



# AFTER

**'A brilliant and  
important book'**

*New Statesman,  
Books of the Year*

**'Riveting and  
heartbreaking'**

*Maaza Mengiste,  
Guardian*

Abdulrazak  
Gurnah

# LIVES

B L O O M S B U R Y

SHORTLISTED FOR THE ORWELL PRIZE FOR POLITICAL  
FICTION 2021

LONGLISTED FOR THE WALTER SCOTT PRIZE FOR  
HISTORICAL FICTION 2021

‘A remarkable novel, by a wondrous writer, deeply compelling, a thread that links our humanity with the colonial legacy that lies beneath, in ways that cut deep’ Philippe Sands

‘To read *Afterlives* is to be returned to the joy of storytelling as Abdulrazak Gurnah takes us to the place where imagined lives collide with history. In prose as clear and as rhythmic as the waters of the Indian Ocean, the story of Hamza and Afiya is one of simple lives buffeted by colonial ambitions, of the courage it takes to endure, to hold oneself with dignity, and to live with hope in the heart’ Aminatta Forna

‘Effortlessly compelling storytelling ... Gurnah excels at depicting the lives of those made small by cruelty and injustice ... A beautiful, cruel world of bittersweet encounters and pockets of compassion, twists of fate and fluctuating fortunes ... You forget that you are reading fiction, it feels so real’ Leila Aboulela

‘A tender account of the extraordinariness of ordinary lives, *Afterlives* combines entrancing storytelling with writing whose exquisite emotional precision confirms Gurnah’s place among the outstanding stylists of modern English prose. Like its predecessors, this is a novel that demands to be read and reread, for its humour, generosity of spirit and clear-sighted vision of the infinite contradictions of human nature’ *Evening Standard*

‘In clean, measured prose, Gurnah zooms in on individual acts of violence ... and unexpected acts of kindness. Affecting in its ordinariness, *Afterlives* is a compelling exploration of the urge to find places of sanctuary’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘Gurnah deftly manages the feat by spiking his stirring indictment of colonial atrocity with the intimate ordinariness of itinerant lives’ *Spectator*

‘Many layered, violent, beautiful and strange ... A poetic and vividly conjured book about Africa and the brooding power of the unknown’ *Independent on Sunday*

‘A vibrant and vivid novel which shows human beings in all their generosity and greed, pettiness and nobility, so that even minor characters seem capable of carrying entire novels all by themselves’ *Herald*

‘Abdulrazak Gurnah is a master of his craft ... An intricate, delicate novel, vitally necessary’ *New Internationalist*

‘Brings together the themes of choice, love dislocation, memory and history. The powerful stories that Gurnah tells in his novels provoke us to examine our own choices and where they have led us today’ *London Magazine*

**ABDULRAZAK GURNAH** is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021. He is the author of ten novels: *Memory of Departure*, *Pilgrims Way*, *Dottie*, *Paradise* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread Award), *Admiring Silence*, *By the Sea* (longlisted for the Booker Prize and shortlisted for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award), *Desertion* (shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize), *The Last Gift*, *Gravel Heart* and *Afterlives* (longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize and shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction). He is Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent.

He lives in Canterbury.



ALSO BY ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

*Memory of Departure*

*Pilgrims Way*

*Dottie*

*Paradise*

*Admiring Silence*

*By the Sea*

*Desertion*

*The Last Gift*

*Gravel Heart*

# AFTERLIVES

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

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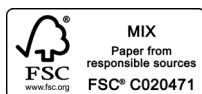
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ONE





Khalifa was twenty-six years old when he met the merchant Amur Biashara. At the time he was working for a small private bank owned by two Gujarati brothers. The Indian-run private banks were the only ones that had dealings with local merchants and accommodated themselves to their ways of doing business. The big banks wanted business run by paperwork and securities and guarantees, which did not always suit local merchants who worked on networks and associations invisible to the naked eye. The brothers employed Khalifa because he was related to them on his father's side. Perhaps related was too strong a word but his father was from Gujarat too and in some instances that was relation enough. His mother was a countrywoman. Khalifa's father met her when he was working on the farm of a big Indian landowner, two days' journey from the town, where he stayed for most of his adult life. Khalifa did not look Indian, or not the kind of Indian they were used to seeing in that part of the world. His complexion, his hair, his nose, all favoured his African mother but he loved to announce his lineage when it suited him. Yes, yes, my father was an Indian. I don't look it, hey? He married my mother and stayed loyal to her. Some Indian men play around with African women until they are ready to send for an Indian wife then abandon them. My father never left my mother.

His father's name was Qassim and he was born in a small village in Gujarat which had its rich and its poor, its Hindus and its Muslims and even some Hubshi Christians. Qassim's family was Muslim and poor. He grew up a diligent boy who was used to hardship. He was sent to a mosque school in his village and then to a Gujarati-speaking government school in the town near his home. His own father was a tax collector who travelled the

countryside for his employer, and it was his idea that Qassim should be sent to school so that he too could become a tax collector or something similarly respectable. His father did not live with them. He only ever came to see them two or three times in a year. Qassim's mother looked after her blind mother-in-law as well as five children. He was the eldest and he had a younger brother and three sisters. Two of his sisters, the two youngest, died when they were small. Their father sent money now and then but they had to look after themselves in the village and do whatever work they could find. When Qassim was old enough, his teachers at the Gujarati-speaking school encouraged him to sit for a scholarship at an elementary English-medium school in Bombay, and after that his luck began to change. His father and other relatives arranged a loan to allow him to lodge as best he could in Bombay while he attended the school. In time his situation improved because he became a lodger with the family of a school friend, who also helped him to find work as a tutor of younger children. The few annas he earned there helped him to support himself.

Soon after he finished school, an offer came for him to join a landowner's book-keeping team on the coast of Africa. It seemed like a blessing, opening a door to a livelihood for him and perhaps some adventure. The offer came through the imam of his home village. The landowner's antecedents came from the same village in the distant past, and they always sent for a book-keeper from there when they needed one. It was to ensure someone loyal and dependent was looking after their affairs. Every year during the fasting month Qassim sent to the imam of his home village a sum of money, which the landowner kept aside from his wages, to pass on to his family. He never returned to Gujarat.

That was the story Khalifa's father told him about his own struggles as a child. He told him because that is what fathers do to their children and because he wanted the boy to want more. He taught him to read and write in the roman alphabet and to understand the basics of arithmetic. Then when Khalifa was a little older, about eleven or so, he sent the boy to a private tutor in the nearby town who taught him mathematics and book-keeping

and an elementary English vocabulary. These were ambitions and practices his father had brought with him from India, but which were unfulfilled in his own life.

Khalifa was not the tutor's only student. There were four of them, all Indian boys. They lodged with their teacher, sleeping on the floor in the downstairs hallway under the stairs where they also had their meals. They were never allowed upstairs. Their classroom was a small room with mats on the floor and a high barred window, too high for them to see out although they could smell the open drain running past the back of the house. Their tutor kept the room locked after lessons and treated it as a sacred space, which they must sweep and dust every morning before lessons began. They had lessons first thing and then again in the late afternoon before it became too dark. In the early afternoon, after his lunch, the tutor always went to sleep, and they did not have lessons in the evening to save on candles. In the hours that were their own they found work in the market or on the shore or else wandered the streets. Khalifa did not suspect with what nostalgia he would remember those days in later life.

He started with the tutor the year the Germans arrived in the town and was with him for five years. Those were the years of the al Bushiri uprising, during which Arab and Waswahili coastal and caravan traders resisted the German claim that they were the rulers of the land. The Germans and the British and the French and the Belgians and the Portuguese and the Italians and whoever else had already had their congress and drawn their maps and signed their treaties, so this resistance was neither here nor there. The revolt was suppressed by Colonel Wissmann and his newly formed *schutztruppe*. Three years after the defeat of the al Bushiri revolt, as Khalifa was completing his period with the tutor, the Germans were engaged in another war, this time with the Wahehe a long way in the south. They too were reluctant to accept German rule and proved more stubborn than al Bushiri, inflicting unexpectedly heavy casualties on the *schutztruppe* who responded with great determination and ruthlessness.

To his father's delight, Khalifa turned out to have a talent for reading and writing and for book-keeping. It was then, on the

tutor's advice, that Khalifa's father wrote to the Gujarati banker brothers who had their business in the same town. The tutor drafted a letter, which he gave to Khalifa to take to his father. His father copied it out in his own hand and gave it to a cart driver to deliver back to the tutor who took it to the bankers. They all agreed that the tutor's endorsement was certain to help.

Honourable sirs, his father wrote, is there an opening for my son in your esteemed business? He is a hard-working boy and a talented if inexperienced book-keeper who can write in roman and has some basic English. He will be grateful to you for his entire life. Your humble brother from Gujarat.

Several months passed before they received a reply, and only did so because the tutor went round to plead with the brothers, for the sake of his reputation. When the letter came it said, Send him here and we will try him out. If everything goes well, we will offer him work. Gujarati Musulman must always help each other. If we don't look after each other, who will look after us?

Khalifa was eager to leave the family home on the landowner's estate where his father was the book-keeper. During the time they waited for a reply from the banker brothers, he helped his father with his work: recording wages, filling in orders, listing expenses and listening to complaints that he could not remedy. The estate-work was heavy and the workers' pay was meagre. They were often struggling against fevers and aches and squalor. The workers added to their food supplies by cultivating the small patch of ground the estate allowed them. Khalifa's mother Mariamu did that too, growing tomatoes, spinach, okra and sweet potatoes. Her garden was next to their cramped little house and at times the paltriness of their lives depressed and bored Khalifa so much that he longed for the austere time he spent with the tutor. So when the reply from the banker brothers came, he was ready to go and determined to make sure that they would retain him. They did so for eleven years. If they were at first surprised by his appearance they did not show it, nor did they ever remark on it to Khalifa although some of their other Indian clients did. No, no, he is our brother, Guji just like us, the banker brothers said.

He was just a clerk, entering figures in a ledger and keeping records up to date. That was all the work they allowed him to do. He did not think they fully trusted him with their affairs but that was the way with money and business. The brothers Hashim and Gulab were moneylenders, which as they explained to Khalifa is what all bankers really are. Unlike the big banks, though, they did not have customers with private accounts. The brothers were close in age and looked very alike: short and solidly built, with easily smiling faces, wide cheekbones and carefully clipped moustaches. A small number of people, all Gujarati businessmen and financiers, deposited their surplus money with them and they lent it out at interest to local merchants and traders. Every year on the Prophet's birthday they held a reading of the maulid in the garden of their mansion and distributed food to all who came.

Khalifa had been with the brothers for ten years when Amur Biashara approached him with a proposition. He already knew Amur Biashara because the merchant had dealings with the bank. On this occasion, Khalifa helped him out with some information that the owners did not know he knew, details about commission and interest that helped the merchant strike a better deal. Amur Biashara paid him for the information. He bribed him. It was only a small bribe, and the advantage Amur Biashara gained from it was modest, but the merchant had a cut-throat reputation to maintain and, in any case, he could not resist anything underhand. For Khalifa, the modesty of the bribe allowed him to suppress any feeling of guilt at betraying his employers. He told himself he was acquiring experience in business, which was also about knowing its crooked ways.

Some months after Khalifa made his little arrangement with Amur Biashara, the banker brothers decided to transfer their business to Mombasa. This was as the railway from Mombasa to Kisumu was under construction and the colonial policy of encouraging Europeans to settle in British East Africa, as they called it at the time, was approved and launched. The banker brothers expected better opportunities to be opening up there, and they were not the only ones among the Indian merchants and craftsmen. At the same time, Amur Biashara was expanding his

business and he employed Khalifa as a clerk because he himself could not write in roman alphabet and Khalifa could. The merchant thought this knowledge could be useful to him.

The Germans had by then subdued all revolt in their Deutsch-Ostafrika, or so they thought. They had taken care of al Bushiri and the protests and resistance of the caravan traders on the coast. They had suppressed that rebellion after a struggle, captured al Bushiri and hanged him in 1888. The schutztruppe, the army of African mercenaries known as askari under the direction of Colonel Wissmann and his German officers, was at that time made up of disbanded Nubi soldiers who had served the British against the Mahdi in Sudan and Shangaan 'Zulu' recruits from southern Portuguese East Africa. The German administration made a public spectacle of al Bushiri's hanging, as they were to do with the many other executions they would carry out in the coming years. As a fitting token of their mission to bring order and civilisation to these parts, they turned the fortress in Bagamoyo, which was one of al Bushiri's strongholds, into a German command post. Bagamoyo was also the terminus of the old caravan trade and the busiest port on that stretch of the coast. Winning and holding it was an important demonstration of German control of their colony.

There was still much for them to do, though, and as they moved inland they encountered many other peoples who were reluctant to become German subjects: the Wanyamwezi, Wachagga, Wameru, and most troublesome of all the Wahehe in the south. They finally subdued the Wahehe after eight years of war, starving and crushing and burning out their resistance. In their triumph, the Germans cut off the head of the Wahehe leader Mkwawa and sent it to Germany as a trophy. The schutztruppe askari, aided by local recruits from among the defeated people, were by then a highly experienced force of destructive power. They were proud of their reputation for viciousness, and their officers and the administrators of Deutsch-Ostafrika loved them to be just like that. They did not know about the Maji Maji uprising, which was about to erupt in the south and west as Khalifa went to work for Amur Biashara, and which was to turn into the worst rebellion



of all and elicit even greater ferocity from the Germans and their askari army.

At that time, the German administration was bringing in new regulations and rules for doing business. Amur Biashara expected Khalifa would know how to negotiate for him. He expected him to read the decrees and reports that the administration issued and to complete the customs and tax forms that were required. Otherwise the merchant kept his business to himself. He was always up to something, so Khalifa was a general assistant who did whatever was required rather than a trusted clerk as he had expected. Sometimes the merchant told him things and sometimes he didn't. Khalifa wrote the letters, went to government offices for this or that licence, collected gossip and information and took little presents and sweeteners to people the merchant wanted kept sweet. Even so, he thought the merchant relied on him and his discretion, as much as he relied on anyone.

Amur Biashara was not difficult to work for. He was a small elegant man, always courteous and soft-spoken and a regular and obliging member of the congregation at his local mosque. He donated to charitable collections when a small disaster befell someone and never missed the funeral of a neighbour. No passing stranger could have mistaken him for anything but a modest or even saintly member of the community, but people knew otherwise and spoke of his cut-throat ways and his rumoured wealth with admiration. His secretiveness and ruthlessness in business were thought essential qualities in a merchant. He ran his business as if it were a plot, people liked to say. Khalifa thought of him as the pirate, nothing was too small for him: smuggling, moneylending, hoarding whatever was scarce as well as the usual stuff, importing this and that. Whatever was required, he was willing. He did his business in his head because he did not trust anyone, and also because some of his deals had to be discreet. It seemed to Khalifa that it gave the merchant pleasure to pay bribes and make devious transactions, that it reassured him when he made a secret payment for what he desired to happen. His mind was always calculating, assessing

the people he dealt with. He was outwardly gentle and could be kind when he wished but Khalifa knew he was capable of real sternness. After working for him for several years, he knew how hard the merchant's heart was.

So Khalifa wrote the letters, paid the bribes and picked up whatever crumbs of information the merchant cared to let drop, and he was reasonably content. He had a flair for gossip, for receiving it and disseminating it, and the merchant did not rebuke him for spending many hours in conversation in the streets and cafés rather than at his desk. It was always better to know what was being said than to be in the dark. Khalifa would have preferred to contribute and know more about the deals but that was not likely to happen. He did not even know the combination number of the merchant's safe. If he needed a document he had to ask the merchant to get it. Amur Biashara kept a lot of money in that safe and he never even opened the door fully when Khalifa or anyone else was in the office. When he needed something from it, he stood in front of the safe and shielded the combination wheel with his body as he turned it. Then he opened the door a few inches and reached in like a pilferer.

Khalifa had been with Bwana Amur for over three years when he received word that his mother Mariamu had suddenly died. She was in her late forties and her passing was completely unexpected. He hurried home to be with his father and found him unwell and deeply distraught. Khalifa was their only child but in recent times had not seen a great deal of his parents, so it was with some surprise that he saw how weary and feeble his father looked. He was ill with something but had not been able to see a healer who could tell him what was wrong with him. There was no doctor nearby and the nearest hospital was in the town where Khalifa lived on the coast.

'You should've told me. I would've come for you,' Khalifa told him.

His father's body trembled gently all the time and he had no strength. He was no longer able to work and sat on the porch of his two-roomed shack on the landowner's estate, staring out blankly all day.

‘It just came on me a few months ago, this weakness,’ he told Khalifa. ‘I thought I would go first, but your mother beat me to it. She shut her eyes and went to sleep and was gone. Now what am I supposed to do?’

Khalifa stayed with him for four days and knew from the symptoms that his father was very ill with malaria. He had a high fever, could not keep food down, his eyes were jaundiced and he passed red-tinted urine. He knew from experience that mosquitoes were a hazard on the estate. When he woke up in the room he shared with his father, his hands and ears were covered with bites. On the morning of the fourth day, he woke up to see his father was still sleeping. Khalifa left him and went out to the back for a wash and to boil water for their tea. Then as he stood waiting for the water to boil he felt a shiver of dread and went back inside to find that his father was not sleeping but dead. Khalifa stood for a while looking at him, so thin and shrunken in death when he had been so vigorous and such a champion in life. He covered him and went to the estate office to get help. They took his body to the small mosque in the village by the estate. There Khalifa washed him as required by custom, assisted by people who were familiar with the rituals. Later that afternoon they buried him in the cemetery behind the mosque. He donated the few belongings his father and mother left behind to the imam of the mosque and asked him to distribute them to whoever might want them.

When he returned to town and for several months afterwards Khalifa felt alone in the world, an ungrateful and worthless son. The feeling was unexpected. He had lived away from his parents for most of his life, the years with the tutor, then with the banker brothers and then with the merchant, and had felt no remorse for his neglect of them. Their sudden passing seemed a catastrophe, a judgement on him. He was living a useless life in a town that was not his home, in a country that seemed to be constantly at war, with reports of yet another uprising in the south and west.

It was then that Amur Biashara spoke to him.

‘You have been with me now for several years ... how many is it, three ... four?’ he said. ‘You have conducted yourself with efficiency and respect. I appreciate that.’

‘I am grateful,’ Khalifa said, unsure whether he was about to receive a pay rise or to be dismissed.

‘The passing away of both your parents has been a sad blow to you, I know that. I have seen how it has distressed you. May God have mercy on their souls. Because you have worked for me with such dedication and humility and for so long, I think it is not inappropriate for me to offer you some advice,’ the merchant said.

‘I welcome your advice,’ Khalifa said, beginning to think that he was not about to be dismissed.

‘You are like a member of my family, and it is my duty to offer guidance to you. It is time you married and I think I know a suitable bride. A relative of mine was recently orphaned. She is a respectful girl and she has also inherited property. I suggest you ask for her. I would have married her myself,’ the merchant said with a smile, ‘if I were not perfectly content as I am. You have served me well for many years, and this will be a fitting outcome for you.’

Khalifa knew that the merchant was making him a gift of her, and that the young woman was not going to have much say in the matter. He said she was a respectful girl but from the lips of a hard-headed merchant those words revealed nothing. Khalifa agreed to the arrangement because he did not think he could refuse and because he desired it, even though in his fearful moments he imagined his bride-to-be as someone abrasive and demanding with unattractive habits. They did not meet before the wedding or even at the wedding. The ceremony was a simple affair. The imam asked Khalifa if he wished to ask for Asha Fuadi to become his wife and he said yes. Then Bwana Amur Biashara as a senior male relative gave consent in her name. All done. After the ceremony coffee was served and then Khalifa was accompanied by the merchant himself to her house and introduced to his new wife. The house was the property Asha Fuadi inherited, only she did not inherit it.

Asha was twenty, Khalifa thirty-one. Asha’s late mother was Amur Biashara’s sister. Asha’s eyes were still shadowed by her recent sorrow. Her face was oval-shaped and pleasing, her demeanour solemn and unsmiling. Khalifa took to her without

hesitation but was aware that she was only enduring his embraces at first. It took a while for her to return his ardour and to tell him her story and for him to understand her fully. This was not because her story was unusual, quite the opposite, in fact, since it was the common practice of pirate merchants in their world. She was reticent because it took her a while to trust her new husband and be sure where his loyalty lay, with the merchant or with her.

‘My Uncle Amur lent money to my father, not once but several times,’ she told Khalifa. ‘He had no choice since my father was his sister’s husband, a member of his own family. When asked he had to give. Uncle Amur had little time for my father, thought him unreliable with money, which was probably true. I heard my mother say that to his face several times. In the end Uncle Amur asked that my father sign over his house ... our house, this house ... as security for a loan. He did that but did not tell my mother. That’s what men are like with their business affairs, furtive and secretive, as if they cannot trust their frivolous womenfolk. She would not have let him do it if she had known. It is an evil practice, lending money to borrowers who cannot afford to repay it and then taking their houses from them. It’s theft. And that’s what Uncle Amur did to my father and to us.’

‘How much did your father owe?’ Khalifa asked when Asha fell into a long silence.

‘It doesn’t matter how much,’ she said tersely. ‘We still wouldn’t have been able to repay it. He left nothing.’

‘His passing must have been sudden. Perhaps he thought he had more time.’

She nodded. ‘He certainly did not plan his passing very well. During the long rains last year, he suffered a recurrence of malarial fever, which he did every year, but this time it was worse than any other time before and he did not survive. It was sudden and horrible to see him in such a state before he went. May God have mercy on his soul. My mother did not really know his affairs in detail, but we soon found out that the loan was still unpaid and there was nothing left with which to make even a gesture of payment. His male relatives came to demand their share of his inheritance, which was really only the house,

but soon found that it belonged to Uncle Amur. It came as a horrible shock to everyone, especially to my mother. We had nothing in the world, nothing. Worse than nothing, we did not even have our lives because Uncle Amur was our guardian as the senior male relative in our family. He could decide what happened to us. My mother never recovered after my father died. She first fell ill many years before and was always ailing after that. I used to think it was sorrow, that she was not as ill as she said but allowed herself to moulder out of misery. I don't really know why she was miserable. Maybe someone made medicine against her, or perhaps her life was a disappointment. Sometimes she was visited and spoke in unfamiliar voices, and then a healer was called in despite my father's protests. After he died her misery turned into overwhelming grief, but in the last few months of her life another agony afflicted her: pains in her back and something that was eating her up from inside. That's what she said it felt like, something eating her up from inside. I knew she was going then, that this went beyond grieving. In her last days she worried about what would happen to me and begged Uncle Amur to look after me, which he promised to do.' Asha looked gravely at her husband for a long moment and then said, 'So he gave me to you.'

'Or he gave me to you,' he said, smiling to lighten the bitterness in her tone. 'Is it such a disaster?'

She shrugged. Khalifa understood, or could guess, the reasons why Amur Biashara had decided to offer Asha to him. In the first place he was making her someone else's responsibility. Then it would prevent any shameful liaison she might be tempted into, whether she had anything in mind or not. It was the way a powerful patriarch would think. Utamsitiri, Khalifa was to save her from shame and keep the name of the family clean. He was nothing special but the merchant knew who he was and marriage to him would protect her name, and therefore Amur Biashara's name, from any possible dishonour. A safe marriage to someone dependent on him like Khalifa would also preserve the merchant's property interest intact, keep the matter of the house in the family, so to speak.

Even when Khalifa knew the story of the house and understood the injustice of his wife's position he could not speak about it to the merchant. These were family affairs and he was not really family. Instead he persuaded Asha to speak to her uncle herself, asking for her portion back. 'He can be just when he wants to be,' Khalifa told her, wanting to believe that himself. 'I know him quite well. I've seen him at work. You have to put him to shame, make him give you your rights, otherwise he will pretend all is well and do nothing.'

In the end she spoke to her uncle. Khalifa was not present when she did and pleaded ignorance when the merchant politely questioned him about it afterwards. Her uncle told Asha he had already left a portion for her in his will and wanted the matter left there for now. In other words, he was not to be bothered with any further discussion about the house.

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It was early 1907 when Khalifa and Asha married. The Maji Maji uprising was in the final throes of its brutalities, suppressed at a great cost in African lives and livelihoods. The rebellion started in Lindi and spread everywhere in the countryside and towns of the south and west of the country. It lasted for three years. As the widespread extent of the resistance to German rule sank in, so the response of the colonial administration became more relentless and brutal. The German command saw that the revolt could not be defeated by military means alone and proceeded to starve the people into submission. In the regions that had risen, the schutztruppe treated everyone as combatants. They burned villages and trampled fields and plundered food stores. African bodies were left hanging on roadside gibbets in a landscape that was scorched and terrorised. In the part of the country where Khalifa and Asha lived, they only knew of these events from hearsay. To them these were only shocking stories because there was no visible rebellion in their town. There had not been any since the hanging of al Bushiri although threats of German retribution were all around them.

The steadfastness of the refusal of these people to become subjects of the Deutsch-Ostafrika empire had come as a surprise



to the Germans, especially after the examples that had been made of the Wahehe in the south and the Wachagga and Wameru people in the mountains of the north-east. The Maji Maji victory left hundreds of thousands dead from starvation and many hundreds more from battlefield wounds or by public execution. To some of the rulers of Deutsch-Ostafrika, this outcome was viewed as unavoidable. Their passing was inevitable sooner or later. In the meantime, the empire had to make the Africans feel the clenched fist of German power in order that they should learn to bear the yoke of their servitude compliantly. With each passing day that German power was pushing that yoke firmly on the necks of its reluctant subjects. The colonial administration was strengthening its hold over the land, growing in numbers and in reach. Good land was taken over as more German settlers arrived. The forced labour regime was extended to build roads and clear roadside gutters and make avenues and gardens for the leisure of the colonists and the good name of the Kaisereich. The Germans were latecomers to empire-building in this part of the world but they were digging in to stay for a long time and wanted to be comfortable while they were about it. Their churches and colonnaded offices and crenellated fortresses were built as much to provide a means for civilised life as to awe their newly conquered subjects and impress their rivals.

The latest uprising made some among the Germans think differently. It was clear to them that violence alone was not enough to subdue the colony and make it productive, so clinics were proposed and campaigns against malaria and cholera initiated. At first these served the health and well-being of the settlers and officials and the schutztruppe, but later were extended to include the native people too. The administration also opened new schools. There was already an advanced school in the town, opened several years before to train Africans as civil servants and teachers, but its intake was small and limited to a subordinate elite. Now schools were opened, intended to offer an elementary education to more of the subject people, and Amur Biashara was one of the first to send his son to one of them. The son, whose name was Nassor, was nine years old when Khalifa came to work

for the merchant and fourteen when he started school. It was a little late to be doing so but that did not matter too much because the school he went to was intended to teach pupils trades not algebra, and his age was appropriate for learning how to use a saw or lay a brick or swing a heavy hammer. It was there that the merchant's son came to learn about working wood. He was in the school for four years, at the end of which he was literate and numerate and a competent carpenter.

During those years Khalifa and Asha had lessons of their own to learn. He learned that she was an energetic and obstinate woman who liked to keep busy and knew what she wanted. At first he marvelled at her energy and laughed at her opinionated summaries of their neighbours. They were envious, they were vicious, they were blasphemers, she said. Oh, come on, stop exaggerating, he protested while she frowned in stubborn disagreement. She did not think she was exaggerating, she said. She had lived beside these people all her life. He had taken her invocation of God's name and her quotations of verses of the Koran to be a manner of speaking some people had, an idiom, but he came to understand that for her it was not just an exhibition of her knowledge and sophistication but of serious piety. He thought she was unhappy and tried to think of ways to make her feel less alone. He tried to make her want him as he wanted her, but she was self-contained and reluctant and he thought she merely tolerated him and submitted to his ardour and embraces dutifully at best.

She learned that she was stronger than him, although it took her a long time to say it so bluntly to herself. She knew her own mind, often if not every time, and once she did she was firm whereas he was easily swayed by words, sometimes his own. Her memory of her father, about whom she tried to be respectful as her religion commanded, interfered with her judgement of her husband and, increasingly, she struggled to contain her impatience with Khalifa. When she could not, she spoke to him sharply in a manner she did not intend and sometimes regretted. He was steady but too obedient to her uncle who was nothing but a thief and an impious hypocrite with his lying saintly manners. Her husband was too easily satisfied and often taken advantage of,

but it was as He wished it to be and she would do her best to be content. She found his endless stories tiresome.

Asha miscarried three times in the early years of their marriage. After the third miscarriage in three years she was persuaded by neighbours to consult a herbalist, a mganga. The mganga made her lie down on the floor and covered her from head to toe with a kanga. Then she sat beside her for a long period, humming softly and repeatedly, and speaking words Asha could not make out. Afterwards the mganga told her that an invisible had taken her and was refusing to allow a child to grow in her. The invisible could be persuaded to leave but they would have to find out its demands and fulfil them before it would do so. The only way they could know the demands was by allowing the invisible to speak through Asha, and that was most likely to happen when it was allowed to possess her fully.

The mganga brought an assistant with her and made Asha lie down again on the floor. They covered her with a thick marekani sheet and then both began to hum and sing, their faces close to her head. As time passed and the mganga and her assistant sang, Asha shivered and trembled with increasing intensity until finally she burst out in incomprehensible words and sounds. Her outburst reached a climax with a yell and then she spoke lucidly but in a strange voice, saying: I will leave this woman if her husband makes a promise to take her on the hajj, to go to the mosque regularly and to give up taking snuff. The mganga crowed with triumph and administered a herbal drink, which calmed Asha and sent her into a doze.

When the mganga told Khalifa, in Asha's presence, about the invisible and its demands, he nodded compliantly and paid her her fee. I will give up taking snuff at once, he said, and I will just now go and perform my ablutions and head for the mosque. On my way back I will start enquiries about making the hajj. Now please get rid of this devil at once.

Khalifa did give up snuff, and he went to the mosque for a day or two but he never mentioned the hajj again. Asha knew that even while he was acting compliant Khalifa was not persuaded, was just laughing at her. It made it all the worse that she had

allowed herself to agree to the blasphemous treatments her neighbours suggested. All that humming in her ears had become tiresome but she could not help it, she really did find Khalifa's lack of prayers irksome and wished for the hajj above all things. She found his quiet mockery of these desires deeply estranging. It made her reluctant to try again for a child and she found ways to discourage his ardour and avoid the disagreeable fuss he made when aroused.

His lessons fully learned, Nassor Biashara left the German trade school at the age of eighteen, besotted with the smell of wood. Amur Biashara was indulgent with his son. He did not expect him to help out in the business, for the same reason he did not require Khalifa to know the details of his many transactions. He preferred to work alone. When Nassor asked his father to finance a carpentry workshop so he could go into business for himself, the merchant was happy to oblige, both because it sounded like a good venture and also because it would keep his son out of his affairs for the moment. There will be time to initiate him into the business later.

The way of the old merchants was lending and borrowing from each other on trust. Some of them only knew each other by letters or through mutual connections. Money passed from hand to hand – a debt sold on in payment for another debt, consignments bought and sold unseen. These connections were as far away as Mogadishu, Aden, Muscat, Bombay, Calcutta, and all those other places of legend. The names were like music to many people who lived in the town, perhaps because most of them had not been to any of them. It was not that they could not imagine that they were all probably places of hardship and struggle and poverty, just like everywhere else, but they could not resist the strange beauty of those names.

The old merchants' business dealings depended on trust but that did not mean they trusted each other. That was why Amur Biashara did his business in his head, only he did not bother to keep his records straight and in the end his cunning failed him. It was bad luck, or fate, or God's plan, as you will, but he was suddenly taken ill in one of those terrible epidemics that used to occur

much more often before the Europeans came with their medicines and their hygiene. Who would have thought how many diseases lurked in the filth people were so used to living with? He fell ill in one of those epidemics, despite the Europeans. When it's your time, it's your time. It might have been dirty water or bad meat or a bite from a poisonous pest that was the cause but the outcome was that he woke up in the early hours one morning with fever and vomiting and never rose from his bed again. He was barely conscious and died within five days. In those five days he never regained his presence of mind and all his secrets departed with him. His creditors came along in due course with their paperwork in good order. Those who owed him kept their heads down and the old merchant's fortune was suddenly a lot smaller than had been rumoured. Maybe he had meant to give Asha her house back and never got around to it but he left nothing to her in his will. The house now belonged to Nassor Biashara, as did everything else that was left after his mother and two sisters had taken their share and the creditors had taken theirs.

Ilyas arrived in the town just before Amur Biashara's sudden death. He had with him a letter of introduction to the manager of a large German sisal estate. He did not see the manager, who was also part-owner of the estate and could not be expected to make time for such a trifling matter. Ilyas handed in his letter at the administration office and was told to wait. He was offered a glass of water by the office assistant who also made probing conversation with him, assessing him and his business there. After a short while, a young German man came out of the inner office and offered him a job. The office assistant, whose name was Habib, was to help him settle in. Habib directed him to a school teacher called Maalim Abdalla who helped him to rent a room with a family he knew. By the middle of the afternoon on his first day in the town, Ilyas was employed and accommodated. Maalim Abdalla told him, I'll come by for you later so you can meet some people. Later that afternoon he called at the house and took Ilyas for a stroll through the town. They stopped at two cafés for coffee and conversation and introductions.

'Our brother Ilyas has come to work at the big sisal estate,' Maalim Abdalla announced. 'He is a friend of the manager, the great German lord himself. He speaks German as if it's his native language. He is lodging with Omar Hamdani for the moment until his lordship finds him accommodation suitable for such an eminent member of his staff.'

Ilyas smiled and protested and bantered back. His effortless laughter and self-deprecating manner made people comfortable and won him new friends. It always did. Afterwards Maalim Abdalla took him towards the port and the German part of

the town. He pointed out the boma and Ilyas asked if that was where they hanged al Bushiri and Maalim Abdalla said no. Al Bushiri was hanged in Pangani, and anyway, there was not a big enough space here for a crowd. The Germans made a spectacle of the hanging and probably had a band and marching troops and spectators. They would have needed a big space for that. Their walk ended at Khalifa's house, which was the teacher's regular baraza, where he went most evenings for gossip and conversation.

'You are welcome,' Khalifa said to Ilyas. 'Everyone needs a baraza to go to in the evening, to stay in touch and catch up with the news. There is nothing much else to do after work in this town.'

Ilyas and Khalifa became good friends very quickly and within days were speaking freely with each other. Ilyas told Khalifa about how he had run away from home as a child and wandered around for several days before he was kidnapped by a schutztruppe askari at the train station and taken to the mountains. There he was freed and sent to a German school, a mission school.

'Did they make you pray like a Christian?' Khalifa asked.

They were strolling by the sea and could not be overheard but Ilyas was quiet for a moment, his lips clamped together uncharacteristically. 'You won't say anything to anyone if I tell you, will you?' he asked.

'They did,' Khalifa said delightedly. 'They made you sin.'

'Don't tell anyone,' Ilyas said pleadingly. 'It was either that or leave school, so I pretended. They were very pleased with me and I knew God could see what was really in my heart.'

'Mnafiki,' Khalifa said, not yet ready to give up tormenting him. 'There is a special punishment for hypocrites when you get there. Shall I tell you about it? No, it's unspeakable and you will have it coming to you sooner or later.'

'God knows what was in my heart, in there under lock and key,' Ilyas said, touching his chest and smiling too now that Khalifa was making a joke of it. 'I lived and worked on a coffee farm belonging to the German who sent me to school.'

'Was there still fighting up there?' Khalifa asked.