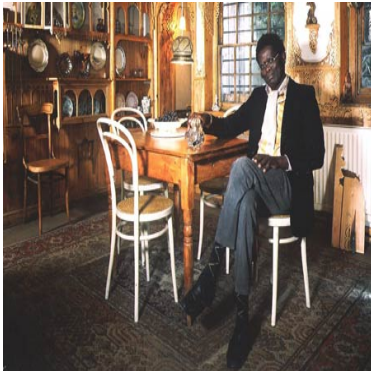


Khadambi Asalache

Kenyan poet and novelist who transformed his London home into a work of art that combined the cultures of many lands



February 28, 1935 - May 26, 2006

STRIKING to look at, with his almost blue-black Masai colouring and height, Khadambi Asalache hid his many talents under a gentle personality. He was a private man, an idealistic aesthete who had learnt to view life with amusement.

Born in 1935 in Kaimosi, western Kenya, the first child of the local chief, he showed his literary bent early by herding cattle with a volume of Shakespeare in his free hand. His father sent him to the best school available, the Holy Ghost Fathers' Mangu High School, which gave him a Christian name, Nathaniel, so some friends always called him Nat. He remained free of any faith and sceptical of all forms of government — starting with the tribal.

He went to the Royal Technical College, Nairobi, to read architecture but was diverted while at a students' conference in Tunisia and spent the next few years in Rome, Geneva and Vienna, where he studied fine art, moving to London in 1960. There he survived by teaching Swahili at the Berlitz School, working for the BBC African Service and doing some architecture and garden landscaping, while he wrote fiction and poetry.

His first novel, *The Calabash of Life*, came out in 1967. It is about a more practical Hamlet figure in Kenya who opposes the usurper chief. It went into ten editions worldwide and was on the syllabus of many schools in Africa, putting Asalache among the most serious writers in the burst of East African novels in English in the 1960s and 1970s.

Asalache was on the council of management of the Africa Centre in London in the 1970s. He also helped to write and produce an instalment of the BBC TV series *Danger Man* that was set in an African city.

His poems were published in literary journals, and in 1973 Eothen Books brought out a collection, *Sunset in Naivasha*. Several explore the feelings of a voluntary exile who loved his land. Perhaps the best known is *Death of a Chief*, which appeared in the *Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, 1995.

He wrote a second novel, *The Latecomer*, using animals as characters in the way the traditional African storyteller does, so as to be able to dissect his audience without risking wrath. The plot shows a conference where the animals manoeuvre to choose a secretary-general. Recognisable are the ruthless lynx, tycoon blackbuck, impressive warthog and idealistic bushbaby who tiptoes into politics and regrets it.

Publishers turned it down, but the manuscript was read by some followers of African literature who admired it. Khadambi sold it to the BBC African Service, which ran extracts from it on two days in January 1971.

In the late 1970s Asalache took an MPhil in the philosophy of mathematics at Birkbeck College, taught by Roger Scruton and Ruby Meager. He then became a civil servant at the Treasury. His occasional lunches at the Travellers Club (Wilfred Thesiger had proposed him for membership) amused him because he was surrounded by Treasury bigwigs lunching too.

He discovered the 77A bus which could take him over the river to the long, hill-hugging Wandsworth Road. In 1981 he bought one of its worst houses, a two-up, two-down on the upper slope, last slept in by dossers and with a basement letting in water. Rescuing this house introduced him to another art, fretwork in pine, which used his architectural training, his love of Africa and travelling, and his poetic attention to little things.

In 1986 he began in earnest to turn the house into a work of art. He lined it with never symmetrical or repeated fretwork shelves, arches, architraves and friezes, delicate as cobwebs, the motifs including birds, geometrics, dancers, flowers and leaves, Africans going to market and animals (though not carnivores).

He told the first journalist to notice his work, Ena Kendall in *The Observer*, in February 1989: "Some Arab designs are very elegant but repetitive. Most African shapes are self-centred: to do a continuous shape with them is not easy, so for linkage I looked to Morocco and India."

His house was in *The World of Interiors*, July-August 1990, and the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, February 2000, and by the turn of the millennium it was well-known to the influential architectural historians John Cornforth and Tim Knox, director of Sir John Soane's Museum. Knox wrote about it in *Nest*, autumn 2003: "It is an extremely serious and carefully worked out exercise in *horror vacui*, taking its inspiration from the Mozarabic reticulations of the Moorish kingdoms of Granada." Guided by Asalache, he pinpointed the sources: the Great Mosque at Cordoba, the Alhambra and Generalife Gardens in Granada, the doors of old houses in Zanzibar, the wedding-cake-like panelled interiors of Damascus, and the yali — wooden houses in Istanbul. Books Asalache consulted include the catalogue of the Africa exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1995, Y. H. Safadi's *Islamic Calligraphy*, and *Istanbul: Gateway to Splendour* by Ahmet Ertug.

In 1989 he met the Scottish basket-maker Susie Thomson, who had his favourite colour of hair, red. Their dinner parties were planned weeks ahead by Asalache, who had dried tuna flown from Mombasa by a contact, vegetables and spices from Asian shops in Tooting. Guests ate with their hands, helped by chapattis, in the golden light under a pierced lampshade.

Susie was his helpmeet, looking after him when he (a non-smoker) was found to have lung cancer last year. He finished his house, and bequeathed it to the National Trust. It will not be a

rival to the Brighton Pavilion — the amazingly satisfying experience of seeing Asalache's Africa and the East in little pine rooms depends on the small and kindly scale.

Asalache is survived by Susie Thomson.

Khadambi Asalache, poet, novelist, civil servant and fretwork artist, was born on February 28, 1935. He died on May 26, 2006, aged 71.

Source: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article1083789.ece?>