

A Candid Twist in the Tale

Michael Holman's *Last Orders at Harrods* is candid indictment of the African's inability to successfully manage his affairs, says Okechukwu Uwaezuoke

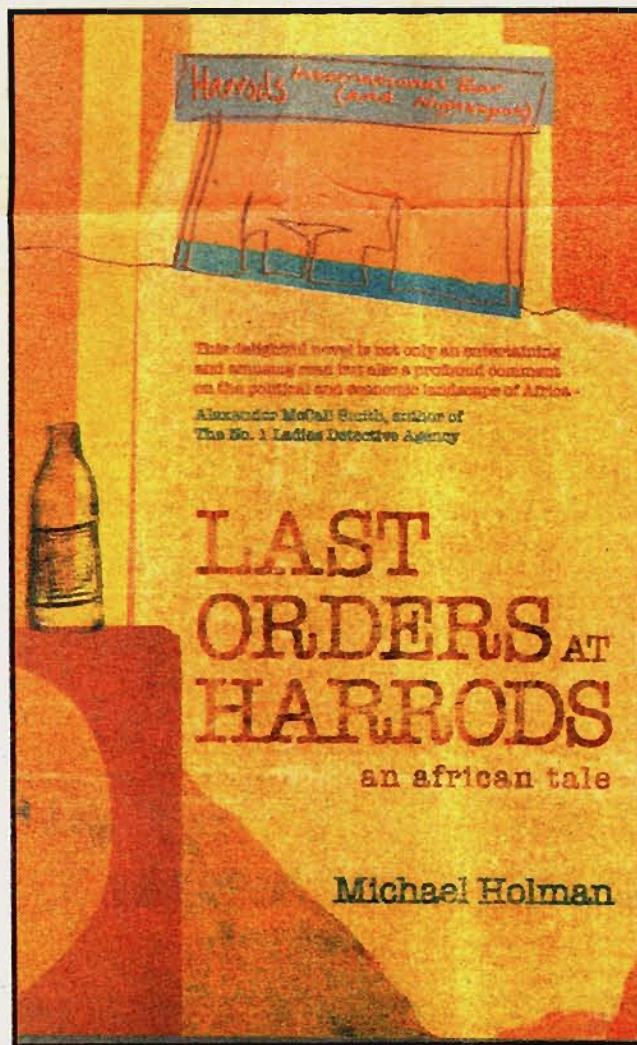
Africa is indeed a dark continent: literally and metaphorically. It is little wonder the Western media love to beam the spotlight on its feet of clay. You can then understand why I do not think much of literary efforts by Westerners on Africa. But all that changed when I read Michael Holman's *Last Orders at Harrods* (An African Tale).

It is a candid and engaging tale. Its appeal lies in its informed commentary - the author was the London Financial Times' Africa editor from 1984 until 2002. Deftly woven into the tapestry of this satire, is the familiar story of the typical African society. Kuwisha is a metaphor for most sub-Saharan African countries. It is a dysfunctional society with decrepit public utilities. Its urban centres crawl with street urchins. And a megalomaniac president, challenged by an emasculated and visionless opposition, presides over this chaos.

But whatever may be the short-comings of this fictional country pale beside Holman's magnanimous depiction of his engaging heroine, Charity Mupanga. She is self-possessed, down-to-earth and morally towers above others like a monolith in the wasteland of the present-day despair and decadence. She dons a well-burnished halo as the quintessential virtuous African woman and retains the writings of her late vicar husband, David, as her holy text and guide. Even when faced with her own troubles, she still accommodates concerns about the future of Kuwishan values in her large heart. She thus pours out her musings before Edward Furniver, the paradigm of the good old English man "gone native": "Who will look after the young people?...Children without grandmothers and grandfathers? Who will teach them about how to behave? Who will tell them about manners, and show them that you should have respect for old people, and to honour tradition? Who will hug them?" Little wonder even Furniver is so enthralled by her presence and personality that he seeks her opinion on an apparently trivial matter.

Meanwhile for daring to name her modest watering hole Harrods International Bar (and Nightspot) she is being harassed by a London law firm, which represents the interest of the big and famous London store. But she means well. She is only honouring the memory of her late father, who had chosen the name Harrods to get a job as the British High Commissioner's gardener. So it is easy to understand why she would want to defy the London lawyers.

Perhaps, if the London lawyers had known that Harrods International Bar (and Nightspot) is a big name for a modest, slum-based bar, they might not



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have bothered writing those letters. But thanks to Charity's propriety the bar draws its clientele from the respectable circles of the Kuwishan society. Besides Furniver, the divorced manager of the only savings bank in the Kireba slum, there are also the likes of Cecil Pearson (the London-based *Financial News* correspondent) and Lucy Gomball, an aid worker repre-

senting WorldFeed. So it is indeed a significant meeting-place in Kuwisha, which even the ageing President Josiah Nduka will ignore at his own peril.

Yet, he is unwilling to unleash his thugs on the proprietress even when he suspects that Titus Ntoto and Cyril Rutere, the two leading Mboya Boys, are her protégés. He would rather, it seems, not stir the hornet's nest. His is a regime, which ordinarily won't hesitate to launch genocidal extermination campaigns voices of dissent. He manages to neutralise the opposition led by Anna Nugilu. The vociferous Newman Kibwana stands the risk of being investigated.

So much in Holman's novel echoes the Nigerian tragi-comical political scene. Besides the hounding and taunting of the opposition, which takes all forms and shapes across the entire continent, there is also that nauseating holier-than-thou and father-knows-best attitude of the president.

Not the least of the casualties in the power game are the masses, in whose interest these self-seeking clowns are supposed to be working. Activists could oppose the government in the name of the masses but when the gun smoke of protests clear the masses are worse off than they were.

Holman's description of the Kuwisha underlife reveal in clear terms that the problems of the masses transcend the ideological demagogues of the politicians. The Mboya Boys, products of the unjust capitalist society, are as self-serving as the political office holders.

Poverty - expressed either as indigence or indulgence - is the root of much of the problems facing Kuwisha. The visionlessness of its leadership is the direct consequence of the illiteracy of the followership or vice-versa. The dereliction of the entire infrastructure is an eloquent testimony of the people's inner life. The hypocrisies of office holders are matched by the hypocrisies opposition leaders.

The twist in the plot is almost comical. Anna Nugilu has long been suspected as President Nduka's Trojan horse. But Kibwana's sudden transformation after the riots remains incomprehensible. Indeed it is as incomprehensible as the action of those Nigerian politicians who accepted positions in the government of a military junta even they were supposed to have been part of an election-winning team.

Last Orders at Harrods is therefore not just about the white man's folly has come home to roost! It is a tacit indictment of the African continent for its inability to manage its affairs successfully without swallowing the bitter pills of the World Bank.