



1982

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Recommended Citation

Lindfors, Bernth, The new David Maillu, *Kunapipi*, 4(1), 1982.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol4/iss1/13>

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Abstract

In the 1970s David Maillu emerged as the most significant popular writer in Kenya. This he accomplished not by writing school books for local branches of international publishing houses nor by soliciting the patronage of government-subsidized Kenyan publishers but by establishing his own firm, Comb Books, and inundating the market with novelettes and volumes of verse he himself had written, published, and then energetically promoted.

The New David Maillu

In the 1970s David Maillu emerged as the most significant popular writer in Kenya. This he accomplished not by writing school books for local branches of international publishing houses nor by soliciting the patronage of government-subsidized Kenyan publishers but by establishing his own firm, Comb Books, and inundating the market with novelettes and volumes of verse he himself had written, published, and then energetically promoted. His first 'mini-novel', *Unfit for Human Consumption* (1973), the costs of which had been underwritten partly by a loan from a friend and partly by a trade agreement with a distributor, had sold so well that he had been able to invest the proceeds in a second book, *My Dear Bottle* (1973), a poetic apostrophe to the consolation of inebriation. This too had been swallowed up quickly by a pop-thirsty reading public, and Maillu had plowed the profits back into the firm just as quickly, bringing out in the next year another mini-novel, *Troubles* (1974), and another humorous soliloquy in verse, *After 4:30* (1974), as well as reissuing the first two sold-out titles. By repeating this kind of pyramiding procedure, Maillu in four years was able to publish twelve books he himself had written (including a Swahili translation of *My Dear Bottle*), reprint the best-selling works several times, and publish four books by other Kenyan authors who had similar stories to tell. By the middle of 1976 Comb Books had expanded to a staff of seven or eight full-time employees occupying two stories of an office building in downtown Nairobi, and nearly all the technical aspects of book production — from type-setting on modern IBM machinery to designing of multi-coloured jackets — were being handled in-house. Maillu made such an impact on the East African book world that other publishers rushed to emulate his example, introducing their own series of romantic novelettes and long-winded lyrical ruminations, often with photographs or drawings of sexy-looking girls on the covers. It was clear from this frantic competition that Comb Books had been a hair-raising success.

But Maillu's fortunes changed rather abruptly in 1976. First, in June that year, his books were banned in Tanzania, so he lost his major

'foreign' market to the south. Political instability in Ethiopia and economic chaos in Uganda under Idi Amin had already robbed him of export opportunities on other borders, so just as his publishing house was beginning to grow and expand, the potential market for his books was contracting. However, by this time, encouraged by his early successes, he was printing a minimum of ten thousand copies of each new book he wrote, and his reprint runs sometimes went as high as thirty thousand copies. Eventually he over-extended himself, and the pyramid came crashing down. He published no books in 1977, and the only titles to appear under the Comb Books imprint in 1978 were *English Punctuation* and *English Spelling and Words Frequently Confused*, which he had put together under the pseudonym of Vigad G. Mulila. His creditors sued him, forced him into bankruptcy, closed down his Nairobi office, and seized his business property, auctioning it off in September 1978 to pay a portion of the 700,000 shillings (about \$100,000) he still owed them. Comb Books, a bold experiment in popular publishing, thus died in its sixth year.

But Maillu has not remained silent since then. Under a new imprint, David Maillu Publishers Ltd., he has recently brought out three new books of his own and has reissued a 1975 Comb Books title he supposedly co-authored with a prostitute. He has also published two novels in the Macmillan Pacesetters series, has a third in press, and has a very long fourth novel (ca. 600-720 pages) completed and under consideration in London. In addition, he has finished a novelette that he hopes will help to raise 'a few million shillings' for the Koola Town Self-Help and Community Development Scheme near his hometown of Machakos; he has invited Kenya's President Daniel arap Moi to write a foreword for this book. Maillu reports that he is currently busy writing an epic of Akamba life covering the period from 1800 to 1981, a volume that might turn out to be twice as long as the most ambitious work he has attempted so far.¹ The author who began his literary career with popular mini-novels in 1973 is thus turning his hand to giant blockbusters eight years later.

What happens to a writer's work when he can no longer publish all of his own books and therefore must submit some of his manuscripts to a foreign publisher? What happens to his work when harsh economic realities force him to choose very carefully what he himself is going to risk scarce capital to publish? What happens, in other words, when a totally free creative spirit is placed under constraints he has never before experienced? Does he express himself in a different way? Does he deal with different themes, different situations, different characters, different ideas? Or does he resort to the familiar formulas that have won him his

reputation, seeking thereby to repeat earlier successes? David Maillu, a self-made literary phenomenon who went from pop to bust and is now trying to float a second career balloon in rough weather, provides an interesting case study of the popular artist under pressure. What strategies has he employed to survive?

When Maillu first appeared on the East African literary scene, he introduced an innovation that no other writer in his part of the world had exploited so fully: he talked dirty. True, Charles Mangua had done this a little earlier in Kenya in two extremely popular novels, *Son of Woman* (1971) and *A Tail in the Mouth* (1972), but Mangua wrote humorous picaresque tales in which a street-wise hero talked tough and dirty. Maillu may have learned something from Mangua, but his own civil servant heroes were not roughshod rogues but middle-class victims of biological urges that ultimately destroyed their careers; they talked weak and dirty. For instance, here is the way *Unfit for Human Consumption* begins:

Jonathan Kinama, civil servant in the Republic of Kenya, waited in the bank, at the counter, teller No. 2. His insides burnt with impatience, much impatience, for his two months salary. It was pay day, the end of the month April 1972. The bank was full of customers, men and women, and at such a time one had to wait for a very long time. The bank had assumed a strange smell, a blend of cigarette smoke, and cheap and expensive local and exotic perfumes. And there was smell of sex, especially from some of the women who had come to the bank hurrying through the hot morning. However, such sex smell could only be detected by some experts like Jonathan Kinama who had great experience in women. There were women of all sizes, from the tallest to the shortest; from the most beautiful to the ugliest.

Kinama decided to keep himself busy while waiting by looking at the women. There were many pretty women to entertain him, most of them modern looking, impressively smart with straightened hair, some wearing Afro-American wigs. All of them carried expensive handbags of cheetah skin, zebra, lion, and plastic. This was the scene of the modern African woman. Kinama's eyes rested on one girl, yes, that one — a fat girl armed with huge breasts, and highly pronounced buttocks, obviously soft and comfortable, luxurious. There was something more of great interest about her. Her legs. Thickly set legs, beautiful of course, and enthusiastically polished by nature in chocolate brown. And she protected them in the latest fashion of stockings. A bird that fitted too well in her mini dress, a mahogany mini which matched very well with her body. Kinama calculated in his mind and passed her as a sexy bird.

Her eyes met his and he quickly looked away pretending that he had not been looking at her. But not before he had managed to have a glance at her lips: full lips which seduced his for a kiss. He licked his lips. She was unaware that he had been studying her. Now she fell into conversation with a thin girl, nail-hard looking. They talked in English and the accent which came from the thin girl sounded doubtfully local. He studied the thin girl and found himself thinking, 'How would a man hold this one?' But his eyes went back to the fat one in spite of the attractive accent of the

thin one which was putting more value in her. Kinama's ideal girl for sex satisfaction and romance was a plump girl with shoulders that arched nicely and intoxicating breasts like those ones. He could hardly take his eyes from her. He waded through the crowd till he came to a good position where he could see her face well. 'Hi!' he thought, then he sighed.

'Man, this one,' he thought, 'this one is very much fit for human consumption!' He began wondering what man on earth enjoyed her.

'Delicious!' He thought and began surveying her legs, then her hips and ... 'Just there!' He thought and his penis began rising. (pp.5-7)

Kinama, a middle-class tragic hero, does not rise very high before he suffers a middle-class fall, losing his job because he cannot control his desire for sex and alcohol. Distraught, he commits suicide.

It was this kind of story — the soap opera of civil servant self-destruction — that Maillu made his own in his first mini-novels and long poems. Sometimes he would focus on men, sometimes on women (usually working women — secretaries, schoolgirls, prostitutes and the like), but his stories seldom ended happily. The protagonist would have to suffer for having over-indulged in the fleeting pleasures of the bed or bottle, pleasures which Maillu paused to describe in elaborate and zesty detail. Some of his detractors called such writing pornography, but it would be classified as rather innocuous softcore material on the bookshelves of any western drugstore or supermarket, including those in Nairobi. Yet in East Africa no one before Maillu had written about such matters in quite the same way, with so much attention focused on the physiological and psychological dimensions of erotic and dipsomaniac behaviour. It was no doubt this unusual 'frankness', as Maillu terms it,² that won him so many readers. He talked dirty in a new way.

If we compare Maillu's latest works with those he wrote and published during Comb Books' brief heyday, one change becomes apparent immediately: the dirty talk is gone. His heroes may be sexually active but they are not sexually obsessed, and their physical interactions with members of the opposite sex tend to be described with restraint, even reticence. This is true not only in the two novels he has published in the Macmillan Pacesetter Series, *For Mbatha and Rabeka* (1980) and *The Equatorial Assignment* (1980), but also in *Kadosa* (1979), the first novel brought out by David Maillu Publishers Ltd., and in 'Tears at Sunset', the yet unpublished novel written for the Koola Town Self-Help and Community Development Scheme. Moreover, carnal love has no place in *Jese Kristo* (1979), a morality play performed at the Kenya National Theatre in October and November of 1979 and published in the programme prepared for that production, or in *Hit of Love* (1980), a

one-hundred page poem issued by David Maillu Publishers Ltd. in a bilingual (English-Kikamba) format. The only exception or throwback to Maillu's earlier sexy style of writing is *The Flesh: Part One* (1979), a poem about prostitution purportedly written in Kikamba by Jasinta Mote and translated, edited, 'produced', and reprinted by Maillu after having been originally published by Comb Books in 1975. Since *The Flesh: Part One* belongs to an earlier phase in Maillu's career and may have been composed to some degree by someone else, it will not be considered here except as an example of what is produced by a hard-pressed softcore publisher returning to old tricks of the trade. Perhaps Maillu needed a proven bread-and-butter (or bed-and-better) title to get his new publishing venture off the ground. His previous experience in the popular book business would have taught him that prostitution sells.

But such pandering to prurient interests was not the sort of thing that an established British publisher would be likely to be eager to include in its own popular series. Every Macmillan Pacesetter contains the following policy statement: 'All the novels in the Macmillan *Pacesetter* series deal with contemporary issues and problems in a way that is particularly designed to interest young adults, although the stories are such that they will appeal to all ages.' The initial titles in the series are indicative of the pace Macmillan hoped to set: *The Smugglers*, *The Delinquent*, *The Betrayer*, *The Hopeful Lovers*, *Bloodbath at Lobster Close*. Clearly the emphasis was meant to be on formulaic fiction — stories of mystery, adventure, and romance. Young adults interested primarily in raw sex would have to seek their literary thrills elsewhere.

Maillu's success in adapting to new popular formulas is evident in the first two Pacesetters he has written. *For Mbatha and Rabeka* is built on a classic love triangle. Mbatha, an idealistic primary-school teacher, is planning to marry Rabeka, his beautiful childhood sweetheart who teaches at the same village school, but while she is in Nairobi recovering from a liver ailment, she meets Honeycomb Mawa, a Panel Beater Foreman with Bodyliners Limited, who shows her the town in his Saab sportscar, wining and dining her at all the top establishments in the Rift Valley and escorting her to high-class international parties. Rabeka, dazzled by the urban glitter and impressed by Mawa's sophistication and wealth, begins to long for life in the fast lane:

As soon as she returned to Kilindi, she noticed how primitive things were and how many essentials of living were missing. To start with, she saw how poor life was in the country. Then the list continued: there were no entertainment centres, no television, no high class hotels, no cinemas, no good transport facilities, no hairdressers,

no newspapers, no bookshops or libraries, no intellectuals with whom to discuss serious subjects, not to mention how far this place was from the city of international communication. (p.99)

Mbatha, distressed by Rabeka's new materialistic outlook and heart-broken when she leaves him with the intention of marrying Mawa, has a mental breakdown that puts him in an asylum for six weeks. But the story ends happily when Mawa, unable to raise a substantial loan to cover his marriage expenses, fails to turn up for his own wedding, and Rabeka, embarrassed and tired of waiting, agrees to run off that same afternoon with her dependable old beau. Village virtue thus wins out over big-city flashiness.

The story moves rapidly, and several vividly sketched minor characters add humour and variety to a fairly conventional romantic plot. Maillu, in bringing his lovers together, does not omit erotic encounters entirely, but most of the heavy-breathing action takes place in bedrooms or river-banks offstage. The most intimate scene described is one in which Rabeka and Mawa, forced to share a guestroom in her uncle's Nairobi apartment, huddle together at night under a single blanket in order to keep warm. Unable to sleep, they leave the light on and talk for a while:

Later, sleep overcame her and she blotted out, leaving him still brightly awake. He turned slowly and faced her in that semi-back position she lay. He studied her calm face that had now been taken over by the innocence of sleep. Her kissable lips lay loosely, very tempting ... he felt her clear clean breath gently breezing over his face. He liked the way she breathed; he admired her nose, her eyelashes, that chin, those cheeks, all of which were given a fine finish by the pretty mouth — those lips again. Between her lips, her milk-white teeth half showed ... She smelt nice. He brought his mouth closely to hers, so that she breathed straight into his nostrils, not a stinking breath, but a living one; one though not fresh, was refreshing, challenging, feminine. Slowly, he placed his arm over her bosom, doing his best not to awaken her. His hand lay just below her breasts.

'Your highness,' he called much, much later.

'Yes,' her eyes flew open, being sensitive to the light.

'I can't sleep.'

'I'm sorry, I can't keep awake much more ... What can I do for you to make you sleep for a while before we wake up?' She felt his hand across her bosom and didn't object.

'I guess nothing you can do.'

'Put off the light and try to sleep, please.'

He reached the switch and put off the light then returned the hand back. She turned her back to him, took his hand and put it under her arm and, how daring! now put it over her breast as if she thought that was the only favour she could extend to him. 'Please, for my sake, try to sleep.'

And he *did* sleep, though after a long time. (pp.78-9)

The difference between the Pacesetter Maillu and the earlier sex-pacer Maillu is quite clear if we compare this kind of titillation with what comes to hand in any Comb Book. Here, for example, is an excerpt from *Troubles* in which a secretary, trying to win a promotion, meets her boss after hours in the office to feed him fish and chips and, in the process, arouse another of his appetites:

He looked at her greedily as if she was a piece of nicely roasted chicken which he wanted to eat. Erna took everything easily, advancing by degrees. If things went on the way they looked, she thought, then she knew that she was on the right path to the promotion. He began kneading her breasts and her eyes began responding. He kissed her lips, pulling her more to himself. They looked at each other, smiled, then when he kissed her this time, she gave him all her long tongue to suck on. He did it passionately, eating all the bits of chips on the tongue. She writhed in his hands. When he released her a little bit, she folded up the paper and put aside the chips, then pushed all her breasts to him. And he knew what to do with them ... He kissed and sucked on her firm breasts, shattering her and triggering off her vagina powerfully excited and making it begin chewing its lips and trying to swallow them. He took a glance at the gloss black hair thatching her vagina.

'Ohooo, Ohooo, Oho-o!' She cried as his pole drove into her lively flesh. She arched her hips up and up to meet him, hastening his powerful warm thing into a full swallow — complete homecoming ... He knew too well how to drive a woman mad with it, building her up into a crushing climax. Now he took to another style, sucking and twirling her nipples. That amplified her crying, sometimes her breath locking up and storming out. Now he added his finger to twirling her clitoris. She squirmed, twisted, scratched the floor, and hit his legs with her heels. And when he began racing for the finals, she joined with a savage reaction and a saxophone note leaped her anus. Her orgasm span to the gate synchronizing with his. Maiko began puffing out like a monster and just before they reached their climax, the telephone rang! But they hastened, punching each other wildly until the climax outbroke stormingly. (pp. 112-7)

One doubts that a publisher such as Macmillan would have allowed its offices to be used to promote such creative work.

Maillu's second Pacesetter, *The Equatorial Assignment*, was an African adaptation of the James Hadley Chase type of thriller. Benni Kamba, Secret Agent 009 working for the National Integrity Service of Africa (NISA), is pitted against beautiful Konolulu, known professionally as Colonel Swipta, an agent for a multinational European organization intent on destabilizing Africa for the benefit of the Big Powers. NISA has its headquarters at a Saharan desert outpost run by the brainy Dr Triplo, and Colonel Swipta works at a mountain station called Chengolama Base run by the unscrupulous and equally brilliant Dr Thunder. Benni Kamba's mission is to infiltrate Chengolama Base and destroy it before Dr Thunder can launch his secret weapon, a missile called

Thundercrust that would obliterate NISA. Agent 009 accomplishes this by making romantic overtures to Colonel Swipta, killing her after gaining her trust, and then detonating the Thundercrust on its launching pad, thereby destroying Chengolama Base. The good guys win; the bad guys die.

The action-packed plot of this adventure story includes a kidnapping, a high-speed car chase, an assassination attempt, a submarine manoeuvre, a spying mission, a helicopter getaway, an airplane pursuit, several dastardly betrayals, and countless explosions and murders. Moreover, it is all good, clean fun, with cunning and courage triumphing over might and malice. The earthiest episodes, Benni Kamba's few tumbles with Konolulu, are handled playfully rather than pornographically:

They spent the night together in Kamba's flat. Very early the next morning, they swam far out to sea together. Obviously this girl was a powerful swimmer too.

As they swam round each other, rising and falling with the waves, Kamba thought she was funny in bed. He remembered the manner in which she had coiled and uncoiled, then made that single and final brief cry, 'Jjjah!'

They swam closely.

'You know what?' she said. 'I'm swimming naked, come and feel me.'

He passed his hand over her breasts, then down there.

'Beware of the small fish.' (pp.34-5)

This is light fiction written with a light touch. Unlike *For Mbatha and Rabeka*, *The Equatorial Assignment* does not deal with semi-serious social issues or with real people in recognizable situations. It is escape literature pure and simple, an indigenous variant of an extremely popular foreign genre. Benni Kamba is an African James Bond.

The books Maillu himself has published in recent years are no saltier than those he has published with Macmillan, but they tend to reflect other facets of his personality as a writer. In the play *Jese Kristo* he sets the story of Jesus Christ in a modern African state, the Republic of Savannah, in order to explore a number of related political and theological notions. The historical analogy enables him to comment on injustice, tyranny, violence, and the persecution of innocent and upright people in contemporary Africa in a dramatic context that his audience could not fail to understand. This is satire with provocative symbolic punch.

In the bilingual poem *Hit of Love*, Maillu meditates on the nature of love, asking such questions as 'Why do I live at all, and for what?', 'Does love find or is love found?', 'Do I love you or am I made to love you?',

'Does love regret?', 'Can love be counted in terms of profits and gains?', 'Who is responsible for what I feel?', 'How do I fit in the solar system of your life?' This restless questioning is not unlike the compulsive talkativeness in some of his early long poems, especially the garrulous *The Kommon Man*, which comes in three volumes and runs to nearly 850 pages. Maillu's keen interest in philosophy and 'the moral side of life' achieves expression in this kind of contemplative verse.

A more pragmatic love problem is the theme of Maillu's unpublished community development novel, 'Tears at Sunset'. A beautiful young woman (with the unlikely name of Swastika Nzivele) has married a hard-working young man, Silvesta Maweu, whose family home is in the dry hill country of central Kenya. Unfortunately, his work as a bank accountant keeps him far away at the coast most of the year, and Swastika is left upcountry with the responsibility not only of maintaining their homestead and farm but also of caring for his eighty-year-old mother, Kalunde. At first the two women get along well, but their relationship deteriorates when Kalunde criticizes Swastika for throwing a dinner party and dance one night during her husband's absence. Worse yet, Swastika takes up — and occasionally takes off — with a married neighbour, Simon Mosi, who owns a large farm across the river. When Silvesta returns home unexpectedly and finds her gone, he is furious, but his mother and the village pastor calm him down, and he and Swastika are reunited momentarily. However, as soon as he goes away again, Swastika backslides into unwifely behaviour, seeing too much of Simon and too little of her ailing mother-in-law. She even poisons the family dog so he will not bark when Simon pays his evening visits. The next time Silvesta comes home, he thrashes her soundly and threatens to kill her. She leaves and it appears that their marriage is broken, but he still loves her, misses her, and eventually tries to get her back. When Kalunde dies, Swastika returns to him and they live happily ever after in the highlands, raising three children and building up their farm by constructing a big dam and employing modern methods of irrigation. What had been dry and barren is cultivated at last and bears healthy fruit.

Maillu touches upon a number of topical matters in this story, not the least of which is the plight of the mateless married woman in rural society. Swastika's problem is that she feels bored and unfulfilled living alone upcountry. As she says in a long letter to Silvesta after their break-up,

I think I just found myself very lonely, or afraid of myself, and I just got involved. Country life has many problems. A whole barren world in which you find yourself in

no other company but that of village and little educated women. I am not trying to argue that I am better than they are; but it is that they and I belong to different worlds. You will probably think that I am talking a lot of nonsense.

I think I have one great problem, call it weakness. I can't exist like that without doing anything. That is, I feel that I must engage myself or be occupied by something concrete. Not just trying to supervise some labourers digging coffee holes or making terraces. I need something more than that.

After your duty in Mombasa, you can stroll around, doing some window-shopping or sight-seeing, or go for a swim or to watch the sea as I know you like doing, or see a movie. But what do I have in Kyandumbi or at Koola Town? I am sure I am not the only person seeing it that way. Until there are facilities in a place like that, you can expect worse things from younger people.

In the old days, people were kept busy by their social activities — dances, communal celebrations for circumcisions and childbirths, initiations, participation in clan affairs, looking after the livestock and large families, and so on. What have [we] today in that place?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

And yet, one is expected to live there happily. It is a nice place, but it lacks other things. The desert looks very beautiful, with all those sand dunes, and so on, as you might have seen in films; but no one would like to live in it, because it lacks other factors that are essential to life. Of course, I am not trying to liken Koola to the desert, but I am sure you know what I am trying to say. The place doesn't lack water alone, but many other things. I would love to live in a place like that, in the country, if there were other things to occupy my mind.

I don't know whether you can connect this with my behaviour. Had I been a teacher or something, maybe my time there would have been less boring. I didn't love that Mosi the way you thought. It was a problem deeper than that, and I have great doubt whether you will ever understand it. There is nothing I am trying to justify about the whole involvement. It goes without question that it was immoral behaviour ... That was also the cause of my disagreement with your mother. It would be good for me to simply say that I got messed up ... A friend of mine once told me that even paradise would be boring without some form of occupation. (pp. 84-5 of unpublished typescript)

It is apparent from Swastika's astute effort at self-analysis that her problem is rather different from that of Rabeka in *For Mbatha and Rabeka*. She is not attracted by the gaudy tinsel of city life or the smooth talk of fast men. She simply needs a productive outlet for her energy, something intellectually engaging that will keep her stimulated and busy.

Mailu evidently perceives such environmentally induced ennui to be a major source of unhappiness and social disorder in contemporary Africa, for he returns to this theme again and again in his writings. In the introduction to *Jese Kristo* he remarks that

Most of the adults in Africa today are standing face to face with the devil of 'having nothing to do after work, and having nothing for entertainment' ... Most of the heavy drinking that is invading the country says that something is seriously wrong

somewhere. When man lacks the means of recreation, he turns to drinking, sex, and crime.... There is so much mental hunger in this country that one wonders what could be done to, at least, cut it down by fifty percent. In Western worlds, there are theatres, clubs, sports, dances, films, television, books — the list is long — available to everyone. In our worlds, these are for a few individuals, the élite. For the mass and the common man, there is the bottle and the woman and the mouth. It is not surprising that our countries have the highest birth rates in the world.... The common man has hardly any chances of educating himself beyond where the teacher left him. Food alone is not enough to sustain the human life. (pp. 4, 16)

Maillu the moralist, Maillu the practical psychologist, Maillu the homespun philosopher, Maillu the comedian, Maillu the popular publisher, tries to provide the kind of stimulating entertainment that will satisfy the mental hunger of his people and thereby help to sustain 'the human life' in Kenya.

Perhaps the most encouraging sign of Maillu's growth as a creative artist has been his willingness to experiment with new forms and new ideas. Instead of continuing to churn out only one type of literature, he has moved in a number of different directions simultaneously, dabbling in drama as well as fiction and poetry, and trying his hand at everything from spy thrillers and domestic melodramas to religio-political satire and meditative verse. But his most remarkable piece of writing since the demise of Comb Books must certainly be the first book he published in the David Maillu Publishers Library series launched in 1979, a novel called *Kadosa*, which the author himself terms his 'most favourite work'.³

Kadosa is a blend of romance, adventure, science fiction, metaphysical speculation, and hallucinogenic horror. It concerns a love affair between Dr Mutava, a scholar returning to Kenya to complete a study of 'African Mythology and Apparition', and a mysterious supernatural creature named *Kadosa* who is herself an apparition. *Kadosa* possesses immense powers, including the ability to transform herself at will into anything visible or invisible. She treats Mutava to terrifying displays of her total control over the bodies and minds of human beings, injuring and even killing those who annoy her. She also rules Mutava's imagination, filling his dreams and other unconscious moments with horrific sights that nearly drive him mad. Mutava calls in another scientist from Switzerland to study her, but the old professor flees after *Kadosa* turns his head coal black. Mutava, despite all his qualms and traumas, finds himself powerfully attracted to this phenomenal *femme fatale*, and he is genuinely sorry when she ultimately is called back to another world. She leaves him pondering the illusory demarcation between being and unbeing.

This was, in many senses, a fantastic way for Maillu to begin his second literary career. *Kadosa* was utterly unlike anything he had written before. For one thing, there was no sex in it; the love affair between Mutava and Kadosa was absolutely platonic, with the primary point of focus throughout being on marvels of fantasy rather than matters of physiology. *Kadosa* literally took the reader to another world. The boldness of Maillu's conception may be sampled in any of the uncanny nightmares that haunt this book. Here, for instance, is one of Dr Mutava's hallucinations in a movie theatre:

The screen flipped and instantly another scene came. Someone stood by a very large gate: he was dressed in white, but a red cap was on his head. A stethoscope hung round his neck. He wore red shoes. The walls of the house he was seen in faded out into a grey darkness and I could not see properly what was beyond the grey darkness. The door next to which this man stood was, like the gate, very wide. I looked carefully at him and came to the conclusion that he was a doctor.... From his left, I saw a long line of women advancing towards the doctor. And on coming close to him, each bent, uncovered her bottom and the doctor pushed an injection into her quickly, then she passed. There were women of all sizes and of all races. The doctor acted very quickly on them, throwing glances here and there as if he were afraid of being seen by anyone. But just as soon as each patient passed the doctor, she began to wail and writhe in pain.

That scene passed quickly and I saw the women come out from another opening into the building. And upon entering a large parlour, they dropped onto the floor and blood began to pour out from them as they wailed and writhed in pain. Some of them lay in the pools of blood as if they were dead. But on the left-hand side of the house, another person who looked like a doctor, but this time wearing a green cap and green shoes, stood there with a long knife and each time a pregnant woman passed by him, he stabbed her in the stomach and took out the child and while the child was still kicking in his hands, he threw it out through a window and left blood-stains running down the wall. Then that woman would fall down immediately and she would wail and writhe in the agony of the pain like all the others. After this scene, the screen faded into something else: there was a big heap which, when I tried to find out what it was, I discovered that it was composed of dead babies, some still kicking with a bit of life in them, others who had only been a few months old before they were delivered... (pp. 60-1)

This vividly visualized horror is followed by other cinematographic sequences equally intense. Maillu, in delving so deeply into morbid zones of the imagination, was breaking new ground in African fiction. *Kadosa* was the first Kenyan novel to explore the surreal mysteries of the occult.

Literary critics have not been very generous in their assessments of Maillu's work. No one has lavished praise on him, and few have admitted finding any redeeming value in what or how he writes. The general feeling among serious academics appears to be that such literature is

beneath criticism for it is wholly frivolous, the assumption being that a scholar should not waste his time on art that aims to be truly popular. Yet Maillu cannot be ignored in any systematic effort to understand the evolution of an East African literature, for he has extended the frontiers of that literature farther than any other single writer. One may regard his writing as undisciplined, unrefined, uncouth, and outrageously excessive, but it is precisely because he has been spectacularly audacious and unmannerly that he is important. He has broken most of the rules of good writing and has got away with it, thereby releasing an embryonic literary culture from the confining sac of conformity to established conventions of taste and judgement. Maillu, a primitive pioneer and intrepid trailblazer, has liberated fenced-off aesthetic territory. Now that he has pushed the boundaries of decorum back, others can stake out their own claims in the same untamed wilderness.

Moreover, Maillu is important because he possesses tenacity and resourcefulness. He has learned to survive by adjusting to new circumstances and imposing his will on the world about him. He has taken risks that the prudent would have eschewed and has discovered through trial and error, as well as trial and success, just how far he can carry others with him. One has to admire his courage both as a publisher and as an author. Perhaps no one else would have persisted so long in the struggle when buffeted continually by criticism that everything he produced was unfit for human consumption.

NOTES

1. Letter from David Maillu to Bernth Lindfors dated 18 September 1981.
2. 'Interview with David Maillu', *Mzungumzo: Interviews with East African Writers, Publishers, Editors and Scholars*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Africa Program, 1980), p. 68.
3. Written on title page of presentation copy of *Kadosa* given by David Maillu to Bernth Lindfors.

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