

Decolonial Subversions

2020

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Humanity/personhood in the
Swahili philosophy of *utu*

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Cognates of *ubuntu*: Humanity/personhood in the Swahili philosophy of *utu*¹

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Abstract

This article interrogates the humanistic foundations of African philosophy, as expressed in the philosophy of *ubuntu* for instance. It does this through a study of the Swahili discourse on *utu* (humanity, humankind, personhood). To do this, the article explores the semantics of the Swahili language and its idioms and sayings and goes on to examine how these are reflected in several genres of Swahili poetry, prose fiction, but also theoretical discussions among experts in radio broadcasts, internet blogs or in interviews reproduced in literature on Swahili philosophy. The article isolates several distinct understandings of *utu*: next to the "cultural" concept, developed both affirmatively and polemically across a range of genres from traditional metric poetry to popular literature and blogs, there are specific readings of the concept in *ujamaa* novels, in existentialist literature, and in experimental prose fiction. The article observes that one important vector of these understandings is religion; they offer divergent answers to the question of how far *utu* is derived from religious faith. This concern with religion is practically absent both from the discussions on *ubuntu* in southern African cultures and from the variations on humanistic philosophy in West Africa. Having raised the question of what makes "African humanism" different from the conceptualizations of humanity in other regions and from other historical forms of humanism in the world, the article suggests that it is the lack of interest in the non-human world to which humanistic philosophy would respond and the absence of a "natural philosophy" as a counterpart of life focalized through humanity and theorized in human-centred terms, that characterizes the many mutations of humanism in Africa.

Keywords: ubuntu, humanism, humanity, utu, Swahili philosophy, Swahili literature

¹ This article is an adapted English translation of an article published originally in Swahili under the title "*Lidstvi ni Utu? Ubinadamu baina ya Tamaduni.*" *Swahili Forum* 14 (2007): 89-134. An open-access full-text version can be downloaded here: <https://ul.qucosa.de/api/qucosa%3A11684/attachment/ATT-0/>.

1. Introduction: "African humanism"?

African worldviews are believed to be built on humanistic principles: "I know of no African philosopher who has not argued that African philosophy is humanistic," states Lewis R. Gordon (2008: 186). Yet what does this "African humanism" mean? Gordon goes on to define humanism as "a value system that places priority on the welfare, worth, and dignity of human beings" (ibid.). Yet, is the human not present in any philosophy? What makes African thought humanistic that is missing in non-African thought?

There are two types of relating "African humanism" to existing belief systems. Suggesting "much similarity in the cosmologies that ground the religious practices [of many indigenous ethnic groups in Africa], especially those of people south of the Sahara", Gordon (2008: 186) derives "African humanism" from the ontological hierarchy inherent in those shared cosmologies, which places God on top, followed by spiritual beings, ancestors, and then humans. Animals, plants and inanimate nature follow in rank after humans. Similar arguments have been made earlier by Placide Tempels (1959) and Alexis Kagame (1957). The ethical and social qualifications of "being human" are then related to the interconnectedness of ontology, ethics and law: disturbing an *ontological* order is an *ethical* problem that needs to be rectified by *legal* measures.

By contrast, a number of African philosophers argue that the root of "African humanism" lies in social practice. They see the core of "African humanism" in "African communitarianism" or "communalism" (see Bongmba 2005, Etta, Esowe, Asukwo 2016, Eze 2008, Metz 2015, Táíwò 2016, van den Berg 1999, Venter 2004, Wafula 2003), which places the emphasis on the primacy of the being of the community. The individual is tied to the social fabric and defined through the community: "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", "mtu ni watu". "I" is because "we" are. Humans can only become fully human in and through community. It is through this dependence of humanity on community that "being human" acquires social and moral dimensions.

Several concepts of "human" and "person"² are elaborated in the field of academic African philosophy. In Yorùbá, Segun Gbadegesin (1991: 27) insists that the word *èniyàn* has a moral and normative meaning: to say that someone "is not *èniyàn*" (*kì ìsé èniyàn*) means that person lacks morality. This normative content of "being human" is linked to the relationship of the person to his/her community: "A person whose existence and personality is dependent on the community is expected in turn to contribute to the continued existence of the community. This is the normative dimension of the concept of *Èniyàn*" (Gbadegesin 1991: 58). Similar connotations are at the basis of the South African philosophy of *ubuntu*. The concept has always been present in local philosophies. But it was in the context of apartheid and especially the post-apartheid reconciliation processes that *ubuntu* was deployed to build the "rainbow nation".

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one of the people who brought this traditional philosophy into political discourse to facilitate the continuing dissipation of the spirit of apartheid and to trigger forgiveness during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He said:

² Most African languages do not have the terminological distinction between a "human" and a "person", unless introduced by philosophizing users.

Africans have a thing called ubuntu. It is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go the extra mile for the sake of another. We believe that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging. (quoted here: <http://www.harisingh.com/UbuntuAge.htm>)

Shutte concurs with Tutu:

I am going to present the African ethical vision contained in the idea of UBUNTU. For simplicity's sake I will speak of "the" African vision, although I do not want to suggest that there is only one. It must be remembered that I am talking about traditional African ideas rather than contemporary ones, ideas that pre-exist the influence of European culture. I am not writing as an anthropologist. I am not interested in African ideas just because they are African, nor in the whole range of African culture with all its local differences. I am interested only in a central set of ideas because they seem to me to be both true and important, and to supply something that our dominant scientific culture lacks. (2001: 16)

While in European philosophy, community is often conceptualized as secondary, as an amalgamation of individuals, *ubuntu* constructs personhood starting with the community: it is not the "I" that constructs a "we" but a "we" that constitutes an "I". To be a human being is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and establish humane relations with them. Life is the process of becoming a person and acquiring humanity through building relationships with others:

UBUNTU is the name for the acquired quality of humanity that is the characteristic of a fully developed person and the community with others that results. It thus comprises values, attitudes, feelings, relationships and activities, the full range of expressions of the human spirit." (Shutte 2001: 31)

Also Mogobe B. Ramose sees *ubuntu* as *the African philosophy par excellence*:

Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy. the be-ing of an African in the universe is inseparably anchored upon *ubuntu*. Similarly, the African tree of knowledge stems from *ubuntu* with which it is connected indivisibly. *Ubuntu* then is the wellspring flowing with African ontology and epistemology. . . . African philosophy has long been established in and through *ubuntu*. (1999: 49)

Similarly to Gordon (2008), he believes in *ubuntu* being common to all Africans:

Apart from a linguistic analysis of *ubuntu*, a persuasive philosophical argument can be made that there is a "family atmosphere", that is, a kind of philosophical affinity and kinship among and between the indigenous people of Africa. (...) the blood circulating through the "family" members is the same in its basics. (1999: 49)

Ramose divides the word in *ubu-ntu*. While *ubu-* captures ontology and being in general, the "enfolding being before it manifests itself in the concrete form or mode of ex-istence [sic] of a particular entity" (1999: 50), *-ntu* expresses epistemology, in that it is oriented towards "unfolding" through "incessant continual concrete manifestation through particular forms and modes of be-ing" (1999: 50).

Ramose goes on to quote several expressions about *botho* (the Sotho version of *ubuntu*): *Motho ke motho ka batho* meaning "to be a human being [sic] is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others and . . . establish humane relations with them" (1999: 52) or "*ke motho – gase motho*" (literally, s/he is a person – s/he is not a person), which demonstrates that the affirmation or negation of *ubu-ntu* is an "ethical, social, legal judgement of human worth and human conduct" (1999: 52-53).

Concepts similar to *ubuntu* were employed in state ideologies of Zimbabwe, where Samkange's *hunhuism* relies on the same concept in Shona (*hunhu* or *unhu*), and Zambia, whose president, Kenneth Kaunda, integrated "African humanism" into his state ideology and reinterpreted it in a distinctly socialist way (Heising 1990: 45). Common to all these concepts of "humanism" is the primacy of a normative definition of humanity, that is, "being human" means having social and moral attributes. A biological definition of humanity is absent or irrelevant, and the conceptualization of the non-human world is generally less developed and less central in these philosophies than that of human qualities and interactions, which leads to the philosophy of *ubuntu* being characterized as "anthropocentric" (Horsthemke 2015, 2017) and to efforts to bring the non-human world into the equation (LenkaBula 2008).

Swahili philosophy shares this fundamental humanistic vision of reality and can be rightly called a humanistic philosophy: it focuses on the human sphere, deals primarily with human interactions, and develops a human-centred vision of the world. This article interrogates this humanistic focus in asking how "humanity" (*utu*) is constructed in such a philosophy and how life is focalized through humanity in all its aspects. To do this, it examines a body of texts that includes a variety of Swahili texts pertaining to a range of intellectual discourses: from language itself and its sayings to online resources and Swahili poetry and prose fiction.

2. What is *utu*?

In order to clarify the meaning of *utu* in Swahili language and culture, I will follow a two-step procedure similar to that adopted by Kresse (2007). First, I will analyse the semantic field of "humanity" in the Swahili language, comprising *utu* and several concepts related to it (especially *ubinadamu*). I will examine how the human being is defined in everyday language. It will be seen that *utu* is only one notion in the semantic field of humanity's self-definition, together with other words used in Swahili. The meaning of *utu* is further complemented by the occurrences of *utu* in several proverbs and sayings of the Swahili. The meaning of *utu* thus isolated will be referred to as the "cultural" or the "ordinary" meaning of the concept.

But the meaning of *utu* and of other ethical and philosophical concepts is not exhausted by everyday usage. In every language and culture, it is mainly expert debates that contribute to the definition of these concepts. For this reason, I will develop my analysis by looking at how the concept of *utu* and other concepts of this semantic field are reflected in Swahili scholarly traditions. Kai Kresse (2007) identifies Islamic scholarship, herbalism, and poetry as three intellectual trends which are important in the Mombasan cultural context. For Swahili culture more broadly, I argue it is important to consider a wider spectrum of

discourses, in particular the types of texts ranged under the term of "Swahili literature", such as various genres of poetry and the novel.

I will undertake this reflection on the concept of *utu* and other concepts related to *utu* in four stages determined by two factors: the logic of the development of the concept and a historical perspective. They show the major changes in the definition of *utu* as they happen in specific historical eras. The first stage is a systematization and development of the "cultural meaning". This concept of *utu* is firmly grounded in a transcendent source of values and of meaning: God. What is good is what God advised humans to do. The concept of *utu* undergoes only slight modifications in the literature of *ujamaa*, which, unlike its atheistic European counterpart (e.g. Eastern European socialist literature), depends strongly on traditional culture and its values, including religion.

The firm grounding of morality in a transcendent entity is removed in existentialist writing, an anti-metaphysically oriented philosophical and literary trend focusing on the immanence of the condition of the human being in the world. The removal of the transcendent ground can result in an overly negative and pessimistic vision of human life as meaningless. But it can also lead to a vindication of forms of transcendence that are present within the scope of human existence, such as procreation or creative work, and to an accentuation of values immanent to human life. This stage of the development sees the "perfection of humanity" in terms of experience in this world. A fundamentally realistic notion of the human condition is left intact in existentialist writing, with its characteristic qualities such as personal identity and unity, a temporal and spatial setting, a distinction of states of mind, or the fact that the human being in question is alive.

A systematic violation of all of these conditions is found in several authors' works since the 1990s in the Swahili literature. This trend is characterized by a profound deconstruction of the *conditio humana*: of the unity of the subject, the setting in time and space, we find a reversal of causality, the uncertainty whether characters are alive or dead, awake or asleep. As some literary critics argue (Khamis 2005), these reflect the loss of a unified "reality" referent in a hybridized postcolonial society. An example is K. W. Wamitila's novel *Bina-Adamu!*, which effectuates a specific deconstruction both in its protagonist and in the figure of the intended reader.

2.1. "Cultural meaning" of *utu*: semantic field of "humanity", sayings and proverbs

The Swahili language has an uncommonly extensive vocabulary related to the question of the self-definition of the human being because this vocabulary draws on two sources: on words of Bantu origin and on words of Arabic origin. For this reason, there is the duality of *utu* and *ubinadamu/uanadamu*, *mtu* and *binadamu/mwanadamu*. There is also the duality of *kiumbe* and *mahuluku*, the human being as created by God. On top of this, there is also the word *mja* which is used in the context of the Islamic religion in the meaning of the human being as God's servant or slave (a Swahili rendition of the Arabic *abd-*, attached in male names to the 99 names of Allah). There is also the word *mlimwengu*, which is used mostly in the plural (*walimwengu*) and which refers to humans as inhabitants of the world. In the singular, it features in Shaaban Robert's poem called "Mlimwengu" (1969: 29-30, transl. into English as "Mankind" by Ndulute 1994: 28-29).

Some Swahili speakers differentiate between *utu* and *mtu*, on the one hand, and *ubinadamu* and *binadamu*, on the other hand. They maintain that *utu* and *mtu* are words with a normative moral meaning, whereas *ubinadamu* and *binadamu* express humanity as one species among others, without the normative content of having desirable moral qualities. As Bakari Abeid from Zanzibar, an expert in Zanzibari culture, explains:

Mtu ni kiumbe kilekile kinachoitwa mwanaadamu. Mtu anatoka ndani ya mwanaadamu, au utu unatoka ndani ya ubinadamu. Lakini katika ubinadamu mna wanaadamu hawa na wanaadamu hawa. Kuna wasokuwa na hishima. Mtu kuwa hana hishima haimwondolei kuwa yeye ni binadamu. Bado binadamu. Mwizi binadamu, mlevi binadamu, mwongo binadamu, fidhuli binadamu, fitna binadamu, hiana binadamu, mpika majungu binadamu, mgombanishaji watu binadamu, anopenda kutawanya watu wanosikilizana binadamu. Sasa mtu ni yule asiokuwa na vitendo hivi na akawa na vinyume vya hivi. Kwa mfano, ukweli, hishima, adabu, ukarimu, utii, unyenyekevu, usikivu, kupenda watu, ndugu, marafiki, kukimu ulionao kulea wanao vizuri; mazuri yote yanapofanywa na mtu, huo ndio utu wenyewe. Sasa hiyo hishima, hizo adabu, kila kitu kimo ndani ya utu, huo ndio utu wenyewe huo. Kuwa na vitu hivi ndio unathibithisha huo utu. Kama huna vitu hivyo unabakia ni mwanaadamu, lakini si mtu. Kwa sababu utu ni sifa maalumu uwe nazo, kama huna, unabaki mwanaadamu. Kwa sababu ndiyo aina ya kiumbe wewe, mwanaadamu. Lakini si mtu, maana huna utu. Sasa utu ni mambo yote mazuri, ndio utu. (Abeid & Mwinyi 2003)

Mtu is the same being that is called *mwanadamu*. *Mtu* is part of *mwanadamu*, or humanity (*utu*) is part of humankind (*ubinadamu*). But in humankind there are different kind of humans. There are those who have no worth. If you don't have worth, it does not mean you are no longer human. You are still human. A thief is human, a drunkard is human, a liar is human, an insulting person is human, intrigue is human, perfidy is human, a conspirator is human, one who divides people is human, one who likes to separate people who get on well is human. Now, *mtu* is the one who does not do these things and possesses their opposites. For instance, truthfulness, respect, good manners, generosity, obedience, humility, attentiveness, love for people, relatives, friends, providing for those you are with to help raise their children well; all the good things done by a person (*mtu*), that is humanity (*utu*). Now that respect, those manners, everything is within *utu*, that itself is *utu*. Having these confirms that *utu*. If you don't have these, you are still human (*mwanadamu*), but you are not *mtu*. Since *utu* is a specific characteristic to have, if you don't have it, you are still human (*mwanadamu*). For you are a type of creature, human (*mwanadamu*). But you are not *mtu*, because you do not have *utu*. Now *utu* is all those good things, that is *utu*.

Also the word *kiumbe*, "creature", is used to talk about humans without the moral connotations. As Abdilatif Abdalla wrote in his poem, "Kichu Hakiwi ni Uchu":

Waliwo na sifa hizo [mali, nguvu, cheo], viumbe niwanenao
Mali wangakuwa nazo, ukubwa wangawa nao
Wangawa na nguvu hizo, wadhiliyazo wenzao
Siweki viumbe hao, kwenye daraja ya watu
(Abdalla 1973: 87)

Those who have those qualities [wealth, power, rank], those I call creatures

*Although they have wealth, although they have status
Although they have those powers with which they oppress others
I do not place these creatures on the level of human beings (watu).*

Of course, the word *kiumbe* does not only apply to humans but also to animals. In this poem, Abdilatif Abdalla compares humans lacking qualities associated with *utu* to elephants, who are also *viumbe*.

But other speakers use the words *utu* and *ubinadamu* in the same meaning. Ndesanjo Macha, a lawyer and journalist from Tanzania, has written an article that refer to a famous Swahili saying. The title of this article is "Mtu ni utu sio dini!" ([To be] a human being is [to have] humanity, not [to have] religion!). When he refers to his article elsewhere, he quotes the former as "gumzo lile la Binadamu ni Utu" (that talk of *binadamu* being *utu*, Macha 2004b: 3), and he uses both the words, *utu* and *ubinadamu*, in the same meaning. Other numerous examples of the synonymous use of these two words are in the writing of George A. Mhina and Asha S. Kibwana Kunemah, which will be dealt with in detail in this article.

Several Swahili proverbs and sayings are related to *utu*: *mtu ni utu* ("[to be] a human being is [to have] humanity") emphasizes the moral content of *utu*. *Mtu ni watu* ("[to be] a human being is [to be among] people") underscores the social characteristics of *utu*. *Utu ni kitendo* ("humanity is action") stresses the importance of manifesting *utu* through actions. And finally, *mtu si kitu* ("a human being is not a thing") means that the value of a human being is of a different kind than that of things and it is impossible to treat a human being like an instrument used to further one's own purposes (see Kresse 2007: 140). On the other hand, it can also mean "mtu si lolote, si chochote, yaani hana thamani, hana udaima" ("a human being is nothing, has no value, no lasting existence"), as William Mkufya pointed out to me in an email on 11 July 2006. It then refers to human vulnerability and the impermanence of human existence.

Whether we distinguish the meanings of *utu* and *ubinadamu* or not, these two concepts, along with the other concepts (such as *kiumbe*, *mja* etc.), are parts of the semantic field of the self-definitions of a specific being, the human being. In the following sections, I will examine how these two concepts, *utu* and *ubinadamu*, together with other concepts from this semantic field, are reflected, developed and transformed in Swahili written literature.

2.2. *Utu* in literature

2.2.1. Developments of the "cultural meaning" of *utu*

The "cultural meaning" is, comprehensibly, the most common meaning of *utu* in Swahili culture. A long explication of the concept of *utu* has been presented in the *utenzi* by the Mombasan poet Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo (1936-2019), *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* (*Utenzi* about [the proverb] *mtu ni utu*). Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo was one of the most famous contemporary Swahili poets. His poetry has been published in several collections, such as *Malenga wa Mvita* (1971), *Taa ya Umalenga* (1982), and *Poems from Kenya* (1966), in Lyndon Harries's English translation. The long poem called *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* was written in 1960 in the month of Ramadhan, as the poet explains in his introduction (Nassir Juma Bhalo 1979: 1), but it was only published 19 years later, that is, in 1979.

Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu is divided into ten sections, entitled "Chanzo" ("Beginning", st. 1 - 33), "Dhamiri" ("Intention", st. 34 - 57), "Upendano" ("Mutual Love", st. 58 - 187), "Mazingatio" ("Caution", st. 188 - 211), "Unyumba" ("Domestic Sphere", st. 212 - 280), "Pendekezo" ("Suggestion", st. 281 - 296), "Mbasi Mwema" ("Good Companion", st. 297 - 316), "Zinduka" ("Awaken", st. 317 - 431), "Mtunzi" ("Author", st. 432 - 444) and "Umalizo" ("Conclusion", st. 445 - 457). The first verses are a prayer and they clarify the reasons why the poet has composed this *utenzi*. The final sections identify the poet and the situation in which he wrote the poem. It is the middle sections that are the actual explanation of the diverse characteristics of *utu*.

In conformity with the cultural meaning of *utu*, "humanity" is no mere biological characteristic to Ahmad Nassir. It is a normative moral concept, defined through a set of characteristics described in the middle sections of the poem: *upendano* (kindness among people) without *fitina* (intrigues, instigating discord) and *ubaguzi* (discrimination), such as *ukabila* (tribalism); *unyumba* (good relations in the domestic sphere); the qualities of *mbasi mwema* (true friend); and *dini* (religion) – these are imperative to follow for everyone who would like to be called *mtu* by his fellow-humans (see Kresse 2007: 139-175). While these qualities define having *utu*, Ahmad Nassir insists there is no "perfection" in humanity:

Maana mwana-Adamu
Ameumbwa hakutimu
Mkamilifu adhwimu
Ni M'ngu pweke sikiya. (1979: 12, st. 56)

*Namely, a human being
Was created imperfect
The perfect glorious one
Is only God alone, listen.*

To the pious Muslim, there is no perfect human being; only God is perfect.

Ahmad Nassir's half-brother, Abdilatif Abdalla, contests this opinion. In *Sauti ya Dhiki* (Voice of Agony, 1973), a collection of poems written during his prison sentence (1969-1972) incurred by Abdilatif Abdalla's resistance to Kenyatta's regime after independence, two poems engage explicitly with definitions of humanity (*utu* and *ubinadamu*), "Kichu Hakiwi ni Uchu" (lit. A thing is not humanity, that is, possessions do not define humanity) and "Ukamilifu wa Mja" (Perfection of the human being). In these two poems, Abdilatif first presents negative definitions of humanity: he explains what humanity *is not*. The positive definitions that he arrives at are not only opposites of these negative ones, but they evoke values of a diametrically different type.

"Kichu Hakiwi ni Uchu" starts off playfully in Kigunya dialect:

Ni nyani ambidhiweo, yu nchu kwa chake kichu?
Ni nyani nnena hao, ntaka hadaa vachu
Nadhengee vangineo, jura hatopacha kwechu
Nchu kwambiwa yu nchu, ni uchuwe kwa wendiwe
(Abdalla 1973: 82)

*Who is said to be a human being for his/her possessions?
Who ever says that, wants to deceive people
He should look for others, a silly person will not deceive us*

A human being is human because of his/her humanity towards others

In stanzas 13-17, the poem shifts to Kimvita and defines the meaning of "kitu" (st. 18 and 23-25). Then the poet continues to search for that thing that makes a human being human. This thing is not wealth, power or social status. An elephant, even if it has all of these things, cannot be called a human being. People with wealth (st. 30), power (st. 31-32) or high social status (st. 33), if they fail to use these well, are like that elephant: they are called "creatures" (st. 35), but they do not deserve to be called "humans". That which makes a creature merit the name of human is the quality of his/her behaviour towards others: the readiness to help, not to oppress others, especially those who are lower than him/herself in social rank (see also the poem by Ahmad Nassir, "Wapenda Mtu kwa Kitu", Nassir 1971: 163). Abdilatif concludes by stating (st. 44):

Basi tusidanganyike, tusiwe mbwa kuhadawa
Mtu si kwa kitu chake, japo kwacho asifiwa
Utu wake kwa wenzake, ndiwo wa kuhisabiwa
Vyengine sitaambiwa, nami nikaviamini
(Abdalla 1973: 88)

*So do not let us be mistaken and deceived
A human being is not human for his/her possession, even if s/he is renowned for it
It is his/her humanity towards others that counts
If I am told otherwise, I will not believe it*

Instead of the characteristics of the negative definition, a human being is here defined through his/her *utu*, which in this poem is understood as a person's kind acts towards others.

A similar procedure is pursued in "Ukamilifu wa Mja" (Abdalla 1973: 12-14). The poet first enumerates bodily parts and states each time that those do not constitute the perfection of a human being; then, like Ahmad Nassir, he asserts that only God is perfect:

Hakuna mja kamili, ndivyo twalivyoambiwa
Kadhalika mimi hili, nasema li sawa sawa
Mkamilifu wa kweli, nakubali ni Moliwa
Maana yangu 'tatowa, ya mja kukamilika (1973: 14, st. 16)

*There is no perfect human being, that is what we were told
And myself, I say this is correct
The truly perfect one, I agree, is God
I will give you my concept of the perfection of a human being*

However, what makes this poem distinctive and different from both "Kichu Hakiwi ni Uchu" and from Ahmad Nassir's elaborations, is the fact that, in the following stanzas, Abdilatif does present a definition of "the perfect human being"; it is derived from the capacity to "[k]ufikiya daraja, ile aliyoumbiwa" (st. 17) ("to achieve the level upon which it was created"). This is then defined through experiential characteristics:

Aiyelewe duniya, kwa marefu na mapana
Azipite zile ndiya, za miba mitungu sana
Avuke bahari piya, zilo na virefu vina
Hiyo ni yangu maana, ya mja kukamilika
Akishafikwa na hayo, si kwamba ndiyo akhiri

Lazima awe na moyo, wa kuweza kusubiri
 Kuyasubiri ambayo, yote yatayomjiri
 Kama huyo 'tamkiri, ni mja mekamilika (Abdalla 1973: 14, st. 18-19)

*To understand the world in its depth and its breadth
 To pass those paths with very painful thorns
 To cross oceans, too, that are very deep
 That is my definition of a perfect human being
 Once she has been through that, that is not yet the end
 The human being must also have a patient heart
 Ready to wait for whatever will happen to her
 One like that, I will admit, is a perfect human being*

"Human perfection" is not defined through qualities or properties, through objects such as bodily parts, through wealth, power, or social status, also not, as in Ahmad Nassir's poem, by the attribution of moral qualities (kindness, friendship, righteousness etc.). "Human perfection" is defined by experience, especially painful experience, and by an openness towards the future and acceptance of future events. This view of humanity, strikingly innovative against the religious backdrop, brings Abdilatif's poetry close to the philosophical trend of existentialism. Indeed, reacting to centuries of oppression, a large part of African literature in general is inherently existentialist, exposing human existence in its pain and anxiety – and the world as a place difficult to understand and often rendered absurd (see Rettová 2016). We will return to existentialist understandings of humanity in later sections.

As Kai Kresse emphasizes in his discussion of Ahmad Nassir's *utenzi*, it strives to present an explication of *utu* that is valid regardless of the cultural context or the historical era of its composition. It is the meaning of *utu* as such, not a definition of *utu* pertaining to a specific historical period or the culture of a specific nation or ethnic group. The cultural and historical setting can only strengthen or fail to strengthen the characteristics of *utu* in people. Based on the interview held with Ahmad Nassir, Kai Kresse explains:

A remarkable feature of this whole consideration of morality in a Swahili context has been the mostly ahistorical character of *utu* as it has been presented. (...) It is noteworthy that Ahmad Nassir still agrees wholly with this explication of *utu* that he wrote almost forty years ago; he confirmed this to me repeatedly during our conversations. (Kresse 2007: 166)

This condition of Ahmad Nassir's definition of *utu* being independent of history is even clearer if we acknowledge the references that *utenzi* makes to several famous Swahili poems from different historical epochs. So for example, the section called "Unyumba" ("The domestic sphere") is reminiscent of *Utendi wa Mwana Kupona*, a famous *utenzi* composed by Mwana Kupona binti Mshamu in the 19th century (Allen 1971, Hichens and Werner 1934, Werner 1917). The section called "Mbasi Mwema" ("Good friend") resembles a poem by Muyaka bin Haji (ca. 1776-1840), a renowned Swahili poet from Mombasa. His poem is called "Mwandani" ("Friend", see Abdulaziz 1979: 180-181, see also Hichens 1940: 67). In the same way as Muyaka, Ahmad Nassir suggests several ways to test your friend in order to see whether he is a true friend.

The section called "Zinduka" ("Awaken") uses very powerful imagery to expose the impermanence and degradation of beauty and value in this world, advising its readers to

follow religion. This section references another famous Swahili poem, *Utendi wa Al-Inkishafi* composed by Sayyid Abdallah bin Ali bin Nasiri (1720-1820) in the 18th century (Hichens 1939, Allen 1977, Abdullah 1996). These intertextual references evoke the whole tradition of Swahili poetry and relate the meaning of the concept of *utu* in *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu* to this long tradition of learning.

As Ahmad Nassir explains in his interview with Kai Kresse, "*utu, kwa jumla, ni vitendo vyema*" ("*utu, in general, means good actions*", interview 27 August 1999, quoted in Kresse 2007: 170), and in his *Utenzi wa Mtu ni Utu*, goodness is defined according to the standards of Islamic religion. But as Kresse's Swahili informants, including Ahmad Nassir, emphasized, *utu* does not depend on Islam or religion in general. In spite of this, these informants were unable to explain what makes good actions have this characteristic of goodness if not their conformity to religious teachings. As Kresse says:

While for Nassir, as he confirmed to me in interviews, *utu* is not a religious or Islamic concept, the conceptual framework here is nevertheless reliant on a conception of God for the full explication of *utu*, and in this respect he concurs with common social knowledge. (Kresse 2002: 172-173)

According to this explanation, the "cultural concept" of *utu*, also in its exposition in literature, depends on a transcendent source of values and meaning. This source is usually God: good actions are good because God has ordered the human being to act like that. As we will see, this condition will change dramatically in existentialist literature, which removes the transcendent source of values. But before that, let us examine a few more literary examples of the "cultural meaning" of *utu*.

The majority of "didactic literature" in Swahili employs the cultural meaning of *utu* – from the writings of Shaaban Robert to the novels of the present day. Mwalimu Asha S. Kibwana Kunemah, in her 2003 novel called *Ubinadamu Tabia* (Humanity is [in] the character), explains the meaning of *ubinadamu* or *utu* through an allegorical story.

Mzee Hamisi has a single daughter called Manyenga. Because of his greed, he accepts proposals from seven suitors, although he only has that one daughter. In order to solve his problem, Mzee Hamisi goes to a native witch-doctor, Mzee Mwamba, who advises him to bring together young females of six animals - donkey, sheep, goat, dog, cat, and monkey - together with seven identical sets of clothes and a few other things in seven copies. Then these animals are enclosed in a single room together with Manyenga for seven days. After this time, seven daughters, all with Manyenga's looks, come out of the room and are married off to the seven men.

The happiness of Mzee Hamisi and his wife, Bi. Kidee, is mixed with doubts: how will they now recognize their real daughter? A few months after the wedding, Mzee Hamisi consults again Mzee Mwamba to ask him how he can identify the real Manyenga. Mzee Mwamba advises: those other six girls have a human face, but they are still animals and they still have their animal nature. Mzee Hamisi should visit all of his daughters and enquire with their husbands and in-laws about each girl's character and behaviour. Mzee Mwamba explains:

Kutokana na maelezo utakayopewa na huyu mume, juu ya tabia ya mkewe, basi wewe utalazimika kuyachuja na kuyapima. Ndipo utakapoyatolea tathmini kuwa binti huyo, ana tabia ya ki-utu, au ana tabia ya ki-nyama. Kama ana tabia ya

kinyama, basi utaichuja ile tabia kuwa ni tabia ya mnyama gani; kati ya wale wanyama sita, tuliowaunganisha na Manyenga. Utafanya hivyo kwa mabinti wote saba. Baada ya hapo, ndipo utakapomudu kumgundua binti gani aliolewa na mume gani. Au Manyenga wenu ameolewa na mume yupi. (Kibwana Kunemah 2003: 36)

You will have to scrutinize and examine what each husband will tell you about his wife's character. Then you will assess whether that specific daughter has a human or animal nature. If she has an animal nature, then you will determine which animal's nature that is, from the six animals that we merged with Manyenga. You will do this for all seven daughters. After that you will be able to recognize which daughter was married by which husband and which husband married your Manyenga.

Mzee Hamisi follows the advice. Every time he meets one of his daughters and enquires with his in-laws, he can recognize the nature of the bride: this one has a goat's character, this one has a dog's character. These daughters are not even very pleased to see him and their husbands tend to be the ones who take care of their guest more diligently. The final journey takes Mzee Hamisi to his real daughter, Manyenga. She welcomes him with great joy and asks about her mother with tears in her eyes. Seeing her father reminds her of her life back at home and she does not want to let him leave again. As the writer concludes:

Kwani huo, ndio utu wa mtu. Mtu ni fikra, mtu ni mawazo, mtu ni huzuni. Mtu ni utu! (Kibwana Kunemah 2003: 62)

For that is the humanity of a human person. A person is ideas, a person is thought, a person is sadness. A person is humanity!

The intention that led Mwalimu Asha S. Kibwana Kunemah to write this book, as she states in her introduction, was "[ku]elezea uasili wa wale binaadam ambao wana tabia ama matendo ya kinyama." ("to explain the origin of those humans who have animal characters or actions", Kibwana Kunemah 2003: 4). Using an allegorical tale, she criticizes the moral depravity of contemporary society:

[U]tamuona mtu ni mzuri wa sura na umbo. Lakini tabia zake, kamwe hazieleweki, mavazi yake mafupi kama mbuzi. Ukiongea naye anakujiibu ovyo ovyo kwa kukukemea. Ukizidi kumuonya, yuko tayari kwa mateke, japo awe ni mwanamke. (...) [M]atendo yake ni ya mchanganyiko wa hulka za wanyama kadhaa na silka ya utu nayo ipo kidogo. (Kibwana Kunemah 2003: 72)

You will see someone looking good in appearance. But his/her habits are incomprehensible, his/her clothes are short like a goat's. If you speak to him/her, s/he will answer to you poorly and with harshness. If you warn him/her, s/he will be ready to kick you, even if it is a woman. . . . His/her actions are a mixture of the characters of several animals and there is very little of human disposition.

Kibwana Kunemah explains the features of humanity thus:

U-Binaadam ni tabia ya kibinaadam wala siyo kukatwa ukatoka damu. Kwani hata mnyama pia, akikatwa sehemu, ni lazima atachuruzika damu. (Kibwana Kunemah 2003: 4)

Humanity is human character and not the fact that if you are cut you will bleed. Even an animal, if it is cut, it will surely trickle blood.

The "cultural meaning" of *utu*, as we have seen, generally depends on religion. I will conclude this section by discussing a text that strongly criticizes the idea of *utu* being dependent on religion. Ndesanjo Macha is a lawyer, journalist, blogger (*Jikomboe, Digital Africa*), poet and hip-hopper (Zuckermann 2005). He comes from Tanzania but is based in Vermont in the States these days, He examines the relationship between *utu* and religion in two articles that were published on the internet.³ Their titles speak clearly: "Mtu ni utu sio dini!" ("[To be] a human being is [to have] humanity, not [to have] religion!") and "Ukristo unafundisha upendo, Uislamu amani: Lakini mbona bado twauana?" ("Christianity teaches love, Islam peace: But why are we still killing each other?") (Macha 2004a, 2004b).

The basis of Macha's criticism is the conviction that religions are the causes behind evil in the world. They are used to justify wrongdoings as something that can be forgiven or that is even desirable and good. Macha explains:

Utashangaa wakati ambapo dini zahubiri upendo, ni rahisi zaidi watu kuua bila huruma kwa misingi hiyo hiyo ya dini. Au kuona mauaji yanayojengewa hoja za kidini kuwa ni sawa. (Macha 2004a: 1)

You will be surprised, but while religions preach love, it is easier for people to kill mercilessly on that same basis of religion. Or to consider massacres that are supported by religious arguments as acceptable.

He gives many examples from different countries and even examples drawn from history: the history of the Hebrews as they left Egypt, the history of the Crusades, the later conflicts between Muslims and Christians, the example of Amina Lawal from Nigeria, or the example of Northern Ireland and Southern Sudan (Macha 2004a: 1-2). There is no justification for this manslaughter, and Macha says firmly that "[h]akuna mtu mwenye haki ya kutoa uhai wa mtu mwingine. Si serikali wala si dini." ("there is no one who has the right to take the life of another person. No government and no religion", Macha 2004a: 2)

He questions why religions lead people astray, and he says that the basis of the evil actions sanctioned by religion is the failure to lead people to live well together. Instead, religions make them debate about religious issues and put one religion at war with another:

Kwanza ukichunguza vizuri utagundua kuwa watu wa dini tofauti wanapokutana mjadala unaozuka hapo huwa sio kuhusu jinsi ambavyo binadamu tunaweza kuishi kwa amani na upendo ila dini ipi ni ya uongo na ipi ni ya kweli.

Kumekuwa na mihadhara mingi tu ya dini hapo nchini ambapo mahubiri makubwa sio juu ya misingi ya dini hizo bali ni juu ya dini ipi ni ya uongo. Kitabu kipi sio cha Mungu. Nabii yupi kajituma mwenyewe. Waumini wa dini gani watakwenda motoni. (Macha 2004a: 2)

First, if you examine things well, you will discover that when people of different religions meet, the discussion that arises is not about the manner in which we people can live in peace and love but about which religion is false and which is true.

There have been too many religious lectures in this country where the main sermons are not about the foundations of those religions but about which religion is the wrong one. Which

³ The articles are no longer online. The author of this article has offline versions that were downloaded in 2006.

book is not God's. Which prophet has proclaimed himself. The believers of which religion will go to hell.

Macha calls religions of this kind "aina fulani ya ubeberu wa kiroho" ("a kind of spiritual imperialism"):

Yaani kuna tabia ya kila dini kutaka kuwa ndio ya kweli peke yake na nyingine zote ziwe ni za uongo. (Macha 2004a: 3)

So there is the nature of each religion that it wants to be the only right one and all the others are supposed to be false.

In spite of this, when Macha criticizes religions, his solution of these problems is not atheism:

[K]una jambo moja ambalo ni muhimu sana tukalielewa. Unaweza kuwa na Mungu bila kuwa na dini. Yaani sio lazima uwe na dini ili uwe na mahusiano na Muumba. (Macha 2004a: 3)

There is one thing that it is very important to understand. You can have God without having a religion. That is, you do not have to have a religion in order to have a relationship to the Creator.

And he goes on to say:

[M]ara nyingi dini huzuia binadamu kumwelewa Mungu vizuri! Yaani badala ya dini kuwa ndio njia ya kumjua Mungu inakuwa ndio kikwazo. (Macha 2004a: 3)

Many times religions prevent people from understanding God properly! That means that instead of religion being a way to know God, it becomes an obstacle.

In the article called "Ukristo unafundisha upendo, Uislamu amani: Lakini mbona bado twauana?", Macha gives examples of people who are not religious and yet show respect for God, such as the San ethnic group in Namibia and Botswana or the Maasai of Kenya (Macha 2004b: 3). Also in Western countries there are many people who refuse adherence to a church but do not consider themselves atheist. They reject the religious dogmas that go against the findings of science, but they still place God in their lives.

In order to explain why the debate on the truth or falsity of specific religions is misguided, Macha asks about the origin of people's religion and says that the religion they follow and that they believe to be the only true one is the one that they were born into:

Kwanini watu wengi walioko Zanzibar ni waislamu, au watu wengi wanaoishi Rombo mkoani Kilimanjaro ni wakatoliki au Wasabato wengi wanatoka Mara. (...)

Biashara ya utumwa ilipeleka Uislamu kule Zanzibar, Bagamoyo n.k. Na ukoloni na kazi za wamisionari zilipeleka Ukristo kule Kilimanjaro. (Macha 2004a: 3)

Why are many people in Zanzibar Muslim or many people living in Rombo in the Kilimanjaro Region Catholic, why do many Seventh-Day Adventists come from Mara? (...)

Slave trade brought Islam to Zanzibar, Bagamoyo and so on. And colonialism and missionary activity brought Christianity to Kilimanjaro.

Having a specific religion is not a question of enquiry and conscious decision, and the adherence to it also does not mean that this or that person wants to be close to God. Having a religion is something that is instilled in people by their parents:

[D]ini tulizonazo tunazo kwakuwa wazazi wetu walizichagua sio kwakuwa tulifanyia utafiti (bila upendeleo) dini zote. Tukasoma misahafu ya dini mbalimbali kisha tukaamua kuchagua dini moja. Ukweli ni kuwa tumejikuta tuna dini hizi tayari. Wakati unakuwa hata kabla hujaelewa kwa undani dini ni kitu gani tayari una dini ya wazazi wako. Basi ukishakua mtu mzima unajikuta uko ndani ya hizi dini na lililofuata ni kuzitetea kwa moyo wako wote. (Macha 2004a: 4)

We have the religions that we have because our parents chose them, not because we did (impartial) research on all religions and then read the holy books of various religions and decided to choose one religion. The truth is that we found ourselves having those religions already. Before you even understand what religion is, you already have your parents' religion. So when you grow up and become adult, you find yourself within those religions and the next thing is to defend them whole-heartedly.

According to Macha, people do not research religions and such research is often even prohibited. They believe that religious matters should not be questioned, something that Macha criticizes severely:

"Ukitafiti sana mambo ya dini utakuwa kichaa", nimesikia watu wengi wakisema hivi. Hili ni kosa kubwa sana. Binadamu hatuishi kama wanyama kwa hisia. Tunatumia fikra, tunahoji mambo, tunajenga hoja za kimantiki. Tunadadisi. Tunatafiti. Ndio tunavyopeleka mambo kibinadamu hivyo.

Hakuna jambo hapa duniani ambalo ukijadili au ukitafiti utakuwa kichaa. Huu ni msemo ambao nia yake ni kuwaweka watu kizani. (Macha 2004a: 4)

"If you do too much research on religious matters, you will go mad," I have heard many people saying. That is a big mistake. We people do not live like animals only by feelings. We reflect, we interrogate things, we build logical arguments. We question. We research. That is how we manage things as humans.

There is nothing in this world that makes you mad if you discuss and research it. That is an expression whose purpose is to keep people in darkness.

People learn religion by heart without research and without questioning whether its teachings are such that will be helpful in their lives. This approach to religion makes people ignore their real-life needs and disregard the quality of their lives:

[W]atabisha sana juu ya mistari iliyoko kwenye vitabu vilivyoandikwa miaka maelfu yaliyopita na wala sio jinsi ya kuishi maisha mema. Au jinsi ya kujenga nchi. Au kutengeneza mitaro ya maji machafu. Utakuta watu hao wanaishi kwenye mazingira machafu, wanatupa takataka ovyo, wanakata miti ovyo, hawali mlo kamilifu, wanasema uongo lakini watakuwa mbele sana kukariri mistari. (Macha 2004a: 4)

They will quarrel to no end about lines that are in the books written thousands of years ago and not about the way to live a good life. Or to build a nation. Or to construct sewage ditches. You will find those people living in dirty surroundings, throwing out rubbish carelessly, felling trees carelessly, not eating complete meals, telling lies, but they will be very good at reciting the lines.

Based on these thoughts, Macha states that the big flaw of religions is "kushindwa kutafsiri itikadi za kidini katika maisha ya kila siku" ("to fail to translate religious ideologies into everyday life", Macha 2004a: 5).

The lack of research into religions derives from the fact that religion is like oppressive politics, it intends to manipulate people to do what it wants:

Kihistoria serikali na dini vimekuwa ni vyombo ambavyo havipendi kuhojiwa. Vinapenda watu wawe wanasema "ndio mzee." Serikali inakutisha kwa jela na polisi na dini inakutisha kwa moto. (Macha 2004a: 4)

Throughout history, the government and religion have been institutions that don't like to be questioned. They like people to respond just "yes sir". The government threatens you with jail and police and religion threatens you with hell.

Macha exposes the hypocrisy of many people who follow religion, yet they accept bribes, they lie, steal or lack compassion for their fellow humans. He asks this heavy question:

[K]ama wanaofanya maovu na maonevu ya kila aina hapo nchini wana dini, mjadala mkuu uwe ni juu ya dini ipi ni ya kweli au ni juu ya tufanye nini ili tuwe watu wema? (Macha 2004a: 5)

If those who perpetrate evil deeds and oppression of all kinds in this country are religious, should the main debate be about which religion is the right one or about what we should do to be good people?

He concludes by urging his fellow Tanzanians to discuss the issue of development, education, help to the poor and the unemployed. This, in his view, will return *utu* to society.

In his second article, which is more emphatic about certain issues than the first one, Macha stresses the importance of "kuleta uwiano wa hisia na mantiki katika imani zetu" ("bringing harmony of emotion and logic in our beliefs", Macha 2004b: 4). He explains:

Tukiacha mantiki tupu itutawale tutakuwa tumekosea. Tukiacha pia hisia zitutawale tujue tumekwisha. Kutokana na hisia wakati mwingine tunaamini masuala ambayo katika hali ya kawaida huwezi hata kuthubutu kuyafikiria. (...) [Kwa mfano,] kuamini kuwa kumpiga binadamu mwingine kwa mawe (tena sio mawe makubwa bali madogomadogo ili asife haraka) sio unyama kwa kuwa imeandikwa mahali fulani. (Macha 2004b: 4)

If we allow pure logic to dominate us, we will be in error. If we allow emotions to dominate us, we should know that is the end. Under emotion, sometimes we believe issues that in a normal state you can't even dare to think. . . . For instance, to believe that to stone another person (and to stone her not with big stones but with small ones so that she does not die quickly) is not bestiality, because it was written somewhere.

Although Macha seems to suggest a concept of *utu* that could be qualified as utilitarian, by opposing religion as a pillar of *utu* and by his emphasis on a good way for people to live together, his criticism is not radically opposed to religion. He criticizes the existing ways of religious adherence, but his criticism does not affect the basis of religion. Macha does not criticize belief in God; on the contrary, religion can even prevent humans from understanding God, because it is a wrong way to implement belief in God (Macha 2004a: 3). Macha criticizes the depravity of religions as systems of practices, not the deficiency of religions as systems of beliefs. In his opinion, beliefs affirming the existence of God harmonize with *utu*. He only advises to look at the values of *utu* first, before going into the conflicts between various religions and their specific beliefs.

2.2.2. *Utu* and *ujamaa*

Had the literature of *ujamaa* followed the same trajectory as socialist literature in Europe, it could have brought a major change in the understanding of the meaning of *utu*. European socialist literature manifests a simple pattern: the good is linked to socialism and evil to capitalism. This pattern is accompanied by radical rejection of religion both as practice and as belief. The only source of value and meaning is socialism itself, explained by historical materialism.

The ideology of historical materialism interprets human economic and social life in history as a mere manifestation of the development of matter according to the laws of its transformations; the ideology explaining these transformations of matter is called dialectical materialism. These ideologies are seen as the sources of values of political and economic systems such as socialism and communism, which, on their part, are the source of the value of human life and everyday actions. "The meaning of life" of humans is not to live well but to implement socialism, in any way possible: even at the cost of personal suffering or the suffering of other humans who are seen as obstacles in the implementation of the ultimate goal of solidifying socialism in society.

This way of making a transcendent source the grounds of the value of human life resembles religion, which also depends on a transcendent source to identify the value of human life; socialism simply worships the laws of the transformations of matter in place of "God".

But the ideology of *ujamaa* and that of European socialism are vastly different. Since the founder of *ujamaa*, Julius Nyerere, intended to present *ujamaa* as a kind of socialism having an African origin and being compatible with the traditions of African societies (Nyerere 1968), the distinction between the traditional social system and the system of *ujamaa* was not as radical as in Europe. According to *ujamaa* ideology, the values of *ujamaa* are the same as those of traditional Africa. For this reason, it is not necessary to bring a revolution in order to implement socialism, unlike in Europe. It is only necessary to return to original African values. *Ujamaa* is synonymous with sharing and reciprocal help -in one word, *utu*.

This is obvious in the novel by George A. Mhina, *Mtu ni Utu* (cf. Sengo & Kiango 1977: 37ff.). It is the story of the orphaned Sozi, who is brought up by his father's brother, Samesozi, and his wife Wanamesozi. These two are cruel people. They deny Sozi food and clothing. Sozi nearly dies after he eats inedible berries in the bush. He is saved by a man from Msolwa, his mother's village. But also his foster parents are greedy and mistreat Sozi; they refuse to return him to his biological mother out of greed for the clothing that she has brought him. In the end Sozi can no longer tolerate their tyranny and escapes from home. He meets Mkala, a hunter who wants to marry Sozi's mother, and is led by him to Diswa, another village in the region. There, Sozi lives with an old woman called Kizee, whose wealth he inherits a few years later when the woman dies. Sozi moves to the village of Chiva to live with his mother and her second husband, Mkala. Everyone likes Sozi. He has by now become an adult man and is called Bwana Mamboleo, "Mr. Progressive", because he makes people participate in rebuilding their village. They build better houses in place of their poor huts, and they also construct a school and a hospital.

After helping people of Chiva, Sozi moves to Diswa. He shares his inheritance with everyone in the village and motivates the people of Diswa to renovate their village with this

wealth. They build a school and a hospital. Finally, Sozi visits the third village, Msolwa, and develops it like the other two. All three villages prosper under his leadership. Roads are built to facilitate communication between them. Each village cultivates a crop that grows well in the area around the village and people also keep livestock. This brings a dramatic increase in economic production. Sozi forgives the people who oppressed him as a child, Samesozi and Wanamesozi. The two have spent a long time going from village to village because they were expelled every time their bad characters showed. Eventually they have nowhere left to go and are forced to become better people. After Sozi pardons them, they return to Chiva, are given a nice house and live there, participating in their fellow villagers' effort to bring progress and more prosperity in the village.

In the preface to his novel, George Mhina explains the relationship between *utu* or *ubinadamu* and *ujamaa*:

Katika ulimwengu kuna huruma na ukatili, umoja na ubinafsi, ubepari na ujamaa, uchoyo na ukarimu na kadhalika, alimradi kila jema lililopo hapa duniani lina kinyume chake. (Mhina 1980: v)

In the world there is compassion and cruelty, unity and egoism, capitalism and socialism, greed and charity, and so on, since every good thing that exists in this world has its opposite.

Ujamaa is on the same side of this duality of values as compassion, unity and charity. Mhina strives to show these values in his narrative, and when he explains that, he no longer mentions *ujamaa* but *utu* or *ubinadamu*:

Katika hadithi hii ya 'MTU NI UTU' baadhi ya mambo ambayo hayastahili binadamu mmoja kumtendea mwingine yametolewa uwanjani. Hayo ni mambo yaletayo huzuni na taabu na kwa jumla huharibu *ubinadamu*. Je, *ubinadamu* ni nini? MTU NI UTU hujaribu kujibu swali hili. *Ubinadamu* unajitokeza na hali kadhalika kinyume chake kitadhihirika. (Mhina 1980: v)

In this story of Mtu ni utu, some of the things that are unworthy of one human being to do to another have been taken out in the open. Those are things that bring sadness and trouble and, generally, damage humanity (ubinadamu). What is humanity? Mtu ni utu tries to answer this question. Humanity manifests itself and also its opposite will become evident.

Utu is a traditional value, and this proximity between *ujamaa* and traditional values is clearly shown in the novel. *Ujamaa* values, such as reciprocal help, contributing one's personal property towards the prosperity of the community, etc., are compared to *utu* or *ubinadamu*:

Hii [yaani, kufanya mali ya binafsi kuwa ya wanakijiji] ilikuwa dalili nzuri ya kutokuwepo na choyo, na kuishi namna hiyo ndiyo kuishi kibinadamu. (Mhina 1980: 64)

This [i.e. making private wealth into collective property of the villagers] was a clear sign of the absence of greed, and to live in that way means to live like humans (kibinadamu).

The castigation of *choyo* ("greed") is, of course, oblique criticism of capitalist economy. Mhina emphasizes that *choyo* is opposed to *utu*:

[M]aisha ya wanakijiji hawa yalithamini zaidi utu wala siyo mali. (Mhina 1980: 32)

In the life of these villagers, utu was more valuable than wealth.

This good character derives from reciprocity:

Hali hii ya kushirikiana kiasi kile ililetwa na mioyo mipya iliyokuwa imetakata; mioyo ambayo ilithamini utu wala siyo mali. (Mhina 1980: 43)

This state of sharing to that extent was brought by new hearts that have become pure; hearts that valued utu and not wealth.

The *mioyo mipya* ("new hearts") brought by the "revolution" of sharing more than previously, are in fact hearts informed by the traditional morality of *utu*.

The one who has no respect for *ujamaa* values becomes *adui wa ubinadamu* ("an enemy of humanity"):

Siku zote tumeshirikiana katika kuzifanya kazi zetu. Matatizo ya kila mmoja wetu ni matatizo yetu sote. Siku zote tumeamua kuwa aendaye kinyume cha kanuni ya maisha katika kijiji hiki ni adui wa ubinadamu. (Mhina 1980: 49)

Every day we worked together. The problems of every one of us were our common problems. Every day we decided that someone going against the rules of life in this village was an enemy of humanity.

The relationship between traditional values is underscored by the very frequent use of traditional Swahili proverbs and sayings. For example, the proverb *kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa* ("one finger does not squish a louse") is mentioned twice to support the value of reciprocity (Mhina 1980: 43 and 80). Many other proverbs are used in the same way, essentially to highlight the proximity of *ujamaa* ethics with the morality of traditional Swahili society.

Since entering *ujamaa* was interpreted as being a natural evolution of traditional society, not as a violent or radical step that had to be achieved by a revolution separating *ujamaa* from African traditions, many beliefs that were eradicated by socialist regimes in Europe were left untouched by *ujamaa* and by other systems of African socialism (for example, the materialism of Kwame Nkrumah's consciencism, Nkrumah 1970). *Ujamaa* did not cast doubts on God's existence. On the contrary, religious beliefs had their place among its values. Having exposed the "enemies of humanity", Samesozi na Wanamesozi, who came to Diswa under different names in order to disguise their identity as Sozi's former oppressors, Mkala says:

Msema kweli ni mcha Mungu. Ubinadamu wetu tutauhatarisha ikiwa tutakataa kusema kweli na badala yake kuustawisha uwongo. (Mhina 1980: 51)

One who tells the truth is one fearing God. We will put our humanity at risk if we refuse to tell the truth and instead allow lies to flourish.

At another place, the evil that Samesozi's family did during Sozi's family when they bullied the boy is called *dhambi* ("sin"):

Matendo kama haya ni dhambi mbele ya Mungu na binadamu pia. (Mhina 1980: 55)

Actions such as these are sins before God and humans equally.

As these quotations show, and contrary to European socialism and communism, God and religion continued serving as the source of the values of *utu* in the *ujamaa* system. The concept of *utu* in *ujamaa* literature is thus constructed on the foundations of the cultural concept of *utu*, integrating aspects of its religious dimensions.

The cultural concept of *utu* depends on religion to explain what makes good actions good. Socialism introduces another source of values, that is, the development and transformations of matter according to the ideology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. Both of these sources are transcendent to human life: they do not show to the human being in everyday experience. We only know about them, respectively, from the Revelation and from the testimony of prophets who have a capacity of superior, extraordinary knowledge, and from the arguments of thinkers who interpret the world's events in history and make their beliefs in one or another ideology. They are postulates that humans have to agree to accept or refute. They cannot manifest themselves in human life itself.

2.2.3. *Utu* in existentialist literature

The firm foundation of morality in a transcendent source of value and meaning has been removed in existentialist literature. In Swahili literature, existentialist literature is represented in particular by Euphrase Kezilahabi's novels *Kichwamaji* (Hydrocephalus, 1974) and *Dunia Uwanja wa Fujo* (The world is an arena of chaos, 1975), and William Mkufya's *Ua la Faraja* (The flower of consolation, 2004).

Existentialism gained popularity as a philosophical trend which focuses on death and the feelings related to the consciousness of death, such as anxiety, absurdity, and alienation from other people and from objects:

Baadhi ya sifa zinazohusishwa na udhanaishi ni hofu kubwa au kihoro (*anxiety*), utupu wa maisha, kifo, ufupi wa uhai na hali fulani (*finitude*), na ukengeushi [*alienation*, taz. Wamitila 2002b: 210]. Wana-Udhanishi wanaamini kuwa urazini wa kisayansi pamoja na uyakinifu wa kiviwanda vinachangia kumkengeusha binadamu. Binadamu anakengeushwa na Mungu, jamaa au familia yake, asili yake na yeye mwenyewe. (Wamitila 2002b: 123)

Some of the characteristics associated with existentialism are anxiety, absurdity of life, death, finitude, and alienation. Existentialists believe that scientific reason together with industrial materialism jointly alienate humans. Humans are alienated from God, family, their origins and themselves.

It is true that the consciousness of death in human life is a very important feature of existentialist literature. In *Kichwamaji*, the writer highlights this importance of the realization of death, through a book called *Siri ya Maisha* (The secret of life) that the main character, Deusdedit Kazimoto, is reading:

Konokono aendako hajui, lakini hasahau kubeba kaburi lake juu ya mgongo wake. Anatembea amelala juu ya ardhi ya mama yake. Hana haraka. Anajua atafika mahali fulani. Nyuma anaacha njia wajukuu wake waone, wapite. Lakini mwanadamu anakuja huyo, kichwa juu juu, ameweka moto na mbingu kama mwisho wake. Anamkanyaga mama yake ampaye chakula. Ili kuonyesha tofauti kati yake na wanyama wengine anatembea kwa miguu miwili daima. Anapokuwa mzee ndipo anapoanza kutambua kwamba alikuwa akitembea na kaburi lake mgongoni. Je, siri hii kubwa ambayo hata konokono anaifahamu, kwa nini mwanadamu hataki kuifahamu? (Kezilahabi 1974: 145-146)

The snail does not know where it is going, but it does not forget to carry its grave on its back. It crawls lying on its mother's earth. It has no hurry. It knows it will arrive somewhere. Behind, it leaves a path for his grandchildren to see and follow. But a human being rushes,

his head up, having posited hell and heaven as his limits. He treads on his mother, who provides him with food. To show his difference from other animals, he always walks on two legs. Only when he becomes old does he start to recognize that he was walking with his grave on his back. Why does the human being not want to understand this big secret that even the snail knows?

But the consciousness of death only provokes the feelings of anxiety in the human being, because s/he has lost the relationship with a source of values that is transcendent to his/her life. This transcendent source related the human being with a system of values broader than his/hers own life. In that way, life had a firm meaning in spite of its finitude.

Losing this relationship can lead the human being to despair and unsurmountable doubts about the meaning of his/her life: life has limits, it has a beginning and an end, and if you cannot see a meaning of life between these two limits, while lacking a source of meaning which would be beyond these limits, you cannot see any meaning in living. The main character of *Kichwamaji*, Kazimoto, is an example of this view. At the end of the novel, he ends up lacking a meaning in his life and kills himself.

But the outcomes of existentialist thought about death can also be positive. Dkt. Hans Jumbe, an important character in William Mkufya's *Ua la Faraja*, makes clear that it is possible to transcend the limits of human life, the limits of birth and death. This possibility of transcendence is in having children:

Watu au kiumbe chochote kinazaa ili kiendeleo kuwepo. Miili inayokufa na kuacha watoto, ambao ni mbegu yao, imejidumisha kwenye hiyo mbegu. Mbegu ile inaendelea kuishi. (...) Miili ya Bwana Ngoma na Bi Tabu iliyokufa ni ile iliyochakaa. Lakini watu hao wako bado hai kwenye miili ya wanawe. Mtu anayezaa, hafi (...). Kuzaa ni mwanzo wa kudumu. (Mkufya 2004: 383-384).

People or any creatures have offspring to continue existing. The bodies that die and leave behind children, who are their seeds, have perpetuated themselves in those seeds. Those seeds continue living. . . . The bodies of Mr Ngoma and Mrs Tabu that have died have been worn out. But those people are still present and alive in the bodies of their children. Someone who has children will not die. . . . To have children is the beginning of permanence.

Progeny is extremely important, but there is also another way to transcend the limits of one's life. The human being is able to transcend the limits of his/her life in that s/he makes her name continue, also by doing good deeds that will be remembered by people together with his/her name long after his/her death. As the Malian historian Berehima Wulale explains: "Fen fila dama de be se ka mogo kisi banni ma. O fen fila ye walenuman ni woloden ye" (1995: 92, *There are two things that can save you from ending [without leaving anything behind]. These two things are good deeds and bearing children.*). While bearing children is a blessing and one on whom this blessing has not been bestowed will not get children, it is within the power of every one of us to act well.

In spite of the renown that they brought to existentialism, the consciousness of death, anxiety, absurdity and alienation are only the *outcomes* of the fundamental attitude of existentialism, namely the attention it pays to the diverse characteristics of human existence in the world. Next to the possibilities to search for ways to transcend oneself, existentialism searches for values immanent to human existence itself in this world.

This approach is represented by a character called Asha Mmanyema in *Ua la Faraja*. The Swahili say, "majuto huja kinyume" ("regret comes last", cf. also a poem by Muyaka bin Haji, Abdulaziz 1979: 151), and indeed, many characters in Mkufya's novel who have been infected by HIV/AIDS bitterly regret their actions that brought them this incurable disease. Asha, although she is also seropositive, does not regret. She affirms she has enjoyed the actions she did and her life was beautiful in spite of bringing her this disease:

Mimi ndiyo unavyoona: virusi vinanitafuna taratibu. Lakini nimeifaidi ngono vya kutosha. Hata nikiumwa ninacho cha kujisifia kwamba maisha ya ngono nimeyafurahia. (Mkufya 2004: 342)

I am as you can see me: the virus is consuming me slowly. But I have profited from sex to satisfaction. Despite my sickness I have something to be proud of, that I have enjoyed sexual life.

Asha faces death peacefully and fearlessly. She is able to look back and feel happy about her past. Although the readers are not advised to imitate her actions, they can be attracted to her attitude: in life there are beautiful things, but they come at a cost, to ourselves and to those around us. The cost does not devalue their beauty, but it is necessary to be aware of this cost. And it is good to be able to confirm we know what we want and we are ready to achieve those things at their cost: we are ready to bear the results of our actions; if not, we should avoid them.

These values, such as the pleasure of sex, are immanent to human life in the world. Human life is meaningful every time and under any circumstances, as the Austrian psychologist, Viktor Emil Frankl, insists (Frankl 1972, 1976, 1977, 1982, 1984 and 1994). There is meaning in active life, but also in life that can no longer be active, and finally there is also meaning in the attitude one assumes face to face with one's suffering, as Frankl himself demonstrated in the most extreme conditions during his detention in a Nazi concentration camp. The meaning of life cannot depend of the capacity to transcend oneself, such as in children: "procreation is not the only meaning of life, for then life in itself would become meaningless, and something that in itself is meaningless cannot be rendered meaningful merely by its perpetuation" (Frankl 1976: 189). The meaning of life is immanent to life itself.

I will conclude this discussion on the existentialist concept of *utu* in Swahili literature by an exposition of how it analyzed the effects of slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racial discrimination and other forms of political and economic oppression on Africans, an analysis we can call "collective existentialism", because it applies the categories of existential analysis, typically strictly individualistic, to collective entities, such as nations or the totality of black people and shows how political and economic oppression provokes anxiety, doubts about the meaning of existence in the world and alienation not only in individuals but in these collective entities.

African nations have been heavily affected by political and economic violence in history. They have been ruthlessly economically exploited and their societies were politically uprooted, but worse still, these forms of oppression affected their dignity and their *utu*. As Abdilatif Abdalla expounds in one of his poems from the collection *Sauti ya Dhiki*, called "Mamaetu Afrika" ("Our mother Africa"):

Si mali tu Mamaetu, hawakutosheka kwani
Vile vile ndugu zetu, wakatiwa utumwani

Hawakuthamini utu, wa walo na ngozi hini
Wakituona manyani, kwamba tu weusi Mama
(Abdalla 1973: 37, st. 7)

*It's not just our wealth, Mother, they were not satisfied with it
They also enslaved our brothers
They did not value the humanity of those who have this skin
They considered us monkeys, because we are black, Mother*

People who have been denied the dignity that is due to them by others start seeing themselves in another way; their *utu* changes. William Mkufya discusses this type of *utu* through his character called Dkt. Hans, in *Ua la Faraja*:

"Mataifa yote ya Kiafrika yameundwa katika mipaka ya watawala wao wa Kizungu. Mataifa yao ya asili yalivurugwa, yakawekwa katika mipaka mipya ambayo yaliweza kutawalika. Walivurugiwa uchumi wao, mila zao, tawala zao, imani zao... kwa ufupi, Wazungu waliuua utu wao na kuunda utu mpya wa Mwafrika. Utu usio Uzungu wala Uarabu wala Uafrika. Utu kama shairi guni - *Utu-guni*, utu usio na mwangwi wala lahani. Wakafanikiwa kuwatawala hao *watu-guni*. *Watu-guni* walipodai uhuru kwa heri na shari, walifanikiwa kuupata. Lakini ulikuwa uhuru wa *Watu-guni!* . . .

Hebu fikiria taifa la watu lisilo na uasili, mila, imani, falsafa, uzalendo wala mwelekeo! Kisha wako 'huru' katika ulimwengu ulioelemewa na nguvu za wale waliowavuruga!" (Mkufya 2004: 361)

"All the African nations were created within boundaries of their European rulers. Their original nations were disturbed and placed within new boundaries that were easy to control. The economy, traditions, governments, beliefs of Africans were disturbed . . . in short, the Europeans killed their humanity and created a new humanity of the African. A humanity which is neither European nor Arab nor African. A humanity like a defective poem – defective humanity, humanity that has neither echo nor melody. Then they successfully ruled those defective humans. When the defective humans claimed independence at any cost, they managed to get it. But it was the freedom of defective humans! . . .

Just imagine a nation of people that have no origin, traditions, beliefs, philosophy, patriotism or inclination! And they are "free" in a world that is governed by the power of those who disturbed them!"

In an email from 11th July 2006, Mkufya expands:

Ni utu wa mtu aliyevurugiwa utu wake kisha akaachwa atangetange kuutafuta huku akizidi kuharibika. Ni utu wenye matatizo ya tafsiri ya utu. Ni utu ulioambukizwa au kuingizwa hofu, woga, utumwa, ujinga, na unafiki. Ni utu unaostahili elimu ya utu wa kweli.

It is the humanity of someone whose humanity has been disturbed and then he was left to wander around looking for it while he continues suffering damage. It is humanity that has problems understanding the meaning of humanity. It is humanity infected or filled with fear, anxiety, slavery, ignorance and hypocrisy. It is humanity that needs education about true humanity.

This attitude of cultural alienation is present in all existentialist literature in Swahili, and as Vilém Řehák suggests, this is the major difference between Western European and African

existentialism (Řehák 2006). Western existentialism focuses predominantly on the individual person and his/her situation, strictly separated from other people. Other people are part of the world that this individual is confronted with and that s/he many times fails to understand; they appear as strangers or even his/her enemies. Other people prevent the individual from being him/herself, their "gaze" affects and disturbs his/her freedom. On the other hand, African existentialism, next to the individual on his/her own, looks at the entire society and its situation. The individual is not opposed to society, but it is the very subject of existentialist questioning.

In many existentialist novels in African languages, there are people who are sick. These diseases make them become aware of their condition of existing in the world, think about death and question the meaning of life. At the same time, these diseases are made into metaphors for social problems that affect all people in these societies. Hydrocephalus in Kezilahabi's novel, *Kichwamaji* (1974), AIDS in Mkufya's *Ua la Faraja* or, if we look in the literature of one of the neighbouring literatures, madness in the Shona novel *Mapenzi* (Lunatics, 1999) by Ignatius Tirivangani Mabasa, are diseases that affect individual characters in these novels, but they also metaphorically affect the entire societies.

The intellectual Manase, in *Kichwamaji*, who has a child with hydrocephalus, says of the future generation:

[N]aona watoto wetu wanakuja na vichwa vikubwa. Sijui kunaweza kuwa na nini ndani ya vichwa hivyo. (Kezilahabi 1974: 214)

I see our children coming with big heads. I don't know what can be inside those heads.

Dkt. Hans, in *Ua la Faraja*, translates AIDS to mean a state affecting the whole of African society:

Huu ugonjwa wa UKIMWI usababishwao na virusi umetukuta tayari tunaugua UKIMWI wa kijamii. Umekuta jamii yetu haina kinga ya lolote linalotuvamia, iwe njaa, vita, ukame, madawa ya kulevywa au migogoro ya kisiasa. UKIMWI wa kijamii umeshakula utu wetu, uzalendo wetu, busara zetu na imani zetu. (Mkufya 2004: 357)

That disease of AIDS that is caused by a virus has already found us ailing from societal AIDS. It found our society without any immunity against whatever attacks us, be it hunger, war, drought, drugs or political conflicts. Societal AIDS has already destroyed our humanity, our patriotism, our wisdom and our beliefs.

In a way reminiscent of the understanding of existentialism in Eastern Europe under communist dictatorship, African existentialist writings do not educate the human being about his/her existence in the world as an individual, but they also awaken his/her political awareness.

What is important to realize, in this context, is that existentialist literature describes *conditio humana* in a fundamentally realist way. In fact, existentialism looks *specifically* at the human condition in the world, with ontological characteristics such as personal identity ("I am one person and the same person for the entire duration of my life"), characteristics of being in space and in time ("I know where I am and I know the sequence of my life in time and in correspondence to other events"), the difference between states of consciousness ("I can distinguish wakefulness from dream, etc.") or the fact that the person whose existence is described is alive.

2.2.4. *Utu* and "the new Swahili novel"

All of these conditions are challenged by several Swahili authors since the 1990s. The chief characteristic of this trend of novelistic writing is the fundamental deconstruction of the *conditio humana*: of personal identity, being in space and time; cause and effect are reversed; clarity about life and death is lacking, as is clarity about being awake or in sleep. These new novels also complicate other regularities of literary writing, such as the difference between literature and literary criticism. I would like to discuss here one novel that has "humanity" in the title.

The name of Kyallo W. Wamitila's *Bina-Adamu!* (Man! 2002) plays with the many meanings hiding in the word *binadamu* ("human being", literally "son of Adam"). The word list at the end of the book explains that *bina* means "miracle", so the name of the novel can be read as "the miracle of Adam". At the same time, *kubinya* means "kufinya" ("to pinch"), so the name, with the exclamation mark, can be read as *binya (bina-)Adamu!* ("pinch (the son of) Adam!") or even *binya damu!* ("squeeze blood!"). *Kubini* means *kughoshi*, which is *kuiga sahihi ya mtu kwa nia ya kuiba* ("falsify someone's signature with the intention of theft", Wamitila 2002a: 157), so one can also read the title as "bini (bina-)Adamu!" ("falsify (the son of) Adam"). The novel plays with all of these meanings (Wamitila 2002a: 141, 147 and elsewhere).

The story describes the journey of the main character, *Bina-Adamu Msafiri* ("Traveller Son of Adam"), to find three hermaphrodite children, who will make the life in the character's home village better. He travels through countries that resemble Germany, Japan, Russia and Africa, and everywhere he is told about a certain P.P., an embodiment of *mfumo wa ubepari na ubeberu kwa jumla* ("the capitalist and imperialist system in general", Wamitila 2005: 95). P.P. is eventually revealed as a giant having the bodily proportions of a child. The two initials mean Peter Pan, a child who never grows up.

This novel shows all the signs that have been mentioned as characteristics of this new literary development: perception does not correspond to reality (the character hears laughter but cannot see the one who is laughing, he is beaten but there is no one beating him, etc.), the character's identity merges with that of his uncle, he himself is not certain about where he is, where he is going or what it is that he is looking for.

The novel is full of allusions to elements of different cultures of the world. Many times they are merely mentioned by name in the text in italics, without any further explanation. Such elements are, for example, the name of the Germanic god *Wotan*, the nickname of the former president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, *Osagyefu*, the collection of Japanese heroic tales, called *Heike Monogatari*, the Japanese religion of *Shinto*, and others.

We get interesting results if we analyze these elements of interculturality from the perspective of reception aesthetics. Interculturality expands the hermeneutical horizon of understanding (Gadamer 1990) or the "horizon of the unsaid" (Kezilahabi 1985: 224ff.): the horizon of understanding of the culture of one's birth and the culture that one has received through education have been conjoined and the person now has a broader horizon combining these two cultures. This person can understand both cultures: s/he sees both of them as "his/her".

Who is the intended reader of this mixture of so many cultures? For whom does this novel have a "horizon of the unsaid"? In my opinion, the intended reader is one who is able to give

up a narrowly culturally or geographically defined perspective and who is ready to open him/herself to face other cultures. It is a reader who is ready to read novels as *hypertexts*, following unexplained words in italics as hypertextual links in order to understand the text in more depth. This is a new way of reading which is connected to the technological advancement that has radically changed human thought, having created new concepts of time and of the sequence of cause and effect (Landow 1997).

In this way, Wamitila's novel is a deconstruction of the cultural concept of *utu* or *ubinadamu* in a double sense: through the narrator and through the intended reader.

3. Conclusion

This article has explored the Swahili mutations of the concept of *ubuntu*, a concept with links to central moral concepts in many African cultures. As in these cultures, also *utu* carries moral connotations. However, unlike *ubuntu*, understandings of *utu* prominently feature religion as the source of the moral qualities of *utu*. While *ubuntu* is occasionally derived from a cosmological understanding, more often its moral meanings derive from the social constitution of humanity and personhood. All this said, the article also abundantly shows that the understanding of *utu* is not limited to a single definition; the debate among writers, poets and journalists exposes the inner pluralism of a culture (cf. Hountondji 1996), held within a sustained tradition of Swahili-language intellectual discourse.

In conclusion, I would like to venture an observation about "African humanism" in general. What makes "African humanism" different from other forms of humanism, such as its European cognate(s), is the glaring absence of natural philosophy as its counterpart. The lack of concern for the "non-human" in and of itself differs from both the *philosophia naturalis* of the pre-Socratics and from, for instance, classical Indian philosophy, which conceptualizes the human departing from the whole of the universe, to the extent of dissolving the self. In a humanistic philosophy, by contrast, the non-human world is only a matter of concern in so far as it is the setting of human interactions and endeavours. The conceptualization of humanity reflects this. The human is not theorized as part of a totality, as *animal rationale*, as one among other objects in the world, but rather everything is centred around the human. The sophist Protagoras's statement that "Man is the measure of all things" perfectly captures this perception - a statement that, in Ancient Greece, was in fact an attempt to dismantle earlier natural philosophy (Taylor and Lee 2016). This is also the reason for the moral normativity embedded in all self-conceptualizations of humans in such a humanistic philosophy. "African humanism", then, does not arise as a turning of the focus from "outside" to "self", from "objectivity" to the "subject", but it is the departure point of all philosophical thinking.⁴

⁴ How the "non-human", the "world" features in such a philosophy and how it gradually develops as a philosophical topic of its own right in a humanistic philosophical tradition, is the topic of a separate enquiry (Rettová forthcoming).

4. References

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