CIRCULAR MOTIFS AND STRUCTURE IN EUPHRASE KEZILAHABI’S NAGONA AND MZINGLE AND AN ONGOING BUDDHISTIC STUDY

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Introduction

This article deals with two novels Nagona1 and Mzungile (‘Labyrinth’) written by one of the most prominent Swahili authors, Euphrase Kezilahabi. Although the novels have been extensively discussed, I believe that significant themes have not received sufficient attention. In previous studies, critics have emphasised the uniqueness of the novels. Gromov uses expressions such as “idiosyncratic” and “magical.” (2009: 127) Nagona has attracted more attention than Mzungile. For example, Diegner (2005: 25) considers Nagona Kezilahabi’s most complex work, while Mbatia calls Nagona an “anti-novel.” 3

Alena Rettová (2004) has tried to solve the novels’ mysteries by referring to Kezilahabi’s doctoral thesis entitled “African Philosophy and the Problem of Literary Interpretation.” (1985)

1 “Nagona” is a woman’s name in Kezilahabi’s hometown, Ukerewe, and it means “I snore” in Kikerewe (Diegner 2002: 45). In the novel, the protagonist asks his grandfather the meaning of “Nagona” (Kezilahabi 1990: 43). There seems to be freedom as how to interpret the meaning, so I prefer leaving it untranslated as proposes Diegner (2005: 25).

2 For information about Kezilahabi’s biography and works, see Bertoncini (2009: 93-94).

In 2014 Gaudioso analyses Kezilahabi’s poems in the light of his discussion on the concept of time and the subject-object dichotomy. He prompts further studies on Nagona and Mzingile, and says that their mysteries are revealed by referring to Kezilahabi’s thesis (Gaudioso 2014: 76). Lanfranchi also indicates that Kezilahabi’s change in his writing style from realism to non-realism, which can be seen in Nagona and Mzingile, is connected with his philosophical theory of onto-criticism discussed in his thesis written before this stylistic shift (Lanfranchi 2012: 73). There is no doubt that some ideas in the novels are derived from his doctoral thesis. Rettová (2004) has already examined the meanings of several descriptions and scenes in the novels by comparing with discussions in the thesis. However, the message of the novels still remains vague. What I would like to deal with in my article is the message itself, not the meanings of details. For this purpose, I will not use his thesis as a main source of my discussion because I think it is also a literary text that would need further in-depth interpretation.

In this article, the novels will be regarded as a single inter-connected story, firstly because Kezilahabi has said they are closely related (Diegner 2005: 31-32), and secondly because they have overlapping narratives, motifs, structures, and themes. Although the complexity of the novels has been emphasised in previous studies, I argue that, if examined as one closely inter-connected story, a single unifying structure can be revealed. The novels share one story which repeats birth and death of a saviour, as well as destruction and regeneration of certain absoluteness. This circular structure, which regularly repeats birth and death is, what the twentieth century theologian Mircea Eliade calls “the pan-Indian doctrine of age of the world and of the cosmic cycle”, and according to him, it is also the basic concept of Buddhist thought (Eliade 1973: 185).

In this article, I will try to understand the circular structure in the novels by referring to Buddhist thought, not only because of the circularity in question, but also because it will tell us the reason why the novels contain many words which make the veracity of the story doubtful and uncertain, such as mzaha (joke), usahaulifu (forgetfulness), ndoto (dream) etc. Although some critics have emphasised the theme of Christianity, particularly in Mzingile (Mezger 2002, Diegner 2005), I think Buddhistic reading is not inconceivable, because Kezilahabi himself uses Eliade’s term “status nascendi” in Mzingile (Kezilahabi 1991: 65).

I hope this study will contribute to a wider discussion of readings present in Swahili literature.

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4 All Swahili-English translations in this article are mine.
Outline and characteristics of the novels

Nagona

One of the main characteristics of *Nagona* is its fragmented narrative. (Khamis 2003, Gromov 2009) *Nagona* consists of ten chapters, which, except for Chapter IX and X, seem to have no direct connection with each other. Place, time, and even the narrator changes throughout, except some words, for example, *ukweli* (truth), *duara* (circle), *mshumaa* (candle), *kichaa* (insane person), *kimya* (silence), *mkombozi* (saviour), *vurumai* (confusion), *paa* (gazelle), etc, appear frequently.

However, there are seven chapters narrated by the use of the anonymous *mimi* (the first-person pronoun ‘I’). In these chapters, one episode becomes apparent — that of a journey of an anonymous male protagonist who seems to have a mission. Almost everyone he meets on his journey acts as if they have known about his mission, and have been waiting for him. At the end of this journey, he finds the light of truth by dancing in a disorderly manner. His mission seems accomplished at this point; though, ironically, the failure of his mission is foretold in previous chapters.

Although there are seven chapters that share the same first-person narrator, *Nagona* takes the form of a series of fragmented episodes. This is because the first-person narrator, who is regarded as the protagonist of the novel, has amnesia and periodically forgets everything. Because of the narrator’s illness, *Nagona* is filled with unexplained events, which make the narrator and novel unreliable and obscure. In Chapter I, the protagonist finds himself in an unfamiliar place. Because he is amnesiac, he does not know who or where he is. He starts walking and meets many people; but his *ugonjwa wa usahaulifu* (forgetfulness) prevents him from retaining any information. Every occurrence is incomprehensible, and makes him more anxious. His anxiety is revealed by his idiom where he frequently uses expressions that indicate indeterminacy such as *yaelekea* (probably), *nilijikuta* (I found myself doing), *sikumbuki* (I don’t remember), *labda* (maybe), or *sina hakika* (I am not sure). These expressions make readers doubt the veracity of the narrative.

Against, and, because of, this lack of certainty, almost all the characters he meets on his journey try to give him as much information as possible. They all know about him and tell him about his mission. Their dialogues with him are didactic. However, at the same time they are puzzling, so that it is impossible for the protagonist to understand their instructions.
That \textit{Nagona} is filled with didactic dialogues may be the reason why Elena Bertoncini described the structure of this novel as one containing “allegorical narratives”.\footnote{Bertoncini-Zábková, Elena. (2000) Panorama de la littérature swahili. Eds. Ursula Baumgardt & Abdella Bounfour. \textit{Panorama des littératures africaines. Etat des lieux et perspectives}. (Actes de la journée d'études du 28 novembre 1998). Paris: Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales & L’Harmattan. pp. 135-155. Quoted in Diegner (2005: 25).} Gromov indicates the similarities between \textit{Nagona} and Friedrich Nietzsche’s \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} (2009: 126), where the protagonist preaches how to live independently after the “death of God” (Nietzsche 1978: 64). This comparison highlights the didactic and allegorical aspects of the novel. However, the difference is that many dialogues in the novel, which seem to be didactic on the surface, resist interpretation. They fail to convey any lesson to either the protagonist or readers; instead, they puzzle them and exemplify novel’s labyrinthine quality.

\textbf{Mzingile}

Fragmentation also characterises \textit{Mzingile}. Nevertheless, it is possible to rearrange the fragmented chapters so that they become more coherent. \textit{Mzingile} is not as complex as \textit{Nagona} and the story proceeds as follows.

The protagonist \textit{mimi} (‘I’) hears a voice, which tells of the death of the second saviour. The protagonist then starts a journey in search of the second saviour’s father, to tell him of his child’s death. The father turns out to be God, who is a miserable old man living in seclusion. He has been spending much of his time dreaming sweet dreams, which are sweeter than real life (Kezilahabi 1991: 12). He does not remember his child, the second saviour, and declines to attend the funeral. Disappointed with God’s condition, the protagonist begins his journey home. However, on the way, guided by an indeterminate power, he meets the old man again. On returning home, the protagonist finds his village destroyed by a nuclear war. In the midst of the ruins, he finds the old man sleeping in his house. He tries to kill God, but fails because he sees the old man’s face turning first into that of his father’s, and then his own. He begins living with the old man, but one day the protagonist meets a woman who tells him she is his wife, so he abandons the old man to live with her. After seven days of rain, the world destroyed begins to regenerate, and the old man disappears. In the end, at a paradisiac place where animals are grazing peacefully, the protagonist and the woman meet twins who are suggested as the third saviour, and, just after, they again witness the presence of the old man.

In \textit{Mzingile}, the protagonist is neither amnesiac nor forgetful and there is no certainty he is the same person as the protagonist of \textit{Nagona}. However, like \textit{Nagona}, the story is full of indeterminacies and unreliable narratives related to the validity of protagonist’s motivation.
As noted, what motivated the protagonist to begin his journey was a voice speaking of the death of the second saviour. He hears the voice in a state of *nusu macho na nusu usingizini* (half-asleep and half-awake) (Kezilahabi 1991: 5), and proceeds without knowing fully where he is going. Somehow, he arrives at the old man’s hut.

However, in Chapter III, a *kichaa* (an insane person), who is the narrator of this chapter, confesses that he capriciously uttered the voice telling about the saviour’s death when he was in a “half-asleep and half-awake” state, and now does not remember much about what he said (Kezilahabi 1991: 19).

Ostensibly, what caused the protagonist’s journey turns out to be the capricious voice of the insane person. Furthermore, both the speaker and listener, as interlocutors, were half-asleep at the time. As narrators of their particular chapters, both of them share the characteristic, which is described as an “unreliable narrator” in modern literary theories; that is, the narrator whose reliability is seriously damaged for some reasons, such as mental disorders, defects of memory, limits of perception and knowledge, etc. Here, the reason is the state of being unable to distinguish reality from dream. This slippage makes the whole story unreliable and motivates the reader to suggest the journey is the protagonist’s dream.

**The absence of a morally conclusive ending**

Unreliability is the main characteristic of both these novels; however, both share the theme of destruction and regeneration of authority. *Nagona* focuses on the authority of philosophy while *Mzingile* gives religious authority more attention. Diegner has already pointed out that *Nagona* offers a variety of intertextuality, as it mentions a lot of philosophical and religious texts (Diegner 2005: 28). He extracts some scenes in *Nagona*, and reveals the influence from three key issues; European philosophy, existentialism and criticism of religion. Diegner argues that in *Nagona*, Kezilahabi criticises representatives and practices of the Christian faith, not Christian religion. He explains that although a priest is portrayed as a notorious drunkard, the confession, which is made to this priest, is still an important element to build a new human-kind.\(^6\)

I rather think this confession is dishonest and ironic, because the confessant continuously irritates and makes the priest angry saying “God is dead” (Kezilahabi 1990: 52). However, I agree that in *Nagona*, criticism of religion is quite modest comparing with *Mzingile*. In *Mzingile*, as I will look into the details, his criticism of Christian religion escalates further.

Although the novels concern the philosophical and religious authorities, the conclusions of both novels never pass judgment on these authorities, and confuse readers who have expected

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\(^6\) Ibid.
didactic messages. This absence of a morally conclusive ending is the reason why critics have been attracted by the novels and have produced many articles dealing them until today.

Despite the amount of studies, following perception by Diegner is still to the point. Diegner sees that the main theme of *Nagona* is the search for truth, and concludes “Kezilahabi limits himself to describing this search and consciously leaves both the truth itself and the frequently puzzled readers in the dark” (Diegner 2005: 33). This representation is also effective in describing the characteristic of *Mzingile*. The absence of a morally conclusive ending is why the stories may be regarded as “open-ended” (Khamis 2003: 82, Gromov 2009: 126), and this characteristic will be discussed in details in the following two sections.

**The authority of philosophy in *Nagona***

In *Nagona*, the names of philosopher figures appear many times. In Chapter III, in an other-worldly place, the protagonist meets with *kitu kama kiwilivili cha binadamu* (a body that resembles a human being) surrounded by eight people: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – who are purifying their souls by gazing at them spat on their hands (Kezilahabi 1990: 15). “The body” tells the protagonist that they all have failed “to enter the circle” of truth.7 These philosophers are representatives of European academic centralism judged as both antiquated and incorrect, and the scene is a bitter satire.8

Chapter IX depicts *siku ya Ngoma Kuu* (the day of the Great Dance), which is also called *siku ya kokoga karne* (the day to present centuries) (Kezilahabi 1990: 56). On this day, three dance groups are led respectively by three figures that can be read as Aristotle, Freud, and Marx. Each displays their philosophical theories in dance to what is ostensibly a black audience.9

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7 In Chapter V, the mysterious king says to the protagonist, who has been searching for a gazelle, “*Mkimshinda, basi mchukueni maana mtakuwa mmeshinda vikwazo vyote na mtakuwa mmeingia katika duara ya kweli*” (If you defeat her (the gazelle), take her with you. You have triumphed over all obstacles and have entered the circle of the truth) (Kezilahabi 1990: 33). Therefore, in this novel, “to enter the circle” seems to be synonymous with “obtaining the truth”.

8 Here I should refer to Kezilahabi’s doctoral thesis where he critically discusses European literary and philosophical tradition, to search for an authentic reading of African literature (Kezilahabi 1985). In his thesis however, Kezilahabi declares clearly that he was influenced by existentialists, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger. His paradoxical stance on European philosophy has been already questioned by Lanfranchi. She tries to explain Kezilahabi’s intention by saying that even philosophers whom he traces inspiration from, cannot free themselves from the traditional presupposition of European philosophy (Lanfranchi 2012: 83). The scene in *Nagona* mentioned above also can be read as Kezilahabi’s view on the limitation of European philosophy.

9 Many expressions in this chapter show that the episode is situated in Africa, or more precisely, Kezilahabi’s hometown Ukerewe. Kezilahabi has written an article on *ngoma* (dance and drums) competition in Ukerewe society (Kezilahabi 2000), and in describing the Great Dance in this chapter, Kezilahabi is obviously inspired by *ngoma* competition in Ukerewe. In his article, he lists the main attire used by dancers, i.e., the strings of beads hanging on shoulders, a hat with ostrich feathers, a fly whisk which the dance leader holds in his hand, jingling bells tied on legs to produce the sound of rhythm, and skirts of goat skins (Kezilahabi 2000: 184–185). All of them are mentioned by the protagonist’s next-door neighbour, who is said to be “one of the first saints in Africa”. He
people evaluate the theories, which have authority over the world, without restraint. Then, the insane people’s group, which the protagonist has joined, presents their dance of confusion (Kezilahabi 1990: 59). To begin with, the audience treats this group with derision, but after that, they join the dance of confusion. At the climax of the dance, the light of truth called “Nagona” dawns on the protagonist (Kezilahabi 1990: 60). On the following day (as related in Chapter X), the girl named “Nagona”, who is suggested to be the second saviour, is born, and the birth is purportedly a result of the dance of confusion. This series of events then passes a similar judgment on European philosophy as related in Chapter III. The group that accomplished the birth of truth was not the one led by a European philosopher who represents rationality, but the mentally infirm protagonist and his insane troupe, who will never be Europeanized.

This outcome naturally leads Khamis to conclude that “in order to re-discover and find their ‘identity’, Africans must dance in their own style, however haphazard, probing and painful it may be. It is only through this that the world will reciprocate and recognize them favourably” (Khamis 2003: 82). Rettová agrees with Khamis and indicates that his perspective coincides with the discussion in Kezilahabi’s doctoral thesis, where he emphasises the need of destructive stand against the Western-centrism (Rettová 2004: 58). Gromov also points out that the outcome alludes to the issue of the liberation of Africa and the Third World, although he accepts that Nagona’s ending is left open (Gromov 2009: 126).

However, before reaching my own conclusion, I need to return to Chapter III. This chapter is one of the most puzzling in the novel because the protagonist seems to recover from amnesia and talk with “the body” (Kezilahabi 1990: 13). In their conversation, the protagonist says, “Mkombozi wa pili hakuweza kufanya muujiza wowote” (The second saviour could not do any miracles). “The body” replies, “Mkombozi wa kwanza alisulubiwa tu, lakini wewe na Mkombozi wa pili mliliwa kabisa” (The first saviour was just crucified, but you and the second saviour were completely eaten) (Kezilahabi 1990: 14).

As mentioned above, the birth of the second saviour occurs in Chapter X, so how could the conversation that refers to the second saviour, be mentioned before in Chapter III? In Chapter IX, the protagonist seems to have accomplished his mission. Nevertheless, in the earlier Chapter III, the death of the second saviour and failure of his mission are foretold.

instructs the protagonist on how to prepare for the Great Dance, by indicating him the above-mentioned attire (Kezilahabi 1990: 53-55). Also in this chapter, as Rettová (2004: 58) has already indicated, Kezilahabi uses a term of ngoma competition in Ukerewe. On the day of the Great Dance, four groups compete for audience’s attention and excitement. At the climax of each group’s dance, they have the time to show malimboto, in other words, the time to show the wonder (Kezilahabi 1990: 57). The word, malimboto is derived from amalimboto; “mysterious or supernatural shows of new and unfamiliar technology”, which characterises a climax of a dance (Kezilahabi 2000: 191-192). The Great Dance is, therefore, the place where the „strong” locality absorbs the academic authority and evaluates it.
Therefore, in conclusion, one cannot find the theme of the overall novel from its outcome. Garnier is aware of this when he observes that “The novel concludes in a climax of meaningless words. Everything that happens in the novel is a narrative device to define meaninglessness” (Garnier 2013: 84). It is clear that Nagona is not a novel that offers obvious messages like “the liberation of Africa”, rather its temporal shifts, suspension of narrative sequence, and indeterminacy of personal identity resist definitive readings.

**Religious authority in Mzingile**

In Mzingile, religion, and Christianity in particular, is the main theme throughout. The novel features many iconoclastic scenes. For example, the white priest living in the protagonist’s village gets drunk and destroys statues in his church while cursing God (Kezilahabi 1991: 20). Because of starvation, he devours Mkombozi wa pili (the second saviour) (Kezilahabi 1991: 20). In Chapter VII, when the protagonist returns to his village destroyed by nuclear weapons, he enters the ruins of a church to find a statue of Jesus with its throat cut and an armless Maria without her child. Parts of the neck and the child have fallen on the floor. A statue of Yosef is also broken, and in the sacristy, he finds human bones strewn about (Kezilahabi 1991: 54).

The most shocking description is of the old man God. In Chapter II, the protagonist visits his hut and tells him of the death of his child, the second saviour. However, as noted earlier, he is a miserable old man who does not even remember he has a child. Refusing to attend the funeral, he exclaims, “sitaki tena kuhusishwa na ghasia zilizotokea! Sihuusi sasa! Mimi sasa ni mwotaji tu!” (I don’t want to be involved in the past confusion again! I am not involved now! Now I am just a dreamer!) (Kezilahabi 1991: 11). His message to the mourners at the funeral is, “naelea katika Amani ya vurumai. Sitaki tena kuhusishwa na muundo uliokuwapo” (I am floating in a peaceful mess. I don’t want to get involved in the past creation) (Kezilahabi 1991: 12). After being expelled from his isolated hut, God wanders around wearing only a dirty loincloth. When he falls down, he is so weak that he cannot stand by himself. This parody of God is humorous, and even arouses pity.

The iconoclastic treatment of Christianity in Mzingile is so harsh that it seems to be a polemical depiction of the antichrist. However, the climax reveals a double twist.

As noted, in Chapter VII, the protagonist leaves the old man and takes up with the woman who is purportedly his former wife. Suddenly, it begins to rain for seven days. After the rain, the world starts to regenerate. As noted by previous studies (Gromov 1998: 74, Mezger 2002: 82), the couple is naked like Adam and Eve in a prelapsarian paradise. In the midst of their peace and joy, twins, who are supposed to be the third saviour appear, and together the family forms four lights that illuminate the world from the top of a hill (Kezilahabi 1991: 70).
CIRCULAR MOTIFS AND STRUCTURE IN KEZILAHABI’S NAGONA AND MZINGILE

In this chapter, Christianity is also parodied. These joyful Christian images, which take place after the iconoclastic events, have no reality whatsoever. Furthermore, this uplifting scene of illumination does not end the novel. Just as the protagonist raises his hands, in the symbol of peace, he witnesses the old man creeping up the hill. Then the last sentence of the novel reads, “Wanyama walikuwa wakicheka!” (Animals were laughing!) (Kezilahabi 1990: 70). Perhaps the appearance of the old man reveals the oldness of the “new world” created by the protagonist and his wife. However, the last sentence also seems to ridicule the old man.

Previously, Gromov has read the novel’s conclusion as “the world is forgiven and life will start anew” (Gromov 1998: 74), but later he restates that the ending is “open and ambiguous” (Gromov 2009: 128). However, he then insists that Kezilahabi is sending “a serious warning to modern humans, with a call to reassess their values” (Gromov 2009: 128). Nevertheless, Gromov does not explain what the author’s warning is, or what values are reassessed. It is also not clear why the novel is so obscure if its intention is to be a moral tale. Garnier finds it impossible to interpret this final scene (Garnier 2013: 94). Thus, in this mzingile, or labyrinth, there must be no ending as “the exit”.

The circular structure of the story

The storyline in both novels reveal that it is futile to concentrate on an “ending” or “conclusion”. Therefore, in the following two sections, rather than focus on the details of the story in each novel, I will try to disclose how their underlying labyrinthine structures are created.

As mentioned in the previous section, these novels share the theme of destruction and regeneration of authority. Reading these two novels as single connected story reveals a simple unifying structure, which repeats that cycle. The circular structure reveals why the stories in the novels never actually end.

As shown in ‘Fig. 1’, the novels follow a circular path through two points: the birth of a saviour and regeneration of truth (point A), and the death of saviour and destruction of truth (point B). For example, in Nagona, when the protagonist starts his journey, the first saviour has already died. Then, the second saviour appears after Ngoma Kuu (the Great Dance). In Mzingile, after the second saviour dies, the protagonist starts his journey and finally the third saviour appears. Both novels start from the death of the saviour and finish with the birth of the next as represented by the left hand side of the circle in ‘Fig. 1’.
In Nagona, the first saviour, who was already dead, seems to be Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{10} In the midst of destruction and loss, symbolised by the death of the first saviour, the protagonist starts his quest for a new truth represented by the arc from A to B. Then in Chapter IX, the protagonist dances the Great Dance, the light of truth pierces his eyes, and the next day, (as related in Chapter X) the second saviour is born.

In Mzingile, the journey of the protagonist starts when he hears the voice telling him about the death of the second saviour. On the way, he meets the old man (God) several times, so this journey is a quest for God. In the final chapter, when the protagonist bathes in a spring, his body begins to shine. The novel then ends with the appearance of the third saviour (the twins), with whom the protagonist illuminates the world from the top of a hill.

The light, which appears with the birth of a saviour, seems to suggest that a new theory or paradigm now rules the world. Even so, the light or truth is destined to disappear with the death of a saviour (point B). The destruction is so harsh that there seems to be no hope, but after seven days of rain, the world regenerates. In the new world, the protagonist and the woman are innocent like Adam and Eve in paradise. However, the similarity with Adam and Eve suggests a further expulsion from paradise – the fall. Thus, at point A, the second coming at point B is already implied and the cycle never ends.

To avoid misunderstandings, I need to make clear that the novels’ circular structure does not correspond to “the eternal recurrence of same configuration”, as Nietzsche advocated.\textsuperscript{11} Nagona and Mzingile are different and independent novels, with many differences, including the aims of the protagonists’ journeys. However, these detailed differences cannot escape from its fundamental structure. Sooner or later they will end up by completing a cycle, showing that they are merely another variation of the circular story.

In the novels, readers frequently have a sense of déjà vu due to some particular utterances. During their journeys, the protagonists in both novels meet many unfamiliar people who seem to know them. In Nagona, many of them tell the protagonist, “Tulikuwa tukikusubiri” (We have been waiting for you). In Mzingile, the expression changes slightly, “Nilikuwa sikutegemei wakati kama huu” (I didn’t expect to see you now). Their utterances suggest that events are recurring; though, they are not exactly the same.

\textsuperscript{10} In Nagona chapter III, the sentence, \textit{Mkombozi wa kwanza alisulubiwa} (the first saviour was crucified) is used twice (Kezilahabi 1990: 13, 14).

\textsuperscript{11} Regarding Nietzsche’s recurrence, I referred to Heidegger (1976) and Mistry (1981). Mistry compares Nietzsche’s recurrence with Buddhist view of time. She indicates that the clearest difference between the two is found in Nietzsche’s insight that “re-existence occurs in the same form” (Mistry 1981: 141, emphasis in the original).
By numbering saviours born anew, it may be possible to suggest the difference from the former, impressing readers with the stream of linear time. However, it is out of question for Christianity to accept more than one saviour (Maki 2003: 186). The idea of numbering saviours can be read as a satire upon Christianity. It does not imply the progress nor development, but exchangeability and ordinariness of any saviour.

Then, why is the saviour who seems to be Jesus Christ assigned to “the first saviour”? I suppose that the answer is to make a victim of Christianity. This intention is also read from settings of the second and the third saviours. The second saviour is set as a woman, and moreover, a black woman. Here, another option is given regarding race and gender of a saviour. And what comes next is abandonment of monotheism, namely, twin saviours.

It is possible to read it as a satire upon Christianity from these settings; nevertheless, another option, the second saviour, cannot make a difference, and ends up by being easily killed. The slight change seen in the utterance in Mzingile may show feelings of disappointment with unexpected early death of the second saviour. Therefore, the theme of the novels is not mere satire upon Christianity, but the circular structure itself.

Circular symbols in the narrative

The image of the circle appears repeatedly in each novel. The word duara (circle) appears in both novels, and especially in Nagona, where it occurs more than fifty times. Garnier has already pointed out the importance of the image of circle, not only in Nagona and Mzingile, but also in Kezilahabi’s other novels. He picks up the image of circle in Kezilahabi’s novels and tries to find the common meanings from them, such as “chaos”, “defence against intrusions to the social structure”, and “an asocial principle” (Garnier 2013: 81-82). However, I argue that the image of circle in Nagona and Mzingile is totally different from that of his other novels, in its importance and characteristics. In the novels, the circle itself is the main theme and it governs whole aspects.

The circular image symbolises the narrative structure of Nagona. As noted, Diegner considers Nagona as Kezilahabi’s most complex work (Diegner 2005: 25). This view is probably due to its narrative style. Khamis explains this well when he observes, “In this novel the chrono-logical narrative strategy is deliberately disrupted. In Nagona there is no story mediated to us in coherent sequences, but only through loose and often disjointed plots and pieces of stories intricately conjoined” (Diegner 2003: 79, emphasis in the original).

In a “chrono-logical narrative strategy”, in another word, a linear narration, events proceed over a sequence of time in a linear way from beginning to end, and time is irreversible. However, narration in Nagona is “non-linear” (Gromov 2009: 125), and, as noted, both novels have a circular narrative as shown in ‘Fig. 2’. In the circular narrative, there is no irreversible time and
events are turning without beginning or end. Therefore, the order of events is not important. There is no restriction on how the circle can be divided or the chapters ordered. The chapter numbers in ‘Fig. 2’ merely differentiate them, but do not represent their ordered sequence. In a circular structure, all events exist at the same time, so there is freedom as to where the narration can begin or end.

In *Nagona*, the narrative reveals a non-sequential order of events. For example, in Chapter I, the protagonist strays into an unfamiliar town, which is silent and still except for few birds flying in the sky. On the ground, ant wings are scattered everywhere. Seeing this, the protagonist thinks “they have fallen last night” (*walikuwa wameanguka usiku uliopita*) (Kezilahabi 1990: 2). However, in Chapter IX, after the nightlong Great Dance, “birds are seen flying here and there picking winged ants fallen that night of the Great Dance” (*ndege walionekana wakirukaruka huku na huko wakidonoa kumbikumbi waliaoanguka usiku huo wa Ngoma Kuu*) (Kezilahabi 1990: 61). These descriptions suggest that the Great Dance was held a day before the ants appeared, that is, before Chapter I. Therefore, events depicted in Chapter IX precede the beginning of Chapter I.

In addition, Chapter III strengthens the strange way in which Chapter IX precedes Chapter I. As mentioned previously, here the protagonist meets “the body” who speaks of events which have not been narrated yet, in the past tense and tells the protagonist that, “you and the second saviour were completely eaten” (Kezilahabi 1990: 14). The birth of the second saviour occurs in Chapter X, after the Great Dance, which occurs in Chapter IX. Mirroring this effect, in *Mzingile* Chapter II, the insane person foretells the death of the second saviour, and Chapter V describes how the second saviour died. Therefore, the events described in *Nagona* Chapter III occur not only after Chapters IX and X of the novel, but also after *Mzingile* Chapters II and V. Here, the reader may be motivated to suggest that this narrative conundrum can be resolved by placing the events of *Nagona* Chapter III after *Mzingile* Chapters II and V.

However, this rearrangement does not solve the puzzle. In *Nagona* Chapter III, the philosophers drop their souls into a river by mistake. Then, in Chapter VI, one of them reappears and says he has lost his soul (Kezilahabi 1990: 40). These events prevent *Nagona* Chapter III being inserted into the *Mzingile* narrative sequence; however, the themes of death and regeneration intersect between the two novels.

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12 The winged ant is the reproductive member of the white ant community. Unlike other members, they do not fear light and fly away from the nest. In *Nagona*, winged ants symbolise hunters who pursue “light” or truth. Winged ants appear when the protagonist, who also seems to be a hunter of truth, dances at the climax of his journey. Therefore, the appearance of winged ants in Chapter IX is not, it seems, a coincidence.
CIRCULAR MOTIFS AND STRUCTURE IN KEZILAHABI’S NAGONA AND MZINGILE

Furthermore, and significantly, these interpretive problems arise only when the stories are understood in the context of linear time. By applying the concept of circular narrative time, the puzzle is solved because all events are contiguous in time. As shown in ‘Fig. 3’, any point on the circle can be regarded as being both “before” and “after” another. In Nagona Chapter III (N3: “the body” relates that the second saviour was eaten) can be regarded as being “after” Mzingile Chapter II (M2: the voice foretelling the second saviour’s death) or Chapter V (M5: description of the second saviour’s death). At the same time, this can be regarded as being “before” Nagona Chapter VI (N6: philosopher in N3 reappears) or Chapter X (N10: the birth of second saviour).

‘Fig. 3’ shows Nagona and Mzingile represented in a single circle. Therefore, the events of two novels intertwine in a complex manner that resists resolution.

As mentioned, the fragmentation of the storyline is the reason why these two novels are often depicted as “complex”, and even “anti-novels”. However, these readings proceed from the assumption of an irreversible and linear time structure, and by applying a circular entwined structure that in some respects overlap each other, the structures of the novels can be resolved.

The novels’ cycle and Eliade’s philosophy

The cycle of destruction and regeneration turns in both storylines and governs all events. Just as the story reaches a climax and light appears as if the absolute truth is realised (‘Fig.1’, point A) it is, violently defeated (‘Fig.1’, point B), and, in the course of time, a new truth appears replacing the old. The novels seem to suggest all past creations are meaningless, however, even in the midst of destruction, some preparation for the new world can be seen.

This cyclical structure of time, represented by this circle, is, according to twentieth-century theologian Mircea Eliade, close to the basic concept of time of archaic man and adopted by many societies since (Eliade 1971). As shown in ‘Fig.1’, birth brings death and that destruction brings regeneration. Death or destruction is an essential part of the next birth and regeneration because according to Eliade, “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 cycle is described by the narrator of Mzingile as follows,

“Ulimwengu unahitaji mwanga mpya!” Kichaa alipiga kelele na kisha akaongezea, “Lakini huyo haitakuwa kabla ya uharibifu na maafa!” (Kezilahabi 1991: 5)

“This world needs new light!” An insane person shouted and he continued, “But it won’t be before the destruction and calamity!”

In the concept of cyclical time, which repeats destruction and regeneration, it is possible to say that, “no event is irreversible and no transformation is final” (Eliade 1971: 89). The cycle sug-
FUKO ONODA

gests that there is neither eternal truth nor absolute destruction in this world. This is because as Eliade argue, “even the disappearance of an entire humanity (deluge, flood, submersion of a continent, and so on) is never total, for a new humanity is born from a pair of survivors” (1971: 87); and, if a nuclear explosion is added to his list, Eliade provides a concise summary of the theme of Mzingile. In the ruined village, the protagonist and the woman become aware they are in what Eliade calls “status nascendi” (in the nascent state), and the archetypes of new human being (Eliade 1961). This is depicted by the following conversation:

“Mimi naona kama tumo katika status nascendi13.”

“Maana yake?” aliniuliza.

“Yaani ni kama tumezaliwa upya.”

“Si hivyo tu, sisi sasa ni tegemeo la taifa jipya la binadamu. Wajibu wetu ni kuhakikisha katika sura ya dunia.”

“Kung’ara kwetu kwamulika njia ya wakati ujao.” (Kezilahabi 1991: 65)

“I feel like we are in status nascendi”.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“It means like we were born again.”

“That isn’t all. Now we are the hope for a new nation of human beings. Our responsibility is to ensure human beings will survive on the surface of this world”.

“Our brightness lights up the way to the future.”

The usage of the word “status nascendi” suggests that Kezilahabi created the story being anchored in the circular structure, which repeats destruction and regeneration, because this word does not mean mere “the beginning”, but “the beginning, which comes again and again”.

Therefore, when a story ends in a moment of rebirth, it seems to have a happy conclusion. However, if a story has circular structure, it is impossible to understand the whole from the viewpoint of one moment. The circular structure reveals only one lesson; there is neither eternal truth nor absolute destruction.

Although Eliade agrees that the concept of cyclical time is adopted in many societies, as historian of Indian religion, he insists that it is well formulated particularly in Indian tradition (Eliade 1971: 112). According to Eliade, belief in the periodic destruction and creation of the universe is already found in the Atharva-Veda, one of the oldest scriptures of Hinduism. India developed a doctrine of cosmic cycles by punctuating them. The smallest unit of measurement is called yuga or “age”, which is preceded by a “dawn” and followed by a “dusk”. Duration of each yuga varies from 1,000 years to 4,000 years. A complete cycle, or mahāyuga consists of four

13 In the original text, only the word “status nascendi” is given in italics.
CIRCULAR MOTIFS AND STRUCTURE IN KEZILAHI’S NAGONA AND MZINGILE

yugas, therefore comprises more than 10,000 years. Eliade emphasises that the essential element in this figures is the cyclical character of cosmic time. He writes, “The same phenomenon (creation-destruction-new creation), foreshadowed in each yuga (dawn and dusk) but fully realized in a mahāyuga, is repeated over and over” (Eliade 1971: 113, parenthesis in the original). Eliade deals with this Indian view of the world in many of his works, and places it as the foundation of his theories including the concept of “eternal return” (Eliade 1971).

In his article, “Time and Eternity in Indian Thought”, he elaborates on the philosophy of time in Buddhism, which according to Eliade, accepts the pan-Indian doctrine of cyclical time (Eliade 1973). In the next section, I will refer to Eliade’s explanations as well as some other’s works to argue that the Buddhist thought is effective to reading two Kezilahabi novels. Although Kezilahabi uses Eliade’s term, it would be too hasty to predicate that Kezilahabi has contact with Buddhism. This article only suggests its possibility.

A Buddhist reading

The labyrinthine structure in two Kezilahabi’s novels reveals the cycle which repeats birth and death. As Eliade mentions, cyclical time is universal and fundamental view of time. Therefore, it is unreasonable to identify the novels’ cycle particularly with the cosmic cycle of Indian thought. However, the novels have other important aspects, which have stronger affinity with the Indian thought, or more precisely, Buddhist thought: obscurity and unreliability.

In the previous sections, I presented the novels into one simple shape, circle. However, the simplification cannot describe the novels’ obscurity or unreliability. Yet, the question remains: why should the story be told by using a flood of obscure and mysterious expressions? In other words, why is the concealing device which covers the simple structure needed? The Buddhist reading can offer an answer to this question.

According to Eliade, Buddhism shares the same measuring systems of the cosmic cycles as the pan-Indian conception. The endless births and rebirths of universe, accompanied by an equal number of human births and rebirths, reveal a certain fact, namely, the meaninglessness of a human life. This fact “terrorizes man and compels him to realize that he must begin this same evanescent existence over and over again, billions of times, always enduring the same endless sufferings” (Eliade 1973: 181). As the result, he is obliged “to seek an issue from this cosmic wheel and from these infinite transmigrations” (Eliade 1973: 185). This is attainable by regarding “every ‘form’ that is manifested in time not only perishable but also ontologically unreal” (Eliade 1973: 190, emphasis in the original). In other words, he tries to abandon any attachment to things in this world, since attachment is the source of suffering (Saigusa & Kishida 1997, Hirai 2001).
Buddhism has many terms which express the unreality of the temporal world. For example, in Japanese, this idea is simply described as *Shiki-soku-ze-Kuu*, which is translated in English as “form is exactly emptiness”. It tells that all things seen in this world, including human beings, are temporal shapes that will soon disintegrate and pass. Therefore, any attachment to temporal existence leads to despair (Takagami 1963). Eliade also regards salvation as “the deliverance of man from the pain of the internal cycle of ‘life-death-birth’” (Eliade 1973: 185) and argues “the only hope and the path of salvation is the Buddha, who has revealed the Dharma (absolute reality) and disclosed the road to Nirvana” (Eliade 1973: 191, parenthesis in the original). Dharma is the central theme of his message: “all that contingent is unreal” (Eliade 1973: 185, 191).

As mentioned, the labyrinthine structure seen in *Nagona* and *Mzingile*, was revealed to be the turning cycle of birth and death. At the same time, the idea, which enables readers to escape from this labyrinth, is also found in the novels. In the novels, the frequent use of particular words obscures the story such as *maluwelewe* (hallucination), *usahaulifu* (forgetfulness), *mzaha* (joke), *ndoto* (dream), and *utupu* (emptiness). The narration of both novels exaggerates their obscurity. In *Nagona*, as previously mentioned, the narrator frequently uses expressions that indicate indeterminacy such as “probably”, “I don’t remember”, or “I am not sure”. The narrator in *Mzingile* sometimes narrates his experiences in a “half-asleep and half-awake” state (Kezilahabi 1991: 4, 5, 52). Indeterminate expressions such as “probably” and “I found myself doing” are also found in *Mzingile*.

To conclude, one can find the similarity with Buddhist thought in these aspects of the novels, i.e., the circular view of the world described by the storyline, and the sense of unreliability and unreality expressed by the idioms. In the next section, I will analyse further the similarity by focusing on a word *mzaha* (joke), which seems to be the main cause of the unreliability of both novels.

**Mzaha and Kuu**

The word *mzaha* seems to be a keyword in both novels. This word is often used to introduce or conclude a sequence of events by the narrator, such as, for example, *Yote yalianza kama mzaha* (All things started like a joke), and *Ilikuwa kama mzaha* (It was like a joke). Frequent use of these sentences has effect of making the veracity of the story doubtful and uncertain. The narrator treats everything in front of him as unreal as if he does not relate to it at all – as if he were dreaming.

Not only the narrator, but also characters in the novels use this word. In *Nagona*, an unknown pregnant woman talks the protagonist about her pregnancy as follows,
“Unaiona mimba hii! Basi hii ni mimba ya Mkombozi wa pili. Yote haya yalianza kama mzaha. Nilikubali mimba ya kwanza. Lakini sasa amechoka kusingiziwa mimba hizi na hali yeye si baba watoto.” (Kezilahabi 1990: 24)

“You can see that I am pregnant! Fine. Now I am pregnant with the second saviour. All these things started like a joke. I have accepted the first pregnancy. But now he is tired of being blamed for these pregnancies, and the situation of not being a father of the children.”

The woman uses the word *mzaha*, even when she talks about the seemingly important matter; the pregnancy of the second saviour. Needless to say, the protagonist cannot understand the meaning of her remark, neither do the readers.

The last sentence of *Mzingile*, *Wanyama walikuwa wakicheka!* (Animals were laughing!) (Kezilahabi 1991: 70) also emphasises the novel’s jokey mood. What is laughed at may be the old man who is described immediately before this sentence. However, since the sentence has no object, it can also be interpreted as that the whole story itself is the target of the laughter and suggests that the whole story is a joke.

The old man who used to be God makes the strongest impression of the word, *mzaha*. In *Mzingile*, the old man declares his nihilism by saying, “*Maisha yeneye ni mzaha mkubwa kuliko yote. Ndiyo maana yanaweza kuishika*” (Life itself is the biggest joke. That’s why we can live) (Kezilahabi 1991: 13).

Seeing the similarity between two lines; “life is a joke” and “form is emptiness”, the word *mzaha* (joke), seems to tell the similar idea to that of *Kuu* (emptiness). The idea of *Kuu* tells vanity of the material world and releases human beings from the suffering of attachment. Similarly, the idea of *mzaha*, which makes the storylines obscure and untrustworthy, would be understood as the message “Do not fixate”. That is, this idea seems to prompt readers to view the novels’ structure as a turning circle and abandon any attachment to the storylines, then give up trying desperately to unravel their mysteries.

In *Mzingile*, the old man God rejects to leave the protagonist’s house and says, “*Siondoki! Ebu nilaze vizuri upande wa kushoto nipate kuota juu ya utupu*” (“I won’t get out! Hey you, roll me over on my left side so that I can dream about emptiness”) (Kezilahabi 1991: 59). He is not interested in “past creation” (Kezilahabi 1991: 12), or in Buddhist term, any “form”, which might have been created by him, and prefers dreaming a sweet and empty dream (Kezilahabi 1991: 12, 15). The word “dream” is used many times in *Mzingile*, and is also used by Buddhist philosophers to describe the fluidity and unreality of the present. Buddha himself said that the world is merely a dream (Saigusa & Kishida 1997, Yokoyama 2009).

Thus the old man, who used to be the Almighty God, now seems to assimilate into Buddha, who tells readers the way to read and solve the mystery. One difference between Buddha and the
old man lies in their self-awareness. Buddha repeats the central theme of his message: all that is contingent is unreal; but he never forgets to add na me so attā (this is not I), to tell that he is not involved in the cyclical flux of time, that he has transcended cosmic time (Eliade 1973: 191). Only in this way he can avoid self-contradiction (Saigusa & Kishida 1997). In the novels, however, the old man confesses the unreality of his existence as follows:

Zamani hizo mlikwako tu mawazoni mwangu. Lakini sasa nimegundua kuwa mimi pia nimo mawazoni mwenu. (Kezilahabi 1991: 33)

In the past you have existed only in my mind. However, now I realise that I also exist in your mind.

The old man insistently rejects to be the founder of new religion. This shows that he is similar to a trainee monk who has renounced the world and practices meditation to transcend cycles and attain to Nirvana.

Thus, in the never-ending circular labyrinth, readers can find exits everywhere, not by persisting in resolving the mystery, but by reading the Buddhist allegories in the novels.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have regarded two novels *Nagona* and *Mzingile* as a single inter-connected story to reveal their circular structure. Both the novels regularly repeat birth and death without concluding the story. This article has shown that the structure is the reason why the novels seem to be difficult, especially for readers who expect a morally conclusive ending.

Circularity seems to be the most important concept and imagery in these novels. In *Nagona*, characters around the protagonist constantly demand him to “enter the circle”, which means to obtain the truth. In *Mzingile*, the protagonist speaks about his view of life where, [...] binadamu ana mhimili wake mwenyewe. Katika mhimili huo hujiviringisha mwenyewe wakati yumo mbioni kulizunguka jua lake lisiloonekana ([… each human being has his own axis. In this axis, he turns himself while turning rapidly around his invisible sun) (Kezilahabi 1991: 5).

It seems the image of the circle provides readers with a clue of how to read and understand the novels. If read in search of a storyline the novels appear complex. However, if read as one inter-connected story with overlapping, but not completely parallel sequences, the storylines turn on the theme of destruction and regeneration; thus revealing their dual circular structures. This approach also helps the reader to understand the characteristic narrative style. A fragmented narrative stems from this structure, because within it the order of events is not fixed. It is only natural that both *Nagona* and *Mzingile* are said to be open-ended, because an “ending” is not important inside a continuous cycle; nor does it ever occur.
Eliade tells that this structure; never-ending cycle of destruction and regeneration is interpreted as the basic concept of time, especially in Indian tradition and Buddhist thought. In the novels, many words that make the story untrustworthy seem to tell readers similar lessons. Thus Buddhist reading enables to disclose the novels’ labyrinthine structure. Buddhists try to escape from this cycle by practicing the idea of Kuu, while in the novels; the word mzaha (joke) tells readers not to fixate on the storyline, which is exactly the idea, which enables readers to escape from the circular labyrinth seen in the novels. Since Kezilahabi has quoted Eliade’s term, I would like to emphasise that Buddhistic reading of his novels is reasonable approach.

The novels seem to be a bitter satire upon Western Civilization, or particularly Christianity. However, reading from the Buddhist perspective, it turned out that they go beyond a mere satire, and create the totally different philosophy. I hope this article will open up new horizons for studies of the novels.

References


**Figure legends**

Figure 1. The circular structure of the story: The storylines in *Nagona* and *Mzingile* repeat destruction (point B) and regeneration (point A). Both novels start from the destruction of authority and end in the regeneration of a saviour. Therefore, the novels mainly describe events in the left part of this circle, but various events in the right segment also occur in the novels. The arc B to A indicates the journey of the protagonist. At the end of the journey, the light of truth illuminates the protagonist.

Figure 2. Linear narration: The upper arrow indicates the sequence of narrative time. The short arrows beneath it indicate how the parts of the sequence turn into a story. Roman numerals stand for chapters in a story. This figure merely shows the style of linear narration and does not represent a particular novel.

Figure 2. Circular narration: Roman numerals stand for chapters, but are assigned tentatively. The question marks indicate there are no restrictions on the ways the circle can be divided or the chapters numbered. This figure also does not represent a particular novel.

Figure 3. Circular story: N3, N6, and N10 stand for *Nagona* Chapters III, VI, and X respectively. M2 and M5 stand for *Mzingile* Chapters II and V.
Figure 1.

Birth of the Saviour
Regeneration of Truth

Light

Journey
and quest

Nagona
Mzingile

Death of the Saviour
Destruction of Truth

Figure 2.

Figure 3.