



Tribute

Euphrase Kezilahabi (1944–2020)

Iribe Mwangi

In a research dissertation, Habwe describes Euphrase Kezilahabi as an author who has lost hope in life. This is ostensibly because desperation forms the motif in most of his literary works such that all his main characters end up dying after leading a hopeless life. This is the case, for example, with Rosa and Kazimoto as respectively depicted in his early works of fiction, *Rosa Mistika* and *Kichwamaji*. However, what Habwe depicts as loss of hope could be interpreted through the prism of existentialism as Kezilahabi's philosophy goes beyond despair.

Kezilahabi's philosophy as depicted through his literary works may be explained through an interrogation of his background. Born in April 1944 in the village of Namagondo in Ukerewe, Tanzania, Kezilahabi received his early education in that rural setting before joining a Catholic Seminary where he studied for close to a decade. His training at this point in time was thus geared towards him spending his life as a priest. This was not to be, however, because instead of proceeding to higher levels in the seminary, in order to work towards his ordination, Kezilahabi decided to join the University of Dar es Salaam for undergraduate studies. After his graduation, he was posted to a secondary school as a teacher. This marked the beginning of his life-long dedication to the career of teaching, which he undertook to the highest possible level. In 1971, Kezilahabi went back to the University of Dar es Salaam for his second degree in which he specialised in literature. It is around that time that his first creative work, *Rosa Mistika*, was published.


The novel set the tone for all his future writing. In the text, he questions the essence of life, no doubt reflecting a struggle in his personal life in regard to whether to remain steadfast to the vocation of serving God as a priest or choosing to lead a secular life. As a writer, Kezilahabi thus espoused and pioneered an engagement with existentialist philosophical thought in Kiswahili fictional writing. The basic questions that sum up his writing are: "Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going or what is my here-after?" His became a writing full of despair and anxiety. The answer to the question "Why am I here?" is aptly answered in his 1975 publication *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* in which he depicts how the world is a stage for chaos wherein each individual plays his part in causing chaos before exiting the stage.

As is suggested earlier, the only exit from a tumultuous life as depicted by Kezilahabi is through death. This is evident in his short story "Wasubiri Kifo" (Mbonde) where the characters depicted in the story are so miserable as a result of the poverty that they suffer from, that they spend their time simply awaiting death. In another short story, "Mayai Waziri wa Maradhi" (Wamitila), the writer depicts the state of despair in a country whose Minister for Health had the sole mission of spreading epidemics among the populace. Ranne observes how, in Kezilahabi's works, dying is part of living, not the opposite of life. On the other hand, the dead are not completely dead, but rather are still "alive", albeit in a different form. The same kind of approach is evident in poems such as "Mahojiano na Kifo" written by Kezilahabi through which the author depicts a persona who is conducting an interview with death.

Other than his approach to representing life through his writing, Kezilahabi is also famed for dismantling the old order of writing Kiswahili poetry by writing in free verse, as is evident in all his poems that are collected in his anthologies *Kichomi*, *Karibu Ndani*, and *Dhifa*. Together with his contemporaries such as Ebrahim Husein, Kuliyo-kela Kahigi, and Mogybuso Mulokozi, he started a poetic movement in the 1970s that favoured content over style in regard to composition, much to the chagrin of the orthodox poets at the time who were more inclined towards the use of fixed forms in regard to structural and sound devices in poetry.

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As a person, Professor Kezilahabi had a quiet demeanour that belied his extensive knowledge of Western and African world views. His life growing up in Ukerewe never ceased to influence his thinking, writing, and philosophy. He combined this with elements from his schooling, both at home in Tanzania and in the Western world, having studied for a PhD at the University of Wisconsin, and also with the benefits of being widely travelled. Almost everyone who interacted with him readily admits that Kezilahabi was quite humorous. Kezilahabi worked as a lecturer, first at the University of Dar es Salaam, and later in his life sharing his expertise in Swahili language and culture further afield by teaching at the University of Botswana. He spent his last two years at his Dar es Salaam home battling an illness and passed away on 9 January 2020.

Kezilahabi leaves behind a great legacy. This legacy includes his established philosophy on how existence precedes essence, that death starts at birth, that life is absurd and it is nothing but death. He also leaves us with the concept of choice—that we live how we choose to because we have the freedom to make choices. In terms of creativity, Kezilahabi was prolific in all genres as is evident through his publication of six novels, three anthologies of poems, a play, and numerous short stories.¹ He also contributed greatly to scholarship through his academic publications and conference presentations where he expounded upon the philosophical thought depicted through his writing. He was not only a great Kiswahili scholar but a great scholar of literature and philosophy, too.

Fare thee well, Prof. Kezilahabi. Since “dying is part of living”, we believe that you hear us. You explored death a lot but got no breakthrough. In fact, in the interview with Death, Death never answered a single question. It was silent—dead silent! Because of that, we ask no question but say Kwaheri, Kezi!

Notes

1. Using length to classify his work, *Rosa Mistika*, *Nagona*, and *Mzingile* may be classified as novellas. However, in this analysis I use the parameters of temporal space, character development, completeness of themes, and the complexity of plot to classify the three as novels.

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