

# Out of Africa 1985

## Settler Romance in Nature Paradise



*Out of Africa* is the most successful film ever to be set in Africa. The nostalgic tale of Karen Christentze Dinesen, who married a friend to escape from her native Denmark and become Baroness Blixen, who joined the emerging settler class in Kenya just before the outbreak of World War I,<sup>1</sup> and who went hunting with her lover Denys Finch Hatton in the magnificent setting of the Rift Valley, attracted a much larger public than those already entranced by her writings. Renowned actors such as Meryl Streep, Robert Redford, and Klaus Maria Brandauer further enhanced the film's appeal. The khaki chic of Meryl Streep set off a fashion trend (Conant, 1986), and Dinesen's *Out of Africa* made the U.S. and British bestseller lists. With the help of a budget of close to \$40 million that ensured excellent 'production values', Sydney Pollack had created an outstanding film. Seven Academy Awards, including best picture, and numerous other awards in the U.S. and elsewhere, gave the film wide recognition. World-wide box office receipts have surpassed \$200 million. *Out of Africa* continues to be shown regularly on the Disney Channel, and it is readily available in just about every video store.

*Out of Africa* is the most important recent example of the 'beautiful Africa' approach to Africans in the West. The film takes us to the Garden of Eden,<sup>2</sup> it presents Europeans as the masters of that universe, and it has Western viewers identify with them and their view of the land and the people. *Out of Africa* finds a plausible scenario for images of white dominance by its choice of time and place. The film is set in an early phase of colonialism – indeed, this part of East Africa was still a British 'protectorate' when Karen Blixen first arrived. And it takes us to one of the few settler colonies: the comfortable climate and fertile lands attracted European settlers to what came to be known as the 'White Highlands.' The film poster, repeated in most countries with little variation, invites us to join the bliss of Meryl Streep and Robert Redford lounging in the Garden of Eden. It has been so popular as to become the only poster of any of the films featured here to be reproduced commercially. *Out of Africa* presents an Africa long gone, focuses on a setting where Europeans live off the labor of Africans who have been dispossessed of their land, and shows contented Africans serving their white masters: the farm workers sing happily as they harvest the coffee for their mistress. We are far from Tarzan, but the white man – and the white lady – continue to be the dominant figures in the Western image of Africa.

We are treated to similar pictures from a time long gone, when dispossessed Africans labored for their white masters – happily, we are supposed to believe – in another outstanding and immensely successful Hollywood film: *Gone With the Wind* held the record of having grossed the

[Western films put] us in the back-ground, which is where we are in Western history. Africans are betrayed on the screen ... They are part of the landscape and they are used for a function – like to bring an orange juice to the master – and they walk out of the scene. We are never human beings. We are underdeveloped characters. Our sex life, our feelings of love or hatred are not explored because they don't see us as part of a society. (Haile Gerima quoted by Pfaff, 1977: 28)

1 The film has Karen Dinesen arrive in Kenya in 1913 and stay for about a decade. Actually, she disembarked in Mombasa in January 1914 and, after several trips to Europe, finally left in 1931. Foreshortening her stay may have served to enhance the drama of the story. And putting her arrival a year earlier highlighted that she arrived before the outbreak of World War I in August 1914.

2 East Africa is of course quite literally the Garden of Eden where the human species originated about 1.8 million years ago.

## Recovering the African Past

most money ever for half a century. The difference is that by the 1980s the racism of the film classic was widely recognized and rejected,<sup>3</sup> whereas a similar account from Africa was widely praised – in the West. But how does the portrayal of Farah Aden, Kamante Gatura, and Chief Kinanjui look to their great-grandchildren? To the one perhaps studying colonialism at the University of Nairobi right now?

*Out of Africa* offers a variety of perspectives on the colonial experience, or more precisely on the experience of one of the few colonies where Europeans settled in substantial numbers, appropriated the land to themselves, and made Africans work their estates. These perspectives range from the conservative to the patronizing to the domineering. But they are all European perspectives, and they invariably take the master status of Europeans for granted. Denys Finch Hatton stands for nostalgia and benign neglect: 'Don't turn Africans into little Englishmen,' 'we are only passing through.' Chief Kinanjui is portrayed as a conservative preoccupied with retaining his power. His 'The British can read – and what good has it done them?' is good for laughs that drown out the obvious rejoinder that they have managed to establish themselves in power in foreign lands. Baron Blixen's 'The servants are wonderful' illustrates Haile Gerima's observation: white cinema goers are treated to the vicarious experience of belonging to the master race. And Baroness Blixen represents the gentle face of paternalism, or rather maternalism: some education, some health care, some land for 'my Gikuyu.'<sup>4</sup> It is left to the anonymous settler who gets into an argument with Baroness Blixen and a fight with Barclay Cole on New Year's Eve to suggest the vulnerability of the colonial regime. He is opposed to educating Africans – perhaps he understands that educated Africans will challenge the colonial dispensation and cease to be such wonderful servants.<sup>5</sup>

3 On the distortions of the historical record in *Gone With the Wind*, see Chadwick (2001: 189–98).

4 I am using the more recent spelling of the name of the largest ethnic group in Kenya who previously were referred to as Kikuyu.

5 Instead of acknowledging the challenge educated Africans posed for colonialism, Western fiction usually ridiculed them. The classic example is Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, recently resurrected on the screen. The all too many similar treatments of educated African-Americans are painful to remember, but at least they are a thing of the past.

6 Just about the time *Out of Africa* was released Hollywood began to produce several films denouncing the *apartheid* regime.

Indeed, at about that time educated Africans began to assert themselves. In 1921 they established the Kikuyu Central Association. Jomo Kenyatta became its Secretary in 1928, demanding land reform and political rights for Africans. He went to England in 1930, got a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics, and published his dissertation *Facing Mount Kenya*, an account of Gikuyu society, in 1938, just one year after the appearance of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*, published under the semi-pseudonym Isak Dinesen. Perhaps we cannot expect the retired settler to have been sensitive to these developments, but we should expect such sensitivity from Hollywood, many years after Kenyatta had become the first President of independent Kenya in 1963, at a time of growing protests against the racism of *apartheid* South Africa.<sup>6</sup>

A few elements in the film remind the keen observer that Africans were no longer all that 'traditional' even in the early days of colonialism. Young Kamante speaks English. When conversing with Farah and Baroness Blixen, Chief Kinanjui does not speak his own Gikuyu language but instead uses Swahili, the East African *lingua franca*, a fact lost on most Western viewers and one that the film does not care to convey. And some of the servants are practicing Islam, another major world religion

come from foreign lands. But these are minor elements lost in a flood of images of other races serving Europeans. The devotion of African servants, and Indians at the club, to their masters is all the more striking when compared with Blixen's relationship with her grumpy American foreman. The Africans in *Out of Africa* only exist in relation to their masters. If Farah appears, rather implausibly and in fact contrary to her account, unattached to family and kin, this reinforces the image of his exclusive devotion to his mistress. The distance between the races is extreme: Denys does not talk with his companion; Barclay 'thinks' that his mistress is fond of him. Only in the relationship between the lonely Baroness Blixen and Farah does the film ever so tentatively begin to bridge the gap between the races.<sup>7</sup>

The scene of Blixen arriving with the supply wagon at the army camp tellingly conveys it all. The camera shows an exhausted and disheveled woman: we are made to see the hardship she endured. There is no suggestion that the Africans who made the trek possible suffered like her, or indeed that the journey was harder on them: they walked, while she rode on her horse. Her servants had risked their lives as a matter of course, while her American foreman had told her in no uncertain terms that ferrying war supplies was not part of his contract.<sup>8</sup>

*Out of Africa* takes white superiority and dominance for granted. Instead of problematizing race relations, it makes gender into the salient issue. From the historical record and from her writings, Karen Blixen appears as an independent and assertive woman, and gender is not a

*Farah Aden and Baroness Blixen  
arrive at the army camp*

7 Claire Denis's *Chocolat* offers a quite different, sensitive portrayal of the colonial context and interracial relations as the director recalls her childhood in Cameroon in the 1940s.

8 Here as elsewhere the film dramatizes: in real life Baroness Blixen made several much less adventurous supply treks over shorter distances.

*Chief Kinanjui: the Hollywood  
portrayal of the fellow-aristocrat  
Baroness Blixen described*

9 In Charles Kiselyk's documentary *A Song of Africa* Streep takes a feminist stance against Pollack on certain issues.

10 The contrast between Karen Blixen's 'feudal mirage' and the historical context in Kenya is elucidated by Kennedy (1987).

11 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Kenya's foremost writer, presents some of the evidence for such a harsh assessment (Ngũgĩ, 1993: 132-5, also in some of his earlier essays). JanMohamed (1983: 49-77, 186-7) emphasizes Blixen's deep involvement with and genuine concern for Africans in his appreciative discussion of her autobiographical writing, and takes issue with Ngugi.

major explicit theme in her *Out of Africa*. The film, in contrast, shows a much weaker woman, dependent on men, with Meryl Streep playing the entranced girl to Robert Redford, the gallant man of adventure. He is made to initiate her into hunting and to prompt her to start writing - Karen Blixen's stories had been published, and she had hunted game before she ever met Finch Hatton.<sup>9</sup> Hollywood, however, responded to the heightened concern with gender issues in the West at the time the film was produced. Thus the film gives great play to her being escorted from the men's bar at the Muthaiga Club when she first arrives in Nairobi, then invited in for a drink on her final departure. When she arrives at the army camp the men watch in silence as it sinks in that she is as tough as the strongest among them. But, of course she has not become one of them. She has complained previously that it is a men's war, and she leaves quietly the next morning without so much as awakening her husband. When in the end she implores the new Governor to recognize that 'Kenya is a hard country for women,' viewers are asked to forget how privileged she was, and that colonial Kenya was a hard country for Africans.

*Out of Africa* is explicitly based on the writings of Blixen. Her *Out of Africa* eloquently conveys the charmed existence of the early settlers, the sense of discovery and adventure, her experiences of love gained and lost.<sup>10</sup> Reading her is, however, a doubly unsettling experience. While her racism is not altogether unexpected, its depth still comes as a shock.<sup>11</sup> It is even more unsettling to discover that the Africans she tells us about have

considerable stature, quite unlike the people the film shows us. Hollywood, in 1985, thought fit to diminish these Africans so as to convey an image of simple Africans serving sophisticated (listen to that Mozart playing!) white masters.<sup>12</sup>

Most striking is the transformation Hollywood wreaked on Chief Kinanjui to show us an old man cloaked in cow-hide emerging from a miserable hut, shuffling around with an attendant who has a blanket knotted over his shoulder, and bowing to the white lady. In her book, Blixen presents him as a fellow-aristocrat. He sometimes came over to see her, 'in a gorgeous fur-cloak [of blue monkey skins], accompanied by two or three white-haired senators and a few of his warrior-sons' (Dinesen, 1937: 142).<sup>13</sup> We learn that he ruled over more than 100,000 people, and that he eventually visited her in a fancy car acquired from the American Consul.<sup>14</sup>

Farah speaks broken English in the film, but from Blixen we learn that Farah spoke English and French well. He had joined her on the boat in Aden when she first came to Kenya, and he accompanied her on the train to Mombasa on her final departure. He had married and brought his bride from Somalia to the farm: along with her came her mother, her younger sister, and a young cousin. He handled the plantation's accounts. After Blixen's departure he established a small shop and became one of the city's notables. Malik Bowens, who plays Farah, visited his family, which had become very influential in Nairobi (Rouchy, 1986).

Kamante, in Blixen's account, 'had all the attributes of genius' (Dinesen, 1937: 36). The Prince of Wales complimented the Baroness on the Cumberland Sauce Kamante had prepared. After she had returned to Denmark, Kamante had letters sent to her regularly. His mistress was greatly embarrassed when he was imprisoned for having taken the Mau Mau oath in the 1950s rebellion against the British settlers. Eventually he provided stories and illustrations for a book (Kamante Gatura, 1975). He came out on location one day when the film was shot,<sup>15</sup> but he was living in dire poverty (Kramer, 1986; Critchfield, 1994: 239–40; Dedet, 1986).<sup>16</sup>

The visit of the Prince of Wales alerts us to the fact that the Blixen estate was much more important than the film lets on. Baroness Blixen and her overseas partners owned 6,000 acres, and she employed several Europeans. Blixen was running a major business enterprise based on cheap labor. If she failed – because the soil, rainfall, and altitude were ill-suited for coffee – most settlers did very well under the colonial dispensation. Lord Delamare, lord of a million acres, was indeed their leader, but as far as Africans were concerned, he was anything but the friendly gentleman: he ruthlessly pursued settler interests against them. Hollywood chose to offer us a nostalgic tale of happy Africans serving Europeans absorbed in their romantic entanglements. As for the great-grandchildren of Farah, Kamante, and Chief Kinanjui, President Jomo Kenyatta may well have spoken for them when he commented after seeing the film: 'We are not amused' (Kramer, 1986: 27).

12 *A Song of Africa* offers an instructive discussion of the music choices made by John Barry, with some interference by Sydney Pollack. Barry acknowledges that he used African elements only once and briefly, during the Masai sequence.

13 *A Song of Africa* has period photos of Farah, Kamante, and Juma, but not of Chief Kinanjui.

14 Pollack was a stickler for authenticity when it served to enhance exoticism. Gikuyu no longer perforate and elongate their earlobes, so the extras were outfitted with drooping latex ears specially produced in England (Universal Studios, 1985).

15 Kamante is shown visiting the location in *A Song of Africa*.

16 Cooper (1991) details many of the liberties Pollack took with both the historical record and Baroness Blixen's accounts. She shows in particular how Africans were progressively omitted at each successive stage: autobiography, first film script, final script, shooting, and editing. Eventually much of the interaction between Blixen and her servants was eliminated, while some incidents between Blixen and Farah were recast in the film as exchanges between her and Finch Hatton. The 'shooting script' is provided by Luedtke and Pollack (1987). Pollack has claimed that he had read everything and emphasized the power and remarkable dignity of the Africans chosen to play Farah, Kamante, and Chief Kinanjui (Henry, 1986). He has also commented on the problems of producing a film based on literary material, incidentally mentioning that the young boy Kamante became Blixen's renowned chef, but he offers only economy and dramatic effect as explanations for omissions and outright inventions (Luedtke and Pollack, 1987: x). We are left to wonder about the role of Judith Thurman, Blixen's foremost biographer, who is credited as associate producer and appears in *A Song of Africa*.

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