

BOOK REVIEW | *London Cape Town Johannesburg* is published by Kwela Books

# Book explores where 'ubuntu' disappeared to

Zukiswa Wanner takes a look at racism and other social ills of newly independent South Africa

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One rarely finds an African novel with sustained romance or love between a couple these days. There are books about marriages; about couples who start off well and leave their loves, but not of those who plod along the tricky paths of life without some cheating or divorce, in the end. It always seems as if writers are intent to prove today's armchair sociologists' claims that marriages today can't last or families are an outdated story or that commitment is fantasy.

But *London Cape Town Johannesburg* (Kwela Books, 2014) by Zukiswa Wanner is a book where love and marriage nearly outlast the story. Probably the marriage doesn't hold on after the tragedy that the story ends with but for once the romantic ideal of a marriage full of love, hope, sharing and companionship drives the story of the life between Germaine Spencer — a white British — and Martin O'Malley — a black South African brought up by an Irish step-father. It is the couple's life that we follow from London to Cape Town to Johannesburg, hence the title of the novel.

## Race relations

So, *London Cape Town Johannesburg* is a story about movement. It is a story of journeying across race, social class, continents, cultural and personal beliefs, love, hate, etc. Race is important in this story because race pretty much defines what South Africa is today — 20 years after independence — and will be in future.

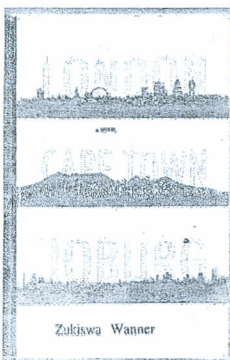
The marriage of Germaine to Martin in England follows in the footsteps of Martin's mother, who had married O'Malley and had a child with Liam O'Malley. Germaine and Martin have Zuko Spencer-O'Malley — a child of three heritages: Zulu, English and Irish. It is the death of Zuko, which sets off the story — or stories — in the novel.

Briefly, this is the story of Germaine, Martin and Zuko. Zuko is born in England but the parents relocate to South Africa soon after. The family moves to Cape Town, where Martin had been offered a job in an investment bank. Germaine continues with her work as a ceramist, setting up shop with local women. After

10 years in the Cape they move to Johannesburg. Martin takes up work as the CEO of his brother, Liam's company, Mokoena Holdings. Despite protestations from his mother, Martin eventually meets his biological father, Martin Mtshali, who is suffering from cancer. Mtshali cons Martin and Germaine, together with Liam, out of their lifetime savings when he convinces them to invest in his company, whose money he takes for personal use.

Primarily this is a story about a journey of love between two people who decide to marry despite the difficulties of interracial marriages. Despite being relatively settled in England, they move to a newly independent South Africa, where race defines nearly every aspect of everyday life, would definitely have adverse consequences for them. However, the two appear to be bonded together more by the romance than by the socio-cultural prejudices that shadow their lives in South Africa. Martin is taken to have betrayed blacks by marrying a white woman, as his brother Liam — 50 per cent white — who is more prejudiced than any of their immediate relatives, always seems to suggest. However, the couple is determined to weather the tensions that such racially-blinkered worldview would otherwise cause.

*London Cape Town Johannesburg* is also in some senses, partly in relation to the racial question, about South Africa's own post-1994 journeys. Here we have the tribulations of interracial relations, political misadventures by the ANC — which Liam represents, violence, economic inequalities, etc. Cape Town and Johannesburg are the two pillars of South Africa. They both connect the country to the rest of the world and are also its economic motors. The South African Parliament sits in both cities, during summer and winter. But they are also the places where racism and economic differences are most



Writer Zukiswa Wanner, author of the book, *London, Cape Town, Johannesburg* (Kwela Books, 2014).

explicit. Germaine may have found a place to set up a pottery workshop in the township but working with the underprivileged township women isn't just philanthropy, it is a reminder of failed economic policies of the post-apartheid ANC governments, which have left too many blacks on the margins of the economic mainstream.

Liam's business empire and rise in the ruling party shows how values of solidarity, equality and justice are mere slogans in today's South Africa and no longer the philosophy that carried the ANC to power in 1994. To call this turn of events betrayal or selfishness doesn't begin to describe the terrible poverty and suffering of many blacks in South Africa today.

But what makes *London Cape Town Johannesburg* so appealing is Wanner's style of telling the stories of the various characters through the lenses of Germaine, a foreigner; Martin, a local but whose worldview is "foreign" — British/Irish; and the child's viewpoint through the diary of Zuko.

The shifting viewpoints of the three, even on the same issue, bring closer to the reader not only different perceptions on the country, but retain the image of a family struggling to come to terms with the indeterminate realities of the post-1994 South Africa throughout the story. However, this appears more as an ideal family, one with very few upheavals. It appears more moulded in Mandela's "rainbow nation" spirit.

Yet throughout the story one has a feeling that the rainbow nation is a dream whose time hasn't come in South Africa. The racism and xenophobia that even Zuko diarises seem to suggest that it will take more than rhetoric — like that of Liam and his party

comrades — and the goodwill of "liberal" (white) South Africans and the government's affirmative action such as the Black Economic Empowerment policies to make the country one big equal and peaceful family. The sexual violence that makes South Africa the "rape capital" of the world — as some media have called it — and which in *London Cape Town Johannesburg* is highlighted by Liam raping Zuko is a horrific and ineradicable stain on a country that proclaims ubuntu (a shared humanism) as its core values.

Zuko's suicide is a profound rejection of the violence that the vulnerable — women, the old, the young, the poor, foreigners, the racial minority, etc — endure in South Africa today at the hands of men, the wealthy and politicians. The boy's violent act of taking his own life, on the eve of his 13th birthday, also raises questions about parenting and the society's responsibility to children.

One is left wondering, like Germaine, whether parents are today too absorbed in their own careers to care about children. And if parents are too busy making money, what about the society's role in raising the young ones? Where does one turn to when trusted ones, like Zuko's uncle, Liam, turn into monsters?

*London Cape Town Johannesburg* is an absorbing book, which at times emotionally repaints the seemingly old values of friendship, romance, solidarity and family. But it is also realistic enough to temper its own story with the texture of the harshness of today's world, where the innocent often don't have a second chance against the evil.

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## UoN now has to compete with the best



Prof Mbiti, the seventh vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi

BY PETER M.F. MBITHI

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the University of Nairobi and, most importantly, to this function to witness my inauguration as the seventh vice-chancellor of this august institution. This is a momentous occasion for this university as we usher in a new era in governance.

Fortunately, the history of this university since 1970 is replete with ideas on how the management has surpassed hurdles and forged ahead with its agenda. My six predecessors had their own challenges and all of them have recorded in the annals of history great achievements during their times in office.

Dr Josephat Njuguna Karanja, the first vice-chancellor between 1970 and 1979, when I was a student in my formative undergraduate studies, is remembered for his defence of intellectual freedom. Prof Joseph Mungai (1979 to 1985) was a very amiable gentleman and is remembered for opening up the administration to students. Prof Philip Mbiti (1985-1991), is remembered for being a great organiser and working through small teams to achieve corporate goals.

## Revenue streams

Prof Francis Gichaga, the fourth vice-chancellor (1991-2002), left his footprints in the sands of time by increasing access to higher education and diversifying revenue streams of the university through the introduction of Module II programmes that ultimately set the foundation for the rapid development witnessed in the last 17 years.

The fifth vice-chancellor, Prof Crispus Kiamba (2002 to 2004), is remembered for enhancing student and staff awareness and involvement in the governance of the university. More importantly, staff and student unionism became an integral part of the university governance system.

My immediate predecessor, Prof George Magoha (2005-2015), will be best remembered for his robust transformative leadership that led to many structural and infrastructural developments. Indeed, many of his footprints, among them the University Towers nearing completion, will forever remain iconic in the university.

A reflection on these achievements of my predecessors over the past 45 years, accounts for the present University of Nairobi.

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REFLECTIONS OF A SCHOLAR | Thoughts of a man of letters

# Maestros vs experts: Who takes the crown?

Established scholars use their conference papers to network and further their careers

BY AUSTIN BUKENYA  
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In academics, only one experience is as exciting as a truly lively classroom interaction. This is the ambience of an international scholarly conference.

I have just realised that it is more than a month since I last attended such a conference, the Literature one at Pwani University. Yet I am still on a "high" from it, New Year and all the other festivities notwithstanding. I haven't even honoured all the promises and pledges I made to keep in touch with all the wonderful friends I made.

For making friends with like-minded colleagues from different parts of the world is one of the joys of such occasions. Indeed, especially for the young and emerging scholars, conferences are one of the best opportunities for getting noticed by the international academic community.

You might have thought that, going by the old "publish or perish" adage, getting into print in peer-reviewed anthologies and refereed journals is the surest way to recognition in academe. But then, a striking conference paper is the best candidate for those publications.

But even for the established scholars, conferences are unique opportunities to test and refine their work. This, of course, implies that in scholarship there are no pinnacles. Even after appointment to the highest chairs in the scholarly establishment, true scholars never rest on their

laurels. Indeed, promotion is a challenge to produce even more knowledge.

Some conferences have even been recognised as markers of major transitions in the state of knowledge in our disciplines. A good example in Literature is the legendary Johns Hopkins one in 1966, when Levi-Claude's "structuralism" was publicly challenged by Derrida's "deconstruction".

Eleven years later, but on a more modest scale, we saw the transition from "oral literature" to Zirimu's "orature" and to the whole "oracy" enterprise, which remains continuing business today, to both my joy and my challenge. Still, the Lagos FES-TAC77 Colloquium was not in vain, especially as it was one of our own East African moments on the grand stage.

One particular conference stands out in my memory, though, and for a rather bizarre reason. I did not read my paper, "Ubingwa na utaalumu katika somo la Kiswahili (Virtuosity and expertise in Swahili studies)", which had secured me the invitation to the conference in the first place. Naughty, naughty!

But then, this was Dar es Salaam 2000, and as an "only son" back in my alma mater's luxurious lap, I was entitled to some indulgence. Do you remember how this is answered in stylistic parallelism? (An only mother, too, is entitled to some obedience!)

Anyway, TUKI (later renamed TATAKI), then under the stewardship of my neighbour and bosom friend Mlinzi Mulokozi, was

marking 70 years of systematic Kiswahili study and research. What better way to celebrate than to have an international conference?

So, they had come, the gurus, the maestros and the virtuosi as well as the experts, the specialists and the theorists from all over the world, descending on Dar to celebrate Kiswahili. They ranged from the heaviest heavyweights, like Abdilatif Abdalla, Euphrase Kezilahabi and Mohamed Abdulaziz, to the lightest lightweights, like yours truly and a whole host of "Nani bin Fulanis", with a very fine crop of young scholars in between.

There were, in fact, so many papers submitted for the conference



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Austin Bukonya

that the organisers had resorted to the now-common practice of scheduling parallel sessions. This meant that several papers would be presented simultaneously at different venues.

But there was one paper I wasn't going to miss, and this was "Utandawazi ama Utandawizi (Globalisation or global rip-off)?" by Said Ahmed Mohamed (Khamis), whom I then only knew through his literary work. But it just so happened that his paper was in a session parallel to one in which I was to present.

Priding myself, falsely, on my homeground knowledge of the conference, I thought I could quickly "flake" the *utandawizi* presentation and then dash to my venue and ask to deliver my paper at the tail-end of the session.

But alas, that was not to be. I was so absorbed in Khamis's presentation that by the time I remembered to get to my venue, there was no tail-end to catch. The session was literally ending, and I just held my peace.

Nor did the session chair, who I believe, was my sister Zubeida Tumbo-Masabo, or anyone else there ask any questions about my paper. A sop to my scholarship!

Anyway, I got thinking about my paper again as I listened to some of the Kiswahili presentations at my latest conference at Pwani, which was, commendably, entirely bilingual in both conception and execution. I couldn't help wondering if our scholars were aware of the *ubingwa vs utaalumu* dichotomy.

The heart of my 2000 paper,

prompted by some of the debates raging then, was that linguistic expertise was not to be confused with dazzling performance in Kiswahili or any other language for that matter. Each had its role and neither should be judged on the terms of the other.

In simple terms, the virtuoso (*bingwa*) exhibits wide, deep and creative performance in his or her language. He or she is not necessarily expected to possess or exhibit exceptional analytical, interpretive or descriptive competence of the language or the literature.

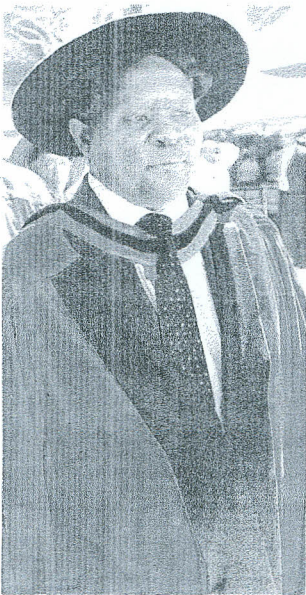
The expert (*mtaalumu*), on the other hand, is expected to possess deep and wide-ranging awareness of the workings of language and literature, and the intellectual tools to identify, analyse and describe these mechanics. He or she need not be a star performer in the language.

Maybe what is needed in the relationship between the two is an amount of generous humility. The experts should respect the creative users' instinctive competence with the language, orature and literature. Nor should the virtuosi ignore or dismiss the insights of the linguistic or literary experts, even if such experts are not native or skilled users, as most of the virtuosi are.

I wonder who would be best qualified to interpret Chomsky's famous line of "verse": Colourless green ideas sleep furiously!

Prof Bukonya is one of the leading scholars of English and literature in East Africa

## New boss pledges to make UoN a world class university



ANTHONY OMUYA | NATION

Prof Peter Mbithi during his installation as the seventh vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi on Thursday.

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What do I intend to do as the seventh vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi? To set the tone, I quote Cardinal John Henry Newman, who had great ideas about university education. He said: "The university teaches to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought to detect what is sophistical and to discard what is irrelevant."

For this university to continue producing quality products that live to the ideals of Cardinal Newman then, we need to compete with the best in the world.

My vision is to ensure that we become a top-ranked, sustainable, world-class institution with enduring and valuable scholarly excellence. My first objective then, is to ensure that the University of Nairobi produces quality and holistic graduates in diverse fields of study to meet the expectations of the market and to provide solutions to the challenges affecting our society.

To achieve this, we will review academic processes in order to ensure quality programmes and increase the relevance of our graduates to industry. The areas that I will target include: Development and upscaling the integration of ICT into learning and teaching and inbuilt experiential learning in our programmes.

I will also enhance the quantity, quality and relevance of research. In the past 10 years, the university research fund has increased tenfold from Sh350 million to Sh4 billion due to increased research by our members of staff and collaborators.

With more support and increased focus on this function, the research docket should experience exponential growth in the university, and especially given the many challenges that our society is facing. It will thus be necessary for interventions by researchers in almost every facet of life.

To achieve this goal, my administration will focus on enhancing the capacity of researchers, improve the management of research funds, enhance dissemination of research outputs to society, incubate research efforts and partner with industry.

### Stakeholders conference

Indeed, in the course of this year, we will hold a conference for industry stakeholders in research to exchange views on how to grow research at the university. I also intend to increase internal research funding starting with at least Sh1 million funding to any staff with a fundable proposal.

My other area of focus is the improvement of academic and social facilities for our students with more attention to student mentorship, orientation, beyond classroom

extracurricular activities and social life. We have already begun a process to construct hostels to accommodate over 5,000 students through the Public/Private Partnership, to address the perennial problem of inadequate accommodation.

Also lined up for construction through the same model is the School of Law Tower at Parklands. This will house the increasing academic activities of the school, and give it the profile befitting its status as the leading law school in the region, the construction of CD4 labs, construction of a teaching hospital and, of course, the completion of ongoing projects, among them, the University Towers.

Apart from the physical revamping of facilities, we shall also focus on an effective structure for their management and also progressively evolve governance by involving staff and developing young staff for management. Other will include professional management of the human resource portfolio to increase staff motivation, retention and productivity.

All these proposals require financial resources which I intend to enhance through the establishment of endowment funds, creation of a university foundation, partnering with the private sector to finance capital projects and increased involvement of the alumni in fundraising for the alma mater.

I will also work with the government closely and lobby them to support our reform agenda and preferably increase capitation to cater for the payroll in order to free some of our internally generated funds to be used for revamping our facilities.

The task ahead of us is challenging yet, the university will not relent in its endeavour to realise a horizon of opportunities for exploiting and competing with reputable universities worldwide.

### Wise words

I will end by leaving you with another thought from Cardinal Newman, and which captures the value of what we do. "University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society... It is the education which gives a man a clear conscience view of his own opinions and judgments, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them."

I truly believe that you and I can make the University of Nairobi to deliver this product to our society.

Excerpt from a speech delivered by Prof Peter Mbithi during his inauguration as the seventh vice-chancellor of the University of Nairobi on January 14, 2015, at Taifa Hall