

## Nihilism and Postproverbials in Euphrase Kezilahabi's Poetry Anthology *Dhifa (Feast)*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses nihilism and postproverbials as exhibited, and how occasionally they occur *pari passu*, in a postmodern Swahili anthology of *Dhifa*, published in 2008 and authored by Euphrase Kezilahabi. Nihilism is “the radical repudiation of value, meaning and desirability” (Nietzsche Friedrich 7). It is a doctrine of skepticism that negates among others, idealism, mythology, arbitrary morality, and sacred values while maintaining that established institutions based on these beliefs must be destroyed. It is a populist notion and a philosophical orientation that interrogates the meaning of life and sees life as being hopeless and meaningless. On the other hand, postproverbials are “radicalized proverbial utterances which subvert the logic and the pattern of conventional proverbs, and aim to supplement an essentially traditionalist imagination with an iconographic and modernist consciousness” (Raji-Oyelade Aderemi 49). Both forms aim to repudiate or subvert the established mantra or ethos. Justification for our contention of the proposed point of convergence between these strands is demonstrated in the innovative manipulation of Swahili proverbial logics and symbolism by Kezilahabi in his many works, and in particular, *Dhifa*. We present evidence of how Kezilahabi turns the conventional form of Swahili proverbs which normally serves as a vital medium to prescribe and proscribe the code of conduct of the people around to postproverbials, which are in essence, structured in a more unconventional form. Kezilahabi uses the same path to advocate his new beliefs, and values them through postproverbials or anti-proverbs<sup>1</sup>. We are determined to show in this paper that the use of postproverbials is a key weapon that Kezilahabi harbours in his anti-platitudinous maneuvering to precisely drive his agenda. Our rationale is derived from parallelism we noted between *Dhifa* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) by Friedrich Nietzsche (2006).

**Key Words:** *Nihilism, Postproverbials, existential idealism*

### Introduction

Born in Ukerewe, Tanzania, Euphrase Kezilahabi was, until his demise in January 2020, a professor of African Literature at the University of Botswana. He published three anthologies of poetry: *Kichomi*<sup>2</sup> “Stabbing Pain” (1974), *Karibu Ndani* “Welcome Inside” (1988) and *Dhifa* “Feast” among other literary genres. Alena Rettová on Kezilahabi’s adaptation of Martin Heidegger’s “Being” refers to Kezilahabi as a philosopher who strives to “dismantle the resemblance of language to the world” by challenging the fundamental philosophical dichotomy of subject and object (439). Likewise,

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<sup>1</sup> One may be tempted to see Postproverbial and anti-proverb as synonyms in the sense that they both alter the traditional proverb. Whereas this is true to a certain extent, it should be noted that the Postproverbial is an extension of a traditional proverb. They act as oppositions and tend to subvert the traditional proverb. Conversely, anti-proverbs are based on a known proverb. They are deliberate parodies, alterations and innovations. In Kenya, this phenomenon has been linked to urbanization and the rise of the millennial generation that finds the traditional proverb more ‘complex’ as opposed to either anti-proverb or Postproverbial.

<sup>2</sup> This maiden anthology stirred unprecedented controversy on the Kiswahili literary scene. Kezilahabi ‘contravened’ the hitherto established formal traditions of Kiswahili poetry. On his part, the poet argued and went further to succinctly explain the possibility and legitimacy of free verse and innovation in Kiswahili poetry. In some translations, *Kichomi* is referred to as “Twinge”.

Kezilahabi has gained publicity in the Swahili literary world for being a “challenger of social and political issues” in his works (Coughlin David 196). This study has selected the postmodern anthology of *Dhifa* that came out a decade after the publication of the highly controversial novelistic dilogy of *Nagona* “Insight” (1990) and *Mzingile* “Labyrinth” (1991).

Kezilahabi is arguably a canonical and radical Swahili literary genius of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is a poet and a novelist of modern Swahili genres, and also a leading critic of pre-20th century Swahili verse forms. However, by revolutionizing conventional and sacrosanct adage in his own poetry, he comes forth as a ‘pariah’ for his ‘indecenty’.

### Kezilahabi and Nietzsche Views

Kezilahabi (1944-2020) and Nietzsche (1844-1900), both exceptional philosophers and influential poets, share common perspectives and ethos in life. While Nietzsche is proud to shake off every kind of dogmatism through his poetic labyrinth style, Kezilahabi has gone further to call one of his controversial novels *Mzingile* “Labyrinth” (1991). Hence, both writers construct their texts in a form of labyrinth marked by multiple paths. Their major concerns are the search for the meaning of life, the interpretation of reality and the understanding of our beings (Wamitila Kyallo 86).

According to Roberto Gaudio (2015), Kezilahabi, has cosmetically replaced Nietzsche’s concepts of *narcoticum* with that of *tonicum* as antidote to “rehabilitate” the sleep “consciousness” of African beings who need to be liberated from the dogmatism and “supremacy of morality and ethnicity” (67). Rejection of religious dogma and calling into question the sacred values and beliefs and his extensive engagement with the movement that questions revered values and worldviews in his literary works places Kezilahabi in the nihilist camp where his motive is to “create meaning in his context for the purpose of unmasking and liberating” his readers to “break free from the tethers of teleology” pursuant to the Nietzschean line of thinking (Gaudio 67).

A nihilist is a person who does not bow down to any authority. Nihilism is the world historical movement of the peoples of the earth who have been drawn into the power realm of the modern age (Heidegger Martin 62-63). As a clear sign of his signatory ‘stubbornness’, Kezilahabi’s debut novel, *Rosa Mistika* “Mysterious Rose” (1971) was temporarily banned by the Tanzanian government. The publication was viewed as socially, morally, and politically incorrect. As if fueled by the ban<sup>3</sup>, Kezilahabi showed no sign of abating his moral ‘insensitivity’ and continued to pour more scorn on controversial philosophical issues around death, afterlife, God’s existence, happiness, and absurdity in his other literary works between 1974 and 2008. His true campaign against what he construes as impinging hegemonic powers in his society started to unfold, winning only a handful of local supporters and a multitude of critics. But he boasts of his ‘obstinacy’ by calling himself snake, bomb<sup>4</sup>, bees, and even *Kichwamaji* “emptyheaded” (1975).

Kezilahabi ironically apologizes to his readers for ‘coming out’ too late, “Ulikuwa wapi Kichwamaji! Ungelizaliwa mapema! (Where were you Kichwamaji, you should have been born earlier!) (*Kichwamaji* 37). To put Kezilahabi into the ‘rebellious’ literary dock is a credit to him and accusing him of his style of ridicule and unapologetic tone is a further affirmation of his artistic prowess. It has become a tendency for existential nihilist writers to stir controversy. Other writers who have raised controversy include Kithaka wa Mberia, a Kenyan, who writes in free verse. However, a number of Kiswahili literary critics do not seem to admire and enthuse at the mode of philosophy that Kezilahabi espouses and propagates in his works (Wamitila 80).

At some point, the dilogy of *Nagona* and *Mzingile* were seen as the climax of Kezilahabi’s philosophy (Wamitila 86), *Dhifa* was not yet out. However, in the prologue of *Dhifa*, Wamitila gives

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<sup>3</sup> One might interpret the lifting of the ban by his government a result of the pluralistic waves cutting across his society then. It is like Kezilahabi had predicted tumultuous paradigm value shifts in his society.

<sup>4</sup> Kezilahabi calls himself a bomb, a beehive, a bee that stings, a snake eater, “a tear gas” (bomb) against classic poetic structure in his anthology *Karibu Ndani* (11).

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credit to Kezilahabi as teacher of the world on institutional betrayal of trust, abuses of power, injustices, religious bankruptcy, death and being, hypocrisy and moral sickness in the society. We consider *Dhifa* as a teleological anthology and a ‘postscript’ to the dilogy of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. This study has selected anthology of *Dhifa* that came out a decade after the publication of the highly controversial novelistic dilogy of *Nagona* (1990) and *Mzingile* (1991). Kezilahabi has gained limited Swahili readership out of those dilogy whose main agenda was his existential idealism. Wamitila defends Kezilahabi as a number of Swahili literary critics do not seem to admire his mode of philosophy (80).

In creating *Dhifa*, Kezilahabi seems to have borrowed a leaf from Nietzsche, on the timing, theme and style of his radical anthology. *Dhifa* displays many of the common characteristics of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885). They both broke ten years of solitude to come back to their readers to sermon and teach humanity on how to create own values and purposes, free from all prejudices and moralistic expectations of the society. *Dhifa* holds within it the very essence of both authors’ thematic kernel but more graphically the euphoria of jubilation by succeeding to cause mayhem on the uncharted moralistic territory. Nietzsche concludes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with an image of Zarathustra assembling few adherent flocks back to his enclave to enjoy ‘a feast’ while singing and jubilating at the conclusion of their mission. Therefore, all four volumes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, are woven around the backdrop of “festivity”. Readers of *Dhifa* are warmly invited to enjoy the feast and dance. However, “the dance and (songs) are not received well by all spectators” due to foul language and desacralization of logos (Rettova 57).

Not only does *Dhifa* coincide with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in terms of theme and tone, Kezilahabi and Nietzsche feel proud to impose their vision over dominant dogmatism through their labyrinth poetic style. Kezilahabi moulds titles of his works to lead readers to self-reflect. While *Dhifa* requires readers to reflect ‘festivity’ through songs, in *Mzingile* the novel employs the “Labyrinth” as its title. Kezilahabi generally tends to employ irony or rather text parody to ridicule religious systems that exalt one man as the shining example of all of humanity (Coughlin 205). Therefore, artistically, Kezilahabi relies on rhetoric marshaling and intertextuality of ridicule songs in *Dhifa*. As such, he calls upon all teachers to listen to his songs.

*Kwa Walimu Wote* (to all teachers)

*Sikilizeni wimbo huu:* (listen to this song)

(Kezilahabi 1)

*Dhifa* thus posits jubilation, songs and feasts at the centre of life-changing experience enjoyed by adherents of existential nihilists. The singing of Halleluya! Halleluya! Halleluya! in the poem *Mlokole* “Born Again” (*Dhifa* 48) is a kind of feel-good parody of a liberating moment in which the like of Zarathustra, Kezilahabi and Nietzsche are engrossed in the world and what it has to offer.

Kezilahabi, a literary tactician, engages his readers in critical thinking. The striking things that will awe any readers of Kezilahabi are his clever presentation of the close relationship between African traditional religions and Catholic ontologies on one hand and Western nihilism on the other. For each traditional episode narrated, there is equally background reference to Biblical discourses or other referential texts. By breaking free from the tethers of teleology, one is empowered in outlook and outcome because for the first time it is possible to find answers without proceeding from pre-existing perceptions. A direct way to describe it might be by ‘detachment from everything’.

### **Postproverbials and Cultural dynamism**

Balogun Oladele rightly argues that truth expressed by conventional proverbs is not necessarily limited to moral truth. Rather, such truth extends to epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, legal, scientific and anthropological facts (Balogun Oladele 86; Fayemi Ademola 6). By reworking or subverting those conventional proverbial expressions in new insight, we are entering a new territory specifically termed by Raji-Oyelade as “postproverbials”. Postproverbials are radical speech acts that are alternate creations derived from and which stand against traditional proverbs (Raji-Oyelade 15).

They are produced either in jest or in ignorance of conventional and generally accepted and anonymous proverbs in a given culture. Postproverbials are found in numerous formations in contemporary poetry, novels, drama, film, music and other ancillary genres like talk shows, sermons, and speeches (ibid). Postproverbials thrive in the capacity of the speaker's exuberant disdain for the traditional proverbs or well-rehearsed practice intended to make mockery of traditional proverbs for fun's sake.

On the question of how postproverbials have encroached into daily vocabularies of the Yoruba, Raji-Oyelade opines that, postproverbials are "migrant texts in the traditional performance, moving from people to people and getting transformed in the moment of travel; "migrant" in both senses of space and time: moving freely and bifocally between the rural and the urban space, fluid and doubly transitory" (16). In both invention and reception, as much as the site of creation may seem to be frequently urban, postproverbials also find convenience and favorable condition for their exercise in the open space of the cultural sphere, be it urban, peri-urban or rural. Thus, postproverbials are the recent 'posterity' of traditional sayings, the posterior reaction or response to conventional wisdom and native intelligence: they are futuristic rump of verbal art form prone to every kind of transfigurations associated with cultural dynamism. It is in this light that Raji-Oyelade is of the opinion that postproverbials are, "[C]onsequence[s] of new consciousness of African modernities resulting from the transformation of village or community square tradition, decline in the deployment of the standard resources of languages, and the indifferent or triumphalist sense of overcoming these languages with the use of the English language" (21).

A proverb is regarded as a saying in more or less fixed form marked by 'shortness, sense, and salt' and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth. It is also marked by some kind of poetic quality in style or sense (Ruth Finnegan 383). It comprises insightful, well-structured observations or commentaries on life that appear to sum up the accumulated knowledge, wisdom and experience of the society in question vis-a-vis the subject being referred to (Mulokozi Mugyabuso 7-8; Madumulla Joshua 258). Over the centuries before writing, proverbs have been passed on mainly through oral traditions. Although a proverb is characterized by its concise fixed artistic form, its evaluative and conservative function, in this chapter, the term is used in the same way as anti-proverbs, or supplementary proverbs (see for example Raji-Oyelade; Mieder Wolfgang; Mnenuka Angelus; Kipacha Ahmad; Daniel Iyabode), its authoritative validity and finally, its anonymous origin" (Schipper Mineke 22). At present, the veracity of many proverbs is negated. The view that proverbs are wisdom of elders has been challenged as well as "deconstructed and reconstructed" (Balogun 4). Thus, some proverbs are unreasonable by virtue of their prejudice and irrelevance to modern day realities. In other words, they are old-fashioned (Fayemi 16).

Anti-proverbs are defined as "parodied, twisted, or fractured proverbs that reveal humorous or satirical speech play with traditional proverbial wisdom" (Mieder 28). In the same vein Raji-Oyelade defines postproverbs or supplementary proverbs as "alternate creations derived from and which stand against traditional proverbs." (75). Mieder for instance, argues that proverbs are twisted from their original wordings and structures in form and content and bring about a different meaning, which is often diametrically opposed to the original meaning. The truth of these formulaic carriers of wisdom is devalued, ridiculed or sharply negated through ironic or satiric distortions of letters or words, additions or contractions. This change is the expression of a transformed social reality and world view, which rests on the principle of "constancy in change", the outcome of social developments, the process of re-evaluation (Militz Hans-Manfred and Klaus Ulrich Militz 28-33), development of science and technology, globalization, rejection of some African cultural practices (Mnenuka 75-103; Kipacha 104-121) and trend of African politics and leadership.

Proverbs are social modes of communication which have a dominant role in most African societies. They are cultural tools for transferring the traditions of a speech community in terms of their values, beliefs, and collective knowledge from one generation to another. They are folkloric metaphors but unlike other oral folklore, they are not set apart or restricted to certain domains of

usage. They are highly integrated into daily conversation and speech making and can be found in every interactional setting in Swahili society. Indeed, proverbs are sacred and they carry tremendous power and authority for anyone who is able to use them skillfully (Penfield Joyce and Duru Mary 119-128). Each deft deployment of proverbs in African societies is regarded as an index of one's intelligence, the philosophical turn of one's mind (Nwachukwu-Agbada Obi 194-200). Makamani Rewai also describes proverbs as vital component of the indigenous knowledge systems among Africans (124). The 'social end', as Meider opines, is what makes the use of proverbs inviting and meaningful (13-17). Other than their powerful verbal expression, proverbs have proved to be of great relevance/benefit to traditional and modern societies, and this is due to the fact that users with gifts of creativity who are familiar with its techniques may use it in settling conflicts (Ademowo and Balogun 152-153). They can also be used in pedagogy (Bascom William 333-49). In addition, they can be applied in promotion of values (Penfield and Duru 119-128). From the above views, it then can be argued, that, proverbs are very precious and fundamental intangible and cultural heritage of the Swahili people. In addition, the proverbs are a repository for knowledge. This means that, one must understand the wisdom emanating from those proverbs. Even if the proverbs differ in their rendition, the proverbial wisdom remains intact.

There are three levels of meaning in which proverbs operate: Firstly, the text (literal meaning); secondly, the generalized moral and cultural principles (philosophical meaning); and thirdly, the meaning defined by the specific interactional context (contextual meaning) (Nwoga Donatus 1975: 186-204). The literal meaning explains or depicts concrete imagery using the symbols of traditional, ancestral or modern life; the philosophical meaning emphasizes the moral truth associated with the proverbs. Essentially, meanings and interpretations of the selected postproverbials show lack of wisdom which proverbs intend to promote and this designates the lack of guiding value embedded in postproverbials.

#### **Are Postproverbials Transformative in Wisdom Function?**

Reworking of proverbial expressions in new insight is specifically termed by Raji-Oyelade as "postproverbials" or by Mieder as "anti-proverbs". Mieder defines anti-proverbs as "parodied, twisted, or fractured proverbs that reveal humorous or satirical speech play with traditional proverbial wisdom" (28) but equally lends support to the coinage of 'postproverbials' by Raji-Oyelade as a fascinating phenomenon of deliberating changing proverbs to create new proverbial wisdom that fits new times and changed social mores in Africa (Raji-Oyelade 15-16). We argue in this paper that Kezilahabi has joined the bandwagon in *Dhifa* to epitomize the dynamic and innovative strategy of new form of proverbs and embraces it as his signatory epitome of his own worldview and his nihilist ethos.

According to Raji-Oyelade, postproverbials are sort of playful blasphemies inherently supplementary or subversive, in which received wisdoms are queried, tested and subjected to textual rupture (8). They definitely stand against bonafide proverbs as "alternate creations derived from and which stand on their own" (Raji-Oyelade 75). Although some scholars consider twisted proverbs or proverbial phrases as harmful and blatantly blasphemous, others like Taiwo Emmanuel go further to counsel youngsters to shy away from the practice of parodying of traditional proverbs (80). Mieder defuses such a gratuitous fear by warning that if the traditional proverbs failed to cope with modern realities they will be automatically "changed into revealing and liberating anti-proverbs" (416). Kezilahabi seems to heed Mieder's warning. His strand of proverbial techniques invites readers from the onset to recognize them as undisputed yet underneath provides ground for him to ultimately revise their ideals and allow them to question their vitality.

The proverbial "conveys a strong message that advocates for change in society" (Kipacha 106) and capture the attention of the readers and sway them in a new direction. Postproverbials can achieve this by means of criticism, mockery, or even insult (Schipper 23). The alterations introduced by postproverbials demonstrate the fact that the proverb's truth and culture-bound collective ideals are being contested (see also Mnenuka 75-103 and Kipacha 104-121).

In *Dhifa*, Kezilahabi critiques various issues such as leadership and politics, dependent economy, and modern culture in Tanzania and other African countries. On the 'Introduction' section of the book, Wamitila comments that the poet wants his readers to inquire, question, examine and pry their selves, lives, environment, country and universe. An example from the poem *Zimwi* "Ghost" (40), states, *Zimwi Litujualo limetula Likatwisha* "A Ghost that knows us has devoured us completely" is a postproverbial whereas the traditional proverb is *Zimwi Likujualo Halikuli Likakwisha* "a Ghost that knows you cannot devour you completely". In Kiswahili literature, the term *Zimwi* "Ghost" is often metaphorically used to refer to dictatorial leadership systems (Senkoro Fikeni 25). Ghost may also denote an authority, political party or a leader who misuses funds to the extent that the citizens do not benefit from the economic resources of the country. Thus, the same word may be used variedly referring to different contexts.

### Kezilahabi and Postproverbial Inventiveness

In his anthology *Dhifa*, Kezilahabi straightforwardly jests the sacrosanct Swahili proverb such as "*Akusukumaye ataka uanguke* "the one who pushes you wants you to fall" into "*Asimamaye huanguka*" "The one who stands falls" to openly criticize the established values and rigidified wisdom (Kezilahabi 32). Kezilahabi acquires the character of becoming an inventor of postproverbials. It is not surprising that following his line of thinking, Kezilahabi relies on the proverbial expressions that marshal his followers into action. He aspires to see major transformation in people's thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, immobility is a hindrance to progress. What Kezilahabi subverts here is the suggestion that if you keep standing you will fall down. The original proverb speaks of falling down by being pushed but Kezilahabi suggested otherwise in the postproverbial, that inactivity will eventually lead to one's downfall. Why does Kezilahabi urge his compatriots to be active? By changing the proverbial phrase in that manner, Kezilahabi declares emphatically that there are forces that fight to tame them into submissive state.

Kezilahabi urges his compatriots to ward off their docile posture. Going by the second subverted proverbial phrase "*upole wa mkizi*" "the quietness of a cuttlefish" instead of the positive proverbial phrase "*hasira za mkizi furaha ya mvuvi*" "the anger of the cuttlefish is the joy of the fisherman" (Kezilahabi 52), the demand for action in the first postproverbial is made clear that the two classes represented by metaphor of fish and fisherman helps Kezilahabi to put his point across using folk references. There are definitely two antagonist classes at loggerheads here where one class is bent to push the other to remain dormant and inactive. The figurative expressions as employed by Kezilahabi in these two examples befit nihilistic and postproverbial rupture to destruct idle philosophy, negate docile idealism and mythology, and to destruct the disingenuous despots that profit from it.

Closely related to postproverbial expression coined by Kezilahabi as "*Asimamaye huanguka*" "He who stands falls", is the subverted form of a traditional proverb "*Alalaye usimwamshe ukimwamsha utalala wewe*" "Don't awaken the one who sleeps lest you sleep too" or "rather let sleeping dogs lie" which has been changed to "*Alalaye huamka mapema*" "the one who sleeps awakes early" (Kezilahabi 26). This new coinage aims at awakening the people from their metaphoric deep slumber. Kezilahabi uses all tricks in the books including humor, irony, satire, and cynicism. Above all, his strategy encompasses the use of proverbs and proverbial expressions. His proverbial informed verse is the most effective tool he relies on to drive his point home.

Generally, studies in modern Swahili proverbs and/or in other societies are still scanty<sup>5</sup>. For instance, Mieder pleads with scholars worldwide to undertake more research in both paremiography (the collection of proverbs) and paremiology (the study of pro-verbs) of especially "new proverbs that are still awaiting the registration in proverb collections" instead of mainly "occupying themselves

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<sup>5</sup> Mochiwa's poems which were composed between 1973 and 1983 also deal with post-colonial Tanzania and after the declaration of socialist ideology in 1967. His poems, especially *Mvumilivu* (A patient person) insists that a patient person will ultimately eat a rotten stuff. The book seems to address various issues such as social, political and economic disillusionment and urges for change.

with traditional proverbs” (Mieder 14, 399-416). With regard to “changes” in Swahili literature, many studies have been done in written literary genres such as poetry, novels and drama (cf. Senkoro 22-38; Indede Florence 73-94).

To be able to urge his readers to take matters into their hands and address their own problems and concerns, Kezilahabi sought the assistance of inventive proverbial expressions that his people are aware of and value deeply. A famous bonafide Swahili proverb “*Mchumia juani hula kivulini*” “He who earns his living in the sun, eats in the shade” is transformed by Kezilahabi into an inverted form of “*Mti ukuliao kivulini si thabiti*” “the tree that grows in the shade is not strong” (Kezilahabi 35). Evidently, his aim is to draw readers’ attention to the metaphor of *kivulini* “shade”. It is not surprising that he refers to “tree shade” against the scorching sun as many of his people spend their days out in the field to make ends meet. Definitely the social group that Kezilahabi is targeting consists of workers who earn their bread through toiling out in the sun. To contribute to the prosperity of his people, Kezilahabi uses a form of postproverbials that plays the role of lifting the spirit of the people to see the need to change their status quo. He abhors “*umasikini wa kujitakia*” “self-inducing poverty” and thus urges through the metaphor of “eating in the (tree) shade” (Kezilahabi 50).

In his subversion of the original proverb that urges people to toil in the scorching sun so that they may enjoy the benefits in the tree shade, he sees such mantra as poison to his people. In his perspective, the old proverb gives leeway to leaders to let his people continue to labour at the prospect of empty promises. For him the presence of heat, in particular scorching sun, is an important ingredient for prosperity. He adopts the tree of life symbolism to caution his people against the three vital elements of a tree: water, air and sun. A tree that misses one of them is most likely to be confounded to perpetual natural death. Essentially by foregrounding the symbol of tree of life, Kezilahabi is questioning the entrenched belief in the idea of the Promised Land or the land of milk and honey as a reward touted by politicians or religious leaders. The “work hard” mantra for success is misused and abused as an exploitative tool in the proverb. Kezilahabi seems to caution his people that this is a political gimmick and cannot alone ensure one reaches the top and enjoys the fruit of his/her labour. In saying that *Mti ukuliao kivulini si thabiti* “the tree that grows in the shade is not strong” Kezilahabi is emphatically going against the exploiters who benefit from the sweat of the majority. The inhumane and exploitive relationship between the “few haves” and the majority “have nots” is laid bare by the writer in the innovative postproverbial. The world has obstacles and frustrations enough to block the path to success. The metaphor of “eating in the shade” is innocently contrasted with “cultivating in the sun” in the conventional proverb but instead, Kezilahabi sways his readers to focus on the tree that provides the shade hence bringing the metaphor of water and light that gives the tree a sustainable life. He hints at his main existential thesis about life, based on the equilibrium of the tripartite elements.

Kezilahabi’s coinage of *Kuishi kwajitembeza* “to be living advertises itself” was derived from an old adage that “*Kizuri chajiuzua kibaya chajitembeza*” “A good commodity sells itself; a bad one advertises itself” (37). It is obvious that his existential orientation is at play here. He marks a vital transition from the Swahili literary pedigree to a universal territory. *Kuwako ndo muhimu Kuishi kwajitembeza* “Presence is important whereas living is of no use” was a postproverbial that Kezilahabi coined out of *kizuri chajiuzua kibaya chajitembeza* “A good commodity sells itself a bad one advertises itself” (37). Kezilahabi leads his readers towards a different dimension of existential thinking such that “*Tufapo tumekufa*” “when we are dead we are dead” to derive home his existential standpoint that there is no afterlife (37).

Kezilahabi’s parodic maneuvering of a traditional proverb is a demonstration of his earlier contention, when he asserts the need to use “the language of dismantling and liberation of words from convention” as proved in his counter discursive adage (217-218). The position of the postproverbial as “a nuclear verbal evidence of the transgressive, subversive, iconoclastic and modernizing imagination”, as Raji-Oyelade rightly observed, sends a clear signal to the readers that whoever applies it, is actively drawn into a radical niche of being a critique and a repudiator of the

illocutionary moral values and meaning exerted in the common wisdom of his/ her society (124). In other words, one is caught in the nihilism ethos.

Kezilahabi deliberately uses alternation to implant controversy. He takes advantage of the process of manipulation of the old proverbs and proverbial expressions in form and content to usher the new insights. In a unique way, he recreates the unmarked part of the proverb to highlight marked ethos. As a typical existential nihilist<sup>6</sup>, Kezilahabi ingeniously uses the acidic dissolution of delusion. Hence his writing targets to ridicule the ridiculous; draw readers to imageries of absurdity, throw contradicting argumentation and mock the ardent symbols, shrines and practices of teleological worshippers as shall be illustrated in his gnomic *Dhifa*. In other words, Kezilahabi opted to embrace Breton's<sup>7</sup> principle of absolute freedom of expression in artistic work to manipulate the mordacity, antipathy and mockery of the hegemonic value systems.

There is use of postproverbials and anti-proverbs in *Wimbo wa Unyago*, "The song of a Ritual" (17). One postproverbial states that, *Achaguaye embe bichi Ajua lini litaiva*, "He who chooses a raw mango knows when it shall ripen". Indeed, the headword, *Achaguaye*, "He who chooses" has been applied in Swahili traditional proverbs as a precautionary measure to those who prefer short-term bargains as opposed to long-term benefits of an object. In similar vein, drawing an analogy, we have, *Mchagua jembe si mkulima*, "One who "picks" his hoe is not a real farmer; A bad workman blames his tools". The apex of this proverb is that a good farmer can use any type of farm equipment. Anyone who selects a (i.e. unnecessarily insists on using a specific) hoe is not a good farmer.

In the same poem, Kezilahabi states, *Tusichonacho kuwa tusicho*, "Whatever you don't possess, you don't have" (15). There are many Swahili proverbs with similar connotations. The example provided here by Kezilahabi can be compared to the following Swahili proverbs. For instance, *Lisilokuwapo moyoni halipo machoni* "What is not in the heart is not in the eyes [eyesight]". It connotes a scenario, whereby, one does not care for those they do not love. Similarly, *Fimbo ya mbali haiui nyoka* "A remote stick (i.e. one which is far away) does not (i.e. cannot) kill a snake (near you)."

In the poem *Wakati Fulani*, "Some other time", Kezilahabi states, *Kuishi ni kufa* "Living is dying" (6). Among the Swahili, it is encouraged to be optimistic and not pessimistic. If "*Kuishi*" "to live" is contrasted with "*Kufa*" "death", then, Kezilahabi is advocating death as ultimate destiny of the human being. To him and his fellow existential nihilists, there is no such a thing as afterlife. Here, he is dealing more directly with the question of religion and death and his nihilist standpoint is surfaced by the postproverbial "*Kuishi kwajitembeza*" that literally means that the euphoria of having afterlife and heavenly reward is, according to him, is a daydreaming endeavor. The fact that his people subscribe to the belief in God in whatever form, seems to sadden Kezilahabi. As a nihilist, he enjoys shocking his people by calling for an end to the old moral system, and to urge them to resist vices in society. Kezilahabi further reiterates his belief that *kuwako ndo muhimu*, "to live is what matters". The afterlife is transformed by Kezilahabi into a fictional stage to assure readers that their fear of death and afterlife is unfounded.

In *Hatima ya Watu*, "Destiny of a People", Kezilahabi states, *Miti iyumbapo upepo unavuma*, "Where trees sway, there is wind blowing" (44). In Swahili traditional proverbs, the blowing of wind is associated with the swaying of a flag. Thus, we find the proverb *Bendera hufuata upepo*, "A flag follows the wind". This proverb shows that an ostentatious person has no steadfast character but obeys the prevailing spirit. Again, the use of "miti" "trees" in Swahili is associated with the

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<sup>6</sup> Which is the philosophical theory that life has no intrinsic meaning.

<sup>7</sup> As a cultural movement, artists who embraced surrealism had some form of freedom just as the freedom enjoyed by the proponents of postproverbials and even anti-proverbs. As a movement, artists painted illogical scenes that Breton argued was aimed at resolving contradictory conditions of dream and reality into absolute reality. To Kezilahabi, perhaps, postproverbials could be the "super proverbs".



presence of builders. The Swahili proverb *Palipo na miti hapana wajenzi* “Where we have trees, there are no builders” is popular among the Swahili. In Kezilahabi’s postproverbial, the occurrence of “trees swaying” manifests the presence of wind. Conversely, in the traditional Swahili proverb, the presence of trees is a demonstration of lack of builders. In the same poem, *Hatima ya Watu*, “Destiny of a People”, there is a postproverbial that states, *Kutojua ni kujua*, “Ignorance is knowing”. But in traditional Swahili proverb, we do have *Kutojua humlaza nyoka jikoni*, “Ignorance puts a snake to sleep in the kitchen”. In the former, ignorance is seen as a learning experience whereas in the latter, ignorance is condemned. However, *Kutojua ni kujua*, “Ignorance is knowing”, can be equated to *Kupotea njia ndiko kujua njia*, “Getting lost on the road is knowing the road”, which is a traditional Swahili proverb and widely used in different contexts to encourage people that learning is a gradual process.

In *Wimbo wa Unyago*, “The Ritual Song” Kezilahabi states, *Akuandikiaye barua ndefu ashindwa kusema ukweli*, “He who writes you a long letter does not say the truth” (17). It appears that this postproverbial is derived from the traditional Swahili proverb, *Akumulikaye mchana, usiku atakuchoma*, “He who shines a light on you [i.e., shows up your defects] by day, sets fire to you [destroys your reputation altogether] by night.” If one praises you in your presence, he will slander you in your absence. The deeper meaning is that flatterers are hypocrites. On the surface of it, a long letter may be perceived positively but in the real sense, it has negative connotations. He adds, *Akupigiaye simu kila siku hana la kusema bali haloo*, “He who calls you all the time has nothing to tell you except hallo”.

Other postproverbials used by Kezilahabi in *Wimbi wa Unyago*, “The Ritual Song” include *Asifuye macho yake ataka kuyafumba*, “He who praises his eyes wants to shut them”. In addition, *Asifuye miguu yako ataka usitembee*, “He who praises your legs does not want you to walk” and also, *Asifuye meno yako ataka ucheke kijinga*, “He who praises your teeth wants you to laugh foolishly”. The expression ‘asifuye’ “He who praises” is found in the traditional Swahili proverb *Aisifuye mvua / jua, imemnyea / limemwangaza* “He who praises rain / sun has been rained on / has been shone on by the sun”. It means that he who talks of a man's goodness has benefited from it. Kezilahabi’s deconstruction of the Swahili proverbs *Aisifuye mvua imemnyea* “He who praises rain has been rained on” or *Aisifuye jua limemwangaza*, “He who praises the sun has been shone on” has thus resulted in postproverbials.

As readers interact with Kezilahabi’s *Dhifa* and other works, they become acquainted with the postproverbials he uses and they gradually gain currency in the larger society. Balogun rightly argues that truth expressed by proverbs is not necessarily limited to moral truth. Rather, such truth extends to epistemological, metaphysical, aesthetical, legal, scientific and anthropological facts (cited in Fayemi 6). As a matter of fact, Omari Shani opines, some modern proverbs are laden with humour, jokes and look playful (21-46). (cf. Mnenuka 75-103; Kipacha 104-121; Meider 13-17).

### Conclusion

In his 2008 poetic anthology of *Dhifa*, Euphrase Kezilahabi introduces the ontology of nihilism to offset the overriding cultural and ideological milieu of his literary community. He artistically weaves his counterarguments against conventional value systems, employing the technique of postproverbial that helps him to devour the very fabric of the established Kerewe and Swahili belief systems in *Dhifa*. He detours from the apologetical stance of his counterparts to place himself as an anti-platitudinous artist and thus finds himself in a grim position in Swahili literature. Unshakably, like Nietzsche, Kezilahabi takes great pride in his artistic maneuvering and calls himself, “a new seed”, “a snake eater” and “pig headedness” who only came late to stir uproar, to fraternize with radical poet-philosophers like Nicanor Parra, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Kezilahabi dismantles many familiar Swahili proverbs as a deliberate attempt to put across his viewpoint. We see that most crucial ideas in his *Dhifa* make use of postproverbial mechanization. Kezilahabi’s interest is on probing deep into the subconscious of his readers in order to change their thinking and outlook of the world. To achieve his objective, he has adopted unique techniques of

parodying and reformulating the conventional proverbs. In *Dhifa*, Kezilahabi critiques various issues such as political leadership and religion using postproverbial coinage. By deliberately modifying quintessential and sacrosanct Swahili proverbs into new proverbial wisdom, Kezilahabi has joined the new wave of doubters and change makers. Kezilahabi's maneuvering of a traditional proverb is a demonstration of his earlier assertion of the need to use "the language of dismantling and liberation of words from convention" as proved in his counter discursive adages (217-218).

The use of proverbial discourses has allowed Kezilahabi entry into discursive interaction while discussing controversial subjects such as political betrayal, death and afterlife. It is clear that his opposition to the conventional value systems of his society is important steps towards value transformation of his society. This study has analyzed the phenomenon of deliberately modifying quintessential and sacrosanct Swahili proverbs into new proverbial wisdom that usher modernity and changed social mores in the Swahili cosmos. The study shows how Kezilahabi innovatively subverts the prescriptive and proscriptive forms of traditional Swahili proverbs in his works to create new insights. The study shows closely mutual linkage between postproverbiality and nihilistic character of the writer.

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