The Portrayal of African Philosophy in Swahili Literature as an Agent for Emerging the Basics of Native Culture

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Abstract: **This article examines African philosophy as a tool for developing the foundations of indigenous culture, with reference to literary works. The specific objective is to explore the role of African philosophy in building, reinforcing, and embedding itself within the foundations of indigenous culture through Swahili novels. Primary data were obtained from the library using a close reading method. Key aspects of African ontology reflected in the selected novels include the concept of the living force, the circle, magic, superstition, witchcraft, ethics, prudence, wisdom, religion, marriage, procreation, unity, and cooperation. These elements play a vital role in educating society about customs and traditions across generations. The roots of customs, traditions, philosophy, history, and social development are embedded in traditional life, serving as the backbone of cultural values and identity in many communities across the region. Elements of African ontology serve as a strong indigenous framework that facilitates the transmission, reinforcement, and preservation of society's cultural fabric and philosophy of life from ancient times to the present day. This article recommends that African philosophical elements be further explored in other genres of oral literature, as they accurately reflect the lived realities of society.**

Keywords: **Portrayal, Agent, African Philosophy, Swahili Literature, Native Culture, Sociological Theory.**

1. INTRODUCTION

This article explores the application of African philosophy as a tool for developing the foundations of indigenous culture, particularly through Swahili literature. Philosophy is a discipline that engages with conceptual analysis, testing arguments, and establishing methods of reasoning. Fuluge (2021) asserts that philosophy involves the evaluation and verification of arguments presented by various theories concerning the reality of life, considering the environment, belief systems, culture, and human behaviours. This perspective highlights philosophy as a means of pursuing certainty through reflection and critical inquiry into the human condition, beliefs, and the surrounding environment.

The existence of African philosophy has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Some critics argue that due to the historical absence of writing systems among certain African communities, African philosophy cannot be said to exist independently of Western traditions. They claim that what is labelled African philosophy is in fact a mixture of rituals, superstitions, beliefs, taboos, and narratives that lack the rationality required to qualify as philosophical thought (Hountondji, 1983). This view, often propagated during the colonial era, was intended to rationalise the marginalisation of African epistemologies and to undermine the achievements of pre-colonial African civilisations.

Opponents of this claim argue that denying the existence of African philosophy ignores the dynamic and evolving nature of African thought systems. Philosophy is fundamentally a rational reflection on human existence, life, and destiny. Bodunrin (1981) defines philosophy as the pursuit of truth through deep contemplation. African philosophical thought, though sometimes orally transmitted, engages with metaphysical and ontological questions in a manner consistent with

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global philosophical traditions. Asante (1993) notes that Africans possess a distinct philosophical worldview shaped by metaphysical frameworks that examine reality, existence, and the essence of being. Proponents of African philosophy assert that it need not mimic Western philosophical methods to be deemed legitimate. African civilisation flourished as early as 10,000 BCE in regions such as Egypt, where indigenous knowledge systems, including geometry, pictographic writing, and architectural engineering, were developed. However, historical accounts often omit these contributions, favouring Western figures like Descartes, Hegel, Socrates, and Spinoza.

Several African communities, such as the Hausa of Nigeria and Ghana, the Amharic of Ethiopia, and the Swahili of East Africa, have long possessed written traditions. The argument that philosophy must be documented in written form fails to address the philosophical content present in these societies' religious and poetic texts. Scholars such as Faustine (2017) affirm the existence of African philosophy rooted in African contexts and concerns. Colonial influence led many Africans to devalue their traditions and adopt foreign ideologies. Western philosophy permeated African discourse, literature, ideology, and religion, resulting in the marginalisation of indigenous identity. Colonialism disrupted the roles of traditional institutions such as art, religion, dance, and language. These external languages and ideologies often undermined the richness of local cultures and philosophies.

African societies have their own philosophical systems composed of eschatological, epistemological, and ontological elements expressed through literature and other cultural forms. African philosophy blends elements of idealism and materialism. Mulokozi (2017) defines "African" as referring to native populations and the diaspora, excluding immigrants from other continents. Migrant communities brought their philosophies to Africa, such as the Arab Muslims of North Africa and the Jewish Christians of Southern Africa. Despite claims to the contrary, African philosophy exists and is manifested in narratives, myths, art, songs, traditions, and spiritual practices.

In literary terms, a novel is a broad and stylistically complex prose narrative. Wamitila (2010) defines it as a story with depth of character and moral scope. The capacity is to integrate various literary devices, including narrative voice, dialogue, and song. Madumulla (2009) adds that the novel imitates social realities bound by time, place, and cultural systems. Because of its expansive form, the novel is well-suited for reflecting ontological themes. Accordingly, this study examines how Swahili novels portray African philosophy as foundational to indigenous culture.

2.   RESEARCH METHODS

This article assesses the role of African philosophy in establishing the foundations of indigenous culture through selected Swahili novels. It employs a literature review methodology, with primary data collected using a close reading approach from *Mirathi ya Hatari* (1977), *Tata za Asumini* (1990), *Janga Sugu la Wazawa* (2002), and *Nyuso za Mwanamke* (2010). Close reading provides targeted insights by carefully analysing selected texts (Chilisa, 2012, and Kahn, 2011). Primary data refers to original data collected specifically for the study at hand (Koul, 1984). The library method was used to gather secondary data to corroborate the findings.

3.   RESEARCH THEORY

This study applies Sociological theory to analyse, validate, and discuss the data. Sociological theory, originating with Hippolyte Taine, gained prominence in 19th century Europe (Okpewho, 2006). One of its principles is that literature reflects the social environment in which it is produced (Booker, 1996). Artists draw from their society's historical, political, and cultural conditions. Thus, literature is an extension of the society that produces it. Literature reflects and shapes the values, beliefs, and philosophies of a community. As Selden, *et al* (2005) observes, it portrays human life in its fullest complexity. The ontological elements in the novels were analysed as products of specific societal conditions, considering their historical, economic, and philosophical dimensions. The researcher focused on how artistic and social forces interact to reflect ontological themes. Thomas (1991) notes that sociological criticism requires examining literature within the context of social realities. Thus, this research investigated the interplay between society's historical trajectory, values, and the philosophical perspectives depicted in the selected texts. The novels were analysed in terms of their themes, characters, and treatment of social issues. Their portrayal of ontological elements was examined about the real-world experiences and values of the communities they depict.

4. PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY IN SELECTED NARRATIVES

This section explores the manifestation of African philosophical elements in the superstitions and cultural practices in Tanzania, as reflected in selected Swahili novels. Elements of African ontology presented here include matters of upbringing, parenting, marriage, wisdom and prudence, unity, and cooperation. The selected novels examined in this section are *Mirathi ya Hatari* (1977), *Tata za Asumini* (1990), *Janga Sugu la Wazawa* (2002), and *Nyuso za Mwanamke* (2010).

4.1 Living Power

Living Power is defined as the vital force that animates and sustains all living beings. It encompasses every aspect of African life, spiritual, religious, physical, mental, and social, and governs the interconnectedness between the living and the non-living. Ontologically, it structures the principles by which living beings engage with inanimate forces. Psychologically, it explains human emotions such as joy and pain as integral parts of existence (Kajosi, 2013). In essence, *Living Power* shapes African life experiences regardless of the source, whether animate or inanimate.

The principal source of *Living Power* is God. This power flows from God to elders, to spirits, then to humans, and finally to animals and plants. Africans believe healers can increase or reduce *Living Power* within individuals. Tempels poses various philosophical inquiries about healers and their role. The loss of *Living Power* signifies death. In *Mirathi ya Hatari*, after the death of old Kazembe, Nyamidze seeks answers from a healer: "My son, this morning I went to Mrs Tamwene to ask about the death of your father" (p. 60). The healer claims his death was not God's will but the result of human interference. Additionally, Malipula proposes taking Gusto to *Chikanga* (a healer) to ascertain his involvement in Kapedzile's death.

4.2 Witchcraft, Superstition, and Magic Healing

These interrelated concepts are examined collectively. Witchcraft is often employed to fulfil personal desires through supernatural means. According to Parrinder (1962), witchcraft is inherently harmful and aims to influence outcomes through fear or harm. Witches as operating in the supernatural realm to torment others. Superstition refers to the belief in inexplicable phenomena, while magic is its practice. Africans generally acknowledge both and believe outcomes depend on usage. Magic draws from spiritual powers and uses incantations and rituals to achieve results. Any misfortune is typically attributed to witchcraft. A healer can offset the effects of magic, and thus, magic can manifest as either harm or healing.

In *Mirathi ya Hatari*, Kazembe bequeaths magical inheritance to Gusto, saying: "My son, I am leaving you a great task... I leave you all the medicines in my possession in the magic spells" (p. 15). Gusto later takes an oath of allegiance: "Enyi mahoka na mababu" (p. 21). Deaths occurring within magical contexts include the murders of Kapedzile, Dina, Nyamidze, and Nandi, with revenge killings by Gusto and Mavengi. The widespread belief in witchcraft compels some to wear amulets for protection. In *Janga Sugu la Wazawa*, old man Ninalwo and his sons embark on a journey to find the cause of recurring deaths in their family. The author notes: "They disappeared from Usukumani and saw healers with all kinds of amulets and charms to protect human life" (Ruhumbika, p. 42). Traditional healers exploit societal fears for financial gain, enriching themselves and their patrons (Ruhumbika, p. 187).

Historically, witch-hunts in Europe led to mass executions. Germany alone recorded over 800,000 deaths up to the 17th century (Tehenan, 2003). Today, some African societies view traditional healers and fortune-tellers as instigators of conflict. Mair (1969) urges a critical examination of these incidents. However, not all ailments or problems should be automatically attributed to superstition or witchcraft.

4.3 The Concept of Circularity

The concept of circularity in African societies is closely linked to the idea of beauty in the African worldview. This is particularly evident in traditional games, songs, and dances that are performed in a circle, as well as in the design of objects and traditional circular huts. African thought is deeply shaped by the circular form, as many of their settlements are viewed through the lens of circularity—especially when one considers the natural features of the land and sky (Mpalanzi, 2019). These circular forms are said to have influenced the way Africans perceive various aspects of their environment.

The African identifies himself through the extended family, which includes the living, the deceased, and those yet to be born (Mbiti, 1969). For the African, a deceased person is still considered human. Therefore, the notion of family extends beyond the nuclear unit of father, mother, and children—it encompasses the entire lineage. The African upholds this

extended family within a strong chain built on unity, solidarity, brotherhood, and the interconnectedness of all beings and elements within the community. About circularity, African prefers objects with round shapes. For instance, in the novel *Mirathi ya Hatari*, the concept is portrayed when Gusto is taken into a cave and made to sit on a stool with circular shape (p. 33). Furthermore, Gusto demonstrates the idea of circularity when he praises Dina for having a round face (p. 30). Likewise, *Mzee Mavengi* performs a ritual around Dina and Gusto in a circular movement (p. 73), and even Gusto's table is described as circular. The philosophy of circularity is believed to symbolise and manifest beauty.

4.4 Morality

In African communities, morality is a deeply valued and emphasised aspect of social life. Good morals are considered essential for nation-building and for maintaining social foundations that promote obedience and discipline (Kaponda, 2018). The African moral framework is constructed hierarchically, starting with the elders down to the youngest. Child-rearing involves referencing the past, shaping the child on strong moral foundations, and preparing them to live effectively today and into a future that holds great significance in completing the cycle of life.

Africans believe that morality forms the foundation for peace, humanity, and decency in society. In the novel *Tata za Asumini*, the author describes how Asumini was raised with strong moral values. Her mother expresses that, if God were to take her soul at that very moment, she would be at peace, knowing she had shaped her daughter into the mould of a girl with good character (p. 19). Asumini was taught how to carry herself with modesty and self-awareness, even through the use of the cane, which helped instil the discipline imparted by her parents. This reflects how African ontology ensures that parents play a central role in raising morally upright children. The issue of upbringing and morality is also clearly presented in *Nyuso za Mwanamke*. Nana's father urges her to pursue education and follow the path her parents had hoped for. He frankly warns her about the consequences of the path she has chosen, particularly in regard to singing *taarab* music:

"You refuse to take the safe route I've prepared for you. A path that would benefit you… I want you to study and become someone. But you've chosen to plunge yourself into a filthy sea. What will besinging do for you? You've soaked yourself in music, and that music is taarab. What good will taarab bring to your life? You passed your exams with flying colours, and now you want to throw your future into a pile of broken instruments! You can pursue any respectable profession in this world." (p. 46)

This underscores the parents' duty to guide their child with honesty and clarity about life's realities, using cultural values and traditional norms as a foundation for moral upbringing.

4.5 Wisdom and Prudence

Wisdom is the knowledge of how to do something effectively, while prudence is the ability to apply that wisdom in solving problems. Together, wisdom and prudence arise from the ability to think, make sound decisions, and act accordingly. In African societies, age is often considered a measure of one's wisdom and prudence (Wiredu, 1980). This belief stems from the idea that older individuals possess greater insight due to their life experiences, cultural exposure, and having encountered many situations, an idea demonstrated in the character of *Faisal*. In *Nyuso za Mwanamke*, Faisal encourages Nana using wisdom and prudence, advising her not to worry excessively about the challenges she is facing (p. 124). He also uses his wisdom to caution *Bi. Chuma* and her companions were to stop bothering Nana, allowing her the peace of mind she needed to face her difficulties.

Wisdom and prudence also influence choices related to modest dressing. In *Tata za Asumini*, Miriam advises Asumini on the value of dressing modestly. She encourages her to wear the *kanzu* and *mabaibui*, traditional garments that preserve decency without causing confusion within the community. Miriam explains that God has commanded modesty and that everyone interprets and applies that in their own way. She also recalls how their elders lived with the belief that proper attire consisted of *kaniki* or simple *kanzu* (p. 51). This demonstrates how wisdom and prudence in African society also govern personal appearance and cultural preservation, helping individuals like Asumini choose clothing that aligns with tradition. This philosophy is vital, as it empowers Africans to act in ways that harmonise with their environment and heritage.

4.6 Unity and Cooperation

Unity and cooperation are pillars of African social structures. Typically, nothing can be successfully achieved without cooperation (Oruka, 1990). These values form the bedrock of collaboration from the family level to the wider community.

Africans strongly believe in unity, particularly in productive activities, as a means to achieve success. This theme is clearly echoed in *Nyuso za Mwanamke*, which stresses that the easiest way to succeed in any endeavour is through unity and teamwork (p. 233). This affirms that no one can be complete in isolation; wholeness depends on others. Unity is the walking stick of the weak, essential for achieving meaningful progress in society.

Similarly, in *Tata za Asumini*, the author presents unity and cooperation through characters like Zaina, Masika, and Bi. Mize, Bi. Time and Mwatima, who come together to support Asumini during her mental distress. The author narrates how Masika dashed off to buy a bottle of cold water from a neighbour. "'Here, drink this,' Zaina urged Asumini after pouring the water into a glass and bringing it to her lips. But Asumini refused outright to drink" (p. 106). This scene highlights the communal effort to restore Asumini's well-being. African unity is further encapsulated in proverbs such as *Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu* (Unity is strength, division is weakness), *Figa moja haliinjiki chungu* (One log cannot support a cooking pot), and *Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa* (One finger cannot kill a louse). These sayings carry messages that promote togetherness and kinship in the community.

4.7 Marriage and Parenthood

In African societies, the value of marriage is largely defined by the couple's ability to bear children. Parenthood is a divine gift bestowed upon humankind. Africans believe that those with children continue to live on after death. Despite the pride associated with polygamy, wives are viewed as treasures through whom children are born, leading to the growth of the family line. Children are seen as a source of future prosperity, and as one grows older, their importance becomes even greater (p. 80).

Marital happiness is considered incomplete without children. Pregnancy is seen as a sign of a stable marriage. In certain African cultures, a marriage is not fully recognised until the woman bears a child (Mbiti, 2011). The first pregnancy symbolises the final seal of the marriage and the woman's full acceptance into her husband's family and clan. Marriage and childbirth are considered blessings by the community. Parents often prefer their children to marry partners of their own choosing. In *Nyuso za Mwanamke*, a woman implores her husband, saying, *"Let us not marry off our daughter to a distant man just for our own desires, let her marry for love, even if the suitor is wealthier than all the rich men in the world"* (p. 69). Parents feel a duty to ensure their child marries someone they believe to be suitable. When a suitor presents a proposal, the daughter is expected to accept if it aligns with family approval.

Africans maintain marriage for the continuation of the lineage through childbirth. Human life begins with pregnancy, the result of marriage (Deme, 2009). One becomes fully part of the generational cycle through marriage, with children born into it eventually joining the spirits of the departed, whose names are often passed down. Through marriage, a person finds assurance of immortality, as their name and lineage are carried forward. Thus, marriage represents the continuity of creation. This concept is clearly shown in *Mirathi ya Hatari*, where the marriage between *Kazembe* and *Nyamidze* results in eight children, though sadly, they passed away (p. 5). Marriage is thus a vital institution that sustains a community's labour force and contributes to national development, while also strengthening cultural bonds and societal respect. In some African communities, having many children is considered a sign of honour and a form of wealth. As the author puts it: *"By the time I was born, my mother and father already had six children. We were living in a single room in the Madongo Poromoka neighbourhood. My parents and the younger angelic children of God slept in the bedroom, while we older children and young adults slept in the sitting room or outside in the yard"* (p. 79). This underscores the high regard Africans place on parenthood, valuing children irrespective of economic status.

4.8 Religion

For the African, religion is the origin of all things; it is not an acquired practice but an inherent part of his identity from the earliest times. It forms part of his heritage, not something borrowed or imitated. Wherever the African lives, his religion lives with him. He holds the belief that all religions originate from *Allah*, who transcends human beings in power, strength, and authority (Oluwale, 1999). In the selected novel *Janga Sugu la Wazawa*, the author vividly portrays themes related to traditional religion, Christianity, and Islam. The rituals, funeral ceremonies, marriage customs, and prevailing belief systems in the daily lives of the *Wakerewe* are deeply rooted in traditional religious practices. The novel highlights the clash between traditional religion and Christianity, a conflict that emerged with the arrival of missionaries. This tension is well illustrated through characters such as;

Ninalwo and Magayane's father. Along with other tribal elders, they refused to send their children to school because they associated the education system with the religion of the Europeans. In *Ukerewe*, the colonial administration had established a school in *Kagunguli*, near *Bukindo*, the capital of the indigenous chiefs since the German colonial period. Indigenous leaders such as *Mzee Ninalwo* boycotted these schools because enrolling a child required both the child and the father to undergo baptism. One of the strict conditions imposed by the missionaries was that a father with multiple wives had to divorce all but one, usually his eldest wife, in order to be baptised (Ruhumbika, 75).

A convert was required to destroy all traditional sacrificial implements and renounce the religious practices of his ancestors. The Europeans, having conquered the people, demanded the burning of these ancestral sacrificial objects, which they deemed expressions of "barbaric faith." This portrayal underscores the tension and cultural disruption caused by foreign religious impositions. The novel further illustrates the persistence of traditional belief systems. When facing a violent storm, *Mazula* turns to his mother and asks, "Mama, shall I offer a sacrifice?" (*Ruhumbika*, 31). His mother urges him to do so immediately. Mazula proceeds to offer a heartfelt invocation:

"Oh Mugasa! God of all the waters on Earth, grant us safe passage as we journey to Ngoma to mourn our departed relative, just as fellow human beings do when they lose their loved one." (Ruhumbika, 31)"

The theme of religion also reappears when *Mazula* and *Bugonoka* decide to be baptised and embrace Catholic Christianity. Likewise, *Father Joni* converts to Islam, adopts the name *Isa*, and marries his beloved *Maimuna*. These religious transitions, from traditional beliefs to Christianity or Islam, and even between the two, highlight the dynamic and pluralistic nature of religious identity in African societies. Such shifts remain common in contemporary contexts, where it is not unusual to find Christians converting to Islam, Muslims embracing Christianity, or individuals returning to their indigenous religious roots. This fluidity underscores the enduring complexity of religious belief in African cultural life.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has analysed how African philosophy is portrayed in Swahili literature. Key ontological concepts include the living force, circularity, magic, superstition, witchcraft, morality, prudence, wisdom, religion, marriage, procreation, unity, and cooperation. These elements serve to educate successive generations on customs and traditions. The philosophical foundations of tradition, history, and social development are richly reflected in traditional life. Elements of African ontology provide a robust framework for cultural continuity. They function as mechanisms for teaching, reinforcing, and unifying society based on indigenous philosophies and cultural values that have persisted from antiquity to the present.

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