

DANCE OF THE JAKARANDA

Peter Kimani

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Dance of the Jakaranda is a refreshing fictional narrative set in the historical context of the former British East Africa Protectorate, later called the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, and then the independent Republic of Kenya. Kimani has succeeded in writing a novel that builds upon past narratives on the encounter between Africans and their European colonisers as presented by prominent African authors like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) and *The Healers* ([1979] 2000), as well as Kenyan authors like Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Weep Not Child* (1964) and *Petals of Blood* (1977). The play that Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Micere Githae Mugo wrote, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), and the play by Alamin Mazrui, *Kilio Cha Haki* (1982), also examined the Kenyan colonial period.

The historical background of *Dance of the Jakaranda* spans the period between the late 19th century and the year 1963 (i.e. after Kenya had achieved independence). The narrative, which is divided into a prologue, 23 chapters and an epilogue, centres on Christianity, colonisation and resistance, themes which all three the main characters (Reverend Richard Turnbull, Ian Edward McDonald, and Babu Rajan Salim (Babu)—a Punjabi Indian railway worker) embody. European missionaries imported Christianity into Kenya, and shortly thereafter the British settlers colonised the Kenyans and abrogated the laws that gave them rights over their ancestral lands. As a result of these two developments, the Kenyans put up a resistance against these usurpers of their ancestral lands, and engaged in armed struggles against them until they got their independence and won back their country.

As from the first page of the prologue, there is rich usage of flashbacks. The narrative commences with the would-be British colonialists roaring into a part of the protectorate that the European geographers called the Rift Valley. Indeed, the novel aptly describes it as follows:

Villagers were roused from their hamlets by a massive rumbling that many mistook for seismic shifts of the earth. These were not uncommon occurrences—locals experienced earthquakes across the Rift Valley so often they even had an explanation for it. They said it was God taking a walk in His universe. They believe this without needing to see it, but on that day the villagers saw the source of the noise as well. It was a monstrous, snakelike creature whose black head, erect like a cobra's, pulled rusty brown boxes and slithered down the savanna, coughing spasmodically as it emitted blue-black smoke.

This black snake, which turns out to be what the Kikuyu, the largest ethnic group, calls the *Iron Snake* or the *Lunatic Express*, suggests that the lives of the locals are no longer the same after this encounter, especially since they are not asked whether they want or need this *Iron Snake* on their ancestral lands or not. They simply see that the rails have been laid without their knowing what they are there for; until the *Lunatic Express* speeds through the Rift Valley into their lives.

Kimani equally highlights the symbiotic relationship between colonisation and Christianity in the prologue through describing the love-hate cooperation between Ian Edward McDonald or Master, as he is called by the locals, and Reverend Turnbull, the missionary who is sent to convert the inhabitants of the British East Africa Protectorate to Christianity and who calls Kenya God's own country because of the beautiful landscape. The conversation of the two men in the prologue gives an insight into the structure of the novel. The discussion centres on a child who was born out of wedlock to a chief's daughter who had been taken in by the Reverend Turnbull, because the man accused of impregnating the girl, Seneiya, the daughter of Maasai Chief Lonana, was a fugitive. How did this come about? The rest of the novel becomes a mosaic whose pieces are slowly put together to give a complete picture of the narrative.

Given the havoc that Christianity wreaked on supposedly godless Africans—a topic that has been documented in many history books and colonial narratives—what comes to mind at this point is the sermon of a Nigerian, Reverend Mojola Agbebi, a leading proponent of *Ethiopianism* who advocated an African-centred Christianity. He was the founder of the Native Baptist Church (now the First Baptist Church) in 1888 in Lagos, Nigeria. In his 1902 "Inaugural Sermon", which he gave in Lagos, Nigeria, he stated:

European Christianity is a dangerous thing. What do you think of a religion which holds a bottle of gin in one hand and a Common Prayer in another? Which carries a glass of rum as a vademecum to a "Holy" book? A religion which points with one hand to the skies, bidding you "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," and while you are looking up grasps all your worldly goods with the other hand, seizes your ancestral lands, labels your forests, and places your patrimony under inexplicable legislations? O! Christianity, what enormities are committed in thy name. (Agbebi 1902)

Agbebi's criticism of European Christianity, the kind of Christianity that Reverend Turnbull represents in Kimani's novel, highlights the hypocrisy of this religion in respect of Africans. This is echoed in the novel when Turnbull states that "God shouldn't live so close to the heathens" (11). Why should God not live close to the so-called heathens whom Turnbull has been sent to convert to Christianity by his church in England? So, instead of saving them, he sows his own seed through sexual immorality—he warns towards the end of the novel that he may have left children littered all over the colony.

Turnbull also seems to admit that the European God is and must be different from the heathen Africans' God. This is a way of consolidating Western hegemony over African agency: even in Christianity, God is not the same. So, if Agbebi concluded that European Christianity was dangerous, he was saying that the type of Christianity practised by Turnbull and his church is not in the interest of Africans. It is not a generous religion that respects Africans and their religions and cultures. Instead, it is a violent religion that condones the dehumanisation and humiliation of Kenyans and turns them into squatters on their own ancestral lands. Turnbull, who is supposed to be different from the unforgiving and vindictive McDonald because he is a man of God, allows another man to suffer for his own (Turnbull's) sins.

In the subsequent chapters of the novel, Kimani centres the narrative on McDonald and the labourers brought to work on the railway line from British India. The intention behind the construction of the railway line is to link Lake Victoria and the Nile with Mombasa. One of these Indian labourers is the nineteen-year-old Punjabi, Babu Rajan Salim, who comes with his young wife, Fatima. A misunderstanding occurs between Babu and McDonald upon Babu's arrival in Mombasa when he tries to help McDonald to interpret what three fellow Punjabi Indians are trying to tell him. But McDonald mistakes it for an attack on him and it turns him against Babu. They become sworn enemies for over 60 years. Since the incident, McDonald does not trust Babu and always looks for ways to harm him. He stunts Babu's wife's recovery with a fake treatment from Dr Casebook, and underpays Babu for the construction work on the railway that he is supervising. He refuses to come to Babu's aid when Babu is wrongly accused of raping Seneiya.

Upon his retirement from active military service, McDonald builds a house which he names *Monument to Love* for his wife Sally, who has left him after having betrayed him (with their South African gardener) by engaging in what she feels is an atonement of past sins committed by her great-grandfather who was a slave owner. The narrative informs us satirically:

Her tryst with the South African gardener was prompted by the same instinct: an unspoken guilt over past mistreatment of blacks through slavery and her patriarch's complicity in it. After reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* days after its publication in 1899, her estrangement from white privilege was complete. (60)

McDonald later turns the house into a white-men-only club where he and fellow white men spend time in between their wildlife expeditions.

But, as events herald the dawn of independence, the whites-only setting of the club changes and non-white Kenyans are accommodated. In fact, we are told in the novel:

When the doors and the windows to the house were finally opened, the villagers were surprised to see cows rearing their big heads in the doorway. That's when the edifice was converted into a farmhouse that later gave way to the segregated social establishment, which further gave way to the multicultural outfit named the Jakaranda, the letter k for Kenya replacing the c in the jacaranda that McDonald said sounded "colonial." (62)

Until now, the club has indeed been colonial, but, with independence, segregation becomes politically incorrect, and thus Jakaranda sheds its colonial connotations by becoming Jakaranda and opening its doors to Africans and Indians.

Babu's grandson, Rajan, born to a son called Rashid, who was fathered by his Indian friend and colleague, Ahmad Dodo, while Babu was a fugitive, makes a living on the stage of the Jakaranda hotel in 1963 by singing the *mugithi* tune. This *mugithi* tune is a dance about stories told to him by his grandfather, Babu, about his experiences working on the railway line. Rajan also performs the *marebe* dance, which is,

the true story of the Indian trader who encountered a lion in the Tsavo forest as he led his mule to the camp. The mule carried on its back pails of paraffin and when the lion struck, Babu to Rajan, its claws got stuck in the ropes holding the pails. The mule attempted to flee but was paralyzed by fear and the additional load on its back. The lion could not extricate himself from the hessian ropes. The pails of paraffin clanged together as the mule hee-hawed, trying to shake the beast burdening his back. (65)

It is at this time that Rajan meets and kisses a mysterious woman in the dark corners of the Jakaranda hotel. He searches for and finally finds her and learns that her name is Mariam. This meeting unlocks the doors of the intertwining lives of the three main characters, because she is the missing link between them. Rajan runs away with her, and they begin to search for answers.

As mentioned earlier, the novel has a historical setting, and Kimani subtly uses Kenyan history in the narration. The reader is reminded that the Kenyans fight against the appropriation of their lands and live through the inhumane intrusion into their society by the British colonists. Nyungo the drummer, who previously worked for McDonald, asks a question as he and other locals storm McDonald's land and confront him with the atrocities that he and his fellow intruders have committed through the colonisation and subjugation of Africans:

What would make a man leave his land of birth, go after another man's land and impose his way of life on them? And as if that was not enough, destroy their culture? (284)

The question that is left unasked is: What does the coloniser expect the colonised to do? Accept this intrusion into their lives or resist it? It is remarkable that Babu, being an

Indian immigrant, is one of the central figures in the novel. His character is especially important because, unknown to his arch-enemy, McDonald, and his fellow colonisers, he is a key figure in the fight against colonisation because he helps the freedom fighters in the forest by financing them. As the locals storm McDonald's land, Nyundo (who used to work as McDonald's servant) confronts McDonald and tells him that the resistance movement in the forest has many supporters, some even working for him, and that Babu is one of them. McDonald is surprised. Nyundo gives him additional information about Babu's involvement in the freedom struggle:

That's our man. His code name was Guka. Patriot of the highest order. And when the history of the country is written, a chapter will be devoted to him. He was committed to the end. Or I should say, right from the start. The earliest I can remember was that incident at Fort Jesus when he made you wet your pants. And when our elders sat to think about foreigners who could be drawn to our cause, his name was mentioned repeatedly ... he used that fine head of his to formulate ways in which to contribute to the movement without arousing suspicions ... he helped us in all ways, as our people put it *kwa hali na mali*. And for investing in our nation, our nation will honor and remember him. (286–287)

This is indeed an interesting turning point in the novel, because the money Babu has made as a rich man is now spent helping the local inhabitants in the forest, right under the noses of the colonisers as well as his arch-enemy, McDonald. Babu's role in the struggle explains why the masses demand that Rajan, his grandson, be released from prison. He is one of them and they see him as their own son. Thus, by making Babu's character central in the narration, Kimani reminds the readers of the fact that those who took part in the struggle for Kenyan independence were not only of Kenyan origin: they were also people of other backgrounds who lived in the society at the time.

There are parallels between the characters in the novel and Kenyan historical figures of resistance. The freedom fighters are modelled on the Mau Mau fighters; the big man is modelled on Jomo Kenyatta; and Rajan's character is somewhat reminiscent of the post-independent activist, Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, who was seen as a symbol of resistance against the new elites and their corrupt ways. All these characters add to the fluidity of the novel, because they are symbols of collective resistance mounted by Kenyans who were driven off their ancestral lands by the white men who came quietly, first of all as visitors who then became landowners. The owners of the land became squatters on their ancestral lands.

In *Dance of the Jakaranda*, Kimani has done a remarkable job of introducing different storylines and then piecing these back together to become one coherent story. This highly ambitious venture has been quite a success: the back-and-forth movement in the narrative does not disrupt the multiple storylines—instead, the author uses this kind of narrative as a thread to weave all the characters and events together. Indeed, no character is forgotten, in part because they are all part of the narrative circle and without them the circle cannot be complete. Kimani has subtly woven the Kenyan colonial history into the narrative through the use of three main characters who represent the foreign

presence in Kenya. He uses them to re-memorise and re-imagine the colonial intrusion into the ancestral lands of Kenyans, and to remind one of the subsequent struggle heroes who fought hard against colonial oppression, subjugation and humiliation.

This narration is such that in the end there are no winners, only broken men. Turnbull and McDonald are symbols of the erosion of traditional African values; they remind the reader of the need for mutual co-existence and respect for the ancestral African land. Turnbull, who is supposed to be different from the unforgiving and vindictive McDonald because he is a religious leader, looks on as Babu suffers for his own (Turnbull's) sins. In a letter that he leaves behind for his granddaughter, Mariam, the mysterious woman that Rajan runs away with, Turnbull finally confesses that he was the one who had raped Seneiya. He also informs her in the letter that she was fathered by McDonald. Turnbull's confession, saved until almost the end of the novel, is the highlight. Babu is the only character who succeeds in leaving behind a lasting legacy that is built around his work with the freedom fighters in the forest. Whatever he lacks in his own personal life as a husband to his wife, Fatima, is compensated for through his grandson, Rajan, who fills the void left by the wounds of the past that he has carried around with him for years.

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