

Excerpts from **PRINCES AND GODS**, (formerly **Eclipse over Lake Tanganyika**)

by **Albert Russo**, part of the **African Quatuor**

Under a leaden sky a breeze languidly hugs the white- washed walls of the Asian quarter. The immutable scent of spices, glued to your nostrils, permeates your lungs as if it had always been part of you. There is a touching quality about the chalky brightness that covers the narrow stalls, the colonial workshops, the oriental counters and the tumble-down dwellings with their inevitable back yards. Something promiscuous. Unhallowed. Yet genuine.

The main street is still dormant. Along the shabby, low- fronted buildings, an array of tinfoil motifs — geometric designs and abstract flowers — alternate with dyed laurel twigs and garlands like a chain of tawdry necklaces. At the curb of the road stands the mosque, resembling an overgrown sugar loaf freshly painted in hues of ochre, pale pink, and pistachio green. Its minaret, spangled with electrical candles, projects a shadow on the pavement like a javelin slitting open an imaginary serpent. In a scene where human actors are absent, the sun lends a dramatic, desolate touch.

A door creaks, slowly set ajar like lips parted by a timid yawn. A band of urchins trickles through, one by one. You can distinguish the girls from the boys by the plaits tied up with white ribbons on both sides of the head. Then, suddenly thrust into the glaring sunlight, a blast of colors. Masquerade of iridescent costumes. The scene remains eerily mute. You would think they were all scared to move. Scared to disturb the new order of things as if they had become intruders in their own quarter. Bluejay hair where shafts of rays indulge in orgiastic games. Chubby little faces, glistening here and there with beads of perspiration. The boys' yellow and turquoise outfits vie in exuberance with the satin and velvet dresses of the girls. There are three of them... now four... now six... finally eight. Brothers and sisters? Cousins? Or both? What grave expressions they bear! Already frowning at such a tender age!

Delicate filigree bells jingle around their wrists, as elusive as the muffled notes of an angel's choir.

The baby boy takes a false step and stumbles over a brick. He is about to sob. He has scratched his brand new leather boots and, prancing with rage, he kicks the ill-fated brick several times with his right toe. Now he starts howling. The eldest of the children scowls at him. The others silently stare at the scene, uncertain whether they should comfort their little brother or be angry with him. Haven't they been told that this was a very special day and they should behave?

A woman stalks out, half-dressed, with locks of hair hanging down her shoulders.

“Stop that racket or I’ll call your father. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. What will the Aga Khan think of us?”

Little Hassan certainly doesn’t grasp the full implication of these words, yet all at once he becomes motionless, like a piece of wood.

“Where’s Dalila?”

“She’s making up, mommy,” answers a barely audible voice.

“What?” With a firm hand, the woman drags her youngest son inside the house.

The first room they cross looks like a furniture repository. It is rather dark, but after a while the eye gets accustomed to the semi-obscurity of the place. Outlines of three low Indian tables finely chiseled with arabesque patterns — the feet are in the shape of elephant trunks. To the left, a black and red leather pouffe with, at its center, a gilt-designed throne. A few precious objects are scattered around with disregard: a jewel-case inlaid with baby shells, small ivory statues whose garments fall with the subtlety of lacework, and an enormous carved tusk representing a tiger hunt. Somewhat hidden is a camphor chest, the pungent scent of which permeates every piece of furniture and living particle in the room. In a nook stands a miniature replica of the Taj Mahal. How many sighs, how many intrigues have unfolded behind those draft-screens of marble interlacings?

On one of the pale blue walls hangs the portrait of young Karim Khan — beardless prince whose large forehead prognosticates early baldness. It is a grossly hand-colored picture such as can be found in every Ismaelite home. Karim, spiritual chief of a Moslem sect, counting no less than thirteen million followers. Karim, the direct descendant of the Great Imam Ismael. For the faithful scattered throughout the world, he is revered as a prophet.

Mother and son then pass through a courtyard shaded by a leafy rubber tree into a cosy and comfortable living room. Today it has been exclusively arranged for the pleasures of the table. On a plaited bamboo tray, smeary honeycombs are surrounded by flaky triangular pastries. And next to an untouched plate of almond biscuits is the appetizing cone of a sugar-dusted cake, its snowcapped peak enclosed in a glass dome.

The sour-sweet aromas that you inhale on entering seem as much a part of the room as the walls and the ceiling. The air is heavy with curry and the acrid scent of nutmeg, mixed at times with the delicate perfume of Ceylon tea or the odor of roasted sesame seeds. You can hardly smell the two boughs of mimosa flowers mounting guard in a tall brass jug.

Little Hassan, who’s not habitually a bashful child, gives his mother an occasional wink, his eyes fastened upon her even when she is not watching. Still clinging to her arm, they both step into Dalila’s bedroom. Pouting with surprise, the young girl leaps

away from the mirror. She is wearing a beige tulle jumper on top of a baggy pair of silk trousers with a fringed belt around her waist. She hastily sets a hibiscus flower in her chignon, while holding an obviously used lipstick between her fingers.

“What do you think you’re doing, painting your face like that?”

“But mother, it’s the day of... you know.”

“All the more. You haven’t turned fifteen yet. And look at yourself. Daubed with cosmetics. Who are you trying to imitate? Those stuck-up European girls? You’re seeing too many movies. Haven’t you any pride left? Any self- respect?”

“Perhaps I should wear a veil... like you used to. Or like grandmother.”

Little Hassan flattens himself against the door while his sister gets a slap across her face.

“The cheek! So this is how you waste your time, hey. Instead of taking care of the little ones. First, you will go and wipe that stuff off your face. And when you are a bit more presentable, you will take the children over to uncle Rachid’s. Do you hear? If they ask about me, tell them I won’t be long. A good thing your father isn’t around. He would give you the hiding of your life.” Then, glaring at the now frightened toddler, she adds, “Stay here until she’s ready, okay!”

This ugly scene reminded Oswald of the chasm that often separated the human races and brought to mind a story that an old zano (watchman) had related to him two days earlier, as he was bandaging the zano’s forearm. The old man’s eyes shone with pride as he recounted the events, for they concerned one of his favorite nephews, Ilongo.

Having done his homework and fulfilled the household chores, Ilongo forked the crossbar of his bicycle and pedaled his way along the footpath that snaked through the tall grass. The rain had halted and he breathed in the thick pea-scented air, letting it slowly, sensuously seep into his lungs as if it were an elixir.

No sooner had the tires of the Flandria hugged the asphalt than Ilongo gathered speed. He cleaved the atmosphere and spread his arms wing-like, shifting the weight of his hips in a regular sway so as to keep his balance, ready for an imaginary takeoff. He could now clearly view the lake with the fawn-tinted mountain range kneeling on the opposite bank like a many-humped lioness. Ilongo often dreamt of hovering above the dozing ‘beast’ so that he could vie with Mungu in the daily task of ministering to his earthly creatures, a task that did not preclude occasional outbursts of wrath, such as the lightning that had struck a neighboring village the other day, for how else would the people be reminded of Mungu’s presence?

Cycling towards the airdrome was the lad's favorite pastime. He would watch the kitenge-clad women pick cotton while, close to a shed, boys barely older than he pressed the fluffy white bolls into wicker baskets. On the other side of the road stretched a paddy-field where other women toiled, bent over, their ankles deep in the water. Ilongo felt exhilarated at the sight of such industriousness.

Not long ago, the schoolmaster had lectured on the land and its produce, stressing the importance of coffee in the nation's economy. He had explained that both Arabica and Robusta beans were of such high grade that the bulk was exported to the United States of America, bringing in return much needed foreign currency. This, to Ilongo, had been somewhat of a revelation, for America was the country where Baba Paul Leroy Smith lived.

Baba Paul was Ilongo's foster father, who encouraged the lad to pursue his schooling and to learn — later on — a useful profession. When, in one of his letters, Baba Paul had asked whether he already had an idea of what he wanted to do in the future, Ilongo mentioned the civil service and spoke of Uncle Tambe. Uncle Tambe, a senior clerk at the post office in the capital, was a much respected man, even with the elders, and he could also type with two fingers.

But it was between broadcasting and aviation that Ilongo's heart swayed. Whenever he had an opportunity, Ilongo would borrow the Philips transistor from Diluwe. He enjoyed listening to the frenzied beat of the local music and to the latest French or American songs, but nothing interested him more than the news. The voices of the man and the woman would alternate to inform him of events, small or shattering, through which Mungu manifested his moods. He liked to believe that he was being addressed personally and drank in the words with a mixture of relish and fascination. He pictured himself before a microphone, speaking as the Messenger to all and sundry in a tone of voice at once vibrant and confidential. No matter how sad the news might be, he would win the admiration of thousands of listeners.

Ilongo the pilot was the other image that flashed in the schoolboy's mind, especially when, as now, he was riding parallel to the runway. The potbellied air force Bréguet squatted at its habitual place nonchalantly behind a DC 3. Except for a few cars stationed in the parking lot, there was no sign of the imminent arrival of the plane coming from Europe. Ilongo always waited with the same pinch of emotion for the moment the gleaming object would pierce through the horizon, gradually taking form, in total silence first, then with a rumble that would stretch into a long, drawn-out whine. How majestic the white and blue aircraft would appear as it initiated its descent, making no more noise than necessary, as if mindful not to disturb the peace of Mungu.

"The plane must have been delayed again," the young boy concluded, disappointed, as he watched the evening set in after dusk's swift and blazing interlude.

He hadn't noticed the hour go by. The crickets had begun their stupid din, trying as forcefully as they could to drown the concert of rumors that accompanied the

brightening of the moon. Yonder, the lake shimmered as if star powder were being sprinkled on its surface. Each one of these flickering lights was a fishing boat. Early in the morning at the soko, the fish stalls would display their rows of fleshy banga-bangas still agape, as if even dead they wanted to lure you, and the glistening dakalas, those tiny fishes the size of a toddler's finger, which one chewed whole, head, tail and bone, when deep fried.

Ilongo suddenly perked up his ears, then realized the gurgle came from his own stomach. He'd just remembered that for dinner he could have the leftovers of yesterday's chicken mwambe. Shangazi (Auntie) always cooked generous portions of mwambe, which she served with manioc dough and hibiscus leaves when guests like the ndukus (relatives) from the hills were staying with them for a couple of days. Ilongo wondered whether Baba Paul ate the same kind of food or if he preferred beefsteak with salad and French fries, of which the Europeans here seemed so fond.

Baba Paul's last letter dated from a month and a half ago. In it he'd said that Ilongo should prepare himself for a lovely surprise. Last year's money order had permitted Ilongo to buy a second-hand bicycle. Although he hadn't gone through the rites of manhood yet, on receiving the Flandria, Ilongo felt he'd entered the adult world.

As the eldest child of the household, Ilongo helped Shangazi take care of her three children. His mama had died giving birth to him. Soon after her death, Ilongo's father married Shangazi, but Ilongo could hardly remember him, as Shangazi had chased him away a long time ago. Shangazi still referred to her husband as the good-for-nothing who'd spent his time running after loose women and wasted the family's meager resources drinking pombe (beer).

Actually, Ilongo didn't miss his real father. Baba Paul had more than replaced him, for not only was Baba Paul Ilongo's foster father — it said so in the document the young boy kept with his school reports — but he also provided for Shangazi and the children. Shangazi pretended that the good spirits had taken pity on her, shutting up old Mapindi once and for all. Mapindi, who was Diluwe's grandmother, had once cast a spell on her. "Doomed you are," she'd said, "for you shall remain without a husband and because of you the foreigner from beyond the Great Water shall be consumed by fire."

Jealousy had poisoned Mapindi's tongue, since now the old woman had become completely mute. She continued to curse with her eyes, though, and whenever Shangazi had to go and fetch water from the river — Mapindi's hut stood at the edge of the pathway — she'd spit on the ground, wishing that those vicious orbs would be plunged into eternal darkness.

Time and again, Shangazi had warned her nephew not to go near the hut of Mapindi's family, but they were the only ones in the village that owned a transistor radio. Ilongo found it very difficult to obey. In fact, Ilongo, who had never questioned his love for Shangazi, believed that she was an easy prey to superstition and that her fears of the old woman were a bit ridiculous.

That night, after making certain the children and Shangazi were asleep, Ilongo brought the oil lamp to the head of his mat and opened the round tin box containing Baba Paul's letters. The lad chose one at random and, as he began reading it, he felt a pinch at the base of his heart. He went on to the next letter and then to the next, and by the time he had put back the lid over the tin box and turned off the flame inside the oil lamp, he had gone through the whole correspondence and contemplated the hand-colored portrait of his foster father.

Lulled by the soft purring of the sleepers, Ilongo drifted into that borderless expanse that lies between wakefulness and dream and which, high in the fabled Mountains of the Moon, is Mungu's retreat. On the surface of the lake of clouds loomed the face of Baba Paul, huge and seemingly awash. As his lips began to move, the mountain peaks started to shake, looking like fangs slicing the air. A voice could now be heard, deep and cavernous and so very weary it must have traveled all the way from the center of the earth. The voice spoke a language unintelligible to Ilongo, yet there was something familiar and awesome about it. Mungu had strange ways of addressing humans; that was why there were witchdoctors to interpret his messages.

At the far end of the lake of clouds, another face appeared, much smaller than Baba Paul's. It was toothless old Mapindi, dusty and wrinkled like the ground in the dry season, and yet she was beaming. Then a crow flew in and pecked at Mapindi's eyes; all the while the old woman continued to laugh. Soon, though, the whole cloud and mountainscape vanished under the crow's wings.

Riding to school the next morning, Ilongo thought intently about Baba Paul. It was composition day and he had a feeling that he was going to write about his foster father. That strong, sudden urge took Ilongo by surprise, for although it was no mystery that he and his family had a provider, until now the lad had been very guarded when people questioned him about Baba Paul. In any case, Ilongo had never been the boastful type. Could the dream have prompted such a change in attitude?

"I'm getting superstitious like Shangazi, aya!" He grinned. Not quite convinced, he spat towards the ground but, instead, the blob landed on the rim of the wheel.

At school the teacher made the announcement before class that during the night a great tragedy had occurred. The plane coming from Europe, which had been expected late in the afternoon, had crashed in the jungle of southern Sudan. The investigators would have to locate the site of the accident, but it was feared there would be no survivors. For days, all over the land, conversation revolved around the plane crash. In the middle of the week, the two local newspapers released pictures of the scattered remains of the aircraft. The black box, however, hadn't been recovered. In the village, speculation abounded. One elder claimed it was a revenge of the martyrs' souls against the colonialists. To this argument a younger man retorted, "And how about our own people who happened to be aboard — returning students, most of them?"

The elder clicked his tongue. “They had no business leaving the soil of their forebears to come back and sow venomous ideas among our population. As it is, there are enough future politicians and would-be ministers parading with their ndukus and wives in expensive new cars and filling their homes with devilish instruments. Have our youth lost all sense of pride? Whoever finds that black box had better be warned, for the spirits inhabiting it will strike him, and they won’t spare his kin, either. Spirits do not tolerate disrespect.”

Ilongo kept thinking of Baba Paul; every one of his nights now became crowded with images of his benefactor. They were mainly peaceful images, but nonetheless it started to weigh inside the lad’s chest. Also, he did not like the way Mapindi croaked each time people spoke about the plane accident. He had noticed how awkwardly she would glance at him as if she were rejoicing in some evil deed. “Nonsense,” he exclaimed to himself, dismissing the idea that she had cast him a spell, “the old woman is just losing her mind.”

On Friday, the schoolmaster gave back the corrected compositions and Ilongo was praised for having written the best paper. He was invited to read it aloud in front of the class. Ilongo felt at once flattered and uneasy. Was it right to display in public that privileged relationship? Anyway, it was too late; with contained emotion, Ilongo read his composition. Thus it was that his fellow students learned about Paul Leroy Smith, an African-American who resided in New Orleans in the southern State of Louisiana, a man who worked as a pharmacist in a drugstore, who was a bachelor, and who devoted what spare time he had to civil rights activities because he could not forget that his grandparents had once been slaves. Paul Leroy Smith had marched with a great Black leader named Martin Luther King, who was working for the cause of his people, just like Lumumba and other great Africans who had fought and were still fighting the wars of Independence. Wishing to resuscitate the link with his African heritage, Paul Leroy Smith had become Ilongo’s foster father.

Late one afternoon, as he was tying the chain of his Flandria to the pole outside the family hut, Ilongo saw Diluwe run in his direction.

“A letter from America,” Diluwe said, panting. “It’s for you. It was found among the debris of the plane.”

Staring at the envelope Ilongo remained aghast for a while. The whole upper left corner was charred and on the lighter patch below one could clearly distinguish a fingerprint, as if someone had wanted to stop the fire from spreading. A chill coursed down Ilongo’s spine as he opened the letter. Diluwe stood by, eager to hear what the news was all about. Ilongo silently read the portion of the letter that had escaped the flames. In the last paragraph Baba Paul announced that he was about to fulfill his dearest wish — he was coming to Burundi to meet him. And here was his travel schedule: he would fly from New Orleans to New York, where he would catch the transatlantic flight to Brussels; he would stay overnight in the Belgian capital, then board the plane for Buja.

Fate had decided that the letter accompany its sender. Thus had the soul of Baba Paul returned to the continent of his ancestors.