



Proximate historiographies in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* Russell West-Pavlov

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Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014) places alongside forms of historical fiction familiar to European readers, a form of historical causality that obeys a different logic, namely, one governed by the long-term efficacy of a curse uttered in pre-colonial Buganda. The novel can be read as a historiographical experiment. It sets in a relationship of 'proximity' linear historical narration as understood within the framework of European historicism and the genre of the historical novel theorised by Lukács, and notions of magical 'verbal-incantatory' and 'somatic' history that elude the logic of hegemonic European historicism but nonetheless cohabit the same fictional space. Makumbi's novel thus sketches an 'entanglement' of various historical temporalities that are articulated upon one another within the capacious realm of fiction, thereby reinforcing a cosmic ontology and axiology of reciprocity and fluid duality whose infringement in fact triggers the curse at the origin of the narrative. **Keywords:** historicism, historical novel, metahistoriographical fiction, proximity, Ugandan historical novel.

Introduction


In the opening of Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014), a young man named Kamu Kintu dies during a mob lynching in Kampala's slum quarter Bwaise.¹ The inaugural episode, set in 2004, appears to be cut loose from the rest of the plot, but during the course of the novel, more and more connections emerge. The narrative thus appears as a causal enigma whose linkages only gradually become clear. The delayed unlocking of the mystery of Kamu Kintu's lynching thereby makes space for another set of causalities indexed by the victim's name: 'Kintu' evokes and indeed provokes the reiterated effects of a curse uttered upon his clan more than two-and-a-half centuries earlier. In 1750, the expatriated Tutsi Ntwire utters a curse upon the Ganda noble Kintu Kiddu who is responsible for the death of Ntwire's son Kalema (50), a curse that will afflict Kintu's descendants over successive generations. Kamu Kintu is the most recent direct descendant and bearer of the accursed name. In this way, Kintu elevates forms of historical causality that would normally be dismissed as 'superstition' (Chakrabarty 104) to the same level as conventional historicism.

Makumbi's novel has been hailed as an epic work of contemporary Ugandan, and indeed Eastern African literary creation (Evers; Lipenga; Mwesigire; Nabutanyi), in accolades that seem well-earned given the 400-page span of the novel, and its ambitious attempt to encompass pre- and postcolonial Ugandan history. No less significant are the implicit claims it makes for understandings of historical causality that lie outside the customary purview of putatively 'universal' Western historiography. The novel deploys historical fiction to suggest ways in which alternative historiographies may coexist in an 'entanglement' (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* 14, 16; Nuttall 2–4; Werner and Zimmerman) with European versions of history and its writing. In this article I investigate *Kintu*'s interventions into the imbrications of various types of historiography within the framework of historiographical *fiction*, a capacious genre that proves to be more accommodating of such experimentation than most historical writing. This article mobilises the notion of 'proximity' as a conceptual instrument forged in current work on contemporary African literatures and cultures (Fontein; Iheka 21–56; West-Pavlov) to conceptualise the articulation of multiple versions of history in Makumbi's novel.

The article makes three connected claims, proceeding in a dialectical manner. First, *Kintu* suggests that the 'evenemential' causality of 'historicist' history is also inhabited by an alternative causality, that of the curse itself,

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indeed, that of the curse-as-history. I explore two salient aspects of the curse-as-history: that of the curse as a verbal-incantatory history; and that of the curse as a somatic and environmental history. Second, the symptoms of the curse, in which language and bodies are intimately entangled, systematically allude to a principle of duality and reciprocity whose infringement is the original trigger for the curse. Third and finally, in a synthesis of these two claims, I show how the novel combines a pluralised historical consciousness with an ontological principle of duality, in a flexible epistemological structure that eschews hard dichotomies. The novel itself, then, is a performative instantiation of the non-synthetic conjoining of incommensurable types of history that results from such a principle as it is played out at all the levels of the fictional text.

Forms of history

Unlike a novel such as Moses Isegawa's *Abyssinian Chronicles* (2000), which offers an epic panorama of Ugandan and Eastern African history, on occasions in a literally god's-eye manner (306; see West-Pavlov 105–6), Makumbi's breadth of vision does not seek to portray the history of the postcolonial era in documentary depth (contrary to the claim made by Nabutanyi 369). Makumbi seeks to "give Ugandans a taste[s] of their long and complicated history" (Makumbi and Underwood) predominantly in the forms of hints at key moments of the second half of the twentieth century, from Independence via Obote and Amin and beyond. However, these indices are almost always passing references that only briefly key her tale into what Braudel, rebutting the dominance of an empiricist historiography of human actions, referred to as "eventive" or "evenemential" history (I, 21). The novel repeatedly references but then discretely sidelines Uganda's post-Independence history: "Since nothing had been heard of [Magda] since the 1970s, it was assumed that she had died during the bush war of the 1980s" (*Kintu* 214); "It now occurred to Isaac that Sasa could have been one of Amin's people who fell from grace after the war" (259). It is not that Makumbi is not acutely interested in post-Independence history, as is evinced by her own commentaries on the novel (Makumbi-Morris 310–1). Rather, the meagre sketchiness of this political history serves a significant purpose: namely, to make ample space for the curse as an alternative historical causality, agency, and structure.

Jameson (69) has famously described what he called the "third-world novel" as, quite literally, "*an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (emphasis in original). Characters in *Kintu* occasionally generalise the curse to make it something approaching an allegory of human existence: "Our own cursed world!", laughs Nnabaale; and for Miisi, "the mind was a curse: its ability to go back in time and hop into the future to hope and worry was not a blessing" (360, 364). But these are misreadings of the curse, which is not a metaphor for history, but far more a force in history. In *Kintu*, the curse, which kills the progeny of Kintu throughout his clan for two-and-a-half centuries and more before it is overcome, does not work as an allegory for something else in history (even though a history of racism, (neo)imperialism, and oppression is undeniably omnipresent in the interstices of the action). The curse cannot be translated into something other than its own effectiveness (a more potent version of what German reception theory calls *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or 'effect-history'; see Jauß and Culler 59–64). The curse, quite simply, works in history.

What are the specific characteristics of this curse-as-history as depicted in Makumbi's *Kintu*? In what follows, I will note two salient aspects: that of the curse as a verbal-incantatory history; and that of the curse as a somatic history.

First and foremost, the curse must be understood as a historical causality that functions according to the principles of 'proximity' underpinning oral communication (Finnegan; West-Pavlov). 'Proximity' in this context indexes the workings of instances of language that do not describe, depict, or represent the world, but, as incantatory language, exert a direct and spatially immediate causality within the world (Olúpòṅà 99). Paulo Kalema's grandfather Kanini understands this when he balks at Paulo's self-imposed change of name to Kalema—the name of the semi-adopted son and quasi-twin whom Kintu Kiddu accidentally kills in the first part of the story, thereby provoking the curse cast by the boy's biological father, Ntwire. Kanini notes that "[t]he coincidence of the name was *too close* to the curse" (161, emphasis added). The proximate curse-as-history cannot be understood as a speech act merely in the sense of Austin, Searle, or even Butler (*Gender Trouble; Excitable Speech*); the curse as history does not merely provoke actions via a discursive-cognitive process. Rather, the novelty of Makumbi's tale is double: she endows the speech act with an enhanced form of incantatory, physical potency evoked by Taussig's notion of 'contagion' (47, 220), and then she swivels the affective, somatic immediacy and synchronicity of orature communication onto the diachronic axis. In this way, "words not only travel, they acquire arms and legs along the way" (*Kintu* 53). To this extent, the curse-as-history is part of the fabric of historical causality in a way that

eludes the customary rationalist conceptions of causality guided by human intention and action or by empirically documented processes. The incantatory word cannot be accommodated to either of these notions of causality.

Several characters in the contemporary parts of the novel underestimate the potency of the curse-as-history. In their ignorance of the power of names they inadvertently confirm the force of names as the anchor-point of the curse-as-history. Suubi, for instance, blithely dismisses the names as sites at which the curse takes effect:

N is for Nakintu but I don't use it really. Nakintu is the feminine version of Kintu. The name 'Kintu' is clanless, any clan can use it. Things like clans don't matter to me, really. [...] Yes, Suubi means 'hope' but my parents never really told me what they were hoping for. I have no attachment to names really. (*Kintu* 143)

As is observed so often in the novel, which is dominated by a “cruel sense of irony” (29), when characters repress one part of their heritage, they merely accentuate another part. By naming herself Nakintu, Suubi suppresses her name and status as ‘Nnakato’ (i.e., the younger twin, the derivative copy of the original, more dominant twin-soul, or Babirye, her dead twin sister Ssanyu, with whom she is locked in a life-long struggle). But, by the same token, as her Aunt Kizza points out, rectifying the elision (150), Suubi inadvertently reveals her kinship with Kintu (‘Nnakintu’). In claiming to be clanless, she paradoxically cements her allegiance with the Kintu clan. And, indeed, she does embody hope, not via the empty placeholder of the non-existent parents, but because she eventually both accepts her clan membership and manages to overcome the “primal conflict” (9) with her sister: she preserves the twin in the concrete form of a wooden necklace around her neck that ensures an enduring proximity, and thus physical community, of the two (403–5). Ultimately, Suubi embodies an “attachment” via—and to—names that drives the curse, and persists, in a positive form, after its resolution. This is an ‘incantatory’ force of language that joins bodies to one another, synchronically and diachronically over a *longue durée*, in an eminently somatic fashion.

I dwell on a similarly instructive act of ironic (mis)naming. Paulo Kalema drops the name Kalemanzira, inherited from an itinerant Rwandan water carrier his grandparents claim was his biological father. Mistakenly thinking, however, that evidence of his illegitimacy will shame his family, he fails to realise that illegitimacy is in fact an alibi for a greater shame—that of the incest committed by his adolescent mother Ruth with her twin brother Job (375–9). Contracting ‘Kalemanzira’ into ‘Kalema’ (the name of the boy killed by Kintu), he thereby reveals a secret even more dangerous than the other two—that of the curse: “Nonetheless, he insisted on being called Kalema if Kalemanzira was too much for his family” (208). The deeper irony, then, lies in the fact that the “too much” that Paulo Kalema seeks to cover up out of respect for his family in fact lays bare another, more powerful “too much”—the deadly burden of the name of the primal victim killed by an adoptive father to which he remains oblivious until much later on. All his linguistic manoeuvring merely cements and reinforces the incantatory, somatic power of names in history and indeed their power to drive history.

Second, the curse as history has a ‘somatic’ character that is not merely restricted to humans but extends to their environment. Here, ‘somatic history’ is meant in the sense coined to describe the Southern African San shaman’s stance towards rock art, one of somatic involvement rather than distanced spectatorship (Blundell 173), which spills over to include the place in its entirety (Morris 134–5). Emblematic of this form of ‘environmentally somatic’ history is a tree close to Kintu’s residence that is intimately connected to the curse and recurs throughout the narrative. Kintu comments to his son Baale, soon to be struck down by the curse, “There has always been such a tree in this place [...] It’s always the same size though, I don’t know whether it’s the same tree or if one dies and another grows” (*Kintu* 55). The tree embodies the principle of organic continuity in discontinuity, both in the curse that strikes fatally again and again, and in the family whose genealogical continuity paradoxically provides the very condition of possibility of the curse’s longevity. This tree is where the twin-mother Nnakato, Kintu’s wife and the mother of the quasi-twin Baale, hangs herself after her son dies (79–80), but the self-same tree grows in the identical place two-and-a-half centuries later (362, 301). The tree is also a metaphor of the way history (as narrative) persists in the midst of history (as repeated destruction and persistent misfortune). It is Suubi, meditating upon her erased memory of her own traumatic childhood, who retrieves faint fragments of the tale of Kintu as recounted by her grandmother: “there was only blankness. [...] She could find no [...] dreams from that life in her memory: just the voice telling that story and the tree they sat under when the sun glared” (92). This is why Isaac, another contemporary descent of Kintu, wonders: “Does the ground remember Kintu’s feet? The ground had a memory he was sure: it was beyond comprehension, beyond sight and beyond touch but he knew it” (352). The curse-as-history is an ‘environmental somatic’ history, because it is a grounded history embedded in the natural world. Thus the dead communicate with the living, not just in the form of dreams and visions—when we are told

that after his death “Kalema had not made contact” (44), this is a disturbing sign of rupture—but also in the form of animals such as a cobra, sundry other snakes or lizards, birds, and even leaves (36, 243, 342).

Bees, a recurrent motif throughout the novel, instantiate this embedded ‘environmental somatic’ history. In close proximity to the pink-barked tree is the hive of bees that Kintu and Baale harvest. The bees return again and again in the novel, bestowing a visitation upon Miisi the very day Kamu’s death is revenged, on Good Friday 2004, thereby triggering the crypto-paschal dénouement of the tale: “As the cloud approached, Miisi saw it was a swarm of bees. He could even see the individual bees. Each bee flew in its own circle pushing ahead, returning and pushing ahead again. Yet, in spite of this dizzying flight, the swarm moved forward as one” (282). The image of looping, circular, or cyclical non-linear history is a common one in postmodern historiographical fiction, whether from Europe (Swift 132, 135, 140) or Africa (Isegawa 471; Mahjoub 245; Palangyo 129). What is more striking in this context, however, is the notion of the sameness within constant change as the bees pursue their inexorable forward movement. The bees thus embody, not as metaphor or symbol, but as a concrete manifestation elsewhere borne out in language, the curse-as-history.

By the same token, however, they are part of the natural world in its typification of the fundamental principle of unity in multiplicity and its constitutive rule of reciprocity, the very antidote to the originary infringement that triggers the curse at the outset: “The most important thing is to take only some [of the honey], maybe half. Just as you pick wild fruit and must throw some back to the wild, so must you leave honey for the bees”, Kintu instructs Baale (*Kintu* 56). The bees embody both the curse and the contravened principle that triggers the curse, and their return “to claim their territory” (286) anticipates the clan’s restoration of the traditional shrine, where the bodies and spirits of Kintu, Nnakato, Baale, and Kalema will be put to rest.

Environmental somatic’ history with its overflowing of the borders of time and space is most striking for the way it eschews the distinct temporal parcellation crucial to Western conceptions of history. If historical understanding in Europe since the end of the early modern period has been structured by the concept of a distinct segmentation between past, present, and future (Koselleck), the curse-as-history, by contrast, is characterised by a principle of proximate adhesion, whose functioning is verbal-incantatory and somatic-spatial. To ‘call’ someone by a name is to ‘call down’ the curse upon them, or alternatively, at the end of the novel, to invoke a counterforce that neutralises the curse: “‘If Nnakato has been calling then this is us answering,’ Bweeza stated extravagantly” (*Kintu* 344). Proximate contagion and incommensurable cohabitation are the guiding principles of an alternative mode of verbal-incantatory and somatic-spatial history that itself cohabits, in close proximity, ‘Western’ historiography. Trees, bees, snakes, and figures in visions, and the curse they accompany, nestle at the interstices of a factual-evenemential historical narration—one that encompasses an almost anthropological description of the vagaries of Bugandan local and royal politics in the pre-colonial period, and the turbulent transition from the late colonial to the post-independence and later post-Amin periods. Such heterogeneities of historical causality can be contained, but not reduced or resolved, by a fiction in which characters persistently find themselves “floating in two worlds” (388). Indeed, what Chakrabarty has called the “irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity” and a “plurality of times existing together” (108, 109) transpires to be the salient characteristic of the principle of unity in multiplicity to which I now turn.

Singular plural

The historical causality that *Kintu* dramatizes within historicism eschews segmentation and discrete elements of causality and proposes, instead, an incantatory, somatic, environmental history whose basic principle is proximity. This notion of historical causality does not disable the more abstract, universal historicism that has become hegemonic and self-evident since the European Enlightenment, but is entangled with it within the novel’s fictional story world. Makumbi’s novel thus proposes a more universal principle of reciprocal unity in multiplicity that constitutes the underlying moral imperative that the author tables as a response to the socio-political malaise of contemporary Africa.

Once again, however, this principle is presented in the novel via a somatic manifestation. It is striking that those struck with the curse consistently present symptoms that disturb the symmetry of the human body. In the inaugural lynching episode, Kamu Kintu’s left eye is destroyed, leaving his right eye staring, mimicking his ancestor Baale, Kintu’s doomed son (xix, 77, 88) and numerous other victims of the curse are afflicted on only one side of their body (284). This is symptomatic of a fundamental failure of reciprocity, emblematised, for instance, by Kamu’s failure to pay debts (xv, xvii), to which I will return in more detail below.

This destabilisation of human ambidexterity is counteracted in the novel by one salient instance of a positive duality that, significantly, exceeds the singularity of the individual body. It is worth dwelling on this instance because it possesses a broader significance across a range of African cultures. The predominant manifestation of unity in multiplicity in *Kintu* is to be found in the figure of identical twins, who inhabit every corner of the novel. Kintu's two main wives are twins, the wife who bears his children first give birth to four sets of twins (12), and his adopted and biological sons are said to be twins (24). Kintu's more or less successful attempts at dealing fairly and judiciously with these various sets of twins (15) are at the centre of the bundles of actions, many of them "reckless" (44) in terms of cosmic balance that culminate in the curse.

Twins are most important in the novel because across a range of African societies, in many different forms, they give social expression to the complex relationships between sameness and identity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, singularity and multiplicity, as they complement and contradict each other in a single social site (Peek; Renne and Bastian). In *Kintu*, twins are envisaged as the result of "primal conflict" that leads to a "splitting of the soul" (8–9). Twins thus focalise fundamental anxieties about adjudicating the conflicts that beset societies at various scalar levels: "If the soul is at conflict even at this remote level of existence, what chance do communities have?" (9) But just as the figure of the twin provides an objective correlative for conflicting, polarised values, so too the figure itself can be conceptualised as a site of conflict *and* of harmony. A range of ethnographic and sociological evidence from many regions and cultures in Africa shows that twins are both demonised and venerated, that invidious injunctions such as the ritual killing of twins may be contravened by real practice, and that conceptions of twinship can change significantly over time. It is significant that the figure in the novel whose conflict with her dead twin is most protracted and almost fatal, Suubi, and whose father Wasswa is said to have murdered his twin brother (98), is also the one who resolves the conflict most successfully. Twins are thus the embodiment of the central complex of unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity, an embodied manifestation of "being singular plural" (Nancy), and the concomitant complexes of reciprocity or animosity that are the novel's profoundest concern.

At least two important concomitants of this complex can be enumerated in the novel. The first is the dyad masculinity-femininity. *Kintu* implicitly attempts to shift traditional blame for cosmic "guilt from the woman to Kintu" (Makumbi and West-Pavlov). Kintu is not portrayed as an inherently bad ruler and is given credit for many judicious actions; he is depicted as a good husband, to his first, beloved wife at least, and he is never at ease with the masculinist dictates of Baganda society (Kintu 4, 6, 13–14, 70). But he uses femininity as a term of abuse (4), blames political unrest on women (6), and makes fatal mistakes that, he recognises too late, his wife would intuitively have avoided (29). Contemporary masculinity is depicted as predominantly rapacious and predatory: as a starving child, Suubi "did not steal from men [on the market], because when they caught you, it did not matter how thin you were, men had no hearts" (104). As a rule, in *Kintu* the women survive more often than the men, and of the couple Kintu and Nnakato, it is the feminine figure who persists in popular oral lore. In the community where the clan's shrine is reconstructed, the myth has been re-written by the peasants to shift the emphasis from Kintu and the curse, to Nnakato and the feminine lineage: "Kintu Kidda, the essence of everything, had been erased from Kiyiika's memory while Nnakato had flourished to divine proportions" (342–3). The ethos that her memory cultivates is an ethos of reciprocity: "When you harvest anything—fruit, vegetables, honey—leave half behind for her [Nnakato]" (343). Significantly, this injunction almost identically replicates Kintu's injunction to Baale while gathering honey (56). It is such an ethos of reciprocity that the text proposes as the substance of a pragmatically democratic, patient, and constantly renegotiated co-existence between the partners in a marriage relationship. "If you treat Ntongo well and if you don't try to be perfect, things will work out in time", Baale is counselled (74).

This is not to suggest that the basic binary of male and female is hypostatized by the novel: at least several other options are gestured towards, including a portrayal of pre-colonial homosexuality (41–2) and an exemplar of unruly femininity in the person of Zaya, the mother of Baale's child Kiddu (19–21; see Nabutanyi). Rather, the dyad masculinity-femininity, like twinship, offers a template for the basic social unit of reciprocity—even though real communities inevitably prove to be more complex and more intricately reticulated than any duality would suggest. It comes as no surprise, then, that Makumbi's second novel *The First Woman* (2020) shifts its attention from Kintu, the first man, to Nambi, his partner, in a further exploration of the gendered nature of the unity in diversity of fundamental social units.

The second concomitant of twinship is nature: humanity and nature, as an avatar of twindom, constitute the cosmos. Kintu explains to his son Baale that “the bees that live on top of Mayirika Hill are to be treated like a brother” (*Kintu* 56). From the outset, nature as the partner of humanity is stressed at crucial conjunctures in the text, as in the passage pertaining to the bees:

Remember not to come in a foul mood. [...] Sometimes Kayuki [the spirit incarnated in the bees] is in a mood. When the bees will not leave or when they're aggressive, go home; return when he's in a better mood. [...] The most important thing is to take only some [of the honey], maybe half. Just as you pick wild fruit and must throw some back to the wild, so must you leave honey for the bees. (56)

Kintu's injunctions are moral precepts whose basic message is always that of a multiplicity in which reciprocity creates unity.

Custom and ritual are merely extensions of such rules of respectful reciprocity that encompass every aspect of life. The infringement of such rules is the cause, ultimately, of the curse. Kintu, despite his seeming knowledge of such regulations, commits a series of contraventions of custom. He ignores a host of premonitions and auguries (29). Kalema drinks from Kintu's taboo gourd, leading to the slap that kills the boy (27). The lad is buried under the wrong tree, in a twisted position, because Kintu neglects to supervise the burial, and is then stripped of his burial sheet (30, 37, 38). Kintu fails to hold funeral rites for the boy (44), to tell his wives, and to inform Ntwire of the boy's death (45–7, 49–50). All these violations of custom are disturbances of reciprocity, even when it may have the appearance of a simple interdiction or an instance of “respectful distance” (287). Kintu is of course not the only one to commit such transgressions. Ntwire infringes the conditional hospitality of the Ganda people: “while Kalema blended into Kintu's vast household, Ntwire hovered at the peripheries of the community. Unlike the Tutsis who found their way to the capital and assumed Ganda names on arrival and married Ganda spouses, Ntwire stood aloof” (24). The curse that he utters is doubly “vindictive” (91) for it punishes the infringement of reciprocity from a stance of non-reciprocity. When the malevolent spirit of Ntwire confronts the clan in its contemporary mobilisation to put the curse to rest, it continues to refuse to speak Ganda, swearing instead in Lunyarwanda (372), and it takes a bevy of victims' lives in a final orgy of revenge (395). Not even the curse is reciprocal, seeking the re-establishment of a disturbed equilibrium, but is excessive and potentially infinite in its temporal reach.

The text in its entirety is a bitter paean to a basic, underlying principle of constitutive connectivity and reciprocity that recurs frequently as a principle of social cohesion in many African societies. It is given expression by Achebe's famous dictum to the effect that “[w]herever Something stands, Something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute” (68). Mbembe describes this neighbourly impulse within African thought as a principle of “compositionality” (“Africa: Continent of the future” 13), implying com-(with)-position-ality as the basic condition of social life and cosmic existence. Nyamnjoh calls this ethos “conviviality” and sees it as arising from the basal incompleteness, in other words, the originary connectedness of humans (261).

Ntwire emblematises a willed lack of connection and conviviality: “*Ntwire stood away from everyone, and everything*” (90, emphasis in original). The turn of phrase negates, word for word, Achebe's dictum. Ntwire's negated ‘conviviality’ wreaks a disruption of genetic connectivity as it unspools its own perverse connectivity across history. Other manifestations of this negated connectivity are Kanani's house, “split into two worlds” of separate parents' and twins' domains (177), or the “war between the new and the old” (217) that sunders Africa from top to bottom.

The great paradox, of course, is that the curse, with its perverse continuity across time and its ‘contagious’ adhesion to names, demonstrates that connectivity cannot be negated; it can only be perverted, turned into something destructive. Conversely, however, the curse can also be exorcised and thus resolved, so that vibrant connectivity is restored. This is the paradox that resides in the very title of the novel: the name “Kintu”, which becomes the linguistic trigger and medium of the curse, is also “a variant of the term ‘*obuntu*’ or ‘*Ubuntu*’” (Ryman, n. p.). This makes it a marker of co-humanity and co-existence par excellence, because *ubuntu* famously explains humanity as personhood through other persons, and more generally being through co-being.

Like the bees that incarnate the continuity of the curse when they come in a visitation to Miisi at the end of the novel, this synchronic and diachronic connectivity is in itself neither good nor bad; continuity and connectivity, whether synchronic or diachronic, is simply in the nature of things in this non-compartmentalised cosmos. Indeed, good and evil themselves cannot be separated from one another, but are simply the positive or negative

faces taken by the various inflections and calibrations of connectivity as they are wielded or deployed by actors in the universe. “Nature is as ugly as it is beautiful”, says one character (*Kintu* 360), and Kintu feels “betrayed by the rock and the tree” that enable Nnakato’s suicide after the death of their son Baale (79–80). Yet the simple fact is that nature, like humans, can easily shift from the principle of reciprocity to a stance of vindictiveness and malice because these are two sides of the same coin of connectivity. Even nature evinces the profound ambivalence of duality, which can oscillate between collaboration and enmity. It’s not simply that Kintu infringes reciprocal and ethical action. Many of his actions are ethically noble. Rather, what is at stake is the proximity of good and evil, their status as ‘identical twins’, and the necessity of constant vigilance to preserve social stability and the common good. The ethical task of humanity is thus to work hard to maintain relationships of reciprocity and generosity, not an office of sinecure, so as to prevent them tipping over into destruction.

Such ideas culminate in a notion of history which is a tangible, material, ontological network of connections infused with ethical agency and responsibility accruing to all actors in the cosmos. Miisi may claim that “[t]o forge a link between the coincidental events of New Year’s Day and the arrival of the bees was too tenuous” (290), but such “separatism” is an essentially modern approach that only emerges in the early modern period and can never claim absolute and universal validity (Ghosh 56–9). This “separatism” is ethically problematic because, as an ontological assumption, it removes the basis for connectivity that furnishes the ground of normative co-existence; it generates a notion of history in which causality is a merely mechanistic affair stripped of its normative foundations. Thus, the apparent marginalisation of ‘evenemential history’ that characterises Makumbi’s novel is in fact a deliberate strategy to restore its ethical fabric.

Historiographical epistemology

It becomes apparent, at this juncture, that *Kintu*’s staging of an entanglement of ‘evenemential’ and ‘incantatory’ or ‘somatic’ history constitutes a significant effort to recalibrate the epistemology of historiography as it relates to African temporalities. Makumbi’s project addresses a number of deep-seated and enduring historiographical dilemmas.

The writing of African historiography has been dogged by two fundamental problems. The first was to assert that Africa had a history, in the face of enduring European claims to the contrary: Hegel in the 1830s pontificated that Africa “forms no historical part of the World; it exhibits no movement or development” (91, translation modified). Trevor-Roper could say, as late as the 1960s, that “at present there is [no African history], or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa” (cited in Gilbert and Reynolds xi). Such claims were rebutted by cultural nationalist historicism (Neale; Ogot; Reid, *A History of Modern Uganda* 30–2). Inherent in their work, however, was a second problem, namely, to show that African forms and experiences of life in their full complexity were worthy of being included in history. Kissinger, for instance, claimed that “[t]he axis of history starts in Moscow, crosses over to Washington, and then goes to Tokyo. What happens in the South is of no importance” (qtd in Prasad 4). The task was now to revalorise that Southern historical experience and its historiographical forms. In such a context, oral history, for instance, gained a particular importance (Ogot 205–7).

The two problems are linked because inverting the relationship just sketched, the denigration of African forms of life served to legitimise the disqualification of Africa from history. To tell stories of African history that allow at least the substance of complexity in past times to be given narrational space poses a central problem. For that substance can often only be categorised as ‘legend’ or ‘superstition’ within the narrowly positivist, empiricist, and realist mode of narration of the past that Western historiography takes for granted (Santos 172). To admit Africa to history on its own terms is, quintessentially, to interrogate the stranglehold of realist narration upon historiography. It is, fundamentally, to question the exclusive validity of ‘evenemential’ history and its empiricist presuppositions. Addressing directly the agency of gods and spirits in historical action in non-European historical contexts, Chakrabarty explains that:

A narrative strategy that is rationally feasible in the modern understanding of what constitutes public life—and the historians speak in the public sphere—cannot be based on a relationship that allows the divine or the supernatural a direct hand in the affairs of the world. [...] Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody’s belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past. (104)

'Evenemential' history is haunted by the ghosts of its others, but is blissfully oblivious to their stories in its rationalism.

Historians working in the wake of the 'ontological turn' (Anderson 117–26) might address this dilemma by suggesting that "to produce histories that are more ethically defensible, more philosophically robust, and more historically meaningful, we need to analyse each non-modern lifeworld on its own ontological terms, in its own metaphysical environment" (Anderson 2). Such a solution merely displaces the problem, however, onto a different spatial terrain, taking difference, rather than universal sameness, as the principle of historiographical writing. Such difference, even when stripped of its hierarchical burden from the colonial past, assumes, however, a clear temporal, and thus spatial, distance between the two histories.

What happens, however, when the two merge in what Santos calls "intertemporality" (177)? Such an intersection occurs in *Kintu*, both in spatial terms, where an irreducible mix of West and non-West can be combined in one person such as Miisi, the Cambridge-educated sceptical traditionalist who is tasked with banishing the curse, and in historical terms, as is the case with the curse-as-history, running as it does from pre-modern, pre-colonial times into the digital present according to the identity of naming. *Kintu* thus forces a dilemma: how to reconcile these two principles when they converge, indeed collide, in the same time and space. In order to do this, we need not only a paradigm of difference (historical and cultural), but also one of proximity and similarity (historical and cultural). These two paradigms, in turn, need to be brought into neighbourly proximity, in a manner that can best be described by the philosophical oxymoron of "being singular plural" (Nancy).

This is not a paradox imposed upon the text from outside. Miisi personifies the dissonance between these two ways of knowing history, and eventually goes mad because of his failure to reconcile the two epistemic paradigms: "Miisi was endowed with both cerebral knowledge and a non-cerebral way of knowing. But every time ours popped up, he squeezed and muted. He worshipped cerebral knowledge. [...] So he was sacrificed [...] for knowing and refusing to know" (410). Miisi is a writer who embodies his own parable of "Africanstein", a tragic and perplexed indigenous figure reconstructed out of prosthetic European limbs (306–7).

Whereas Miisi describes the conundrum but cannot resolve it himself, Makumbi's *Kintu* suggests that fiction is an apposite mode for confronting this dilemma. Creative historiographic fiction is capacious enough to include a range of different degrees of 'realism', posited as it is, by definition, upon at least some element of "willing suspension of disbelief". Fiction can accommodate various modes of historical reality in a way that most historiography cannot. *Kintu* thus furnishes a seamlessly merged hybrid of 'evenemential' or 'eventive' history (Reid, *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda*) with something approximating a history written in the wake of the 'ontological turn' (Anderson 117–26). For instance, detailing the violent internecine conflicts that racked Baganda royal politics, Makumbi explains the unusual stability of Ssemakokiro's reign as Kabaka from 1797 to 1814 despite its origin in a fratricidal coup: "Ssemakokiro, unlike his father, was quick to appease his brother's blood. First, he banished all the men he had sent to kidnap Jjunju, including their extended relations, from Buganda. Then he renamed his palace Jjunju. It worked for Ssemakokiro because he died of natural causes in 1814" (81). The careful observation of ritual practices, which belongs clearly to the 'ontological turn' and is awarded truth value according to its historical epistemological context, is employed to explain a history so unmistakably 'evenemential' or 'eventive' that it can be precisely dated.

The one-thing-next-to-another that is Achebe's motto, or the paradoxical notion of "being singular plural" is a principle that holds good not only for twins, for the genders, for humanity and nature, but also for historiographical epistemology, and finally, for the shape of material reality itself, so that a much broader spectrum of causal networks than mere "natural causes" has to be admitted. *Kintu* lodges an appeal for an ethos of reciprocity at this level of universality because the text believes that such reciprocity is the only solution for social and geopolitical reconciliation in our troubled times.

In *Kintu*, to adopt Miisi's voice, there "was an ancient story kept alive by the breath of belief". Miisi claims that "[i]t did not matter that he did not believe the spiritual aspect of it: what mattered was that for some reason, tradition had preserved the history of his ancestry" (343–4). Makumbi's text eschews such weak relativism, and clearly does 'believe' the story, not merely because it makes a story of the story, but because it brings multiple stories into proximity with one another and hesitates to differentiate between 'fictional' fiction and 'true' fiction within its own boundaries. The ethical force of such epistemological generosity obviously reaches, however, well beyond the covers of the book.

Notes

1. Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *Kintu* was first published by Kwani? in Nairobi in 2014, followed by One world in London in 2018; all subsequent references (page numbers only) are to the latter edition. I would like to thank Makumbi for an instructive email dialogue during the writing of this article.

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