

# No Place Like Home

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Jonathan Kingdon's sketches of an agama lizard and a Nsenene bush cricket, 1954

## Origin Africa: A Natural History

by Jonathan Kingdon.  
Princeton University Press,  
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Jonathan Kingdon is one of Africa's most celebrated artists and naturalists. His paintings and sculptures have been exhibited from Cambridge to the Smithsonian and beyond, and adorn skyscrapers in Nairobi, rock shelters in KwaZulu-Natal, and churches in Kampala, Uganda, to mention just a few examples. Kingdon's distinctive paintings—sometimes abstracts composed of blocks of bright color that fill the entire canvas—draw their inspiration from Africa's extraordinary biodiversity, which, as he constantly reminds us, includes our own species.

Kingdon is perhaps best known globally as a naturalist and writer. His books fill entire shelves of my library, with the comprehensive six-volume *Mammals of Africa*, the authoritative guide to the continent's 1,160 species of land mammal, taking up most of one by itself. More portable and better known, *The Kingdon Field Guide to African Mammals* is an indispensable reference while on safari.

Kingdon's zoological research is inseparable from his art. Indeed, some of his artworks are summaries of his scientific findings, working in much the same way that an abstract of a scientific paper does. This is well illustrated by his painting *Visual Geometry in African Monkeys*, which appears in *Origin Africa* and depicts the colorfully marked patches of skin and fur on the faces, posteriors, and chests of cercopithecoid monkeys. By doing so, it provides both a key to identification and a summary of Kingdon's discussion of the evolutionary drivers of such ornamentation.

Currently based in Oxford and Rome, Kingdon was born in 1935 to English parents in colonial Tanganyika, now Tanzania. Integrated thinking—which takes into account time, place, sounds, organism interactions, and details of morphology—is the cornerstone of his research. His account of the Saharan locusts that swarmed around his childhood home beside Lake Victoria gives a sense of how this works. As the swarm arrived, he writes,

the whirr of their wings mixed with the crackle of their legs and the squeaking of their jaws as they descended indiscriminately on every plant from tree to shrub, weed to grass.

The insects ate everything, leaving behind “a leafless landscape and a sludge of excrement.” Flocks of wattled starlings followed, “all of them energetic consumers of locusts,” their calls a mimicry of the locusts’ “squeaks, screeches, rustles and bursts of hissing.” Kingdon saw that each male starling had a slightly different arrangement of fleshy wattles and bald skin around its beak, jiggling like “animated insect puppets.” He surmised that in their efforts to attract females, the male starlings have become caricatures of their favorite prey.

I know of no other living naturalist capable of such astonishing insights. Kingdon's work on the wattled heads of birds, for instance, from vultures to turkeys and cassowaries, makes it clear that the favored food of each species is reflected in the fleshy protuberances on their heads. Were we like birds, men going on dates would adorn their faces, heads, and necks with vivid simulacra

of steak frites, kung pao chicken, or tacos al pastor.

One of the most striking aspects of Kingdon's writing and thinking is the way he deals with animals and humans as living individuals, rather than types. The closer an animal species is to our own, the more evident this becomes. Kingdon is especially enamored of gorillas, as the astonishing montage of gorilla faces he includes early in his new book, *Origin Africa*, makes clear. Each face is individual, and each clearly expresses a different emotion.

Kingdon has known one gorilla family in western Uganda for over thirty years, and its members have provided much of the raw material for his gorilla work. Their patriarch, before Kingdon first met them, was Ikimuga, a great silverback who had lost the fingers of one hand to a snare. One night, as he slept, Ikimuga was killed by an unusually large leopard. The big cat ate only his testicles, “as if to register contempt for such a feeble victim,” Kingdon writes. While this may seem anthropomorphizing, it fits the facts, and I can think of no better explanation. As I read the sentence, I felt that I had entered the mind of a leopard, one of humanity's most feared predators, at the height of its powers.

Years later Kingdon, while in the company of a European guide named Mike, met another dominant male gorilla, Rugabo. Rugabo was fascinated by Mike's very prominent (and very ungorilla-like) nose. He sat down beside the man, reached out an enormous fist, and held the nose between his index and third fingers before bringing his knuckles to his own nose for a sniff. Then, “as the two primates looked mo-

mentarily into each other's faces, Mike thought he saw the corners of Rugabo's mouth turn up in the shadow of a smile.”

Kingdon seems to be able to connect even with species that are distant from us in evolutionary terms. When he was very young, his family adopted a baby elephant, and the two played with an understanding and intimacy that has stayed with him ever since. The elephant “would come and wrap his trunk around my head,” he writes,

and, with its fingered tip, probe with gentle yet insistent movements into my ears, nose, mouth, even, very gently, my eyes. We watched one another continuously because our eyes seemed to be our greatest commonality.

And as they tickled each other, wrestled, and explored the world together, they would, in a glance, catch each other's moods.

In these and the many other anecdotes that pepper *Origin Africa*, the boundaries between the human species and other animals soften, then simply disappear. An image of the head of a female Sumatran orangutan alongside a self-portrait represents the apogee of the process. The distribution of facial hair is strikingly similar in both, as are the nose and the hair on the head, while the intelligent look in the orangutan's eyes seems to confirm Kingdon's opinion that apes may see us as “aberrant, comical, certainly disagreeable versions of themselves.”

*Origin Africa* is a twinned biography of the author and his natal continent. The project had a long gestation (Kingdon had been talking about it for decades); the pandemic finally provided the time for him to complete it. The profusely illustrated and exquisitely written book rests on three pillars: Kingdon's prodigious research, his art, and an extraordinary bequest of notes, papers, and letters left to him by his mother, Dorothy, which details verbatim his words and childhood experiences, and includes his childhood sketches (she also saved a baboon skull that he had transformed into a toy racing car). Dorothy's papers are of particular interest because they provide many vignettes of life in colonial East Africa, as well as insights into the young Jonathan's intensely curious mind.

The papers record that Kingdon entered the world in the city of Tabora, where his father, Teddy, was stationed as a colonial officer in the British territory of Tanganyika. But the circumstances of his birth were extraordinary, almost resembling the nasence of the founder of a classical civilization. One of the Kingdon's neighbors had raised a leopard cub known as Nippy. By the time Dorothy was about to give birth, the animal was three-quarters grown and hunting independently, though still returning daily to the neighbors' house to rest.

The young leopardess seemed to recognize Dorothy's pregnancy, and the

two female mammals formed a tight bond. After Jonathan was born, Nippy entered the room, and an apprehensive Dorothy watched as the big cat licked the infant all over, as if Jonathan were her own cub. (Kingdon's reputation is such that when I related this extraordinary incident to a colleague, he sat still for a few moments before responding, "Would we expect anything less from the great man?")

For the first seven years of his life Jonathan's world was defined by three authorities—his mother, his father, and Saidi, a Nyamwezi man who acted as Jonathan's "tutor, sentry and buddy." As a result, Jonathan grew up speaking Swahili and English with equal facility, and the worldview he formed was likewise both European and profoundly African.

Saidi encouraged Jonathan to observe nature carefully, his folk stories bridging the gap between the human and animal worlds. One of Kingdon's earliest memories is of watching a pair of horned chameleons copulate, which he brought to Saidi's attention. "Little brother," Saidi said,

we are very, very lucky to witness this act. These are messengers from ancient days. They say, "One day your skin will wrinkle all over, like us, you will move very, very slowly, like us, but you and your *watoto* will live long, like us..." Never forget this day.

From an early age Kingdon was a natural mimic, and his mother's writings provide abundant examples of him encountering animals and imitating their calls, even before he learned their names. It's an ability that has stayed with him his entire life: it is fascinating to watch Kingdon tell a story involving animals or other human beings, not only because of the vocal mimicry involved but because his posture, facial expressions, and movement produce an exceptional simulacrum of his subject. I once saw him imitate a silverback: the tall, muscular human completely transformed into the awe-inspiring sight of a terrifying male gorilla. It was impossible not to be intimidated.

*Origin Africa* provides the most riveting account of the evolution of the African continent, and the animal life on it, that I have read. Africa's most ancient extant lineages stretch back to around the time when it was incorporated into the supercontinent of Pangaea, among the most venerable being the lungfish, the killifish, and the frogs. These are the animal "nobility" of the African fauna, and the stories these travelers from deep time have to tell are extraordinary.

The delicate spookpadda, or Table Mountain ghost frog, is a prime example. The creature grows slowly in its bleak environment on the upper slopes of Table Mountain overlooking Cape Town. Its ancestors have been living in

this challenging environment, clinging to life among the inhospitable rocks and spiny bushes, for around 140 million years. These frogs are so delicate, yet so perfectly adapted to the rocks they live among, that they have survived countless droughts, deluges, and other dramatic changes in climate—even the asteroid strike that destroyed the dinosaurs 66 million years ago.

Only a few major types of mammals have Africa as their point of origin, but this select group includes both elephants and humans. Kingdon argues that Africa's unique properties—including its unsurpassed biodiversity and regions of long-standing fertility such as the Great Rift Valley—assured that human evolution could not have occurred anywhere else on Earth. And as he states, it is a scientific fact that every human outside Africa is a colonist, for Africa is our species' homeland. Yet paradoxically Africa is, according to Kingdon, "an unimaginable place" for many people alive today, our "center stage" not even ranking as a sideshow in their thinking. It is this attitude that *Origin Africa* was written to change.

If there is a fault with the book, it is that though it broadly condemns racism, examples hardly feature. The only one Kingdon gives us in detail concerns himself:

One morning, while I was buying fruit in Mbeya's open market, a gang of youths swanked past and one called out, "*Tazama huyu nyani zeru, mweupe kama usaha, ninajaa na karaha*," ("Look at that albino baboon, white like pus, how disgusting.") A market woman turned to me. "Don't listen to them, brother, they're just hooligans."

I would have thought that during his long life Kingdon would have encountered other instances of racism that were worth reporting.

Africa has changed profoundly over Kingdon's lifetime. In 1930 there were estimated to be around 10 million elephants and around 166 million people on the continent, but today there are fewer than half a million elephants and 1.45 billion people. As Kingdon writes:

Africa is the most misrepresented continent on Earth, with the most dehumanized and abused of histories... In concert with the degradation of our people, we watch the annihilation of our fauna, our flora and the natural communities they form—assaults driven by global anarchy. Likewise, domineering industrial nations have stolen the dignity and reduced the worth of human beings, while turning the world's climate against us in what feels more and more like an implacable rampage.

Having lived through and been part of these processes (Kingdon confesses with great regret to shooting elephants

in his youth), he is the perfect guide to Africa's recent natural history, and his book provides many examples of the dilemmas faced by those seeking to balance animal and human needs. When writing of the baby elephant his family fostered, Kingdon relates:

The elephantlet had been orphaned by his mother's enlarged appetite for vegetables—her last meal had been an entire plot of millet, the precious reward for a human family's labour following a fierce famine. Her long white incisors were auctioned and the proceeds entered the treasury that issued famine food for the farmer's family and a portion of my father's salary.

Other examples of the desecration of nature related by Kingdon are fiercer and crueler. "I was once taken to a site not far from Nairobi," he writes, "where an entire herd of tame and much-loved giraffes was encircled and machine-gunned by young soldiers." But it is the rapine of global corporations that Kingdon reserves his greatest vitriol for:

In the last forests, corporations eat trees as if they were chainsaw-voiced death-watch beetles... Trawlers... Hoover up seas and lakes... like rampaging aquatic dragons.

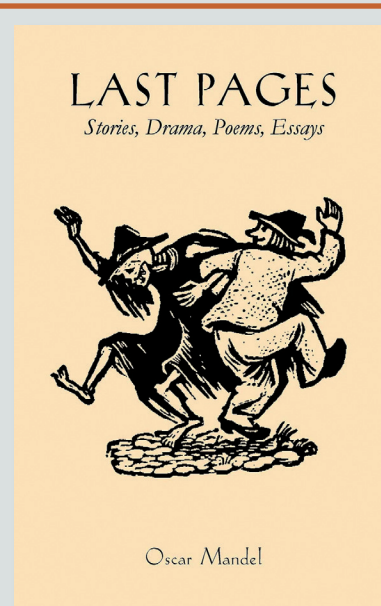
Kingdon clearly fears for the future of Africa's biodiversity, but it is anger—a will to fight back—rather than despair that characterizes these parts of the book.

Overall, though, the mood of *Origin Africa* is joyful. It brims with exuberant creativity. In Kingdon's youth, the mood of the continent was optimistic. He recalls that as a student at Makerere University in Uganda he lived

among many fervent Pan-Africanists, all of us convinced that the aggressive, racist, exaggerated nationalism that had culminated in two World Wars and one Cold one should have been enough to invite unity among thinking people and especially among young Africans. Then the brutal political murder of our most charismatic Pan-Africanist, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961 so enraged all Africans that by 1963 Kwame Nkrumah and Haile Selassie had huge support and a done deal in founding the Organisation of African Unity.

Still today, it is to the organization's successor, the African Union—with its focus on health, peace, and the promotion of democracy—that Kingdon looks for hope.

The octogenarian African even dares to speculate that in the future Africa will lead the world. "Now is the time to break decisively with our still all-too-colonial past," he writes, asserting that if Africa was humanity's nursery, then it will one day be recognized as the world's university. The continent, he believes, is well suited to this role because of its extraordinary diversity, natural riches, and intact ecosystems, an understanding of which is vital if we are to repair our world. If and when that day arrives, humanity will have come full circle. ●



"A voice like no other"

*Last Pages* is a rich miscellany by the Belgian-American author **Oscar Mandel\***, consisting of two bright **novellas**: *Two Gentlemen of Nantucket* and *Wickedness*; a **comedy**: *The Fatal French Dentist*; ten **poems**; and six **essays**: "Unacceptable Poetry," "Against Castrated Art," "Concerning Imbecility," "Otherness," "To Be or Not To Be a Jew," and "Melancholy Thoughts of a Nonagenarian."

\*Author of *Otherwise Poems* and *Otherwise Fables*

From *Concerning Imbecility*:

Nature has bestirred itself to bestow on mankind an astonishing practical brain (homo faber)—having already done much for the apes—that is to say a brain capable of creating, after the sea-tossed Ark, roofed huts and houses, fire and cooking, bread, wool, the wheel, arrows and machine guns, irrigation, sheep-herding, pulleys, automobiles, flashlights, the hydrogen bomb, techniques for orbital rendez-vous, the Internet and the flood of electronic gadgets invented by our outrageously smart electronic gadget engineers; and then, having so to speak done its job, it has so to speak shrugged its shoulders, saying "What is it to me?" when that same brain, escaping from its proper acreage, has invented Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, prayers, incantations, theories of Creation, metempsychosis, the influence of the stars, the Chosen People, the Trinity and Transubstantiation, infant baptism, washing oneself in the Ganges, palmistry, Mormonism, the platonic Idea of the Chair that begets all our chairs, Leibnitz's monads, spinning tables and ectoplasm, a plague caused by the wrath of God, Nirvana, feng shui, no making telephone calls on the Sabbath, reading the future in the guts of a sheep, ghosts, goddesses with eight arms and twelve breasts, fear of Friday the 13th, the divine right of kings..... Those dots tell you that I could go on for a thousand pages....

**Turner Publishing, 330 pages, \$16.99**

## The New York Review Summer Schedule

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