanda Amata, from whom he took his pen name “Amata Ric”, inspired by the expression ‘Amata Gaimba’ that in the language of the Mwera from Lindi means ‘lion’s spit’[6].

Mwambe is the editor of the magazine *Ngurumo*[7] *ya Mwandishi* (‘The Author’s Roar’), the managing director and CEO of *Jamvi la Simulizi* (‘The Narrative Carpet[8]’), as well as the CEO of *Kitabu Maisha* (‘A Book for Life’) an ongoing project.

Mwambe started devoting himself to writing in 2012, when he opened a dedicated Facebook page. His passion has always been for investigative (*upelelezi*) and detective stories. Mwambe’s first detective story *Mwanamke mwenye juba mweusi* (‘The woman in a black coat’) is unpublished. Afterwards, he created his main character Kamanda Ric Amata, who is the formidable investigator (*mpelelezi*), investigating on behalf of a secret society, and whose first investigation was narrated in the unpublished story *Izabeli* (‘Isabel’).

The multimedia project *Jamvi la Simulizi* (‘The Narrative Carpet’) started as a Facebook page and a smartphone application (*kitumizi cha simu ya mkononi*) in 2013. However, the app was hacked immediately, and did not reopen until 2022, when unfortunately, it was subjected to a further piracy attack. In fact, piracy appears to be a major issue for online publishers and their websites, Facebook pages and Apps. Mwambe restarted the project in 2020; it now includes a website “*Jamvi la Simulizi*[9]”, a Facebook page, and the *Jamvi la Simulizi App*. The reloaded App has been launched through regular back cover ads since the magazine issue of December 2022. Mwambe[10] is also engaged in the ongoing project of a local NGO, *Kitabu Maisha* (‘A Book is/for Life’). The organisation aims to encourage reading, distributing books and creating book clubs among primary and secondary school students. Since 2023, the *Jamvi la Simulizi App* has been working regularly; it displays free issues of *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* magazine and offers free download of Kamanda Amata’ s books. The book collection is

[5] Personal communication with Richard Mwambe, whom I thank, through a WhatsApp call on the 2nd of June 2023.

[6] Personal interview with Richard Mwambe on the 16th of November 2023.

[7] *Ngurumo* (1959-1974) was a popular newspaper edited by a TANU (Tanganyika African National Union) supporter Randhir Thakers (Callaci 2017).

[8] Or ‘The Carpet of Narration’.

[9] https://www.richardmwambe.com

[10] Personal communication with Richard Mwambe through a WhatsApp call on the 22nd of March 2023.

designed by the *Jamvi la Simulizi* publishing company, and hard copies are printed in a small publishing house in Kariakoo. The "investigation series" shows off the UWARIDI official logo. As a member of the Writers' Association, Richard Mwambe explains he benefits from the review and editing support offered by the association's expert members.

4.1. The magazine: Ngurumo ya Mwandishi

Ngurumo ya Mwandishi ('The Author's Roar') (henceforth NM) is a free monthly online magazine, launched in October 2021[11] by *Jamvi la Simulizi* ('The Narrative Carpet'), a media and publishing organisation owned by Richard Mwambe. The editor in chief of the magazine is Mwambe himself, with the help of Rey Stanley (until the end of 2022). This "*jarida pepe*", 'electronic magazine', is advertised on Facebook, both on the *Jamvi la Simulizi* page and the editor's profile, and is distributed by email and WhatsApp by Mwambe himself. He is currently distributing the magazine every month to about 250 people in different countries, and he estimates he has about a thousand readers[12].

The main objective of the magazine is to encourage reading among Tanzanians, particularly those who cannot afford to pay for books or who are not interested in spending their money buying books. Such people will find novels serialised in the magazine. Mwambe's main technique for attracting readers is to make them familiar with the writers and their personal life stories, casting the writers as everyday heroes or friends so as to make fiction reading more attractive. Another central activity of the magazine is to look for new authors and involve them in open discussions.

The first issues were 10 pages long; from August 2022, the design was improved with a new brighter index and new sections. Page numbers increased from 16 pages in 2022 to 20 in 2023; the progressive increase in pages and sections is a sign of the magazine's success.

Since the magazine's mission is not only to shed light on popular writers and their novels but also to encourage reading, especially in Swahili, among Tanzanians, one of the magazine's slogans urges readers to: "*Fanya vitabu kuwa ni sehemu ya bidhaa unazonunua mara kwa mara*" ('Make books one of the goods you purchase from time to time', NM 7: 3). Each issue is characterised by a slogan containing the selected topic to be discussed in the 'editor's bureau' ("*Dawati la Mhariri*") on the first page of the magazine by Richard Mwambe, or 'Amata Ric' (since August 2022 this section has been renamed *Tahariri* 'editorial comments').

The core sections of the magazine consist of the following: *Mwandishi Wetu* ('Our writer') a space devoted to the writer of the month, who introduces themselves and their work. The section "*Pitio la Vitabu*" ('Book Review') displays an attractive book review of either a classic novel such as Adam Shafi's *Vuta N'Kuvute* ('The tug of war', 1999) (NM 14) or popular new

[11] For this article, I have analysed the issues released from March 2022 (NM 6) to the 22nd issue released in July 2023 (NM 21).

[12] Mwambe personal conversation on the 2nd of June 2023.

fiction such as Frank Masai's *Mwimbula* (2023) (NM 13) and Mtalaze Dickson's *Kijiji Kisicho na Makaburi* ('The village without a Cemetery' 2019) (NM 12). Then, the section *Riwaya* ('Novel') runs two serialised novels, *Mpiga Mbio*[13] ('The Runner') by Mwambe and *Usiwe Muuaji* ('Don't be a Killer') by Jane Davis (until NM 14), with each taking up two pages of the issue. Since March 2023, another two pages have been added to serialise another Kamanda Amata detective story, *Cronoc 7*. Then, *Ana kwa Ana* ('Face to face') is an open dialogue and interview with an invited reader of the magazine. Finally, "*Tangazo"* is an advert space which advertises bookshops and Swahili literary festivals such as *Tamasha la Fasihi ya Kiswahili* 2022.

The June 2022 issue was a special issue dedicated to the second edition of the literary event *Elite Mjue Mtunzi* ('Know the Authors'), which is supported by the *Elite Bookstore* group and the UWARIDI writers' association. One of the authors mentioned is Ibrahim Gama, who won the national prize *Ngao ya Mtunzi* ('The Author's Shield'), a UWARIDI writers' award, for his books that are also serialised on Facebook. The April 2023 issue dedicated some pages to the results of the Mwalimu Nyerere National literary prize (*Tuzo ya Taifa ya Mwl. Nyerere*).

The concluding section is *Matangazo* ('Advertisements'), which since December 2022 advertises the newly released *Jamvi la Simulizi App,* providing explanations on how to download and use it. Alternatively, the *Tangazo* page advertises Kamanda Amata's book series. Both the *Book Review* section and the serialised novels pages include box ads with the authors' contacts to enable buyers to purchase their books. In the section *New in Town* of the issue of February 2023, Mwambe launched his novels *Mpatanishi* ('The Agreement') and *Harufu ya Kifo* ('Smell of Death').

4.2. Kamanda Amata and the novel *Harufu ya Kifo*

Mwambe told me in a personal conversation that he has written about 37 manuscripts, though only the following titles have been published: *Tufaha Jekundu* ('The red Apple', 2015), a story about drug trafficking; *Chronoc 7,* published in 2017 and currently serialised on *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi*; *Mpatanishi* ('The Agreement' 2020); *Harufu ya Kifo* ('Smell of Death' 2020); *Waridi – Lenye Fumbo*[14] ('The rose - with a secret or Rosa Mistika' 2023); and *Operesheni Kashmir* ('Operation Kasmir' 2024).

These novels are part of a collection of detective-cum-spy thrillers which narrate the amazing investigations of the hero Kamanda Amata. Amata is indeed an example of the "resolute hero" protagonist of crime and political fiction (Garnier 2013).

[13] This novel has been serialised live, read by Richard Mwambe aka Amata Ric, on the radio programme *Safari Mix* broadcast on *Nuru FM* (https://radiotadio.co.tz/nurufm/) every Sunday from 13th of August 2023.

[14] The story, whose title was probably inspired by Kezilahabi's homonymous novel, is a complex case for Kamanda Amata. This book is an unfinished story waiting for a sequel. This novel is only available in pdf.

Mpiga Mbio ('The Runner'), a novel about "*mapenzi na ujambazi*" 'love and gangsters', is serialised on *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi*. Finally, Mwambe anticipated[15] that his forthcoming novel, now in progress, will be another investigation for Amata, entitled *Shajara ya Muuaji* ('Diary of a Murderer').

The first draft of *Harufu ya Kifo* ('Smell of Death' 2020) was written in 2017; the novel is "*simulizi ya kipelelezi na ujasusi*", 'a spy thriller story' (*Ngurumo ya Mwandishi*, February 2023). The core message, which has a postcolonial flavour, is to have trust in local medical research and laboratories. The novel deals with AIDIOSIS, an imaginary disease caused by a chemically produced virus that emulates AIDS. The AIDIOSIS outbreak occurs in the same years and with the same devastating effects as AIDS. AIDIOSIS is the symbol of the two big pandemics, AIDS and Covid-19. In fact, even though the novel was drafted three years before the Covid-19 pandemic, it was published after its outbreak and is set at the same time as the AIDS outbreak.

The novel starts with a flashback to 1962 when the *Watanganyika* were celebrating independence and the philosophy of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. This introduction praises some African patriots and the first presidents of independent countries such as Patrice Lumumba (DRC), Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) and especially Samora Moisés Machel[16] (1933 –1986), the revolutionary leader who set free Mozambique.

Then, a flashforward thrusts the reader into 1984, when the "*UGONJWA WA AJABU*" ('the strange illness', Mwambe 2020: 6) of *AIDIOSIS* spreads in Sub-Saharan Africa and its people start smelling a 'death smell' (*harufu ya kifo*, Mwambe 2020: 6). AIDIOSIS breaks out exactly one year after the advent of HIV/AIDS, which was first reported in the Kagera region of Tanzania in 1983.

Another temporal skip pushes the reader forward to 1996 in Philadelphia, where the American medical researcher Drostdyhof Fenegan, who is determined to find a way to stop the epidemic, decides to embark on field research in Tanzania, one of the countries most affected by the virus. Mwambe told me that the name "Drostdyhof Fenegan" was inspired by *Drostdy Hof*, a white wine from South Africa, and a drug called *Fenegan*.

From this point onwards, the novel follows a chronological order. After a while, Dr Fenegan who is working in partnership with a local medical doctor, Dr Edward Minzi, isolates a new virus, *Amphiliot* (Mwambe 2020: 12), which can work as a vaccine for the lethal virus and discovers a formula to cure AIDIOSIS. The news that Tanzania has discovered a vaccine alarms the CIA, who send spies to kill Dr Fenegan. Subsequently, two accidents occur: firstly, the plane transporting vaccine samples from Tanzania to Geneva for analysis by the World Health Organisation crashes; secondly, the secret laboratory in the forest of Londo (Lindi), where Dr.

[15] Personal conversation on the 2nd of June 2023.

[16] Machel is also Mwambe's favourite hero to whom he has been dedicating an historical section called *Miamba Wa Afrika* ('African Rocks') since the February 2023 issue of the magazine *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi*.

Fenegan and Edward discovered the formula, is made to explode. That was the Russian researcher, Lord Dimens, who intends to steal the vaccine formula and claim to be the one who discovered it. Dimens kidnaps Edward, who has inherited the "*formula ya Anti-Aidiosis*" (Mwambe 2020: 219), and forces him to reproduce it for the *Dimens-LabTech* in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique. Kamanda Amata, the secret agent of TSA 1(the Tanzanian Secret agency) CODE 005, is called in by his superior, Madam S, to investigate the plane crash and the secret laboratory explosion. This international spy story, which involves Philadelphia, Geneva, Mtwara, Dar es Salaam, India, Virginia, and Cabo Delgado, is indeed a difficult case for the hero detective. Amata is severely wounded and taken to India for treatment, where he meets Zainabiya, a mysterious and sensually appealing spy. In the end, Amata not only debunks Dimen's illegal traffic, but he also sets Edward free and saves the formula to produce the vaccine. In conclusion, Amata, who is also a romantic lover, comes back home to his partner, Gina.

The novel is written in standard Swahili with a simple syntax and few rhetorical figures. The dialogues are characterised by a few sentences in English and Portuguese to insert the reader into the international plot.

The expression "*harufu ya kifo*" is both Amata's phrase to describe the complex investigation, and a metaphor for the deadly epidemic. *HARUFU YA KIFO* is also a metonymy hinting at both the consequence of the illness: death, and its cause: the conspiracy theory, as Dr Fenegan explains to Edward.

> *Kama Waafrika mkijituma katika tafiti hizi mnaweza kuukomesha huu ugonjwa lakini mkiitegemea Ulaya kamwe hamtajitawala, na kamwe hamtajivunia Uafrika wenu. Sikia, nataka nikupe siri, na iwe siri yako tu. Huu si ugonjwa kama mnavyouona. Hili ni* ***bomu au niite shambulio la kibaiolojia****. Na bado yapo mengi yametegwa kwenye miili yenu Waafrika, siku yatakapolipuka mtalia na kusaga meno. Life Span yenu itakuwa miaka arobaini mpaka hamsini, Mwafrika hatoweza kuzaa tena kwa njia ya kawaida isipokuwa opareshen, na kwa sababu hii vifo vya akina mama vitakuwa vingi kwa kukosa damu na kadhalika. Nimechunguza, na nimehakikisha hilo. Virusi hivi hatari vya* Ostrogonus *vinadhoofisha kinga za mwili na kuzimaliza kidogo kidogo.* (Mwambe 2020: 19)
>
> As Africans, if you dedicate yourselves to this research, you can stop this illness, but if you rely on Europe, you will never be self-reliant, and you will never be proud of your Africanness. Listen, I want to tell you a secret, and let it be your secret alone. This is not an illness as you see it. This is a **bomb** or should I call it a **biological attack**. And there is still a lot trapped in your African bodies, the day it explodes you will cry and grind your teeth. Your lifespan will be forty-fifty years, an African will not be able to give birth again in a normal way except with surgery[17], and for this reason the death of mothers will be high due to lack of blood and so on. I checked and I have confirmation. This dangerous *Ostrogonus* virus weakens the body's immunity and destroys it little by little.[18]

[17] This event reminds me of the scenario portrayed by Aldous Huxley in his novel *Brave New World* (1932).

[18] All the translations from Swahili into English in this paper are mine. Emphasis added.

The disease of AIDIOSIS is also metaphorically called "*programu*" ('programme', Mwambe 2020: 107):

> *[…] Kwanza kabisa ujue kuwa AIDIOSIS si ugonjwa kama wengi mjuavyo, ile ni* ***program*** *au ningeita* ***mradi****, kwa lugha nyepesi…* (Mwambe 2020: 106)
> […] First of all, you must know that AIDIOSIS is not a disease as you all know, this is a **program,** or I should call it a **project** in an easy language…
>
> *[…]* ***program*** *itakayoteketeza maisha ya Waafrika au kama wao walivyoita 'kizazi duni'* (Mwambe ibid.)
> A **program** that will hijack African people's life or how they say, 'the defective generation'.
>
> *[…] Walichokifanya wakatengeneza* ***formula*** *katika mtindo wa virus* (Mwambe ibid.)
> What they did was to create a **formula** in the shape of a virus.
>
> *[…] AIDIOSIS ni* ***silaha mbaya ya kibaiolojia*** *ambayo haijawahi tokea duniani.* (Mwambe ibid.: 107)
> AIDIOSIS is a **shocking biological weapon** that has never appeared before.

Since I have conducted extensive research on HIV/AIDS in Tanzania (Nicolini 2022a,b; 2021), it is particularly interesting for me to explore how the aetiology of the disease of AIDIOSIS is discussed in relation to one of the early myths about HIV/AIDS (Mutembei 2009; Rödlach 2006): as an experiment created in a laboratory to harm African people. The novel offers an interesting postcolonial narrative that denounces both colonial and postcolonial damage in Africa. Moreover, the novel supports the scientific capacities of Tanzanian researchers, as demonstrated by the character of Dr Edward. From an epistemological point of view, the novel endorses a positivist epistemology of science and blurs the dichotomous distinction between, on the one hand, African medicine, characterised by traditional healers and herbalists, and on the other, modern western science and medicine. Traditional healers are not even mentioned, and it is a Tanzanian researcher in cooperation with an American one, who discovers the vaccine in a Tanzanian laboratory. The novel does not mention in detail symptoms or ways of transmission of the virus; it just embraces the conspiracy theory regarding the aetiology of the disease and focuses on the devastating effect of this mortal disease in the country.

Furthermore, the novel can be described as both a popular postcolonial spy thriller and a bio thriller, which embraces the conspiracy theory of HIV/AIDS so as to criticise neocolonialism and neoliberal policies. The genre of "Bio thriller" or medical mystery represents the body politic in the neoliberal age in postcolonial African states (Christensen 2012). Indeed, the metaphor of the virus that invades a body reflects the neoliberal "viral economy" (Christensen 2012: 85) or, in other words, all the "threats of postcolonial African states under neoliberal global capitalism" (Christensen 2012: 86).

The novel is also fighting against the formation of "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); this can be found in neo-imperialist aims that try to subjugate people through imaginary or real lethal viruses[19].

To conclude, the detective hero Kamanda Amata has more than one social commitment: firstly, he fights for justice to assure a safe community for all citizens; and secondly, Mwambe, aka Amata Ric, through his novels and online publications, fights to improve reading among Tanzanians and thereby supports the popular writers' community as well. Besides this, Mwambe, who identifies himself with his main character, has inserted in his WhatsApp business number an auto-reply that advertises the *Jamvi la Simulizi App*, where Kamanda Amata's books can be purchased at an affordable price either in soft copies (*mfumo wa UPDF*) or hard copies. He signs the ad message as follows: *Kamanda Amata ... Atakujibu meseji yako muda si mrefu* ('Kamanda Amata …will reply to your message shortly'[20]).

5. *Tulizo* ('Chill out') with the *Mwandishi wa Watu* (People's Writer')

Frank Masai is a young writer living in *Bongo* (literally 'brain'), the big metropolis that needs wits. Indeed, urban dwellers must be smart to survive all the city struggles. Masai is a writer, editor of *Tulizo* magazine as well as managing director and CEO of *Tulizo media*. Masai decided to commit himself as a community web writer since 2013 through his Facebook profile and by launching *Tulizo media*. He signs himself with his pen name: "*mwandishi wa watu*" – the people's writer or a writer for/of/between his people. Indeed, he wishes to "provide people with a message that they can really understand"[21]. The author's objective is to distribute information to all people. He attracts readers by a captivating design that helps everyone to learn something new in a faster and easier way. Masai says he focuses on "*mwonekano*", the 'outlook', designed to attract people's attention.

Tulizo magazine was launched in January 2022 as a monthly distributed to about 200 people; however, in 2023, because of lack of support and Masai's other commitments, it started appearing more intermittently. In fact, the young editor told me that one of his near-future projects is to improve the magazine and assure regular monthly issues.

The *Tulizo media* project includes six services: firstly, *Tulizo Graphics*, which is Masai's core business and greatest passion; secondly, *Tulizo Studio*, a recording studio; thirdly, *TULIZO* magazine; fourthly, *Tulizo* printing services; fifthly, *Tulizo Visual*, which produces video and picture; and finally, *TulizoFlix,* which focuses on film reviews.

The name *Tulizo* ('Comfort') was chosen to reflect the comfort provided by the services offered by *Tulizo media*. Customers can find more than one service dispatched remotely and

[19] Another example of a journalistic investigation that is also a philosophical fiction opposing necro-power formation is the novel by the Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, the Book of Bones* (2016). This novel, which is based on the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, tells the story of a history teacher who investigates the death of his parents.

[20] WhatsApp message received on 31st of July 2023.

[21] Personal communication with Frank Masai, whom I thank, through WhatsApp on the 20th of July 2023.

extremely fast by the same entrepreneurship. The company slogan is "*TULIZO, TUNAKUTULIZA*[22]" 'Be relieved, we calm you down'. The name of the magazine, *Tulizo*, 'Comfort/Relief', hints at the relaxation eventually offered to readers after a full day of struggles, when they can finally sit down and 'chill out' by reading the magazine.

Masai is a UWARIDI member and has written about 20 stories, though he has only published four titles: *Mwimbula* (2023); *Kwa Sababu Nakupenda* ('Because I love you' 2023); *Neno* ('The Word', 2024); and *Kumbe Anayo* ('She has it!' 2024). Additionally, the online novel *Kifo Kwa Kifo* ('A Death for a Death' 2024) is currently serialised on Facebook.

The novel *Mwimbula*, written in 2016, was first published in 2019, and reprinted by *Tulizo media* in 2023, both in hard and soft copies. Masai said that he has sold about 500 hard copies and about 50 soft copies of this novel; he has not serialised the novel in its entirety on Facebook, simply posted excerpts to attract readers to buy a copy. Masai said that he would like to develop a film script from the novel and have *Tulizo media* produce the film. This will also demonstrate the multimedia potential of popular web literature.

5.1. *Tulizo* Magazine

TULIZO ('Comfort/Relief') Magazine *"kwa Habari fasaha za fasihi"* ('for articulate news about literature') is a free monthly magazine, which first edition circulated on Facebook and was dispatched both by email and WhatsApp in January 2022[23]. Additionally, *Tulizo* started being circulated and dispatched through the e-books and audiobooks platform *getvalue.co*[24] (since October 22[25]). *Tulizo* started with a format of 14-pages, but from the fourth issue increased its pages to 25, divided into several sections.

In the first issue of January 2022, the opening section, called "*Kiswahili Daima*" ('Swahili language forever'), was dedicated to discussing two literary prizes, *Mabati* and *Nyabola*, and the writers who won them, thus encouraging young writers to take part in literary prizes. The issue of July 2022 was a special issue entirely dedicated to the writers' festival called *Mjue Mtunzi* ('Know the author'), which is supported by the *Elite Bookstore* group; the online bookshop *Lantern e-books*; the network APE; and the UWARIDI writers' association.

Each issue reserves a corner to advertise the *Tulizo media* service as well as literary events such as the International Festival of Tanzanian Books (*Tamasha la kimataifa la vitabu Tanzania*). In some issues, there are special sections devoted to literary prizes such as the Mwalimu Nyerere National Literary Award (*Tuzo ya Taifa ya Mwalimu Nyerere*) to both advertise the calls for manuscripts and celebrate the winners.

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[22] Personal communication with Frank Masai through WhatsApp messages on the 31st of July 2023.

[23] For this article, I have analysed the issues released from January 2022, the first edition of the magazine, to the 13th edition released in April 2023.

[24] https://www.getvalue.co/

[25] The free magazine is however sold on the platform at 1,000 TZS.

The core sections of the magazine are as follows: "*Tulizo Xclusive*", re-named as "*Huyu Hapa*" ('This One') in September 2022, where Masai introduces selected writers and their fictions, such as Wilbard Makene (*Tulizo 1*) and Hussein Tuwa (*Tulizo 11*). The section "*Wazo la Mwandishi*" ('the Author's Thought'), renamed as "*Safari ya Mwandishi*" ('The Author's Travel'), is where selected authors talk about themselves and their fictional works, such as Mohammed Hammie Rajab's *Maji Mandiga* ('Mandiga's Well' 2020), winner of the James Curry prize 2022 (*Tulizo* 2); conversely, "*Kona ya Msomaji*" ('the Reader's Corner') or "*Msomaji Wetu*" ('Our Reader') is a space dedicated to open up dialogue with the magazine's readers. The section "*Domokaya*" ('The Chatterbox') is a provocative one. For instance, in the first issue (*Tulizo 1*, Jan. 22), Masai uses this section to advocate for writers' rights to be acknowledged as artists. He does so by playing with a Swahili saying: *"Waandishi wa vitabu sio wasanii. Ukistaajabu ya Mussa, utayaona ya Firauni"* ('for those who believe that novel writers are not artists: if you don't believe in the prophet Musa you will see what the wicked pharaoh did'). Likewise, the funny section "*Habari Nazi*", as the author explains, delivers 'heavy news, but in the hearing, sweet as a coconut' ("*Habari ngumu na nzito lakini ni tamu kusikiliza*", *Tulizo* 1). Conversely, "*La Mkosoaji*" ('Of the Critique') is a section that sheds light on writers' mistakes, assuming that some writers are not reading enough themselves (*Tulizo 4* Apr. 2022). Finally, "*Somaflix*" is a page dedicated to book reviews written exclusively by Masai that was added in December 2022. For instance, in the 13th issue, Masai offers his own review of his novel *Mwimbula* (2023).

Considering all the sections added, the magazine has increased its page length to between 28 and 30 pages (since November 2022). However, in 2023 the magazine started being released intermittently, temporarily halting the enthusiastic work done in 2022.

5.2. The Novel *MWIMBULA-kutoka kwa Mwandishi wa Watu*

This novel *MWIMBULA-kutoka kwa Mwandishi wa Watu* ('The Sacrificial Animal – by the People's Writer', 2023) narrates the sad story of a young woman, Faraja, who changes her name to *Mwimbula*. *Mwimbula* is a Bantu word that, according to the tradition, refers to the cow, or goat, offered as a bride's dowry. This cow is sacrificed and offered at the wedding banquet. Faraja/Mwimbula feels like the cow offered in sacrifice at the wedding, because she devotes herself completely to her husband and his family.

Mwimbula is a woman who believes in and respects the cultural traditions passed on by her parents and was initiated into womanhood through the *unyago* teachings. However, since globalisation causes people to lose respect for tradition, they start breaking taboos and behaving without moral conduct. This environment, filled with people who have lost their humanity, makes Mwimbula a victim. Nevertheless, she strongly resists and continues to behave according to traditional teachings and her sense of humanity. Finally, Mwimbula shows her humanity by sharing her story to set an example for the community.

The novel also introduces the character of Samwel (Sam) Timbe, an expert in social welfare (*ustawi wa jamii*) working for the United Nations in Mpanda, who meets Mwimbula by chance, who wishes to tell him her story.

When Masai started writing this story in 2016, he was planning to write a romance; in fact, Masai told me that the first title he gave to this novel was "Why Love?", a love story which would describe the hard times of a woman who had endured much for love. However, Masai decided to review the text, shifting the focus onto traditions and encouraging respect for local traditions, though not uncritically. By the time the work was published in 2019, it covered ethics, tradition, globalisation and gender.

Firstly, this novel aims to foster respect for traditional customs and ethics, taught through traditional rituals; secondly, the novel is a romance, narrating Mwimbula's unconditional love for her husband; thirdly, it criticises globalisation and its harms; fourthly, it is a story about gender that fights for women's rights and liberation against gender-based violence and discrimination. The readers targeted are both educated women, to remind them not to forget their cultural traditions, and men, to teach them respect for women. Lastly, it is a story about *utu,* humanity, which teaches people to have patience (*uvumilivu*) to endure hard times and support each other.

The female protagonist, Faraja Majige, is a wealthy young woman who graduates in law; however, her family has taught her to respect cultural tradition as well. Faraja had been imparted womanhood lessons through *unyago*, the female initiation ritual to adulthood.

> *Lakini ni familia ambayo ilikataa kusahau tamaduni na mila zao licha ya baba na mama kuwa wasomi, (Masai 2023: 16)*
>
> However, it is a family that refused to forget their culture and customs, even though their father and mother were intellectuals.

The male protagonist is Stepeda Sekisengo, a poor boy, who, after an accident, was taken in care by the Majige family, who paid for his studies. Faraja and Stepeda grow up closely, fall in love, and get married respecting all the traditions, including *mahari,* the payment of the wedding gift, *mwimbula*, the cow to be slaughtered and offered at the wedding banquet.

> *"Mwimbula anaweza kuwa ng'ombe au mbuzi. […] Na mwimbula huyo ni lazima aje kama alivyo kwa sababu ndiye atachinjwa siku ya kugawa mahari ya binti yetu," […] "kama mnavyojua, mahari ni ya pande tatu. Upande wetu sisi kama baba. Upande wa mama. Na upande wa binti. Hivyo wakati wa kugawa mahari hiyo, mwimbula atakuwa sehemu ya mahari hiyo na pia kabla ya hapo tutafanya jambo la kimila kuomba ridhaa kwa mababu zetu tufanikishe tukio hilo. Na mwimbula ndiye atahusika kuomba ridhaa hiyo kupitia damu yake."* (Masai 2023: 57)
>
> "*Mwimbula* can be either a cow or a goat [a sacrificial animal for the exorcism] […], and this *mwimbula* must be kept as it is, because it will be slaughtered on the day when the bride's wealth for our daughter will be shared," […] "as you know, the bride wealth is made of three parts. Our parts as the father, the part of the mother and the part of the daughter. When the bride wealth will be shared *mwimbula* will

> be part of it, and before that, we will please our ancestors to ask them to bless the marriage. The sacrificial animal will satisfy our ancestors offering its blood."

After the marriage, Faraja becomes a lawyer employed by her father's company, while Stepeda becomes a popular musician known as "Step sex"; they are blessed with a baby boy named Daddy. Nevertheless, Stepeda, because of his growing success, starts indulging in alcohol and drugs, and has many sexual affairs. In addition to this, he abuses Faraja by cutting her with a knife and flogging her back for his amusement, though she tries to resist: *Mimi ni mkewe na si chombo cha ngono* ('I am your wife not a sexual device', Masai 2023: 104).

In the meantime, Faraja's parents are brutally killed during a burglary at their home and Faraja's inheritance is stolen by other family members. Since Stepeda is throwing money away on drugs and prostitutes, Faraja, in order to provide for her son, is forced to prostitute herself, and some of her pictures are sold to a pornographic magazine. Furthermore, she is abused by her sisters-in-law (*mawifi*), who pour boiling oil on her arm, blaming her for the family breakdown (Masai 2023: 18).

Therefore, Faraja changes her name to Mwimbula and decides to tell her story to Samwel Timbe, as an example to other women. In the meantime, she starts her own business and finally succeeds in obtaining a house as part of her inheritance. Conversely, Stepeda begins suffering from AIDS: "*Ana virusi vya UKIMWI*" ('He got the virus of HIV/AIDS', Masai 2023: 21) and many other AIDS opportunistic diseases (cancer, diabetes, kidney failure and tuberculosis).

AIDS in this novel is an illness that symbolises well-deserved punishment for bad behaviour and lack of humanity. This seems to be a common symbolic use of HIV/AIDS in contemporary literature as shown in the Safal-Cornell (2018) award-winning novel *Mungu Hakopeshwi* ('God Doesn't Borrow Time,' Baharoon 2017) in which the villain is punished by the shameful disease of HIV/AIDS (Nicolini 2021b):

> *Nimelipwa kwa dhambi nilizozitenda […] leo nimekuwa na miongoni mwa watu wanaoishi na virusi vya ukimwi!* (Baharoon 2017: 243)
>
> I have been repaid for the sins I committed […] today I am one of those people living with HIV!

Nevertheless, Mwimbula, being a loving wife, takes care of her husband until he dies. In the end, Sam decides to make a film inspired by the touching story of this beautiful woman, always covered up with her *kitenge* (traditional cloth). The film, supported by the United Nations, is aimed at supporting Mwimbula and her son, but it also delivers a message to the whole community.

The idea of making a film based on this novel is also one of Masai's future projects as he told me. This idea is also encouraged by the contemporary flourishing of the Tanzanian film industry, as shown by the international success of *Kijiweni* productions' *Tug of War* (2021)[26].

Thus, the ethical message enclosed in this novel is the same as the Swahili proverb: *Usiache mbachao kwa msala upitao* (lit. 'Don't abandon your old rug for a passing mat'); appreciate and value your cultural traditions and don't abandon them for dangerous globalised new tendencies and behaviour which has lost its humanity. *Utu* as 'humanness'; 'humanity'; and 'being humane' is a value passed on through *utamaduni*, 'culture' and rituals such as *unyago,* in contrast with *utandawazi*, 'globalisation', that can be a hook for neo imperialist aims. Masai appears to share Fanon's interpretation of cultural imperialism. The "colonial cultural alienation" (Fanon 2017; Mbembe 2001) produces an effect of "identification in the colonial subject" (Fanon quoted in Bhabha 1994: 44) and the colonised people who identify themselves with the white oppressor start wearing "white masks on black skins" (Fanon 2017). This is the scenario that Masai aims to prevent, as he argues in the preface of his novel.

In this preface, Masai advocates for three important cultural traditions (*mila*): firstly, the initiation rituals *jando* and *unyago,* which teach about family and community stability as based upon wives' rectitude (*mafiga matatu*); secondly, *mahari*, the payment of the marriage dowry that is symbolised by *mwimbula*, the sacrificial animal to be consumed at the wedding banquet. However, he criticises a tradition which includes the role of *mawifi*, sisters-in-law, who intervene to protect the family men in case of problems during the marriage, for instance, by physically punishing the wife.

Masai confronts *UTAMADUNI* ('culture') with *UTANDAWAZI* ('globalisation') that according to him is a form of colonialism in disguise. The author firmly criticises African people's subjugation to globalisation and their denial of traditions:

> *Tunauita UTANDAWAZI. Ambao ukiingia ndani yake kwa kina, utagundua kuwa ni sehemu ya ukoloni.* (Masai 2023: 4)
> We call it GLOBALISATION and if you explore it in depth, you will discover that it is part of colonialism.
>
> *Imani ya mtu mweupe kichwani mwa mtu mweusi, ni kwamba: BAADA YA MUNGU NI MZUNGU.* (Masai ibid.)
> The belief of a white man inside the head of a black man is 'AFTER GOD THERE IS THE EUROPEAN'.

Faraja respects African customs and habits, defending them with her friends and colleagues, who, attracted by globalisation and technological advancement, have lost faith:

> *Faraja aliamua kuvalia njuga suala la mila na desturi mbovu za Kiafrika. [...] Bila sisi kupambania mila na desturi zetu, tutaumizwa sana na Uzungu [...]*

[26] This is a film based on Adam Shafi's novel *Vuta N'Kuvute*, which was released in 2021 under the direction of Amil Shivji, and which was the winner of Best Feature Film award at the Zanzibar International Film Festival 2022. See: https://www.kijiweniproductions.com/films/vuta-nkuvute

> *"Tunadanganywa na rangi nyeupe na kuiona yenyewe ndio sahihi. Lakini ukweli ni kwamba, rangi nyeusi ndio tupo sahihi."* (Masai 2023: 51f)
>
> Faraja decided to pursue the issue of bad African customs and habits […] If we do not fight for our habits and customs, we will be affected more by Western culture […] "We are cheated by the white colour and we believe it is right. However, the truth is that we black people are the ones who are right."

> *...licha ya tamaduni zetu kugeuka silaha, lakini najihisi bado natamani kuzifuata.* (Masai 2023: 16)
>
> …despite our traditions having turned out to be weapons, I still feel like I desire to respect them.

The novel illustrates how many flawed individuals have lost their humanity, behaving selfishly, like computers that do not care for others:

> *Mwimbula: "Watu wamebarikiwa mioyo ya kikatili pamoja na usahaulifu. Watu wanasahau ni wapi wametoka na wapi ulipita nao. Wanakuja kukusaliti kipumbavu sana. Kuna muda nilitamani kugeuka hata kuwa Iddi Amin au Hilter. Msaliti nimuondoe duniani…"* (Masai 2023: 30)
>
> Mwimbula: "Some people have been blessed with cruel hearts and forgetfulness. People forgot where they came from and where you have gone through with them. They betray you foolishly. There was a time where I desired being transformed into Idi Amin or Hitler. To delete traitors from the world…"

> *"Sisi binadamu bwana, tumeumbwa na ubongo wenye memory card*[27] *kubwa mno. Karibu terabite mia tano. Lakini sasa, terabite mia nne tisini na tisa, tumejaza upuuzi na terabite iliyobaki ndio ufanisi wetu, [...] Kama wao walitumia Uzungu na kusahau desturi zetu Waafrika, mimi ni nani ambaye natakiwa kuendelea kunyenyekea tabia za Kiafrika?"* (Masai 2023: 74f; 79)
>
> "We human beings are made with a brain containing a huge memory card. Almost 500 terabytes. However, now we have used 499 terabytes for foolish things and only the remaining for our success. […] If people use western epistemology to forget about our African episteme (norms), who am I who is bound to continue to suffer African customs?"

Faraja's personhood is endowed with humanity and wisdom, which are teachings embedded in cultural traditions:

> *Huko akakabidhiwa kwa bibi yake kwa ajili ya unyago. Faraja akawekwa ndani na kufunzwa haya na yale. Alifunzwa mengi hasa* ***heshima na hekima****.* (Masai 2023: 47)
>
> There she was entrusted to her grandmother to undergo her *unyago* ('initiation rite'). Faraja was secluded and taught about this and that. She learned a lot, especially **respect and wisdom**.

> *"haya mafiga matatu. Moja ni mumeo, lingine ni mashemeji na lingine ni mawifi. Na hichi chungu ni wewe. Endapo mmoja kati ya hawa akatokea kutokuelewa, basi ni lazima utadondoka. […] "****Usiache mbachao kwa msahala upitao****. Kamwe usibabaike kwa maneno ya watu, ukayaona hayo ndio yanafaa na kuikacha ndoa yako hata kama ndoa hiyo ni sawa na kuzimu. Nakwambia tena, usiache mbachao…"* (Masai 2023: 48f)

[27] The fusion and confusion between humans and machines are also a theme in Said Muhamed's novel *Dunia Yao* ('Their World' 2006).

> "These are three cooking stones. The first one is your husband; the second represents your brothers-in-law; and the third represents your sisters-in-law. Finally, this pot is yourself. If one of those will not understand you, you must fall down. […] "**Don't abandon your customs for others passing by**. Never get confused by other people's words, you will see that those are good only to evade your marriage, even though your marriage is like the after world. I tell you once more, don't abandon your customs …"

Nevertheless, traditions can be a double-edged sword; they protect people from perdition and wickedness, but if respected uncritically can also have a dangerous side. Faraja, to respect tradition, endures every violence committed by her sisters in law (*mawifi*):

> *"Nina tofauti gani na yule ng'ombe aliyetolewa sadaka na kisha kila aliyealikwa kumtafuna hadi mifupa. Nina tofauti gani na yule ng'ombe aliyetolewa sadaka kaburini kwa lengo la kuwashukuru mizimu? Nina tofauti gani na yule ng'ombe aliyekatwa vipande na kufanywa kitoweo kwa ndugu zangu? Nina tofauti gani na Mwimbula?"* (Masai 2023: 64)
>
> "What is the difference between me and that cow, which was offered in sacrifice and masticated until bones by all the guests? What is the difference between me and that cow, which was offered in sacrifice to thank the spirits of the ancestors? What is the difference between me and that cow, which was cut in pieces to be the side dish for my parents? What is the difference between me and Mwimbula?"

In the end, Mwimbula's story makes Sam reflect deeply on humanity and the difference between being 'a human being' and 'being humane':

> *Sam: Licha ya kwamba nilikuja kuchukua historia, pia nilikuja kama binadamu mwenye utu. […] binadamu mwenye roho yenye kila sababu ya kuitwa utu.* (Masai 2023: 16; 21)
>
> Sam: Not only I came to get the story, but I also came as a person with humanity. […] A human being who has a so wul that deserves to be called humane.
>
> *"Hii dunia tunaishi na binadamu na watu. Tofauti ya binadamu na watu ni kwamba, kwenye watu unaweza kukumbana na aina ya viumbe ambao huwezi kuamini. Humu ndimo kuna maadui na marafiki pia. Ila kwenye binadamu, humu huwezi kukumbana na kundi kama la watu. Kwamba huku utakutana na aina moja ya viumbe. Huku utakutana na utu. Hadi unaitwa binadamu, ujue ndani yake una utu. Lakini watu, ni tofauti kidogo. Ndani ya watu kuna wenye utu na wasio na utu,"* (Masai 2023: 69f)
>
> "In this worlde live with human beings and people. The difference between human beings and people is that amid people you can encounter creatures you do not trust. Here there can be enemies, but friends as well. Amid human beings you cannot encounter [this sort of] people. You will encounter only one kind of creature. You will encounter [those] with humanity. When you will be called a human being, be aware that inside you there is humanity. However, people are different. There are persons with or without humanity,"

The novel fits into a "preemptive style of writing" (*écriture préemptive*, Nganang 2007; Vierke 2019) bearing "meta-witness"; in other words, the text witnesses to the characters' witnessing of both historical and personal tragedies. The aim of this "preemptive testimony" (Montesano 2015) is to pre-empt future tragedies by avoiding past mistakes and to somehow restore humanity.

> *"Mwimbula. Sauti yako imeziokoa jamii zingine Tanzania," filamu ya Mwimbula ilianza hivyo. [...] Mwimbula alikuja kuibadilisha jamii. Jamii ikakubali kubadilika.*
> ***Wewe je? Umebadilika?*** (Masai 2023: 114)
>
> "Mwimbula. Your voice has liberated other Tanzanian communities" Mwimbula's movie started like that. […] Mwimbula has come to change the community. The community accepted to be changed.
> **And what about you? Did you change yourself?**

The novel is written in simple language, and since it consists of dialogues between the two main characters, Mwimbula and Sam, they communicate in a colloquial style, which consists of everyday speech forms. The dialogues are mixed with many English sentences to show the level of education of the characters. Moreover, the use of proverbs and sayings in the narrative, which are traditional carriers of philosophy (Wanjohi 1997; Masolo 2014), is a stylistic strategy to highlight the philosophical thoughts delivered by the whole text.

> *Wahenga walisema, "Ya Ngoswe, mwachie Ngoswe*[28]*."* (Masai 2023: 67)
>
> The ancestor said: "Mind your business; the issue of Ngoswe, leave it to Ngoswe."

Proverbs are vessels of Afrocentric knowledge, in contrast with the Western-led globalisation that characterises the postcolonial period (Mignolo 2011; Lamola 2016).

The novel is about love and women's rights, but above all, I argue that it is a novel that can be analysed through the lenses of moral philosophy. The novel conveys *utu* (humanity/humaness) from the Swahili proverb "*mtu ni utu*: humans can only become fully human in and through humanity" (Rettovà 2020: 32; 2007b; Kresse 2007). Traditional rituals such as *unyago*, the female initiation rite, are pillars in the formation of the normative concept of personhood according to "African communitarianism/communalism" (Masolo 2004; 2010; Gyekye & Wiredu 1992; Wiredu 2008; Menkiti 1984; 2004; Nyerere 1968; Senghor 1964). The objective of personhood formation is to enable the individual to develop critical abilities towards both old and new habits, by being capable of discerning the risks in both globalisation and in some aspects of tradition. Indeed, African philosophy in the 21st century seems to be characterised by a "humanistic mode of philosophy" (Ukpokolo 2011: 230) based on two pillars: rational autonomy to conduct "free inquiry", and "social agreement" aimed at the common good (Ukpokolo 2011: 233). In other words, individuals should find a balance between personal choices and societal responsibilities, respecting both their family and the wider community. In conclusion, *Mwimbula* is a philosophical romance teaching the philosophy of *utu*.

[28] This saying is also a quote from the well-known play *Ngoswe: penzi kitovu cha uzembe* written by Edwin Semzaba (1992).

6. Comparing the two web writers' works

To sum up, the two novels analysed share a common feature: the metaphor for illness, which is discussed in relation to two debates either a postcolonial critique or the philosophy of *utu*. Both novels represent the disease of HIV/AIDS as either actual *UKIMWI* (Masai 2023) or *AIDIOSIS* (Mwambe 2020), the symbol of cultural imperialism[29] and the psycho-political trauma of "colonial cultural alienation" (Fanon 2017). For instance, in *Harufu ya Kifo*, AIDIOSIS is a form of neocolonialism and imperialism to rule African countries by means of biological weapons that recreate necro-power conditions. In *Mwimbula*, the character of Step gets infected for having lost *utu*, his humanity, by chasing after globalised targets.

I argue that the two novels contain philosophical discussions: *Harufu ya Kifo* (Mwambe 2020) is a bio-thriller that deals with epistemologies revolving around the disease of AIDIOSIS, a biological bomb; *Mwimbula* (Masai 2023) is a romance that deals with ethics and communitarianism. Both are characterised by a "preemptive style of writing" aimed to pre-empt the repetition of human mistakes that led to both collective tragedies, such as a chemically generated virus, and individual tragedies, such as gender-based violence.

Furthermore, by means of both their novels and magazines, the two web writers make use of two pillars for "conceptual decolonisation" (Wiredu 1998; 2002): the use of African languages and the promotion of "African communitarianism" (Masolo 2004; 2010) making of *fasihi pendwa pepe*, 'Swahili popular web literature', a link to connect people on and through the web.

Discussing the two magazines, *Ngurumo ya Mwandishi* and *Tulizo*, they represent conversational fora in a textual and graphic form about literature and society, in other words, they are a multimedia kind of literary café of the 21st century. Both magazines are attractive display windows on popular literature aimed to attract readers and customers, which utilise peculiar techniques to interlace readers and writers together by means of shared community issues.

The magazines describe not only the stories of writers and artists as people struggling with everyday life challenges but also readers' life events and stories. Indeed, the objective of the magazines is to open up a conversational arena between writers and their readers, including both perspectives. For instance, the magazines include sections that give space to the authors who can speak about themselves and launch their works, as well as sections where readers' reviews and feedback are collected. The discussions deal with both literary and social matters. The success of both magazines is demonstrated by the constant increase in both page numbers and additional sections. Readers' interest promotes editors' engagement, highlighting the key interplay between authors and audience and their interconnections established through popular web literature. This dynamic is further fuelled by the enhancement of communication technologies and the social media.

[29] Likewise, the Tanzanian philosopher William Mkufya explained in his Swahili novel *Ua la Faraja* ('The Flower of Consolation' 2004) the concept of *UKIMWI wa Kijamii* ('the AIDS of Society or societal AIDS' Mkufya 2004: 357).

7. Conclusions: the development of Swahili digital literature and philosophy

Popular web writers, alongside their multimedia projects and companies, such as Masai's *Tulizo media* and Mwambe's *Jamvi la Simulizi* are building upon the legacy of earlier multimedia projects like *Global Publishers* and *Kona ya Riwaya* created by the previous generation of web writers, James Shigongo and Hussein Tuwa respectively. In the 21st century Swahili popular literature "digitalised" (Diegner 2018a,b; 2020; Reuster-Jahn 2017) and moving online it has been empowered by the "active digital creativity of the cyberspace" (Mutembei 2017: 47), where "intertextuality meets interdisciplinarity" (Mutembei 2021). Thus, new hybrid genres characterise "experimental Swahili literature of the 21st century" (Mutembei 2021) such as "WhatsApp narrative" (Mutembei 2017) and the "cyberbaraza", which is a practice of digital public communication regulated as the Zanzibari *baraza* but moved to digital social networks (Brunotti 2018).

I argue that the technological enhancement, already in progress in the country, has been furtherly boosted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The advent of *UVIKO-19* (*Umoja wa Virusi vya Korona*, 'the cluster of Coronaviruses'), which was first confirmed in Tanzania on the 16th of March 2020 (Tarimo & Wu 2020), has deeply affected communications, which had already entered a digital sphere, by enhancing technological development, so as to bring people together online (Nicolini 2021). An example of which is the technologically enhanced teaching in Higher education (Mtebe & al. 2021) supported by TEHAMA (the Ministry of Information, Communication and Information Technology Tanzania). Consequently, the evolution of communication impacts popular literature that reflects "the episteme of the everyday": peoples' reactions to socio-political evolutions (Newell & Okome 2014). In fact, from my observations in Tanzania there is a vibrant and flourishing environment of upcoming novelists and publishers which is on the increase.

Swahili popular web literature that I call "*fasihi pendwa pepe*", which includes Swahili popular literature (digital and non) circulating online through the social media, is the most prolific genre of Swahili literature in terms of number of writers and creativity of the 21st century. Furthermore, a vibrant environment is built up through the social media rich in initiatives and events such as book launches, social media discussions and live events. Currently, the distribution and marketing of popular literature is mainly supported by associations such as UWARIDI and the UWARIDI App[30] as well as through their different agreements with distributing infrastructures. For instance, *Elite Bookstore*[31] distributes hard copies of books through its branches located in Mbezi Beach, Mikocheni and at the University of Dar es Salaam. Meanwhile, *Lantern e-books*[32], an e-books library and digital publisher, physically sited in Mbezi Beach, distributes the most affordable soft copies.

[30] https://uwaridi.dautechnology.co.tz
[31] https://www.elitestore.co.tz/
[32] www.lantern.co.tz

Recently, a monthly event *Kalam Salam* has been promoted to celebrate Swahili literature. The event is run by the publishing house *Mkuki na Nyota*[33] and hosted at the Alliance Française of Dar es Salaam every first Thursday of the month. As an example, the event of the first of June 2023, which was devoted to celebrating the winners of two literary prices[34], namely the National literary Prize Julius Nyerere (*Tuzo ya Taifa ya Mwalimu Nyerere*[35]) and the Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature[36], was posted on the Facebook profiles of many popular web writers. A special guest was Halfani Sudy, the winner of the Safal Cornell prize 2021 with his novel *Kirusi Kipya*, published by *Mkuki na Nyota* in 2022, which is indeed a new crime fiction and detective story. *Kirusi Kipya*, narrates the investigation conducted by the female officer Hanna Halfani and the detective Daniel Mwaseba who are delving an intricate case of drug trafficking in Tanzania, which the author defines as "a new virus" assaulting the country.

Facebook is a driving force active through both writers' personal accounts and dedicated pages to advertise events and book launches as well as to distribute and market fictional works. Facebook advertisements and posts work alongside WhatsApp; in fact, WhatsApp contacts are always provided to establish communication.

Nowadays, we are users of extended trans-national multimedia digital phenomena working through plural platforms online. This also represents an inter-class phenomenon, considering the wide range of both distribution and purchasing prices, from medium-quality printed books to the cheapest soft copies. Certainly, the internet connection and the ownership of at least a smartphone are *sine qua non* conditions to be part of the web. Furthermore, the web literary arena bridges the gap between popular and élite literature, because it encourages and supports young writers, who can be the future winners of national and international literary prizes, thus becoming the new élite of writers. The fracture with élite literature is also repaired by the new content of popular fiction, which is truly committed to community issues and takes up contemporary social challenges showing ethical concern and *utu*, humanity. I argue that popular literature is deeply engaged in community issues, and it is ethically committed to build a better society; thus, it can be read as a contribution to moral Afrophone philosophy. The philosophical reading of digital popular novels suggests not only a bridging of gaps between élite and popular literature, but also a contribution to the discipline of 'popular Afrophone philosophy' on the web.

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[33] *Mkuki na Nyota Publishers* is a pioneering independent publishing house established in 1991 by Walter Bgoya (Suriano 2021).

[34] The Safal-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature winners of 2022 are Dotto Daudi Rangimoto's novel *Ujanajike* (Womanhood) and Salum Makamba's poetry collection *Mamangu Nipe Wosia* (Mother, Counsel me): https://kiswahiliprize.cornell.edu/2022-winners/. The winners of the literary prize *Tuzo* Nyerere, which were announced in a ceremony in Dar es Salaam, on April 13, 2023, are Hamis Hussein Kibari with the manuscript *Gereza la Kifo* ('Death Prison') for the novel category, and Amri Rajab Abdala with the collection of poems *Mtale wa Ngariba* ('Circumciser's Blade) for the poetry category.

[35] https://thechanzo.com/2023/04/14/washindi-tuzo-ya-taifa-ya-mwalimu-nyerere-ya-uandishi-bunifu-watangazwa-dar/

[36] https://kiswahiliprize.cornell.edu/; https://www.facebook.com/MabatiCornellKiswahiliPrize/

To conclude, the objective of this study is to illustrate the successful development of Swahili popular literature in the 21st century, which is indeed experiencing not only an increase in the number of emergent writers and novels published both online and offline, but it is also surrounded by a vibrant environment rich in festivals, events and literary competitions. Contemporary writers are supported in their struggle to obtain success by multimedia platforms and the social media developing Swahili web popular literature. Furthermore, the writers are not only committed to entertainment purposes, but they are also engaged in community development. Therefore, popular literature blurs the boundaries with "serious" literature contributing to popular digital Afrophone philosophies, a discipline that deserves to be better investigated in further research.

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