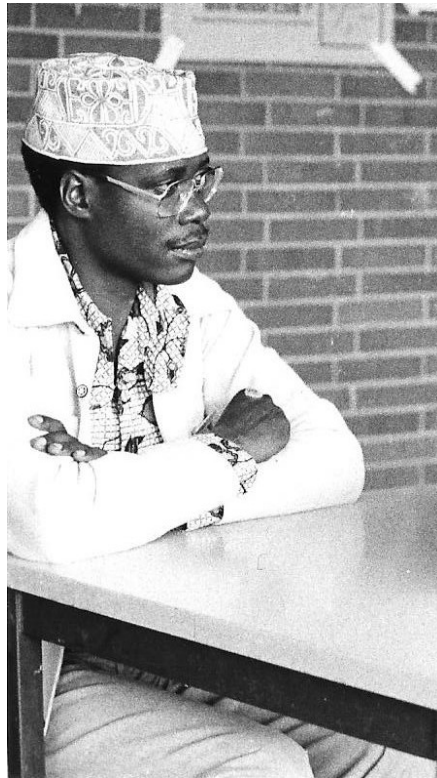


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TO THE ETERNAL PRESENCE OF POETRY, TO EUPHRASE KEZILAHABI

ROBERTO GAUDIOSO



Euphrase Kezilahabi in Mainz, Germany, April 1977.
Picture used with kind permission of the Kezilahabi family.

“We have lost, first of all, a poet. There are a few poets in the world; each century has only three or four poets.”¹ These words were pronounced by the Italian writer Alberto Moravia at the funeral of the Italian poet Pier Paolo Pasolini. If Moravia’s words are true, I would add that Kezilahabi was one of these few, too.

¹ All translations are mine. I would like to thank Duncan Tarrant very much for language editing. Moreover, I would like to thank Lutz Diegner for helping me during the revision of this *kumbukizi* and for his kind attention: *Asante Mwalimu Luti*. It is also thanks to him that I was able to provide a more comprehensive bibliography of Kezilahabi’s works.

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On the 9th of January, 2020, the Swahili poet Euphrase Kezilahabi left us after more than two years of illness. He left two sons and a daughter, nephews, nieces and his wife, who had taken care of him especially during this difficult period.

According to him, literature – both creative literature and the discipline that studies it – should not be a celebration. I agree with him, and I am conscious that the better way to honour him is to invite the reader to read his works; however, I also cannot avoid writing these few pages to celebrate him and his work. In doing so, I am trying to respect Kezilahabi’s poetics, which was based on challenges and provocation: in this spirit I am writing.

I remember when I was in Gaborone to interview him in July 2015, I asked him why he had decided to submit the manuscript of his first novel *Rosa Mistika* (1971), written in Swahili, to a competition of a literary prize for novels in English. His answer was: “Kwa kuchokoza” (To provoke them). He expressed a similar stance in his last public speech during the second edition of ‘Ngoma na Vailini: The Worlds of Swahili Poetry’ at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” in June 2017. He inaugurated the conference with a keynote address entitled ‘Ushairi wa Kiswahili na Wakati Ujao’ (Swahili Poetry and the Future). The keynote provocatively had the same title like an article of 1976 in which he had criticised traditionalist poets, literary scholars and critics for their essentialism, their moralism and their self-referentiality (1976: 127-129). In his 2017 ‘Ushairi wa Kiswahili na Wakati Ujao’, he posed another challenge for these poets, scholars and critics. He presented briefly the form of the poem ‘Maisha’ (Life), published in *Dhifa* (The Banquet; 2008: 32), which is neither traditional nor in free verse (cf. Gaudioso 2019: 229-231), and smilingly asked: “How do you call this poem with rhyme and metre from no traditions?”

Euphrase Kezilahabi was born in Namagondo on Ukerewe Island in Lake Nyanza (Victoria) on 13 April 1944.² He spent his childhood in Namagondo in the atmosphere of Ukerewe landscapes and culture. Ukerewe, Namagondo and Nabili River, in particular, were a constant inspiration for his poetry:

Naikumbuka michezo yetu myeleka tuliyopiga
Visogo vikilamba mchanga sote tukishangilia
Bali tukiicheza na kamali kuchanganya.
Mafahali tukiyapiganisha, kelele tukazipiga

² The biographic information in this *kumbukizi* mainly comes from my interviews with Euphrase Kezilahabi and his older brother Pantaleo Nagane during my fieldwork (July-August 2015), Lutz Diegner’s dissertation (2006: 43f) and personal communication with Kezilahabi’s daughter Neema Kezilahabi (July 2020). I would like to thank both Neema and Mzee Pantaleo.

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Jasho likitutoka Nabili tulijiogea
Zimebaki sasa hadithi kuwasimulia watoto.
(‘Namagondo’, *Kichomi* 1974: 68)

*I remember the boxing matches we had,
all of us cheering the knockdowns.
We played bali and gambling games.
We set bulls fighting and made tremendous noise.
When we were sweaty, we swam in the Nabili.
What remains now are stories to tell children.*

The poem above refers to a game Kezilahabi liked a lot. The *bali* game is a game based on the speed of participants. They are in a position like in the photo below. Each participant has to go around the square, and the one who is the first to go back to her/his starting position wins. Kezilahabi had a reputation of being very fast when playing this game.



*Kezilahabi's brother Mzee Pantaleo Nagane describes the game 'bali'.
© Roberto Gaudio, 2015*

Kezilahabi started his formal education in Nakasayenge School in Namagondo and in the German missionary school in Kagunguli. In 1957, he entered secondary school at Catholic Seminary of Nyegezi in Mwanza before studying for his B.A. of Education Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) until 1970. He started writing his first novel *Rosa Mistika* while still in secondary school and published his first poems in the journal *DarLite* in 1969.

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Kezilahabi's first language was Kerewe, but he also spoke the regional languages Jita and Sukuma. Swahili was actually his third language. In addition, he acquired Latin and English in school. His first poems are in English, but Kezilahabi soon chose to adopt Swahili as his sole language for literary production. The switch from English to Swahili, despite occurring at the beginning of his career as a writer, was very important because it characterised all of his production and critical works.

Moreover, it was very important in the context of writing his first novel, *Rosa Mistika*. Kezilahabi submitted the manuscript of *Rosa Mistika* for an East African competition to find the best English-language novel. The commission told him that they could not give him the prize because the competition had been conceived only for novels written in English, and his novel was written in Swahili, yet they appreciated the novel so much that they decided to publish it. However, a few months after its publication, the government banned *Rosa Mistika* due to its content which was considered controversial, especially by officials of the Catholic Church.

This means that as early as in 1969, Kezilahabi had posed the question regarding the use of African and European languages in African creative writing. With his choice of the Swahili language, which was not his first language, he made a choice which was different from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's later on, who in 1977 chose to use his first language Gĩkũyũ. On the one hand, the choice of an African language, which was not his first language, meant that it was a conscious choice, and neither an obligation given by birth nor motivated by an idea of origin. This pragmatic choice, instead of Kerewe, showed his will to tackle this question beyond the mythology of origin and ideology. On the other hand, against the backdrop of the historical Tanzanian context, this choice reflects his will to adhere to Julius Kambarage Nyerere's project of a national language and to the harmonization of a multicultural identity. Such syncretism can be perceived from the first photo which accompanies this text: Kezilahabi is wearing a *kofia* which is usually seen as an icon of Muslim identity on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coast and a shirt made from African texture from Tanzanian mainland.

In 1970 he taught in Morogoro at Mzumbe Secondary School and then, in 1971, at Mkwawa Secondary School in Iringa. At the end of 1971, he was employed as a Tutorial Assistant at the Department of Swahili Studies of UDSM. In 1976, he completed his M.A. in Literary Studies with a dissertation on Shaaban Robert. In 1974, he published a collection of Swahili free verse poems, *Kichomi* ('Tearing Pain'), which was bound to spark a vast debate on the nature and tenets of the Swahili poetic style, a debate which continues until today. His prose and his poetry were characterized in style and content by a poetics of emancipation.

In Kezilahabi's view, in fact, literature has a precise purpose of liberating and emancipating people (Kezilahabi 1985). According to Kezilahabi, literature is not based on communication (ibid.: 221),

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but rather on experience and understanding through the perception of a literary work as a living event, which can transmit different feelings and sentiment. For him, literature is a vehicle of freedom and truth. Thus it can be considered as a *tonicum* against the narcosis of society (see also Gaudioso 2019: 77-152). Literature is understood by Kezilahabi as a bitter medicine that reawakens and pricks the consciences of humans, stimulating them towards understanding, self-liberation, and action. Such illuminating perspective emerges, for instance, in the poem *Afrika na Watu Wake* ('Africa and Its People', 1974: 19). Here Kezilahabi portrays the African continent as a body suffering from thorns. These thorns are not only a metaphor for colonialism and its effects, but also for essentialism, spiritualism and mythology of past and origin, which includes the African one (1985: 357f). Furthermore, the pain is described as the propeller towards awareness of one's own wound – without compassion.

Lakini kuitoa miiba hii
Tunahitaji macho makali
Mikono isiyotetemeka
Moyo usio na huruma
Na kuona miiba ilipoingia.
(‘Afrika na Watu Wake’, *Kichomi* 1974: 19)

*But to remove the thorns
we need sharp eyes
hands that do not shake
heart without compassion
to see where the thorns entered.*

From 1974, Kezilahabi was Lecturer in Swahili Literature at the Swahili Department of the University of Dar es Salaam (USDAM) and became a Senior Lecturer in 1978. In these years, he became a member and then director of the association of UWAVITA (Umoja wa Waandishi wa Vitabu Tanzania, ‘Union of Writers in Tanzania’). In 1978, a satirical play, *Kaptula la Marx* (Marx’s Shorts) started to circulate in photocopy at the University of Dar es Salaam. This work, which strongly criticised the government, could only be published twenty years after its writing.

At the beginning of the 1980s, he left Tanzania to study at the University of Wisconsin in Madison (USA) to obtain a second M.A. degree. He wrote another M.A. thesis entitled *The Concept of the Hero in African Fiction* (1982), and completed a PhD program with the dissertation *African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation* (1985). Afterwards he returned to Tanzania and resumed his job at the University of Dar es Salaam.

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In these years of intense academic activity, he published two short novels (*Nagona* [Kerewe female name], 1987/1990 and *Mzingile*, ‘Labyrinth’, 1991) and his second collection of poems, *Karibu Ndani* (‘Welcome In’, 1988). All of these texts are characterized by a very synthetic and Orphic style, which comes from his studies in philosophy, especially the German philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, magical realism, the philosophical questions about African being and time, and of his seeking for an African aesthetics, which for him should be Orphic and liberating. He strives to inextricably unite thought, dreams, and actions:

Ninapotea katika bahari ya ndoto
Ndani ya msitu uliofungama
Ambamo kufikiri bila vitendo ni kuwa msaliti.
(‘Nondo’ [The Moth], *Karibu Ndani* 1988: 14)

*I am lost in the sea of dreams
in the forest that becomes denser
where to think without actions means being traitor.*

He also seeks to establish a kind of African epistemology founded on a new approach, which is “*katikati ya ujuzi na urazini mpya*” (in the middle of knowledge and new *ratio*; *Kisima*, ‘The Well’, 1988: 25). In 1995, he moved with his wife to Gaborone to teach there, as an Associate Professor of African Literature and Philosophy at the University of Botswana. In 2008, he published his last collection of poems *Dhifa* (‘Banquet’) characterised by a new musical style and by a more explicit encouragement to action for people to fight for their rights and freedom (see for instance the poem against dictatorships, *Dikteta*, ‘Dictator’; 2008: 31). This is very much evident in the lines below taken from the poem *Kwa Watu Wenye Rangi* (‘To All People of Colour’):

Haki iwapo hatarini
Usifiche uso wako ndani ya umati wenye umoja
Usijifiche blanketini kama kunguni [...]
Tokezeni hadharani na kudai haki yenu.
(‘Kwa Watu Wenye Rangi’, *Dhifa* 2008: 54)

*If rights are in danger
do not hide yourself in the union of crowd
do not hide yourself in blankets like a bedbug [...]
Come out to demand your rights.*

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Kezilahabi won several literary prizes, for instance, in 1974, the East African Publishing House Prize for his novel *Kichwamaji*; in 1990, the Edoardo Sanguineti Memorial Prize (Salerno, Italy) for his poems; and in 1995 the Shaaban Robert Memorial Prize of BAKITA (*Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa Tanzania*, Tanzanian National Swahili Council) for all his works. He participated in a number of national, regional and international literary festivals and was frequently asked to read from his works during academic conferences.

Kezilahabi and his reform of Swahili poetry, his style, aesthetics, and critical and philosophical thought represent a unique contribution in the history of Swahili literature. Many scholars, students and translators have worked on him, among them Elena Bertoncini Zúbková, Lutz Diegner, Annmarie Drury, Natalya Frolova, Xavier Garnier, Roberto Gaudio, Mikhail Gromov, Kulikoyela Kahigi, Joshua Madumulla, Mwenda Mbatiah, John Mbonde, Shaaban Mlacha, Said Ahmed Mohamed Khamis, Mugyabuso Mulokozi, Rajmund Ohly, Katriina Ranne, Alena Rettová, Fikeni Senkoro, Kyallo Wamitila (despite the length of this list it is far from being comprehensive).³ However, he was not happy with his impact on Swahili literature, especially on Swahili poets and writers. Once, when I was in Gaborone to interview him, he lamented that none of the young generation of Swahili poets and intellectuals followed him; *nemo propheta in patria* (None is prophet in his homeland) the Latins said.

Kezilahabi contributed to Swahili literature with works which anticipated their epochs and which, perhaps for this very reason, were often sources of shock for their style and their content. Believing that a suffering man is always on the way to truth (1985: 238) and that truth is freedom (1985: 66-67), Kezilahabi used the *tonicum* as a preferential tool and defined his approach to his intellectual and artistic activity as onto-criticism (1985: 221). The main aim of his *tonicum* and onto-criticism was to consciously push people to think and to act.

The poetics of the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi were characterized by a similar criticism. At the end of his life, Leopardi wrote the poem “La ginestra, o fiore del deserto (The Wild Broom, or Flower of the Desert, 1836) in which he says: “Ben ch’io sappia che obbligo / Preme chi troppo all’età propria increbbe” (Well aware I am that oblivion / perseveres on him who too unpleasant becomes in his own time).

All of Kezilahabi’s works are full of the spirit of their time, but they were met with harsh opposition among many Swahili intellectuals and writers, and also among some Swahilists. This criticism against Kezilahabi affected the young generation of Swahili writers to such an extent that among them, Kezilahabi’s works are in part ignored or neglected. This is sad at least for

³ Prominent examples of translations of Kezilahabi’s works in entire volumes are Elena Bertoncini Zúbková’s Italian translation of *Kichomi* (Kezilahabi 1987), Annmarie Drury’s English translation of selected poems (Drury [ed.], 2015) and Xavier Garnier’s French translation of *Nagona* and *Mzingile* (Kezilahabi 2010).

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three reasons. First, these works are full of challenges: they push their readers to intensive thinking. Secondly, they provide teaching, especially for young people, from which they could profit. Thirdly, Kezilahabi decided to write in Swahili, and not in English, because he wanted to address Swahili-speaking societies, but his works are mostly known among Swahilists.

Maybe Kezilahabi's works are works of other times, the future ones.

Strong reactions to Kezilahabi's works show the power and the vitality of them. Praised and contested, his contribution as an intellectual and a poet is outstanding. It went (and goes) beyond limits of space and time, as is shown by generations of researchers and translators who have been working on him. His tireless aesthetic research in his play, his novels, stories and poems has created a poetics of its own kind which strives, again and again, to synthesize all times in the moment of *sasa* (now), in this eternal presence. His poetics push us to understand ourselves, to understand the things of the world, to liberate us.

Fasihi si maji mafu, ni hai

Literature is not dead water, it is alive

(Euphrase Kezilahabi, 1981: 144)

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