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PART I

Parameters and Contexts

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Act I

Isike at the Crossroads

I

IT IS THE EARLY HOURS OF 12 JANUARY 1893, and Isike, ruler of Unyanyembe in central-east Africa, has withdrawn to the inner enclosure of his fort. He is trapped and running out of options. A short distance away, a hostile force is closing in: an assorted army under the command of Lieutenant Tom von Prince comprising a contingent of German troops and bolstered by an array of local allies. Just a few hours earlier, these forces had succeeded—after months of failure—in gaining the upper hand against Isike’s own soldiers, and had destroyed his outer fortifications. Now, Isike has taken refuge in his inner sanctum, where he keeps his remaining supplies of gunpowder.¹ Perhaps he contemplates the only choices left to him: surrender or death. Whatever the nature of those deliberations, he chooses death. A little before dawn on the 12th, the German-led force scales the walls and despite the courage of Isike’s men, they are unable to match the German breech-loaders’ rate of fire. Now the enemy is just metres away. Isike carefully lights a fuse, and touches it against his stores of ammunition. The whole magazine goes up in a terrifying explosion.

Alas, Isike isn’t *quite* dead—or at least, not dead enough for the Germans. They drag him, badly injured and barely conscious, to a nearby tree and hang him. They then shoot dead one of his children, his young son, who happens to be in the vicinity.² Von Prince will recall, years later and with no apparent self-awareness, that Isike died “a hero’s death,” and will

muse that “[i]f his timing had been a little more exact, a great deal of his conqueror would also have gone up in the air”.³ He will write this in a memoir published in 1914, with the Second Reich in its pomp. A few months after this, he will meet his own end, killed fighting the British at the Battle of Tanga in German East Africa.⁴

What renders this scene especially powerful is the apparent clarity with which lines are drawn. Isike takes on, in this telling, a heroic hue; he is a resister, a warrior, confronting the onslaught of European invasion. It is the end of the road, however, and a brutal new order beckons; he has done his best, but now there is only rupture, and destruction. The Germans, on the other hand, reveal the moral vacuum at the heart of whatever enterprise they believed they were involved in. Here, in all its ugly simplicity, is the awful violence of imperialism, often forgotten by the very people who accuse those seeking to remember it of trying to change the past.⁵ Isike might have laid claim to a certain heroism, his own violent past as a slave-dealer notwithstanding; but his son—a defenceless child, killed on the spot—had no such agency at his disposal. The Germans don’t even appear to have fought particularly valiantly. They had guns, lots of them, and used them to deadly effect—eventually, that is, for they had been bested frequently by Isike’s own army over the preceding months. But it is hardly the stuff of Teutonic legend. They hadn’t even really done it on their own—far from it, in fact, having relied on a host of local allies to get close to Isike’s enclosure and to ultimately lay claim to this patch of East Africa. Easy, then, for the conceited von Prince to reminisce two decades after the fact about Isike’s “heroic death”. There is—apparently—no remorse about how he placed Isike’s semiconscious body in a noose, or how he had his son killed.⁶ These were the irrelevant minutiae of civilisation-building among savages, the quotidian particles of dust thrown up as Africa is dragged into some semblance of ‘modernity’, or quasi-modernity, or some sort of liminal state which would prepare them for it. In any case the circumstances of von Prince’s own death remind us that these were Great Empires, destined to fight amongst themselves, while African subjects looked on bewildered, or died of typhoid, or famine, or were killed in service as *askari* (colonial soldiers); but the Great Empires, crucially, are front and centre of the picture, the

global entities within which Africans adapt, and mediate, and mitigate, and live their lives.

Above all, the manner of Isike's death, and the destruction of his enclosure, suggests *conquest*, and thus *rupture*. A rapid end to something, and the beginning of something else. 'The Scramble' involves many terrible traumas, and African suffering on a shocking scale; but its supposedly blinding speed and intensity throws everything else—including, most importantly, what led to it—into shade. We are reminded of Okonkwo at the end of Chinua Achebe's great novel. Faced with colonial invasion, and the evaporation of everything that he had known—and that had made him such a towering figure in his own community—the complicated, energetic, anxious Okonkwo takes matters (or the only matter he could) into his own hands:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. [...] The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilisation to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. [...] Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. [...] He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.⁷

Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* on the eve of Nigerian independence; a new era was upon Nigerians and all Africans, it was supposed. And yet Achebe's gaze—and that of many others, including scholars and producers of culture—was drawn backward to the moment of putative 'conquest'. It cemented the notion that 'The Scramble' for Africa had been a traumatic juncture, a seismic remaking of the landscape in which Africans must operate. It reinforced the idea of the enduring significance of the partition, and the 'conquest' it seemingly involved—for both Africa and Europe, and ultimately the world at large. Okonkwo was a fictional character, of course. But Achebe's genius was to distil the anguish of the age in Okonkwo; to drive home with such lucidity the idea of catastrophe. For Achebe, presumably, the only logical conclusion to the story was

Okonkwo's self-destruction, in the face of European aggression; self-murder as the old world was swept away by a new order, represented in the novel by a dispassionate colonial official who, even as he looked on Okonkwo's cadaver swaying from the branch of a tree, was mulling over the book he would write about his civilising adventures. Achebe knew his colonial ethnography, and the context within which much of it was produced.

Isike is not a fictional character, however. His attempted self-destruction, and his subsequent murder, were very real, as was the intense emotional turmoil he must have experienced in his final moments as he contemplated the strange and entangled journeys which had led him to this point. And it is those journeys with which we are concerned here, in particular what they tell us about a tumultuous, revolutionary and ultimately global epoch, and, as we will see, the ways in which they find their echoes elsewhere across the continent during that era.

Isike had become *mtemi*, or paramount ruler, of Unyanyembe in 1876 upon the death of his father, Mkasiwa. He evidently had ambition and ability, but this was a febrile, turbulent time, and the capture of the chiefship of Unyanyembe had become a serious prize, sought by many. At first, he was vulnerable. He was challenged by a relative, Nyungu-ya-Mawe, already a successful, energetic warlord among the Kimbu to the south. Nyungu, moreover, had the support of the Nyamwezi leader Mirambo, another regional hegemon, who dominated the road to the west and who had spent the last few years at war with Unyanyembe—or, at least, with the powerful community of coastal merchants who resided there. But Isike enlisted the help of that community—little could happen in Unyanyembe without them—and saw off Nyungu's challenge.⁸ Over the next few years, Isike not only survived—no mean feat in this neighbourhood at this time—but prospered. He outlived his adversaries Nyungu and Mirambo, both of whom died in 1884, and manipulated the multiple risks and threats by which he was surrounded on a daily basis. He had to manage carefully the influential and well-armed Swahili merchants, whose interests were primarily pecuniary. For above all, Isike's status, and the significance of Unyanyembe, rested on its commercial value. Unyanyembe itself was not a major producer of the kinds of commodities in demand across the

region—in fact, in many ways it was pretty inconsequential from that perspective. Its importance lay, rather, in its position as a transit handler of goods coming from a wide area. The great advantage to being the *mtemi* of Unyanyembe was that the polity sat on a vital crossroads. Roads flowed into Unyanyembe from all directions: from the south, and the rich commercial frontiers opening up across the grasslands there; from the lacustrine north, where a string of bustling states competed for control over lucrative trade routes; from the west, where Isike's road became someone else's, running through the violent hunting grounds of the eastern Congo basin and through the entrepot of Ujiji; and of course from the east, from Bagamoyo on the coast, and beyond that from Zanzibar and the Indian Ocean world.⁹ Isike's domain sat astride a network which linked that great ocean with the central Congo basin, and beyond that the Atlantic world. Trade flowed through Unyanyembe, and in many ways was its lifeblood. It was what connected Unyanyembe to the world. Isike himself had done very well out of it, taxing commerce in his domain and acting as a trader in his own right, and lived in some style as a result. He had an impressive house, dressed in the finest garments from the coast and owned pillows and "a thick soft carpet", according to a Swedish traveller who passed through in 1886.¹⁰ He also owned a large number of guns and plenty of ammunition, of course, imported from the coast, enabling him to exert some political and military influence over a wider area. The chiefs of Unyanyembe dealt in elephant tusks and people. Like thousands of others, this was a matter of aspiration, and innovation. But then again . . . the great disadvantage to being the *mtemi* of Unyanyembe was also, precisely, that the polity sat on such a vital crossroads. In many ways it was a geopolitical reality which destabilised politics, and made rulership a lonely and vulnerable business, opening up opportunity and presenting peril in equal measure. The *mtemi* profited mightily from his position as the main transit handler of slaves and ivory in the area; but as a consequence he also dealt in violence, and understood all too well the existential dangers of being a dealer in violence. The commerce which flowed through his realm attracted thieves and bandits, but while he publicly decried robbery and corruption, he quietly ensured that he received his share, and had his arrangements with those who operated in the political and commercial

gloaming of his polity. He had to face down ambitious relatives who would seize his position in a heartbeat; some of them even worked for hostile neighbours who feared and resented Unyanyembe's geopolitical position and Isike's role in it. Isike, in short, lived a dangerous, interesting life at the heart of a revolution which had been shaping the region for decades.¹¹

Still, one increasingly existential hazard with which he hadn't reckoned was Germany. Unyanyembe, so tiny compared to the global powers whose representatives now pressed in on him from the east, seemed to have become disproportionately significant. It was evidently at the centre of dramatic global shifts; apparently in the eye of the storm. When Europeans had first shown up, they were—with one or two exceptions—rather an unthreatening, even fearful lot; they spent much of their time ill, and often appeared to be lost, though definitely in search of something. Later, however, they took on an altogether more brutal, determined aspect, inserting themselves into the gaps created by the region's transformation, and bringing ever better weapons to the pursuit of influence and leverage. After over a decade as ruler of Unyanyembe, Isike had proven himself to be a pragmatic man, certainly not someone who was ineluctably unreconciled to dealing with foreigners. He had been doing so his whole life. But his problems with this particular group of intruders began in the late 1880s. In 1886 a German trader, Giesecke, was killed following a commercial dispute, and Isike confiscated his property—as he believed was his right—and from that point a momentum of antagonism built up between Isike and the Europeans. In 1889, weary of their machinations and intrigues, Isike forced a group of missionaries belonging to the White Fathers out of their base at Kipalapala. The Germans began to build a coalition against him. In 1890 an Ottoman scientist named Emin Pasha, formerly governor of the Egyptian province of Equatoria, arrived at Tabora, the main town in Unyanyembe and the centre of a transregional network.¹² He came with a thousand soldiers and two explorer-diplomats in the late nineteenth-century mould, Franz Stulmann and Wilhelm Langheld. Isike watched on anxiously as Emin Pasha forged a treaty with the ever-opportunistic coastal community at Tabora, the latter agreeing to recognise German suzerainty in exchange for the ability to choose their own *wali*, or head of community. Bruised by this coalescence of increasingly

hostile interests, but cognisant of his own vulnerability, Isike agreed to surrender two of his cannons and make a payment of ivory to demonstrate his faith in the new arrangement; but antagonism only increased through the early 1890s. In April 1892 Isike's son led an attack on a passing German column, in response to which the Germans successfully attacked his base at Ipuli. A few weeks after this defeat, in June, the Germans turned their attention to Isike himself. He could still hold his own, though: he managed to repel a German assault, and closed down all the caravan routes through his territory.¹³

There was still, in theory, an opportunity for peaceful resolution. Isike had in fact attempted to agree an armistice with a Commander Sigl; but the problem was now in Tabora itself, for two sovereign authorities in the town placed Isike in an impossible position. The anthropologist Otto Raum—himself born in German East Africa a mere decade after these events—put it best, perhaps: Isike needed power “over life and death of subjects; in maintaining public order by the suppression of robberies, slave-abduction, and interference with caravans; in levying tolls; and in controlling contacts between Africans and whites.”¹⁴ In other words, Isike had a right to the sovereign supremacy due to him as ruler of Unyanyembe. Any ‘armistice’ with the representatives of the Second Reich was going to make that impracticable. And so they mustered their forces, and made their advance on his enclosure—the confrontation seemingly inevitable, supposedly as inevitable as the outcome itself.

II

ISIKE DIED, IT SEEMS, IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL MODERNITY. And modernity came armed to the teeth. His passing, and the seeming destruction of Unyanyembe's sovereignty, marks what is conventionally posited as the most fundamental temporal boundary in African history: the partition of the continent at the end of the nineteenth century, and its morphing from *precolonial* to *colonial*; or, perhaps—for it sometimes seems that this is what is *really* meant—from premodern to modern. With death, and the violent encounter, comes fracture. Here, we have endings, and we have beginnings. It is a scene which is being replicated across the African

landmass at precisely the moment that Isike is strung up from a tree: a casual survey will reveal myriad other communities fighting ‘suicidally’, resisting the new era with their supposedly archaic weapons and arcane fetishes. In much of this, we see the enduring valorisation of the idea of conquest and resistance and heroism—for many good and understandable reasons. The idea of rupture also undergirds, if in often spectral ways, the fixation with the colonial moment. Moreover, Isike seems to perish in strange temporal isolation, for his and a multitude of other stories are frequently told as part of a singular and hermetically sealed moment of time: the ‘Partition’, ‘The Scramble’. This has allowed the focus of attention, whether of a negative or positive bent, to be firmly on external, primarily European, dynamics; it has also allowed for the casting of a revolutionary epoch in Africa into some serious shade, at least in terms of its long-term implications and legacies.

In reality, the moment of Isike’s murder represents the culmination of a remarkable era of African transformation, revolution, reformation. What follows is a modest attempt to reposition that remarkable era in Africa’s modern trajectory. Isike’s stretch of road captures in microcosm the experience of millions of Africans in the course of the long nineteenth century: the role of insurgency, of political volatility and instability, of fractured and contested succession; but also of creativity, and innovation, and aspiration. The road enables us, too, to explore the contexts within which Europeans moved in the late nineteenth century. For above all, Isike’s road was a global one—representatives from across the world travelled on it, and the people living along it became part of that world. Isike’s road thus leads us to a contemplation of the very nature of Africa’s place in modern global history. In the course of the nineteenth century, and in concentrated form, we see the convergence of a number of the salient vectors involved in reciprocal global change—both in Unyanyembe itself, and along one of the most important roads in African history: namely, that stretching from Bagamoyo on the coast to Ujiji on the shore of Lake Tanganyika. The world comes to Unyanyembe; but Unyanyembe also comes to the world, and shapes that world in its own way. This is an African story, and an Afro-global one, as much as a European or an imperial one. Unyanyembe illustrates Africa’s nineteenth-century experience

of goods, gods and guns; the example of Unyanyembe demonstrates the potential of micro-global history to elucidate the impact of macro-global forces.¹⁵ It also presents us with an opportunity to try to understand the role of individual communities in what can feel like a tsunami of global forces, threatening to submerge such communities and reduce them to footnote, at best. Again, Unyanyembe presents us with an entry into an exploration of Africa's place in global history—and not just Africans' experience of and engagement with the world, but also Europeans' own experience and conceptualisation of the area, and the road, and its characters. This is a story of motion, and energy, and direction of travel: it is Isike's road, as much as his polity, which justifies our opening gambit, and which enables us to link the era of partition with the processes unfolding *within* Africa—and in Europe, and in the Indian Ocean world—over the course of the preceding decades.

As for Isike himself, he is not one of the most famous, or noted, protagonists of Africa's nineteenth century. Few if any people beyond Africa and outside of the realm of Tanzanian history will ever have heard of him. Likewise his political realm, Unyanyembe, doesn't figure in global histories, or even, prominently at least, in histories of the partition. But there are very good reasons for selecting the area as our recurring point of reference in exploring Africa's nineteenth century and the ways in which that transformative, indeed revolutionary, era culminated in the partition of the continent. What follows is concerned with that larger set of processes and events; and Unyanyembe, and the road which runs to it and through it, exemplifies the story and underpins the narrative. This was Isike's road; and it was Africa's.

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