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Interpreting Kezilahabi's *Nagona* and *Mzingile* through the Religious Thought of Mircea Eliade

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Abstract

The first experimental novels in Kiswahili literature were *Nagona* and *Mzingile* by Euphrase Kezilahabi, published in the early 1990s. Although both are considered revolutionary, their esoteric nature has allowed for diverse interpretations from scholars over the years. This study is another attempt to present the hidden meanings of these two enigmatic novels, employing the classic methodology of comparative literature, particularly by exploring intertextual connections. The analysis begins by identifying the factors contributing to their elusiveness. They are revealed to be two: the circular structure that results in the lack of a moral conclusion and the literary devices of increasing uncertainty. This study then attempts to interpret these factors with reference to the thoughts of the 20th-century religious scholar Mircea Eliade. Connections between Eliade and Kezilahabi are evident: Eliade's terminology appears in *Mzingile*, and Kezilahabi references Eliade's work multiple times in his doctoral dissertation. This study suggests the possibility that Eliade's thought influenced Kezilahabi at the level of conception of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. Furthermore, it proposes a new reading of the two by drawing on Eliade's engagement with Indian philosophy.

1.0 Introduction

Nagona and *Mzingile*, published in the early 1990s, were considered to have come "too early in Kiswahili literature" and were even condemned for having the potential to destroy Kiswahili literature which is still in its "formative stages," and in which writers should stick to an accurate portrayal of the reality around them (Wamitila, 1998: 90). On the other hand, some researchers highly praised the two novels for "blazing the new trail for the future development of Kiswahili writing" (Gromov, 1998: 78).

The reason for these contrasting reactions to these two novels lies in their experimental nature. Wamitila refers to them as "polymorphic" and "metaphysical" novels which depict "the transcendental nature of human efforts in search of truth and the meaning of life" (Wamitila, 1991: 62). Gromov describes

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the influence of postmodernism and the magical realism of Latin American and African fiction (Gromov, 2009: 128). *Nagona* has attracted more attention than *Mzingile*. For example, Diegner (2005: 25) considers *Nagona* Kezilahabi's most complex work, while Mbatiah refers *Nagona* as an "anti-novel" (dhidiriwaya) (Mbatiah, 2001: 7). The complexity of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, which defy a straightforward interpretation, has aroused the interest of researchers, and papers on the two novels continue to be published in Tanzania and abroad.

Then, what message were these experimental novels conveying? Previous studies' responses to this question, such as the denial of Western absolutes, affirmation of African values, and desire for African emancipation and unification lacked diversity (Khamis, 2003; Rettová, 2004; Gromov, 2009). According to Wamitila (1998: 80), "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."

Ten years after the publication of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, an approach of reading them with reference to Kezilahabi's doctoral dissertation was attempted. Kezilahabi studied philosophy at the University of Wisconsin in the 1980s and authored his dissertation on Western and African philosophy (Kezilahabi, 1985). Using Kezilahabi's doctoral dissertation as an example, Rettová (2004) explains the meaning of some of the enigmatic expressions in the two novels. Lanfranchi (2012) indicates that studying his doctoral dissertation is a necessary preliminary step in reading them, and Gaudioso (2014) mentions the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger, who are also mentioned in his dissertation. Kezilahabi's doctoral dissertation resembles a complex literary work more than a clear exposition of his ideas, making it challenging to use its arguments as a definitive basis for interpreting the two novels. This study adopts the approach of examining the dissertation that references a wide range of literature as an effective means of exploring Kezilahabi's reading history.

Recently, attempts have been made to use narrative theory to interpret the two novels: Ilomo (2022) analyzes "focalization" of the portrayal of mystical beings in the novels; Ponera and Kinga (2022) analyze "duration" in the two novels and depicts how Kezilahabi is influenced by Tanzanian customs, politics, and literary traditions, but applies his knowledge of narrative theory to create a unique mystical narrative.

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies that confront the complex narratives of *Nagona* and *Mzingile* and analyse them in a variety of ways. However, none of these studies has focused on exploring the messages or hidden meanings of the two novels.

This study aims to present a completely new meaning for these two novels. To achieve this objective, this study uses the classic methodology of comparative literature, which attempts to reveal intertextual relationships between texts in different linguistic and cultural spheres under the phase of influence. Specifically,

this paper employs a method of empirical literature study, in which it will prove from Kezilahabi's previous works that he is influenced by the ideas of a religious scholar, Mircea Eliade, and then apply these ideas to the analysis of the two works in order to obtain a new interpretation.

This paper analyses two works that give the impression of being esoteric and identifies two factors that contribute to their elusiveness: the absence of a moral conclusion and the devices used to increase uncertainty. It then proposes a new reading of the two works, suggesting that they may have been inspired by the ideas of Mircea Eliade, a 20th-century religious scholar whom Kezilahabi refers to several times in his doctoral dissertation.

2.0 Summary and Characteristics of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*

Since neither novel has a linear storyline, it is impossible to summarise the stories without referring to their fragmentary structure. Furthermore, due to their enigmatic nature, their summaries directly reflect the author's interpretation.

2.1 Nagona

As indicated in previous studies, one of the main characteristics of *Nagona* is the fragmentated narrative (Khamis, 2003; Gromov, 2009). Except for chapters 9 and 10, there is no temporal or geographical connection between the novel's 10 chapters; consequently, the novel appears to be a collection of disconnected episodes. Moreover, the narrative perspective is not unified. Although seven of the ten chapters (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 10) are narrated in the first person, there is also a chapter narrated in the first-person plural (Chapter 4), a chapter narrated in the third person (Chapter 6), and a chapter entirely composed of dialogue, as in the play (Chapter 8). The same unnamed man narrates the seven first-person chapters, but it is difficult to read a consistent story from these chapters because he is amnesiac. Nevertheless, since this character's story seems to be the subject of this novel, the narrator will be referred to as the protagonist in the following discussion.

Chapters 2 and 7 are mainly about the protagonist's memories of his grandfather. In these chapters, the protagonist explains how his grandfather mysteriously taught him to wait for a "sign" (ishara) and how, as a result, he suffered from mental illness and amnesia. The remaining chapters tell the protagonist's mission-related journey. Due to his amnesia, the story always begins with him not remembering when, where, or why he was there. Among the places he visits are a town inhabited by people who do not speak but only cough and laugh, an afterlife-like place where famous philosophers converse with their souls spewed into the palms of their hands, a fortress in the desert that suddenly disappears, and a square where the "Great Dance" (Ngoma Kuu) takes place. Everyone the protagonist meets along the way tells him, "I have been waiting for

you," and even pretends to already know about his mission. At the end of the novel, the protagonist joins the "madman's" group to perform the dance of confusion to bring the light of truth to earth and bring a second saviour into the world. This could be interpreted as if the protagonist had succeeded in his mission, but the mission's failure has already been hinted at in the previous chapter.

It is difficult to read a single story from a novel. However, the presence of common keywords in several chapters suggests that this novel is not a collection of unrelated episodes. They are: "truth" (ukweli), "circle" (duara), "candle" (mshumaa), "madman" (kichaa), "silence" (kimya), "saviour" (mkombozi), "hallucination" (maluweluwe), "forgetfulness" (usahaulifu), "confusion" (vurumai), "gazelle" (paa), "soldier of light" (askari wa mwanga), etc. Individual episodes are endlessly splitting and diffusing due to the double disconnection of the dimensions of time, space, and narrative perspective, but these keywords hold them together.

The title of this novel, "*Nagona*," is a name given to girls in Kezilahabi's homeland of Ukerewe. According to research conducted by Junko Komori (1999) on the meanings of names in Ukerewe, "na" is a prefix attached to a girl's name, and "gona" is a noun meaning "all things." In Ukerewe, it is common for names to carry a message of lamenting hardship or death; hence, the name "*Nagona*" means "I have experienced all the bad things" and is a name given to a child born during such a time (Komori, 1999: 30).

2.2 *Mzingile*

This novel, like *Nagona*, is characterised by its fragmented narrative and disjointed narrative perspective. There are seven chapters in total, with Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, and 7 written in the first person. I consider the narrator the protagonist because what is told in these chapters seems central to the plot of this novel. However, only the narrator of Chapter 3 can be assumed to differ from the narrators in the other four chapters. Chapters 1 and 5 are described in the third person. There are sufficient clues to reassemble the fragmented episodes in chronological order to make them easier to grasp than in *Nagona*. The following is a summary of the story:

After hearing a voice announcing the death of the second saviour, the protagonist travels to inform the saviour's presumed father about her death. Once the only God, the father, is now a weak old man who lives in seclusion and refuses to interact with the outside world. The protagonist is saddened to see the old man in such a condition, but he returns to his hometown to attend the second saviour's funeral. On his way back home, he runs into the old man he just left. When he returns to his hometown, he finds that the villages have been destroyed and people have died as a result of a nuclear war. A third encounter with the old man occurs at his residence. He is irritated by his mysterious relationship with the old man and

quarrels vehemently with him; however, they later accept each other and begin to live together. One day, the protagonist meets a woman who claims to be his wife and abandons the older man to live with her. The destroyed world was reborn after seven days of continuous rainfall, and the old man disappeared. While the animals graze peacefully, the protagonist and the woman encounter a third saviour; shortly thereafter, they see the old man again.

In *Mzingile* too, there are recurring keywords in several chapters. In addition to "truth," "circle," "madman," and "saviour," which are also found in *Nagona*, these terms include "emptiness" (utupu), "dream" (ndoto), and "gourd container" (kibuyu). Also, in *Nagona*, everyone who encounters the protagonist says, "I have been waiting for you," whereas in this novel, the common line of those who encounter him is changed to "I did not expect you to come at this time," indicating the protagonist's position in the story.

3.0 The Elusiveness of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*

The following discussion identifies two factors that give the reader an impression of the two novels' elusiveness. One is the circular structure behind the two novels, which results in the absence of a moral conclusion, and the other is the use of various methods to increase uncertainty.

3.1 Absence of a Moral Conclusion: Circular Structure

Nagona and *Mzingile* depict the destruction and regeneration of two Western authoritative and moral frameworks: Western philosophy and Christianity. However, the circular structure of the novels makes it difficult to draw a clear moral conclusion about these systems of authority.

The term "circle" appears frequently in both *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. In *Nagona* the word is used more than 50 times, and the protagonist's mission is described as "entering the circle" or "going to the centre of the circle."The circle exists as both an image and a structure of the two novels. Considering these two novels as a single story, a structure of repeated destruction and regeneration can be observed. This structure prevents the drawing of definitive moral conclusions from the two novels.

In *Nagona*, the first saviour, supposedly Jesus Christ, had already been destroyed. The protagonist travels in search of a new truth in a godless, bereft world. In the afterlife-like place, famous Western philosophers such as Plato, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche strive to purify their souls as atonement for failing to grasp the truth. On the day of the Great Dance, depicted in Chapter 9, groups of Western philosophers perform dances that embody their respective philosophical systems, observed and assessed in various ways by seemingly African spectators. It is not those groups, but rather the "dance of chaos" performed by the "group of madmen"—in which the protagonist takes part—that ultimately succeeds in

unifying the audience. At the height of the enthusiasm, a light of truth descends from the sky and shines through the protagonist's eyes. The next day, a baby, believed to be the second saviour, is born, and the novel ends at this point.

This ending appears to reject the authority of Western philosophy and instead affirms a distinctively African mode of thought that departs from Western rationality. It is not surprising that previous studies have interpreted the novel's ending as a denial of Western absolutes, an affirmation of African values, and an articulation of desire for African emancipation and unification (Khamis, 2003; Rettová, 2004; Gromov, 2009).

However, the doom of the second saviour, born in Chapter 10, was mentioned in Chapter 3. The protagonist speaks of something like a human body in an afterlife-like place. When the protagonist says, "The second saviour could not perform any miracles," the human body responds, "The first saviour was only crucified, but you and the second saviour were completely consumed." Thus, the protagonist's mission, which seemed to have been accomplished in Chapter 9, is implied to have failed much earlier in Chapter 3. Therefore, unlike previous studies, it is not possible to draw clear moral conclusions from this ending. This is because the previous references in Chapter 3 undermine the apparent success in Chapter 9 and refuse to provide a clear resolution or affirmation of values.

References to Christianity are prominent in *Mzingile*. The protagonist's journey in *Mzingile* begins when he hears an enigmatic voice announcing the death of the second saviour and commands him to inform the second saviour's father. During his journey, the protagonist enters a church that has been destroyed, where he finds a headless statue of Christ alongside many human bones. In another episode, figures of authority within the Christian world are deceived by a madman who stages a mock resurrection of Christ for his own amusement. Furthermore, it is revealed that the father of the second saviour, whom the protagonist is seeking, is none other than Yahweh, the singular God of Christianity. However, this figure is portrayed as a pitiable old man suffering from amnesia and covered in filth.

In the final chapter, a woman whose body radiates light appears as the protagonist's wife; as they bath in the fountain, the protagonist's body begins to glow. The novel ends with a scene in which the third luminous saviour - the twins - appears, and they all stand on top of a hill and become four lights illuminating the world. However, the old man crawls from the base of the hill to mar this magnificent scene. As a symbol of the old world, his appearance seems to indicate the deception of a new world. The novel concludes with the sentence, "The animals were laughing!" (Wanyama walikuwa wakicheka!) (Kezilahabi, 1991: 70). The source of laughter in this sentence is not explicitly stated; therefore, it could be the old man, the four on the hill, or the whole story itself.

The light that appears with the new saviours at the end of both novels signifies the values and ideas that dominate the new era. In both novels, the new saviours are not presented as a salvation to be celebrated. As a result, it is difficult

for the reader to believe that this saviour is the final and absolute one. As in a classic novel, the reader may attempt to deduce the story's meaning from its conclusion, but this is impossible in these novels. After reading the two novels, the reader cannot help but feel that there will be a fourth and a fifth after the third saviour. Only the repeated circle of birth and death of saviours and the destruction and regeneration of the world are emphasised in these two novels.

In *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, Western philosophy and Christianity are prominently featured, but their moral evaluation remains ambiguous. The lack of a clear conclusion and the circular structure create a sense of elusiveness that confuses readers used to classical narratives.

3.2 The Literary Device of Increasing Uncertainty

The second factor contributing to the elusiveness of *Nagona* and *Mzingile* is the literary device of increasing uncertainty. The events narrated in the two novels are characterised by the ambiguous boundaries of reality/dream and sanity/insanity. Events are continually deflected from their veracity by various factors, including setting, narration, and dialogue. This section identifies the literary devices that render the stories in the two novels uncertain.

3.2.1 Uncertainty in Narrative Method: *Nagona*

In *Nagona*, the first-person narrator, who is also the protagonist, is an unreliable narrator because he is a person with amnesia. Except for the past reminiscing chapter and the final chapter, the protagonist always appears with amnesia, and the narrative begins with him not knowing when or why he is there. The following are the beginnings of these chapters:

Chapter 1

It seemed to be evening because a faint golden light was shining in the valley where I was. Neither did I remember seeing the sun, nor anyone nearby. Perhaps, hallucinations and forgetfulness brought me here (Kezilahabi, 1990: 1).

> Yaelekea ilikuwa jioni, maana kulikuwa na mwanga hafifu wa ki-dhahabu humo bondeni nilimokuwa. Sikumbuki kuona jua na sikumbuki kuona mtu mwingine karibu nami. Labda maluweweluwe (as in the original) na usahaulifu ndio ulionifikisha hapa.

Chapter 3

> I do not remember when it was. Perhaps it was evening. I found myself alone and walked in a garden-like place (Kezilahabi, 1990: 13).
>
> Sikumbuki ilikuwa wakati gani. Huenda ilikuwa jioni. Nilijikuta natembea peke yangu mahali palipofanana na bustani.

Chapter 5

> I remember that it was early in the morning. I do not remember whether it was my first or last time. I found myself wandering through the woods (Kezilahabi, 1990: 24).
>
> Nakumbuka ilikuwa asubuhi na mapema. Sikumbuki kama huu ulikuwa mwanzo au mwisho. Nilijikuta nimo msituni natangatanga.

Chapter 9

> I do not remember the exact day I came here. All I can remember is that I slipped and fell as I was peering into the valley to see what was inside. I had nothing to grasp. Therefore, I slid right down, but never reached the bottom. Finally, I passed out due to fear (Kezilahabi, 1990: 53).
>
> Sikumbuki ilikuwa siku gani hasa nilipofika hapa. Nakumbuka tu kwamba nilikuwa najaribu kuchungulia bondeni kuona kilichomo nilipoteleza na kuanguka chini. Sikupata mahali pa kushika. Kwa hiyo, niliteleza moja kwa moja, lakini sikujihisi nafika mwisho wa utelezi. Mwishowe nilizimia kwa hofu.

In these chapters, the protagonist's surroundings are puzzling to him because of a lack of information about the place and himself. Furthermore, because of amnesia, he was unable to store his experiences as memories, and his narrative was full of confusion about what unfolded in front of his eyes.

As an unreliable narrator, the protagonist's narrative descends into an abyss of uncertainty, unreality, and ambiguity. Frequent use of expressions such as "it seems" (yaelekea), "I found myself ~ing" (nilijikuta), "I do not remember" (sikumbuki), "perhaps" (labda), and "I am not sure" (sina hakika) always creates the impression of uncertainty in the protagonist's narrative. "Hallucination" (maluweluwe) and "forgetfulness" (usahaulifu) are also keywords used to describe the symptoms of amnesia. Due to this symptom, his narrative was abruptly cut off. The reader is left with the suspicion that the entire story has been a hallucination of the protagonist.

3.2.2 Uncertainty of the Settings: *Mzingile*

In *Mzingile*, the protagonist no longer has amnesia, although there is no evidence that this is the same person as the one in *Nagona*. In chapters written in the first person, the narrator's memory is never disconnected, making it easier to capture the plot than in *Nagona*. However, even in this novel, narratives were rendered ambiguous and uncertain by various devices. The most effective section is the one in which the madman's random statement initiates the journey of the protagonist, the central theme of the novel.

When the protagonist was "between waking and dreaming," (nusu macho na nusu usingizini) one day, he heard the following words: "Wake up! They killed her! She is the last hope for dignity and humanity. Go! If he cannot come, ask permission for a burial" ("Amka!" Wamemuua! Alikuwa tumaini la mwisho la heshima na utu wa binadamu! Nenda! Mwambie kama hawezi kufika atoe ruhusa tumzike.") (Kezilahabi, 1991: 5). The voice further tells the protagonist about the hut he is to go to and the old man he is to meet. The protagonist embarks on his journey without knowing his exact location. The meaning of what the voice told him later became clear: The protagonist arrives at the hut, meets, and talks with an old man sleeping inside.

As the conversation progressed, it became clear that the old man was once the only God and that the protagonist came to tell him that his child had died. The journey of the protagonist to and from is the main focus of this novel. In Chapter 3, however, another character takes on the role of the narrator and makes a significant confession. In this chapter, the narrator describes himself as a "madman." The voice that triggered the protagonist's journey was uttered by the madman on a whim. The following is the madman's narration:

This is exactly what happened. I awoke one morning as my dreams slowly shifted into reality. In the morning darkness, I shouted outward, "Wake up! They have killed her! There is no hope! Go! If he cannot come, go ask for permission to bury her!" And other words, I no longer remember. The neighbour, listening to my words in half a dream, got up and left without saying goodbye to his ailing father. He was asleep and awake at the same time (Kezilahabi, 1991: 19).

> Hivi ndivyo ilivyokuwa. Siku moja niliamka asubuhi, wakati ndoto zianzapo polepole kurudia uhalisia. Katika giza la asubuhi nilipiga kelele nje, "Amka! Wamemuua! Hakuna tena matumaini! Nenda! Mwambie kama hawezi kufika atoe ruhusa tumzike!" Na maneno mengine ambayo siyakumbuki. Jirani yangu, akiwa katika hali ya nusu ndoto aliyasikia maneno haya, akaamka, akaondoka bila hata kumuaga baba yake mgonjwa. Alikuwa nusu kama amelala, nusu kama macho.

The "neighbour" in this sentence is the protagonist. The only basis for his journey was the whimsical utterances of the madman. Furthermore, both the madman who uttered the random voices and the neighbour who heard his voices were "between waking and dreaming." Although this journey is the subject of this novel, its basis falls into the inseparable realms of dreams and reality. This novel contains numerous important keywords, including "dream." In both *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, it is unclear how much of the story is the narrator's dream and how much is reality, thus increasing the uncertainty of the story.

4.0 Discussion

This part of the study examines the possibility that the two factors contributing to the impression of elusiveness, identified earlier, may be influenced by the thoughts of Mircea Eliade, a 20th-a century religious scholar whom Kezilahabi refers to several times in his doctoral dissertation. It also proposes a new interpretation of the two novels. Before discussing Kezilahabi's text with reference to Eliade, I would like to briefly overview Eliade's thoughts.

4.1. A Brief Overview of Eliade's Thoughts

Mircea Eliade was a Romanian historian of religion and one of the most influential religious scholars of the 20th century, as well as a world-renowned authority on the interpretation of religious symbols and mythology. Eliade sought trans-cultural similarities and unity in religion, particularly in mythology. His thought is based on the idea that there is an essential and universal framework for interpreting religious meaning.

Eliade regarded humans as religious beings (homo religiosus). Eliade's theory basically describes how religious humans view the world. For Eliade, myth is a means by which religious humans understand and deal with existential crises such as historical and temporal limitations, meaningless suffering, and the lack of deep meaning in life. Religious humans perform myths and rituals in order to give value to their own lives. By imitating the behaviour of gods and mythical heroes in rituals and passing down their adventures in myths, religious people attempt to escape from meaningless secular time and return to meaningful sacred time. They seek to live in a circular time that regularly returns to its beginning (Eliade, 1963).
Eliade's thought includes criticism of modern Western civilisation. According to Eliade, the desire to remain in mythical time causes "terror of history." This terror of history is not unrelated even to modern non-religious people. Even if modern people claim to be non-religious, they cannot find value in the linear progression of historical events. For Eliade, the denial of religious thought is the primary cause of modern anxiety (Eliade, 1971).

According to Eliade, Westerners should learn from non-Western cultures to find something other than meaninglessness in suffering and death, and to escape from the "terror of history." For example, Eliade believes that Hinduism offers lessons for modern Westerners. According to many sects of Hinduism, historical time is an illusion, and the only absolute reality is the immortal soul or atman within human beings. According to Eliade, Hindus escape the terror of history by not considering historical time to be the true reality (Eliade, 1960).

Eliade's thought presupposes the existence of a universal "essence" behind all religions. These discussions have been criticized for excessive generalization and essentialism.

4.2 Eliade's Circle

Eliade is mentioned once in *Mzingile*. After embarking on a journey to find the father of the second saviour who had died, the protagonist returned to his village to find that it had been destroyed by the nuclear war. After walking around the village, he realises that the only survivors are himself, a woman who claims to be his wife, and an old man who was once the only God. The protagonist, who feels a bond with the woman, realises that they are destined to attain "status nascendi" and become the prototype of a new humanity.

> "I feel like we are in status nascendi."
> "What does it mean?" She asked.
> "It means like we were born again."
> "That is not all. We are the hope for a new human nation. It is our responsibility to ensure the survival of humans on Earth's surface."
> "Our brightness paves the way for the future" (Kezilahabi, 1991: 65).
>
> "Mimi naona kama tumo katika status nascendi."
> "Maana yake?", aliniuliza.
> "Yaani ni kama tumezaliwa upya."
> "Si hivyo tu, sisi sasa ni tegemeo la taifa jipya la binadamu. Wajibu wetu ni kuhakikisha kuwa binadamu atabaki katika sura ya dunia."
> "Kung'ara kwetu kwamulika njia ya wakati ujao."

"Status nascendi" is Latin for "state of generation," a term used primarily in chemistry. However, Kezilahabi appears to have taken this term from Mircea Eliade's work, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (first published in 1957), because Kezilahabi refers to this book several times in his doctoral dissertation.

In The Sacred and the Profane, Eliade focuses on circular time as one way to understand the existence of a "religious man." According to Eliade, the religious man lives in ordinary profane or continuous time, and in the sacred time realised by a festival. A festival is a reenactment of the creation of the universe. Therefore, the periodic festival brings the religious man back to the same sacred time that manifested in the previous year's festival or the festival of a century earlier. In other words, the religious man resides when the world is in statu nascendi and tries to be reborn by symbolically participating in the annihilation and recreation of the world (Eliade, 1959: 80).

In *Mzingile*, the term "status nascendi" is appropriate because it describes the moment of the world's birth to which one repeatedly seeks to return to regain new vitality. As seen in the quotes above, the protagonist and his wife, who survived the nuclear war's devastation, are aware that they were amid the world's new birth.

Eliade also argues that destruction, similar to the nuclear war depicted in *Mzingile*, was necessary to precede the rebirth of the world. In The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History (first published in 1954), he writes: "any form whatever, by the mere fact that it exists as such and endures, necessarily loses vigor and becomes worn; to recover vigor, it must be reabsorbed into the formless if only for an instant" (Eliade, 1971: 88). This possibility of destruction prior to rebirth was also highly advocated by the madman in *Mzingile*.

> "This world needs new light!" A madman shouted, then continued, "But it won't be before the destruction and calamity!" (Kezilahabi, 1991: 5).
>
> "Ulimwengu unahitaji mwanga mpya!" Kichaa alipiga kelele na kisha akaongezea, "Lakini hiyo haitakuwa kabla ya uharibifu na maafa!"

Eliade's sentence is an appropriate summary of *Mzingile*. The disappearance of an entire humanity (due to a deluge, flood, submersion of a continent, etc.) is never complete, according to Mircea Eliade in The Myth of the Eternal Return, because a new humanity is created from a pair of survivors (Eliade 1971). Eliade's thoughts and the themes of the two novels–the circles of destruction and regeneration–are thus clearly comparable.

Kezilahabi uses Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane to critique Camara Laye's Radiance of the King and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood in his doctoral dissertation (Kezilahabi, 1985). Regarding Petals of Blood, Kezilahabi points out that prayers are offered to mythological and legendary figures during despair. Kezilahabi makes reference to the circular time in Eliade's The Sacred and the Profane when he says that the purpose of prayer is to reaffirm the "paradigm of 'creation-destruction-creation'" and to reactualize primordial time (Kezilahabi, 1985: 298).

Based on the above, it is likely that Kezilahabi was influenced by Eliade's thoughts in some way at the stage of conceiving the theme of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. Therefore, I may be able to refer to Eliade's thoughts for the two novels' hidden meanings. According to Eliade, in the circular time of destruction and regeneration, "no event is irreversible and no transformation is final" (Eliade, 1971: 89). The circular structure of the two novels conveys the concept that there is neither absolute nor universal truth nor definitive and irreproducible destruction.

4.3 Similarity to Indian Thought

Eliade's theory can also be used to partially explain the significance of the device that increases uncertainty, the second factor that makes understanding the two novels elusive. Indian philosophy expert Eliade often linked his discussion of the circle of destruction and regeneration to Indian thought. In The Sacred and the Profane, he describes how the repeated cycle of creation and destruction is counted in India and states, "This is what happened in India, where the doctrine of cosmic

cycles (yugas) was elaborately developed" (Eliade, 1959: 107). According to Eliade, a single cosmic cycle comprises 12,000 divine years. It takes 360 years to live a divine year. Therefore, a single cosmic cycle lasted for 4,320,000 years in human time. The life of Brahma is made up of 100 of these "years," or 311,000 milliards of human years, according to Eliade. Even so, the god's life span is not infinite because the gods are not eternal and cosmic creations and destructions always follow one another (Eliade, 1959: 108).

This repetition of the cosmos' fundamental rhythm became a pan-Indian doctrine that plunged Indian intellectuals into despair. Because this eternal repetition meant "eternal return to existence," in other words, "indefinite prolongation of suffering and slavery" (Eliade, 1959: 109). Eliade states that for them the only hope was "nonreturn-to-existence," or "final deliverance," but in The Sacred and the Profane he does not go further into its meaning or the method of liberation (Eliade, 1959: 109).

Eliade's paper "Time and Eternity in Indian Thought" included in Man and Time (1973) refers to a method of liberation from the eternal return. According to Eliade, the idea that "not only do human existence and history, with all their empires, dynasties, revolutions, and counterrevolutions without number, prove to be ephemeral and in a sense unreal" is the logical conclusion drawn from the enormous numbers associated with the cosmic cycle (Eliade, 1973: 181). All existence in "Great Time," is evanescent, illusory, and ontologically nonexistent. The endless cycle of creation and destruction inevitably conveys the lessons of world abandonment. Therefore, a religion of Indian origin seeks spiritual liberation by renouncing attachment to the existence of this world, pursuing absolute reality and the principle that dominates the universe, and becoming one with it.

In 2.2, I argued that the protagonist's unreliable narration and the frequent use of words such as "hallucination," "forgetfulness" and "dream" contribute to the elusiveness of *Nagona* and *Mzingile*. This uncertainty in the two novels is similar to the unreality of the existence of this world in Indian thought. Specifically, the function of the word "joke" (mzaha) resembles the Indian conception of thought. When events are narrated in the two novels, the preface, "It all started as a joke," and the conclusion, "It was like a joke," are frequently repeated. As a result, the narrative becomes suspicious, and the reality of the events is lost. The narrator distances himself from the events unfolding before him, as if they were occurring in another dimension that had nothing to do with him.

In *Mzingile*, an old man who was once the only God directly expresses the unreality of the world. Following is a conversation between the protagonist and an elderly man who is sleeping in a hut hidden from the world, having "empty dreams."

> "(Omitted) Now I have a joking relationship with everyone. Everyone is looking for opportunity to make fun of me."

> "Every day, people make wishes. People pray and hope that their wishes will come true."
> "That's exactly what making fun is."
> "But people are not joking."
> (Omitted)
> "Life itself is a bigger joke than anything else. That is why we can live."
> "Whom should people now address their requests?"
> "To their own desires."
> "Are you never going to listen to people's wishes again?"
> "Even if I hear them, I will immediately forget them" (Kezilahabi, 1991: 13).

> "(Omitted) Sasa wote ni watani zangu. Kila mmoja anatafuta kisa cha kunitania."
> "Lakini kila siku wanatoa maombi yao. Wanasali na wanataka magetemeo yao yatimizwe."
> "Huo ndio utani wenyewe."
> "Lakini hawafanyi mzaha."
> (Omitted)
> "Maisha yenyewe ni mzaha mkubwa kuliko yote. Ndiyo maana yanaweza kuishika."
> "Sasa wataelekeza wapi maombi yao?"
> "Katika utashi wao."
> "Kwa hiyo, hutasikiliza tena maombi yao?"
> "Kama nitayasikia nitayasahau upesi iwezekanayo."

The declaration by the once only God, who is the symbol of absolutism, that "life itself is a joke," indicates the importance of the word "joke" in *Mzingile*.

The protagonist of *Nagona* has amnesia, while the protagonist of *Mzingile* is on the border between dreams and reality. They tell their stories from the perspective of stepping back from events and refusing to relate to the material world, to impart lessons to their readers. It is a state of mind that can be expressed by the word "joke," which shares many similarities with the Indian concept of abandoning attachment to the world.

If the circle of destruction and regeneration in the two novels was influenced by Eliade's thought, it is possible that Kezilahabi was referring to Eliade's description of Indian thought, which developed the concept of circular time into the idea of the world's unreality.

5.0 Conclusion

This study reexamines *Nagona* and *Mzingile* using the methodology of comparative literature, focusing on potential intertextual links between Kezilahabi's fiction and the religious thought of Mircea Eliade, particularly his

engagement with circular time and Indian philosophy. Unlike the definitive and confident tone of Kezilahabi's doctoral dissertation, these two novels convey a pervasive sense of uneasiness, uncertainty, and unreality, suggesting a greater closeness to Indian thought. *Nagona* and *Mzingile* are far from the political claims of the Western-African dichotomy and African liberation highlighted in previous research. These philosophical novels embody teachings that regard the world as ephemeral, illusory, and ultimately unworthy of attachment. This study has proposed an alternative reading of Kezilahabi's experimental fiction—one that moves beyond socio-political and ideological binaries, and instead situates the novels within a broader metaphysical, spiritual, and intertextual discourse, offering a new perspective on Kiswahili literature.

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