

# TLC Showcase

---

JENNIFER MAKUMBI

<b>Introduction to the novel</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Extract from Kintu</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>About the Writer</b>	<b>9</b>

## Introduction to Kintu

---

**T**LC offered me a mentorship on the Chapter and Verse scheme after coming second runner-up in a competition. I was mentored by Sara Maitland who was magical; the novel was in its rawest form but she was encouraging while at the same time letting me know the implication of my choices for my novel within the European publishing industry. Mine is a peculiar book, with 4 main characters and with as many point of views. What I liked about Sara most was that while she prepared me for the possible difficulties in placing it with a publisher, she also encouraged me to carry on breaking the rules.

When I thought that the novel was ready, it was passed on to Jacob Ross who was such a generous reader in that he marked up the script and posted it back to me. He was also very candid; the novel was far from ready. As a result I restructured much of the text and it improved tremendously. I am eternally grateful.

### **About the novel, *Kintu***

In January 2004, a curse from 1760 returns to haunt Kintu's descendants. The novel not only takes us back to the beginning, when Uganda was still the illustrious Buganda Kingdom but takes us through history to see how individuals grapple with this inheritance. It is a novel not only about a family, a clan, a tribe or a nation – it is about living.

## Extract from *Kintu*, by Jennifer Makumbi

---

As the train rattled through the city's underbelly, the house continued to dominate my thoughts. With There was a knock. Kamu's woman woke up and climbed over him to get the door. She picked a *kanga* off the floor and wrapped it around her naked body. Sucking her teeth at being disturbed so early in the morning, she walked to the door with the annoyance of a proper wife whose husband was at home.

The woman considered herself Kamu's wife because she had moved in with him two years earlier and he had not once thrown her out. Every night, after work, he came home to her, brought shopping, ate her cooking and he was always ravenous. When she visited her parents, Kamu gave her money so she did not go empty-handed. That was more than what many certified wives got. Besides, she had not heard rumours of another woman. Maybe Kamu banged some girl once in a while but at least he did not flaunt it in her face. The only glitch in her quest to become Kamu's full wife was that he still wore a condom with her. With his seed locked away, she had not grown roots deep enough to secure her against future storms. A child was far more secure than waddling down the aisle with a wedding ring and piece of paper. Nonetheless, she would bide her time: condoms have been known to rip. Besides, sex with a condom is like sucking a sweet in its wrap: Kamu would one day give it up.

The woman unbolted the door and pulled it back. She stepped outside on the verandah and stood stern, arms folded.

Below her were four men, their breath steaming into the morning air. Their greetings were clipped and their eyes looked away from her as if they were fed-up lenders determined to get their money back. This thawed the woman's irritation and she moistened her lips. The men asked for Kamu and she turned to go back to the inner room.

\*

The woman and Kamu lived in a two roomed house on a terraced block in Bwaise, a swamp beneath Kampala's backside. Kampala perches, precariously, on numerous hills. Bwaise and other wetlands are nature's floodplains below the hills. But because of urban migrants like Kamu and his woman, the swamps are slums. In colonial times, educated Ugandans had lived on the floodplains while Europeans

lived up in the hills. When the Europeans left, educated Ugandan climbed out of the swamps, shook off the mud and took over the hills and, raw Ugandans flooded the swamps. Up in the hills, educated Ugandans assumed the same contempt as Europeans had for them. In any case, suspicion from up in the hills falls down into the swamps – all swamp dwellers were thieves.

On her way to the inner room, the woman stumbled on rolled mats that had slid to the floor. She picked them up and saw, to her dismay, that the bright greens, reds and purples had melted into messy patches, obliterating the intricate patterns her mother had weaved. In spite of the tons and tons of soil compacted to choke the swamp, Bwaise carried on as if its residents were still fish, frogs and yams of pre-colonial times. In the dry season, the floor in her house wept and the damp ate everything lying on it. In the rainy season, the woman carried everything of value on her head. Sometimes, however, it rained both from the sky and from the ground: then the house flooded. From the look of her mats, it had rained in the night.

As she lay the discoloured mats on top of a skinny Johnson sofa, she felt a film of dust on her smart white chair-backs. The culprit was the gleaming 5 CD *Sonny* stereo (fake *Sony* made in Taiwan), squeezed into a corner. She glanced at it and pride flooded her heart. Since its arrival just before Christmas, Kamu blared music on full volume to the torment of their neighbours. The booming shook the fragile walls, sprinkling dust on her chair-backs. The wooden box on which a tiny *Panasonic* TV (fake *Panasonic* made in Taiwan) sat was damp too. If the moisture got into the TV, there would be sparks. She thought of shifting the TV, but there was no space for its detached screen.

\*

The woman squeezed between the sofas and went back into the inner room. Kamu was still asleep. She shook him gently,

“Kamu, Kamu? Some men at the door want you.”

Kamu got up. He was irritated but the woman didn't know how to apologise for the men.

He pulled on a T-shirt which hung loose and wide on him. When he turned, 'Chicago Bulls' had curved on his back. He then retrieved a pair of grey trousers from a nail in the wall and put them on. The woman handed him a cup of water. He washed his face and rinsed his mouth. When Kamu stepped out of the house,

each man bid him good morning, but avoided looking at him.

"Come with us Mr Kintu: we need to ask you some questions," one of the men said as they turned to leave.

Kamu shrugged. He had recognised them as the Local Councillors for Bwaise Central.

"L.Cs," he whispered to his woman and they exchanged a knowing look. L.Cs tended to ask pointless questions to show that they are working hard.

As he slipped on a pair of sandals, Kamu was seized by a bout of sneezes.

"Maybe you need a jacket," his woman suggested.

"No, it's morning hay fever, I'll be alright."

Still sneezing, Kamu followed the men. He suspected that a debtor had perhaps taken matters too far and reported him to the local officials. They had ambushed him at dawn before the day swallowed him. It was envy for his new stereo and TV no doubt.

They walked down a small path, across a rubbish-choked stream, past an elevated latrine at the top of a flight of stairs. The grass was so soaked that it squished to their steps. To protect his trousers, Kamu held them up until they came to the wider murram road with a steady flow of walkers, cyclists and cars.

Here, the councillors surrounded him and his hands were swiftly tied behind his back. Taken by surprise, Kamu asked,

"Why are you tying me like a thief?"

In those words Kamu sentenced himself. A boy – could have been a girl – shouted,

"Eh, eh, a thief. They've caught a thief!"

Bwaise, which had been half-awake up to that point, sat up. Those whose jobs could wait a bit stopped to stare. Those who had no jobs at all crossed the road to take a better look. For those whose jobs came as rarely as a yam's flower this was a chance to feel useful.

The word 'thief' started to bounce from here to there, first as a question then as a fact. It repeated itself over and over like an echo calling. The crowd grew: swelled by insomniacs, by men who had fled the hungry stares of their children, by homeless children who leapt out of the swamp like frogs, by women gesturing angrily, "Let him see it: thieves keep us awake all night," and by youths who yelped, "We have him!"

The councillors, now realising what was happening, hurried to take Kamu out of harm's way but instead their haste attracted anger. "Where are you taking him?" the crowd, now following them, wanted to know. The councillors registered too late that they were headed towards Bwaise market. A multitude of vendors, whose ire for councillors was well known, had already seen them and were coming. Before they had even arrived, one of them pointed at the councillors and shouted,

"They're going to let him go."

The idea of letting a thief go incensed the crowd so much that someone kicked Kamu's legs.

Kamu staggered. Youths jumped up and down, clapping and laughing. Growing bold, another kicked him in the ankles. "*Amuwadde 'ngwara!*" the youths cheered. Then a loud fist landed on the back of his shoulder. Kamu turned to see who had hit him but then another landed on the other shoulder and he turned again and again until he could not keep up with the turning.

"Stop it, people, stop it now," a councillor voice rose up but a stone flew over this head and he ducked.

Now the crowd was in control. Everyone clamoured to hit somewhere, anywhere but the head. A kid pushed through the throng, managed to land a kick on Kamu's butt and ran back shouting feverishly to his friends,

"I've given him a round kick like *tyang!*"

Angry men just arriving asked, "Is it a thief?" because Kamu had ceased to be human.

The word thief summed up the common enemy. Why there was no supper the previous night, why their children were not on their way to school. *Thief* was the president who arrived two and a half decades ago waving 'democracy' at them, who recently had laughed, "Did I actually say democracy? I was sooo naïve then."

*Thief* was tax collectors taking their money to redistribute it to the rich. *Thief* was God poised with a can of aerosol *Africancide*, his finger pressing hard on the nozzle.

Voices in the crowd swore they were sick of the police arresting thieves only to see them walk free the following day. No one asked what this thief had stolen apart from *he looks like a proper thief this one and we're fed up*. Only the councillors knew that Kamu had been on his way to explain where he got the money to buy a gleaming 5 CD player and TV with a detached screen.

As blows fell on his back, Kamu decided that he was dreaming. He was Kamu Kintu, human: it was them, *bantu*, humans – he would wake up any minute. Then he would visit his father Misirayimu Kintu. Nightmares like this come from neglecting his old man. He did not realise that he had shrivelled, that the frightening Chicago bull had been ripped off his back, that the grey trousers were dirty and one foot had lost its sandal, that the skin on his torso was darker and shiny in swollen parts, that his lips were puffed, that he bled through the nostril and in his mouth, that his left eye had closed and only the right eye stared. Kamu carried on dreaming.

Just then, a man with fresh fury arrived with an axe. He had the impatient wrath of *you're just caressing the rat*. He swung and struck Kamu's head with the back of the axe, *kppau*. Stunned, Kamu fell. He fell next to a pile of concrete blocks. The man heaved a block above his head, staggered under the weight and released the block. Kamu's head burst and spilled grey porridge. The mob screamed and scattered in horror. The four councillors vanished. Kamu's right eye stared.

\*

Kamu's woman only found out about his death when a neighbour's child, who had been on his way to school, ran back home and shouted,

*"Muka Kamu, Muka Kamu! Your man has been killed, that he is a thief."*

The woman ran to the road. In a distance, she saw a body lying on the ground with a block on top of its head. She recognised the grey trousers and the sandal. She ran back to the house and locked the door. Then she trembled. Then she sat on the armchair. Then she stood up and held her arms on top of her head. She removed them from the head and beat her thighs whispering, *maama, maama, maama* as if her body was on fire. She sipped a long sustained breath of air to control her sobs but the lungs could not hold so much air for so long – it burst out

in a sob. She shook her body as if she was lulling a crying baby on her back but in the end she gave up and tears flowed quietly. She refused to come out to the women who knocked on her door to soothe and cry with her. But solitary tears are as such that they soon dried. The woman closed her eyes and looked at herself. She could stay in Bwaise and mourn him: running would imply guilt. But beyond that, what? Kamu was not coming back. She opened her eyes and saw the 5 C.D player, the TV with a detached screen, the Johnson sofa set and the double bed. She asked herself, "Do you have his child? No. Has he introduced you to his family? No. And if you had died, would Kamu slip you between earth's sheets and walk away?" Yes. The following morning, the two rooms Kamu and his woman had occupied were empty.

\*

Three months later, on Good Friday the 9<sup>th</sup> of April 2004, Bwaise woke up to find the four councillors' and six other men's corpses – all involved in Kamu's death – strewn along the main street. Bwaise, a callous town, shrugged its shoulders and said,

"Their time was up."

But three people, two men and a woman, whose market stalls were held up by the slow removal of the corpses linked the massacre to Kamu's death.

"They raided a deadly colony of bees," the first man said. "Some blood is sticky: you don't just spill it and walk away like that."

But the second man was not sure; he blamed fate. "It was in the name," he said, "who would name his child first Kamu and then Kintu?"

"Someone seeking to double the curse," the first man sucked his teeth.

But the woman, chewing on sugar cane, shook her head, "Uh uh." She sucked long and noisily on the juice and then spat the chaff. "Even then," she pointed in the direction of the corpses with her mouth, "that is what happens to a race that fails to raise its value on the market."



## About the Writer

---

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi is a Ugandan writer living in Manchester. She mainly writes fiction – novels and short stories. Her short story 'The Accidental Sea' man received commendation from the Caine Prize (2013). Jennifer received a mentorship award from The Literary Consultancy in 2008. Her manuscript, *The Kintu Saga* went on to win the *Kwani?* Manuscript Project. Now titled *Kintu*, the novel is scheduled to be published by Kwani? Trust in May 2014. Jennifer is a member of the African Reading Group *ARG!*



run by Geoff Ryman, in Manchester. She teaches Creative Writing at Lancaster University as an Associate Lecturer. In April 2014, Jennifer was announced as one of the shortlisted writers for the Commonwealth Writers' Short Story Prize.