The Jive Talker

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How to Get a British Passport

Samson Kambalu

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An extract

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The Jive Talker

1

My father wore three-piece suits that he had ordered from London in the sixties and seventies when he could still afford them. Back then he looked like Nat King Cole, but when I was growing up, he looked like a scarecrow. This was not because his suits were too old (for a good suit can last for ever) but because my mother was obsessive about hygiene. When my father, who was a clinical officer, returned from his weekly round in the hospital wards, she would undress him in the backyard, before he entered the house, and wash his suit to get rid of the tetanus, whooping cough, measles, mumps, TB and other dangerous diseases that she thought she could trace within the familiar scent of aspirin on him. For some reason she did not trust the local dry-cleaners for that kind of job. Her washing machine was the big boulder in the middle of the yard; she would soak the suit in hot water and Sunlight soap and mash it up to a pulp with her strong hands. Thereafter an eerie silence would descend upon the house because the sight of the suit hanging on the line used to scare away all the birds from the surrounding trees.

But my father did not mind looking like a scarecrow. He said he was a philosopher and walked with his head held high in the sky like a giraffe. His favourite study was the toilet. Apart from the fact that it was the only private space in the house, he believed that it was from the toilet that all great

ideas came. It was not a coincidence, he said, that Martin Luther conceived the Reformation in the toilet. Our toilet was therefore usually stuffed with an eclectic mix of books from his huge two-part bookshelf in the living room, which he called the Diptych. Many of the books were by his favourite writer, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. My father said that Nietzsche was the perfect philosopher for the toilet because of his searing aphoristic style and cold truths. He had every book that Nietzsche had ever written among the piles of paperbacks by the side of the toilet: *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Untimely Meditation*, *Human*, *All Too Human*, *Daybreak*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *The Case of Wagner*, *The Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, *Nietzsche vs. Wagner*, *The Will to Power*, *Ecce Homo* and even the one book he is supposed to have written when he went mad towards the end of his life called *My Sister and I*.

My father made quotations and notes from his readings and hung them all over the toilet walls until they spilt over to other places around the house. And, since the time in Blantyre when he had been moved from the leafy suburb of Queens to the rough Nkolokosa township in order to make way for a real doctor from England, we had called him the Jive Talker, not because he lied or talked jive, but because he liked to keep us awake on random nights and inflict his Nietzsche and personal affirmations on us in drunken performances, which he called jive, named after his favourite beer, Carlsberg Brown, which he also called jive.

When my mother asked the Jive Talker not to talk to us about Nietzsche because we were too young to understand the blasphemous ravings of syphilitic philosophers, he protested, saying that we were taught about the equally irreverent Christ even before we could read the Bible and yet we *understood*. And he was right that we understood, or some of us anyway: there I was one morning, in Thyolo

District, suffering from diarrhoea and perched on the toilet, a skinny African boy, only eleven years old, and I was hooked on Nietzsche like I had been on the Bible when I was a Born Again. I now wanted to become a philosopher. I was confident that I could do it at that green age because I had read in the Bible that Jesus was already debating the scriptures with the rabbis when he was only twelve years old. My mother also told me the story of Kalikalanje, the wizard boy, who within a year of his birth was conducting profound conversations with grown-ups after he had accidentally fallen into the fireplace and jumped out with the brain of a sage. She thought I was special too: I had been born two months premature, had often fallen from my bed as a baby and had almost drowned in a well when I was three years old. These, she reckoned, were the reasons why the Jive Talker thought I had an eidetic memory, why I always came top at school and why I sounded like I already knew enough jive to invent my own religion in time for my twelfth birthday.

2

I should have washed that piece of fruit first. I had been recovering well from the malaria which I had caught after doing a rain dance in Arthur's nuclear bunker, when, earlier that morning, my little sister, Linda, gave me a piece of mango to make me feel better; instead, I got from it a bad case of diarrhoea that had me glued to the toilet seat for hours. Luckily enough I was home alone and nobody else needed to use the bathroom.

I had made myself a big sugar-and-salt solution and placed it on the bedside table to make sure I would not die of dehydration, but I very soon forgot about it. The trouble

was that when I was off school for whatever reason I always enjoyed being in the toilet, nosing through my father's books and notes. I could do it for hours and it was no different that day, especially now that I had decided I would become a philosopher. It was like reading nonsense verse of the 'Jabberwocky' variety, which I loved: meaningless but meaningful. As I thumbed through Nietzsche that morning, I did not understand most of it but that did not deter me because, thanks to the Jive Talker, I did at least understand what each one of his aphorisms meant: the *will to power*, just like my father's personal affirmations.

These were mostly creative visualisations of his professional ambitions and usually began and ended with a mysterious phrase, *'I am a multimillionaire.'* He would habitually type the affirmations on A4 paper and then carefully fold the paper so it could fit in his wallet. Here are a few examples I found in his bedroom when he died from Aids in 1995:

> I am a multimillionaire.
>
> This week brings me a chain of successes. Within a few days from now I will be a great success in the eyes of my superiors. I will have performed my work well. Everyone will admire my work. My superiors will be highly impressed by my work. Stacks and stacks of money both in glittering silver and banknotes are on their way to me! I will ride in beautiful cars. Friends will invite me to parties. I shall be in very splendid health.
>
> I am a multimillionaire.

> I am a multimillionaire.
>
> My goal at this time is to open tomorrow's course for polio vaccinators with ease and enjoyment so

that my audience congratulate me! I will be highly congratulated after opening the course.

I am a multimillionaire.

I am a multimillionaire.

I will manage all government hospitals in Malawi.

My office is at the Ministry of Health Headquarters in the City of Lilongwe.

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I am a multimillionaire.

Native

1

In around 100 BC a group of Bantu-speaking peoples armed with iron-tipped spears migrated from the Congo Basin onto the East and Southern African plateaux, displacing the Stone Age pygmies from the area down south into the Kalahari Desert. Among these peoples were the Chewa who settled in what is now the central region of Malawi.

When the Dutch Reformed Church came to Dowa District in 1892 the Chewa were a matriarchal society: a man lived with his wife's people and played a marginal role. He did not even own his children or property. He was little more than a sperm donor who sometimes helped with manual work. That was the position my grandfather, *o*Banda, had in his family before he became a Christian. When his household converted, however, he found himself the head of his family. Not only that: he was given a *name*, Elisa. Before the missionaries, a name was not something you were given, but something you *earned*. Until you earned your name, which for many never happened, you were called by your clan name, which had a slight variation to denote your gender. Thus in the case of my grandfather who belonged to the Banda clan all the males in his household were called *o*Banda and all the females, *na*Banda. When the neighbours' child came into their compound to deliver a message and called out '*o*Banda!' several men would come out of the mud huts and the child had to point a finger at which *o*Banda he

was looking for. The missionaries, however, had different ideas: they said that every man was special from birth and christened each one of them with relatively unique names. And as if that was not enough, they were also required to pick up a surname to register with the colonial authorities. My grandfather chose the surname *Kambalu*, which means 'splinter'.

Fascinated by the new order of things, Elisa Kambalu sent his son, my father Aaron Elisa Kambalu, to Robert Blake Mission School to get an education. My father's ambition was to go all the way to Edinburgh to study medicine, but his dreams were cut short when one of Blake's Boer teachers called him a 'native' as he worked in the school gardens. He had hated that word ever since he realised its implication. Losing his temper, my father threw his hoe at the teacher, narrowly missing his head. They expelled him from the school and sent him to prison for several months. It was during his incarceration that he read Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* and embarked on a lifelong project of self-configuration and enhancement through any book he could lay his hands on in that remote part of the world.

Back at home in Misi Village his father sold goats and fowl of all kinds to support him while he completed an O-level correspondence course in English with a college in London. He got an E. The poor result, the Jive Talker reckoned, was not because he did not know his grammar but because he had been too bombastic.

Anyway, at the age of twenty-four, armed with the London certificate, my father left his village for ever. The year was 1964. It was the beginning of a new era. Malawi had just gained independence from the British, with Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a US- and UK-trained lawyer and physician, as its first president; the young country had never been so optimistic.

2

Aaron Elisa Kambalu moved to the city of Blantyre, named after the birthplace of the Scottish missionary and explorer, Dr David Livingstone. He trained as a medical assistant at Blantyre Medical School. He was then placed at a government clinic in Naperi township: it was there, among half-naked ailing natives, that he found his future wife.

My mother was different. She looked like Twiggy; her hair was parted in the middle, ironed straight down into a bob and decorated with a plastic red rose. And, since this was long before the Decency in Dress Act of 1971, she wore a miniskirt and high-heeled shoes. She carried a handbag. She spoke fluent English. She loved the Rolling Stones too …

Upon realising this, my father immediately announced that he had run out of aspirin and sent away the rest of the natives. He then closed the door and turned round to give the young lady a thorough examination.

Her name was Jane Kaphwiyo, she was twenty-two years old, a Ngoni, hence her unusually light complexion and her petite figure. In relative terms, people of her kind were new to this hotter part of Africa: she was more Hottentot than Bantu. The Ngoni were a warrior tribe who had fled British settler excursions from the Eastern Cape, Portuguese slave raiders from Algoa Bay and Shaka Zulu's subsequent *Mfecane* (the Crushing) in South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. The displaced warriors had fought and looted their way into the interior of Africa until they were slowed down by food poisoning in Malawi: they had come across a stash of *kalongonda* (velvet beans), which they did not know needed days to cook. A good number of the marauding warriors were poisoned to death while the survivors were disarmed by the creation of the British Protectorate of Nyasaland on 14

May 1891. Their exodus thus terminated, some of the Ngoni settled in Ntcheu District in a village they called Chingoni.

When the Montfort Missionaries came to Chingoni Village in 1901 to establish the Roman Catholic Parish of Nzama, my maternal great-grandfather lost his land in a deal that his cousin, the paramount Ngoni chief, Njobvuyalema ('tired elephant'), made with the French missionaries. As compensation, the missionaries offered to teach his children to read and write. When my grandfather, Henry Kaphwiyo, finished school, he left the village to work as a clerk in the copper mines of Zambia, then known as Northern Rhodesia. By then he was already married and had a daughter, my mother, whom he left in the care of the missionaries. The Montfort Missionaries at Nzama Parish were raising my mother to become a nun until some mysterious stranger made her pregnant.

She left the baby on the doorstep of the parish priest and went to Blantyre to study as a primary school teacher at Kapeni Teacher Training College. That's where she met my father one afternoon when she had a headache. Six months later they were married, following an agreement that her bastard child stay back there in the village with the grandparents. They went on to have eight children, who in order of birth are Emily, Lucy, Joyce, Elson, Kondwani, Chikondi, Linda and Bond.

One hungry afternoon I asked my mother why the household was big enough to staff a farm. Was it because she was Catholic? Her reply was ingenuous but brutal: the supply of contraceptives at the hospital was erratic.

3

I was born in Nkalo, Chiradzulu District, on 23 November 1975, the year they killed Sweetman Kumwenda, the police chief from the Northern Region, and exiled the Jehovah's Witnesses to Zambia for refusing to buy Malawi Congress Party membership cards. My mother told me that on that day my father came home late at night, soaked to the bone by the heavy rains. He had been out in the bush administering polio vaccines. We were pretty broke and so the cold supper that awaited him on the table in gleaming china was bad by his normal standards: two lumps of maize meal, pumpkin leaves in a groundnut sauce and a couple of smoked *utaka*, a bitter, finger-sized fish from Lake Malawi. All the same, he sat at the table and said his prayers. When he opened his eyes, the dim light of the oil lamp revealed that there was no cutlery by his plate. He hated that.

'Where is my knife and fork?' he asked the stillness of the house.

There was no answer.

My father, it was well known, loved his cutlery better than his food.

'Where is my knife and fork?' he asked once again. His notorious temper was already steaming but still there was no answer, only the pelting rain on the tin roof and the muffled buzz of a fly keeping vigil at the table.

'Where is my knife and fork!' He bellowed it out this time, banging the table with an angry fist.

His startled pregnant wife suddenly answered from the bedroom: 'You cannot eat that fish with a knife and fork.'

She was still half asleep but she was right: *utaka* is a lean fish when smoked and dangerous if eaten with a knife and fork. In every bit you sawed off there was a bone waiting to lodge into

your gums and throat or go down your windpipe and choke you to death. The only way to eat *utaka* is with your hands, feeling your way through it. But my father, a progressive gentleman, valued etiquette above his own life and upon hearing my mother's reply he completely lost his temper.

'You bloody natives! You don't understand!' he roared, and pushed the table away in disgust.

The table was new from the carpenter's workshop – you could still smell the pine – but it was not perfect. Parts of the woodwork had warped and, upon being pushed, the table came off the cardboard stopper under the shorter leg and swayed from side to side. The lantern fell off the table and smashed to the floor with a *boom!*

Suddenly the curtains were on fire, the sofa, the display cabinet, the Diptych … the whole house was on fire.

That calmed his temper quickly.

He woke up the whole family, my mum, my sisters, Emily, Lucy and Joyce, my brother Elson and the nanny Ayene, not to lead them out into the safety of the rain outside, but to help him save what was left of the Diptych from the conflagration. The family dragged the incredibly heavy twin bookcases out of the house to the shelter of the banana trees, but it had taken so long that there was no time to save anything else, so the family just stood there, shattered, watching the house burn down.

Then suddenly my pregnant mother's womb began to turn; that's when I crawled out of her like a little mouse, two months before my time, right there beside the Diptych.

There were no incubators at Nkalo Clinic; I survived by the kangaroo method. The midwife told my mother to wrap me warm between her breasts with a *chitenje* and to keep me there until I was strong.

I was born the fifth child, and they named me Kondwani, a Chichewa name, which translates as Meher Baba's expression, 'Don't worry, be happy.'